The Rise of Darth Vulcan

by RHJunior

Summary

Ted was just having fun on Halloween. He had a pretty clever costume and an invite to a pretty fun party, and was making the best of it-- when he suddenly gets yanked sideways through reality into Equestria. Naturally he manages to make a very bad first impression, and is now an enemy of the State...

Maybe he shouldn't have gone out dressed as a villain.
The chains clinked idly against the wall where I dangled. I had to admit, I was kind of impressed. I had no idea how they'd managed to cobble together a whole human-proportioned dungeon cell, manacles and all, in the time since they'd gotten ahold of me. Especially the manacles. I mean, it couldn't have been easy making them with hooves and all.

I saw a tell-tale shadow coming 'round the corner, outside my cell. The shadow became two ponies dressed in roman-style armor who were carrying weapons strapped to their sides and matching sour expressions on their faces. They stopped outside my cell door, glaring at me like they'd like to run me through with their horns.


Right behind them came the source of the light; a tall white pony... well, more of a horse, she was nearly twice the height of the guards... with a flowing, candy-floss mane and tail, feathered wings tucked in at her sides, and a long, tapered, spiral horn growing out of her forehead. She was wearing a golden collar, shoes-- no, not horseshoe-- shoes, more like... boots? Over her hooves? my brain gave up looking for words... and a golden tiara.

I rolled my eyes. Oh boy. a Princess. A Pretty Pony Unicorn Pegasus Princess. Could this world pile up the girly cutesy pootsy crap any higher? I was amazed she didn't fart glitter.

Her horn glowed... oh great, magic using Pretty Pony Unicorn Pegasus Princess. So yes, it could. The cell door unlocked itself and she stepped inside. She nodded to a smallish unicorn sitting outside the cell, who nodded and pulled out a quill and scrolls and began writing. The bars slammed shut behind her.

Whoa, these guys really had no experience with bad guys if they were handling things like this. I mean, her inside with me, and her bodyguards outside? That sounded like a potential hostage crisis to me.

Then again, I wasn't exactly an expert on these things. And I was manacled to a wall so I wasn't likely to cause her any difficulty.

Come to think of it, what I knew about the creatures in this little girl's fairy tale world gone wrong didn't make things better for me. From what I'd seen, the more sparkle-poo something was, the more frickin' powerful it was. She had wings and a horn and a flowy magical mane and was wearing all the fancy jewelry; that probably meant that she wasn't locked in here with me; I was locked in here with her.

"I am Princess Celestia, Sol Invictus, Diarch and Ruler of Equestria," she said. "And I would have words with you."

She glared at me with her big over-mascara'd eyes. It didn't look like a "now you die" sort of glare though. It was more like, I dunno, that look you get from an angry parent. Like she was going to scold me for breaking into the cookie jar. That just flew all over me. Here I was, the dread and terrible scourge of Equestria, and Pony Princess Glitter Farts was going to pull the 'naughty child' stare on me? It just got on my last nerve. No way I was going to be patronized by this bimbo.
I looked her dead in the eye and proceeded to deliberately stick my foot in my mouth. "So, how's it hanging?" I said glibly. She couldn't see the smirk behind my mask, but she could certainly hear it.

That did it. That stern maternal air got a lot less maternal. She glared at me, swelling up in that way you see mothers do when they're about to lower the boom. She stepped in front of me and looked me in the eye, her head level with mine despite the fact I was standing tippy-toe in my manacles, and leveled her long sharp horn so that the point was level with the space between my eyes. The tip glowed menacingly. "Now, sorcerer," she said, "We are going to get some answers from you. If you value your life and your freedom you will answer all of them, immediately and truthfully. If you do not, you will regret it immensely."

"Who are you?"

I gave a mental shrug. Stuff it. "Ted."

There was a pause. "...Ted," she replied.

"Ted," I agreed.

There was another pause. "...That is not the name you gave my little ponies when you were rampaging through Equestria, Ted," she said a trifle sarcastically. Wow, they do sarcasm. I was starting to wonder.

"And I'm sure everyone calls you Sol Invictus," I quipped. "Wasn't exactly my first choice to go around with a Nom de Plume, but your little jerkass ponies weren't exactly going to back off from the Dread Sorcerer Ted."

"So which shall we call you by?" she said with mock civility. "Your actual name, or your name of choice?"

"....Darth Vulcan?"

My snort of laughter confused her. Dang, hearing that name come out of the mouth a sparkly winged unicorn princess just was too much. Her bewildered look only made it funnier. I spluttered and snorted for several seconds, till I finally gave up. I managed to nudge the visor of my Darth Vader helmet with my shoulder so it flipped up before I suffocated on my own spit. "Ai, whoo, fresh air," I said, panting for breath. "Forget it," I said to her baffled expression. "You wouldn't get the joke if I explained it to you."

Her expression turned cross. She leveled her horn at my face again. "Enough. I have tolerated your flippancy long enough; now answer my questions. Who are you, why are you here, and why have you been persecuting my little ponies??"

"Fine, you horse-pony-narwhal thing," I said. "My name is Ted. I have no idea how I got here. And I've been making life for your little pretty pastel pansy ponies miserable because they're JERKS. That clear enough?"

She seethed for a minute. "Fine. I shall make my questions more direct." She put the glowing tip of her horn against the pendant locked around my neck. "How did you come into possession of the alicorn amulet?"

I smirked at her. "Ding ding! You asked the right question..."
Halloween has always been my favorite holiday. It's the simplest holiday for one reason: *No social obligations.* No weird relatives visiting or traveling a thousand miles to visit them yourself. No awkward family dinners. No struggling to buy just the right card or just the right gift. No desperate flop-sweat while you wait to see if that special someone sends you a valentine back. The only expectation is (maybe) you have a tub of candy to hand out to the little nosepickers when they come to the door. Other than that it's just costumes, parties, candy, pranks, what's not to love?

Especially the costumes. Yeah, I love doing costumes, even though I don't do it as much anymore. Hey, not everyone can run off to a Con at the drop of a hat, and anyway if I ever showed up at one of those Nerd Herds these days the guys back home would have never let me live it down. Yeah yeah yeah, I'm a peer-pressure driven puss, get it out of your system. And yeah, whatever. I'm just not stupid and socially tone deaf. Unlike geek boys, I remember that I have to go to school and work and $@#$^ with regular people after the party's over. You go prancing around dressed like Batman in public all the time and then act all astonished and hurt when people laugh at you later, you deserve what you get. Me, I kept it to socially acceptable norms-- as in, Halloween.

Of course, at the current year I was kind of stumped for ideas. I was sifting through the debris of an old curiosity shop, looking for inspiration. I'd had a pretty good run the previous couple of years. Last year I'd managed to score an old Darth Vader helmet at a Goodwill store, thrown on a cape and farm-hand style overalls, and gone as "Darth Bubba." ("Aw, shoot son, come on over to the dark side, it'll be a hoot!") That'd been worth a few laughs.

I wasn't finding anything interesting on the shelves, and was about to the point where I was seriously considering wearing last year's costume again (sacrilege!) when there was this enormous BANG! somewhere overhead. The shelves around me rattled and jumped. I yipped and hopped out of the way as some of the items hanging overhead came tumbling down.

After my pulse slowed down I checked the shelves overhead where the bang had come from. I figured one of the plugged in displays had blown a bulb, or something. Sure enough, there was a ruptured lava lamp and what looked like the remains of a plasma ball. The bits were scorched and smoking faintly; it looked like a power surge had hit the socket they were plugged into. A couple of other electronic widgets were flickering or acting like they'd burned out too. Crazy old coot who ran the store always plugged too many things into one socket...

I let the owner know what had happened. He came up the aisle, griped and moaned when he saw the mess, and started untangling cords and unplugging burnt-out novelty junk. While he was pulling the ruined merchandise off the shelf, I noticed a stray piece of junk jewelry in the middle of it. It must have fallen off the rack above the display. I reached over his shoulder and plucked it out of the mess.

I don't know why it caught my eye. It wasn't particularly flashy at first glance; it was made of some dull grey metal, with a gem in the center the color of dried blood. Plus it had bird wings, and a unicorn head. I am so NOT into unicorns, or anything fancy-fairytale like that.

But the more I looked at it, the more gnarly it seemed. Heck, it looked like the sort of medal an evil overlord would give one of his minions for terrorizing the highest number of helpless peasants that financial quarter, or for shooting down the most heroic rebels. I started to have a rush of inspiration to
"Hey, how much for this?" I said.

He barely even looked, and rattled off a price. I parted with some filthy lucre and claimed my prize.

When I got home with it, I got out the old Darth Vader costume parts and went to work.

You ever look at the original Darth Vader costume? I mean REALLY look at it? It's actually kind of, well, weak. It gives an impression of badass armor at first glance, but then you look again... and you realized the helmet is kind of plain, the shoulders are sloped and narrow, the panel of buttons on the front of the suit looks like a vandalized jukebox, the gauntlets and boots are just cloth and heck, the actual torso is nothing but a onesie made out of quilted cloth. Why settle for Darth Vader? Why not take old school Darth Vader, and see if I could crank it up to eleven?

First off I added some huge, swept-back horns to the helmet. I had some glowing-eye spectacles from an old "faceless wraith" mask; I hotglued those to the inside of the helmet so that Vader's black beetle eyes now glowed a hellish red on command. A battery powered voice changer went inside the mouth. No wheezy rasp for me; this thing made me sound like I gargled sulfur every morning before breakfast. I'm a dab hand with simple mechanical devices; I'd re-cut and rigged the face of the helmet so it could pop up and slide up into the crown of the helmet. After all I wanted to be able to eat and drink while I was running around in this getup without pulling the entire helmet off.

The bodysuit was a cheap pair of black coveralls. I upped the ante by adding spiked plates: elbow plates, shin plates, knee plates, shoulder plates. A pair of big black stompy boots I spotted at some ex-goth's yard sale served for footwear. Fake metal gauntlets from a fake suit of armor replaced Vader's much wimpier Naugahyde gloves. And his flowing black cloak went by the wayside; I had an old black fuzzy bathrobe that had fallen afoul of my kid sister's attempt to stone-wash her jeans by throwing chunks of brick into the washing machine. It was ratty and tattered and coming unravelled in places so much that it looked like dead muppet roadkill. A little work with a pair of scissors, though, and it made a perfect barbarian-esque cloak. (Hmm. Muppet Slayer. Gotta remember that one for next year.)

I wavered the longest time on the weapon of choice. I wanted to make a sort of cross between a lightsaber and Skeletor's sword, but I spent too long dithering about how to make the blade. I ended up bunting, and made a staff out of a fist sized ceramic skull and a six-foot stick of driftwood I'd found. It was less Dark Jedi and more Evil Overlord, but what the heck. The final touch was the amulet, which I slung around the neck of the gorget and pop-riveted the chain in place, so that the pendant rested right at my collarbone. And yes, I put lifts in the boots. I topped out at over six feet tall with 'em. Short sith lord? Never.

That and black paint. Loads and loads of high-gloss, metallic black paint.

And I tell you, I put that outfit on and I looked jagged. It was so Grimdark you'd think I shit bats. I looked like the guy Emperor Palpatine would call "Boss." Anakin Skywalker would have wet his jedi robes if he'd run into me. "Oh yeah," I said to my reflection, the voice changer turning my voice into a rumbling gravel basso. "I am gonna own this party."

Halloween finally came. Someone, I forget who, I think it was the guys from the football team, they had gotten together the stuff for a blowout party. Seems one of them lived in some virtual mansion out in the boonies, an old converted farmhouse or something sitting on a few hundred acres surrounded by woods, you know how rich people do when they buy some place away from all the peasants. Well anyway, it meant plenty of room for a few hundred teenagers, their cars and trucks, and the makings of an enormous halloween costume party/rave/tailgate party. Pretty much the entire senior class and half of the underclassmen were invited, and the rest crashed. Nobody cared, though;
as long as you brought a cooler full of something to eat or drink, you were golden.

I arrived and parked my van on the edge of the town. The house was lit up, the music was blasting, and there were high schooler ghouls and ghosties as far as the eye could see. Oh lawd, cheerleaders in bad little witch outfits, oooo..... I bagged a can of beer and some ribs from some dude's tailgate grill and rocked my way into the throng.

Massive rounds of thumbs up all over the place for the outfit. Pretty soon I was chatting up some hot chick dressed in a naughty zombie french maid costume (bonus points for a two-theme costume, double bonus points for making it any variation of "naughty" and making it work, ding ding!) And making one hell of a good first impression, I might add, when there was a commotion nearby. There was some laughter from a couple of jocks, and staggering up through the masses, propelled by a couple of trips and shoves, comes... I dunno, it takes me a minute to figure it out. His hair is blue, his face is white, he's wearing some sort of roman guard armor, and he has a spiral horn jutting up from his forehead--

Aw, crap. It was a Brony. Some loser had come to the party as a BRONY.

Look, I didn't follow all that trending internet stuff. But it was hard not to know about these effeminate little weirdoes; they were popping up everywhere. We even had a couple running around the halls of our jerkwater-town high school. Dudes running around collecting little girl's toys and wearing T-shirts with cartoon ponies on them and crap. It was as girly as hell, and creepy as hell too.

In fact I think I recognized this one. Some dork who had a locker a couple of steps down from mine; Joe or Fred or Mike or something, who cared. He used to be kind of cool, I guess, or at least not a booger-eating loser. Then he'd started showing up at school in a T-shirt with some grey cross-eyed pony on it-- what the hell did 'Derpy Rules" mean, anyway?-- and that was it. He was a laughingstock by the end of the day.

What made it worse is that he didn't seem to care. It made me wonder if he was retarded or something.

I gave him the once over (side note: black darth vader mask with glowing glass eyes; perfect stone face for scoping people out). He'd done a good job on the costume; that sort of made it worse. He'd used white body paint on his face and arms, his hands painted black; his face was touched up a little bit to make it look more "horsey." He had a pretty good prosthetic horn and ears sticking out from under his tousled blue wig. The wig ran down the back of his neck and down his spine between his shoulders. It was actually glued in place, making it into a sort of mane. He had a pony tail of the same blue color, as in an actual tail, not the hairdo, and he was wearing boots that made his feet sort of look like hooves. The rest of his outfit was a cheap off-the-shelf suit of roman centurion armor.

"What the hell are you supposed to be?" I blurted out.

"A gaywad!" someone in the surrounding crowd shouted.

Everyone hooted. Joe, or Fred-- Nick, that was his name, Nick-- just snorted and brushed himself off. He gave me the once-over right back. "Ted?" He said, his brows furrowing. "That you in there?"

I froze briefly. "Yeah, it's gotta be you," Nick laughed. "Only Ted would put that much hardcore effort into a Halloween costume. So what's up?" This is what made him personally annoying. He was still all the time trying to hang around me, too, howdy, hi, how ya doing, wassup, acting like we were best buds or something. "Hey, have you seen my date?"
"Date?" I repeated.

"Yeah. She's wearing a Rainbow Dash costume?" he said. Like I knew who the hell Rainbow Dash was. And furthermore, yeah, girlfriend. Right.

"Look, I don't know you, dude," I said. My voice rasped through the microphone.

"Sure, we got lockers next to each other. Heck, my Mom knows your Mom--"

"I said I don't know you, man," I growled.


"What?"

"The alicorn amulet." He pointed at my collarbone. "So what, you're supposed to be Darth Trixie, or something?"

"Wha--?" someone around us got the joke and laughed. I didn't. I could hear a couple of the kids standing round making remarks and laughing.

Nick started to laugh. "Dude, you don't know what that is?" he said.

The zombie/maid hottie rolled her eyes and backed away from us both. Great. Loser by association. I got pissed. Nothing makes me madder than people making fun of me with references I don't understand. We were near the edge of the party, out by the woods. I grabbed the dork by his arm and dragged him off to the treeline. Once we were out of earshot I let him go and glared at him. "The hell?" He said, rubbing his arm.

"What is wrong with you?" I snapped. "Don't you get what a freak everyone thinks you are?"

Nick rolled his eyes as he kneaded his shoulder. "Why no, Ted," he said. "I never would have guessed that. Thank you for pointing that out, you are so insightful. And I should care, because?" He looked at me.

"And you don't?" I said.

"Hey, what would be the point?" Nick shrugged. "Look, I'm not a dummy. Most fanboys-- Trekkies, Anime fans, Furries, whatever-- get all hurt and outraged when nobody treats them like the rare and precious snowflake they think they are. But I knew the moment I started watching the show that people would give me crap about it, and I accepted it. The real question is why do you care so much about what people think?"

"Look, dumbass, I don't get your stupid brony jokes, okay?" I said. "Just stay away from me and quit making me look like a loser."

Nick curled his lip at me. "Like you needed any help with that," he said. He flicked the medallion on my chest with a finger. "You don't want to hang out with Bronies, maybe you shouldn't wear a prop from the show around your neck."

"What?"

He laughed. "Ted, that's a replica of the Alicorn Amulet," he said. "It's from the third season of the
show. You might as well be wearing a day-glow t-shirt that says "Brony Fanboy" on the front."

What? I'd been walking around all night with gaywad pretty pony princess jewelry on my chest? I felt like an idiot; I'd picked up some sort of brony junk at the curiosity shop and riveted it to my three hundred dollar costume without even realizing it. I felt my anger just explode. I swore and grabbed the medallion, trying to tear it off.

Trying, I said, because it didn't budge. "The hell?" I muttered, giving the thing a yank. Nope, it wouldn't budge. Baffled and frustrated, I tried to pull off the gorget it was riveted to, instead. That wouldn't come off either! I went from angry to furious. I must have gotten glue on the stupid seams or something. I flipped up my visor so I could get my fingers under the collar at my chin.

Nick's face went from amused to surprised. "Whoa," he said. "How'd you get your eyes to do that?"

"What're you talking about?" I snapped, still pulling mightily at the collar. What the hell was this thing made of? I thought it was plastic-- but it felt as tough as steel!

"Your eyes. They're all red-greeny-purple, like in the show--"

"Will you shut up about your damn cartoon show?" I yelled. I felt my temper go up in a ball of flame like a frozen turkey dropped in a deep fryer. I was grappling double-handed with the gorget, doing a frenzied dance trying to pry the thing and the medallion on it off my neck. My little performance was gathering an audience. A girl came running up and took Nick by the arm. "Nick, what is it?" she said. Well dang, the mythical missing girlfriend. Even in my aggravation I noted she was darn cute. She was wearing a rainbow-colored wig with a matching horse tail, blue feathered angel wings, and a blue leotard decorated with yellow lightning bolts. Sonofagun, a brony chick. The myths were true.

"Dunno, I told him he was wearing an alicorn amulet and he started doing this," Nick answered. "Ted, what's wrong?"

More kids gathered. I started cussing and swearing for all I was worth. When I ran out of curses I started stringing words together at random. I think I spoke in Klingon at one point. The kids standing around gawping at my display backed off a step. I didn't even notice. I didn't even notice the sickly purple-greenish illumination, like some sort of weird inverted black light, shining on them.

I certainly didn't notice that the weird light was coming from me.

"Omigawd, it's real!" the cute brony girl suddenly shrieked. "It's the real Alicorn Amulet! Just like in the show!!"

"What?"

"Look at his eyes!"

Something in me, I dunno, it was like something came uncorked. My guts just flooded with rage. "!#$^#% your stupid pony crap!" I snarled, wheeling on them. Everyone took a serious step back. Whoa. That voice changer was effective. "#$%^ your stupid ponies! If I could I'd burn that stupid airy-fairy ponyland to the ground and pee on the ashes just to see the looks on your stupid faces!"

Yeah, it was complete overreaction. But hell, I was a junior in high school still, and here I was doing the I'm-on-drugs-get-the-spiders-off watusi with a couple of my little pony fans in front of the entire school. I still had another year and a half of high school to look forward to and my rep was
undergoing a ritual killing right in front of me. So, not a happy place.

There was a loud roaring sound; wind suddenly sprang up around us, stirring up a torrent of leaves and dirt and whipping cloaks and other loose bits of costume around in the air. It was like someone had opened a wind tunnel. Weird light the color of a festering bruise bathed everyone. We all looked up. Several people screamed; a black-light colored funnel cloud a dozen yards across had formed directly overhead. I could see more purple-black glowing light glowing in the depths of its throat.

Directly over my head.

Before I could do more than scream (thank God my voice changer made it sound like a much more manly roar) I was plucked off my feet by the roaring wind and hurtled into the sky. The last thing I saw before I disappeared into the dark whirling void was Nick and his brony girlfriend staring up at me, mouths hanging open. Then the funnel closed and I was hurtling through blackness.

Well, not blackness blackness. It sort of looked more like the sort of "darkness" you get on a black-light poster; black boiling clouds interspersed with lots of luminescent tinged linings of indigo, purply lightning veins, flecks of bilious green. Afterward I would reflect that it seemed there was an artist with a very limited palette involved in the whole mess. At the time though I was too busy grimacing and screaming to appreciate the thematic continuity.

I hurtled.. or fell... or... flew... for-- I dunno... a brief bit of forever. All around me the darkness, it, it raged. I could feel it. It was like the universe itself had a hole torn through it, and I was plunging through it.

Then the purpling void opened up in front of me and I fell. I had just enough time to appreciate the still, starry night around me before I noticed the ground rising up to meet me at speed. I started to scream again-- I think I managed to get out "Aihee" before I slammed face down, full length, into the very, very hard ground.

Pain. Pain, pain, painy pain pain. Every part of me hurt simultaneously. At least all my spiky pads had protected me. Though I was kind of regretting not going for the armored codpiece after all... I rolled over slowly onto my back, groaning, and pulled off my helmet so I could clutch at my head unimpeded.

I looked up just in time to see my missing skull-topped staff plummeting out of the sky, skull first, straight towards my unprotected face.

"Oh sh--"

then forehead met forehead and the world went sincerely dark.
I don't know how long I was out cold. I just know I woke up with a splitting headache, staring up at
the night sky. It looked... odd. I couldn't tell you why. Too bright, I think. Too purple-y. Whatever. I
wasn't in a state to think it over though. I blamed it on being dazed from the blow to my forehead,
and sat up.

I groaned and carefully felt my head with one hand-- then tried again, this time removing the metal
gauntlet first. No blood, no bones shifting around or soft spots or anything. Nice big fat goose-egg on
my forehead though. I guessed I was okay. I retrieved my helmet, gingerly putting it back on. If
current events were any indicator, my head probably needed the protection.

I got to my feet, wobbling a bit. I pulled a flashlight out of my belt (safety first, kids) and took a wary
look around. I was in a grassy clearing, surrounded on all sides by trees. Behind me was a statue of...
a winged horse? I did a double take. Yep, a winged horse. Winged unicorn, I corrected. Wearing
armor. I looked closer; it had fangs, too... the hell? What kind of lawn ornament was this?

Where the heck was I? I didn't know of anybody who'd plant something like this in their back yard.

There was a noise out among the trees. I turned and saw lamplight in the distance. Something told
me I'd better be careful; wherever the heck I was, I sure wasn't invited, and I was pretty sure
whoever owned this place wasn't expecting guests. Or maybe they were--- and considering how I'd
arrived, that didn't seem like a real good thing either. I switched off my flashlight, turned off my
glowing eyes, and hid behind the base of the statue, my back to the cold stone, hoping my all-black
costume would disappear in the shadows.

Beams of lamplight started flickering across the clearing. I heard people chattering, mostly children.
They were all chattering about what a great haul they'd gotten, and a couple of grownups telling
them to all stay together.... Trick or treaters? I got sucked up by some weird evil black portal through
time and space just to be dropped on some trick or treaters? I stayed hidden and listened as the
children came tumbling into the clearing.

After a few second a female voice spoke. "All right children, it's time for the Nightmare Night story.
Everyone gather round and listen to Zecora." Nightmare Night? Zecora? Another woman spoke up,
this one with a much deeper voice and the fakest African accent... I'm serious. I know people like
this. Black people who change their name to "Kumbaya" or whatever and try to talk like they hang
out in Mother Africa with Nelson Mandela.

"Follow me and very soon you'll hear the tale of Night Mare Moon. Listen close my little dears, and
I'll tell you where you got your fears, of Nightmare Night, so dark and scary. Of Night Mare Moon,
who makes you wary..."

I rolled my eyes and stifled a groan. Some parents or teachers were doing some sort of "oh how
cute" little halloween outing for a batch of rugrats, complete with a cutesy poosy little ghost story. In
rhyme. I listened in... unwillingly... while Sister Shaka Zulu went on, Doctor Seussing the kids about
some boogyman she made up called Nightmare Moon, and hoo boy, you better fork over some
candy as tribute to the statue or she'll get mad-- all of it in rhyme, of course. I'd heard variations of
that old wheeze when I was a kid. I had always loved it when they'd done that with us; it had meant
I'd be sneaking back after everyone left and scoring an entire extra bag of free candy.

Then came offering of the tribute. I hunkered down as small as I could while I listened to the kids shuffle up through the fallen leaves to drop their loot at the foot of the statue. I wasn't feeling sentimental or anything, but popping out of the shadows and accidentally scaring the tootsie rolls out of a bunch of trick-or-treaters and getting the adults all mad at me was a headache I didn't want. I would just wait until they dropped their candy and left. Of course then I'd be swiping some of it for myself, but hey.

The little rugrats were taking forever, it seemed like. Apparently the kids were a bunch of marshmallows, and were scared of the statue. I could hear the adults chivvying some of them to man up and walk up to the statue. After about the fourth kid had to be wheedled into making the march up, I started getting impatient. "Jeez, already," I grumbled. "Get it over with would ya--"

Did I mention I forgot to turn off the voice-changing microphone in my helmet?

My words came out in a bass rumble loud enough to hear across the clearing. I slapped my hand over my facemask, but it was too late. I heard the crowd on the other side of the statue gasp. Some of the kids let out little screams. Aw sh$%t.

"Somepony's back there!" I heard a little girl shout. (somepony?) Footsteps pattered through the leaves and a flashlight beam bobbed, heading around the statue in my direction.

"Sunny, no, stay back!" Whoever Sunny was she didn't listen. Crap, they would have some brave little idiot in the group. I braced myself for what was coming and turned to get to my feet, just as the kid came galloping around the statue.

Then my brain broke.

It was a pony. A cartoon pony, one that came up no higher than my knee. She had bright pink fur and a bright yellow mane and huge blue cartoony eyes. And she was wearing a bumblebee costume. She had paper bags slung over her back like a pair of panniers, and she was carrying a flashlight in her mouth.

It... I just... I swear, I could literally hear my brain make a sound like a cartoon spring shooting out of the back of a cartoon clock. I dunno, I think it was just all those things at once that did it. I could have handled one or two of them; the fact she was tiny, or pink, or even that she was talking, for crying out loud-- but not all at once. I think it was the bumblebee costume that put it over the top, really. All of it together was like getting whacked in the face with a wet flounder.

I mean... a freaking bumblebee costume.

She froze and stared up at me. I froze and stared down at her. "What... the... HELL??" I bellowed. My voice changer made it come out like the bellow of a dyspeptic gorilla.

She screamed, the flashlight dropping from her gaping mouth and bouncing away across the grass. She spun around and galloped back the way she came.

I'd always wondered why Alice had chased after that rabbit. I mean, common sense tells you that she should have gone the other way. I think I understood where her head was, after that. You see something that unreal, it's like you just have to follow it, just to keep it in sight till your brain can decide whether it believes what your eyes are telling it.

I looked around the corner of the pedestal.
They were all ponies. Ponies or horses, whatever. There were about a dozen of them standing there, mostly little knee-high ones, but one or two who came up to about my waist. The adults, I figured. They were dressed in all sorts of costumes, and most were carrying bags of candy in their mouths. The adults were standing in front, pawing the ground, some of them had their horns leveled in my direction (Horns?!?) or flaring their wings at me. (Wings?!?!) Leading the group was a zebra in a witch costume. "Come out of there, you big disgrace! Quit hiding and show your face!" she shouted, in that pseudo-african accent.

Poleaxed, I came staggering out of the shadows after her, slapping the side of my helmet, trying to jar my brain back in place, accidentally turning my glow-eyes back on in my attempts to commit percussive maintenance on my skull. I looked up and knew a little head-slap wasn't going to fix things. Beep. We're sorry, the Ted you have dialed has been disconnected. Please try again later. Poit! I staggered out of the shadows and into the lamplight. "THE FUGG ARE YOU?" I screamed in Vader-ese.

The crowd... herd... got a load of me in my spike-studded death metal glory. All the foals screamed. "Suh-WEET Aunt Jemima's do-rag!" the zebra screamed, rearing with her eyes bugged out. "Aw HAIL no! Run for it, y'all!" All of them turned and ran in a stampede.

The screams and stampeding hooves faded in the distance. I don't know which way they went. I was too busy screaming and running in the other direction.

I ran off blind, gibbering and arghlebargling to myself as I flailed through the forest, tripping over rocks and banging headlong into trees. I was concussed, I was insane, I was drugged, that was it, Oh @#% someone had slipped me some acid at the party, that had to be it, LSD in that bottle of beer or mescaline in the mesquite barbeque...

I don't know how far I ran or how long, just that I kept going till I was so tired I couldn't run for all the stumbling. I finally regained some of my senses. This could not be happening, yes, I know it's a cliche', I know everyone says that in these stories but that's because all you can say when reality goes on a bender is THIS CANNOT BE HAPPENING, and it's a hell of a lot more meaningful when you're really going through it and not just sitting comfortably in a chair someplace reading about it with narrative omniscience on your side.

But whatever was happening, a piece of me knew I was panicking, and panicking was bad. I clutched the sides of my helmet with my hands."Get a grip, Ted," I said through gritted teeth, "Get a grip, get a grip, get a GRIP--" I was sliding into a panic attack--

And suddenly I... wasn't. For a real short second, the world around me went greeny-black-purple, like the lenses on my helmet had been tinted. This was it; a blood vessel must've burst in my brain....Then there was this sort of rush through my body, spreading out in a wave from my chest, and I was calm again.

I can't explain it or describe it. People don't do that. They don't go from having reality itself flipped upside down on them to being perfectly rational and adapted and crap. The thought about drugs at that party crossed my mind again; I haven't mellowed that fast since that time I went to the ER with a broken leg and the docs bombed me out on morphine. But I squashed that that thought as fast as I could with another: DEAL WITH IT.

I pushed that thought hard, squeezed out anything else that tried to sneak into my head. Whatever had just happened, had happened. It didn't matter if it was a dream or a hallucination or an acid trip or whatever. If I was going to survive I needed to stay calm and trust my senses. I was just going to have to ride it out.
The adrenaline crash hit me a second later. I had stumbled up to an enormous fallen tree, a hollow log big enough for a small car to fit in. Ignoring the smell of decaying wood, I crawled back into the dark and collapsed on the dry earth and grass inside. Pink and yellow ponies, black-light tornadoes, bumblebee costumes, all of it, I could deal with in the morning. I wrapped my ratty fake-fur cloak around me and was out in an instant.
I woke. It was morning. The birds were singing, the sun was shining in through the cracks in the hollow log and someone was pulling at my boots.

I carefully opened my eyes and looked out at the world through my helmet lenses. Something large and hirsute was hunched down at my feet, pulling at my stompy goth boots with enormous hairy paws. It looked about as large as an ape. Two others, slightly smaller, crouched behind it. I froze. I'd never had a run in with any wild animals before but I recalled the advice was to play dead. I lay doggo and held my breath.

My eyes focused a bit more and I nearly had another panic attack. These weren't bears or wolves or... *anything*. They looked like, well like really ugly junk yard dogs, with short mashed faces and mouthfuls of mismatched fangs that stuck out from behind their lips. Except... they were *bipedal*. Yeah. Two legs, two arms. They had hands, huge clawed hands and arms like Popeye. They had short tails with clubbed, spiky ends, and yellow eyes. They were wearing crude armor, breastplates of some sort that looked like they were banged together out of pot metal and old sewer lids. And they talked.

"Get the boots," one of the things grunted.

"Can't," the one yanking on my boots growled back. He sounded like Bobcat Goldthwait with a hangover. "All buckles, can't get 'em off!"

"Too dark in here, too small. Drag 'im out, we'll cut them off," the third one said, hefting a crude knife. "Get other stuff too." They seized my legs and started tugging.

That did it. Playing dead wasn't going to do it; these mutants looked perfectly capable of lopping my legs off just to get my shoes. I should have started hyperventilating right there. Instead, another wash of stay-frosty-itis rolled over me, and I decided that if the passive route wouldn't make them go away, it was time to be proactive. I had wired my voice-changer and my glowing eyes so that I had switches and a volume control in my gauntlet. Carefully moving my thumb, I flicked my eyes on, cranked the volume on my speaker to eleven, and sat up.

"WHO DARES DISTURB MY SLUMBER!" I bellowed as my eye lenses flared molten red.

The response was gratifying. The trio of dog-trolls things shrieked in terror and tumbled backwards out of the log, leaves and bark flying everywhere. I decided I'd better press my advantage. I grabbed my staff-- huh, I'd managed to hold onto it through all that mess last night-- and rolled out of my hidey hole. I sprang to my feet and brandished my staff, flaring my cape and trying very hard to look much bigger than I was.

The three dog-trolls cowered together in a ball and howled. The little one started squalling and ki-yi'ing like my grandma's ratty little pekingese when the cat went after it. Perfect; these things might've been ugly, but they were easily intimidated. The little one kept shrieking, the sound went right through my head like a railroad spike. Holy crap, I wanted to *punt* the little thing.

"SILENCE!" I roared. The howling and shrieking faded into quavery little whimpers. "Who are you?" I said, pointing my staff at them. "What are you??"
Cringing, the middle one prostrated himself. "W-we are Diamond Dogs," he said, his voice trembling. "I Skank. This one called Runt, him, Mange." He indicated the other two.

Diamond Dogs. Ohhhh...kay. Right. Wasn't that a James Bowie album or something? "And you were trying to steal my shoes because?" I demanded.

"Boots have shinies on them," One of the others, Mange I think, said. "We collect shinies for Big Boss." I looked down at my boots. Yeah, the buckles were sort of big and square and silvery. These dimwits probably thought they were silver. Their Big Boss was probably their pack leader. Okay, it was time to go fishing for some info.

"Where are we now? What is this place?" I said, waving my hand around, indicating the woods.

Skank started getting this crafty look on his face. I didn't think I liked that. "Ponies call this White Tail Woods," he said. "They live nearby in Pony town and-- GET HIM, GET HIM NOW!"

Now I'm no bad dude butt kicker, but I've been in a few fights, so I was smart enough not to cringe back and let them bulldoze me. I lunged forward instead, and punched the middle one, Skank, straight in the chest as hard as I could. There was a loud "BRANK", like someone punching in a car door with a sledgehammer, and the diamond dog went sprawling backward, a dent the size and shape of my fist in his breastplate. Crap, what was it made out of, aluminum?

I brought my staff around in a swing, cracking the skull across Mange's jaw. His head jerked to the side, then he shook it off, spittle flying, and came at me again. Crud.

It was at that point I decided to take advantage of a design flaw in their protective gear: they were only armored from the waist up. I brought my staff around in a golf swing, straight into Mange's nads. Ka-RUNCH. He moaned and dropped, clutching himself.

Runt tried to make a go for my leg then, snarling and yapping. I hauled back and punted him as hard as I could. I must have put some adrenaline behind it because he went sailing into the air off my boot and disappeared in the undergrowth twenty feet away, his ki-yi'ing dopplering into the distance. All of us gaped in the direction he'd disappeared in astonishment. Man, he'd caught some serious air. He must've weighed less than a Nerf ball.

I remembered what I was doing and returned my attention to the two fuglies lying at my feet. By that point I had a head of steam going. Skank seemed to be the leader. I planted my boot on the back of his neck, crushing his face into the dirt.

"You were saying?" I growled.


"You try that again and you'll find out how much mercy I don't have," I said, pressing down for emphasis. They said nothing. They lay there clutching themselves and looking at me with intimidated expressions that gladdened my happy little heart.

The next instant Runt came running back into the clearing, yelping like his tail was on fire. he threw himself into a huddle with the others. The shrieking was like nails on glass. "ARGH! Shut UP already!" I yelled at him, readying another kick.

He cringed back. "Mercy! Mercy!" He wailed. I held my kick back and he toned it down. "We gots trouble," he whimpered, looking back the way he came and shivering.

I caught a whiff of something on the breeze. It was like rotting leaves and compost and something else I couldn't identify. The dog-trolls could smell it too. I could see their noses wrinkling. They
started whimpering and moaning. Faint growls echoed through the trees.

"Timber wolves," Mange moaned.

"Lots and lots," Runt agreed unhappily.

I saw the eyes first. Dozens of pairs of glowing green eyes, appearing in the shadows all around us. I grabbed my staff in a two-handed grip and waited for their heads to poke out of the undergrowth. They drew closer, growling, and I realized— their heads were the undergrowth. They were made out of bark and leaves!

They slunk into the clearing and I got a good look. It was made of wood from nose to tail: bark, twigs, dead leaves, lengths of driftwood. Weird green light glowed where their eyes should be. I could see more of that same light seeping out between the bits of bark that made up their skin.

Timber Wolves. I got the joke. I wasn't laughing.

They formed a circle around us. The diamond dogs snarled at them; the timberwolves didn't look impressed. I could figure out what would come next. I'd seen it on Animal Planet. They would keep us surrounded, penned in. They'd take turns lunging at us, harrying us till they wore us down; then they'd pile on us and tear us apart. My heart was hammering in my chest. I was scared spitless...

...No. No, I wasn't. My emotions were backfiring again. I wasn't scared. I was pissed. Some little part of me took a moment to be confused by this— then the first wolf lunged. I brought the head of my staff around in a grand-slam swing. Boom, headshot.

The wolf's head exploded.

"The fuuu...?" I said. Gone, head go blooey. Bark and bits of rotten wood and leaves rained down. The wolf staggered in place, like it was confused. I caught it in the ribcage on the backswing. It burst like a lawn and leaf bag, rotten bark and punky wood going everywhere.

"Holy S@#!, they're nothing but wood!" I laughed. "Wood and @#$ all the way through!" I lit into the others, swinging like Babe Ruth on uppers. Limbs... heh, get it?... went flying everywhere. Three or four of them latched onto me, trying to bear me down. Their teeth barely dented my costume armor. I grabbed them in my gauntleted hands and smashed them against the ground, against the trees, against each other. It was compost carnage.

In a minute or so I'd busted the last of them to pieces. I smashed the last one's head on a rock and dusted my hands off. Holy @#$% that was satisfying. I dusted my gauntlets off. "So much for that," I said. I turned around, just in time to see the first one reforming.

The fugg?

A pile of leaves and wood and debris, shot through with green glowing foxfire, was slowly pulling itself together. The three diamond dogs were bashing away at it for all they were worth, but it wasn't doing much good; it was growing too fast. The head formed and snapped at them; they retreated, yelping. It finished forming and prowled towards us, a growl rumbling in its chest. It was bigger, much bigger. And it looked a lot tougher.

I looked back; the ones I had just smashed were pulling together now. It looked like the seven or eight timberwolves were now clumping into three, much larger ones. Their heads now came up to my chest. They pulled themselves up, fully formed, snarling.
Apparently they decided I was the bigger threat. They ignored the yelping diamond dogs and rushed me.

I lashed around me with my skull staff, cracking wood with every blow. Wooden, fanged jaws closed on my arm and leg. This time, it hurt. They snarled and savaged at me, bearing me down. I screamed in pain as I felt fangs pierce my costume armor and sink into my flesh.

Fire, I needed fire! I fished in my pocket for a lighter. It was Halloween; I'd loaded my pockets with odds and ends for cheap pranks, and a lighter was key to most of them. I got the lighter out just as a set of wooden jaws closed on my hand. Thinking fast, I rammed my arm down the monster's throat as far as I could and flicked the lighter. For a second the wolf stood there, doing its level best to tear my arm off at the elbow. Then the leaves and tinder mixed in with the chunks of wood caught smoke started rolling out of its nose and ears and it let go of my hand. It started doing a mad dance, shaking its head wildly as it caught fire from the inside out.

"HAH!" I gloated-- then I lost my grip on the lighter. I went to one knee as claws and fangs tore at me, watching helplessly as the little plastic lighter skittered away into the leaves.

One tore at my arm; the other lunged over my back, clawing and snapping at my face. Any second now and it would rip my helmet off and that would be it.

Rage exploded inside me. The world turned into swirls of greeny-purple-red-black. I hated those wolves, hated them more than anything in the universe at that moment. "Burn, you whores!" I roared, and rammed my clawed fingers into its throat. Wood crunched under my grip like balsa. I might as well have been squeezing a stump for all the effect it had on the timberwolf, though... then black flames burst from my fingers.

Nnnnot jet black, really. Bloody red, but shot through with black, sort of like molten lava looks, you know? It's hard to describe in words, but you'd know it if you saw it. Whatever it was, it certainly burned like ordinary fire; in an instant the timberwolf's head and neck burst into flame. Like,  

I let it go, and it fell to the ground, writhing and thrashing. It's head was already a blackened lump by the time its body caught fire.

I turned and saw the third one running away. "Oh not a chance," I said. I clutched the black flame in my hands and... threw it at the fleeing timberwolf. A jet of black flame streaked out of my hand and hit the wolf square in the ass. There was a FWACKOOM, and the timberwolf exploded in a ball of fire, burning wooden dog (dogwood, heh) shrapnel raining down everywhere.

I stood there for a minute, my lungs heaving, staring down at my hands. Blackish flames were still licking up and down my fingers. They didn't hurt. They weren't even singeing my gauntlets.

I had shot fire from my hands. FIRE. RED-BLACK fire. From my HANDS. It was about at this point that somebody decided that it was okay to freak out now.

"Who are you?" I heard Skank quaver.

I wasn't paying attention. I was too busy listening to my brain make that noise Beaker from the Muppet Show makes whenever Bunsen brings out a new experiment. MI MI MI MI MI MI MI MI.... "What?"

"Who? Who are you, Dark One?"

That pulled me out of it. Well, partway out of it. I was still silently going holy s@#$ holy s@#$ I have Dark Magical Powers holy s@#$.. Pieces of an idea started tumbling into place.
"I am...." I thought quick. I was still a little giddy from shock and power rush but Oh what the hell. "I am DARTH VADER." I pounded my fist against my chest. "...From the planet VULCAN!"

... Yeah. I know.

My mask must have garbled it. The three of them made some faltering attempts to repeat it, finally settling by consensus on "Darth Vulcan! Hail Darth Vulcan!" They kow towed and groveled.

I stomped over and picked up Skank by the scruff of his neck. "Now. Who do you work for?"

"We work for Big Boss. He makes us gather gems and shiny GAK." My fist around his throat changed his mind. "You, we work for you, you Big Boss now," he squeaked. I let up on his windpipe.

I let my eye lenses light up, bathing his face in their red glow. He couldn't see it, but I smirked in victory. "Good dog," I said.
I had my new flunkies make camp. They found a decent sized cave, made a fire, gathered some bedding, all with a minimal amount of squabbling, punching, and biting one another. When they started grumbling about being hungry, I started to order them to just shut up and go find something—then I recalled that these guys were idiots, and told them I’d find something myself. I was lucky; five minutes of marching into the brush and I heard clucking. Doggone if it wasn’t a chicken, sticking its head out of the bushes. Instead of running off, the darn thing reared up and glared at me, with little beady red eyes.

I froze, afraid to move for fear it would bolt. We stood there for several seconds, the bird glaring into my eyes, me glaring back. It was weird but, the longer we stood there the more agitated the bird seemed to get.

"Niiice chickie... gooood chickie..." Okay, fresh chicken, how to catch? On a whim, I lashed my hand out and made the classic Darth Vader choke-a-bitch gesture. A purple-black, smoky hand shot out of my fingertips, flew across the intervening distance, and gripped the bird around the neck with a choking grasp. Son of a gun. The bird started to flap and struggle; I twisted my wrist and it’s neck snapped. The light behind its eyes went out. I ripped its head off and dragged it out of the bush... nearly crapped myself when the long snake tail came out after it. For a second I thought a python had sneakied up and grabbed my chicken by the butt, and I was going to have to tug-of-war with it...

Celestia made a sound. I stopped. "What?"

"That creature... you do realize now that was a cockatrice," she said. I said nothing. "It's a dangerous reptile that lives in the Everfree," she continued faintly. She actually sounded a little awed. "It kills by locking gazes with its enemies. Anypony who looks into its eyes is turned to stone."
She stared at me. "How is it that you are not a statue even now?"

I mulled it over. " Probably couldn't lock eyes with me through my mask," I guessed. "Eye lenses. That's my best guess anyway." I pondered a moment. "I should have realized why they all looked so awestruck when I brought it back..."

After I realized I was holding one really large creature instead of one small dead one and one angry live one, I shrugged, threw it over my shoulder and dragged it back to camp. Skank skinned it and cleaned it, and we cooked it in chunks over the fire...

"You ATE it??"

"Well yeah, counting the tail that was a lot of meat..."

There was a long pause. Curiosity got the best of her. "So how did it taste?"

"I dunno, snakey-chickeny. Look, are you going to interrupt a lot?"

"Never mind. Continue."

Anyway, we ate our hearty meal of chicken-snake-on-a-stick. I made a point of eating mine out of sight of the others... They hadn't seen my face and I wanted to keep up the mystique a bit... and mulled things over.

Okay, I went off a little ways by myself and started playing with my new Dark Force powers. Blasting stumps and logs, throwing around boulders with my spectral ghost-y hands, whooping and giggling like a loon.

Oh, like you wouldn't. This was freaking awesome!

I even got a little constructive; I tore up some boulders and logs and stacked them up in a crude wall around our little cave entrance. It wasn't Fort Sumter or anything, but it was better than nothing. I got bored with that eventually, plunked my butt on a rock overlooking our camp and went back to brooding.

To start off with, I spent some time pondering my situation, and why I wasn't in freaking hysterics.

Okay, I mean, I'm not the most introspective guy in the world, but I knew myself well enough. Something seemed off. I mean, not 24 hours ago I was going ballistic because I thought I'd stuck girly jewelry on my costume by mistake and a pony-cuddling weirdo was hanging all over me. Then I'd been sucked into another world, run into talking mutant pony things, nearly been mugged by
talking mutant dog-troll things, nearly been eaten by piles of wood that thought they were a pack of wolves (they made a lovely fire by the way), and I'd shot dark, molten, deathmetal-looking FIRE out of my freaking hands. And now I was sitting here, looking up at the sky and digesting my dinner of demon-eyed snake-chicken, as calm as you please.

And that wasn't all of it. Okay, you know what the Uncanny Valley is? It's sort of this thing that explains why creepy dolls are creepy. What it is, is that they look *almost* right, *almost* normal... but just not quite. It's enough to set off your weird-o-meter and give you the heebie jeebies. Right?

Well it doesn't just apply to people or animals or.. animal-people. Everything has an uncanny valley. And everywhere I looked there were things sitting right square in the middle of it. The trees, the grass, the leaves, the clouds... *almost* looked normal. But just not *quite*. Even the sky, the color was off. A touch too vivid, a little too... *something*. I knew for a fact it should be making me spazz out, or putting me off my feed the more I looked at it. But whenever I tried to focus on that feeling, it sort of slipped away. I was upset, angry, honked off, and yeah a little scared, but I wasn't completely off my hinges like a normal person would be.

That by itself was unsettling me. It felt more and more like I was slipping into some sort of unreality....

Okay, time to reflect on a bigger issue. How I got here and how to get back. Same answer, as far as I could figure. It obviously had something to do with the medallion. And it was just as obvious that the medallion was what gave me these funky powers. But what was the connection? Who made this thing? How did I end up with it? Was it some sort of plan on someone's part? I obviously had to find whoever or whatever dragged me here and make them take me home. So the question was, how to go about finding out who they were and where?

I didn't get much thinking time in before Runt and Mange were fawning all over me. (Skank, it seems, was busy hammering the dent out of his crappy breastplate.) I swear, Diamond Dogs must have perfected the art of suck-up. They came cringing up to my makeshift throne and simpered at me. "Great Dark Master Vulcan is tired yes? Must want cushion for poor feet."

"No, I--" One of them picked up my feet while the other stuffed a wadded-up satchel under them, dropping my feet unceremoniously on it.

"Rub back?" Mange offered.

I considered his filthy paws. "No."

"Maybe want refreshing drink?" Runt offered, pulling out a canteen. He licked his slobbery lips.

"Not without a course of penicillin," I growled.

"Don't be stupid, Runt," Mange said. "He can't drink with his mask on!" He reached over to flip my helmet up.

"Hey!" I batted his paws away.

"Yeah, why you wear helmet all the time, Mighty Dark One? You burn your face or something--?"

While I was batting Mange's hands away, Runt reached over and flipped my face mask up. He took one look and shrieked in terror, covering his eyes. "AAAAH! IT HORRIBLE! IT TERRIBLE!"

Mange looked too and fell to the ground, ki-yi'ing and covering his eyes.

"What?? What what??" I yelped, feeling my face. Had that Dark Force stuff I'd done been literal, had it done an Emperor Palpatine to my face? I dug around in my cloak pockets and found a hand
mirror and held it up. My own regular, perfectly normal and totally non-mutated face looked back. I sort of thought I saw a purply glow at the corners of my eyes, but shrugged it off as my imagination. "Oh hah hah, very funny," I snarled, slapping my mask back down.

"Who said that was funny?" Runt whimpered. "It awful! Look like boiled monkey!"

I started to ask, but decided the better of it. I really didn't want to know how they knew what a boiled monkey looked like. "That's my normal face, you idiot. It's just hairless."

"But, but it covered with horrible pocks and boils," Mange whimpered.

"Those are called ZITS, you hairy retard," I snarled. I barely held back the urge to pummel them with my staff. They cringed down at my feet, whimpering. I looked at them in disgust. All the minions in two worlds, and I end up with the Three Stooges with fleas.

"All right, you lot," I said, unconsciously trying to rub my temples through my helmet. "Who around here does magic?"

They looked up at me. "Magic?" Mange said.

"Yeah, Magic. Like I do. Who's the big abra cadabra hocus pocus heavyweight around here? The big league wizard? The Sorcerer Supreme, the Big Magical Enchilada, last of the red hot Swamis, who?"

"Diamond Dogs don't do magic, Master," Runt said unnecessarily. "It the ponies who do all magic."

"Ponies." I said. Like the ones I saw last night. Like the ones...

Yes, it was only right then that I realized that the ponies I saw the night before were the same ones as that stupid cartoon show back on earth. It was probably my mind trying to protect itself from burning out. I was in a cartoon show?? I looked around again. It certainly didn't look like a cartoon. I mean, everything looked real, nothing looked cel shaded or anything. But yeah, talking pastel colored ponies with big heads and huge honkin' eyes, with cutesie pootsie names and going on tricks or treats and holy crap I was in a cartoon--

"I need to lie down a minute," I said. I walked down into the camp and back into the cave. Mange and Runt hastily made a bed for me out of dead leaves and gunnysacks. I lay down on it while the world spun.

Skank made a reappearance. "What wrong with him?" he asked as he picked at the banged-out dent on his chest. The others shrugged.

"I'm meditating," I snapped. "Sit." They sat around me. I tried to remember everything I knew about the My Little Pony cartoon. "Okay, I'm going to ask some questions," I said. "Answer everything I ask. Don't ask any questions, just tell me what I want to know.

"What is this land called, and who rules it?"

After a couple hours of methodical questioning, I managed to piece together the basics. What they told me pretty well meshed with what I knew; this was the magical land of Equestria, run by magical
pony princesses, one who raised the sun, one who raised the moon, and... a couple others, the dogs weren't sure what they did. The land was full of unicorn ponies, pegasus ponies, and, well, pony ponies. Other than the Princesses, the unicorns were the ones who did all the magic, the pegasi handled the weather, pushing clouds around and stuff, and the regular ponies did all the farming. (I snorted at that; three guesses who the peasant class were.) They lived in a peaceful kingdom that ran on Friendship and Harmony, and (from what my flunkies told me about the nearest town) solved all their differences with warm hugs and parties. The unicorns were also apparently really loud and whiny.

As I listened, I slowly calmed down. The world stopped spinning. I guess after a certain level of crazy gets thrown at you, you can't help but acclimate. So I was stuck in a little girl's cartoon land. A cartoon land full of sugar-coated, bambi-eyed effeminate pastel mini-horses with pixy-dust magical powers. This was weirder than any dream or drug trip I could imagine....

I started getting mad. I'd seen enough crappy saturday morning cartoons to know how this had probably gone down. Some ninny pony with cotton candy for brains named Poopsy Candybutt or whatever had gone playing about with some magic MacGuffin and accidentally summoned me to this world. Or, on second thought, it was probably a villain. Yeah, some villain about as scary as a sofa cushion who wanted to steal all the world's smiles or something gay like that.... and had probably tried to fiddle faddle about with some magic mirror or something and accidentally yanked my butt over here.

And here I was. With minions at my disposal and the powers of Darth Vader at my command. In a world where the natives probably thought Gargamel from the Smurfs was an epic level villain.

"Wait'll they get a load of me," I said.

I started to chuckle to myself. The dogs shot looks at each other. I sat up suddenly, making them jump. "You said there was a Princess in Ponyville?" I asked.

Skank nodded. "Purple pony, with wings and a horn," he said. "She lives in a tree."

What I said next made their faces drop.

"Well," I said. "It's time I got a few answers. Saddle up, boys, we're going to town."

It was a bit of a walk. We had to trudge along for well over an hour before we came to the first road, and then an hour after that of trudging along an empty dirt road. Note to self: get a magic carpet or a Diamond Dog pulled chariot or something. Walking everywhere was lame. Already things were looking twee; the fallen leaves were vivid, glowing shades of red and orange, pretty birds were chirping and cheeping everywhere, and there were flowers still in bloom alongside the road with petals as large as my thumb. Even the grass was a rich vibrant green. The sides of the road soon began showing quaint little split-rail fences, and off over the hills were checkerboard fields, with perfect golden bundles of cornstalks like I hadn't seen anywhere outside of a grade school coloring book.

The more we walked, the more nervous the Diamond Dogs got. They were obviously not comfortable this close to a pony town. They had armed themselves with wooden cudgels, and were trooping along behind me, looking back and forth nervously as we saw more and more signs of
civilization.

I didn't give a crap. If they were such wusses that candy-colored ponies intimidated them, then maybe it was time for a human to show them the light.

As for me, I was in a mood. I'd started out just irritated. Getting abducted by a magic vortex and dumped in a forest will do that to you. But the longer I walked, and the more signs of sugarbowl cuteness I saw (cute puffy clouds, ridiculously large fluttery butterflies), and the more I brooded on what had happened, the angrier I got. Just angrier, and angrier, and ANGRIER... It was like the world was rubbing its cloying sweetness in my face. Even the air smelled too sweet...

No, wait, that was the smell of a bakery.

We topped the last hill and Ponyville came into view. I literally reeled back a step. It was like getting smote in the eyeballs with a fistful of melted skittles. It was just... so... treacly. Cute little lopsided houses with thatched roofs, shops made up to look like carousels and jester hats and-- yes, there was the bakery I'd smelled earlier, good gawds it was a giant gingerbread building-- hearts and flowers and pink thises and thats and all of it in bright sugary pastel colors and ARGH!

Set it on fire, purge the world of it!

And trotting about in the streets were ponies. Waist-high stallions and mares, knee-high colts and fillies, some of them wearing cute little clothes, all of them in bright eye-hurting colors, over there a flying pony ever so cutely pushing a puffy little cloud into just the right position in the sky...

"It looks like Walt Disney threw up," I said. The diamond dogs looked at each other and said nothing.

Time to go put the fear of God into the natives. I marched down the hill, thumping the butt of my staff on the ground, my not-so-loyal minions trailing reluctantly along behind me.

All of a sudden I went from angry to seething. At this cloying syrupy world, at all these insipid cartoon ponies. It was just too much. It was bad enough in my world, but there you could turn it off. You could change channels, or go to a different movie theatre, or just stay away from the store aisles or the amusement parks or anywhere else they tried to throw this saccharine sweetness at you. Here it was everywhere, surrounding you, emasculating you. It was like chewing fistfuls of raw sugar.

All the ponies in the street saw me. They stopped in their tracks and gaped at us... gaped at me... as we strode into town.

I choked down my bile, marched to what I figured was the town square, cranked up the volume on my voice changer, and banged my staff on the ground. "ATTENTION!" I said. "I AM DARTH VULCAN! WHERE IS YOUR PRINCESS? I WANT TO SEE HER RIGHT NOW!!"

Then the screaming started.

All of them, every last pony, started shrieking like Satan himself had planted his cloven hoof in their town square, and ran off in every direction. Some of them ran into buildings and slammed the doors. Others just seemed to be running in random directions. Three mares running flower stands started shrieking and just-- passed out. Just boom, over like someone tipping cattle.

Cheezy Cripes. These ponies were wussies! "Oh for f--" I started to say, then gave it up for a lost cause. The three amigos huddled together behind me, clutching their cudgels and looking scared.
"What now, Dark Master?" Runt said.

"Gimme a minute," I grumbled. I would have said more but a rainbow streak suddenly hit me in the head. I went sprawling; helmet or no, that had rung my bell. "The fuh?"

"HAH! That'll teach ya to mess with Ponyville!"

I looked up. Hovering over me was a bright blue pegasus mare with a rainbow-striped mane. "What the hell was that for?"

She flew down and got in my face. "I'M asking the questions around here, pal!" she shouted in her squeaky-raspy voice. "You're gonna tell me who you are, and then you're gonna come quietly or--"

I saw red. Then I saw purple. This overgrown plush toy was going to talk smack to me? I lashed out; black crackling energy wrapped around her, pinning her wings to her side and dragging her out of the sky. "I am Darth Vulcan," I vader-growled in her face, "and I am nobody to mess with." I stood up and rattled her like a maraca in my energy-grip. "NOW WHERE IS YOUR PRINCESS? I think I got a BONE to pick with her!"

She was tougher than her neighbors, I'll give her that. "In Canterlot, if it's any of your business," she said, scowling at me. "What's it to--" She looked at my neck and her eyes went round...er. Impressive, considering how honkin' huge they already were. "W-where did you get that amulet??" she yelped.

"Pawn shop, if it's any of your business," I retorted. "What do you know about it?"

She got a triumphant look on her face. "Look it up in a book, you wanna find out," she said. "You're getting nothing out of me, Dork Vulcan." She smirked in my helmet's face.

That tore it. I went from angry to psycho. Everything went purple-greeny-black again. That smug snotty attitude, like the little jerkoffs back at school... "Too bad," I said. I swung her overhead on a strand of dark energy like a ball on a tether and brought her down square on the nearest roof. She smashed through the thatch and and disappeared from view. Oughta bring the building down on top of her!

Okay, that may have been a bit much. The screams and panic redoubled.

I threw another spectral hand out and snared a pony running by. I dragged the struggling colt to me and bent over so I was face to face with him. He was a runty little palomino with a scruffy brown mane and wide frightened eyes. "Now for the last time, WHERE IS YOUR PRINCESS?"

"Princess Twilight? Sh-sh-she lives in the library, she practices her magic there--" the piebald colt stammered. He pointed down the street. I tossed him aside, sending him tumbling through the dust. He got to his hooves and ran for his life. I was already ignoring him.


"Come on, you lot," I said. The Diamond dogs obediently huddled around me. I looked back and flung a fireball at a couple of rooftops. Might as well keep the civil authorities busy when they arrived. I headed for the library-tree. I had a lead, at least. All this had something to do with the medallion stuck around my neck. Hopefully, failing an actual magic princess, there would be a book explaining this mess...
As I drew closer I suddenly had a brainstorm. A magic library... where she practiced her spells and magic... crap. I bet there were a ton of spellbooks in there. I could learn how to really use this thing. I could learn real magic...

I looked back. The town was in an uproar. I could see pegasi pushing clouds in and making them rain on the burning thatch (oy, even their fire department was whimsical.) I had time. "Guard the door," I told the threesome, and kicked it open.

I stepped inside and found myself in... a library. Books, shelves, et cetera. I shrugged mentally to myself. What had I been expecting? Standing in the middle of the room was a pudgy baby, I supposed dragon. he was scribbling something frantically in a roll of paper. My guess proved right when he blew out a puff of flame, burning the letter he'd just written to ash. He looked up and saw me just as the smoke vanished out the window. He nearly jumped out of his scaly skin. "What're you doing here??" he yelped.

I ignored the question. "Show me your grimoires," I said, looming over him. I did not have time for him to be giving me grief.

"Our wha?"

"Your spellbooks, your books of magic," I shouted, exasperated. Scared, he jumped to it and scurried to a shelf, pointing and then backing out of the way. I grabbed the largest one, that had to be a more comprehensive volume, and opened it up. I turned to the first page.

Nothing.

I stared at the page for a minute. I couldn't read it. It was in some almost-English-looking alphabet that looked like something a toddler would scribble out when he was pretending to write like a grownup. It was gibberish.

I tried the next one. Same story. The one after that... different font, but same arghlebargle alphabet. I saw one with a picture on the cover, maybe I could figure something out from the pictures... nothing. The pictures were clear enough, but they meant nothing without the captions. Still more gobbledegook. It wasn't written in English, none of them were written in English, never mind that was what everybody in this stupid world spoke, of course it wouldn't be written in English.

"AARRRRGGGH!!" I shouted, sending the midget dragon running for its life. Skank, Mange and Runt came crashing in at my shout. I had a sudden flash of hope; I held the open book out to them. "Can you read this?" I demanded. "Any of you?"

The three shook their heads. My hopes were immediately dashed. I growled in frustration. No princess, no magic books... I had to salvage something from this--! "Get your bags," I said. "Take the books off this shelf. All of them." The three looked at each other. "They're magic books, @#$^ it, we'll figure out how to translate them later! Move it!" They hustled to obey.

"Hey, you can't take those--" the dragonling shouted, emerging from under the writing table. I scorched the wall over his head with a blast of black fire. "Then again this is a lending library..." he said, disappearing back into his hiding place.

We left the library with bags laden with books. It was time to make ourselves scarce. Maybe we should loot a couple more places for supplies on our way out, I reflected--

Who should we meet outside but six mares, among them the pegasus I’d body-slammed into a house. She was looking a little worse for wear. They were led by none other than the very purple winged
unicorn I'd been looking for. At least to judge by the tiara, anyway. She did not look to be in a talking mood. "HALT, EVILDOER!" she shouted, her horn glowing.

The orange one wearing a cowboy hat was standing there, twirling a lasso overhead. How did she do that with no hands? That had to be putting a crick in her neck. Wow, was my brain off on rabbit trails or what. "Just stay down, feller, and we won't have to hurt ya," she said. A texas accent?

"Much," the rainbow one snarled.

"Be careful, darling, he certainly isn't going to surrender easily!" ...aaaand an upper crust New England accent, of course. Why not?

Nope, not in a talking mood. "Get back," I thundered (my volume was still on full. I'd forgotten to turn it down.) "I'm in no mood for this!" I brandished my staff. Black lightning crackled around the skull.

"He's attacking!" the blue pegasus yelled. "Let's blast him, guys!"

Blast?

The six of them-- even the ones without wings-- rose into the air. I noticed then that they were all wearing necklaces with glowing gems in them. From the same maker as the alicorn amulet maybe? Oh this was not good.

"We're going to anyway, Rainbow Dash," the purple princess one said. "The Alicorn Amulet has corrupted him. Don't worry, strange creature; the Elements of Harmony will purge your body and mind of the Amulet's dark power--"

Purge my mind...? Oh crap. I remembered something about the show just then from the internet. The Elements of Harmony, some sort of happiness-and-sunshine magical doodads, the "Orbital Friendship Beam" that purged all the darkness inside the bad guys and filled them full of friendship and tolerance. A brainwash machine with a high-pressure hose.

F@#$$. I was about to get a high speed candy-powered frontal lobotomy.

The necklaces and tiara blazed with light. The winged unicorn's eyes turned white. A rainbow like God's finger arced up from the six and came smashing down on me....

I think I wet myself. I know I screamed.

Did you ever bite down with a rotten tooth on something cold and sweet? Or get real dumb as a kid, try to sniff at your mom's perfume, and get a snort of it right up your nose? Or eat a whole can of buttercream frosting at one go? When that rainbow of harmony hit me, it felt/tasted/smelled like that through my whole body. Every tissue in my body was gagging on the glurge of it. I could feel it scouring away my brain, leaving nothing behind but smoothed off corners and vapid, empty thoughts. This was it, I would be left a drooling, smiling simpleton, propped up in a corner, staring at the happy butterfly pattern on the wallpaper....

"Did it work?"

"I don't know.."

"Be careful!"

Then it stopped. I came to my senses. I was on my knees in front of them, holding onto the grass to
keep from falling off the surface of the planet. Slowly my fluffed-up brain squeezed itself back down to the size of my skull. The first clear thought in my head was:

Blind, murderous rage.

"You... little... VERMIN!" I screamed. Purple-red-green-black energy just exploded out of me in every direction. The six of them went flying in every direction, only stopping when they smacked into something immobile. They slumped to the ground, dazed.

The princess was the first one on her feet. "It didn't work!" she said.

"Well no s@#$," I sneered, and hurled a fireball at her.

She threw up a force field before it reached her, stopping it cold. But it felt good to see her flinch when it hit. The little turds had tried to turn me into a pablum-sucking baby because I scared them!

Break their necks, burn them, crush them, leave nothing but ashes!

I did not want to stick around for another blast. I had to get out of there, and like five minutes ago.

"The Elements didn't work! We have to take him down ourselves!"

Hah, a bit of good news. At least I wouldn't get blasted like that again. There was no way these bambi-eyed blobs of moe fluff could--

A purple ray hit me square in the chest and launched me down the street. I hit the dirt fifty yards from where I'd been standing. Ow. "Stay down and don't move!" Princess Periwinkle shouted, flying up and landing a few yards away, her horn still glowing.

Definitely time to leave. I fumbled in the pockets lining the inside of my cloak, hurting for an idea. A smoke bomb? No, these little things wouldn't even conceal me, much less cover my retreat. Wait, what if I magically boosted them somehow? Could I do that? Nothing lost if I tried, I figured. I used darkfire to light the fuse and then poured all the black energy I could into them.

"He's up to something, blast him again, Twi!" The rainbow one yelled. I was really starting to hate that one personally.

I let the fuses burn down to the last centimeter, then threw the smokebombs at their feet. My trick worked. Holy cow did it work. The four little smoke bombs burst with a FOOMP, and billowing clouds of purple-red-green-black smoke covered... everything. I mean everything; I think half the town filled with roiling evil looking clouds, clear up to the rooftops. Man, if I ever got home with this amulet I was going to have a field day.

Everyone started choking and gagging. Except me. Hurray, mask filters. For a second I panicked, wondering how I'd find the trio in all this billowing black fog, then I realized that I could still see through it. It was like looking through a lens filter, but I could still more or less see. I found the three, still huddled together where I left them, still holding our 'loot.' I grabbed them by the collars (actual dog collars, go figure) and tried to figure out our escape.

There was no way we could escape on foot. The smoke screen wouldn't last forever and I seriously doubted we could outrun horses on foot, even short little pony ones, and never mind the ones with wings. Magic time again. I mentally crossed my fingers. Whirlwind. I swept my cloak around in a circle, focusing hard. No dark energy this time. Not much anyway, just a few dark sparkles. But a whirlwind formed around the four of us, driving the smoke back, and hurtled us into the sky.
Woohoo!

I had no idea what I was doing, I just hoped I wasn't screwing up some cosmic balance or racking up some sort of magical credit card debt I wouldn't be able to pay. I remember what happened to Facilier in the Princess and the Frog, after all.

More immediately I hoped I could steer this crazy thing. We raced away from Ponyville in a funnel of wind, the town shrinking behind us in seconds. I looked behind me to see how the diamond dogs were holding up, and nearly laughed. They were flying with their arms out, their tongues hanging out in the roaring wind and big goofy dog-grins on their faces. It must have been like driving in a car with their head out the window. They were having the time of their life.

I brought us down into the woods, close to where our campsite had been. Reentry was kind of a bitch. I lost control when we hit the treetops; we crashed through, landing in a shower of dead leaves, branches, books and diamond dogs in the mossy turf. We all lay there groaning.

Runt spoke up. "That was fun! Can we do that again, Dark Master?"

I chose to ignore him.
"Well, I think that will be listed as the first few of your crimes," Celestia said, her face stony.

"What, grand theft lending library?" I snorted. "I was attacked, I fought back, I ran."

"You set ponies' houses on fire," Celestia said, flaring her wings in anger. "Did you give no thought to the innocents inside? You would have left them to burn to their deaths!"

"It was just a little fire. " I protested. "I wasn't all---" I made fireball-throw-y gestures with my manacled hands. "Fwackoom, instant inferno. Just enough to set the very top corner alight, make a lot of smoke and junk. I'm not a complete lunatic." I'd lived through the fires in our state in the dry season, when the undergrowth in the forest would catch in a slow burn that crawled across the country. I'd helped my dad spray down our roof with a garden hose to keep it from catching. So long as you kept calm and kept your roof wet it wasn't a big deal. Honestly, anyone who lived with a HAYSTACK for a roof ought to be a little better at dealing with issues like that.

"That was hardly any comfort to the poor ponies whose homes you set alight," Celestia said. "The terror they suffered--"

I snorted again. "Spare me, Princess. Your precious ponies would go into stampeding hysterics at a bunny stampede. All I had to do was walk in town in a halloween costume and they went ballistic. They're scared of everything. And if I wanted to kill anyone, I wouldn't have set a couple of patches of wet thatch on fire. I would have flung a fireball inside."

Celestia gave me this incredulous look. She shuddered and turned away. "Your ruthlessness sickens me," she said.

"Yeah, take a guess how much that upsets me."

"My student's report says that after you attacked Ponyville, there was no trace of you for three days. What were you doing?"


Sulking.

Things had not gone according to plan. This world was a little girly cartoon land, wasn't it? I figured I'd just walk into town, bark a few words at the local big eyed talking animals, maybe throw around a few Dark Magic shock and awe, and intimidate them into giving me my ticket home. It hadn't occurred to me that the fluffy little magical things might be able to do something with all that magic besides throw tea parties. Consequence? I'd gotten my skinny butt kicked all over Ponyville by a purple pony princess.
And that rainbow beam... I still got the shudders whenever I thought of it. It had nearly turned my brain into a soft boiled egg. Nobody thinks about how a land of sweetness and light and happy puppies stays that way. But now I knew: by giving everybody's brain a nice thorough washing. I wondered if they went from door to door, or if they just gathered everybody in the town square once a month so they could use that rainbow on everyone all at once--

"That is not how we maintain harmony in our kingdom," Celestia snapped. "And the Elements of Harmony don't work that way."

"Really? Have YOU ever been zapped by it?" I retorted.

"...No," she admitted.

"Got no clue then, do you."

"We do not need," Celestia repeated slowly, "To brainwash ponies to make them want to be happy."

"But you sure need to in order to make them change back that way," I retorted.

Celestia gritted her teeth. "You can keep your opinions to yourself, villain," she said.

"Aww. But then how will you understand my deeper motivations and turn me into a sympathetic character?" I simpered. She bared her teeth at me. I remembered that horses could bite, and went back to telling my story.

It was the second day after we were routed. I was bathing down in the nearby creek-- even I was starting to notice my canned-in funk. I had managed to pry off my costume, even got the gorget off. But the damned medallion was still stuck on a chain round my neck. I washed my clothes out, and was in the process of giving myself a bath while they dried on the rocks. Need I remind you it was late autumn? Only my proctologist knows for sure how far my wedding tackle retreated into my torso before I finally climbed out of the freezing water.

It was when I was standing shivering on the shore, trying to muster the control to magically dry my clothes, that I realized I could have made a bath and heated the water with my magic. F@#%. A few minute's magically digging a crude pool in the floor of my cave, filling it with water and heated stones, and I was recuperating from my stupidity-induced freezer burn in a heated bath. It was much easier to think over my situation in comfort, let me tell you.

Anyway, I wasn't in the best of moods. They were bound to come after me. I'd spent the next day fortifying our encampment, replacing the fallen logs with ripped up boulders, topping the walls with sharpened stakes-- till it dawned on me that anything I could build with my magic, that princess pony could tear down with hers just as easy. When I realized that, I'd blown out an entire wall with my magic in my frustration. I rebuilt it anyway. It at least kept the timber wolves out.
It was stupid, anyway. I had three Diamond Dogs. Three. I could rebuild Castle Greyskull and it still wouldn't matter. What, I was going to hold off an army of angry magical unicorns with three diamond dogs?

At least it wasn't just a hole in the wall anymore. Diamond Dogs apparently could dig like a summabitch, and were at least passable and making lean-tos and crude huts. We had laid in a store of food, smoked and dried, thanks to a little fishing and hunting we did. We had a fire pit for cooking, and another pit for... well.

I took some time to sit down and go through my costume pockets and see if I might have accidentally brought along something that would give us an edge. That was how it worked, right? The modern-age dork gets transported to another dimension or an alien planet or travels back in time, and he uses the awesome futuristic stuff he just happened to bring with him to win the day.

Well, unless I was the secret love child of MacGyver and the Professor from Gilligan's Island, not likely. A wallet with about fifty bucks in tens, fives and ones, my driver's license and library card; three sticks of mint gum—man, I was gonna be wishing for a toothbrush soon; some loose change; book of matches and a cigarette lighter (some gags you can use a match as a fuse); couple tubes of superglue; a baggie of smoke bombs, bang snaps and firecrackers; a magic marker; a bus pass; a pencil stub; four AAA batteries; a prescription bottle with a few pain pills from when I'd busted my knee; a cheap swiss army knife; a little patch and sew kit in a baggie for if the costume got ripped or damaged; three or four SD cards for the cell phone I had forgotten and left at home (of course), a keychain with a "universal remote" that didn't work and a laser pointer with dead batteries; a couple of bandaids; some thumb-sized bottles of indelible dye; a miniature flashlight (which was what the AAAs were for) -- the roll of duct tape had some potential... one of those self-exploding super-fart-of-death bag bombs-- man those things were great, you broke the capsule inside and the baggie swelled up and burst and it made a smell like SATAN had ripped one...

Look, it was Halloween, all right?

What we were facing was a seriously lopsided strategic disadvantage. One guy with a magic medallion and three chickens in dog suits vs. every pastel pony on the planet. It didn't matter if they all were pansies. It wouldn't have mattered if they all had Down's syndrome. It was me, against an army determined to purge the world of my Un-Smurfy naughtiness.

An army...

*We need an army.*

"Skank!" I hollered. Skank came sidling into the cave, averting his eyes. And shielding them with a rag that passed for a towel. And flinching. The flinching was a bit much. Yes, they think I'm hideous, I get the joke. "Yes, oh mighty Dark Lord?" he said.

"Where is the rest of your tribe?"

"Tribe?"

"Yes, tribe. Wolves travel in packs, so do dogs. I don't think Diamond Dogs are much different. And three is a pretty small number for a pack. So where are the rest of you?"

"Told you," Skank grumbled. "They work for Big Boss..." He shuffled his feet.

"And you don't because?"

"Because we ran away and join you," Skank growled. Ah, hah. Thought so. The rest came out
quickly enough. "Big Boss make Diamond Dogs slaves. Makes us dig and dig for gems and gold and shinies, kills any who disobey or displease him." The big hairbag actually started whimpering and puddling up. "Never enough food-- Big Boss takes it all. Beats us, starves us... we hate Big Boss. HATE him." His teeth gleamed in the dark of the cave as he snarled. I actually felt a chill run down my back; it was easy to forget these guys were pretty much rottweilers with hands.

"Good." I got up out of my bath and took the tattered rag from him. Ugh. Forget it. I summoned a breeze and dried off that way, then began donning my costume again.

"....Good?" Skank asked in disbelief.

"Good," I repeated. "Because I don't want to worry about any dogs loyal to Big Boss jumping me when my back is turned." I slipped the gorget under the medallion, and clamped my helmet on. "Let's go get the others." My altered voice echoed in the cave.

I stepped out of the cave into the sunlight, Skank at my side. Runt and Mange came scurrying up, curious. "Get your weapons, get your armor," I said. "We're on the move."

They looked at each other, then around at the camp. "Where we going?" Mange asked.

"You're taking me to Big Boss," I said. "I'm going to kick his ass and then we're going to free the Diamond Dogs."

They were pretty enthusiastic about the news. They flung themselves at my feet, yelping and whimpering and groveling, wagging their tails. "Yes! Dark Master Vulcan will free us! Dark Master Vulcan will save us!"

"No more Big Boss! Hurray for new Master Darth Vulcan!"

It was a day's journey from where we were, to where Big Boss held the rest of the Diamond Dog pack. All along the way I pumped the three for information. There were about a hundred Diamond Dogs, all adult. Mostly males, a few bitches. Diamond Dogs send out their adult males to dig mines and hunt for gems, the females and pups staying at home to tend the hearth fires. Skank's group had been on a particularly good vein of gems when Big Boss found them, killed their alpha and put himself in as top dog. They'd been busting their hump for him ever since. When they weren't working the mine, they were sent out by Big Boss to scrounge, steal and loot for more "shinies." Everyone was too afraid to oppose him or disobey him or even to run away-- he killed anyone who displeased him, cooked them and ate them while the others watched. Running away just got you hunted down. The only reason Mange, Skank and Runt had stuck with me was the dim hope that my magic would protect them.

Whoa. Looks like back stage Ponyland just got grimdark.

He had no lieutenants. He didn't need any. Obedience to the Alpha ran that deep in the bone for them. Noone was close to as strong as him, not even a bit, so noone challenged him for Alpha.

This was going to be fairly straightforward. I walk into camp, magically bitchslap the biggest dog there into oblivion, and the others follow me instead of him.

We arrived at Big Boss' territory that evening. It was an enormous cave at the foot of a mountain, with mine cart tracks running in. I could see Diamond Dogs scurrying in and out with loot bags on their backs. Skank hadn't been exaggerating; they all looked pretty ragged and underfed.

We were hunkered down at the top of a rise, watching the goings on. "What we do?" Runt whispered.
I realized I was hunkered down with them. Wouldn't that look good; the Dark Sith skulking around like a burglar. I deliberately got to my feet and planted my skull staff. "We walk in, kick ass, take names, and rule," I said, and started stomping my way down the hill. The trio yelped in dismay and followed after me.

There was a tunnel, large enough for a subway train, that wormed its way back and forth and down into the mountain, lined with torches of glowing crystal. Diamond dogs stared and scattered as I marched into the mine. Too tired, hungry, or scared to do anything, I supposed. They watched us pass with eyes that glowed in the torchlight.

We reached the last turn in the tunnel before I heard the voices. Someone big, loud, and in charge was berating the staff for falling behind on schedule. "This last week has been pitiful," the voice said, booming in the echoing tunnel. "Barely a morsel!"

"But Big Boss," someone quavered in a gravelly voice I'd come to associate with Diamond Dogs. "Veins are playing out! We find less and less, because there IS less and less."

"Then work harder! Dig longer!" the voice roared.

"But workers starving," the second voice protested. "It been so long since we have meat. flour is rotten, not enough food... "

"Eat grass, eat stones," the voice said, bored. "What should I care? Your bellies are your problem. Meet your quota!"

"No," the voice said, suddenly showing resolve. "We can no work with no food. Alpha is supposed to care for the pack. You Big Boss, you alpha, you supposed to fix this!"

The tunnel rumbled. There was a yelp of terror and a loud crunch. Then a sound uncomfortably like "ptui!" and the crumpled remains of a helmet bounced into the tunnel. "Does anyone else have a problem with their diets?" the voice bellowed. Yelps of terror and the sounds of fleeing dogs answered in the negative.

I had settled into that unnaturally calm state of someone who knows he's suddenly, utterly screwed. I was just ruminating the best tactical retreat when several diamond dogs, fleeing the wrath of their master, came around the bend. They clapped eyes on me, screeched, and bolted away-- most running around and past us, but one of them back the way he'd come.

"What?" came the bellow. "Why do you disturb me further?"

"Big Boss," I heard the dog say. "...Someone here to see you."

".....Wait. What?"

Yup. Doombugged. I set my shoulders and stepped around the corner. Might as well confirm what I suspected.

The chamber beyond was enormous. It was the size of the Superdome, easy, a huge volcanic bubble of stone big enough to house an airport. It was illuminated by glowing crystals growing down here and there from the ceiling. I could see tunnels of all sizes lining the walls, leading off to God knows where. Curious Diamond Dogs were peeking out of every tunnel mouth, trying to see what was going on without ending up caught.

In the center was... just... this just stupid huge pile of plunder. Gold. Gems. Shiny junk of every
imaginable kind. But mostly gems, judging by the sparkle. And sitting atop that was what had to be, could only be, damn my luck, Big Boss.

My toes and fingers went numb. "Skank, Mange, Runt." I called over my shoulder. "There is something you neglected to mention about Big Boss."

"Yes?" came the faint, and very distant, answer.

"You failed to mention he was a dragon."

Yep. Dragon. An enormous, lime green (damn this technicolor world) dragon. He was long and serpentine, with enormous claws, membranous batlike wings folded along his back, and a face full of gleaming fangs. My best guess had him at two, three hundred feet long from smoking nostrils to barbed tailtip.

For the kids playing at home, let me set a mental image for you. You're at the airport. You see that 747 pulling up to the terminal? It wants to eat you.

"What have we here?" Big Boss said. His chuckles echoed off the walls of the cavern like thunder. He slithered around his hoard, sending gems showering down. "Well, you're certainly odd looking enough, ugly little thing. Who, and what, are you?"

I let him look me in my glowing eyes a minute. I cupped my hand at my side and filled it with blackfire. *Pullupthepowerpullupthepowerpulluppullpullpullup*.... "I am Darth Vulcan," I growled through my speakers.

"And what is a Darth Vulcan?" Big Boss said. "When it's at home with its feet propped up?"

He smirked. The expression did nothing to make him approachable.

catchhimoffguardNownownownownowNOWNOW!

"Your replacement," I said, and threw a fireball the size of a truck in his face.

I didn't wait to see the result. As soon as it left my fingers I poured out a torrent of black flame after it, blasting him like a riot hose. He disappeared in a cloud of blood-shot black flame and roiling smoke. The roar of flame was like a jet engine.

I held it till my arm cramped. I dropped my hand, gasping. The smoke and dark parted, and he reappeared... unharmed. Not even singed. I made a feeble little croaking noise.

Okay. F@#$#.

He reared up, fanning his wings. The smoke billowed away from him. I could see the treasure trove glowing with the heat under his claws. "Foolish little warlock," he gloated. "I am immune to any fire. I am a dragon! I bathe in molten rock. And your magic rolls off my scales like water!"

Frantically I threw a pair of black spectral hands at him, trying to grapple him. F@ $# he was right, he was more than right--- the black talons couldn't get a grip on him, slipped off him like he was greased. He waved a claw through them, dispersing him like a little kid swiping at a smoke ring someone blew for him.

"Now, allow me to show you REAL fire." He opened his jaws and blasted me.

I screamed like a cheerleader on helium and held up my staff, as if I could block with it. The world
turned to flame, flame in every direction. For a split second I felt my cloak, my skin start to smolder. Shit, going out like Anakin Skywalker...

No.

The bubble of terror and anger inside me burst. Purple-green-black exploded out of me, pouring out of my pores, bursting in every direction, pure burning black flame, rage made material. The burning cooled to nothing... I... felt my crackling skin heal, my burning, melting costume mend itself. Improved itself. The swirling black scooped up the detritus around me, loose rock, gems, sand, bits of loose treasure, sucking ore out of the very stones, working alchemy on my armor. Plastic and rubber turned to black iron, carbon steel, cloth rewoven into diamond chain. My clumsily made staff turned to ironwood, topped with a horned skull of blackest iron, burning red gemstones for eyes. The only thing unchanged was the Alicorn Amulet, burning red and grey on my chest.

The flames stopped. The blackfire parted a moment later. I stood there looking down at myself...

Bad. Ass.

I looked up at Big Boss. He had the stupidest expression on his face. "Looks like you're not the only one who's fireproof," I said.

Of course, that still left me alone in a room with a giant angry lizard who could squish me with one foot like a grape. I realized that the moment he came roaring down off his hoard after me.

I wish my high school gym coach could have seen me then. I was the slowest runner in gym class three years running. I could have left the track team in the dust that day. I avoided Big Boss's claws by barely a claw's length and started making tracks.

I didn't run back down the tunnel, though. Don't ask me why. Just some instinct that told me getting in a long narrow passage with an enormous dragon would not go well for me. Instead I started running around the perimeter of the room, throwing myself forward with bursts of black magic, with Big Boss making lunges at me like a cat going after a pom pom on a string.

Big as the place was, I was running out of options quick. I knocked down several crystal stalactites with magic blasts, raining them on his head. That just seemed to make him madder. Yup, this was a pickle. He couldn't be burned, he was immune to my magic...

I took a shortcut across the top of his treasure pile-- that made him set up a screech; it must have been a mortal insult to walk on a dragon's hoard--- and had to hop for it because the gems and gold were still hot enough to burn. Ding! Idea! He came lunging over the treasure after me as I slid down the other side. I spun on my ankle and poured my alicorn amulet magic into the pile of treasures, praying it would work.

It worked. As he came over the top of the pile, foot-thick ropes of gold, gems and trinkets lashed up out of the mass and coiled around him, pinning his wings to his sides. "WHAT?" he roared.

"You're right, Big Boss, you're immune to my magic, but guess what!" I shouted. "Your treasure ISN'T!" I poured it on; the ropes turned into enormous talons-- my ghost hands, formed out of gemstones and precious metals rather than black purple smoke. They grabbed the dragon around his neck and middle and tail, clenching him tight.

Big Boss seethed and began lashing. He started breathing flames on the golden talons, trying to melt them. "Oh no, none of that!" I said. With a gesture I sent him soaring through the air to smash into the far wall. He hit with a thunderous boom. Before he could get his breath I whipped him back the
other way, smashing him into the opposite wall, even harder. That time I heard something crack.

I began ping-ponging him back and forth, wall-wall-floor-ceiling-floor-wall, harder and harder. He spit up flame as he whacked into the stones. I found enough iron in the room-- mining carts, old cart tracks-- to muzzle him, wrapping the steel around his snout. And kept right on bashing him around.

And every blow made me let out a little more anger. In no time I was screaming profanities as I threw him around. Then I was just screaming, smashing him into the ground over and over and....

My head finally cleared. I dropped my arm, exhausted. He fell to the floor one last time, groaning.

"He did it..." "He beat Big Boss..." I heard muttering and whispering everywhere. I looked up and saw diamond dogs everywhere, peering down in awe from the tunnel entrances. Word was spreading fast. I stood up and turned around, looking at them.

"Big Boss is done," I said. "I have beaten him. I AM YOUR ALPHA NOW!! ME!!" I roared and beat my chest with a fist. Ow. Bruises.

There was silence. Then the cavern was filled with cheers. Diamond dogs came rushing in, jumping and dancing and cheering. Skank, Mange and Runt were first in line, alternating between fawning on me and boasting about how they found them a new Alpha, here he was, Dark Lord Darth Vulcan, aren't we awesome for finding him first? The whole lot cavorted around all waggy and slobberly and dancing with doggy happiness.

In the middle of the celebration I felt a tug on my cape. "What we do with him?" Runt asked me, pointing at the dragon. Big Boss lay there, bruised and bleeding, bound in chains of his own treasure, glaring at me in hatred.

Dang. What do you do with a giant defeated dragon? Can't exactly drop him off at the pound. "What does it matter?" I scoffed, bluffing for time to think. "He's beaten. He's nothing! Everything he owned is ours. Everything he ruled is MINE." I turned my back on the seething dragon in a show of contempt. "We'll drag him out and dump him in some midden someplace, let him run off to the dragon lands with his tail between his legs." I sneered. "I'm sure we'll all remember him fondly as we count out his hoard--"

The dogs around me suddenly screamed and scattered. I looked back; Big Boss had reared up in his chains, a look of insane rage in his eyes. I could see his belly scales glowing as he built up an enormous fireball. His jaws were still wired shut, but I could see sparks glowing in his nostrils...

I had no time to think. At the last second I telekinetically grabbed two enormous gemstones and corked his nostrils with them. His eyes bulged. His cheeks swelled as the fire raced up his throat. I dove for cover. There was an enormous BOOM, and chunks of red and pink grue rained down everywhere.

I stood up and looked. His head was gone. Completely blown off. The stump smoldered for a bit, then dropped with a crash to the floor. We all stared in stunned silence for a minute. I did the only thing I could think of. I strode over, planted one foot on the neck of the corpse, and shouted to my audience:

"Looks like meat's back on the menu, boys!"
Celestia gawped at me in horror. "YOU ATE HIM?"

"Ah, yup."

She staggered, actually staggered back, jaw hanging in horror. "You ATE a SAPIENT BEING?"

"Well not much, personally. He tasted terrible, and the meat was sort of gritty. I think it was all those
minerals in his diet. The dogs thought he was delicious, though."

She turned away. Her head hung down as she gagged. "He was an intelligent being!!"

I threw my hands in the air...well as far as they could go with me still dangling from my chains.
"And so were the Diamond Dogs! He ate them, they ate him! It's the whole beautiful circle of life,
Princess!"

She wouldn't look at me. She just stood there fluttering her wings and going "Ugh."

"Besides, what I was I supposed to do with a dozen tons of dead dragon?" I went on. "It would have
taken a week to dig a grave large enough, and a funeral pyre would have been visible from twice the
distance of Canterlot. Besides, the Diamond Dogs were starving. They could barely walk and dig,
much less hunt."

No sale. She looked over her shoulder at me in revulsion. It was clear I was now Hannibal Lecter in
her eyes. "To think such a thing as you was left to roam around my kingdom," she said.

"Fine, whatever. Shall I continue?"

Things were moving fast. In less than two days I'd gone from being a helpless victim stranded in an
alternate dimension, to being a barbarian warlord. I had soldiers. I had minions. I had a mountain of
treasure.

I had the runs.

It was probably inevitable. I mean, I got the green apple splatters if I traveled out of state; I'd gone
into another entire universe this time around, I would have been surprised if I didn't get some shocks
to my system from the local germs and bugs and stuff. And call it a hunch, but humans probably
aren't designed to digest cockatrice burgers either. Dragon steaks cooked in a dirt pit are right out.
The celebratory feast the night before had caught up with me. I probably should have taken a clue from the fact I saw some of the Diamond Dogs crunching up gemstones with their meal. Anything with a digestive tract that hardy probably needs it.

By the next morning I was busy squatting over our latrine pit, making my offering to the vengeful god Montezuma and cursing my fate. Cursing pretty much everything else, too. It was late in the day by the time I managed to crawl away from the latrine more than a few steps before having to run back.

By the time I managed to hike up my pants for the last time, I was shaky as a newborn calf and in a foul enough mood to curdle gasoline. This was NOT going to work. I was not going to sit on a pile of treasure with nothing but a bunch of smelly, flea-bitten dog-orcs for company and getting the hershey squirts every time I ate a meal. Somewhere out there were the persons and/or ponies responsible for my misery, and I needed to find them and beat some answers out of them. And d#$% it, I wasn't going to crap myself to death in a cave while I did it.

Time to get organized.

"Skank! Mange! Runt!" The gruesome threesome came running. I'd found a battered throne in the hoard, and had set it up atop the pile. They groveled at my feet, face down in a king’s ransom. "Skank. Take a couple of dogs back to camp, fetch my books." The burly dog scurried to obey. "Keep them clean and dry and don't manhandle 'em. I need to read 'em!" I shouted after him. "--And put them on a shelf when you get back!"

My gut gave a gurgle. I grunted and looked at the other two. "I need food. Other than Big Boss on a stick, that is." Mange sniggered. "Fruit. Vegetables. Bread. You know any place where we can get some?"

Mange and Runt looked at each other. "O-only ponies make that kind of food, Dark Master," Runt said.

I facepalmed. Of course. The last creatures I wanted to see were the only ones who had what I wanted. Five would get me twenty that the ponies were the only race around here with anything resembling civilization, like tools, agriculture, medicine...

Raid their town. You stole the books, steal whatever else you need. They're stupid and cowardly, after the way they treated you they deserve it

...and I was still nursing bruises from the last time I tried to deal with them.

You have more on your side now. Arm the diamond dogs, do a smash and grab raid

Attracting their attention now would be a bad idea too. Most of them seemed cowardly, but those six with the magic doodads seemed pretty willing to mix it up. I was hiding out in the Everfree, where the little pastel twerps weren't willing to go, but if I went smashing about like I did the first time -- I still thought I could have cowed them into submission if it hadn't been for the winged purple one and her magic macguffins, mind --- they might start getting a little more proactive and sent out a party to track me down.

Then we're not ready yet, we need to be stronger

Getting stronger was a good idea. Or at least getting my suffering guts under control. A magical duel while trying not to load my shorts didn't sound like much fun.

First things first, though. Maybe I had other options. Those spellbooks could have all sorts of
answers. "Mange, Runt... time to take a survey. Let's see how many dogs here can read."

...Okay, if it was any number higher than "zero," you lose. In fact, this lot were so illiterate that you'd have to represent their cumulative reading ability in negative numbers. Cartography seemed to be pretty low-priority too; the dirt-sketched maps of the surrounding area they made were less informative than the dirt they were drawn on. I was starting to get a grasp of why ponies seemed to be the dominant species in this place. I left the dogs to their various tasks and went and sat on my throne, fuming.

Runt crept up to where I was sitting and looked at me over the arm of the throne. "What we do now, Dark Master?" he said.

I'd been brooding over that point. I needed info, I needed intel. I could send out spies, I supposed. But that would be begging to be caught; these guys weren't exactly "assassin's creed" material.

You really don't get how dependent human beings are on technology. Especially my generation. It was infuriating; I kept getting the urge to look things up on Wikipedia, or to check out the surroundings on Google Maps. I was a digital age baby--- younger than the internet-- completely cut off from the data I had spent most of my life immersed in. Hell, every time I went into a dark section of cave I caught myself fumbling for a light switch.

Then I remembered this thing I saw on 'World of Warcraft...'

I got to my feet. Time to experiment.

I closed my eyes and tried to focus. I could see it in my mind's eye; energies rippling around me, through me. I needed to do something different with the weird energy I could feel coiling around me. I wasn't sure what I was doing. I wasn't sure what I was doing when I summoned fire, or summoned my spectral hands. I just formed an image in my mind of what I wanted to do, and something-- probably the medallion-- whipped it up, made to order. I was just hoping that this order wasn't too complex.

I felt it as the energy coalesced, swirled into a ball over my hands... then suddenly I was in the air, looking down at the cavern. Diamond dogs were staring up at me in awe, pointing and yelping. I stumbled, disoriented, and opened my eyes--

And I was back on the floor, staggering slightly. All around me diamond dogs were staring at a spot over my head. I looked up; floating there, a few feet from the ceiling, was a translucent green eye, about the size of an orange, with a dark green iris and an inky black pupil, glowing faintly. I closed my eyes again; once again I was looking down from the ceiling. Bingo.

Now for the final test: I tried to move the eye. Slowly it drifted down from the ceiling, and my perspective with it. I brought it down to hover over my outstretched hand. "Perfect," I said. I sat down in my throne again and sent the eye out of the cave. Time to do a little aerial reconnaissance.

My first goal? Straight up.

I sent the eye shooting up, past the treetops, past the cloud cover. Slowly I panned around.
Down below, the Everfree, dark and tangled and impenetrable. to the west, what had to be Ponyville: tiny colorful houses around a sparkling riverbend. Further in the distance, to the northwest, I could see a strange cluster of clouds, streaked with rainbows and pretty curlicues of mist. I focused the eye. I could see pegasi flying, tiny dots, flying back and forth amongst the... cloud houses?? Pegasi lived in the clouds? How?? How did they keep stuff from falling through? What happened when it rained?

Fluffy cloud heaven. I gave a snort. I wondered if they floated back and forth playing little gold harps. Or maybe hung out with the Care Bears. Either way the place was of little use to me; I doubted that I could walk around on clouds.

Disinterested, I looked elsewhere. To the North stood an impossibly high mountain. A waterfall cascaded down one side. Around the bottom and tiered up the sides was a city. And near the very top, clinging to the side of the mountain like a shelf fungus to the trunk of a tree, was an enormous castle covered in peaked roofs and minarets and towers like a child's drawing of a fairy castle. If that wasn't the capital city I'd eat my helmet.

I spun the eye about, spotting swamps, mountains, ravines, open fields. I took a while, soaking it all in till I was confident I had a general feel for the lay of the land. Then I dropped the eye back down below the canopy, and set off for my first destination.

I sent the spy-eye flying just below the treetops, dodging branches and the occasional screeching bird-- score, I could hear as well. What a head rush; it had to be zooming along at fifty miles an hour. I was kind of glad I'd kept my helmet on; I was sure I was making all sorts of dorky facial expressions.

I reached the edge of "Whitetail Woods" in no time, then circled back around, past the alicorn statue I'd seen my first night here.... then I was coming up fast on Ponyville. The little thatch-roofed houses were just as twee as I remembered them. In fact, I couldn't see a sign of my little arson attempt anywhere. It had only been a couple of houses, of course; I could be in the wrong part of town. No, there was town hall, over there to the left... jeez, they patched the damage up quick. Then again it had only been straw...

Come to think of it, Everything was pretty much as I recalled; pastel ponies with pictures on their butts, some in cutesy little outfits, just trotting about doing... whatever. Buying, selling, shopping, tending their wee little flower gardens, pushing baby carriages. I would have thought they would be a little more agitated than this. I'd gone stomping through their town flinging balefire everywhere not two days ago. Back home there'd be police out patrolling, and people looking uptight. Yet they were all trotting about like nothing had changed. Were they really this oblivious?

I kept to the eaves and gutters, not wanting my flying eye to be spotted. I managed to eavesdrop on one or two idle conversations, watch a few of them going about their daily business. It was all very folksy, Mister Rogers "hello neighbor" stuff... these guys couldn't even stop being twee long enough to fetch the mail or take out the garbage. I spotted one yellow and pink one talking to the birdies. "Oh good morning mister tweety.."

Gag me.

I probably hung around the marketplace too long. I went there initially because I wanted to try and figure out their monetary system. No luck; I hid in the awning of a vendor's cart for over an hour, and the most I could figure out was that they used gems and gold coins called "bits." The exchange rate? Damned if I know. I'd watch them sell two apples for enough gold to buy a car, and then turn around and use a sliver of gemstone the size of my pinky nail to buy an entire cartload of carrots. And yet, there down the street came a pony wearing a dress (that broke my brain a little; ponies in
clothing or wearing accessories. No rhyme or reason to it either. It looked like a little girl had run
around town with a costume trunk, playing dress-up with her pets) studded with enough sapphires
(she called them that by name) to pay the national debt. Apple for two bits, apple pie for the same
price. It was complete gibberish.

To be fair, I spent less time on watching the transactions than I did on drooling over the food for sale.
I saw one of the ponies buy-- and eat-- a lily, though. Weren't lilies deadly poison? Either the lilies or
the ponies on this planet were really different. Okay, self-evident answer there.

At the least I figured out they took both gems and gold as money, even if I couldn't figure out the
exchange rate. So this dragon hoard of mine would actually be useful.

Okay, where to next? I remembered someone saying once that you could judge a society by the
condition of its prisons... so I decided to check out the local public school.

It took me a while to find it. Largely because when I did find it, I thought it was a joke. They actually
had a little one-room schoolhouse. A few more pink hearts than usual, but there it was. Little Red
Schoolhouse, with a bell and everything. Of all the things I'd seen, this was the most surreal. And
that's saying something.

I flew down the belltower and into the rafters. I saw little ponies, sitting at little wooden desks; row
after row of little mop tops, heads of curly locks, big shiny cartoony eyes, high pitched little voices.
At the front of the class stood a dark cherry-colored pony with a pinkish mane and a Stepford Smile
that back on earth would have sent grown men backing out of the room with raised weapons in their
hands.

"Good Morning, class!" Augh ye gods, her speaking voice was like someone talking to a three year
old.

"Good Morning Miss Cheerilee!" A dozen cherubic little voices answered. Gharrrrgh. I could feel
the sugar crystallizing in my ears. I bore the pain and continued watching. Genius moment! Maybe I
could get some quick education here. Listen in, maybe pick up some local history or at least some
reading skills and--

And... I was conspiring to sneak into school. Somebody shoot me.

The school day was only moderately informative. This class was apparently well past the primary
stuff, so they weren't taking reading or writing lessons. The math used the same numbers (figure that
one out if you can) but I couldn't glean much from the grammar and spelling tests they took. Science
was... surprisingly basic. Isaac Newton could probably get along fine here. Same general laws of
physics, molecules, sound waves, gravity, biology, etc. The introduction of magic threw a curveball
into some stuff, but Miss Cheerilee kept it to "your magic teachers will explain more later." I got the
general gist about earth ponies doing earth stuff, pegasi doing weather stuff, unicorns doing... well,
whatever they darn well pleased, apparently, so long as they knew the right spell. And alicorns...
were apparently all three combined. Well, well, that could prove useful. Did that mean the alicorn
amulet gave me the powers of all three as well?

What made it unbearable was that all of it was interspersed with lectures and homilies about the
importance of Friendship and Tolerance, proverbs about the importance of niceness, and of course
every. Single. Lesson. Was delivered with that same bobble-headed, you-are-a-toddler-simpleton
voice.

Look, I get the importance of everyone getting along to get along. Oldest lesson in the book, right?
But any school kid can tell you that the version they teach in school is bullcrap that's been raised to
an abortion art form. I'd heard this sort of tune whistled before, usually when some teacher was
lecturing me about 'provoking' bullies into beating me up, what with my all standing there minding
my own business. It's a load of horsecrap shoveled on kids by adults who don't want any 'trouble'
(also known as 'questions,' 'conflicts' or 'independent thought') and prevent it by turning the kids into
mindless, inert, fact-regurgitating lumps.

Meanwhile I was getting a gander at the social interactions going on while teacher's back was turned.
That's when the cutie-pie mask came off of everything. Okay, I'd seen some oblivious teachers
before but this was sad.

She had to be actively ignoring the little pink one in the tiara and her grey friend in the granny
glasses and pearls, for one. As if the jewelry wasn't a clue, those two were obviously the larval form
of the High School Bitch, and getting practice in for the puberty-laden metamorphosis at every
opportunity. The two were cutting up constantly, making nasty little remarks, just radiating snottiness
from every pore. Ol' Teach was acting like she didn't even see them. She was just as oblivious to the
orange pegasus sleeping in her class, or to the two goofy looking unicorn colts in the back who were
alternately goofing off or spacing out... this lady didn't have any kind of handle on her class at all.

Recess arrived, and everyone ran outside to play. I floated outside and roosted in a nearby tree. I
wanted to see what these little fluffballs got up to when there wasn't even the marginal authority
figure of Miss Cheerilee around.

It was pretty much what I expected. Kids that age are empty-noggined little things anyway; this
bunch was mindlessly insipid. There was one trio of ridiculously overcute fillies who were gabbling
together about their 'cutie marks' and 'crusading' for them. Some sort of merit badge or something?

Junior Queen Bee and her understudy Hipster Glasses were busy snarking about how lame all the
other kids around them were. The colts were lame, the poor kids were lame, the 'blank flanks' were
lame...

Forget brain-blasting all the ponies with the Elements. What's the point, when the local educational
system gave the brains of all the foals a daily soft scrub? By the time they were adults If there was
any cognitive spark there, it was buried deep. They could phone it in to the board of education here:
Mission Accomplished: mass lobotomies completed.

I was almost spotted.. Some bored filly with a candy cane mark on her butt looked up in the tree and
must've spotted my eye's glow. I quickly retreated to the bell tower while the little dear waved down
Teacher and lisped out an alarm. Big mistake on my part; recess was over. The teacher sent the little
fat one back to ring the school bell... with me still inside it.

When my skull stopped echoing and I regained my senses, I decided I'd had my fill of kindergarten
and moved on. I did a quick tour of the highlights of the town. A joke shop that looked like a jester's
cap. A flower shop. The Town Hall looked promising. It wasn't. Less than nothing was going on
inside; the mayor sitting at her desk rubber-stamping a stack of forms; her assistant at a typewriter,
hammering out another. I had to go back and look at that one again; yup, the typewriter had only two
keys. Two keys and a space bar.

How on earth...?

Forget it. I left the way I came in. Neither mare noticed me, they were too engrossed in their work.

I decided that keeping track of that purple winged unicorn would be a good idea. Flitting from hiding
place to hiding place, I quickly flew to the house-tree in which the pompous little menace lived.
The image went jittery and the flying eye bounced back a few yards. Baffled, I tried approaching from another direction, only to get the same result. She must have put up some sort of shield or warding or something, keeping spies out. Of course that only made me more curious as to what she was hiding. I considered taking a perch nearby and waiting for her to come out, but then the top half of the horse door banged open and the mare in question stuck her head out and glared in every direction, her horn glowing purple. I must have set off an alarm. I made myself scarce; no point in getting the eye caught. She might be able to magically track it back to me or something.

I hid in a rainbarrel and peeked out through a knothole in the side. She stood there for a minute, giving the evil eye to everyone and noone in particular, then slowly retreated inside. I heard the sound of a bolt slamming home and tumblers turning in a lock. Whatever she was up to in there, she wasn't coming out any time soon.

The school bell rang. I sent the eye back to the schoolyard, hovering around the fringes, and kept a lookout for the pink one in the tiara.

It had occurred to me that this little pink brat had to be royalty or nobility of some kind. There was the tiara, for one thing. More importantly was her attitude. And this place did have princesses, after all.

I managed to spot her leaving the school with her flunky Hipster Glasses. They cantered on into town, prattling at each other, Oh daddy got me this, Teacher's such a bore, blah blah blah. I dropped in behind them, still trying to be careful not to be spotted. From that angle I saw their hip marks-- a diamond tiara on the pink one, a spoon on the grey one. What? Oh, I get it. Born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Or on her butt, anyway. Okay, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon, time to go clippity-clop home to Daddy.

They took their sweet time about it, stopping in several shops along the way. I observed from the shadows and corners. What I saw pretty much clinched it; the moment any shopkeep clapped eyes on her little sparkly idiot hat, they turned servile and obsequious on the spot. She was rude, condescending, and obnoxious too... and they just took it with a smile. Only a princess would act like that and still get treated like... well...
they could barely tolerate her presence. Everyone, and I mean everyone, let their face fall the moment her back was turned. I saw foals cross the street to avoid her. Every group of adults had something to mutter to their friend as she passed, and it was never flattering.

She might not have been a princess. After all she was only an earth pony, and I seriously doubted that earth ponies were among the ruling royal elite. But there were fair odds she was the daughter of some duke or baron or something, some lower-tier nobleman.

Someone ambitious or corrupt. Someone willing to cut deals under the table. Someone I could use.

Eventually the terrible twosome got tired of wasting their daddy's credit and parted ways. I continued to follow Tiara, expecting her to lead me to her mansion or her royal villa or palace... I wasn't expecting to be led to a giant department store.

_Holy crap_, I thought. _They have Wal Marts?_

She trotted in the front door like she owned the place. I managed to dive in through the gap and, once again, roost among the rafters. Some gawky half-grown colt greeted her. "Welcome to Filthy Rich's Barnyard Bargains!" he warbled in a cracked voice.

"Is Daddy in?" she asked him.

"Up in his office." The colt pointed to a walk-up office in the back of the store. Diamond Tiara smiled and trotted on back. I zipped on ahead and popped through the office door as she entered, hastily ducking behind a coat rack.

A coat rack. With coats. In a town where everyone went naked and I was starting to think of people going around naked as NORMAL what the heck...

"Daddy!" Tiara said, throwing herself into the forelegs of the stallion there.

I got a look at her father. He was a brown earth pony with a dark brown mane, slicked back in a pompadour. He had three money bags stamped on his hip. He was wearing a tie wide enough for me to surfboard on and a shirt and jacket collar... but no actual shirt or jacket... I let my mind just skip over that. He looked, in short, like a salesman in search of a used car lot.

Perfect. Even better than a corrupt nobleman.

He gave his daughter a hug. "Hey, pumpkin," he said. "Back from school?"

"Yes Daddy," Diamond Tiara simpered. The next few minutes consisted of Daddy's little girl blathering about her day, interspersed with her begging Daddy for this or that trinket she saw on the way home. Through it all Filthy Rich (for lo, I did perceiveth that wast his name) nodded and smiled and "yes, pumpkin'id". When the brat finally wound down, Daddykins said "Tell you what pumpkin, you go out and look around the store for a while. I've got some papers to finish up, then I have to run to Sweet Apple Acres. Come with me. If you're good, we'll go get a treat at Sugarcube Corner."

"Okay Daddy." She gave him a smooch on the cheek and trotted out the door."Love you!"

"Love you too sugardrop," Filthy said, closing the door behind her.

"_Oh gag me,_" I groaned.

Filthy Rich started, spinning around. "Who's there?" he said, looking around the office.
Back in my cave I jumped. Holy crap, he could hear me? Crap, I had full telepresence. I thought quickly. Best to take this opportunity while I had it. I closed my eyes again and drove the eye out from behind the coat rack. "Mister Filthy Rich," I said. "We should talk."

His expression when a green eyeball the size of an orange addressed him was worth the price of entrance. He nearly jumped out of his skin and tried to go for the door. I swooped in between him and it. I couldn't stop him from leaving but he didn't know that. He skidded to a halt, unwilling to try getting past the eye.

"Give me just a moment!" I said. I wondered what my voice sounded like. "I wish to make you a business proposition."

That caught his interest. "What sort of business proposition?" he said warily.

"I am a... private individual in need of certain goods," I said. "In bulk. For various reasons I will not go into, I am unable to simply trample into town to purchase them. You have those goods. I will make it worth your time to deliver them to me."

"Goods," he said.

"Yes."

"In bulk," he said.

"In considerable bulk."

"What sort of goods?" He asked suspiciously.


His look was incredulous. "Toilet paper."

I sent the eye up in his face. "What?" I said irritably. "You don't think mysterious wizards go doodie?"

He reared back a bit. "It just... doesn't sound like the sort of things a mysterious sinister floating eyeball would want," he said.

"What, were you expecting me to ask for the frozen hearts of a dozen virgins or something?" I chortled theatrically. His grimace was worth it. "No, I need the same humble things anyone else needs."

"Any One?" he repeated in a puzzled voice.

"What?"

"...Never mind." He got a canny look in his eye. "Do you have the bits to pay for it?"

I considered the mountain of gems and gold I was perched atop. It was a good thirty foot slope to the cave floor. "I'm fairly certain," I said. "Name your prices. I will pay double for the convenience of the delivery."
That did it. I could practically hear the cha-ching as his eyes lit up.

He produced a catalog of his merchandise. I picked out a list of the basics, and threw in some of the odder things just out of curiosity. (What the heck was Zap Apple Jam?) I ballparked an estimate for a month's supply for a hundred dogs and myself. He sketched out an amount in bits. I got him to give me a conversion from bits to gems and gold... I wasn't sure how much of this treasure was pressed in bit coins. He informed me it would fill four wagons to bursting. I simply had him add the price of the wagons to the deal.

"Excellent," I said. "We have a deal, then. Where shall we meet to do the exchange? I can come as far as the edge of the Everfree, no farther."

He thought it over. "Do you know where Sweet Apple Acres is?-- never mind, you can't miss it. Only apple farm for a hundred miles. It's due north of here. They have an unused orchard right next to the Everfree, just look for the fallen barn."

"And when?"

"Hmm. Six hours from now too soon?" he said.

"You are an expedient businessman, Mister Rich," I said. "I will see you there, with money in hand."

He twitched his ear like I'd said something odd. I ignored it. "Oh, and Mister Rich?"

I flew the Eye up into his face again and poured power into it till his face was illuminated with sickly green light. "If you cheat me-- I WILL KNOW." I gave another theatrical chuckle and snuffed the eye out.

I opened my eyes and got to my feet. "Mange! Skank! Runt!" I bellowed. They came running. "Get ten-- no, twenty dogs together. We're going shopping!"
I was on my way in minutes, twenty rangy diamond dogs behind me. They had made good use of Big Boss's corpse; their cruddy armor was supplemented now with thick, scaled dragon-leather breastplates, and they were armed with weapons carved from claws and dragon bone. Twenty claws, twenty soldiers. Something symbolic about that.

It took us the full six hours to reach the meeting site. It was easy enough to find, though I had to stop a couple of times and re-cast the... hmm. Needs a cool name... the Evil Eye? DarkVision? Demon Gaze? The flying Eye spell. Anyway, had to re-cast it to get our bearings. That wasn't what slowed us down.

What slowed us down is that I was having to blaze a trail.

Not just blaze a trail, build a road. It was going to be a long haul back with those wagons, and I wanted a nice smooth grade to do it. I started out simple, blasting everything in my path to gravel and ash, then laying the rubble down smooth and packing it hard. Some of the plants resisted... and I mean that literally; we were attacked by vines and branches and one point a particularly vicious patch of toadstools. At first I just blasted them like everything else, but I quickly got irritated at it; they didn't seem to learn by example.

After the fourth dead oak with a jack-o-lantern face, I discovered a new trick. I reached inside with the magic... just desperately wanting to grab them by the neck and rattle their skulls. Or whatever they kept their brains in.... the jack o lantern tree's hollow eyes started glowing purple, and suddenly it was obedient as a trained puppy. It scurried out of our path, following my pointing finger. I forced the glow to spread; vines curled back at the wave of my hand, plants and trees and and bushes uprooted themselves and crawled away. Even the grass shriveled and rippled back from my gaze. I marched forward, my posse of dog-orcs following along behind me.

This. Was. Awesome.

We reached the edge of the forest. It cut off at the edge, sharp as a knife. I sent out an Eye to scope out the location. Beyond the edge of the woods was a few yards of open clearing, followed by row after row of trees, the ground below them thick with orange and gold leaves. There was the fallen barn, too, slumped on its side.

The wagons weren't there yet. "Runt, stay with me. You, you and you, spread out and take cover," I told the dogs, pointing at several spots around the meeting site. I nearly croggled when they leapt into the air, dove head down at the ground, and began burrowing. In seconds they had all disappeared down tunnels into the earth. I saw little humped mounds appear here and there in the grass as they tunneled their way to their lookout points, almost as fast as I could have walked there. Sonuvagun but those mothers could dig.

I sent my eye patrolling around the perimeter... and heard laughing. Children laughing. Immediately suspicious, I followed the sound. A few yards in among the trees was one with a fairly good sized treehouse wedged in its branches.

Three ridiculously cute fillies-- One white unicorn with a mane and tail of powder-puff curls, an
orange pegasus with teeny wings and a fluffy purple mane, and a yellow earth pony with a red mane and a bow on her head she could probably go sailplaning with-- were mucking around in it, galloping up and down the ramp into the branches, playing some game and giggling and squealing with carefree glee. Holy crap the scene was cloying. I recognized them from the schoolyard, the Cutie somethings. They were awfully close to the drop site. This could cause problems.

As I was mulling that over a high pitched taunting voice hit my ears. Who should come trotting up under the treehouse than Filthy Rich's brat. What was she doing here? Oh, right. Filthy Rich apparently had to bring her along when he came out here-- he went straight from the store, apparently.

She was obviously about as popular as a skunk at a lawn party. The other fillies looked at her from their treehouse with expressions of pure loathing. "What are you doin' here, Diamond Tiara?" the ribbon-wearing one said in a down-home twang. (Hey, I got the name right. Two points to me.)

The little prima donna threw a big theatrical sigh and said, "Daddy had to come out here to handle some business or other with your lame family. He told me to go find you blank-flanks and hang out with you." She stuck out her tongue and pretended to gag.

"Great. Wanna play hide and seek? The best hiding places are that way," the pegasus kid said, pointing towards the Everfree. "Just keep walking till you see a cockatrice."

"Aren't you afraid she'll look in its eyes and turn it to stone?" the yellow earth pony said. The three laughed.

Diamond Tiara stuck out her tongue. "Laugh it up," she said. "Daddy's here on business with your family, Applebloom," she said to the yellow one, "and that means I'm your guest." She smirked triumphantly. "So you'd better be nice to me or my Daddy will make your lives miserable."

Wow. This kid was so unpleasant she was practically a caricature.

I suddenly had a nagging feeling I was missing something. The little royal brat was already here. So where was her Daddy with the wagons? I didn't smell a rat, yet, but something was off. I tapped a couple of dogs and whispered some careful instructions to them...

Once they were in place I circled my eye around... no, there they were, coming down between the rows of trees from the northwest: four wagons covered with tarps, pulled by two ponies apiece. I hoped the dogs were strong enough to pull the wagons. Feh, I'd just push them with magic if it came to that.

Filthy Rich was in the lead. He led them to the clearing with the barn and had them unhitch. "That's all fellas," he said. "Go on up to the farmhouse, Granny Smith has some cider for you all." The workponies cheered up and made themselves scarce. Filthy Rich stepped out into the middle of the clearing, looking around.

That was our cue. I sent the dogs out, Runt in the lead, carrying two huge bags of coins and gems. He nearly bolted out from under his pompadour when he saw the diamond dogs skulking through the grass towards him, but he stood his ground.

Runt dropped the bags at Rich's hooves. I saw the gleam of greed in the pony's eyes when he opened the bags. But when Runt and the others made a move to the wagons he held out his hoof. "Hold it. Where's your boss?"

"Huh?" Runt, ever the glib conversationalist.
"I said I want to see the one you're working for," he demanded. "I want him to come out here and confirm that I delivered his merchandise, like I said." He pulled a clipboard out of his pannier, with what I presume was the receipt. "I don't want him coming back later and claiming I shorted him!"

I cursed under my breath. I guessed my little threat had been a little TOO effective; he wanted to cover his rear end. No choice for it. I picked up my staff, turned my eyes up to "high beam" and did my best Darth Vader skulk out of the shadow of the trees. I may have rasped a little into my microphone just for the heck of it too.

His face when he clapped eyes on me, oh man. I didn't think those big cartoony eyes could get any bigger... I strode over and stood there, looking down at him. "You wanted to see me?" I said, slathering it with as much sarcasm as I could muster.

He swallowed and held out the clipboard. I held it up; some sort of itemized list, with carbon paper underneath--- yup, he wanted a signed receipt. I would have loved to see him explain that one on his annual taxes. "Evil Overlord, sale to...."

He threw the tarps back so I could look inside the wagon. They were packed full with everything I'd ordered in boxes, crates, barrels. I made a show of looking over the contents and checking the list. "Good, good," I muttered. I pulled a pen out of my pocket and prepared to sign.

Wait. Barrels? And... why were they covered in writing? "What is in the barrels?" I said.

There was a pop like a giant champagne cork, and the top came off the nearest barrel like a bullet out of a gun. I yelped and stumbled backwards as my line of sight was filled with pink frizz. "SURPRISE!" someone yelled.

A pink pony with an enormous frizzy pink mane had jumped out in a cloud of confetti. "Ta-da!" she sang, striking a pose on her hind legs.

"The hell?" I yelled.

With assorted pops, cracks and bangs the other barrels burst, and five more ponies came tumbling out. I got over my shock and quickly recognized them all; the same six ponies that had tried to fry my brain with their magic amulets. "Hold it right there, Buster!" the purple winged one said. "You're under arrest in the name of the Princesses!"

"Which is her!" the pink one added.

"YOU!" I snarled. (Okay I kicked myself later. Geez, was I going to start wearing a top hat and twirling a sleazy mustache?)

"Okay, well ONE of her," the pink pony said. "Or she's one of them, or-- well, you get the idea." She dropped to all fours and tried to look tough.

"Yeah, give it up, fella, Amulet or not, you're outta your league," the rainbow pegasus said, pawing the ground with a hoof.

A moment later, a half dozen pegasi in armor popped out from behind a cloud I hadn't even noticed and glided down, taking up positions in a circle around me.

I turned on Filthy Rich. He had already scurried backward out of the circle. "You little WEASEL!" I yelled. "I PAID YOU!"

"You couldn't pay me enough to get me to betray Equestria," he said, full of pomposity. Don't think I
didn't notice that he'd already secured the bags of money behind him.

"I paid you! PAID YOU!" I repeated myself. I was literally frothing at the mouth inside my helmet, just... choking on how angry I was at the betrayal. I could have just stolen or looted or taken what I wanted. I tried to buy it legit. I paid double. And this little four legged turd had backstabbed me.

I felt a loop of rope fall over my shoulders, binding my arms to my sides. The orange cowpony had lassoed me. "Now simmer down, Sally," she said around the rope between her teeth. "Yer comin' with us so's we can sort your hash!"

I lost it.

kill everything make them pay burn them all smash them all

I didn't even focus. I just let out this strangled scream and released a blastwave. The rope around me shredded to bits of thread. Every one of them went flying. Several of the armored pegasi went SPLAT against the side of the broken down barn and slumped to the ground. Others just tumbled end over end across the grass or whacked into tree trunks. I began lashing in every direction with bursts of darkfire, bolts of force, raw boiling wads of pure black energy. Trees exploded. The purple alicorn tried to contain me in a bubble; I burst it with ease.

Well, my dogs may not have been smart but they knew "the sign" when they saw it. A dozen dogs armed with spears burst from the ground around us and began harrying the few pegasi guards who had kept their senses.

Then we all heard high pitched screams. Little ponies began running out of the trees, nearly tumbling right into the middle of the battle. Behind them came the dogs I'd sent out, loping along on all fours, herding them. One of them had a struggling filly thrown over his shoulder.

"HAH!" I threw out a loop of purple-black energy, snaring my dogs and their captive and literally yanking them to my side. I plucked the screeching filly from the diamond dog's shoulder and held her up by the scruff of her neck. "EVERYONE BACK OR SHE DIES!"

Every pony there froze. The other fillies had run to their parents or sisters and were hiding behind their legs, whimpering. Wait, which one did I have? I saw the yellow one, the orange one, the white one--

"LEMME GO! LEMME GO! MY DADDY WILL HAVE YOUR HEAD FOR THIS!!" A pig-pink filly with a tiara on both her head and her butt squirmed in my grasp.

Great.

"You moron," I growled at the Diamond Dog who'd caught her. "Four possible hostages and you bring me the one they all HATE?"
Chapter 9

So there we are. Mexican standoff. I and about half my diamond dogs are surrounded by armed and angry ponies. They in turn are surrounded by more of my Diamond Dogs. They have an alicorn, at least one unicorn and the Elements of Harmony. I have the Alicorn Amulet.

And I have one of their foals by the neck as a hostage.

"Nobody move!" I bellowed. Nobody moved. I got the squirming brat under one arm and held my glowing hand to her face. "Lay down your weapons. Now!" The pegasi dropped their spears with a clatter. "The elements too! Take them off---" I flicked my finger and magically righted one of the barrels-- "and drop them in there."

"Not a chance," the rainbow-maned one said.

"I have the upper hand here," I said. "I have one of your foals." The pegasus made a move as if to rush me. "And you're killing her," I finished. I poured magic into my gauntlet. With a skrreeeeek, the metal claw tips of my gloves grew out into long, shiny razor blades. I laid one against Tiara's cheek. Her squeals and struggles stopped immediately and she whimpered in fear.

"All right! All right! Just don't do anything rash," the alicorn said. She removed her tiara and dropped it in the barrel. Fuming, the others dropped their necklaces in after it. I magically plugged the barrel and with a quick wave sent it sailing off into the Everfree.

They cried out in dismay. Perfect. That'll keep them busy.

"Now down on your bellies. YOU HEARD ME! On the ground, bellies flat to the ground."
They obeyed; sitting down...couchant. I resisted the urge to facepalm. "No, I meant... just... face down! Yes, like that, with your... RIGHT! Argh." Eventually I got them all lying prone with their hooves over their heads... with the ends of those nasty little horns planted in the ground. I was going to make D__ed sure they couldn't jump up and blast me, or hurtle hooves first at my face.

I motioned for the dogs to get the wagons. They ran forward eagerly and started the wagons rolling towards the forest line. "You moron," I grated at Filthy Rich. "You threw away a legit contract that would have raked you in mountains of gold. For all you knew I was just some unicorn hermit who didn't want to be hassled."

"I figured out who you were the moment you spoke to me," Filthy Rich said, not looking up from the dirt. "You kept saying you had hands. Nopony in Ponyville other than Spike the Dragon has hands.... and you."

I jerked. So that's why he'd given me those funny looks when I'd spoken to him. And saying Nobody instead of nopony ("nopony." Geez, how whimsical can you get?) hadn't helped either. "And that mattered because?" I retorted. "All I was buying from you was some basic staples!"

This time it was Sparkle's turn to snort. "Don't take us for fools," she said. "One look at that list and I knew what you were up to. Rainbow Juice? Truthbloom pollen? Thaumatically polarized unicorn horn powder? You had over a dozen potent thaumaturgical components and potion ingredients on that list!"
What? Oh for--- I'd thrown in a handful of random items (before you ask, the catalog had pictures)---mostly out of idle curiosity. She was telling me that I'd basically gone in and bought the local equivalent of a few hundred packets of Sudafed and a bag of ammonium nitrate fertilizer. Oh for crying out--

Whatever.

The dogs ran to the wagons and started hauling again. I started backing towards the forest; the trees parted behind me. "Nobody make a move," I said, clutching my hostage under one arm, blades at her neck. "If you try, I swear, you'll never see this brat ever again."

So help me, I actually saw the conflicted feelings on the younger ones' faces.

Make the traitor suffer for betraying you

Twilight Sparkle (yes, that was her name, I finally recalled) dared to lift her head up a little and look at me. "Listen to me, Darth Vulcan," she pleaded. "We're not your enemies. That thing around your neck is the Alicorn Amulet. It gives you power but it corrupts the mind of whoever wears it!"

That settled it. I'd been upset the thing wouldn't come off, but now I was bound and determined it would never leave my neck. "You mean the way YOUR junk jewelry nearly turned my brain into banana pudding?" I sneered. "And you want me to give up my only protection? Not a chance in pan-fried hell."

The first wagon had rolled past me and into the dark of the woods. The second one was squeezing through the gap in the trees when there was a loud crack, and it listed over on one side. Several of the containers inside broke and spilled. I looked back. #$T^! One of the wheels had snapped! I swore like a sailor. I tried to levitate it; no dice. Baffled, I tried using a shadow hand to lift it-- the hand fizzled the moment it touched the wagon.

"What the fuh?"

"The unicorn horn powder, darling," the white unicorn with the ungodly makeup said smugly. "Thaumatically polarized, remember? We wondered why you ordered a box. It dampens magic something dreadful. It seems you've gotten it all over the inside of your wagon."

"The unicorn horn powder, darling," the white unicorn with the ungodly makeup said smugly. "Thaumatically polarized, remember? We wondered why you ordered a box. It dampens magic something dreadful. It seems you've gotten it all over the inside of your wagon."

---

I paused. "Okay, I gotta know."

"What?" Celestia said.

"Unicorn horn powder. Is it powder you use ON unicorn horns, or powder made FROM horns? And if it's made FROM horns, where in the hell--"

"From," Celestia said, impatiently. "We get our horns filed regularly, to smooth out unsightly bumps and ridges as they grow. Is this really important? Now?"

"Well it BUGGED me..."

"GAAAH!" I tried to shove the wagon with one hand. It slid forward a couple of feet but that was it. The blasted thing was blocking the way, and it wasn't budging an inch. I looked up and saw more pegasi winging their way to us; they were just specks at the moment but they were closing fast.
"Leave the wagons! Grab what you can and go!" The dogs obeyed, grabbing bags and barrels and running for it, bounding over the broken wagon. "You're going to regret this," I seethed. "More than you've regretted anything in your life."

I pulled apart the trees behind me and made a passage for myself. I wasn't going to try and climb over the wagon, not with magic-stopping dust all over it. I gave my last threats was I backed into the woods. "Nobody stops me. Nobody follows. If I hear so much as a single hoofstep, she dies." In a surge of rage I poured magic into the ground. Thorny vines erupted from the ground, turning the treeline into an impenetrable wall. I kept pouring it on, sending the vines crawling and weaving through the trees, blocking the way with a thorny hedge. The look on Filthy Rich's stupid face as I closed off the way was priceless.

I turned and ran after the wagon rattling down my make-shift road, fuming. I lifted Diamond Tiara by the scruff of her neck and glared at her eyeball to eyeball. "For your sake, you'd BETTER hope there's some toilet paper on that wagon," I hissed.

It took us, once again, six d--d hours to travel. We had my road. But that just meant I had to stop every few minutes and destroy it behind us to erase our trail, block it with boulders, grow new vines and tree branches, turn up the stones. I took the added precaution of making rabbit trails that branched off for a few hundred yards before dwindling away... I was feeling mean enough to make sure those trails dwindled off someplace particularly nasty. I hope those manticores like their new half-mile driveway. I even took us on a circuitous route on and off the path, laying and destroying new road to confuse things more.

By the time we got back to the cave lair, I was exhausted, bedraggled, and feeling mean enough to bite the head off a cockatrice and chew it. We had less than a third of the supplies I paid for... there was toilet paper, thank God, and some pink medicine that had to be the local equivalent of Pepto Bismol. At least I really really hoped it was.

But what really burned was that my potential avenue for converting this dragon hoard into swank living was gone. Do you have any idea how maddening that was? I could reach down and run my fingers through gold coins. This world, gold and gems were as common as bottle caps. I could scoop up in my two hands enough riches to buy a mansion and a yacht back home, and use the change to buy a fleet of lamborghinis. I was rich as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs put together and I couldn't even buy a loaf of bread.

The one responsible is suffering. You have his child make him suffer more

I considered the kid. I probably was doing the money-grubbing bastard a favor.

Once the path was sealed and we were underway I'd turned her over to one of the dogs for safekeeping. The dog had tied a rope around her neck and made her march along. The moment she was out of my grip she'd used every tantrum throwing trick in the book. She'd fought, she'd kicked, she'd bit, she'd screeched and swore and promised her Daddy would make us all pay. When none of that worked she turned to throwing herself down and turning into deadweight. She'd get cuffed to her feet, only to do it again a few steps later.

Finally the dog holding her leash gave up and just dragged her by main strength. That was hard enough on her, even with the grass and mud smoothing most of the way. Then we reached a bog. The big lunk holding her leash gave less of a crap than a honey badger and just walked in up to his knees. Her screeches turned to splutters and chokes as she was dragged by her neck through the muck, half drowning her and covering her in mud. He didn't let her get to her feet till we got to the other side.
She was compliant after that, limping along behind him as close as she could... and still griping, cursing, threatening and whining with every step. I was at the head of the column, she was at the back, and it still had me grinding my teeth.

When we arrived at the cave I set the dogs to putting the few goods we’d gotten into storage. Then I went and tended to our guest.

She was a mess. She was battered and limping and covered in bruises, thorn scratches and nettles... what little of her wasn’t dripping with half-dried, brackish mud. Her tail was a lumpen mass of tangles and mud, so was her mane. But that d$%^ed tiara was still on her head. It was bent and cracked and half the gemstones were missing, but there it was, stuck on her head at a crooked angle. And I don't know what was in that mud but she smelled like Wookie crap.

Her head was hanging to her knees and her legs were shaking, but she glared up at me, her eyes just bugging out, just as hateful and arrogant as ever. "I'll get you for this," she said, her voice raw. "My Daddy will eat your LIVER-- I'm filthy and I stink and my mane is ruined and-- "

Fwaugh. I'd had enough. I picked her up by the scruff again and took her over to the bath.

At about day one and a half I'd gotten sick of the smell of unwashed dog and used my powers to carve out some basins in the cave floors for bathing, and put out the order that everyone was to take a dunk whether they thought they needed it or not. Anyone that refused, I had the others grab 'em and shove 'em in. They set up a howl, but it worked. The place smelled like wet dog, now, but at least there were fewer fleas.

I checked the nearest stone tub. It still had fairly clean water in it. Perfect. I took the brat and dunked her in the bath, sloshed her back and forth in the water for a minute, than pulled her out. She screeched and splashed the whole time.

She looked like a wet basset hound, but at least the mud was gone. She kaaked and spluttered and set up a howl. "Somepony help me! You saw it, he's drowning me!! This ugly stupid thieving minotaure-thing is drowning me--"

The last of my patience just... vanished. Pop. Burst like a zit. Fury just flushed through me; I saw red. "No," I said. My voice sounded weirdly calm even to me. "This is drowning you." Then I pushed her down under the water and held her there.

The water boiled with her thrashing. I gave it a five count. Then...another five count. Then...

then...

Then just as the bubbles were starting to taper off I pulled her out. She coughed and gagged, puking the water back out. I held her upside down and shook her for good measure till she was breathing clearly, then flopped her over the side of the tub like a wet dishrag.

"There now," I said. "See the difference?" She didn't answer of course, she was too busy shaking and gasping for air. "I said do you see the difference?" She shook her head yes, eyes wide. "And you're not gonna give me any s@#$% anymore, are you?" I asked. She shook her head no. "Good."

I stumped for a minute figuring out what to do with her. I gave her a rough drying with a gunny sack from the wagon, tied her hooves together and took her further into the caves.
The diamond dogs had actually managed to get pretty far in making the place livable. They'd gone and fetched their mates and pups after I'd freed them from Big Boss, and now the whole lot were living in the caverns. The females had either made or brought along crude wooden furniture, some pottery, and other rough style home stuff, and had overseen most of the dragon roasting. They were going over the few goods that had survived our little fiasco and were in the process of putting together something resembling a meal in the communal kitchen area.

I found the one in charge; a big fat she-dog who was as ugly as a bulldog licking a thistle. I picked her because I'd seen her with a few pups clinging to her; she at least knew how to put up with whining kids. I turned down my Vader Voice to a mere rumble before addressing her; I wasn't in the mood for a lot of cringing. "Here," I said, handing her the damp, shivering filly. The dog took her, looking a little confused. "Keep her safe," I said, pointing in what I hoped was a commanding fashion. "Feed her, whatever, but do not let her out of your sight. Understand?"

She gave me a sort of rough curtsy. "Yes, Dark Lord. Keep pony safe, don't let her out of my sight."

"Good." I left her to take care of the brat till I had some new idea what to do with her.

Celestia and her guards stared at me, speechless.

"Say," I said conversationally. "Ever hear of a story called 'the Ransom of Red Chief'? Where two sharp characters kidnap a rich man's grandkid to hold for ransom, and the little darling terrorizes them so bad that they end up begging the old man to take him back?"

"I can't say I've ever heard it," Celestia said stiffly.

"The irony is that it'll probably save her spoiled little life someday."

I basically spent the next hour or so sitting in my private chambers, brooding. I had gold I couldn't spend, an army I couldn't feed, powers I didn't understand... I shot a look over at the crude bookshelves holding my "plunder" from my first "raid."... magic tomes I couldn't read... and now a hostage who's father was probably crossing his metaphorical fingers and checking over her life insurance policy to estimate the payoff.

Crap, I didn't WANT a hostage.

"punish her"

And I couldn't exactly go back and go "whups, didn't need one of these after all" and walk away. Couldn't just throw her out in the woods either.

"finish what you started"
But keeping her was begging for an army of ponies to show up on my doorstep

*but they will anyway*

heart pounding, hands gripping the neck

and it felt so good watching those bubbles trail off didn't it choking flailing light fading--

I snapped awake with a start, gasping and shaking. Cripes, I'd fallen asleep staring at the wall. I hate it when I do that; I don't know why, something about it but when snap awake I have this sort of existential panic attack. It's like sleep paralysis, except, I dunno, in reverse. Like my body has woken up but not my whole brain.

I went through one for a minute there, babbling nonsense to myself and my arms and legs spazzing as my body and brain rebooted out of order. When it was done it was like my defrag had failed. Couldn't even remember what I'd been semi-dreaming about. Something about bubbles and looking up through water....

I was left with a solid mental impression, though; I'd have to be careful around the brat. I had a snap temper right now. Probably from being sick and short on sleep. I might do something hasty--- like chucking her out a window-- that would just make things a bigger pain in the ass than they were already. It might have been worth it all if she'd actually been useful... for... something...

Idea. Time to check on the hostage.

I made my way back down to the kitchen. I found Big Mama (and yes, that was her name) there, working over a cauldron, throwing in chunks of raw meat and chopped root vegetables off the wooden stump she was using for a chopping block. For a moment I got alarmed, I saw a few of her many pups running around, getting into stuff (okay no don't stick your hand in that after picking your ew, okay I don't think I'll be sampling anything out of THAT bag now) but I didn't see Diamond Tiara anywhere. then I looked up and saw a gunny sack hanging from a hook in the wall next to Big Mama's cauldron, right next to a likewise-suspended chunk of Dead Big Boss. A familiar disheveled looking head was peeking out of the bag. It was Diamond Tiara of course, alive and well more or less. Her eyes were fixed on the bloody butcher block below her, and the rather large cleaver sticking out of it. I could hear her whimpering faintly.

I cleared my throat. It sounded like a bear coughing. Big Mama turned around and bowed. "Yes, Dark Master?"

I... words failed me. I pointed to the filly hanging like a Christmas ham on the wall. "... The Hell?"

She looked where I was pointing and got the gist. "Dark Lord say to not take my eye off her," she shrugged. "Here is only place I can see her all the time while I work."

I thought over what to say. I just couldn't assemble the words. I tried three times before I could string something together. "**And what else happened while I was asleep?**" I asked, while I stood there wishing I could rub my temples through my helmet.

Big Mama proceeded to fill me in. Apparently Darling little Diamond Tiara had enjoyed a rather interesting time while I was asleep.

Mama had started her out tied to a table leg by her leash. Diamond Tiara had thanked her by giving her an endless litany of whines and complaints. Hoping to distract her and trying to shut her up, Big Mama had let the pups play with her... which in this case consisted of a lot of pouncing and chewing...
on manes and tails on their part and a great deal of screeching on hers. Big Mama had been nice enough to give her a plate fresh bloody chunks of the best stuff right off the block, only to have the ungrateful thing reject it, screaming in horror. Big Mama had informed her she'd get nothing till she cleaned off her plate. I could see the plate still on the floor, the dried sticky remains of her "dinner" still stuck to it.

She'd kept making all kinds of noise until Big Mama had finally "disciplined" her. Parental discipline among diamond dogs consisted of a mock mauling; batting the kid around on the floor while barking and snarling and snapping your fangs an inch from their face. That had apparently worked wonders. Big Mama had been forced to the gunnysack method because she couldn't work around a pony lying curled in a fetal position in the middle of the floor.

The final insult had been when Diamond Tiara had finally begged to go pee. Big Mama had taken her, sack and all, to the latrines, where the pampered filly had thrown a screaming fit. She had been informed she either used the open-air ditch like everyone else, or she could just hang in a wet gunnysack. Will broken, Tiara, still hobbled, had backed up to the pit to do her business.

And promptly fallen in.

Which of course necessitated a little trip to the baths again...

When the pony was clean to Big Mama's satisfaction (unlike me, Big Mama had access to soaproot), she had stuffed the filly back in the sack and hung her up on the wall while Big Mama finished butchering the fish and dragon meat for the stews. The filly, for a miracle, had shut up once the cleaver came out, so Big Mama had managed to finish making dinner in peace.

I resisted the urge to facepalm yet again. I was resisting that a lot with this particular batch of minions. Why the HELL did Evil Overlords favor dumb-yet-strong minions anyway? "SO let me get this straight. You took a juvenile herbivore. Treated her like a chew toy. Fed her bloody entrails. Dropped her in a latrine. Stuffed her in a potato sack and hung her up like a Christmas goose from a butcher's hook, and made her watch while you proceeded to hack a pile of meat into bloody chunks a few inches from her toes?"

Big Mama stared at me blankly. "Um. I think that it, yeah."

Great. Best diamond dog in the tribe with kids, and she'd probably put the kid into a permanent fugue. I took my unwanted hostage, sack and all, rounded up a bowl of fruits and vegetables, and carried both back to my chambers.

Once I got there I shut the door behind us, dumped her out of the sack on the floor, and cut her out of her hobbles. I plunked the bowl on the floor in front of her, next to a mug of water. "Eat," I said. She stared at it like she was afraid it would bite her.

"EAT!" I yelled. She yipped and began scarfing down a carrot as fast as she could chew, never taking her eyes off me. I plunked my tired butt down in my one chair and let her eat.

After she'd polished off a couple of carrots and apples and slowed down a little, I went over and picked a book at random off my shelves. I plunked it down in front of her. She took her face out of the food bowl and looked at it. Once I was sure I had her attention, I spoke.

"Here's the deal," I said. "You do as I say. Exactly as I say. When I say it. And I make your stay here pleasant. You give me anymore crap, and you go back in the gunnysack." I waved it at her.
She looked at me, with just absolute loathing in her eyes. "I hate you," she said, her voice flat.

"Go ahead and hate me," I said. "But you'd better do as I say."

She started to huff and puff, the way kids do when they're building up a head of steam. Her eyes puddled up. "You can't do this to me," she insisted. "I'm rich. I have powerful friends--"


That hit home. Her little jaw dropped, then-- "That's a lie! I have lots of friends--"

"Bull," I said. I flicked one of my Eyes of Vulcan (ding! we have a winner!) into existence and made it hover around her, staring at her. "I watched you. For an entire day. Followed you around. Watched all you did. Listened in to all your conversations. You have NO friends. There isn't a pony in Ponyville who can stand you. Mare, stallion, colt or filly. You're rude and nasty and spiteful and not a one of them can stand you."

"That... that's a LIE," she repeated. "Silver Spoon is my friend--"

"You mean the little grey pony with the spoon mark, who follows you around everywhere?" I leaned forward till my mask was an inch from her nose. "She only hangs out with you because you're rich. She's just like everyone else in your town; she's only polite to you because your Daddy has money, and because she thinks she has to be."

She jumped to her hooves. "You're a liar! I hate you! When my Daddy comes to save me--"

I blasted her at full volume. "YOUR DADDY TRADED YOU FOR A COUPLE OF BAGS OF COINS!" She froze, her mouth open, her eyes wide in denial. "That's RIGHT. THAT'S JUST WHAT HE DID. HE KNEW WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF HE DOUBLE CROSSED ME AND HE DID IT ANYWAY! He didn't care what might happen to you or to anyone else, BECAUSE HE LOVED HIS MONEY MORE THAN YOU!

"THAT'S why you don't have any friends. THAT'S why nobody who knows you can STAND you! He was too busy grubbing MONEY to teach you how to be anything but a worthless, spoiled little TURD! He PROBABLY figured if he got tired of you, he'd marry you off for even MORE money later so NO BIG LOSS!

"Your Daddy's not some big powerful important pony, he's a money grubbing EARTH PONY with a STORE and a few BUCKS! So if you're waiting for Daddy to save you, FORGET IT! HE COULDN'T CARE LESS! NOBODY DOES! SO GET OVER IT!"

That did it. She sat there for a minute, not moving. Then her mouth closed and her chin crumpled up and the waterworks started. "T-that's not true..." she quavered. "My Daddy loves me. He does. He's gonna come and save me--"

"Shut it!" I snapped. Her jaw closed with a click. "Now here's the deal. Like I said, do as I say and you get treated okay. Maybe even treated good. Give me, or my Diamond Dogs, any s@#$ and you'll go back in the potato sack and back to Big Mama. Do we have an understanding?.... Well?"

Her eyes dropped to the floor. "What do I have to do," she whispered.
I magically picked up the book and propped it up so she could see the cover. "Start reading."

She looked at the book, then at me. "Read this?"

"Did I stutter?"

She looked at the cover, cheeks wet. "Ad-advanced herrma-- hermeneutic principles for--"

"Crap." With a wave of a finger I snatched the book away and replaced it with another. "Try this one."

"In--interme-diate thau-ma...

"Gah. Still too much." I flicked the book away and scanned the shelves. Oy. Brightly colored, big pages, lots of illustrations... with unicorns and bunnies on the cover. Looked like I'd grabbed a whole series. I was gonna have to flash fry anyone that heard about this. "Here." The book landed in front of her.

She read the cover. "Little Unicorn's first books of magic, Volume one?" she said.

I nodded and magically flipped it open to the first page. She sniffled and wiped her eyes and nose on her foreleg. "My Daddy will come and save me, " she said faintly. "He will. You'll see..."

She started reading the first page. I sat back.

Ahhh. Now we were getting someplace.
Celestia just stared at me for a while without saying anything. "I have heard enough for now," she said coldly. "I have other affairs more important than you--"

I pretended to be hurt. "Awww. My self esteem is bruised."

"We will resume this later," she said ominously. She turned and left without looking back, her guards following. I was alone.

Later turned into hours. I hung there in my chains. Every two hours a guard would come in, let me down and walk me to a privy, let me do my business and then walk me back. Other than that, All I could do was hang there and watch the walls mildew.

I was counting the bricks in the wall across from me for the fourteenth time when things changed rather dramatically. One minute I'm hanging there contemplating things, all by my lonesome, the next there's a dark blue winged unicorn pony in my cell with me. Whoah. didn't even see the teleportation flash. My mind really must have been wandering.

Her horn glowed briefly and my manacles opened. I dropped to the cell floor, landing hard. After a moment waiting for my legs to get their strength back, I got to my feet and dusted myself off. "Okay," I said. "And who the heck are--"

Without a word she spun around and bucked me in the chest. I flew across the cell and smacked into the bars with a 'whang.' Just before her hooves connected I'd caught a glimpse of a crescent moon on her flank. "Let me guess," I grunted, lying on the cell floor, watching the ceiling wobble. "Princess Celestia's sister, Luna."

A silver-shoed hoof planted itself on my chest. I could feel my breastplate bending under it. "Still thy tongue, vermin," she hissed between her teeth. "I am here to be thy reckoning for the vicious cruelties thou hast done!"

"Gurk," I said.

Her hoof pressed down harder. The black metal breastplate creaked. Yeah, she was making it clear; she was strong enough to stomp a hole right through me. "My sister is too kind and soft for her own good," Luna went on. "She would parlay with thee, let thee prattle on. I have no such compunctions. Thou hast brought evil upon our ponies, and thou shalt answer us humbly and swiftly, and give us all the truth we ask--- or feel our wrath!"

I sized her up. And laughed in her face. No, I was not that badass or brave or anything. I've always had this tendency to giggle like a loon when I'm scared or keyed up. It probably earned me a lot of beatdowns in school, but then again it stopped a few, too. It depended on whether it made the one delivering the beating madder or freaked them out.

It seemed that Luna was one of the kind that got freaked out. "Wh-what art thou laughing at?" she demanded, leaning back.
She let her weight up. I reached up and pushed her hoof aside. "You," I replied between giggles. I sat up and caught my breath while I fished for an answer.

You want to know something? I've only got one talent, one real talent that actually works. I have a talent for getting under people's skin; figuring out where they're sensitive and where they've got sore spots-- and digging my fingers in. I don't like that about myself at all. I'd learned the hard way that it's worthless for anything but getting my ass kicked. But this time, I wasn't about to hold back.

"Wow. So Celestia sent you in to play 'bad cop,' did she."

"Bad.. cop?" she said.

Oh yeah. She was the one who'd been stuck in the moon for a thousand years, right. Totally out of date. "It means she plays nice, then you get to come in and play all mean and hard... and do the dirty work for her. Like always." I threw in that last bit on a whim. I'd heard all about the Princesses and Nightmare Moon and all that, and I had a few hunches about just how the whole sisterhood thing was really playing out behind the scenes.

I'd guessed right. She snorted, ears laid back. "Watch thy tongue, creature," she said. "I care not for what thou art implying."

"And what am I implying?" I got to my feet and leaned against the wall, trying to look cool and casual, and wishing it would stop moving. "The truth? Things get nasty, she leaves, you come in to rough me up. Pardon me for trusting the evidence of my own eyes."

"Celestia," Luna said slowly, "Did not need to ASK me to put hoof, horn or wing to thee, wretch. I would have done the same on mine own."

"If she let you," I taunted.

She seemed to swell up with indignation and stalked toward me, glaring. "Thou shalt show respect, prisoner," she threatened, waving the tip of her horn in my face.

I held out my finger and pushed her horn aside before it poked me in my mask. "Celestia already did the horn-in-your-face thing," I said. "She did it better, too. Forget it. I don't speak to Celestia's underling."

She whacked me across the face with her hoof, sending me sprawling. I sat up woozily. She stood there shaking her hoof. She'd forgotten I still had my helmet on. "I AM NOPONY'S UNDERLING!"

"Oh get over yourself," I said, hoping the voice changer hid the fear in my voice. I took a minute to try and straighten my battered helmet. "She rules the sun, the thing that keeps everything on the planet ALIVE. You rule the moon-- a fricking night light. You were so unimportant that she did your job and hers for a thousand years without help."

Wow. She heard that and just folded. I mean she fell apart like a wet graham cracker. She tried to stay all pompous and regal but her eyes went all wavery. Under all that bluster she was seriously insecure. Not surprising considering how her sister used her. "My sister and I share the throne," she said. "I rule with her..."

"Rule with her?" I laughed deliberately. "You can't even match her. You tried to stand up for yourself and she spanked your fanny and sent you to your room, and only let you back out when you
promised to be a good little filly and obey her. The only reason you’re a princess at all is with her permission. And she could take that away any time she wanted.” I waved my hands around. "Look at this place. Hell, she built Canterlot while you were gone. It's ALL hers! This is HER castle, HER kingdom, and it has been for a thousand years! You're just the unemployed kid sister she lets sleep on the sofa—"

Then she went Emperor Palpatine on me. "SILENCE!" Moon-colored lightning lashed out from her horn and ran up and down my body. I screamed and jittered, falling to the floor and spazzing. I grabbed the bars of my cell and hung on while I screamed and thrashed.

It only lasted a second but holy CRAP that was long enough. She shut off the fireworks and backed off. She looked shocked at what she’d just done. I think she was more shocked at why. ”Whatsamatter, honey,” I slurred. “Truth hurt?” I chuckled. "Oh hey, y'not c'mpleteley useless, after all... she lets you do all the stuff that would make her look bad. She gets to be the pretty princess everyone loves... an'... an' you get to skulk around inna dark wi' your batponies, scarin' the naughty ponies straight for her.

"Thousan' years an nuthin's changed, hazzit?"

Eyes wide, she spun around and leaped, vanishing in a flash of dark blue light. I lay there on the cell floor, cackling like an idiot while the walls warped and rippled...

Then I woke up with a snort, still hanging from the ceiling by my manacles. Blegh. I drooled in my mask. I blinked my bleary eyes and looked around. Ohhh, so that's how it was, huh? Princess of the Night does the dream thing, right. She'd sensed me nodding off and had decided to slip into my dreams while my defenses were down.

I looked up at my manacles. The runes on them glowed faintly. They couldn't remove my amulet, but they could suppress my power this way. Probably the only reason Luna could slip into my mind like that.... I should have known they'd never take those things off me while I was a prisoner. That should have been my first sign I was dreaming. Well, that and the fact that Luna had been wearing a raspberry flan on her head instead of a crown. But, y'know, dreams.

About an hour later Celestia returned. She was not looking friendly. "What did you do to my sister?" She demanded, her nostrils flaring. "The moment she returned from speaking with you she bolted to her room-- she refuses to come out!" She stepped closer, teeth clenched. "What did you do to her, sorcerer?"

"Do to her?" I said. "I didn't do anything. She's the one who tried to fry me with lightning--"

Her horn sparked. Flames licked out towards me. "Do not trifle with me, Vulcan," she said, her voice dangerous.

"Nothing," I said. "I just reminded her what a loving relationship she has with you... So long as she does exactly as you say."

Celestia paused, pulled her horn back. "What happened in your dream??"

"Don't ask me, you're the one who sent her into my mind to torture me," I said bluntly. "Oh don't give me that look," I said when she looked surprised. "What do you think she gets up to when you send her out in the dark to do your dirty work?"

"Do my dirty work??" Celestia exclaimed.

"Oh come on. You keep her in the shadows, give her fanged bat ponies for her guard, make up a
holiday all about how she eats foals--- she's been your boogie monster since day one. It's a good thing she's still terrified of you, at least. That'll keep her in line." I paused. "It was easy to figure out her weak spot, just knowing your and her story. How she lost it because she was jealous of you. Because she was always in your shadow. Always outshined by you...always forgotten while everyone turned to you and loved you... "

"That has changed!"

I shrugged, sincerely disbelieving. "How? All imprisoning her in the moon did was make things worse. You threw her in a dungeon for a thousand years, till nobody even remembered she existed, and told monster stories about her to little children. Now she's back, she's even further behind you than she was before, and because you're both freaking immortal, that's how it's going to stay, forever. And she knows it. And because you beat her when she rebelled against you, she knows she can never be free of you. That's just how it is."

I watched her roll that over in her mind. She had an expression of wounded disbelief on her face. "You barely met her, and you managed to cut her heart out. How does anyone learn how to be so cruel, so casually?" she said. There was almost a sound of wonder in her voice.

I felt myself sneer. "It's easy when you don't live with your head stuck in pony candyland."

"Anyway, weren't you wanting to hear the rest of my story?...."
Chapter 11

Celestia just gave me this... look. This whole interrogation thing was starting to feel like Silence of the Lambs or something. I resisted the urge to call her "Clarice." She wouldn't have got the joke. "And so that's what you had young Diamond Tiara doing while you had her as your prisoner," she said, her voice even. "Helping you learn more magic."

"Part of it," I said. "Most of it. But I was doing something more important."

"What?" Celestia said.

I grinned. "Learning to read."

It didn't take long at all to start picking up the Equestrian written language. They spoke English... something I still haven't figured out... but that meant their written language had to use the same sounds. I knew the English language had forty four sounds in it, so that meant it was just a matter of learning what symbols meant what sounds. Hurray for Hooked on Phonics.

Of course there was a catch; Their written language is something of a mish-mosh. There were some English or English-looking letters. There were others that were pictograms, almost like chinese or something. And there were other letters that looked like nothing but rows of short and long strokes, grouped together. It should have been impossible for me to learn... but... I was picking it up. Getting more of it every day, and remembering what I learned the next day, perfectly. I was soaking it up like a sponge.

I read the books I'd stolen; the dogs brought in more, muddy, spattered, torn, but legible. (I suspected the dogs had been doing raids; so long as they obeyed my orders not to draw attention by killing, I ignored it.) We went through those as well. By two days I could stumble along through a reading primer, with help. By three I could read at about kindergarten level.

By the seventh day, i was reading fluently on my own.

I realized it had to be the medallion; it must have been opening up the channels in my mind, fiddling with my language centers, making learning easier than it had been since I was a baby... It wanted me to learn as much as I did. My brain felt on fire and I tossed and turned all night with wild, demented dreams, but I learned.

Of course I was killing two or three birds with one stone here. Tiara's little reading sessions were teaching me all about Ponyland... Equestria... its history, how everything worked, and more. At first she was defiant... she'd see me come stalking in and tell me "My Daddy's coming to get me, and you know it." She'd repeat that phrase at any opportunity. I let her.
I kept her chained to my bedpost, with a bucket for a chamber pot, a food dish and a pitcher of water. I gave the Diamond Dogs strict instructions on her care in my absence; they were to only feed her what I told them, to keep her water pitcher full and her chamber pot empty. They were otherwise not to touch her.

The second night, she actually made an escape attempt. The diamond dog in charge of feeding her had made the mistake of giving her a glass pitcher for her water. She'd gotten up on a stool behind the door and waited. I walked in, and she actually managed to smash the thing over my head. Too bad for her I was wearing the helmet. I stood there, water dripping off me, and just looked at her. The terror on her face was palpable.

Funny thing was, I wasn't even mad. I suppose because it was just so pathetic. "And our first mistake was?" I asked. She whimpered while I patiently explained to her that she should have knocked out one of the guards instead, because they generally didn't wear helmets, then used their keys to try and unlock her collar, worn the guard's uniform and sneaked out that way-- not that Diamond Dogs were that dumb; but they used their sense of smell more than their poor eyesight, and they wouldn't have looked too close in the dim light of the cave if she smelled right. She might not have lasted too long out in the Everfree, but she might have managed to survive, given a little luck and swiping a few things on her way out.

She whimpered and cried and promised to be good. I said yes, she would, and gave her back to Big Mama. She spent the next 24 hours on the floor of the kitchen in a cage, with no food or water. I took her back the next morning.

She was good from then on. She kept right on repeating her mantra... "My Daddy's coming to get me..." but now only to herself, when she thought I wasn't listening. At night while she thought I was asleep.

I spent the rest of my time concentrating on upping my surveillance. I had spy-eyes floating all over the Everfree. My range hadn't reached the point where I could get to Canterlot, though I could zoom in with telescope-vision and watch it from outside the walls.

I also sent eyes back into Ponyville. I was flabbergasted when the images I got back from there were of the town going about its business as if nothing had happened. I didn't figure it out till two or three days later, when I saw Diamond Tiara walking to school with Silver Spoon. It was then I noticed that everyone in Ponyville was going through the same routine, over and over again. Son of a gun, Twilight Sparkle had actually gotten one step ahead of me. Instead of just blocking my Eyes from the village, which would've set off alarms with me, she'd cast an illusion over the entire village of a normal Ponyville day, and set it to play over and over again. Like running taped footage over a security camera. The next day Diamond Tiara was gone, Twilight had obviously spotted her mistake, but the jig was already up. I knew that she was up to something.

Diamond Tiara saw me watching (by that point I'd graduated up to watching multiple Eyes by way of floating magical screens, instead of just looking at the back of my eyelids) and she begged me to let her see Ponyville, to see her family and friends. I let her watch. She saw what I saw-- all of Ponyville going about their business, fine as you please. Even her Daddy, opening up his store every morning to make those big shiny bits he loved so much, like nothing had happened.

She stopped saying her mantra after that.

I kept the Diamond Dogs busy too. Hunting, mining, building up our fortifications. I tried to add a little animal domestication to things; I caught a couple more of those chicken-lizard-snake things and brought them back I threw them in a chamber full of giant crystals the dogs had told me were
inedible, blocked the door and told the dogs guarding it to throw some corn in over the top once in a while. ... I dunno, I figured maybe I could get them to lay eggs or something.

The hydra was kind of a big disappointment. The dogs had dug a huge pit for some project or other and the big brute fell in. I was pretty excited when I heard; According to human legends, if you cut off a hydra's head, two more would grow back in its place. I had visions of endless supplies of meat... whack off a head, grill it up, come back later and you have two more. Too bad it's not true. I went down in the pit, bound it in spectral chains, and sliced off one of the necks at the shoulder, but the hydra didn't grow two new heads, or even one. It just shrieked and wallowed and raised a racket.... after a while of watching it bleed I went back down, sewed up the stump and bandaged it up. I figured maybe it just had to happen real slow, growing back normally like a frog leg. Nothing happened, though Stumpy did take to running to the back corner of his pit and cowering whenever he saw me. I put a note to build a ramp out of the pit at the first opportunity and chase it back into the woods; like heck I was going to feed a hydra on our budget. And who knows, maybe he'd grow a new head after a few months out in the wild.

It was a shame; hydra meat is good. Nice and tender. We sliced it up and stuck it in a chamber I'd magically converted to a deep freeze.

It took two weeks, by the way, for me to unlock my magic.

I was lying awake in bed, like always, staring at the ceiling, thinking over the half-gibberish instructions I'd been reading in the magic books I'd stolen. I just wasn't getting much sleep anymore, so I had plenty of time to do just that. My magic was improving. But not by much. I was learning how to do this trick and that spell... but it was all piecemeal, what I thought of as "Menu Item Magic." A list of random spells, make your order, instant delivery... but nothing tying it all together. No formula, no system to it. I could almost grasp it... it was so tantalizingly close...

the amulet can unlock my power

I blinked. That half-thought, where had it come from?

The amulet has the answers. just ask

.... It couldn't be that easy, could it? The Alicorn Amulet had just been acting like a point and click interface, in a way. I poked around blindly with my brain until I set something off. Even the new spells I was learning from the books worked that way. Rudimentary. Like a little kid learning whole words instead of learning the alphabet, or working from a bake mix instead of from scratch. But wouldn't something with a point and click interface like that come with a help menu?

It was worth a try. I sighed and lay back on my bed, and let my mind drift down. Focusing on my magic. Tugging at it, pulling at it, following the tendrils of it deeper... like lying there, trying to define exactly where a particular ache or twinge or itch was coming from, tracing it backward like following a single computer cable through the snarl you find under your desk...

I got down through all the little bundles of magic I'd been poking at before, down to the root, down to the core. There, when I felt like I was completely immersed, I opened up visualized the words I wanted to say:

Tell me how you work
Apparently, that was when I went into the seizure.

I woke up to screaming, and large hairy things holding me down. I shook it off... well, actually I stopped shaking and came to. I took in my surroundings. I was lying on my bed. Several large burly Diamond Dogs were holding my arms and legs down. The screaming was apparently Diamond Tiara. Being chained to the bedpost of an Evil Overlord having a grand mal seizure apparently freaked her out.

I groaned and tried to sit up. "Master Vulcan!" Runt yelped. "What happened, Dark Master?"

"Let me up," I growled. The diamond dogs backed off, and I sat up. I clutched my helmeted head. What happened? What was happening? The moment I had made contact with the Amulet, a complete electro-rave lightshow had gone off in my head. It was like... like...

...Like a hundred epiphanies at once. Like every puzzle piece falling into perfect place. Even now ideas were whizzing around in my head like a runaway firework, setting off still others that pinged around my neurons. I rattled my noggin; the sensation finally stopped. And then I felt it:

Satori.

It's a word in Japanese. It means something like a moment of perfect clarity and understanding. Like Keanu Reeves going "Whoa, I know Kung Fu." That was me. All the abstract gibberish I'd been reading finally came together.

I closed my eyes.... and a menu appeared. A menu written in Equestrian. Dozens of categories, arcane terminology. Evocation, Transformation, Illusion, Teleportation, Enchantment... I flicked through the selection; more glowing script unfolded before my mind's eye. I had them all, and the underlying principles were so simple. Simple as the ABCs and 123s. All of the knowledge of thaumaturgy, right at my mental fingertips. Pre-made spells, and instructions on how to vary them--or create new ones from scratch.

The amulet had been waiting for me to learn to read.

I reached out, and a dozen Eyes of Vulcan sprang into existence, all over the forest. I sent one back to Ponyville; now I could see the matrix of the illusion cast over the town, and adjusted my Eye accordingly. The illusion disappeared, and I got a look into town for the first time in close to two weeks.

I started to chuckle. The Diamond Dogs looked nervous.

"Runt, gather the pack leaders in the war room," I said. "It's time." I snapped my fingers; The end of Diamond Tiara's chain leapt into my hand. With a flash of purple-black light, she and I disappeared.
"...And naow we foind owaselves in the middle of the Evah-free Forest, 'Unting the evah-elusive creachah known as a Darth Vulcan..."

"Discord, if y'all don't shuddup, I'm gonna kick your jaw into your brainpan."

Twilight groaned silently. This little reconnaissance expedition was barely an hour long and already tempers were fraying.

It had been a tense and nerve-racking two weeks since Darth Vulcan had abducted Diamond Tiara. Despite him disappearing into the Everfree, his presence was still felt. His Diamond Dogs were still out and about, thieving from houses and farms near the edges of the forest and attacking caravans, pilfering whatever they could. Their focus had been largely on books, which baffled the victims but made Twilight nervous. She definitely knew that knowledge was power; if anyone could appreciate what sort of damage the right book in the wrong hooves could do, it was her. His spying eye spells were even more unnerving; here was somepony who valued information and strategic intelligence.

On her own advice, Celestia and Luna had sent troops to Ponyville by train and under cover of illusion. It had been brutally difficult weaving the illusion spell that now covered Ponyville and kept the military preparations hidden from Darth Vulcan's prying eyes, but necessary. Darth Vulcan could not have any hint of what was planned, if they were to defeat and capture him.

For all the subterfuge, It was a fairly straightforward plan. She and the other Bearers would track down Darth Vulcan's lair.... which was proving fairly easy. Despite Darth Vulcan's best efforts, he had failed to obscure his trail completely. There were still chunks of Darth Vulcan's makeshift road left behind. A careful scrying spell had finally enabled Twilight Sparkle to eliminate all the false trails; they were now following the true path to Darth Vulcan's lair like a pack of bloodhounds.

Once they found the lair, Then they would send up a magic flare and call in the Royal Guard, a squadron of armored earth ponies and unicorns in pegasus-drawn chariots that were even now waiting in Ponyville for the signal to go airborne. They would dive in and pull the kidnapped filly to safety. He would be overwhelmed by sheer magical and physical firepower and taken prisoner. Alicorn Amulet or no, Diamond Dog army or no, nopony could take on two dozen of Equestria's finest unicorn, pegasus and earth pony soldiers.

"Oooo, ain't she a beaut!"

"I swear, Discord..."

Assuming she could keep the search party from killing each other, she amended with a mental sigh. Princess Celestia had insisted on Discord accompanying them. He was easily the most powerful magical being in Equestria, if not the world, and if they confronted Darth Vulcan he would come in handy. If he could be relied on, at any rate.

Discord was apparently feeling especially peppy today, and had been driving the rest of the party up the wall with his antics. He had spent the last hour running around in khaki shorts and a pith helmet, doing an appalling Hosstralian accent and calling himself "the Cragodile Hunter." He seemed to take special pleasure in irritating the crap out of Rainbow Dash. Of course the short tempered pegasus
made herself an easy mark...

He appeared next to Twilight at that moment. He stuck his head in her line of sight, whispering conspiratorially. "See that theyah?" He pointed at Rainbow Dash, who was standing with her back turned to them, staring off into the forest at nothing. "That theyah is a Ponyville Rainbow Dash. Deadliest breed uv Dash in the wuhld. One bite and I'd be dead in ten seconds flat!...

He picked up a fallen branch. "Oi'm gonna go poke it wiv a stick." Before Twilight could say anything he'd tiptoed over.

"OW! HEY!"

"Oi, she's angry! She's angry! Wotch yerselves mates!" Discord leapt back, flailing his arms in mock panic.

"Discord," Fluttershy chided. "That's not very funny." The snorts and snickers from some of the others belied this. Applejack in particular looked like she was having a hard time not laughing. Dash glowered at her friends, ruffling her wings.

"Hail no, it was dayum hysterical," Zecora said. This earned her an extra-poisonous look from Dash. Pinkie Pie didn't even bother trying; she just rolled on the ground giggling.

"Now Discord, this is no time to be playing jokes," Fluttershy said. "Please wait until after we've rescued the filly, all right?"

Discord grumbled but discarded his 'cragodile hunter' gear. "You ponies are no fun," he groused. He looked over at Zecora. "And might I ask what happened to your ever-so-charming accent?"

"She blew her cover," Applejack said sarcastically, cocking an eyebrow at the zebra. "Seems that whole 'out of the darkest jungles of Zebrababwe' routine was a load of hooey."

"Aw sheddup," Zecora snorted. "Yawl ever try to be an herbalist wid a West Fillydelphia accent? Admit it, none o' yawl woulda lissen to one word Ah evah said if ah din't talk like dat an' dress like dis. Hippa-crits."

Several of the ponies looked awkward. "There's.... more than a touch of truth to that, I'm afraid," Rarity said. "Ponies do judge you by your appearance and your dialect."

"Sho nuff," Zecora said. "Looka Miss Thang here!" She pointed to Rarity. "Think she'd sell her dresses if'n she talked like ah do?? And ah bet every pony hears Applejack talk and takes forty IQ points right off the top--"

"Hey now...!"

"Oh like you don't do it on purpose..." Zecora batted her lashes as she waded through the undergrowth. "Oh, y'all, don't mind mah simple country ways... business deal? Why shore, but oh me oh my, ah cain't be sure I understand all them fancy mathematicals..." the accuracy of the imitation made the others jump.

"It ain't like that," Applejack protested. Her scrunching nose and darting eyes gave her away. The others regarded her suspiciously.

"As entertaining as this is, could we possibly get back to confronting the Villain du Jour? I'm a busy draconequus and I haven't got all day," Discord said.
There was an explosion of sound and darklight, and Darth Vulcan appeared in the middle of their group.

"I couldn't agree more," he said.

I'd been watching the little group for some time... the six Elements, a zebra, and a weird flying chimera of some kind. Didn't these ponies believe in sending soldiers for this sort of thing? They were obviously looking for me. Well, I had been planning for this. This was the part where I'd find out if I had all my ducks in a row. I teleported into the middle of the group (and yes I heard the line. I couldn't resist.)

I guess my entrance was pretty dynamic. At least it got their attention; they all dropped into fighting stances. The pegasi and the alicorn went airborne.

Okay, let's analyze: Two earth ponies and a zebra, two pegasi and an alicorn, and a chimera of some sort. Three, no four, fliers, three magic casters. Step one, eliminate the airborne advantage. I flicked out my hand and a green misty cloud enveloped the four with wings. They coughed, gagged, and sneezed; there was a loud "pop" and an explosion of feathers. When the mist cleared, the pegasi and the alicorn were sprawled on the ground, their wings plucked. They set up a screech when they saw what had happened, the rainbow one especially.

I pointed with my staff. Vines erupted from the ground, coiling around the now ground-bound group of ponies. The pink one jumped clear; I caught her on the backswing with a force field, trapping her in a bubble. She yelped and flailed around, unable to find purchase on the slippery inside with her hooves.

"Time to child-proof the unicorns," I sang. Red rubber balls appeared on the tips of the unicorn horns. Just in time, too. Sparks flew as Twilight Sparkle tried to cast some sort of spell. I'd finally found a use for that polarized unicorn dust; the balls were hollowed out and filled with the stuff. It shut down their magic almost perfectly. Plus it was worth it just for the look on Twilight Sparkle's face.

"Discord! Stop him!" the yellow one, Flutterbye I think it was, shouted.

The chimera kept right on flying and resprouted feathers on his one wing with a wave of his hand. "Oho, you're an interesting one," it said, chuckling. "About time I got a chance to cut loose a little." He snapped his fingers at me. Then frowned and snapped them again. "Hold on here, give me a sec..." he muttered.

I didn't give him a sec. I wheeled about and fired off a bolt of balefire at him.

Now I'll have you know I'd been working on my costume and gear a bit. Turning everything to black ensorcelled metal and gems hadn't been enough for me. I'd taken my staff and worked it over into a proper magic tool. This staff was now a focus and an amplifier for my spells, like the extended barrel of a gun. The bolt of red-black flame I shot at him was bigger, stronger, faster, and darker than any I'd thrown before. It splashed against him and fizzled to nothing.

He yowped in surprise. "Wuhoah, want to play rough, do you?" he snarled. He swelled up like a maddened snake. "Well, no kid gloves for YOU, pal!" He held out his claws and sent a roiling cloud of energy at me.

I went "eep" and countered with a staff-driven blast of my own. Both blasts met in the middle... and
sort of splished against each other, fizzling out again.

We stared at each other for a second, him looking as confused as I felt-- then both of us struck at the same time. Both of us poured it on double-handed, a torrent of power, an express-train of power meeting an express-train of power. They met and...

Sloshed past each other, neutralized. They washed over each of us, him bathed in my backwash, me bathed in his. Almost immediately he started weakening... but to my panic, so did I. I could almost feel myself being drained...

In moments both of us sputtered out. We stood there for a moment, grimacing at each other and holding our clawed hands out at each other like two kids playing pretend wizards. Then we both dropped our arms, panting.

"Oh no, to heck with this. You're on your own," the chimera said suddenly, and disappeared.

"Discord!" Twilight shrieked.

I stood there leaning on my staff, trying to look casual and confident without looking exhausted. That chimera thing's magic had drained me somehow. I couldn't even light a match, I didn't think. I could feel my strength returning but I was going to need a minute. "So that's his name?" I said. "I'll remember it the next time we meet. Someone should be able to print it on his gravestone."

"Don't flatter yourself," Twilight said. Already they were struggling getting free of the vines holding them. She strained; The ball on her horn smoked, and then crumbled to bits. The bubble holding the pink one burst; she fell to the forest floor and ran to help her friends. And yes, dammit, they had the Elements with them again. Next time I would chuck those stupid things in a volcano."Come on, girls, we can still take him!"

"Don't flatter yourselves," I retorted. I pulled out a dog whistle, put it through a hole in my mask and blew. Yes, I had a dog whistle. Halloween pranks, remember? They were great for making people's dogs go bonkers. Rumbling growls could be heard. All around us, glowing eyes appeared in the shadows of the trees.

Glowing, purple-greeny-black eyes.

Timberwolves aren't really animals, or even plants. They're more a... sort of wad of wild magic and dead wood that glommed together and THINKS it's a wolf. I'd found I could control them even more easily than I controlled the trees and plants in the Everfree. I just infused them with my purple-black magic, replacing the green glow normally inside them, and they were mine. Fierce, loyal, perfectly obedient, ready to obey my every whim.

I had a dozen of them surrounding us. They crept out of the undergrowth, darklight bubbling out of their eyes, and began circling the ponies. Twilight zapped one to kindling. Applejack bucked another in two. They quickly reformed into a single, larger beast, and continued circling.

"Better call for backup," I said, amused.

Twilight snorted. "In a minute you're gonna wish you hadn't said that." She raised her head and fired a burst of magic into the sky.
Back in Ponyville, the squadron leader spotted the starburst of magic over the Everfree. "That's the signal, men!" he shouted over his shoulder. "Get these wagons airborne!" To the cheers of the townsfolk, they took off. With startling speed and efficiency, the warrior-laden chariots lifted off from the Ponyville town square and arrowed their way to where the Princess had signaled.

Five minutes after the last chariot had flown off, the town exploded into chaos. Without any warning whatsoever, dozens of buildings suddenly found themselves playing host to hordes of diamond dogs, who burst up out of the basements and cellars and even up through the floors. Ponies ran into the streets screaming in panic, abandoning their stores and shops.

Exactly as planned.

The dogs were under strict orders to do nopony any injury. One hostage had been enough to cause headaches; the Dark Lord wanted nothing to do with frantic or worse, vengeful families coming after them. Their only interest was in the loot.

Sugarcube Corner lost all its baking supplies, all the baked goods for that day, and most of their utensils and kitchen equipment. Golden Oaks library was suddenly short of several shelves. Carousel boutique was plundered for cloth, thread, and sewing gear. The hardware store, the Quills and Sofas, the flower shop, the jewelry store, even the booths and stands in the marketplace... every place was plundered.

Every place, oddly enough, except for Rich's Barnyard Bargains.

The dogs loaded their plunder into sacks, dove back down their tunnels and disappeared, leaving the streets in panic, unhindered by even a single pony.

While the Diamond Dogs were busy in town, I was in the middle of a rolling battle with the Elements and a rapidly growing number of flying chariots. I had seriously under-estimated how much power they were willing to bring to bear. Of course, they were still kind of underestimating me, too. I had regained my strength fast, and was whipping chariots out of the sky with whirlwinds and lightning bolts left and right while their magic bolts were bouncing off my invisible shield (so....awesome..!) without leaving a scratch. And just to keep anything with wings on their toes, I'd summoned a few swarms of bats. Man, those pegasus stallions screamed like little fillies.

The Elements of Harmony were up to their cute little pony necks in it too. My timberwolves were harrying them, keeping them from grouping up and pulling off their Sailor Moon Princess Power routine. They would blast or buck a few only to have them reform and attack, with more wolves arriving by the minute.

Still, the magical firepower coming my general way was getting worse. Perhaps it was time for a strategic retreat. I decided to pull a new trick out and dissolve into mist. Kerpoof, me-cloud. Awesome. I streaked away in a ribbon of mist-- only to be brought up short by an invisible wall. I re-formed, rubbing my mask over where my nose was. It hadn't actually hurt but I'd expected it to. A quick look around revealed that I was in a forcefield bubble about the size of a wrestling ring... me and a unicorn stallion in extra fancy armor.

"Your reign of terror ends here," he said. He magically levitated a sword and aimed it at me.
What? Seriously? I didn't know where to begin. Was Allan Funt hiding in the bushes? I fished in my pocket for another smoke bomb and felt a tiny rectangular packet instead. I couldn't resist the opportunity; I pulled it out and threw it at his hooves. He reared back, then paused, regarding it curiously. "A packet of crackers?" he said.

"To go with all that cheese," I said. (oooo, put some lotion on that Burrrrrn!)

I brandished my staff and circled around. He circled as well, his sword cutting arcs in the air. Seriously? He can make force fields like this and he's going to fight me with a sword? Maybe he couldn't cast the shield and do anything else at the same time. But then again-- ah forget it. "And who are you?" I said.

"Shining Armor--" (seriously? Who next, his daring brother Swash Buckler? well, at least it didn't follow the Pine Sol/Axebeard formula... or the Pansy McTootlepie name recipe common around here either...) "-- prince of the Crystal Empire, former captain of the Canterlot Royal Guard-- and Twilight Sparkle's big brother."

"And you think you have a chance?" (okay we were both fishing at the bottom of the barrel for Errol Flynn dialogue, but we were working without a script here.) "I've slain a DRAGON, dude."

He didn't even bat an eyelash. "And I suppose you think that means you're tough," he said.

"No," I replied. "I think that means I'm fireproof." I held out my staff and filled the dome we were trapped in with fire.

FWACKOOM.

No, I didn't try to kill him. How many times I gotta say it? Vengeful siblings, bad idea. Especially if one is an alicorn princess. But there was nothing stopping me from making him look like a jackass. He screamed like a filly, dropping the shield and doing a stop, drop and roll. Like I said, he was more or less unharmed, the fireball had been so brief it had only singed him. Aaaaand maybe scorched off his mane and tail.

I didn't laugh, but man it was hard.

I heard a horn in the distance. That was Skank, my lookout for this stunt. Perfect timing. I'd have to give him a doggie biscuit. I set off a half-dozen thunderbolts; no lightning, just light and sound, enough to drop everyone present to their knees.

Then I teleported to Ponyville.

I appeared in the middle of town square, standing atop a statue there. I waved my staff, filling the sky with dark stormclouds. Ponies naturally screamed and ran... again! Did they have any OTHER setting? Even a pitchfork wielding mob would be a change... I sent out a handful of my Eyes of Vulcan, cutting them off, corralling them into the square. Once I was fairly sure everyone was there, I set off another round of thunderbolts to get everyone's attention.

When I was done, every pony there was lying on the ground, quivering in fear, my eyes hovering over them giving the place an eerie glow in the dark of the storm. I gave myself a minute to let my ears stop ringing, then magically amplified my altered voice. It sounded like God had gone on strike and given Satan the microphone.

"ATTENTION, PONYVILLE," I said. "I AM DARTH VULCAN, MASTER OF THE ALICORN AMULET AND SORCERER SUPREME. PERHAPS YOU DON'T RECALL
MY NAME.

SOME TIME AGO, I VISITED YOUR STUPID LITTLE TOWN, SEEKING ANSWERS. I WAS ASSAULTED. SOME TIME AFTER THAT, I SOUGHT TO PURCHASE GOODS WHEN I WAS IN DESPERATE NEED. I WAS INSTEAD BETRAYED AND AMBUSHED AND ROBBED!

AND NOW YOU HAVE SENT OUT ARMED THUGS TO ROUST ME OUT OF MY HOME.

I DISLIKED YOU ALREADY. YOU HAVE GIVEN ME A REASON TO TRULY DESPISE YOU!

I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU THINK OF ME, YOU MISERABLE PULING BABYISH PASTEL-FACED PONIES. THE EVERFREE FOREST IS MINE NOW. EVERYTHING IN IT IS MINE. EVERYTHING I HAVE TAKEN FROM YOU TONIGHT-- MINE! DO NOT TRESPASS OR YOU WILL PAY DEARLY! AND IF YOUR PRECIOUS PRETTY PRINCESSES DON'T LIKE IT, TOUGH! YOU HAVE NO FAVOR WITH ME!

I looked down and saw, my oh my, Filthy Rich kneeling right there in the front row. He looked haggard, bedraggled. Like he hadn't slept in weeks. Perfect. "EXCEPT FOR THIS ONE," I said, my voice treacly. I levitated down off the statue and stood in front of him. "JUST THINK OF ALL YOU OWE THIS STALLION. WHY, IT WAS HE WHO BROUGHT ME TO YOUR VILLAGE." Murmurs of shock went through the prostrate crowd. "OH YES. WE CAME TO QUITE A LUCRATIVE AGREEMENT, DIDN'T WE, MR FILTHY?"

I looked around. Disbelieving faces gazed back at me. "OH YES. HE WAS WILLING TO MAKE QUITE THE DEAL WITH ME. HE MADE OUT LIKE A BANDIT, HE DID. OF COURSE, ONCE HE HAD MY GOLD AND GEMS... HE BETRAYED ME. EVEN THOUGH HE KNEW IT IMPERILED HIM AND HIS WHOLE FAMILY. EVEN THOUGH HE KNEW IT MIGHT ROUSE MY ANGER AGAINST THE REST OF YOU.

"SO NATURALLY, I HAD TO SEND MY DIAMOND DOGS TO... BALANCE THE BOOKS WITH YOU ALL. I NEVER WANTED TO DARKEN A SINGLE DOORSTEP IN THIS WRETCHED LITTLE TOWN. BUT MY HAND WAS FORCED. AND YOU CAN JUST THANK MISTER FILTHY HERE FOR ALL OF IT.

"DOUBT ME? JUST ASK MISTER FILTHY HERE ABOUT THOSE TWO HUGE SACKS OF GOLD AND GEMS I PAID HIM. HE'S A GENEROUS MAN, I'M SURE HE'LL SHARE."

Success. I saw shocked faces turn to ones of doubt, suspicion, and anger. He would be lucky if he could sell french fries to a fat man in this town now.... except his store was the only one I had left untouched. They already resented him for being a rich fat cat; now they were going to absolutely HATE him because, even though they knew he'd betrayed them, they were still going to pour money into his pockets for goods and supplies just to get through the next few days...

Time to wrap this up.

"NOW--OUT OF MY SIGHT!"
I set off a roiling cloud of thunder and lightning overhead. Wind whipped up, lightning flashed. Ponies screamed (that was getting so old) and scattered.

Filthy Rich lingered. He grabbed the hem of my robe. "What about my daughter?" He cried out over the storm. Well, how about that. He actually kind of cared.

Wordlessly, I pulled something out of my pocket and dropped it in front of him. He picked it up. It was the crumpled, crushed remains of Diamond Tiara's little crown.

He drew the obvious conclusion. "No, no, NOOOOO!!" He sobbed.

I knelt down next to him, my face mask against his ear. "Too bad you didn't care enough about her to raise her right," I said. "Too bad you didn't care about her more than you cared about your money. Too bad you didn't care about her enough to NOT CROSS A DARK WIZARD." I pulled my robe around myself in the whipping wind and disappeared.

It was the next morning when the Cutie Mark Crusaders found her where I left her; chained by her dog-collar to the front steps of the Ponyville schoolhouse, her food bowl, water dish and chamber pot around her, shivering under a blanket in the cold. Scootaloo went racing to fetch help. She returned with half the town, her father, half mad with grief, in the lead.

It was official; Diamond Tiara was shattered. Her tiara was gone, her coat was ratty and dirty, her mane and tail were a disheveled mess. She sat there in the dust, unresponsive, staring at nothing. Somepony read the note I'd left on her collar. "It says, 'unlock this with the gold,' " the stallion said.

Filthy knew what I'd meant. He ran all the way back to his store, fished out a piece of gold from the bags I'd given him, and ran all the way back. He shoved back through the growing crowd and pressed the coin against the steel collar. The enchantment I placed worked; the collar snapped open and fell off.

It was only then that she looked up into her Daddy's eyes. Eyes filled with tears, she spoke for the first time.

"Why didn't you come save me?"

I watched those six words shatter his heart. He bowed his head and sobbed, broken.

With a flick of my wrist I dispelled the Eye. I had kept watch the entire night and morning just for this moment. Task done, mission completed. The trail back to the lair was completely muddled--confirmed when Twilight Sparkle and her friends had followed my bogus road to the clearing where we'd had our little fracas. The Lair was stocked to the gills now with food, staples, and not a few luxury items. (Skank got a whole box of doggie biscuits for his good work.) And the shopkeep who'd tried to screw me over was a pariah in his own town, alienated from his daughter, and basically had his whole life dismantled before his very eyes.
I sat back in my stolen rocking chair, propped up my feet and took a sip of my stolen cocoa. Mmmm.
Chapter 13

Meanwhile, in Canterlot

Canterlot Castle, surprisingly, actually did have a war room. It didn't get much use, because Equestria was a realm of peace, friendship and harmony, and there were few entities crazy, stupid or suicidal enough to wage war on a nation whose benign maternal authority figure could express her disapproval with a strategically placed solar flare. But the growing crisis in Ponyville had led to the old room being aired out, dusted, and prepared for the gathering sitting there now.

In the high throne sat Celestia. A third of the way around the table sat Luna. Another third of the way around sat the newest member of royalty, Twilight Sparkle. In between them sat the Bearers of the Elements, Zecora, a badly scorched Shining Armor, and a disgruntled Discord. They were all debriefing, and trying to analyze their new enemy in the aftermath of their third encounter with him.

"What I want to know is why Discord bailed on us!" Rainbow Dash scowled. She was exceptionally surly; magic had been unable to make her or Fluttershy's feathers grow back instantly, and she was reduced to walking around with knitted wing-cozies to hide her embarrassing naked wings.

"I have to agree," Twilight Sparkle said. "That seems kind of important. Why did you run, Discord? You're one of the most powerful magic creatures in Equestria if not the world. You should certainly be more than a match for some wizard with an amulet."

"That was not merely 'some wizard with an amulet,' as you put it, Twilight Sparkle," Discord said, making quote marks in the air. "That was the Alicorn Amulet."

"That was not merely 'some wizard with an amulet,' as you put it, Twilight Sparkle," Discord said, making quote marks in the air. "That was the Alicorn Amulet."

"So the Alicorn Amulet... overpowered you?" Fluttershy said.

"It's not so much a question of relative power, dear Fluttershy," Discord said blithely, "as a question of balance. Whoever or whatever this Darth Vulcan is, the power that he uses is almost a perfect opposite of mine."

Twilight looked serious. "I thought I was imagining that," she said. "I saw how you and he seemed to, well, cancel each other out..."

Discord nodded. "Two points to the studious alicorn," he said. "his magic and mine basically neutralize one another because of their opposing natures."

"Wait, you're saying he's the opposite of you? Do you mean this jasper is some sort of dark wizard of order?" Applejack was disbelieving.

Discord shook his head. "There's more than one kind of opposite," he said impatiently. "Look--" he pondered for a moment. "Ah, I have it." He snapped his fingers and a perfect ripe red apple appeared over the table. "Okay, everyone, get out your pencils and paper, it's pop quiz time. What is the opposite of a ripe red apple? Go on, go on, write your answer down..." After a moment's hesitation every pony present wrote an answer on the little cue cards that had appeared in front of them. "Okay, pencils down. Applejack, what's your answer?"

Applejack shrugged. "An unripe green apple."
Celestia hmmed. "I put down 'an orange,'" she said.

"I did put down "an apple core.,"" Luna confessed.

"I said 'a rotten apple.'"

"Me too. Except I said green and rotten."

"You see?" Discord said. "There's more than one way to be an opposite of something."

Twilight's face lit up with understanding. "Oh, so you're saying that this Darth Vulcan's magic is a mathematical opposite of your own along a different mathematical axis," she said.

Discord regarded her with a droll look. "No, I don't think I would ever say that," he said. "But that is essentially correct."

"But you still shoulda been able to whup him," Dash protested. "You got way more power than he does, right?"

"That remains to be seen, Rainbow Dash," Celestia pointed out.

Discord shook his head. "And again, it's not just about relative power. He uses magic. I am magic. It is more... innate to my makeup. Even though I'm heaps more powerful, he can tolerate losing his juice better than I can. Me trying to neutralize him would be like trying to put out a fire. He would survive and eventually recuperate. I wouldn't." He drew a forefinger across his throat with a "krrrkkk" sound. His head popped off his neck and flopped to the table. "In fact we were very very lucky. Not every opposite interaction results in things just fizzling out," the head went on. Discord lifted his head back up and set it on his neck again. "In fact, sometimes there's a rather large bang."

Twilight shuddered. "Matter and antimatter," she said. "Complete protonic reversal..."

"How big a bang are we talking?" Dash asked apprehensively.

"Let me put it this way," Discord said. "How fond are you of this side of the planet?"

"Oh... my..." Fluttershy said.

"Oh don't worry too much," Discord said. "It's only a concern for me because I myself am, how shall we say, dimensionally exotic." He briefly turned into a moebius strip and a tessaract, then changed back. "He's not going to bump into anything else in this corner of the multiverse that will make him go boom. But you can forget me interfering with him in any way, even indirectly. I might survive a run in with him, I would only lose a portion of myself... but I have no desire to find out if I can survive having half my backside blown off, either."

"Thank you for your input, Discord," Celestia said with all sincerity. "Is there anything else you would like to add?"

"One thing," he said. "It should be self evident to you all that he's not from this world, or even this reality. Don't expect him to play by your rules. Or even mine. I get a vibe off him that gives even me the shivers. He's a lot less powerful than me, but he more than makes up for it by not holding back." He stood up. "I'll be in my pocket dimension until this is over, one way or another. If you need me-- well forget it. Ciao." With that, he looped around in on himself, disappearing with a pop.

"Well, that was unnerving," Shining Armor muttered. "And what did he mean that it was obvious he wasn't from this world?"
"Oh, sho nuff," Zecora said. She had completely given up on her accent and seemed to be relishing using her own native patois. "He's got da Alicorn Amulet, don't he?"

The others looked to Twilight for an explanation. She looked... embarrassed. "We... I... tried to destroy the amulet after we got it away from Trixie," she confessed. "But it proved to be indestructible. So I decided to dispose of it by dumping into a portal into the interdimensional Void."

Celestia looked astonished. "You cast a vortex portal? On your own?"

"Only a little one!" Twilight protested. "Just for a few seconds. Long enough to chuck the amulet in..."

"Still. I don't know whether to be upset or impressed," Celestia murmured.

"Considering the inevitable results, I'd settle for 'appalled,' " Shining Armor said.

"Fie, Twilight Sparkle!" Luna exclaimed. "Wast thou not taught more responsible behavior than to be chucking things, willy-nilly, into the Void?"

"It was only a LITTLE portal!" Twilight protested again. "And it didn't even have a targeted outlet. The amulet was dangerous! It had to be disposed of!"

Celestia held up her hoof. "In all fairness, while opening a vortex solo was rather risky--" she gave Twilight a Look. Twilight winced. "It was obviously a calculated risk. The odds of anything dumped at random into the Void coming out of the infinite at all, much less coming out on a world with intelligent life capable of using its power, is infinitesimal."

"And yet here we are," Luna noted dryly. "Methinks of the time we caught that one unicorn student of thine dumping his household garbage into the Void." She paused. "Zounds, that Shoggoth was furious..."

"Um, not to be too obtuse, but am I the only one concerned about how the amulet seems different?" Rarity ventured.

"How do you mean?" Celestia asked.

"Well, the last time any of us saw it being used... the user, as I remember, wasn't just corrupted, she was... irrational," Rarity said, waving a hoof. "Doing daft things like outlawing wheels because she didn't trust them. That sort of thing. This Darth Vulcan character seems, well he's certainly evil and villainous, but he also seems to still have all his marbles."

"And cunnin'," Applejack said somberly. "He took apart Filthy Rich's whole life like a jigsaw puzzle. Never even touched him." She looked sickened. "And what he did to Diamond Tiara..."

"How fares the child?" Luna asked gently.

"Unharmed physically, thank the Maker," Twilight said. "A few scratches and bruises, but those were apparently from escape attempts. Darth Vulcan kept her clean and fed. But inside... she's just broken." Twilight hung her head. " Barely speaks, won't leave her room, barely gets out of bed...Filthy Rich has nurses looking after her 24-7..." It was left unsaid that the nurses couldn't heal whatever wound Darth Vulcan had left on her.

"Could I speak with her?" Shining Armor said. "I want to question her. She might have seen something, or give us some insight into Darth Vulcan's operation, or how he thinks..."
Twilight shook her head. "I can ask, but I don't know if Filthy Rich will cooperate," she said. "He's furiously protective of her right now. I spoke with her, you can review my notes, Shiny, but I don't know how much you'll learn. This much she did tell us: He has a rapidly growing library. I already catalogued all the books he stole. All magic textbooks, from every imaginable grade level, and he's gotten more since then. He's learned to read now. And he's been practicing new magic every single day."

'He is learning our world's magic," Luna said ominously. "And at a prodigious rate, apparently."

"But he was already powerful and dangerous when we first met him," Fluttershy said in alarm. "How much more powerful is he going to get?" Nopony at the table cared to speculate.

"Another thing," Twilight said. "Diamond Tiara said he can't seem to take the medallion off."

"Can't, or won't?" Applejack hedged.

"Can't. She saw him fuss with it once or twice... trying to pull the chain over his head, or unclasp it-- he always gave up. He has to slide the armor around his neck on and off under it."

"I thought that only the pony wearing it could take it off!" Pinkie said, puzzled.

"And the magical aura is different... when Trixie wore it, it turned her eyes and her magic field were red. His eyes seem to glow red sometimes, but-- usually it's this mix of purple-green-black..."

"It may be," Celestia said ominously, "that the Amulet's trip through the aether of the Void changed its properties. In fact I'd say it's obvious that it has changed somehow. Anything we may have learned about it in the past may no longer apply." She brooded. "We need to focus on the one who's bearing it. What specifically do we know about this creature?"

"He's really mean," Pinkie Pie said. "I mean, like, angry mean. All the time." She thought for a moment. "And he really hates Ponyville. And ponies."

"That's a bit presumptuous and general, isn't it?" Rarity said.

"Well he was all 'Ponies are stupid' and 'Ponyville stinks' and Rarrr and stuff--" Pinkie Pie struck a pose, snarling like a monster.

"He's also cunning as heck," Shining Armor admitted. "From the moment the guard tried to ambush him to the moment he did his second attack on Ponyville, he was playing us all like a harp." He ran a hoof over his close-cropped mane; magic had removed the scorched hair and set most of his burns to healing, but his tail and mane were still a long way from where they'd been, length wise. Plus they felt sort of crispy... "And he's ruthless in a fight. He bathed both of us in a fireball, just for a momentary advantage."

"And he's got Diamond Dogs working for him," Rarity said. She gave a small shudder. "Though I don't imagine it would take much to get those uncouth beasts to come to heel..."

"Don't forget, he has control of the plants and animals of the Everfree," Fluttershy said softly. "He sent the bats after the guards, and he wrapped us up in those vines... and the timberwolves...."

"He changed the magic binding them together so they were under his control. I didn't even know you could do that!" Twilight said.

"Another thing to note about him," Luna said, unusually quiet... for her, anyway. "He is vengeful. Very vengeful." She gave the room a cool, passive stare. The only sign of her emotions was the faint
shiver in her wings. "Moreso even than I was as Nightmare Moon. For a single slight, a single perceived betrayal, he conspired to utterly destroy a pony. For a single day's ill grace to him, he has plundered an entire village. One can imagine what dire wrath he holds for those who have thwarted him directly."

"He threatened to d-d-destroy Discord," Fluttershy whimpered, hiding behind her mane.

"And as casually as somepony saying they would pick up a gallon of milk at the store," Rarity said. A chill settled around the room.

"Y'all can see why ah moved outta dem woods heah," Zecora said. "Ah figured ah better move into Ponyville foah he decided t'give me the same 'generous offer' he gave Filthy Rich, an' decided he din't lahk mah answer."

"It is unfortunate that our first encounter with him was so confrontational," Celestia said.

"Hey, I didn't start the riot, he did," Rainbow Dash sputtered. "I show up, everypony's running and screaming and this- this minotaur-robot-demon thing is standing in the middle of town bellowing about the Princesses. What was I supposed to think?"

"Nopony is accusing you, Rainbow Dash," Celestia reassured the touchy pegasus. "You can hardly be blamed for taking preemptive action. Ponyville hasn't exactly had much good luck with unexpected visitors this past year or so. And we've all had a few stereotypical run-ins of late."


".... But all the same, it is regrettable," Celestia went on. "I doubt that things would not have ended up the same, but it is still a missed opportunity.

"Of more import at the moment is his laying claim to the Everfree and all in it," Celestia's expression turned serious. "Which includes the Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters."

"But that old thing is nothing but a ruin," Applejack said. "Why's it so important?"

"Not everything was removed from the castle," Celestia said. "In fact it was abandoned in great haste, so many things of immense value are still there, magically preserved. Many artifacts, major and minor. The contents of at least one of the libraries, which contains many tomes of ancient magic and other knowledge."

"And this guy loves his books," Pinkie Pie said. The others nodded.

"More important is what lies BELOW the Castle," Luna stated. "The Tree of Harmony, from whence the Elements of Harmony came."

Every eye was riveted on her. "You mean these things are, like, fruit off a tree?" Rainbow Dash exclaimed, tapping her necklace.

Celestia raised a hoof and opened her mouth to correct her... then lowered her hoof, a perplexed expression on her face. "Well, technically--" She shook her head. "Whatever. The Tree is tied into the very foundations of our world-- its structure, its magic. My sister and I knew but an inkling of its power and purpose. We dared not tamper with the tree ourselves, gleaning what knowledge of it we did at a remove. Suffice it to say it is incredibly old, incredibly powerful, and incredibly important."
"Discord himself could not lay a claw upon the tree," Celestia said. "But Darth Vulcan, with his strange magics, might be able to breach the protections upon it. As preferable as it would be, we cannot stand aside and let him claim the Everfree as his own. If he should learn of the Tree... and gain control of it...

"Then Heaven help us all."
Chapter 14

Meanwhile, back in Ponyville

Diamond Tiara woke up in bed. A gloriously comfortable bed, soft and fluffy and thick with fat pillows, so deliciously soft and sweet-smelling that it was a shock to her system.

It was not just any bed. It was her bed. She took in the familiar ruffled canopy, the comforters and pillows custom made in her colors: pink, lavender and white, and smelled faintly of potpourri. Across the room she could see her dolls and toys, lined up on their shelves; she could see the wardrobe she knew was full of the finest, prettiest dresses for a little filly that money could buy. She felt a strange sort of disorientation. had it all been nothing but a long terrible dream? Then she felt the roughness of band-aids, the sting of her scrapes and bruises underneath, and the reality of the past two weeks returned.

It had been two days. She was home. She was back home, at long last.

There was a knock, and the bedroom door opened. A pair of unicorn nurses in little hospital caps came in, pushing a cart before them. "Oh, good, you're awake," one said with a professional smile. "That's very good. Come along, dear..."

She took Tiara by the hoof and pulled her out of the bed; Tiara meekly complied. The nurses led her to the bathroom. They didn't fill the tub; they had learned that lesson the first day. Even being near a bathtub full of water made the filly collapse in terror. A sponge bath with a basin was the best they could do. They helped Tiara into the warm water and helped her bathe, gently scrubbing around her cuts and scrapes. Tiara made no protest. They were very careful and gentle, and the warm water felt so nice on her rough fur.

Once she was bathed and dried off (oh the towels were so soft and fluffy), the nurses tended all her little hurts, daubing soothing medicine on them and putting little sticking plasters on the ones that still needed them. That done, they helped Tiara back into bed. One set out a breakfast tray and arranged a meal of vegetable soup and warm sliced bread, while the other took a brush and began brushing out her mane and tail. They had done this all before, that morning when they had found her, Diamond Tiara recalled. Her mane and tail were a lot shorter now; the nurses had been forced to cut the mats and tangles out, leaving her with next to nothing. She'd caught a glimpse of herself in the bathroom mirror; her tiara gone, her mane and tail all but gone; it was like everything that used to be her had been shorn away.

They finished brushing her short hair and set the meal tray in front of her on the bed. She quietly said "thank you" and ate. After she was done, she lay back in the bed, pulling her comforter up to her chin. It was warm here. It was safe here.

The nurses prattled on in quiet, gentle voices about nothing in particular. After a moment Tiara realized they were asking her a question. "...if you're feeling better, I think we could let your friends in from school to see you," one of them said.

Friends? She didn't have any friends. And they'd all seen her already. Chained like a dog to the school's front step. "No thank you," she whispered.

"And your Daddy? Can he come in and see you?" the other nurse asked gently.
Sitting by Darth Vulcan's knee, watching the glowing ghostly image—Rich's Barnyard Bargains, from a bird's eye view; her father trotting up to the front door, jingling his keys, whistling merrily like nothing in the world was wrong...

Tiara rolled away and curled up in a ball.

The nurses sighed. "We'll let you rest for now, dear," one said. "Maybe when you're feeling better..." She left the sentence unfinished. The two wheeled the cart out of the room, closing the door behind them.

Tiara lay there for a while, totally still. She could hear voices outside the door, down the hallway a ways; her father's voice, the voice of her nurses, what sounded like a filly's voice—Silver Spoon? Her ears pricked up... then folded back down. Silver Spoon had only hung out with her because both their parents were rich. And when she'd been kidnapped..

...Silver Spoon prancing along happily to school, to Sugarcube Corner, in the midst of a throng of ponies. Diamond Tiara? Who was that?...

What friends?

The day outside was sunny, but cold. She could feel the cold radiating into the room from the picture window along with the sunshine. The huge, open picture window at the foot of her bed, that looked out onto the woods.... She got up from her bed, made sure the window was locked.

She went to the bookshelves, retrieved two or three of her favorite plush toys—Miss Pretty, Bumpkin the Bear, Mister Hugglesworth—dragged them back to the bed, arranging them in a huddle around herself, hugging them close.

The voices outside were still talking. The nurses were quiet but firm; the younger voices and the voice of her father sounded disappointed, but resigned. She heard them all walk away, hoofsteps receding in the distance. For the briefest moment she wanted to run to the door, to call them back. She just lay there in bed, staring out the window as the hours drifted by, wondering if she would ever feel safe or happy ever again....

She nearly screamed when a head popped up in the window.

It took a moment of heart-stopping terror for her to realize that Diamond Dogs didn't wear horn-rimmed glasses or pearl necklaces. They certainly didn't rap on windows with their hooves, mashing their noses against the glass and looking aggravated. "S-silver Spoon?" Tiara said. She jumped out of bed and ran to open the window.

Silver Spoon tumbled inside. She sat up, adjusting her glasses. "Diamond Tiara, why didn't you--" she looked at Diamond Tiara full on for the first time and gasped. "Tiara... what happened to your mane?"

"Hey," somepony outside the window barked. "a little help out here, wouldja?"

"Oh!" Silver Spoon ran back to the window and reached down over the sill. Diamond Tiara stuck her head out the window. Right below was a five-filly tower. Down at the bottom were Applebloom and Babs, followed by Twist, Sweetiebelle and Scootaloo. "She would have her room on the second floor," Scootaloo growled as Silver Spoon and a reluctant and confused Diamond Tiara pulled her in.

"It woulda been easier if somepony hadn't forgot the rope ladder we made," Sweetiebelle groused.
"Hey, not my fault!"

"Was too!"

"Get off my back!"

"Would alla youse get off OUR backs and get in there??" Babs yelled, losing her temper. "Youse guys are heavy!!" After one or two minutes of this, along with a lot of huffing, straining, pushing and pulling, the filly daisy chain managed to pull itself up the wall and in through the window. They sprawled on Diamond Tiara's throw rug in a pile, groaning.

Diamond Tiara backed up from them warily. The Cutie Mark Crusaders? Why? "What are you doing here?" she demanded, a trifle angrily.

Scootaloo scowled. "Ya got me," she said. Applebloom socked her in the side.

"We wanted to see you," Sweetiebelle squeaked.

Tiara retreated around the other side of the bed, out of sight. "Why?" she said, her voice quavering. "So you could laugh at me some more? So you could see if I still had my collar and my doggy dish?" The memory, the humiliation, found chained to the front step of the schoolhouse like an animal--

"No! Tiara, they're, they're not like that," Silver Spoon pleaded. "They're not bad ponies. They kept me company when I was scared and lonely, when nopony knew what happened to you." She pointed at the Crusaders. "Applebloom has felt horrible that you got kidnapped off her farm. Scootaloo and Babs wanted to start a search party! And not a day didn't go by when one of them didn't ask about you." She stepped a little closer, trying to peek around the corner of the bed. "We've all been so worried about you--"

It exploded out of her. "LIAR!" Diamond Tiara burst around the corner of the bed, screaming in her best friend's face. "LIAR! I know the truth. I saw you all!"

"Saw us?" Silver Spoon said, baffled.

"He showed me," Diamond Tiara seethed, her breath coming in gasps. "He used his magic to show me. A magic window...thing... to let me see Ponyville." They all looked surprised. "Yeah, that's right," Tiara gloated bitterly, a hateful smile on her face. Her eyes welled up, streaks of tears ran down her face. "I saw you all. You were all running and playing together like nothing happened. You, and everypony else-- going to the park, and going to work, and going to school, and to Sugarcube corner like nothing at all happened. You were GLAD I was gone! 'Cause it was PERFECT, wasn't it? 'Cause it was just... like... I'd... never... been... born..." She trailed off into hiccuping sobs.

None of the fillies said a word in their defense. They just... mobbed her. Silver Spoon was the first to throw her forelimbs around Tiara's neck, the others barely a heartbeat behind. Tiara screamed in anger and thrashed, trying to push them away, but they just wrapped around her tighter, hugging her and nuzzling her and refusing to let go. Her screeches turned back into sobs and she gave in, the group hugging her and rocking her back and forth.

The whole story spilled out, a bit at a time. The other fillies were stunned over and over again as they heard it. The march to the cave. The Diamond Dogs. The horrible kitchen filled with blood and gore. The collar, the chain, the near-drowning. "He...filled a toilet bowl with water... and made me drink out of it!" she sobbed at one point-- one of her escape attempts, swiftly punished. Just listening to the
spoiled, hard-nosed filly weep her way through what happened was enough to haunt them all for the rest of their lives.

She finished by telling them how, every day, he had let her watch Ponyville through his magic window, how she'd seen the whole town going about its business, happy and carefree. Then he'd tell her about some rotten thing from her past that she'd done, and tell her this was why nopony cared--because she was rotten and hateful and everypony, even her Daddy, would be happier if she was dead.

They only thought they had been stunned before. The faces around her were filled with expressions of shock, horror, pity, and even, to her astonishment, sputtering fury. "That--- that wicked, wicked, poophead!" Sweetiebelle screeched, her face flushed red, literally drumming the floor with her hooves in rage.

"What a TOAD," Applebloom breathed.

"That's... that's the rottenest thing I've ever heard," Babs said in agreement.

"You GOTTA know that wath all a lie!" Twist pleaded.

Diamond Tiara's head actually snapped back at this. All a lie... The idea was like a beam of light, bright and pinhole-thin, piercing through the fog of misery around her. "But..."

Scootaloo gave her a look. "You mean it never occurred to you that the bad guy might be lying to you?" She put her hooves on her hips. "Good grief, you really are dumb!"

"Scootaloo!" The shout came at her from half a dozen directions at once.

"Well come on!" she protested.

"He showed me... through his magic window..." Tiara said feebly. "I... I saw you all. Walking back and forth to school-- and--"

"School?" Applebloom said, cocking an eyebrow. "DT, we ain't had a single school day since you disappeared! Heck, practically every place has been closed!"

"What?"

The others shook their heads. "Everypony wath thcared that Darth Vulcan guy might try to kidnap thomepony elthe," Twist said. "To get revenge on the town. Miss Cheerilee cantheled thcool, cauth the nopony'd let thэр kidth out." She shivered a little.

"We were only at the schoolhouse that morning 'cause Miss Cheerilee asked us to help clean the classroom," Sweetiebelle said. "And there've been guards all over the streets the past two weeks..." She gasped suddenly and facehoofed. "Oh, doi. That was what it was! Princess Twilight cast an illusion over the whole town so Darth Vulcan wouldn't know what was going on!"


Silver Spoon nodded. "Over the whole town. To anypony outside, the whole town looked perfectly normal. Like last Tuesday, over and over again. Only to people who were inside the town saw what it was really like, with the soldiers and everything. It was kind of neat, actually."

Diamond Tiara gawped in astonishment. She moaned and hung her head. "I'm a rotten pony, and a stupid one!" she said.
"Don't SAY that," Silver Spoon said, hugging her again.

Diamond Tiara looked at her friend, looked at the others. "Why are you being so nice to me?" she asked, utterly lost. "I've been so mean to you all."

"Well... yeah... you've kinda been a stinker," Scootaloo said, rubbing the back of her own head with a hoof.

"But you're OUR stinker," Babs said. The others giggled feeblely.

"You're a pony," Twist said. "And ponyeth are thpothed to care about each other."

"Even if they don't deserve it?" Tiara said weakly, eyes watering again.

"Either everypony deserves it, or nopony deserves it," Applebloom said. "And either way that ain't the point."

The waterworks started flowing again. "I-- I can't promise I'll be a good friend," Tiara said, sniffling and wiping her nose on her foreleg. "I'll probably be a jerk and do awful stuff again..."

"Like ah said, that ain't the point," Applebloom said firmly. "Forgiven's forgiven. And nopony changes all by themselves anyway."

They sat together, talking for a while. Commiserating over the fate of Diamond Tiara's cropped mane and tail ("I dunno, I kinda think it looks good," was Babs' verdict, given with a flip of her own short-bobbed mane) and Twist plying her with some soft peppermint sticks. (Tiara hated peppermint. They were the best thing she'd ever tasted.) It was when the topic drifted around to when school would start up again that Tiara started looking downcast again.

Scootaloo caught her look. "Oh come on, it's not that bad," she said. "Well yeah I mean school stinks but.."

"Ah think she's thinkin' about what ponies will think when they see her, Scoots," Applebloom said. Diamond Tiara winced, and nodded. Applebloom stuck her lower lip out, thinking. "C'mon, Tiara. I think there's some stuff you got ta see."

The household staff, not being foolish, were well aware of the "clandestine" invasion that had taken place upstairs by the Cutie Mark Crusaders. Largely because their chaperone, one Spike the Dragon, was down in the drawing room having a mug of hot mulled cider. The girls weren't allowed to go anywhere without someone to watch over them, but their families had come to the agreement that Spike was levelheaded, responsible, and trustworthy--- and more importantly was a two foot tall reptile with claws and fangs who was swordproof, magic resistant and could breathe fire. He had escorted the CMC to Tiara's house for their visit, then back to Tiara's house for their "super secret pony ninja mission," introduced himself to the butler and made himself comfortable downstairs while he waited for them to come out.
Granted, neither he nor the butler and maids were prepared for precisely how they made their exeunt. There was a thunder in the stairwell and six little ponies came galumphing down, herding a seventh in their midst. Babs was in the fore, clearing a path. "One side, one side, comin' through-- scuse us, Jeeves, we're heading out," she said as they brushed past.

"What's going on?" Spike said, nearly dropping his mug.

"C'mon, Spike, we gotta get a move on!" Sweetiebelle shouted. The tiny herd basically swept him up in their wake.

"And just may I ask where you are all going?" the butler said... with little real hope of slowing the stampede.

"We're taking Miss Tiara out on a constitutional, Worcestershire," Silver Spoon said, with the air of one long accustomed to servants. "We shan't be back till after two. We shall send word if we're going to be later."

"Um, very good, miss," Worcestershire said with a fatalistic mental shrug. The dragon was with them and there were guards on every streetcorner, after all... he and the maids watched as the seven ponies and one dragon piled out the front door, and were gone.

Tiara wasn't sure about this, not at all. She still felt the shivers just being out in the open. But having a tiny herd pressed around her, warm sides against hers, helped her feel better, helped her feel strong. She had to take deep breaths, and look around and remind herself that she was safe. She was right in the middle of Ponyville and she was safe.

Despite everything they'd said, Tiara had been doubting. That was, she doubted until she saw a few of the townsponies in person. There was nothing but sympathy and kind words to her. Even from ponies whom she'd never been very nice to... She'd broken down and tearfully blurted out more than one apology on the way. They'd been accepted with surprised good grace, when all she'd expected was indifference or hostility... After the first one or two, her tears had dried and the reconcilings had come more easily, though no less genuine.

What was more surprising was how much Ponyville had changed. There were soldiers in armor on every block, some patrolling, others tending to pegasus carriages, even a few flying overhead. There were even some standing guard outside the library. "Where did they all come from?" she gasped.

"The Princesses," Scootaloo said. "Weren't cha listening? They moved like, a whole platoon of soldiers into Ponyville the moment that Darth Vulcan guy kidnapped you. They sent in the whole bunch in a big raid into the Everfree to try and rescue you!"

"I didn't know," Diamond Tiara said. "I never saw them."

"Not surprising," Spike said. "Twilight said they didn't even come close to finding Darth Vulcans's lair. While they were in there, fighting the guy in the middle of the woods, the Diamond Dogs were in here, looting and robbing and... well, leaving you chained to the front of the school," he said the last apologetically, shrugging.

"Yeah, it was a whole big shuck an' jive," Applebloom snorted. "Shining Armor was mad enough to spit his bit when he got back and found out..."
Diamond Tiara stopped in her tracks. "Shining Armor?" she squeaked. "The Shining Armor led the rescue team that came for me?" She made a sound like 'hyeeek' and clapped her hooves to her fire engine red cheeks.

"Yeah," swooned Silver Spoon. "He was just as handsome as his pictures..." Diamond Tiera went 'hyeeek' again. Several of the other fillies cooed in agreement.

Spike regarded them all with lidded eyes. "He's married, you guys," he said.

"We know," Sweetiebelle said wistfully.

"We juht like looking at him," Twist said. The others, even Scootaloo, chimed in. "Yeah...."

Spike just rolled his eyes and mimed gagging himself. "Fillies."

"And I missed him," Tiara lamented, stamping a hoof.

"Nah, he's still in town," Spike said, knowing he'd regret admitting it. "In fact, he's going to want to interview you later, to see what you know about Darth Vulcan and his forces---"

"Hyeeeeeeeeeek!"

They trotted through the streets together, the others shepherding her along. It wasn't till they got to a familiar street that she realized where they were herding her. Up ahead was Daddy's store, Rich's Barnyard Bargains. She stopped in her tracks again. "Why are we here?" she stammered.

The others were still. She looked around at them. Applebloom was the one who finally spoke. "DT, maybe I ain't the smartest filly in Equestria, but I remember what you told us Darth Vulcan told you," she said. "I remember what you said when your Daddy came and unlocked those chains, too. You thought he abandoned you. That weren't nothin' but a horrible lie."

"A horrible horrible poopyheaded lie," Sweetiebelle huffed, her face red.

"Whoa, easy there, Mallo Fluff," Babs teased. "Youse is gettin' all hardcore on us." Sweetiebelle tried to glare at her, but it only came out looking like a pout.

"She's right," Applebloom went on. "Your Daddy never abandoned you. Shoot, the Guards had to almost hog-tie him to keep him from charging off into the Everfree all by himself."

"I heard he tried to hire some tough commando type ponies, to do a rescue raid," Scootaloo said. "Which woulda been awesome, but the Princesses stopped him. They were afraid that if he jumped the gun, Darth Vulcan would see him coming and--" she gulped.

Tiara shuddered. She could figure out what Scootaloo was hinting at.

"He ain't done nuthin' since," Applebloom said. "Won't go to the bank. Won't open the store. Just sits there on the front porch..." Applebloom pointed. Tiara could see the silhouette of a pony, slouched over in one of the wooden rockers Daddy left on display for ponies to rest in. It was then Tiara realized that all the windows of the store were dark.

Applebloom gave her a nudge with her nose. "I think your Daddy feels like you did," she said. "Like
the most horrible pony in the world. 'Cause as rich an' powerful as he is, he couldn't come and rescue his little girl.

"He loves you somethin' powerful, an' if you love him you won't let him spend another minute feeling like that."

Tiara looked at her Daddy. She felt something lurch inside, like something was trying to twist her heart in half. The others gave her a few more nudges. She started walking towards the store. Halfway there she started running.

"Daddy!"

Filthy Rich looked up. He was bleary eyed and haggard; he hadn't groomed; his once stylish pompadour was a stringy mess. He hadn't slept in two days. He could barely believe his eyes when he saw the little pink and lavender pony running for him, hell bent for leather. "Punkin?" he said.

She all but flung herself into his forelegs. "Daddy!" she sobbed. She burrowed her face into his neck, clinging like a vine, never going to let go. "I love you Daddy-- I know you tried, you tried-- I don't care, I love you Daddy--"

Filthy Rich hugged her close and showered her with tears. His baby girl was finally back.

Up the road half a block, six fillies stood sniffling and wiping damp eyes, a few of them threatening to punch anyone who blabbed. The dragon however was not so resolute. He was standing with kerchief in claw, bawling to beat the band. "Why are YOU so worked up?" Babs teased him, snickering through her own watery eyes.

"Iiii don't KNOOOOOWWWWW!" Spike howled, blowing his nose with an enormous honk. The others turned on him with rib pokes and hoof noogies, and maybe a couple of back pats and hugs.

It was a beautiful day in Ponyville, and everything was going to be fine.
"In all of your actions thus far," Celestia said, "I am yet to discern any sort of plan."

It was lunchtime. Well, I supposed it was lunchtime; Celestia's guards had led me by my chains to a privy at the end of the hall, let me tend to my business, then brought me back to my cell, where they had handed me a bowl with cornbread and beans. I had been allowed to sit on the floor, my chains fastened to the bars so that I could eat, and Celestia had continued her interrogation.

I looked up at her with a mouthful of cornbread, chewed, swallowed and answered. "Do I look like a guy with a plan?"

Celestia sniffed. "A goal, then. What was your intent? To conquer and rule here? To return to your home with the Alicorn Amulet and rule there, instead?"

I snorted. I could just see myself trying to conquer my world with a magic medallion and a bunch of diamond dogs. The power-grubbing bum-wipes running the world would call a drone strike in on my skinny black-clad butt before you could say oligarchy. Then again, the thought of ruling an empire here... in a world where the technological level seemed to be set to "whatever", the laws of nature and physics were apparently running a reelection campaign against the laws of magic, and everything apparently ran on the logic of a six year old girl... "You want to know the truth, Princess?" I said, wiping my mouth on my sleeve. "I really got only one issue. Getting out of here. After that?" I shrugged. "I'd make my mind up then."

"And the amulet didn't tell you?" Celestia asked, condescending.

"Nope." I took another spoonful of beans. "It wasn't like I unlocked the secrets of the universe, just the user's Help manual. Knowing how to ride a bike doesn't turn you into an X-treem sports rider overnight." This of course went right over her pointy rainbow-wigged head. She gave me a cockeyed look, like I was talking in japanese. "I got the basics," I said, trying to dumb it down a little. "Magic Kindergarten in a box. With maybe an encyclopedia set as a graduation gift." That seemed to clarify things for her. "Besides, it's not like reading a spell book is going to tell you who cast the spell on you."

"Of course, I was sort of limited in what I could do. I was kind of busy fortifying my base. Fall was almost over and Winter was coming fast..."

Everybody in the lair was busting a hump. The dogs had been antsy as heck, digging tunnels everywhere, dragging in food from the forest, nagging me every five minutes about getting ready for winter. This was annoying, seeing as I had other things on my to-do list than to play frontier settlers with a bunch of orc-dogs. First off, I was busy trying to fortify our location against attack by angry magical ponies, and second off, trying to organize a plan to find out who or what had sent me to this
That second one took a pretty high precedent, actually. I'd been dragged into another universe
without my permission, and had the door slammed shut and locked behind me. I didn't like
that. If I'm going to go anywhere or be anywhere, it's gonna be MY choice, MY decision. I had one goal;
find out how I got here, learn how to get back and then kick the @$#$ of whoever was responsible.

Still, I wasn't going to get anything done if the help was too busy pitching a hissy about how the
larder wasn't deep enough or there wasn't enough logs to throw on the fire. I set most of the diamond
dogs to the work of hunting, fishing, foraging, and trapping to bulk up the food supplies. I put Big
Mama in charge of drying and smoking and storing the food the others brought in. I took a few
minutes, leveled an acre or two of trees, and set dogs to chopping them up for firewood. I even had
my dark timberwolves going out, dragging home squirrels and rabbits and other small critters. All
else considered, at least nobody would starve.

Or I might choke a B@#$% if I didn't get the D@#$d toilet working.

"Okay, now turn it on!"

Of all the things in the lair, this was the oddest. Back when Big Boss was still in charge, they'd hit a
convoy carrying a ton of plumbing supplies headed to some royal something or other's manor.
They'd bagged about a ton of plumbing pipe, some random fixtures and-- of all things-- a ceramic
toilet, which had miraculously survived the trip home and was now sitting proudly in my private
chambers.

"Okay, the seals are holding--"

I'd used it as a water bowl a couple of times for the Royal Brat when I had to be away from the lair
for the day (hey, it was clean, and it held tons more water than any other bowls we had. Plus it taught
her not to whine about her water bowl being empty.) But once our big Ponyville Raid went off
without a hitch, I decided to take the bull by the horns and add some creature comforts to my life.
Thanks to those D@#$d ponies, their magic portals and their Alicorn Amulet I was living without
TV, internet, electricity, cell phone access, fast food, modern medicine, or even reliably clean
clothes, but I was not going to go another day without indoor plumbing.

*creak* "oh that's not good"

My dad and I had spent a summer installing a septic system in an old log cabin, so I had the basics
down. Of course, this time around I was having to work with cobbled-together materials and
makeshift tools. (diamond dogs have forges, but lead and copper plumbing fixtures are a little beyond
their skillset.) I'd managed to bang together a workable septic tank and blackwater drain pipe, and I
redirected one of the underground streams into a little gravity-powered reservoir for water
supply. Getting the stolen valves, pipes, etc. to cooperate was another matter, however.

*bang* "WAUGH, TURN IT OFF, TURN IT OFF!!"

Runt didn't turn it off. Not surprising he didn't hear me over the roar of water spraying everywhere in
my half-finished bath house. The intake valve on the toilet had blown off under the incoming
pressure. Skank, Mange and I found ourselves flailing about as we received a high-pressure hosing
down with freezing cold water. Ah, the glamorous life of the Evil Overlord.

And why was I, the Evil Overlord, trying to assemble my own plumbing? I submit for your
consideration the kind of help available. My two assistants, Mange and Skank, were less than zero
help. They were too busy splashing about in the torrential spray, ki-yi'ing and waving their arms like
lunatics. "Pffaugh, stop the water, stop the water!" I yelled, trying to shield my face. No, the helmet was not watertight. Skank lunged forward and tried to stop the flow with his bare hands, only managing to redirect the spray into his own face. He stood there holding the pipe going "Whaaaarrgharble" as he was force-fed about a gallon of water a minute.

"Quit drinking it and plug it!" I yelled.

Mange finally showed some presence of mind and grabbed a hammer, smashing the end of the pipe flat and cutting off the flow. I stuck my head out the bathroom door and bellowed for Runt to shut off the water. Mercifully, the flow finally ceased.

We all stood there, dripping, as I contemplated things. The pipes were smashed (again), the bathroom was drenched (again) and already the humid heat of the furnaces was making the cave smell like wet dog hair. I decided it was time for a change of venue.

"....So," I said. "You were saying something about a ruined castle in the middle of the forest?"

I'd managed to glean a little information from my shoddy library and my dimwitted soldiers. It was an ancient ruin, apparently; the ancient Castle of the Pony Sisters, a crumbling palace half-demolished and abandoned over a thousand years ago. So naturally, this being Stupid Pony Fairyland, when we arrived there I discovered it looked like it had been left abandoned maybe a year, if that.

Seriously, this floored me. I just stood in the entryway for a while and stared. I've seen thousand-year-old ruins before. They're usually little more than a few crumbling walls of stone, covered in vines and moss. Especially in a temperate forest like this. But this... I could see suits of armor lining the hallways. Suits of armor should have been nothing but piles of rust within a decade, what with those holes in the roof. There were rotting carpets on the floor and tapestries that should have been nothing more than topsoil centuries ago. There were paintings on the wall, just ordinary canvas and paint, fully exposed to the rain and sun--- what wouldn't have been washed away in the rain should have been bleached colorless by the sun. Oh there were vines here and there growing through the broken windows and some cobwebs and stuff, but I wasn't fooled.

"@@#% it, magic," I muttered, and shrugged.

This had, of course, become my fallback explanation for everything when I was confronted with the bat-poo space-monkey insanity that is Ponyworld. "@@#% it, magic." Talking ponies? @@#% it, magic. Piles of kindling that think they're wolves? @@@#%$% it, magic. Houses made of clouds? Liquid rainbows? Sun and Moon setting in the wrong d@#n direction again? @$%^@% it, magic. I was starting to understand why most of Earth's pagan civilizations had never crawled their way up out of the bronze age. How could you make sense of the world if you even thought it actually worked like this?

What made my new default answer for Life, the Universe and Everything really irritating was that, around here, it was usually right. I didn't even have to scry for it; the place was obviously under a few gazillion layers of preserving spells, keeping it and everything inside it from decaying.

Ironically that just meant it made less sense. Who would put that much magical preservation on a building and everything in it, just to-- abandon it all? And WHY? Damaged or not it was such a
criminally obscene waste! The suits of armor alone... do you realize how much a full suit of armor cost in the dark ages? They would ransom those things after a battle. And the tapestries? The royalty that lived there probably squeezed the blood-money out of a dozen peasants just to pay for one of them. Furniture, paintings, weapons and shields... I didn't know whether I hoped to find any books here or not; I mean, good night, in the medieval period books were written by hand and cost a precious fortune, I can't imagine what kind of ruler, no matter how depraved and irresponsible and decadent would just leave all this stuff sitting out in the wilderness to...

Celestia coughed.

I stared at her. "You?"

"My sister and I, yes."

"You were the Royal Pony Sis---" Several things clicked all at once. "Sun, Moon, Nightmare Moon..." I pointed at her with my manacled hand. "You had that fight with your sister, trashed the place, banished her to the Moon, and then you-- you just ABANDONED IT??"

She said nothing.

"All that art. All those suits of armor, and gilded furniture, and tapestries, and all those millions of bits in priceless books and art and--- " I clutched at the air. "Millions of hours of peasant labor, all the blood and sweat and tears of your subjects who probably bled through the hooves just making that crap for you or were squeezed penniless to pay the taxes for it and you-- you just left it all out in the wilderness to ROT??"

"The Castle had to be abandoned in haste," Celestia said. "The magic we unleashed that day had set the Everfree forest running riot. There was only time to reinforce the preserving spells on the castle and its contents. We could not go back for any of the castle's many treasures."

"FOR A THOUSAND YEARS??--- You know what, forget it," I said sarcastically, flipping my hands up at the wrist (I had been reattached to the wall.) "It's about par for the course around here. This whole place is run like Clown College. You're thousands of years old and you are absolutely incompetent--"

"Mind your tongue around the Princess, scum," one of the guards barked.

Armor or not, it's hard to be intimidated by something that looks like a plush carnival fairway prize. "Or what?" I sneered at him. "You'll chain me up and throw me in a dungeon?" I shot a look at the Princess. "Or I dunno, stick me in a box for a thousand years and then leave it up to six unarmed fillies to save the day when I inevitably escape? Ooo, how about throwing me in Tartarus where the only guard can be distracted with a rubber ball and a dog biscuit?"

Her face was flaming red at this point. I decided to push it. "Or you could treat me like you do your average magical MacGuffin--" I glanced down at the Alicorn Amulet and smirked. "Just drop it someplace random, rub a four leaf clover and hope nobody nasty finds it. You're supposed to be this wise all-knowing leader with thousands of years of experience, but I've seen people dispose of busted lightbulbs with more care than you show for world-shattering magical artifacts."
She was shifting from red to purple. I shrugged. "Oh, I forgot. This is about VILLAINS. Your protocol for dealing with those is to mistake them for your niece, give them free run of your palace for days on end, ignore all the warnings you get from your most trusted advisor, and then marry them off to your Captain of the Guard..." I let the pause drop. "So yeah. Incompetent." She kept staring, I misinterpreted. "Yeah, I read newspapers. You'd be amazed at the litter that gets dumped at the edge of the Everfree..."

She stared at me in utter amazement. "Why do you say such things when you know that I could have you executed for it?" she marveled.

"Well, here we are," I said, cool as I could manage. "I'm your prisoner. I'm in chains. I'm completely in your power." I lowered my head as if for an executioner's axe. "Take your best shot."

We all stood still. She didn't even lower her horn. "You know I won't," she said, calm again.

"Course not. You wouldn't even frag that prick Sombra, and he was like a little four-hooved Hitler. Heck, you even had Discord dead to rights; five minutes with a sledgehammer and you would have gotten rid of your chaos problem permanently. Don't make a bluff you won't call."

She shuddered. "We do not simply destroy everything that troubles us," she said scornfully.

"Yeah. And you don't keep track of all your little toys either. And it keeps coming around to bite you in your sun-dappled butt, don't it."

I'm sure anyone would want to know what I got up to in that castle. Not much, at first. Me and a dozen diamond dogs stood there in the entryway with a few snow flurries blowing in behind us, looking around, not daring to go further inside. It smelled like a trap. A magically preserved, unguarded castle in the middle of a forest? Yeah, that was what made sense to me. We'd brought crystal torches from the caves to light our way; the light reached far enough that we could see our way around. "Spread out," I told the others. "Everyone, divide up into groups of two or three. Look for the usual; tools, weapons, books--" I paused. "Maybe plumbing fixtures if they have them." Would thousand year old castles have plumbing? Why not, it made as much sense as anything else here.

"But don't touch anything. Just remember where it is, come and fetch me to look at it first. And be careful..." at that moment Runt decided to venture out ahead of the group. There was a squeal of old hinges and an entire section of floor flipped end over end. With a "Yeep" the mangy yellow dog disappeared, the floor folding back in place over top of him.

"...There could be traps," I finished. I sighed and walked over to stand next to the trapdoor. I could see the blue-green light of Runt's torch shining up through the cracks around the edge. "Runt?"

"Yes?" came the muffled reply

"Are you injured?"

"Don't think so..."

"Don't think so?"
"Can't see, Dread Master," Runt's voice quavered. "Can't see! Everything dark!"

I held onto my patience. "Runt?"

"Yes?"

"Try opening your eyes."

There was a pause. "Oh. That better."

I found a loose floorboard and pressed. The section of floor flipped over again and a wide-eyed Runt reappeared, clutching his glow-torch in both hands. "As I was saying," I continued. "Don't touch anything. Stay in groups of three. If you find anything, come to me and show me where it is. Got that?" A few sing-song repetitions, and I was sure they had it. Runt, Skank and I headed off, leaving the others to explore on their own. We all scattered, eyes peeled and scrying pendants in hand.

I suppose the results were predictable. After about a good hour and, my count, thirteen different booby traps, I finally had enough of playing Scooby Dooby Doors and started making my way through the castle a little more forcefully. That is to say, I started using my magic to add some superfluous new open doorways to the preexisting walls in my immediate path.

You know, it wasn't so much that I was losing my temper anymore as I was just not reining it back in the first place. I certainly had the Diamond Dogs intimidated; Skank and Runt were trailing behind me, wide-eyed, as I blasted and/or disintegrated my way into and out of tunnels, traps, and oubliettes, swearing up a torrent as I did it.

"All this--" explosion "--crap I have to deal with--" detonation-- "I say, Princess Sparkle McFluffypoo, we have a small mountain of weapons and magic tomes and super-special ancient artifacts--" disintegrate "-- perhaps we should lock them up in a vault someplace safe?" fireball "Why no, don't be ridiculous! Let's take them and--" bigger explosion "--- stick them in a collapsing condemned building--" eruption "-- out in the middle of a wilderness--" defenestration "-- and fill it full of booby traps!"

I had no clue what the other groups were finding, but thus far the yield had been pretty pitiful. The armor was all pony-shaped, so it was doubtful the dogs could use any of it. Then again, My inner cosplayer was just unable to let genuine, honest-to-crapmonkeys plate armor just lie there and rust... plus, I rationalized, I might get some pony minions sometime in the future... I made a mental note to have the dogs drag it all off, anyway.

The weapons might be more useful. Just looking at them sort've made my brain call a brief halt, though. How did something with no hands use a sword or a spear? I pushed the thought aside. If I pondered that too much and then I'd start wondering about ponies using doorknobs and hammers and spoons and I'd end up staring at a wall trying to make sense of it all.

"Minotaurs."

"What?"

"Most of our consumer goods come from minotaur manufacturers. There are a surprising number of races in the world with paws like yours... Ponies are something of a niche market though so it's
hard to find merchandise that's made expressly for hooves."

I blinked. "That's both surprisingly sensible and vaguely disappointing."

It was when I found a spiral stairwell down into the basement that things started to get interesting. We were about halfway down when the scrying crystal I'd made-- a crude thing from a book of grade school projects; it lit up in the presence of powerful magic-- started to glow. We reached the bottom floor, a dungeon of some sort, and brief scouting around made it clear that the crystal was glowing in response to something even further down, beneath the stone foundation of the castle itself.

I paced around the dungeon floor, tracing out where the light waxed and waned. Yes, definitely something directly below... my breakthrough came when I found a small, black vine, gnarled and thorny, growing up through a hairline crack in the floor. Magic was seeping and sputtering up through the crevice. Success! The vine must be growing in a chamber buried below the castle, I thought.

"Runt, Mange, fetch the others, tell them to bring digging tools-- no wait!" They stopped in mid stride while I thought it over. The vine had already dug its way up to us through the stones. Why go to the trouble of digging down when the vine could do the work for us? I reached out with my magic to the vine and touched it.

Yeah, you can guess how well this went. I was planning on using my magic to sort of feel my way down the vine, then excavate a tunnel around it. The vine had other ideas. The instant my magic touched it, the vine went berserk, shooting out in every direction, burrowing through stone and mortar at way too scary speeds. The vines swelled from as thick as my pinky to as big around as my thigh, splitting the floor into jagged boulders and crushing them like chalk.

I had just enough time to say "oh crap" before we all fell through the floor.

We fell I don't know how far. A two count, maybe a three count. Then I was bouncing off rocks, rocks bouncing off me, me bouncing off of screaming diamond dogs... then bang, landed on the ground again, rocks and rubble and yes, diamond dogs raining down around me.

The rumble of falling rubble finally quit. I lay there for a minute, savoring the pain.. My body eventually stopped screaming "I HATE YOU" long enough for me to do a quick self-survey; miraculously nothing seemed broken, although everything seemed to be bruised... Thank God for my armor. Thank God I had magically upgraded that armor from rubber and PVC to actual metal. As it was there wasn't a single piece of armor on me that wasn't dented all to hell.

I sat up, groaning. My dogs were already getting to their own feet, moaning and limping. Diamond dogs are darned sturdy. We had been very very fortunate; boulders large enough to smash our arms and legs into toothpaste tubes had landed an arm's length away from us. I made a point of limping a ways away from the hole in the ceiling before assessing where we were.

We were at the shallow end of a large, egg shaped cavern. The walls and the ceiling, except for where we fell through it, were covered in enormous crystals that glowed in pale blues and lavenders. A couple of tunnels connected to it trailed off into the dark. The floor was layered in little steppes,
almost like the Giant's Causeway in Ireland. Circular little columns and platforms of stone. They were dotted with moss and other plants that grew in the pale light. And at the center of it all, on the opposite side of the chamber, stood a...

...A crystal tree. It was...

I've never seen anything like it. It was beautiful, with faceted limbs like the branches of a snowflake, and glowing blooms that dangled on fronds like a weeping willow. It was alive, too. I could tell. The whole chamber throbbed with power, and all of it emanating from that tree. I could feel it buzzing in my dental fillings. This made every other bit of magic in Equestria look like a wet firecracker in comparison.

"Gentlemen," I said. "Let's get the hell out of here. NOW."

Celestia looked at me. "You left?" she said.

"Not immediately," I said. "I tore up all those vines down there. Took some fiddling but I managed to find a spell that burned them to ash, clear down to the root. Good thing I did; they were everywhere, and all of them seemed to be growing towards the tree. I'm no gardener but I know a weed when I see one and those things were the nastiest weeds I ever saw."

"That's all you did?" Celestia said. "You swear it." She seemed awfully demanding.

I snorted. "I'm not stupid, Celestia," I said. "I knew that tree was something I shouldn't mess with the moment I clapped eyes on it." That was no exaggeration. The moment I'd stepped close to it I'd suddenly felt like Yosemite Sam the moment he strikes a match and realizes he's tunneled up into a warehouse full of gunpowder. "You ever been out to the desert in Utah? ... eh well no you wouldn't have. But, anyway... the desert. You go out far enough in some deserts, you'll find these balancing rocks. Huge rock formations, boulders as big as houses that have been there since the dawn of time. And the wind, and the rain, and what all else has worn the ground away around them. They've had the ground eroded out from under them till they're sitting there, balancing on a teeny little pillar of stone only a few feet around, some of 'em hundreds of feet in the air. You ever seen that?"

"I know the phenomenon, yes," Celestia said.

"Well I've seen those things too. I've stood there with a million pounds of stone hanging overhead, casting a shadow over me, a whole mountain just sitting there waiting for someone to come along and give it a good solid push and send it crashing down. It's almost like you can just feel all that weight, all that force, just hanging suspended overhead.

"I felt just like that when I stood near that tree. I felt like one solid push and, I dunno, the Moon and the Sun could fall out of the sky." I felt a shiver go down my back. "That tree is one of the fulcrums of the world. I'd sooner stick my tongue in an electric socket than mess around with it."

We left the way we had entered. I burned out the vines, and sealed up that tunnel good and tight,
fusing the rocks together with my magic behind us. Heck, I went so far as to block the other passages leading out of the cavern with stalactites. If I wasn’t going to mess with it, I didn’t want some spelunking bumtwaddle to come galumphing in and start messing with it either. I had to resist the urge to try and whip up some magical gate-guardians or something, too. No telling what a golem might get up to while I was away; the last thing the world needed was for some giant rock statue to trip over its feet and smash the very thing it was protecting.

Once we were back inside the castle proper, I learned that by that point several of the dogs had found the royal library. I had them load up on as many books as they could carry, and we skedaddled, with full plans to return the next day in force and strip the place to the walls. And maybe plant, I dunno, a colony of timberwolves on top of the mess to keep nosy nellies out.

---

*I grinned to myself. I'm sure she could hear the humor in my voice. “Of course, those plans got sort of interrupted...” I said, giving my chains a meaningful jingle.*

“*When I came back the next day-- and three different armies fell out of the skies on me.*"
Well, it wasn't really the plan to go the next day immediately. More like two or three days, while I sorted things out. I had a small mountain of books to shelve, for one thing, and the search parties had actually managed to locate a few magical items in the ruins tucked away here and there. Odd bits of junk, but then again, that was how I'd gotten the alicorn amulet, wasn't it? A random bit of junk in a pawn shop. I wanted a little time to pick through them.

Some of the stuff was rather interesting. A crystal vial in a golden frame, half-filled with some shimmery liquid that my cursory examination indicated was liquified chaos magic. And by cursory examination I mean I spilled a drop of it on my bed and it turned the pillow into an eggplant. Another one was a chunk of floating rock that weighed negative four pounds, with a recipe for making more of it. There was a potion of cloudwalking, which piqued my interest.

"And the books?" Luna's question came in a surprisingly soft voice.

Once again, the Sisters had switched off. I really had no idea what their game was. I was getting bloody tired of back tracking and repeating myself. This would make the third time they had made me start over... I think there was something shaking loose. Ever since Luna's little attempt at going Inception on me while I was asleep, I had picked up this sort of antsy vibe going on between them; like something about me had put a wedge between them. I wasn't egotistical enough to think my little emotional tear-down had opened up any old wounds, but the glances they gave each other made me wonder.

Luna didn't make any further attempts to go swimming through my skull, at least. Well, as far as I knew. My sleep had been more or less undisturbed. Or... at least normal. Same as it had been since I arrived in this world; me waking up in starts and fits, tossing and turning... waking myself up screaming.

Shouting, I mean.

"What of 'em?" I said idly.

"The tomes you stole, and read," Luna said. "I find myself curious; Did they change your opinion of our race any?"

"Why should they?" I said. "What, was I supposed to gain some deep profound understanding of the Pony Condition from them, develop empathy for you all?" I snorted. "Princess, I was looking for spells. Tools, recipes, weapons. I wasn't trying to bone up for a post-modern literature test.

"And what I read didn't exactly melt my coal-black heart with the milk of human kindness. Books, newspapers and other litter my dogs found at the edge of the forest, a few magazines one of them
had picked up in the Ponyville raid-- the books were the usual one-sided 'history by the victors.' And
the more current stuff was just the usual drivel, once you dug down through all the marshmallow
fluff about love and tolerance. Backstabbing gossip, corrupt politics, empty consumerism, Buy this,
wear that, be thin in thirty days, you're worthless if you don't own brand X, yay us, boo them,
worship this vapid celebrity and let us tell you all about how she got a horn extension...

Luna rolled her eyes. "Oh, we art stung to the quick," she said. "The plunderer and foalnapper
thinketh our popular culture to be trivial. How shalt we survive the shame of his scorn?" She gave
me a contemptuous look. "You sulk and sneer down thy nose like a pubescent foal. Shall we fetch
thee some black eyeliner and some E-mare albums to play?"
punch the b@#$ right in her mouth put her in her place

"I'm seventeen, and I'm trapped on another planet run by ponies with the tastes of a bunch of
preschoolers who've thrown me in a dungeon. What's your excuse, Princess BroodyDark?" I shot
back. "Hey, you wanted my opinion of your fluffy cloud world and you got it.

"You want some more specific criticism? How about this: you ponies are oblivious idiots. You let
monsters roam around within spitting distance of your homes and schools; you've got some sort of
natural disaster or rampant army of villains showing up on your doorstep every week; you've got
who knows how many powerful, dangerous artifacts just lying around everywhere, waiting for
someone to come along and push the big red button-- but you act like your world is some sort of big
nursery school! You ignore the dangers all around you and only move your candy-colored butts into
gear when things are just about to blow up in your faces... then, when you've finally dealt with the
disaster of the week, you go right back to prancing along your primrose path as if nothing was
wrong.
You..."

You irresponsible childish idiots deserve to be...

"...deserve to be conquered!"
She pulled her head back, wrinkling her lip.

"Hell, the only reason you captured me--" I shook my chains at her-- "Is because I was trying to be
more responsible than you and your big sister!"

I sure as heck wasn't going to sleep well as long as that hill, with its castle and its secret cave with its
magic Tree, was sitting there. I told the dogs to be ready to move out in two days. We were going to
go en masse to the castle ruins, strip it to the walls of anything useful, And then I was going to fortify
that chamber out the wazoo. I figured first on tearing the castle down-- nothing said "mystic
MacGuffin, Please Dig Here" quite like an ancient ruined magical castle--- planting a few trees
where it used to stand, and then a few nice thick layers of traps, curses, magical guardians and
fortifications was a sure way to keep anyone from casually stumbling across it and mucking about.
The moment we got back to the lair I hit the books, doing research on cursed tombs, impassible
walls, moats of fire, eternal golem guardians, that sort of thing.
There was a surprising amount of information on cursed tombs, actually. But pretty much zero information on how to go about building one. It seemed like sort of a blind spot in the curriculum. Though as for that what I probably wanted was less of a cursed temple and more of an impenetrable one. But I figured we'd take a month or two, do it up right, and I'd have nothing to worry about.

The time table sort of got accelerated though when one of my patrols brought in captives.

I was fit to be tied. There stood a couple of spear-dogs, looking dimly confused, standing guard over seven or eight terrified looking earth ponies with chains around their necks. It seems "patrol the edge of our territory" had somehow translated into Diamond Dog for "hijack a trade caravan and bring the captives back here." "You were supposed to chase them off," I repeated. "Chase. Them. Off. What part of 'chase them off' sounded like 'bring them back to our lair' to you??"

I stopped in my reciting of events, aware that Princess Luna was looking at me like I'd sprouted a second head. "And this troubled you?" she asked in disbelief.

"Oh f@#$, I shoulda figured," I snapped. "Ponyland is just TOO treacly. Lemme guess, you have slaves yourselves--"

"Fah! Absolutely not!" Luna barked, offended. "We are no foul barbarians! What do you take us for?"

"Well what do you take ME for??" I retorted. "Slavery, that's... just..." I would have been waving my arms around if they hadn't been manacled over my head. "...just evil!" Jeez, that sounded lame even to me.

Apparently a third head had sprouted next to the second. "Thou'rt strangely particular about the issue," she said, huffing in sarcastic amusement. "Thou canst pillage, kidnap, assault and terrorize our little ponies out of sheer contempt for their existence, but keeping them in chains is too much for
"Look, lady," I said. "Us humans got a lot of things screwed up. But that racist bulls@#$t is something we don't DO anymore." I foundered, trying to get across to her how wrong even thinking of slavery was. "It's just how it is."

"He was offended?" Celestia said, surprised.

"More like... revolted. His aversion to the idea of enslavement was almost visceral." Luna reclined in her throne, brooding over her discussion with the alien in the dungeon.

"How... bizarre," Celestia said, shifting about on her own throne. "Did he ever clarify why?"

"Methinks he doth not even truly understand, himself," Luna said. "In time I managed to winkle out some fine detail. It seems that, in centuries past, his people did practice slavery. In the case of his own kingdom, based upon what he called 'racism'--- meaning those whose skins were of darker hue than his own."

"An unusual distinction. Perhaps because they were easier to tell apart?"

"Whatever the reason, eventually the issue came to blows. A century and a half ago, a terrible war was fought that divided his country in twain-- those who practiced slavery against those who wished to end it. Many tens of thousands died. Slavery was ended, but at a terrible cost.... and it would seem from his reactions, an aversion to both slavery and racism has been ingrained, nay, verily pummeled into every generation that followed. So much so that even saying certain words associated with those things garners a negative reaction from him."

"Literally?"

"Quite so. The 'N' word, he called it. He could not bring himself to even say it aloud."

"And yet you say he doesn't even really understand why it was wrong, or explain it," Celestia said.

"Strewth. A tragic commentary on his upbringing... twould seem that, while his elders and his society did manage to hammer some few mores and ethics into him... they failed to impart to him a reason for them, or an understanding of them. They reduced him to the level of a dog trained to a dinner bell. He has some rough knowing of right and wrong... but he knows not why."

"And it is the Maker's own guess," Celestia surmised grimly, "where his 'gut reaction' will lead him next... and perhaps has something to do with why the Amulet refuses to let him go, she pondered silently.

"But continue," Celestia said. "What else did he tell you?"

---

Note to the wise: it's inadvisable to engage in primordial screaming while wearing an enclosed helmet.
After my ears stopped ringing and the pounding in my head diminished, I noticed that a rather large area had cleared out around me. All the diamond dogs in the room had retreated to the walls and were trying to cower out of my line of sight. The 'dogs who had brought in the slaves were flat down on their faces. The ponies themselves were huddled together, staring at me wide-eyed. A foal huddled with his parents started to wail. "I wanna go ho-o-o-ome," he blubbered.

"Shuddup, kid, or I'll stamp on all your toys," I said wearily. "Skank, I swear, one of these days you're going to pick your nose and your head's gonna cave in. THINK, okay? Think about all the trouble we got into with just ONE pony prisoner. Now whadda you think is gonna happen when they find out we have SIX of them?"

Skank tapped his fingers together. "....Oh," he said.

"Yeah, 'Oh.' Genius. Look, I'll make it simple. No. More. Slaves. EVER. Got it?" Skank nodded. I spoke up. "The rest of you hear that? NO MORE SLAVES EVER." They growled and whined but said 'yes.' "GOOD. You fleabags cross me on this, I swear, I'll feed you to the hydra!" The yessirs got a lot more enthusiastic.

A cringing Skank raised his paw. "But... what we do with these ones?" He waved at the prisoners. I sighed. "Take them back to the edge of the Everfree--- SAFELY back-- and let them go," I said.

One of them heard me. "But our wagons..." she said.

I went a little Palpatine on her. "YOUR WAGONS ARE FORFEIT!" I said, letting a few lightning bolts crackle around me. "Be thankful your lives are not!" I stepped up closer to them. "When you get back to your kind, pass the word on; stay out of the Everfree, if you value... your lives..."

Something was wrong here; something about their reactions was off. If I'd had a spidey sense it would have been tingling. I stepped closer still. Most of them seemed normal enough, shaking in their hooves, genuinely terrified. The third mare however, something about her wasn't quite right, like she was putting on an act. She noticed I was paying extra attention to her and glowered at me. Her eyes were a purple hue, but for the briefest second they flashed green. And I thought I saw fangs.

"The hell is this?" I lunged forward and grabbed her by the neck.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but I certainly wasn't expecting her to burst into flame. One second I'm hoisting a miniature pony off the ground by her neck, Vader style, the next I'm holding a writhing mass of green fire. The other ponies chained to her screamed; they must have figured I had set her ablaze. I did a little screeching myself, but for whatever reason I didn't lose my grip.

When the flames parted, I wasn't holding a pony anymore; I was holding a winged, horned, fanged, hissing thing.

That, my friends, was a serious WTF moment. The creature at the end of my arm looked like a pony had knocked up that creature from 'Alien.' It was pony shaped, with a gnarled horn and tattered, bug like wings that rattled on my armor like locust wings. Instead of hair or fur it was covered with leathery skin and thick leathery-looking plates, and it had huge, blank, rot-green eyes. It hissed at me, showing a mouthful of fangs, and kicked at me with swiss-cheese looking legs.

I screamed like a cheerleader and let it drop. Shut up, okay? Bug. Bug the size of a human child, okay?

It didn't even hit the floor before its horn started glowing. The slave collar around its neck shattered
and it flew off, swerving around diamond dogs and disappearing down the nearest corridor. I got off a blackfire bolt, but missed. "After it!" I shouted. Nearly every dog in the room ran after it, baying. I wheeled on the remaining prisoners. "THE HELL WAS THAT?"

"A Changeling!" said one of the stallions, a tan-on-gold with a compass rose cutie mark. "Sh-she joined us when we were passing through Ponyville--" He looked sick. "All this time... she was the one who talked us all into taking the shortcut through the Everfree...."

"Talk fast," I snapped. "Who or what are the Changelings?"

"Parasites," one of the other stallions said. "Like vampires."

Whoa. Grimdark.

"They feed on the love of other ponies--"

Okay, not so Grimdark.

"They kidnap other ponies, replace them, their families never know..." one of the mares said fearfully. "Their queen nearly took over Canterlot a few years ago. Started putting everypony in cocoons..."

Okay, maybe not grimdark but creepy enough. "Their queen?" I pressed.

"Chrysalis," the stallion went on. "The Princesses and the Elements of Harmony defeated her, scattered her army to the winds with a magical forcefield powered by true love..."

Amazing. They took an invasion of soul-sucking face-stealers and turned it into glurge faster than Stephanie Meyer turned vampires gay.

The ponies rambled on, filling me in fast on this little epic saga in their recent history. I was really not liking what I was hearing. Apparently this Chrysalis and her army had infiltrated Canterlot in the middle of a huge royal wedding, by having Chrysalis pose as the blushing bride. She'd shut down their defenses from within, letting her swarm in to overrun the Canterlot army, and had actually bested Princess Celestia in a one-on-one fight. She'd only been defeated by the narrowest of margins, when Celestia's niece had activated some sort of "power of love" spell that had literally blasted the entire changeling army out of Canterlot and Equestria.

I listened impatiently. "So this Chrysalis is dead?" I said finally.

The ponies looked at each other. "Noone knows. They never found her--"

"So she's still at large." Great. "Let me see if I have this right. She's a soul-sucking shapeshifting vampire who was powerful enough to nearly take over Equestria, is probably looking for both revenge and for Round Two, and one of her spies, disguised as a pony, was brought right into my lair by my very own diamond dog guards just as I'm getting ready to execute a major operation." I glowered at the Diamond Dogs in question, who cringed down to the ground under my stare. "I suppose it's too much to hope you kept your mouths shut in front of the prisoners? They didn't HEAR anything, did they?"

"We didn't hear nuthin," the colt blurted out. "Specially not about no ruined castle or magic crystal tree." His parents facehoofed.

I just stood there and hung my head. Terrific. The diamond Dogs had blathered in front of the prisoners, and the changeling spy. Which meant a power-mad vampire pony queen was about to
learn the location of the Crystal Tree, at which point she would surely march-- or swarm, or whatever-- straight to the castle to claim it and either become powerful enough to conquer Equestria or muck around with it and accidentally destroy the world, either way blowing my plans for the weekend straight to Sideways Hell.

"Mange, take the prisoners to the edge of the Everfree and let them go, like I said." I looked at them. "Presumably they're smart enough to go tell their Pretty Princesses the joyous news on their own."

I raised my voice and cranked up the volume on my mask. "Pass the word! To arms! Get your spears and shields, Diamond Dogs! We take the Castle of the Pony Sisters tonight!"
Diamond Dogs scrambled for their weapons and armor. Shouting, barking, and the clang of metal on metal made it almost impossible to think. This was not looking good; it was a darn long hike to the castle ruins, and traveling as an army would slow us down badly. Not for the first time I regretted that there were no horses-- the rideable kind-- to be had in this world.

I was looking over my dark-magicked timberwolves, trying to decide how many to bring for the raiding party, when I had a rush of brains to the head. With a quick yank, I magically disassembled them. Working quickly, I pulled a sizable pile of the pieces together and magically coaxed them to reassemble. In a few moments I had a new wolf standing before me, one that stood over four feet tall at the shoulder. Purple-green-black light bubbled from its mouth and eyes, and its wood was discolored from the magic I'd used, looking almost charred black.

Grinning to myself, I leapt onto its back.

Cursing and swearing, I leapt back off.

After several minutes of yowling, swearing, and pulling splinters and thorns out of my crotch, I added some tweaks to the spell. I shaped the wood on its back into a smooth saddle, added some reins made from rope, and tried again. Much better. Perfect, in fact. Thanks to my magic the TimberWorg (see what I did there?) was perfectly docile and obedient, and was so responsive to my lead with the reins that it was like it was reading my mind. I gave the enchanted pile of kindling a magical twist and push, and set it to spawning more TimberWorgs, slightly smaller to suit the Diamond Dogs.

By the time the 'dogs were ready, I had a hundred steeds ready for them. There were two hundred Diamond Dogs in our lair. Half would be riding with me. The other half, mostly bitches, pups, and the old, would be busy in the lair, following plans I had laid out for them. The 'dogs in armor weren't too thrilled with their new rides, but some blunt threats got them up and in the saddle. Their timberworgs weren't as responsive as mine-- I had the advantage of magical control-- but they were docile enough. We tore out of the lair and plunged into the woods, 'dogs and 'wolves baying at the moon, purple-black eyes burning like coals all around us as we raced through the twisted trees.

Man. We were so fricking metal.

I think I'll call mine "Deadwood."

By sheer dumb blind luck, we got there first. I blew open the double doors and we rode right inside. "Take the towers! Secure the battlements!" I shouted, pointing dogs off in different directions. "Skrag, Picknose, Droops, scout the perimeter! Skank, set dogs at every window! Stay in teams of three, people, and pick a password amongst yourselves, we don't need Changelings infiltrating! Runt, get some diggers and reopen the tunnel! And watch the skies, people-- changelings can fly!"

I rode Deadwood up to the battlements and began casting growth spells down the outside of the walls. Thick, thorny vines filled the ravine around us, turning it into a hellish moat. They began growing up the sides of the castle, plugging gaps in the walls and blocking off windows. I had to be
careful to keep the vines from creeping into the crumbling mortar and pulling down the very walls I was trying to reinforce. Soon, I had turned the crumbling gap-faced ruin into a jagged, thorny fortress.

Once I had that done, I raced back down inside the castle to where Runt and his crew were digging out our painstakingly blocked tunnel to the tree. It seemed stupid, but I had to do it; there had been other tunnels into the chamber, and although I had blocked them off, there was still the chance that Chrysalis might find a way through by some back passageway. And after all, what I had magically blocked off, someone else could magic clear again...

I was halfway through the castle when Runt's crew met me going the other way. They were yelping in terror and running like the devil himself was on their stumpy tails. Runt skidded to a halt in front of me. "Dark Lord! The tunnel--"

"What?"

"Ghosts, Master Vulcan! Dark evil ghosts!"

I didn't bother correcting him. It was Equestria, for all I knew there were such things as ghosts. I spurred Deadwood on and rode for the tunnel. Deadwood took the spiral staircase down in massive leaps, bounding from the stairwell on one side down to the other. I reached the bottom in seconds. Man can those 'dogs dig like the dickens; I could see they already had made several meters of headway into the loose stone.

I could also see why they had bolted. What I saw down there made the hairs on the nape of my neck stand on end. A black, undulating cloud the size of a car was coiling through the air over the tunnel, probing at it from time to time with wispy tendrils. A feral growl was emanating from it. Not just a little growl either; it was a basso profundo rumble that I could feel in my bones. The last time I'd heard that, it was in an IMAX theatre, just before the lawyer in Jurassic Park got eaten. It seemed to be skimming around; bumping up against some invisible wall around the hole in the floor, jerking back like it was stung. I heard it hiss in frustration.

I pulled together some mojo and got ready to blast it. It stopped swirling around the tunnel entrance and coalesced into a ball about five feet across. A pair of glowing eyes formed. I got a bad shock there; the last time I'd seen eyes that color, I'd been looking at my own reflection. Then it spoke, in an echoing hiss:

"Cryyyyyystantllllsxxxxxxxx....."

Okay, brain, time to do a google search: "Villains," "Equestria," "Smoke Monsters" and "Crystals." Ding, one entry: KING SOMBRA. Evil unicorn wizard king, ruled Crystal Empire, enslaved the Crystal ponies (note: not made of crystal, flesh and blood with sparkly coats) and defeated by the Princess of Love, Cadence. Hobbies include staircases, turning into a cloud of smoke, enslaveing the world and crystals. Wild guess; he wasn't quite defeated as they thought (oh what a surprise) and is here for the Crystal Tree, presumably to recharge his batteries and resume conquering the world or destroying it or destroying it and THEN conquering it.

Smite him down smite him down

invader trespasser thief how dare he

make the usurper beg for mercy

Like hell he was. I wasn't going to be the slave of a giant bug, and I wasn't going to be the slave of
some pony fartcloud who thought he was Lord Voldemort. "SOMBRA!" I roared, throwing some serious bass in my voice.

A face formed around the eyes; grey and horselike, with long pointed fangs and a blood red horn. "Ah, the creature who found the Alicorn Amulet," it said, looking at me. "My subjects told me of you. I came to the Everfree to wrest it from your undeserving grasp... Imagine my surprise when I find a far greater treasure hidden at the bottom of your lair. I can feel it, the power calls to me from below...the ringing symphony of crystallllllsssss, brighter and more powerful than---"

I interrupted his monologue with a fireball to the face. It passed right through him harmlessly, splashing against the far wall.

He laughed mockingly at me. "Petty little creature, did you think I was so vulnerable as--"

I cut him off with a second fireball. This one was on a timed fuse and exploded inside him, splattering his vapors all over the room. He remained splattered for a few seconds, then regrouped. He swirled back together, seething. "You DARE--"

"Begone, trespasser," I said, flicking another ball of darkfire at him. He dodged this time.

"I will return ere this day is through," he snarled. "And claim what is mine. You will rue defying me!" He swirled about and zipped away, disappearing like a silk scarf up a magician's sleeve. The moment the last of his smoky self was gone I started slapping every magical ward and bubble I could around the perimeter of the room. I then started frantically clearing the tunnel to the Tree, running over the facts as they stood:

What DID I know, if anything?

Okay, I knew Chrysalis and Sombra BOTH were coming for the Crystal Tree. they were two defeated tyrants who had their power crushed and their armies scattered, trying to rally and make a comeback. They were at the nadir of their power which meant I had a fighting chance. I had the alicorn amulet, which meant I had (allegedly) the same level of power at my disposal as Celestia or Luna... or at least Cadance or Twilight Sparkle. So we were probably all at about the same level of firepower here. If they teameled up and decided to cooperate, I was in trouble. Were they likely to do that?

Okay, put yourself in their shoes. Hooves. Whatever. You're Chrysalis, you're basically a cross between a pony, a cockroach, and a succubus. Your species gets by on trickery, deception, and the occasional usurpation from within. You probably get your rocks off on pulling the wool over other people's eyes. Can changelings imitate anything other than ponies? What other abilities do they have? Guess I'm about to find out. But I figure you're going to either go for infiltration or deception.

You're Sombra. You enslaved your own people and ruled over them by brute force. My guess is that you don't DO subterfuge. You got your ass blasted to dust by the Crystal Heart. You're now physically powerless and probably barely clinging to life--- Voldemort in a pony suit, basically. It's gotta be driving you nuts, being dependent on whatever minions you have for even the littlest thing. In fact you're basically trying to pull off a reincarnation, trying to find enough crystal-based magic to give yourself a new body a la "Goblet of Fire." God help my skinny ass if you succeed. The minute you get ahold of a hammer, everything in your way is gonna look like a nail.

Big clue: He was here himself. Poking around as an intangible smoke cloud probably made searching this booby-trapped dump easy, but I didn't see Sombra inconveniencing himself too much. Ego freaks like him don't like being far away from their thrones or from flunkies they can boss
around. So his current seat of power was probably somewhere close.

Chrysalis, on the other hand, had sent a spy. And the spy had gone to the trouble of infiltrating a group of ponies miles away from her final destination. Either it was dumb luck the spy ended up here (not likely; the traders had said it was her idea to take a shortcut through the Everfree), or Chrysalis had gotten word of the Great and Terrible Darth Vulcan and decided to put out feelers (har har.) Chrysalis was therefore most likely in a distant and secure location, and would move at her convenience.

By the time I had reasoned this all out, I had cleared out the tunnel down to the Tree's chamber. It had gone depressingly quick; that just underlined that plugging up the caves with rock wasn't going to be enough. I stalked over to the Tree, cursing, trying to think up some sort of defenses to put up around the chamber--

--and suddenly felt myself flung backwards across the cavern. I landed hard on the stone floor, denting my armor. Again. After a whole night of pounding the dents out... argh.

I got to my feet slowly and shook off the stars floating around my head. A force field of some kind? Was the tree defending itself? Carefully I walked forward; when I got within a few yards of the tree I started feeling resistance, almost like walking into a powerful wind... and a burning sensation on my skin, like I was being sleeted with stinging nettles. I found myself leaning against it, almost sliding back. I made another step... another two.... and the field surged again, flinging me back.

I kept my feet this time, and stood there shaking off the burning and stinging sensation while I regarded the Tree. Oh yes, it was defending itself all right. And it apparently didn't like me very much. I could almost feel a sort of hostility rolling off it towards me. I guess it didn't care for my charming personality. That was probably why Sombra couldn't just slide his smoky way in; if the tree repulsed me, then it probably repelled Pony Hitler out there a thousand times harder.

It would make sense that this was why noone had touched it in all this time. Maybe I wouldn't have to defend the tree at all. Maybe it could defend itself?

That hope sort of fizzled away in the next second. I could get this close; Chrysalis or Sombra could probably figure out a way to get past its defenses too. And even this close was too close for comfort. Not only that, but when the tree had repelled me, the light coming from it had *dimmed*. Even now it was fading in and out a bit.

Curious, I crept closer. Close as I could, in fact. At the very edge of the repelling force, I could see it: the tree had pieces missing. One, two, three... I counted six gaps in the tree, hollow places with very familiar shapes. The star-shaped one in the middle looked especially familiar.

Then my memory flashed back to six little ponies wearing six little pieces of flashy magical jewelry, and I realized just *why* the tree seemed so weak. Yeah, maybe it was a leap, but when you spend a week or two seeing someone walk around with six super-charged magic batteries around their neck, and then you find a magic Macguffin with six suspicious gaps in its superstructure... let's just say noone with any experience playing puzzle side-quests on their Nintendo would be struggling to figure it out.

Naturally. They had plucked the components of their Orbital Friendship Beam from this tree, leaving it weakened and vulnerable... and never thinking to put them back. And just as naturally, the consequences were landing right in MY lap.

I fumed and raged to myself about idiot ponies.... but when I finally calmed down a little, I thought it over and I started to grin. This was actually... perfect.
About an hour later, a black tarball of magic whisked through the skies of Equestria. It flew to Canterlot, swifter than any pegasus, more agile than any guided missile, passing through the tortoise-like defenses of the mountain city and homing in on the castle. It zipped through the marble halls of the palace and stopped dead in midair in the center of the throne room, eliciting shrieks of terror from every pony present and even causing Celestia herself to leap to her feet, wings outspread in alarm.

With laborious precision the inky purple-black spell unfolded its intricate layers, taking the form of a ghostly rendition of Equestria’s newest peril: Darth Vulcan. The translucent, glowing image towered over everypony there, the tips of its horns brushing the ceiling. It looked down at the gaping Princess of the Sun and spoke.

~Greetings, Princesses.~

~I am DARTH VULCAN, Master of the Everfree and soon, Master of ALL I survey.~

~I wield the Alicorn Amulet. I have claimed your forest, and your castle. I have now laid claim to the Tree.~

~Come to the Castle of the Royal Sisters.~

~Bring your crowns, bring the Elements, and surrender them to me before the sunset...~

~OR SUFFER MY WRATH.~

The figure disappeared with a deafening roar and a blinding flash of light. Mass panic ensued. Heedless of the pandemonium around her, Celestia called out:

"Guards! To arms! Summon your commander. Awaken Princess Luna. We fly for the Everfree!"
I didn't waste any time after sending my little pre-packaged message. I raced back up through the castle, passing out orders on the way, till I got to the top of the highest tower still standing. The roof was gone, leaving it open to the sky.

I had been a busy little student, tinkering with illusions, enchantments, potions, artifacts... the pockets of my costume were full of crystals, glass vials, bits and bobs made out of twisted metal wires and other oddments. I had a notebook I had confiscated from the loot we'd accumulated, and over the past few weeks had used it to write down-- in *english*-- any spells I came across that seemed like they might be useful. The moment I hit the top floor of the tower, I got out my notebook and got to work.

The weather over the Everfree was a bit tricky to work with. From what I'd gleaned from spying and from scrounging discarded magazines and newspapers, the pegasi hated messing with it. At first I was inclined to agree with them but once I figured out the trick of it, it was fairly easy to work with--
The sky darkened as my thunderstorm grew. Soon it was as dark as night. My 'dogs were up on the walls, on every tower and at every arrow slit. The walls bristled with spears and bows and torches. A pattering of rain fell, swiftly strengthening. I had no choice about that; the shield had to be at least partially porous, to let the air in. I took a moment to show one of my entourage how to shield his torch from the rain with an empty pitcher. He passed the trick along; soon the walls were bedecked with jack-o-lantern glows and the hiss of rain falling on hot clay. Torchlight gleamed on rough blades and shone in feral eyes.

The courtyard below teemed with dozens of timberwolves, black and seething with purple-green balefire. They were nothing more than piles of wood stuck together with blobs of dark magic and doped with crudely copied instincts, but I could see them moving amongst themselves, tussling and snarling, forming a hierarchy the same as if they were truly alive. I was pleased to see Deadwood was rapidly asserting himself as the alpha; all others cringed away from him, or were rapidly subdued. I sent a few more tendrils of magic his way, knitting him together more solidly, making him more singular and cohesive. He was definitely a keeper.

There were no siege weapons in the castle. No arbalists or trebuchets, not even cauldrons for boiling oil. Hardly surprising; it was a pony castle after all. They probably thought an exceptionally brutal battle involved slushballs with gravel in them. Or maybe pies that were still hot from the oven. Some of the diamond dogs were making an effort to rig up a makeshift catapult or two on the towers---little more than log teeter-totters with large chunks of castle rubble strapped to one end, but the thought was there. I would have told them not to waste their time. I seriously doubted that siege weaponry would feature in the battle to come.

I took my place on the walls next to Skank, Mange, and Runt, and we waited. And waited. And waited a little more.

A 'dog came around with rations; some chunks of cooked meat and tough bread. We chewed and ate where we stood, looking out over the forest. It was another hour of waiting, the rain drumming on our helmets, before our first adversaries appeared.

There was a rattling buzz out among the trees, a noise that had nothing to do with the rain rattling the leaves or the wind shushing through them. A dozen scrawny, insect-like forms separated themselves from the shadows at the treeline and flew across the ravine to us, approaching cautiously. One in the fore was carrying a white flag. Bowstrings creaked all around me as diamond dog archers took aim. I let them: shield or no, looking up at a dozen notched arrows had to be intimidating, and I wanted that. The bugs ascended the short slope to the gates. "Parlay!" the one bearing the flag shouted.

Okay, let me take a minute here. Giant, pony sized bugs with fangs. You'd figure they'd be terrifying, right? I mean, freaky where's-Sigourney-Weaver-when-you-need-her kind of scary. By all rights my skin should have been crawling. But it just wasn't happening for me. The diamond dogs had given me a bigger scare the first time I'd seen them. Okay, the one who's shapeshifted in my grasp had scared the crap out of me, but, you know, element of surprise. Plus, green fire everywhere.

But once you got a good look at them, they looked... they looked like a children's show idea of what a scary monster should be. They were ugly, all right. But fangs or no fangs, there just wasn't much menace there. They were skinny and knobby-jointed and bulgy-eyed and they looked, well, goofy. Those holes perforating their legs and wings made them look like someone had taken a particularly gangly marionette and blasted it with a shotgun. And the fact that their voices sounded like someone playing a kazoo didn't help them, either. Straight up, they looked like villains from an episode of Howdy Doody.
I held up a hand, signaling for the diamond dogs to lower their weapons. Half of them did. The other half opened fire, sending arrows plonking against the inside of the shield. Not that it mattered, the arrows all flew wide anyway. Some even fell short. Apparently diamond dog reputation preceded them; the bugs didn't even flinch. I groaned, facepalmed, and thunked the nearest errant archer on the head hard enough to concuss him. I magically amplified my voice and shouted down at the changelings. "Say your peace," I said.

"Lower the barrier so that we may parlay," the bug with the flag razzed.

I glowered. "You'll parlay from where you stand," I replied.

The thunder rumbled. The changelings said nothing to one another, but the leader/flag bearer looked back to the treeline. Another gangly pony-marionette silhouette separated itself from the shadows and flew toward the light. this one was taller, slimmer, with a long trailing mane-like headfin and tail. Her eyes were different as well; rather than solid masses of blue-green, they were slip pupiled, with enormous bottle-green irises. She-- yes, she put out that "female" vibe, boo hoo, gender stereotyping, kiss my butt-- came floating over on tattered wings, half a dozen guards serving her as living shields. All around, buzzing winged forms rose from the trees and floated in midair, swarming menacingly. She walked up to the force field like she owned the place and gave me an imperious look.

"Queen Chrysalis, I presume," I said.

Thump, thump. Thump thump thump.

"One and the same," she said, as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth.

Thump thump thump. Thump thump thump.

"State your business, Chrysalis," I said.

"I think we both know what that is...Darth Vulcan, is it?" She polished a hoof on her chest and looked at it. "You have... stumbled across an--

thump thump thumpity

"--an artifact of power, the legendary Alicorn Amulet. You have seized the Castle of the Pony Sisters. And now--

thump thump thump thump

"Will you idiots STOP THAT?" she yelled at her hovering troops, who were inexplicably zipping about, mindlessly banging their heads against the force field. She looked at me. "Would you dim some of those torches? The light..."

I waved for the 'dogs to snuff some of the torches. About a third went out. That was apparently enough; The changelings stopped bouncing off the force field and backed off, looking embarrassed.

"Ahem. Now, as I was saying.... My spies tell me that you have, indeed, found what sounds a great deal like the legendary Tree of Harmony." She smiled slyly. "Obviously your star is in ascendance."

"Obviously."
"We are both ponies of ambition--"

I pointed at myself. "Not," I enunciated carefully, "a pony. And neither are you."

She waved a hoof. "Semantics. But we can see eye to eye on certain things. We both regard the ponies as our enemies. We both have... and crave... power."

I let a little silence drag for a second. "You have no clue what I crave," I said.

"But whatever it is, we can gain it easier if we work together," she pointed out. "You have brute power; the power of the Alicorn Amulet, the power of your loyal minions--" she flicked her head towards one of the 'dogs standing on the parapets with me, barely hiding her expression of contempt (he was picking his nose.) "Even the power of the legendary Tree of Harmony in your grasp. But you barely know what to do with it." She gave me her best sly look.

"Whereas I am skilled and versed in the ways of magic. And I am also leader of a host of Changelings, the greatest natural spies and infiltrators on the planet. Together we could accomplish much."

"Until you betrayed me." I let her hear the sneer in my voice.

"Now, that is hardly a way to establish a working relationship," she pouted. Sheesh, I could slice the ham and serve it to my diamond dogs. "You're going to have to ally yourself with somepony eventually. You're not going to get far going it all alone."

"I'd get even less with an 'ally' who's liable to stab me in the back," I said. "Changelings are sneaks and deceivers by nature-- by necessity. You wouldn't be able to help yourself, any more than I could stop breathing." I discreetly scanned the sky, trusting in my helmet's glowing doom-eyes to conceal where I was looking. "'Besides which-- you're incompetent."

Her expression got a lot less friendly. "Excuse me?"

The sky didn't have what I wanted. I had time on my hands so I decided to string her along a bit. "You heard me. Incompetent. I've read up on your little attempt at invading Canterlot. You had an insurmountable advantage. Had everything you wanted and more right at your... hooftips. You could have pulled victory from the jaws of defeat at a dozen different places, and you still blew it."

She snarled, baring her fangs. Ooo, I do believe I hit a nerve. "They pulled a surprise weapon on us," she snapped. "A last minute secret weapon nobody could have expected--"

"You mean the power of Love? Aren't you supposed to be the expert on that?" I let out a basso chuckle. "Yet from what I hear you saw the threat coming. You'd just beaten Celestia with the power of Love, and then laughed when the Alicorn of Love told you that she and her true love could beat you. And stood there cackling like a cut-rate movie villain-- right up to the point the bride and groom slapped you halfway to the badlands with your own food supply."

"But no, I'm not even thinking of that. I'm thinking of the dozens of golden opportunities you passed up just so you could strut about the throne room of Canterlot, bragging about your victory."

"And what would YOU have done in my position?" Chrysalis said, her disdain dripping like treacle.
Man it was easy to goad these ponies into gabbing.

"Taken Celestia's place," I said simply. "You were right next to the crown all this time. A poisoned dagger, something nasty in her morning tea, and you could have swapped her out with noone the wiser. A single day of basking in the love and adoration she gets from all of Equestria, and by the time anybody noticed something was wrong you would have been too powerful to stop."

Celestia gawked at me, stunned. I smirked. "I see a royal food-taster in somepony's future," I singsonged.

She flapped her jaw a bit. I could see the realization in her eyes of just what sort of grand opportunity she missed. I decided to push it. "Then again, it's lucky that you failed. For YOU. What do you suppose would have happened to you once your loyal subjects realized that you couldn't raise the sun?" Her jaw dropped further and her eyes glazed as she realized just how buggered (har har) she would have been had she actually succeeded.

That was it. Keep her attention. "Conquest? What were you thinking? Your race feeds on love. Do you know how cheap and easy that is to get from those vapid creatures? They're even more blind and fawning and sheeplike than my own race...and mine will throw affection at anything. With your powers you could have infiltrated as celebrities-- rock musicians, cute child actors, airheaded fashion models-- you would have had the love and idol worship of millions, and been living the lifestyle of the rich and famous on top of it.

"Hell, as soft as those ponies are, you could have walked up to them just as you are right now, stuck out a quivering lower lip and big dewy foal eyes and told them you were hungry, and they would have gushed love at you like a fire hose."

"The Queen of the Changelings does not beg like a pauper," she said stiffly, arching her neck and tipping her chin up at me, eyes flaring in anger.

"No. She just sneaks, and steals, and betrays when there is no need," I taunted. "She is a pick-feast with all the skills and foresight of a foal trying to steal a pack of chewing gum from a thrift shop. Any creature who lives on something other creatures throw away and still can't manage is too incompetent to live. Begone, cockroach; The Queen of the Changelings has nothing to offer me." I really needed to write some of this stuff down for when I got home and went to a cosplay. This stuff was golden.

Her nostrils flared. "What arrogance leads you to think you can speak to me in this manner?" She said... in way too calm a voice. There it was. She was way too icy for someone who'd been dissed like that; looking past me for something to happen. She was playing for time.
"The same arrogance that leads you to think you can infiltrate my troops," I said, and snapped my fingers.

A few days back I had been busy putting enchantments on my helmet. The batteries for the voice changer and the glowing eyes were dead, for one thing; for another I wanted to find some way to make up for the fact that I had poor peripheral vision while I wore it. I put a few tricks and tweaks in it, but the biggy was a nifty little spell called the Betrayer’s Bane. If it detected someone who had treachery on their mind, it made a little ringing noise, one that got louder the nearer the betrayer was or the more diabolical the betrayal would be. Kid sister planning on stealing your cupcake? tiny ring. Loyal lieutenant planning on stabbing you in the back? Loud ringing.

Of course it had some pretty bad drawbacks. It wasn't directional, for one thing. And according to the text, it could be very subjective-- which is a worse betrayal, a friend stealing ten bucks or a mortal enemy stealing one? I had to restrict its range to keep it from going off every time some ‘dog started pondering snitching one of the gems from my hoard without permission.

But I still used it. It had become necessary; diamond dogs choose their leader the canine way-- whoever beats the crap out of the old boss becomes the new boss. And a few of the bigger rowdies I'd freed from the dragon's slavery had gotten ambitious. I'd already been jumped a couple of times by slavering ‘dogs looking to beat me down and take my place. The first two caught me by surprise and nearly stove my head in, helmet or no helmet. I managed to beat them back in line; the Alicorn Amulet gave me earth-pony strength as well as unicorn magic. But it was a close thing; the others started looking a little more belligerent around me, too.

The third one was a big black brute with a battleaxe. He wasn't going for a mere beatdown, he was going for the kill. Unfortunately for him I'd already installed the Betrayer's Bane. The moment he went for me the faint but urgent dinging noise in my ear turned to a burring like an alarm clock. I spun around and caught him in midair with a lightning bolt. He dropped to the ground, smoking. I didn't have any more trouble with challengers after that.

As I had been running around the ruined castle I hadn't missed the fact that my horde was a bit larger than I recalled, or that the faint chiming had gotten very loud at certain points. When I got too close to certain Diamond Dogs, for one. Or to some of the pack of timber wolves that accompanied us. It wasn't anything I hadn't expected, but I was stunned at how swiftly she pulled it off. She must have had changelings waiting in the trees, ready to slip into our horde unnoticed as we rode into the castle. A leopard never changes its spots after all.

That's why I'd set up the first trap. I'd heard about Shining Armor's anti-changeling forcefield, and with some research had managed to half-guess, half-fudge how it had worked. When the forcefield over the ruins had gone up, I'd also set up a second spell right in the center of the castle to go off when I gave it the signal. I'd felt secure in waiting. For all her genetics were rooted in sneakiness, Chrysalis had struck me as someone who wanted to see the look on your face when she delivered the coup de grace. The moment I saw the gloating in her eyes, I set the spell off.

It wasn't quite the stone-hard wall of force I had hoped for; it was more of a vast, torrential wind, exploding outward in every direction from the center of the castle. It passed through stone walls and thorny vines without a rustle, sleeted through flesh and bone and fur without so much as ruffling a hair-- and swept every changeling lurking in my army up off their feet. They were dashed with brutal force against unyielding stone walls, thrown headlong into tangled masses of thorns, sent hurtling off the parapets. I saw half a dozen timberwolves hurtle into the sky only to smash with brutal force against the dome of the shield. Three of the ‘dogs standing next to me went hurtling off the parapets like they were launched from a catapult. Green fire flared everywhere as changeling disguises failed under bruising and bone-crushing impacts.
The wind passed on, outward through the forcefield, blowing Chrysalis and her forces outside clear over the ravine and back into the trees. What I wouldn't have given for a camera; the look of rage and surprise on her face as she went hurtling arse-first into the Everfree was priceless. I could still hear her raving and screaming.

As soon as she disappeared I was bounding down the inside of the wall. The forcefield would hold her all day; let her waste her fury on that. "Search the castle, bring me any who did not escape!" I shouted. The dogs ran to obey.

The spell was still going. Before I'd reached the bottom of the curtain wall, a group of changelings came sliding helplessly across the courtyard, flailing their legs and going "waaaaaaaaa" in their buzzy voices. They piled up against the foot of the wall with thumps and groans and shouts of pain.

I hopped down to the courtyard and cut off the spell. They lay there in a tangle, groaning and wisely not trying anything. The diamond dogs returned a moment later, dragging a handful more, and tossed them into the pile. Most were busted up pretty badly.

A couple of them were wearing helmets. Commanders, I guessed. I picked out one from the tangle of limbs and wings and hoisted it up by the neck, Darth Vader style. Time for a recruiting drive. "My offer is simple," I said. "Your queen has starved you, wasted you, thrown you into useless fights. My minions are fed and provided for. Join me and you will live well. Oppose me, and perish."

It hissed and spat in my face.

I clawed the slime off my mask with my free hand as the changeling writhed in my grip and tried to snap at me with its fangs. Just as I cleared my mask, it twisted its head and sank its dripping fangs into my forearm.

Everything went red.

kill him

I didn't even hesitate. Power boiled up my arm and into the changeling. It spasmed, lightning shooting out of its eyes, and...

Exploded. Just... bang. Like a water balloon. Green ichor flew everywhere. One minute I was holding a snapping, struggling bug-pony, the next I was holding this... this burst bag of dripping green gore and shattered bones.They weren't exoskeletal after all, I thought. How about that. I gagged a bit at the sight but kept it down.

How about that.

I dropped the remains on the ground. Some of them were still twitching. "Get rid of that," I said to noone in particular. Two 'dogs grabbed the corpse and dragged it off. I felt my stomach surging up, but before I could puke or scream or fall down freaking like a wuss, a cold wave passed through my body, taking away the nausea and shakes.

Not the time to break down, stay cold

That was it. Cool as a glacier. No time to wuss out now, Chrysalis would be back at it in a matter of minutes.

I realized what had just happened. Bitten. Poison! I examined my arm; it didn't look like the
changeling's fangs had gotten through the armor. It was a little hard to tell; I was pretty splattered with green ichor... No. I was good. My heart rate slowed.

I looked over the much quieter group cowering before me. I stood there with dead changeling dripping off me and went on autopilot. I looked at the largest one there-- he was wearing a helmet like the first one, so I assumed he was next in command. "My offer is simple," I said. "Your queen has starved you, wasted you, thrown you into useless fights. My minions are fed and provided for. Join me and you will live well. Oppose me, and perish."

The bug got up on its knees and shook its head like an angry dog. "Never--" it said. "You can't-- can't make us betray our Queen."

Good, make an example of him as well

I started to brew up a ball of darkfire... then I hesitated. He'd strained awful hard to say something so simple. The thought popped in; Won't betray their Queen... or can't?

I used my magesight and looked at our prisoners. Carefully. It took some doing to pierce through the fuzz and static of their natural obscuring aura, but I managed; underneath was a webbing of livid green lines, almost like a mesh of veins and arteries clinging to their skin. It trailed off to a single point over their hearts, then floated away to trail off into the air, joining an enormous tangled cable that writhed through the aether overhead. Three guesses where the other end of that tether went. Some sort of loyalty spell? A geas?

I would have to poke around through my library for days just to guess at what I was looking at. I didn't have days. Time to pull another wild guessathon. I reached out with a spectral hand, snared the trunk line, and snapped it. It certainly did something, to judge by the scream of rage that came from the other side of the wall. Man, that Chrysalis has a mouth.

It had results on this side of the forcefield as well; the bugs went noodle-limbed and started babbling and flailing about aimlessly. I looked at the tendrils in my grasp; they were leaking light from their cut ends and sending little jolts and sparks up their length. As I watched several of them flickered and faded away, I didn't know what that meant but it wasn't good. It must have been like unplugging a game cartridge without turning the game off (yes, I had an old Nintendo my parents bought at a garage sale for five bucks for Christmas, yes my parents were cheap.) Uh oh. Well, I wasn't about to jam the ends of those tendrils into myself. So, playing a hunch, I took the ends in my fist, bunched them up-- and jammed them into the Alicorn Amulet on my chest.

I expected a lot of sparks and smoke and junk, or maybe the changelings to go into seizures. What happened was... nothing. The ghostly tendrils stuck to the Amulet, the staticky flickering quit, and the changelings suddenly seemed to snap out of whatever fit they were having. Hm. The helmeted one got back to his feet and looked at me. "Our... bond... to Chrysalis is gone," he said. "The geas--" (Hah, I called it) "-- is gone! How--" He squinted suspiciously. "No, wait... it is still there... I feel it. But it's not to Chrysalis... it's..." his eyes trailed over to the Amulet.

I tapped it. "To me," I said. Or more accurately, to whomever was wearing the amulet. Or so I hoped. It would suck if they decided they were literally bound to the Amulet itself, and the wearer was just a disposable accessory. I looked down at the Amulet with my magesight. The tethers ran to the Amulet... and from the amulet to me. I could see pulses of light moving along those fibers, from them to the medallion and from the medallion to me, indicating which way the loyalty of the geas ran.

I really hoped that indicated the way the loyalty ran. My guess was apparently right, to judge by his
reaction. His expression went from shock to rage to frustration to resignation, all in a matter of seconds.

I looked at him. "So. This was how she kept your loyalty."

He nodded, squinting in a scowl. "She cast it upon the entire swarm when she rose for her maiden flight," he said.

Green light flashed over the castle wall as Chrysalis expressed her displeasure at losing some of her slaves. "So. Will you serve me willingly?" I said.

He looked me up and down, regarded the stains on the floor that used to be one of his soldiers, and shrugged fatalistically. "Willingly or not-- we serve," he said tonelessly. He bowed to me. His battered soldiers did the same.

What the hell, it worked for me. I turned and addressed the diamond dogs massed in the courtyard and huddled on the parapets and towers. "HEAR ME!" I bellowed, cranking up the volume till my voice echoed. "THESE CHANGELINGS RIGHT HERE--" I pointed at them "--ARE ON OUR SIDE NOW! IS THAT CLEAR?" I had learned to be very specific about that; a couple of recruitments from the local rival diamond dog tribes had ended up with my own soldiers bopping each other over the head.

"You are quick to trust," the lead changeling said, bemused.

"I am quick to punish those who betray that trust," I replied. He nodded carefully, understanding.

There was silence in the pouring rain (well, save for the sounds of unturned changelings bashing themselves against the shield and Chrysalis swearing). A hairy paw went up in the middle of the throng. "WHAT?" I said.

"How we tell them apart from others?" came the faint reply. I looked over at the bugs. Good question. I'd seen chinese crowd footage that was easier to pick out faces. I mentally flipped through a few options. "Kneel. And brace yourselves," I said to them, readying a spell.

The changeling looked worried. "What do you intend?" he said nervously.

"A little palette swap," I said. "Hope you like red." The spell washed over them. When the darkling energy dissipated, the change was striking. Rather than shades of murky green, they were now colored in dark, dark reds. Their plating was burnt umber, highlighted with blood crimson along the seams; their eyes glowed scarlet. NOW they looked a little more badass. The watching crowd of Diamond Dogs "oooooohed," impressed.

I repeated myself. "Will you now give me your oath, to serve me loyally?"

The lead changeling looked up at me. His grin was all fangs. "Against the preening fool Chrysalis? Gladly."

I held out my hand over his head."Your welfare is now my duty. Your loyalty is my due. You shall be fed, and sheltered, and provided for, as one of mine. " I looked out at the crowd. "NOW HEAR THIS: THESE CHANGELINGS SERVE ME! THEY FIGHT FOR ME! ANY WHO RAISES THEIR HAND TO THEM WILL BE PUNISHED!" I looked at the helmeted one. "Your name?"
"I have none," he said. "Under Chrysalis we only had numbers. I was sergeant commander number--"

I stopped him with a raised hand. "No good, these guys can't count," I muttered. "Here's your first benny, hope you like it.

"Arise... BLACK FANG!"

The diamond dogs set up a howl. Any excuse to raise a ruckus. The next minute they were hustling to get the defenses ready."-And give your men names too," I added under my breath to Black Fang. "My life's difficult enough."

"As you command," Black Fang said.

"He was right, you were rather quick to trust them," Celestia said, cocking an eyebrow.

"It was the geas," I said. "Or maybe I should call it a gestalt. They wouldn't act against me. I could feel it. The spell made them an extension of me... they couldn't try to harm me any more than my left toe could start a revolution against my head." I shrugged. "Plus, they hated Chrysalis' steaming guts. Anyway, I wasn't exactly in a position for a really long employee evaluation. If he betrays me, he betrays me, and there wasn't much I could do beyond that. Besides, he didn't have a grudge against me personally. Besides..." I tapped my helmet meaningfully, indicating the betrayal-detecting spell on it.

Celestia persisted. "You'd just turned one of their own to bloody scraps in front of them!"

"Yeah. Seems that fellow was the previous commander of their little group..."

"And what of your previous commander?" I gestured at the grue still dripping off me. The rain wasn't really washing it off well.

Black Fang spat dismissively. "A rear-echelon fool, promoted after the failure of the invasion. Screaming and leaping when he should have stabbed from the shadows. He got many of us killed. The troops had a running bet on whether he would be killed by Chrysalis, by an enemy he failed to subdue, or by one of his own command. I had a pint of nectar on him walking into a wild animal's den and provoking it." He grinned humorlessly. "I wonder if I can convince the others that trying to bite an angry warlock through his armor counts. He would not have poisoned you, by the way. Our bite is numbing and enervating, but it does not kill."

I had the feeling this was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. "As entertaining as this is, we are in no position for idle chatter," I said. "Chrysalis is not the only one who seeks to claim the Tree of Harmony tonight, and we are pressed for time."
"What would you have of me and my changelings?" Black Fang asked.

"That depends," I said. "How many of you are still on your hooves?"

Black Fang threw a glance over his men. "Two or three," he said. "The rest are nursing broken bones or other injuries from that little tumbler you threw them in."

"And what are your capabilities?" I said. "I know you can disguise yourselves as ponies, and other creatures too-- can you camouflage yourselves?" For an answer, he turned the color and pattern of the wall behind him. Even his eyes turned the grey of stone. He even managed to alter his physical shape and texture to look more like brick. Then with another flash of green flames he turned into a pony statue. Then into a suit of armor. "Clever," I said. "Tell your injured to tend their wounds and conceal themselves around the castle. There are plenty of nooks and crannies around here to hide in. Gather those who are fit, I have a mission for you."

"Your target will be in Ponyville..."

I quickly explained the objective to him. He nodded understanding, asked a few concise questions--it was so nice working with somebody who was actually intelligent--and moved to instruct his men. I was very pleased with the maneuver I'd plotted out. If things went well his mission would be unnecessary. If not, his actions might save my hide. And geas or not, this worked in my favor-- if he was disloyal, it put his able bodied soldiers far away from where he could backstab me. If that geas wasn't secure it put him where Chrysalis couldn't reclaim him. And it gave his injured an order to do what they'd probably do anyway-- go into hiding, lick their wounds, and wait till the battle was over.

And hey, what they were going to do might save my bacon later on. Multitasking, gotta love it.

I'd just finished giving him the breakdown when I noticed that Chrysalis and her minions had suddenly gotten rather quiet outside. I checked the dome; still up, the bottom rim still buried in rock five feet deep. I ran up the steps to the top of the curtain wall. Letting Chrysalis out of my sight was a bad mistake. I was halfway up the crumbling staircase when I felt it:

Thoom.

When I say I felt that, I mean I felt it through my feet. And I was wearing my Gene Simmons boots. I double timed it up the stairs; every two or three seconds I felt another thoom. I heard what sounded like trees cracking over the sound of the rain and thunder.

I got up there. All the 'dogs on the wall were gripping their weapons and looking scared. Skank was up on the wall, waiting for me. He finished shaking the water off his coat and turned to me. "Something coming, Master," he said, pointing out at the forest. "Many somethings. Many big somethings." The ground shook again. I looked where he was pointing; I could see places where the trees were shaking, and not because of the wind. That was what had distracted Chrysalis; she and her troops had ceased lashing the dome with changeling-bolts and were now all hovering in midair, turned outward to face whatever was coming this way. There was a stone wall, a force field dome, and a ravine filled with thorny black vines between us and whatever was coming, but I'd never felt more insufficiently defended.

I made an opening in the dome and spoke to Black Fang. "Take your men and go. Go now, while they're distracted." He nodded and flew off. Seconds later a flight of black-and-red changelings zipped out through the portal, on their way to complete their mission... or to flee and wait for their new 'master' to bite it. At this point it was moot.
Trees toppled, and the approaching enemy came into view. It was enormous, a huge hill of a creature, tall as the trees and almost thick as it was tall, lumpen and mossy and colored the gray of stone. It was bipedal, with short, thick stumpy legs, even thicker arms that dragged the ground as it walked, and a huge flattish slab of a head. Its face was human-ish, like a brutish carving of a caveman, and it had a slack-jawed vacant expression. It looked like it had been lobotomized— which may have been the case, because there were huge black crystals growing right out of the top of its skull. It lumbered forward like a zombie, trampling the fallen trees underfoot and crushing them to splinters.

Behind it I could see at least two more, vacant-eyed and drooling and just as massive as the first. And overhead hovered a depressingly familiar pony-faced black cloud. "MINE!" Sombra roared. "THE CRYSTAL TREE SHALL BE MINE!"

It looked like Special Guest Number Two had arrived.
Okay, lemme take a minute here and clarify something. Does it sound like I'm some sort of tactical or strategic genius or something? It must. I mean, I slay a dragon, take over a Diamond Dog tribe, pull a fast one on all of Ponyville, take over the Castle of the Royal Sisters, magically bind a couple dozen Changelings to my mighty will, and then go on to take on Chrysalis and Sombra simultaneously. I must be Napoleon reborn, right?

Trust me, no. I'm not. Almost everything I did was completely spur of the moment. It was just a combination of sheer brass knobs and pure dumb luck that had gotten me this far. The fact that all the pieces fell into place afterward was just more dumb luck. Of course, 'he who dares, wins.' Maybe that's the real story behind every genius leader-- just a guy got a lucky break, then powered through on it.

Plus I wasn't exactly up against strategic masterminds. The villains around here weren't even up to Boris and Natasha levels. Sombra was a thug who relied on brute force (see the oncoming mountain trolls for further details.) Chrysalis was a showoff who threw away her best advantages just so she could strut and preen. Discord (yeah, I read up on him) was clever, but he was so busy being clever he outsmarted himself.

And the rulers of Equestria didn't exactly cover themselves in glory either; a thousand years of relative peace had made them soft and sloppy. It's really not very hard to be a chessmaster when all your competitors are playing Candyland.

"You think us 'soft and sloppy?'"

I snorted. "Pop quiz. You're being invaded by an army of shape-shifting, mind-controlling love vampires who can imitate and replace anyone. Do you: (a)Man the ramparts with big beefy soldiers, all facing outwards (b) throw a state wedding in the middle of the targeted city (c) scan the horizon with a telescope all night or, I dunno, (d) check everyone in the castle once a day for disguises and mind-control spells?"

"Tis easy to be a general from a cushioned sofa the day after the battle," Luna shot back, huffy.

"Assuming you didn't sleep through it," I riposted. She scrunched up her nose and glared at me. "Yeah, you two may have be thousands of years old, but you've not had a serious war in the last ten centuries-- Probably because nobody wants to find out what happens to the Sun if they manage to behead you two. Your go-to plan whenever a crisis comes up is to send a letter to Celestia's student and have her and five mares go fix it with their magic macguffin. Your soldiers got overwhelmed in minutes by the Changelings, and weren't even on the playing field when Discord got loose. If you ever had a leg up in tactics and strategy and all that, you are centuries out of practice. That's not an insult, that's just facts. Use or lose it, and you haven't used it in so long archaeologists have to go looking for proof of it."
My point is... Before I'd arrived here the only place I'd seen a battlefield was a history book or a field trip. But I'd actually read those history books once in a while. Plus, strategy games are big where and when I grew up. I'd spent most of my childhood gaming-- everything from Risk to EVE Online to Civilization to Warhammer. After a few years of that, you kind of pick up things.

So yeah. I'd had a really good run of successful planning, a bag full of know-how, and really good luck...

"Mountain Trolls!" Skank howled.

...Which was coming to an end right about now. "So is that what those things are?" I said, surprisingly mild.

"Yes!" Skank moaned. "Big and strong and tough--"

"I guessed as much--"

"-- live deep in caves. We sometimes dig into their lair by mistake..."

"... at which point your life gets real exciting, yeah, I get the picture," I finished for him. "Do they have any vulnerabilities? Any weaknesses?"

Skank shook his head. "Don't know. We too busy running to ever find out." The oncoming mountain trolls spread out, shoulder to shoulder. The earth shook as more trees came crashing down.

I persisted in pumping my source. "Then how did you escape them?"

"When they stop to wipe off feet."

"Wipe off--?"

"Old diamond dog saying, Dread Master: 'You not need outrun mountain troll--- just outrun slowest friend.'"

"Terrific." I regarded the menace stomping its way towards us. The ravine still lay between us and them, but I had no illusions as to how difficult it would be for those enormous creatures to climb down and back up again. Things were rapidly sliding out of my control; one of our guests was late to the party, and another had brought WAY more to the dance floor than I had been expecting. I had a blind date with destiny and the bimbo just ordered lobster. Things hung on a slim thread here. If Chrysalis got clever, all she'd have to do was step aside, let Sombra's rock-candy-covered titans punch a path through my defenses, and then swoop in behind him to take the prize. But there was no way she'd be stupid or egotistical enough to--

"Curse you, Sombra, the Tree of Harmony shall be mine! Mine and no other!" Chrysalis' horn flared green and a snot-like gobbet of green fire splashed across the chest of the lead mountain troll. The creature moaned and reeled back briefly.

"Begone, overweening insect," said the cloud swirling around the trolls' heads. "You are unworthy of
any of the great powers, much less this one." Purple-green lightning crackled from the cloud, singing the air around the hovering Changeling Queen.

"Arrogant has-been! You dare?" More green fire flew, this time aimed at the hovering black cloud.

"Cockroach!" Sombra roared.

"Relic!"

"Pompous nag!"

"Gas bag!"

... I dunno. Maybe they used to date.

To my delight, they immediately attacked one another. To my disappointment, they were not more evenly matched. Chrysalis' minions swarmed the trolls, biting, kicking, and zapping. The big dead-eyed brutes moaned and staggered back, flailing. That ended quickly when one of them plucked a nearby tree out of the ground and began swinging for the bleachers. Changelings went flying, some of them in pieces, as the troll cleared the airspace around it with its makeshift flyswatter.

The other two trolls imitated their brother, picking up fallen trees and fanning the air around them. They stomped forward, the earthen edge of the cliff crumbling under their feet. They rode the mass of earth and rock down into the ravine, coming to rest in the mass of tangled briars below. Chrysalis' swarm dove on them from above, their crooked horns blazing. The ravine lit up with green and purple fire and echoed with roars and screams.

As entertaining as it should have been watching those two go at it, I was not enjoying it. I realized why a moment later when an enormous crash came from the opposite side of the castle. I raced along the parapets. When I got there I saw that the rope bridge I'd destroyed had been replaced by a fallen tree, and pouring across was a horde of muscular, two legged creatures with horns and... holy crap, minotaurs?This was getting more World of Warcraft by the minute. They were wielding axes and wearing mismatched armor covered in spikes and generally looked like they'd been thrown sideways through a heavy metal band's wardrobe truck. I saw a lot of black crystal decorating them and guessed who they worked for. "FOR THE DREAD KING SOMBRA!!" the one in the lead shouted, waving his axe over his head. They roared and charged the shield, bashing, kicking and hacking at it for all they were worth.

I started to scoff but noticed that they were starting to make headway. Sparks were flying off the force field I'd erected, and I could see glowing cracks, tiny ones but still there, starting to spread. I squinted; their axes and maces and hammers were studded with black crystal. Ah, crap. I was going to have to kick things up a notch.

I stepped up to the top of the wall, making sure they could see me. A few spears bounced off the shield a few feet from me; I ignored them. I let some balefire and purple lightning bolts dance over me for show. "FOOLS, YOU DARE TO CHALLENGE ME?" I bellowed, and poured power into the storm overhead.

It was a calculated move. At least I hoped it was a calculated move. The storm was never really under my control to begin with, I just had it barely tethered in one place. Now I was cranking it up to eleven, with no way to turn it back down if I didn't like the results. I felt it slip out of my hands like the string of a kite.

The sky turned black. The wind rose to a howl, and the spitting rain turned to a torrent. Lightning
slashed wildly all around, striking the ground around the castle... and nailing a few minotaur mercenaries who didn't have the sense not to wave giant metal weapons overhead in a thunderstorm. About a dozen of 'em went down in one shot, spazzing and smoking from their punk-rock haircuts. "Be ready to hit them with everything when the shield falls!" I shouted at the 'dogs.

BOOM. Oh crap. I started to race across the parapets again. I stopped; what the heck was I doing? I cursed myself for a dummy, and instead teleported myself to the top of the highest tower. It was time to put some of that wargaming experience to use and start making a command center. I began creating Eyes. I sent them out to hover over strategic points around and over the castle ruins. A dozen screens flickered to life, floating around me. I looked them over with satisfaction; it was perfect. I had full battlefield surveillance. I put more Eyes near my commanders and lieutenants down in the battlefield, these with voices and hearing—giving myself an instant two-way comlink system—

"Comlink?" Celestia said, looking perplexed.

"Yeah. You know. Two-way intel?" Another perplexed look. "Communication? Instant battlefield intelligence?" Blink. "Being able to talk to my troops wherever they are? Instantly?"

The light dawned for one of them. "That's... that's ingenious!" Luna gasped. "And imagine the peacetime applications, sister... talking with ponies all over Equestria as if they were face to face...Twilight wouldn't even have to write out a scroll..."

I gawked. "You mean you ponies don't have radios or telephones or telegraph or--- All this magic and you still communicate by scrolls?"

Celestia shrugged. "It works well enough..."

I stared. "I could take over this country with three minions and a butter knife."

My pieces were in place, my controls and monitors at my fingertips, my voice in every ear. I cracked my knuckles, rolled my shoulders, and got ready to play.

I took a quick survey. The first mountain troll had made it up the sides of the ravine to the castle, and was hammering away at the forcefield with his fists. That was the booming noise. I got that window open just in time to see the second troll's hand rise up over the edge of the cliff and get a grip. Though they looked badly wounded, with huge smoking wounds across their backs and chests, it looked like Chrysalis' efforts weren't doing much to slow them down. I switched angles; it looked like Chrysalis herself had quit blasting the trolls and was now focusing on blasting away at Sombra. It was doing no good; Sombra was too quick for her to draw a bead. He was swirling in and out through her changelings, dropping one or two as he went. I saw several Changelings down, scorched by magic or hampered by crystals growing over their limbs. He got a shot in at Chrysalis, encasing her foreleg in black crystal. The moment she staggered a dozen changelings dropped hampering the trolls and turned their magefire on him, blasting him from every direction. That got his attention.
The minotaurs were still banging away at the shield on their side, massing up against it, elbowing for room. Suddenly one of them hefted his warhammer and brought it crashing down on the skull of the minotaur in front of him, flattening his bullet helmet. To both our surprise, the hammered minotaur didn't go down. He just turned around, peeled his crunched helmet off his head, and punched the errant soldier in the face. The punched one dropped, flaring with green fire---a changeling!--- the one doing the punching apparently missed that, though, and lit into the minotaur standing behind the quisling, who just so happened to look exactly the same as the one who'd been dropped... in a few short seconds the attack on the castle defenses turned into a free-for-all. It looked like a brawl at a rock concert crossed with the Running of the Bulls.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM. The trolls were back at it. All three of them were up now, and every blow made the whole forcefield shimmer and shake. The rain and wind and lightning didn't seem to phase them at all. I figured I had minutes---

BOOM

Seconds---

BOOM BOOMBOOMBOOM

With a squeal like an AM/FM radio stuck on a bad channel, the shield flared and vanished. A roar went up from the invaders. The inter-party squabbling was forgotten and everyone ran for the walls.

I stepped up to the edge of my tower and looked down. The trolls were the biggest threat, I decided; they had to go first. I sighted down the length of my staff, gathered a massive surge of power, and fired. A spectral fist the size of a Mack truck whooshed through the air over the castle and smashed into the troll's chest. It caught him at just the right moment, when he was standing on one foot and imbalanced. Arms flailing, he staggered backward and fell over the edge of the precipice, down into the bramble-strewn ravine.

I was about to try the same with the next one when a half-dozen changelings fell out of the sky on me. I found myself suddenly very busy fighting for my life. I flailed around myself with my iron staff, bashing anything within reach and firing magebolts wildly. I'm no hand-to-hand warrior, but I outweighed them, I was better armed and armored, and I was wielding the Amulet...which not only gave me the powers of the unicorn, but of all three pony races (--- I STILL feel dippy saying that), including the strength of the earth ponies. (I feel even dippier saying THAT.) My iron staff wrought some serious wreckage on them; I could hear the crack of bones even over the storm.

Soon they were all scattered around my feet, charred, broken and bleeding. I telekinetically pushed them all off the tower, and frantically checked my screens. My 'dogs were pouring the arrows and sling stones down from the walls, and apparently they'd gotten their cruddy catapults to work-- I saw a ball of burning something-or-other arc up over the wall to crash down on the invaders. But it wasn't enough. The minotaurs were almost to the gate-- and the portcullis was open! I screamed through the Eye nearest the gates. "Close the portcullis!!"

"No! Wait!" I heard Mange say.

"What? Close it!" I shouted. The dogs manning the winch hesitated.

"No!! Must WAIT!" Mange barked louder.

"Close it you idiots!!" I seethed. *You stupid insubordinate*-- I watched helplessly as the minotaurs poured through the gate...
"NOW!"

Just as Mange's crew snapped the chain loose. The portcullis came crashing down, smashing a dozen or more of the barbarians to the ground. I whooped. "YES!! Good work, Mange-- I owe you a box of doggie treats!"

The feeling of elation didn't last long. The two remaining trolls were right behind them. They hit the portcullis and barely broke stride, trampling over the minotaurs and tearing the heavy timbers right out of the gate. Stone, wood and mortar rained down. They lurched into the courtyard, moaning and roaring.

Now the battle was joined in earnest. Howling Diamond Dogs poured down off the walls, diving in amongst the few minotaurs still standing and dodging the feet of the trolls. Others poured arrows and slingstones down into the courtyard from the walls and towers. Changelings were dive-bombing from the swarm overhead, their horns lighting up as they did a sort of meteor-drop, blasting craters in the ground with their own bodies.

Me? I was having a rush like nobody's business. I'd never been in a real battle before and always figured I'd fold like wet toast. I should have been curled up in a fetal position, a terrified wreck. But instead I was... psyched. Pumped. Stoked and getting more stoked by the second. The howling wind, the lightning slashing the sky, the clang and smash and roar of the battle below, it was giving me something like a runner's high. I found myself ignoring my screens, leaning over the battlements of my tower, clutching the stones till they cracked in my fists. I needed down there, I needed to be in the middle of that, where was my staff no this wasn't good enough a staff not a staff I needed a sword a sword a SWORD--

The staff smacked into the palm of my hand. Dark energy poured through my arm, making the muscles spasm. The iron of the staff glowed cherry red, melted and flowed like chocolate. I pulled flakes of iron out of the tower stones, out of the air, as my weapon shifted and changed and grew. The iron staff flattened and sharpened; the skull slide down, became the guard and quillion. When the purple-green magic finally parted and the metal cooled to black, I was clutching hilt of a jet-black sword the size of an ironing board in my fist. I took it in a two handed grip, climbed up on the ledge, and leaped off the tower.

Yes, I said leaped OFF the tower. It was something like a hundred, two hundred foot drop. I was screaming like a berserker psycho, but all the way down a teeny tiny little voice in the back of my head that was left of my common sense was shrieking

What in the hell am I doing, man?

I obviously lived. It was a powered leap; Purple lightning was crackling all over me. I think I was using that earth-pony magic to make myself strong and tough and unicorn magic to control my fall. That was probably what saved me. That and a troll broke my fall.

I can't say it was much softer than hitting the pavement. I landed right on his head, right in the middle of that crown of lumpy black crystal growing out of his skull. Ow, ow, ow. Broken shards went everywhere, and the troll actually fell to his knees under the impact. I reversed my grip on my sword, brought it up and rammed it point-first down into the troll's skull.

It was like flicking a light switch. The big brute stopped cold, then went over like a felled tree. I rode his head down to the ground, the last of my sanity going

aieeeeee
The whole way down. Flagstones cracked when it hit. I leaped and landed, stumbling to go down on one hand and knee. For a brief second I wished I'd made a Stratocaster instead of a sword; I could have pulled off an awesome power chord on the way down. Then the battle was all around me and I lost myself to that berserker rush...

I repeat for the people in the slow seats; *I have absolutely no athletic or martial training whatsoever.* But I had enchanted armor, a lightning-spitting sword, the strength of an earth pony, the speed of a pegasus, and the magical powers of a unicorn. As silly as that sounds, even a crosseyed klutz would be wreaking some havoc with all that. And me? I was hopped up on enough adrenalin that everything was moving in slow motion. I whirled into a charging mob of minotaurs and limbs *flew.*

I lashed around me, wielding my surfboard sized sword in one hand and firing mage-bolts with the other. Bodies went sailing or crumpled to the flagstones. Axes and swords struck me hard enough to break bone through my armor; I didn't feel it. More minotaurs poured in from somewhere; changelings swarmed in the air and dive bombed every side. I lashed out in every direction like a drug-crazed lunatic; the sheer press of bodies made it impossible not to strike something.

When I had accessed the user manual of the Alicorn Amulet, a great deal of magical knowledge had been core-dumped into my brain. It had been subtly... and not so subtly... increasing my comprehension and retention skills as well, which was how I learned the Equestrian written language so fast. I had been soaking up every volume I had cracked open like a sponge. That said, despite probably having read as many volumes of magical lore as Princess Twilight herself--

"No. No you haven't," Celestia deadpanned. "Trust me on that."

Well, having ingested half a d@#$n library, anyway, I had plenty of theoretical knowledge about magic. But my developmental skills were still weak. Cobbling together a made-from-scratch spell was still painfully slow. By and large I was still defaulting to the *a la carte* list of spells contained in the Amulet itself; giving the Amulet a fairly vague command and letting it pick the closest thing it had to what I wanted. Not that this was much of a handicap... the thing seemed to have a menu of hundreds... but it did make for some bizarre effects. Especially in stress when I wasn't focusing and my commands started coming out something like "whatever, just hit him with something." Several of my foes found themselves burned, frozen, blasted with lightning, but others were shrunk, or had their weapons turn to margarine, or themselves turned into tragically short-lived chickens. One hardcore looking minotaur had his armor replaced with a pink tutu. The look of astonishment stuck on his face right until the troll stepped on him.

I managed to clear a space around me for a moment in the tumult, and saw Chrysalis. She was avoiding the fight and was making a beeline for the interior of the castle. I had no time; I just threw my hand out and cast. An enormous gobbet of green glowing something launched from my hand, streaked across the intervening space, and struck her square on. She tumbled out of the air and slapped against the wall behind her-- and stuck, glued to the wall by an oozing mass of slime. She screeched and hissed and swore, but she was stuck. Even her horn was encased in hardened slime.
The sheer weirdness of it poked through the adrenaline haze. Bemused, I pulled up the spell in my mind's eye, curious as to what I had just cast... "Booger Cannon? Seriously?"

I wasn't given much time to reflect on the kind of person who would design a spell and name it like that. I had to dive out of the way as a massive troll foot came down where I had been standing just a moment ago. I rolled to my feet and looked up; this troll was a lot more sprightly than his zombified brothers. I saw a black cloud with glowing eyes swirling around its head; Sombra was in the driver's seat on this one, apparently.

And he was of a mind to take me out of the picture. The troll spun about and brought one massive fist down. I barely dodged in time; flagstones shattered inches from my heels. Before he could raise his fist to strike again I leaped aside and Booger Cannoned it, gluing it to the ground. He brought his other hand around; I glued that one down as well, then proceeded to fire the spell another three or four times, till both his arms and legs were encased up to the elbow and knee. He grunted and struggled, but he was stuck fast.

Sombra roared his ire. I flipped him the bird.

The Diamond Dogs were putting in a good showing. Clubs, pickaxes, hammers and spears did heavy damage, and claws and rock-crushing jaws did more. I saw a pack of 'dogs take on a handful of minotaurs; the 'taurs were learning the hard way that standing head and shoulders over your opponent just meant that their teeth were at your crotch level. Yeouch.

The footing grew treacherous with sleeting rain mingled with grue. Taurs, changelings and 'dogs fell under sword and spear, never to rise again.

The battle was not going well. We were flattening scores of minotaurs and changelings, but there seemed to be more of them wherever I looked. Chrysalis had a handful of still-loyal changelings cutting her free from her trap. And over everyone's heads, through the ruins of the open gate, I could see the third troll rising up out of the ravine.

A trumpet, louder than the roaring thunder, sounded from above. Startled, I looked overhead. Fortunately for me, everyone intent on cleaving my head from my shoulders looked up as well. Lightning crashed everywhere. The clouds rolled back, and down in a column of sunlight poured Equestria's Finest, dozens of little pony pegasi, earth ponies and unicorns, the ground-pounders riding in gilded pegasus-drawn chariots, their weapons and golden armor gleaming in the sunlight. And there at the vanguard-- vanguard is the right word, isn't it?-- flew two giant winged unicorns, one gleaming white with a mane like a pastel rainbow spilling behind her, the other dark blue with a sparkling mane of stars.

Cripes, it was the Ride of the Lisa Frank Valkyries.

The unencumbered pegasi peeled off and began bucking nearby clouds, sending lightning lashing across the sky. The Earth Ponies hefted swords and spears; the unicorns' horns lit up. Magic bolts and lightning rained down indiscriminately, striking 'dog, minotaur, changeling and troll alike. I heard one of the princesses shout above the storm to her troops to show mercy, to subdue, not kill... they were all that confident they had the situation under control...

No sign of the bearers with them, of course. I'd made a bet that they'd get tactically savvy and refuse to put their magic superweapon in danger. I took a risk and started flipping through my still-active Eyes, looking out through the ones pointed in the direction of Ponyville. In the distance I saw a tiny purple balloon rising over the treetops...

I'd bet wrong.
I charged up my last smoke bomb and made a quick vanishing act from the battlefield. By the time the smoke cleared I was already racing through the hallways and down the stairwells to the cavern entrance. I was yelling instructions through the Eyes the entire way... not that there was much point; the moment I had vanished in a cloud of smoke, the nerve of the diamond dogs had finally broke, and they were abandoning the castle in a rout. The minotaurs were starting to break as well. I saw several ponies tying the last mobile Troll up in ropes. I could hear the Royal Guard's cheers of victory clear down the stairwell.

It didn't matter. None of it mattered. The only thing that mattered was the one thing that their majesties hadn't noticed: I wasn't the only leader to have left the battlefield.

When I got down to the antechamber, Chrysalis and Sombra were both there. The black cloud and the bug-pony were circling in the air, orbiting the boulder I had pushed over the hole in the floor, lashing out at each other, testing one another's defenses. I wasted no time; I Booger Cannoned Chrysalis, gluing her to the floor. She lay there, squirming like a grasshopper stuck in flypaper. "AGAIN?" she shrieked, infuriated.

"Yeah. Again." She snorted through her nostrils and glared at me. "So. Just you and me now, Sombra."

"Not for long, peasant." The gloating cloud swirled, shrank to a ball, and a solid, flesh and blood pony stepped out. He was slate grey, with a wind-tossed black mane, fangs, and glowing red eyes. He wore steel armor and a crown, a blood red, ermine trimmed robe, and a curved, red horn jutted from his forehead.

"So, you can be solid," I said. I took my sword in a two handed grip. "I'm guessing it takes a lot out of you." I was fishing. I was surprised when he nodded.

"It does," he said. "I can only manage it for a little time each day. But it's more than enough to accomplish my goals."

I let energy pour into my sword, making it glow and hum. "I'm curious how you intend to get past the Tree's protections," I said, circling carefully. "You couldn't even slip past as a cloud of smoke. And anything more solid gets backhanded quite neatly."

Sombra's smirk turned into a toothy leer. "I intend to let these do the work for me," he said, holding out his hoof. He tossed a handful... hoof-full... of tiny black things around the room. Wherever they struck, black thorny vines began to grow. They began climbing up the walls all around us. I recognized them immediately; they were the same vines I had weeded out of the Tree of Harmony's chamber. "Plunder vines," Sombra chuckled in amusement as I sidled away from the spreading vines. "They stifle and disrupt any magical thing they touch. I have, ah, CULTIVATED an immunity to them, and can tolerate their presence. You, I suspect, have not." He was right; I could feel some of the little spells I'd woven into my armor frizzling as the vines drew closer. "I merely have to wait for the vines to weaken you, weaken the magic protecting the Tree, then I shall simply walk in, and claim my prize." His chuckle grew to a rumbling laugh. He stepped forward. A sword made of black crystal grew out of the floor next to him. "Oh, I am going to enjoy this. It will be worth the pain of corporeality to stamp your bleeding corpse with my own hooves." He grasped the hilt in his mouth, yanked the sword free, and waved it around his head in a flourish.

I felt my anger go from a slow burn to a steakhouse sizzle.

Carve that smirk off his face
"Oh, I'm sure it would be," I growled.

Sombra made an inquisitive noise through the sword in his teeth.

"There's just one problem with that little victory dance, Sombra," I said. "You have to be alive to do it." I raised my sword and rushed him. Our blades met in a shower of sparks.

He actually looked shocked when he had to parry. Like he couldn't believe I was actually trying to kill him. They have swords; surely they had to have used them for real at some point? Then again, I was probably outside his circle of experience. Sad, scared little pony slaves with sparkly coats aren't exactly on the same tier as a screaming psycho dressed in death-metal armor leaping at you with a giant sword.

He gave as good as he got, though. We hacked and slashed and parried back and forth across the room, blades and bolts of magic flying and... and um...

Okay it was lame.

Oh come on, LOOK. I'm a seventeen year old with no coordination, no sword training and, super strength or no, I was waving around a sword the size of a coffee table. And he was a miniature horse trying to wield a sword in his mouth. It was worse than that sword fight in "Mom and Dad Save the World." We ran around waving our pointy sticks at each other like two men trying to kill a snake in a phone booth.

The setting certainly livened things up, though. The vines were still growing, spreading across the room, forcing us to dodge around, tearing our cloaks on foot long thorns and barely avoiding getting strangled by lashing loops of vine. The plunder vines apparently decided to up the ante, too; they began sprouting pods that split open into venus flytraps the size of pianos, gnashing and snapping.

I heard a muffled scream behind me. I turned and looked; the venus flytraps had taken an interest in Chrysalis and were creeping up on where she lay trapped. She had pulled loose from the floor and, her limbs and wings still glued together, was now desperately trying to scoot across the floor away from the snapping pods.

Ahh crap.

I leapt across the room and stood over her, and lashed out in all directions with darkfire. The pods shriveled, swelled and exploded. The scorched, decapitated vines thrashed and writhed, retreating.

The Princesses looked astonished. "You saved her?" Celestia asked.

I blinked. "I guess I did."

"If I may ask, why?" Celestia said. The curiosity in her voice was keen. "You have trailed blood and grue across the Everfree. You sacrificed your followers like pawns, and you wreaked horrible vengeance for the smallest of slights. Yet you saved a creature who had not moments ago tried to kill you. Why?"

I actually had to think about it for a minute. "I... couldn't..." I struggled to put the words together. "I suppose I just..." I started over. frowning. "I guess it was primordial."
"Primordial?"

"It's like... the oldest fear in the universe-- being eaten alive. It's something like in the top ten most common nightmares, after all."

Luna nodded in reluctant agreement. "Tis sooth. Tis ancient knowledge; I have seen many a nightmare of such shape," she said.

"I saw those mouths coming for her and--- " I grimaced. "The whole damn world would have been better off if I'd just let the plants have their lunch, but the moment I saw that I had this mental image of her disappearing, screaming, down some monster plant's gullet and... I couldn't let it happen. It's like when you see someone falling. You reach out and catch them. It's instinctual.

"I probably would have dunked her in ketchup and THROWN her to the things, in other circumstances. But... not then."

I sighed and looked at them. "Should I continue? This is sort of the point where you came in...."

"Do so," Celestia said. "We would have a complete record."

Well, just as I was busy playing Dudley Do-Right for a giant bug, the rest of the players arrived. I heard a boom and saw a flash, and the two giant winged unicorns-- that'd be you two-- and the six Bearers came sailing down the center of the spiral stairwell, the earthbound ones carried in a magical aura. "STAND WHERE YOU ARE, VILLAINS!" the dark one boomed. She and the white one landed, their horns alight-- and promptly stumbled into the vines. Their horns sputtered out, and their legs and wings got tangled in the vines. They naturally threw a fit; the six element bearers forgot the rest of us entirely and ran to help them.

Sombra saw that opening and took it. He fired off two blasts-- one sent me sprawling, the other smashed the boulder blocking the tunnel entrance to rubble. The vines surged forward, gorging on the magic. I felt the protective aura fade to nothing. Sombra cackled and transformed back into a cloud and swirled down the tunnel like water down a drain, the vines creeping after him. Cursing, I dove after him. I heard Twilight Sparkle shouting to her friends that they had to stop him-- "him" presumably being me-- while I tore ass down the tunnel.

I arrived in the chamber just ahead of the ponies after me. Vines were crawling everywhere. Sombra was swirling around the Tree like a coal-black tornado, cackling like a loon as the Tree dimmed and flickered. The next instant, the element Bearers poured in, followed by the two winged unicorns... which were you two, of course.

"Vulcan, STOP!" I heard you shout. I realized that you hadn't seen Sombra; you'd been too distracted by the vines, and now all you saw was me standing there in front of the Tree of Harmony with a purple-black cloud of what looked like MY magic swirling around it. There was obviously not going to be time to clear up any misunderstanding of the situation.

You-- that is, you, Celestia-- turned to the Bearers and shouted "Now, quickly, use the Elements!"

"Of course, Princess!" Twilight shouted... then she gave you a smirk, pulled off her tiara and threw it to me. The other Bearers followed suit, pulling off their torcs and tossed them into my open hands. I'll never forget the look on your face as long as I live.
That's right. I was counting on the Bearers showing up with the Elements, I knew the Elements were kept in Ponyville, under the watch of Princess Twilight-- I'd squeezed that much out of Diamond Tiara. But I knew there was a chance you would keep the Bearers away from the actual battle until it was too late. I'd sent out Diamond Dogs on the thin chance they might be able to break into the library and snatch them. But when I took control of those Changelings I saw a chance to hedge my bets.

I sent them out with an Eye in their possession-- yes, I can make them so they can be carried-- to work with the 'dogs I'd already sent out there. The 'dogs tunneled in right under the feet of the guards. The 'dogs then went off and created a ruckus, and the Bearers all went running to retrieve the Elements from the library--- right where the Black Fang and the other changelings were waiting for them. They caught the Bearers unaware, subdued them, cocooned them, stuck them in the library basement, and then swiped the elements and flew out to the Castle in Twilight Sparkle's own balloon.... with your own guards escorting them all the way. See, I'm sure your guards have changeling-detectors and the like now, but there's a flaw in them... they were keyed to Chrysalis' geas, not the changelings themselves. My changelings no longer had Chrysalis' taint on them. They walked right out of town without turning a hair. Heck, your guards helped escort them when they swiped the balloon.

Honestly, Celestia, didn't you even notice that Twilight's magic aura had turned green?

The Elements landed in my hands, and I had time to think one thing: I really hope this works. I spun on my heel and threw them straight at the Tree.

They struck the trunk of the Tree. There was a shower of sparks; the tree's light stopped flickering and swiftly brightened, grew too bright to look at. The whole cavern lit up like the inside of the sun. I heard Sombra's scream....

Then the blastwave came. I was picked bodily up off my feet and flung against the wall with earth-shattering force. There was a pop like a flashbulb going off in my face, then everything went dark.
"......And, then I woke up in here," I finished.

The room fell silent. I looked the princesses over; all three of them-- Celestia, Luna, Twilight-- had gathered to hear me retell my story one last time. There was even a fourth one; I suspected she was the Princess Cadence I'd read about. She was bright pink and even girlier than the other three. Well, it figured; Alicorn of Love, and all that. Small surprise if she looked like a Valentine's Day art project.

I'd probably told and retold this whole mess a dozen times since my capture, and it was getting really, really... well, no, actually, I was actually enjoying the whole storyteller bit, having a roomful of creatures hanging on my every word. Of course it was obvious that the whole 'ask and ask again' routine was to see if they could trip me up with changes in my own story, but what was the point? They had me dead to rights, it wasn't like they were going to have to trick me into incriminating myself or anything. All they got out of it was hearing me get more flourishes out of the story each time I told it.

For this final time, they had moved me into a large chamber further into the dungeons. It was a circular room, more or less set up as a trial chamber. The three princesses were sitting on a raised dais more or less where the Judge would be, and there were one or two armed guards standing around the room. I was standing in the center of the room, my hands chained before me in enormous magic-blocking manacles, chained in turn to loops in the floor. The Alicorn Amulet glowed a sullen red around my neck.

The proceedings had gone on for some time. They had used magic illusions to play back testimony from my other little run-ins. Diamond Tiara, Filthy Rich, Spike, Zecora, the Bearers of the Elements-former bearers that is, ha--- various Panicking Background Ponies from Ponyville... after the fourth colt or filly burst into tears describing the "awful black monster" who'd attacked them on Nightmare Night, it was pretty obvious I wasn't exactly going to be elected Man of the Year, here.

This was apparently a final hearing, before the three monarchs... triarchs?... decided what to do with me. I sort of suspected I wasn't going to get a public trial. Happy fun sunshine land would be all bummed out if they did THAT. My money was on being thrown down some oubliette out of sight. Considering the looks on their faces, they were only debating on how deep the hole would be and whether or not to throw scorpions in after me. Princess Valentine Card looked a little conflicted, at least... Oh right. Sombra and the Crystal Empire, right. She probably felt like she owed me for offing Sombra.

They had decided to finish up with me reciting my own version of events. I had, in loving detail. "I don't suppose you could fill me in on what happened between that big shiny light and me waking up in your dungeons, could you?" I said. "I'm curious what happened to my Changelings and Diamond Dogs, after all."

Annoyed, Luna tossed her head. "Do not hope for a rescue from them," she said. "Your Diamond Dogs fled like cowardly curs...."

upside the head with a wing. Ouch. Shoulda worn the helmet.

Luna ground her teeth. "... scattering into the woods. We dispelled your 'TimberWorgs' into nothing but kindling--" I felt a momentary pang; they destroyed my wolves? Jerks! "-- And your little band of Changelings is no more. We found bloodstains and broken bits of armor along the tunnels and out in the forest; we surmise they were flung to their doom by the blast wave from the Tree of Harmony."

Surmise. I tried to keep my poker face, but Celestia saw through it. "Yes. As you may have guessed--" she shot her sister an irritated look-- "the light burst from the Tree stunned us all. When we came to, we found things as my sister described them. Your diamond dogs fleeing, the minotaurs and the trolls subdued, the changelings gone-- and many dead, killed when they were dashed against walls or knocked from the sky." She closed her eyes in pain. Did she refer to my dead, or to hers? I decided I didn't want to know.

"Chrysalis? Sombra?" I asked.

"No sign of either. Chrysalis apparently managed to break free of her bindings and flee. Sombra, well... considering he was a cloud of vapor at the very center of the blast, it's highly unlikely he survived." Right. And she'd written his obituary last time, too. I decided I'd keep an eye out for any little puffs of black smoke for the foreseeable future. "The minotaurs were captured, but as they are not our subjects and were not, technically, waging war on our little ponies, were held overnight and released on the borders with a warning to choose their employers more carefully in the future. The trolls..." A look of pity flooded Celestia's face. "The trolls did not survive. Sombra's crystals were rooted too deeply in their brains. With him gone, they slipped into a torpor until their hearts simply stopped." Yeesh. Sombra played rough with his toys.

"Their fate is not what we are here to discuss, however," Celestia went on. "We are here to discuss yours. Darth Vulcan, you have committed numerous crimes." She held up a scroll in her magic, reading aloud. "Robbery, violent assault, kidnapping, destruction of public property, destruction of private property, use of illicit magic, willful use of a corrupt magical artifact, psychological torture, resisting arrest, conspiracy to commit all of the above... Your little storm wreaked havoc on half a dozen farming towns once it broke loose. "We found your lair, abandoned, picked clean-- presumably by your former minions as they fled-- Our guards fell afoul of the monsters you kept imprisoned there... a dozen were petrified when they stumbled onto your cockatrice hatchery, and a full score more were hospitalized when your maimed hydra escaped. And three more nearly drowned." She paused, blinked, looked again. "Something to do with a bathroom and an exploding toilet...."

"Even in your cell, you have managed to cause grief and trauma to our little ponies...."

"How so?" Cadence asked.

I smirked. "She's probably talking about the prison guard she left me alone with," I said.

"What sort of world produces a monster like you?" the guard pony said, staring at me.

"You wanna know what my world is like, huh, nancy?" I sneered. "You got it."

I opened my mouth and started talking. I started with the Holocaust, Goebbels experiments, the gas
chambers, lampshades of human skin. Worked my way through the Rape of Nanking, the worldwide slave trade, child pornography rings, Tianenmen Square, Jeffrey Dahmer, Saddam Hussein's favorite pastime with a plastic shredder...

He was pretty tough. I got halfway through describing a partial birth abortion before he started screaming.

Celestia shuddered. "We had to restrain him to keep him from tearing off his own ears," she said. "He refuses to repeat what you told him.. even to the therapists."

"You are a reprehensible creature. Though your recent actions with the Tree of Harmony have been to our benefit--"

"Not exactly my first agenda," I noted sarcastically.

"--You are still guilty of crimes that would mean imprisonment, banishment or both."

I thought about that. "So wait. You're either going to throw me in a dungeon, or banish me, or banish me and then throw me in a dungeon in the place you banish me to?" There was a pause. Princess Twilight looked absolutely disgusted; the other princesses slid a look over at her and snickered inexplicably.

"Very funny," Twilight groused.

What? What did I say?

"...However," Celestia said. "We are prepared to offer you leniency."

I cocked an eyebrow. "...If?" I said. I braced myself for whatever insulting arse-kissing they were about to demand.

"If you will let us remove the Alicorn Amulet," Twilight said.

I must be really really contrary or something. Not a week prior I'd spent an entire afternoon trying to pry that amulet's chain over my head. It wouldn't come off, it wouldn't break, either. Now the magical rulers of Ponyland were offering to take it off for me for free.... and I immediately decided to resist. "Why should I?" I asked suspiciously. "Why do you need my permission, anyway?"

Celestia shook her head. "Because we cannot remove it otherwise," she said.

"The amulet was changed when it was tossed into the void," Twilight said, flushing. "Now there are two enchantments on it--- one prevents you from removing it; the other prevents anyone else from removing it without your permission."

"Thou canst not remove this burden on thy own," Luna urged. "Please, let us help you--"

My hackles went up. "Help me??" I said. "You seem awful eager to take away the one thing that puts me on an equal footing around here. You're my enemies. Why the hell would I let you take it from me?"
Then the pink one spoke up. "Because every morning since we took you captive, you've woken up screaming," she said softly.

Okay, that brought me up short. "Wait. What?"

"Yes, we have been observing you," Celestia said. "Did you think we wouldn't, once we had you in our custody? Your sleep has been troubled. You wake with cries of pain, sometimes shrieks of terror. And while my sister--" she looked aside at Princess Luna -- "can no longer walk into your mind as you dream, nor even see into it clearly, she tells us that your dreams are a turmoil of dark and terrible images."

Luna looked me in the eye. "Sooth. Images of terrible things, memories of your crueler deeds, your own voice crying out in horror... your true self cries out from behind the veil that the Alicorn Amulet has cast over your mind."

What happy horseapples was this? Sure I wasn't sleeping well; I was locked in a fricking dungeon for pete's sake. My expression must have said everything, because their expressions turned pleading.

"Vulcan, you have to listen to us!" Twilight said. "The amulet is corrupting you! The manacles we put on you keep you from casting magic, but they can't stop it from affecting you inwardly. It's messing with your mind, just like the last pony to wear it. The voices in your head will drive you mad!"

Voices in my head?

"Please, let us help you, Ted," Cadence said.

"Not a chance in hell," I sneered. chip chip scrape chip. "You're only scared of this amulet because it gives other people the power you bunch of three-in-one mutants have hoarded to yourself." chip chip chip scrape. "Worse, as far as you're concerned, it protects me from you messing with my head! So much for your brainwashing efforts--"

"We would not stoop to such things--"

"It was the first thing you did to me when I arrived here!" chip chip chip. What was that noise? "You went for those Elements and nearly blasted my brain out my ears! And when it didn't work you tried it again! Your sister sneaked into my mind and messed with my dreams! I wouldn't be surprised if one of you candyfloss-maned hypocrites didn't have half a dozen personality altering spells stuck in their saddlebag right now, ready to try on me!" The little purple one jumped and looked guilty as hell. "Holy @#%, I was right, wasn't I?" I said, pointing at her. She pushed her saddlebags away. "I WAS!! You mind-raping sickos!"

"Twilight...!" This from Celestia. In a voice like walking around with a saddlebag full of brain-rape spells was no more than getting caught sneaking cookies after dinner. Holy crap these candy-colored hypocrites....

Chip chip chunk crack. Okay, I felt that through the bottom of my boots. Everyone in the room paused, listening to the sound of something tunneling through stone. I didn't even have to wonder. I just knew. "Excuse me a minute," I said, stepping backward as far as my chains would let me. A couple of the guards didn't like that; they stepped forward to drag me back to the center of the floor. They crossed over where I'd been standing just as the stones gave way. With a pop and crack and rumble of shattering mortar, a six foot hole opened up under their hooves. With a yelp they vanished. There was a crash rather like two ponies dressed in plate armor landing on a pile of stones. Groans echoed back up through the hole.
A moment later three familiar shaggy heads appeared. Skank, Runt and Mange had arrived. "We found you, Dread Master!" Mange cheered, waving to me. "Now we escape before ponies--" he and his two brothers were immediately surrounded by spear points. "oooo dear" he said, and the three promptly vanished back down their hole. There immediately followed a tumult as every guard in the room poured down the hole after them in pursuit.

I could see the Princesses all getting to their feet. Their horns were lighting up as they prepared God knew what magic to blast the room. Celestia and Twilight stepped towards me, horns glowing. I nearly wet myself when I realized that the little b@# Twilight was probably preparing to use one of those very mind-altering spells I'd mentioned... probably on the 'dogs, and then on me.

Good thing I had a trick up my sleeve. They'd said it right when they said the manacles contained the Amulet's magic. They contained it; they didn't quench it. While I couldn't use it to cast any outward spells, it could still affect me internally. I'd spent every spare moment since entering the trial room preparing a strengthening spell on myself. It would wear off in mere minutes; seconds was all I needed. I poured magic into it, toughening my skin, hardening my bones, turning my muscles and tendons and ligaments into steel cables. I flexed my wrists; The manacles snapped off my wrists like they were made of chocolate shell. I grabbed one in each hand, lunged forward, and slammed one down over Twilight's horn, and one over Celestia's. Their spells fritzed out with a puff of sparks. A quick squeeze with each fist and the thick metal was crimped down on their horns. They staggered and slumped, dazed by the magical short-circuit.

Cadance and Luna's concentration was broken as well. They cried out in outrage and moved to help their sisters. Thinking fast, I grabbed two loose stones and whipped them at their heads. I managed to hit both of them in the head, right at the base of their horns. They went down like a couple of bags of laundry.

I raised my voice above the shouting and the clang of armored figures tumbling down the hole. I let my eyes blaze up. "Your help? YOUR help? You hypocrites! You mewling, condescending sadists! You're a bunch of Dolores Umbridges--- all flowers and fluffy kittens and sickly sweet puke on the outside and full of poison on the inside! You brainwash your subjects, imprison dissidents in stone and banish your own loved ones to the moon for demanding even a crumb of their just due! I'd sooner rot in Tartarus than accept 'help' from you bunch of prissy, cloud-cuckoo, emasculating, two-faced brain-raping..." I don't know what more I would have said, because at that precise moment the blocks of floor that I was chained to fell down the hole after the rest. With a shriek like a schoolgirl I was yanked off my feet and dragged down into the dark.

I landed on top of a rugby scrum of Diamond Dogs, guards, and tumbling rocks. For lack of better weapons I took my chains and began whaling everyone within reach with the stone blocks still bolted to the end. Skank grabbed my arm. "Run!" he howled, dragging me along. I took his advice. We bolted down a side tunnel, leaving a half dozen Diamond Dogs harrying the guards.

Tunnels branched off in multiple directions. Once again the Diamond Dogs' gift for digging was leaving me slackjawed. They must have spent the last week turning the entire mountain into swiss cheese..."Sorry we take so long, Dark Lord," Mange panted, his tongue flapping as he ran alongside on all fours. "So many rooms in Pony Castle, we never think we find you!"

I was about to ask how many 'dogs were digging here when our conversation was interrupted. There was enormous crash of shattering stone, and Luna came down through the cavern ceiling ahead of us. She shook the dust off her mane and wings and glared at me. "HALT, VILLAIN," she said.

"You know, for an alicorn of moonlight and dreams and all that mysterious crap, you're really unsubtle," I said.
"Indeed," she said. "Forsooth, my sister wouldst have stunned thee or cast a sleep upon thee, or used many of her other subtle wiles to subdue thee. I, on the other hoof, shall simply trample thee into a pudding." She brought her forehooves down on the tunnel floor for emphasis. Granite cracked under her hooves. Well, at least she wouldn't try and turn my mind to mush.

I backed down the tunnel, picking up a discarded diamond dog shield and holding it in front of me. "Guess I was right," I taunted. "You really are Celestia's goon. When her dirty little mind tricks don't work, she sends you around to stomp 'em into gut paste. Typical brainwashing tyrant b@#%.

Luna seethed. "My sister hath never done such!"

"Bull," I said. "She did it to you." Luna stopped advancing. "That's right," I said. "Whaddayou think that rinse and scrub cycle you got from her Elements was? That was you getting your personality erased and rewritten into the good little obedient sister she always wanted."

She paused an awfully long time. She shook her head. "That is not true," she insisted. "The elements purged me of the dark powers of Nightmare Moon--"

"Oh really? That all? Remember what it felt like when that big shiny rainbow hit you? I sure know I do." I let my lips peel back in a gallows grin. "Like parts of your mind were being hosed away. That's the truth of it. I bet you sit all alone in your bed at night, wondering what other things got purged too. What little disagreeable traits your dear, loving sister's star pupil peeled out of your head--"

I had her. I could see it in her eyes. "---how much of the real you is still left." I finished. Woops. That did it. She bared her teeth, lowered her horn and charged. This wasn't the rodeo I signed up for. Panicking, I hauled back with the shield and brought it around in a flat swing.

BRANK. Her horn pierced right through the middle of it. She backed off, confused, unable to see around the shield stuck on her horn. She shook her head and started firing magic bolts blindly, swearing and cursing with words I'd need an Elizabethan dictionary to translate. A bolt of magic pinged off the wall next to my head. "Time to make an exit," I said. I reached out with my magic, grabbed every Diamond Dog within my reach, and dissipated us into a cloud of smoke.

This was the second time I'd done that trick. It didn't get any more fun with practice, either; it was incredibly disorienting, all your senses tumbling around... Did you ever do that game as a kid where you spin in a circle with your head resting on the end of a baseball bat and then tried to run in a straight line across the gym? Imagine doing that, except while you're running, you're still spinning. No wonder Sombra was so cranky. It had to be like living inside a running clothes dryer. We swirled through tunnels and crevices in the mountain for several minutes, finally squirting out into the open air in one of the castle's many courtyards. We took form and landed on the cobblestones, somehow all still keeping our feet under us. The moment our feet hit pavement, Skank pulled a whistle out of one of his vest pockets and blew. I didn't hear anything, but the 'dogs obviously did; a few seconds later there was a rumbling noise and more diamond dogs came popping up through ruptures in the pavement.

One scrawny little one came staggering up to me, looking up at me with fawning eyes. He was carrying my helmet and my sword, staggering under the weight, barely able to hold up the surfboard sized blade on his back. Mange patted him on the head. "This Wetnose. Oldest of first litter," he said proudly. "We find dungeon, but not find you. I send him off to search dungeon, tell him 'find Darth Vulcan's things, wherever ponies take them.'"

Wetnose held up my helmet and sword to me. This deserved some drama, here, I decided. Gravely, I took the helmet and put it on, locking it in place, and then took the sword. "You have done well,
Wetnose," I said solemnly. "I am pleased." It went over well; the little wriggler nearly went into spasms of glee at the praise. Mange managed to grovel and look proud at the same time. That's me, Darth Vulcan, man of the people.

"Where we go now?" Skank asked me.

"Down!" Mange replied for me. The others got ready to dig. Before they could do more than scratch up a few cobblestones, though, I felt a tremor pass under my feet. A few details started assembling in my mind. *No, that's just too dang ridiculous...*

*Which means it's probably true*

I blinked. Great, the voices in my head were learning snark. "WAIT! Skank?" I said, '*Just how many tunnels did you dig under the castle when you were looking for me...?*

Skank waggled a paw. "Some," he said. "Lots of tunnels full of shineys under castle, but none go where we want. So we have to dig, ohh..." he started counting on his claws, then gave it up for a lost cause. "half as many, more?"

The castle shivered again. Now for those of you not familiar with the Equestrian tourist sites, Canterlot castle is not precisely *on top of* Canterlot mountain. It's actually stuck to the side, way up high, kind of like one of those shelf fungus you see on trees... And apparently my Diamond Dogs had spent a great deal of time turning the already-unstable shelf of stone keeping the castle stuck in place into a porous mass of tunnels.

Somewhere in the distance a flare of magic went up. I was going to take a guess that Luna was busy collapsing the tunnels below the castle to cut off our retreat. Either that or cutting loose on whatever stragglers she stumbled across; either way the tunnels weren't an option. And if my guess was right they were about to become an even bigger problem.

Whoops.

I cast about frantically for an avenue of escape. It wasn't looking good; the stair-step construction of the castle meant I could see the walls, turrets and open courtyards down below. There were so many guards pouring out of doors and archways and launching into the air it looked like a termite nest. As honked off at the pony world as I was, I didn't feel like fighting half its native population trying to reach the front gate.

The ground shook again. I looked uphill at the structure still above us. What I saw tethered to the northwest tower filled my heart with glee. *Hah! Looks like we have an escape route after all,* I said.

We weren't alone in the courtyard; two or three ponies had been there, hauling various carts and going about their business. The moment we arrived they had run screaming, abandoning whatever they'd been hauling or carrying. Among the discarded junk was a wagon full of loose wood and branches, presumably pruned from the trees lining the gardens and walkways by the groundskeepers.

"Master!" Runt shouted. He stuck a dark, twisted piece of wood in my hand, shaped vaguely like a heart. I stared at it for a moment. It glowed a bit inside, like a burning charcoal plucked from a fire... save that the embers were dark purple. *Oh you brilliant little fleabag,* I said. I threw the chunk of wood into the wagon. The glowing coal-fire spread through the wood, wagon and all. There was a crunching noise as the wagon and its contents splintered, crushing itself down and molding itself into a lupine, four legged shape.
"Deadwood! Good boy!" I said, patting the beast on his neck. Little bloody geniuses, they'd salvaged Deadwood's heartwood. Most of a Timberwolf or Timberworg is just loose wood and debris, but at the core is a chunk I'd come to refer to as the "heartwood." And any decent sized piece of a timberwolf's heartwood could be used to restore it. He blinked glowing purple embers at me. I leapt onto his back and took the reins. Around me the dogs grabbed glowing coals from the remnants of the wagon and began hunting for unsuspecting carts and piles of kindling to make into steeds.

All for the better. The castle was shaking for real now; Luna and her unicorn guards were probably right on our trail, and it was going to be a dead run for our escape. I pointed my sword at the shadowy shape floating against the starlit sky. "SOUND THE RETREAT!" I bellowed. "ALL DOGS, MAKE FOR THAT ZEPPELIN!"

This ride wasn't nearly as dramatic as our first. Our steeds were a bit more slapdash, being made from the shrubs, trees, and rubbish we found as we ran for the zeppelin tower. I saw one 'dog riding a timberworg that looked to be made of fast-food burger wrappers. More and more dogs joined us as we went, popping up out of the ground, fleeing the wrath of the lunar princess and her unicorn guards.

The interference we had to run sort of diminished the impact as well. The guards were beginning to zero in on us. I found myself slashing the air above us with lightning to keep the pegasi off our backs. "How the hell did you find me in this place?" I shouted, hammering another handful of pegasi out of the air with a gust of wind. It wasn't enough; another squadron dropped out of the sky behind them, intent on dive-bombing us.

Before Skank could answer another squadron of pegasi suddenly came out of nowhere and slammed into the ones harrying us, dropping them into the pavement. The opposition dealt with, they rejoined us; a flash of green flame and we were now being escorted by Black Fang and a dozen of his Crimson Guard (ooh, I liked that name.) Ah, the geas. "I withdraw the question," I said. "What took you so long?"

"The geas is not exactly directional," Black Fang said. "We had to infiltrate. Our plan was that we find you, and guide the Diamond Dogs to tunnel to your location, then depart after you escaped back through the underground caverns." There was another explosion as a very angry pony princess magically purged another tunnel. "As you can guess, the plan didn't survive contact with the enemy."

"Good thing we have a plan B," I said. "Onward!!"

With Black Fang covering us, and my darkfire and lightning clearing the way, we reached the top of the castle quickly enough. The sight of a roaring mob of Bad Guys was enough to send the crew of the airship running for their lives. 'Dogs began pouring aboard the ship, running to cast off the lines--

And dropping back as a literal cloud of pegasi rose up to surround the royal zeppelin, crossbows ready. Behind us a small army of earth ponies and unicorns poured onto the roof. And dropping out of the sky to stand among them were the four Princesses, wings spread, horns glowing, and eyes blazing with anger. Luna was covered in rock dust. Cadence was sporting a lump on her head. Twilight and Celestia both looked disheveled and even from here I could see that they were in no mood. "Enough, Darth Vulcan," Celestia said. "Get OFF the royal airship and surrender. You are surrounded, outnumbered and outpowered. You have no chance."

I felt a tremor through my boots. "I dunno, I like my chances."

"Art thou addlepated?" Luna exclaimed in disbelief. "E'en were you to escape our forces now, thou couldst never hope to outrun our pegasi in this cumbersome airship!"
I heard another rumble. "Well in about a minute, you're all going to be too busy to bother with me," I said. I looked at her soldiers. They were all there, all perfectly lined up in front of me on the tower roof. It was too perfect. I couldn't resist. I wound up like I was going to pitch a fastball and flung my hand outward at them.

"FUS RO DAH!"

The wave of force smacked into the earth ponies and unicorns and flung them into the air, right over the edge of the tower roof. They screamed as they plummeted out of sight. Every pegasus there abandoned their position and dove after their falling comrades. With a cry of dismay Cadence and Twilight leapt to the battlements and cast levitating spells and pillowy force-clouds under the falling guards.

"VILLAIN!" Luna screamed in rage, wheeling on me. "If a single one falls--"

"And who's going to catch the rest?" I shouted. Right on cue, the whole castle shook. Celestia and Luna staggered, surprised. "That's right! Your castle is stuck to the side of a mountain-- a mountain riddled with caverns and tunnels from old crystal mines! My diamond dogs have spent the past week tunneling all through it even more, trying to find and rescue me. And you've just been tearing through them like a runaway bulldozer with your magic, trying to hunt them down! Your whole palace is sitting on a mountain slope of swiss cheese, and it's going to give way at any moment!"

The looks of horror on their faces was epic. "What do we do, sister?" Luna said, panicking.

"You two move the Sun and the Moon around," I said. "I suggest you concentrate on using those talents to make sure your pretty palace doesn't crush everything in its path."

They shared a glance. They spread their wings, horns and eyes blazing white, as they began to weave magic through their palace, trying to hold it together. "Help us!" Celestia pleaded. "You wield the power of an alicorn--"

"Yeah, uh, NO," I said. "I'm out of here." Already my diamond dogs and changelings were piled aboard the airship and casting off. I leapt aboard as the gangplank fell away. "I think keeping your house from turning into a city-killing avalanche will keep you preoccupied while I make my escape."

"You MONSTER!" Cadence said. Already she and Twilight had floated the guards to safety and were adding their power to Celestia and Luna's efforts.

I whipped off my helmet. "Monster? You think I'm a monster?" I shouted above the crack and rumble of the shifting castle. Blinding fury poured through every vein and capillary. I shouted till froth flew from my lips. "You dumb bint! I come from a world where rapists and murderers spend less time in prison than people who smoke grass or fib on their tax returns! Where tyrants fill mass graves with little children and stuff people into woodchippers for laughs! Where so-called scientists torture animals to death to invent a new shade of mascara! Where women throw their newborn babies into dumpsters, or rip them out of their womb in bloody chunks because they don't want to take the responsibility of raising their own offspring and maybe missing the fricking PROM! Where kids murder each other for the right to sell poison to other kids in their own neighborhood! Where leaders lie, perjure, plunder and oath-break, and get voted back in office because they promised their followers free health care and cell
phones! Where maniacs strap bombs to their own children and use their wives as human shields! Where they stone women to death for speaking to a man and fly planes into buildings full of innocent people for Allah! Where maniacs slaughter millions for being the wrong race or color and make lampshades out of their skin!

"I'm a monster? There's a thousand monsters, from least to greatest, where I come from. I'M NOT EVEN ON THE LIST!"

I turned my back on her dumbfounded expression and went to the helm. I grabbed the wheel and conjured a wind, blowing us away from the shaking castle and out towards the Everfree.

We were about ten miles distant (and still struggling to figure out how to steer the dang thing) when the mountainside gave way. I heard a rumble and looked back. All the dogs were at the rail or hanging from the rigging, watching.

Son of a gun, they actually managed to do it. The castle, laced together with the magic of four mightily straining alicorns, slid slowly and majestically down the mountainside. Not a brick fell off, either.

Fortunately for all concerned, the waterfalls that emptied off the castle walls filled an enormous lake directly below, so there weren't any buildings or homes directly below it. It was nearly a perfect fit, too; the castle slid down the mountain and into the lake like a fat woman sliding into a jacuzzi. The lake sloshed over its banks, flooding the nearby streets and ruining hundreds of lakefront property owners' day. From the looks of it, the water only came up to the first story. They probably lost their wine cellar, but with any luck and a lot of structural reinforcement they might salvage things.

Of course I doubted the Princesses would appreciate me pointing out they now had an indoor swimming pool on their first floor...

Black Fang regarded the mayhem next to me thoughtfully. "As forgiving and generous as the Pony Princesses are, I don't think they're going to let this one slide," he said idly.

"True enough," I said. "I think I'll avoid any house calls for oh, two, three hundred years?" I turned back to the helm. I pulled up a concealing cloud to wrap around us, hiding us from any nighttime eyes. All that remained now was to retrieve the rest of my army from the fallback camp I'd plotted out, along with all the supplies, equipment and treasure that the 'dog females and young had moved there when I'd been captured. Then, on to plan... C, I think this one was.

"So what next?" Black Fang said.

"In a word?" I said. "We dig in, we rebuild, we fortify. The Everfree is ours. Let's keep it that way."
The meeting in the throneroom was a tense and unhappy one. It had been a long, terrible night, with rescue crews, repair workers, and salvage teams scrambling to stabilize the badly shaken castle and the no-less badly shaken populace. Early morning light was even now pouring through the open doorways and windows. The Princesses, the six Bearers, the Captains of the Day and Night Guard, and a handful of others were gathered around the thrones. Everyone was battered, disheveled, nursing various injuries, and more than one was rather drenched. Celestia sighed as she regarded the assembly, poking absently at her scratched and chipped horn with one hoof. It was going to be absolute murder getting it buffed back down to a smooth finish... "how go the repairs to the castle?" she asked.

One of the ponies-- a worker in overalls and a hardhat-- saluted awkwardly. "Everything's stable now. We dropped pylons down into the lake bed to stabilize the foundation, and the walls and structural supports have been magically reinforced and are being repaired as we speak. The basements, cellars and maintenance tunnels are a loss I'm afraid, but the water only comes halfway up the first floor--- perhaps if we install some pumps, we--"

Celestia waved a hoof in negation. "Just... move everything on the first floor up to the second," she said. "We'll use the first floor as a pool. Or a fishery. Or something."

"Or as a guest suite for the sea ponies," Cadence suggested optimistically. She wilted under Celestia and Luna's gaze. "ahem."

Celestia grunted. "Injuries? Casualties?"

A guard in badly dented armor stepped up and saluted. His hooves squished slightly in the sodden red carpet. (The backwash from their splashdown had crested rather high.) "No fatalities, thank the Maker," he said. "Though we had quite a number of near-drownings from the water surge and when the cellars flooded. Got everypony out, thank goodness. But there have been injuries in the hundreds, ranging from minor fractures on up. Nothing immediately life threatening, but the hospitals are overwhelmed."

"Open the royal coffers to them, give them whatever they need," Celestia said. "Send word to the neighboring towns and cities to send whatever medical professionals they can spare."

"And what of damage to the city and its dwellings?" Luna asked.

A harried looking official with a clipboard spoke up. "Well, your Highnesses, The city itself is still up on the mountainside. A few buildings built up against the castle walls were damaged, but otherwise we got off easily. The castle was sliced out of the mountainside neat as a whistle-- thanks to your magics, of course," he said, bobbing his head to the four. "A lot of houses around the lakeshore were flooded by the splashdown, but damage is fairly minimal. Some broken windows, sodden furniture, that sort of thing... workers are sinking support roots, I suppose the word is, into the mountainside, to restabilize everything. There is some debate among the nobles as to whether they should have their mansions moved down to the, er, new locale, but it's mostly scuttlebutt at the
"Thank you. That will be all." The pony bowed and scurried off. "And see about getting a bridge built to shore," Celestia called after him. "Or lengthening the drawbridge-- or something! Ugh." She flopped back on her throne cushions and blew her bedraggled mane out of her face. She realized that her little ponies were staring at her. "I'm sorry, my little ponies," she said, "I am just all out of serene and majestic today. What a debacle."

"What are your orders concerning...him?" the Captain of the Guard said cautiously.

"What word from those pursuing him?" Luna interrupted, before Celestia could respond. Celestia gave her an odd look but said nothing.

"Nothing worthwhile," the Captain grunted. "The beggar threw them off with a mass of clouds over the Everfree. They didn't fly clear till just before dawn; they found the royal airship floating adrift, with no sign of Darth Vulcan and his crew. There's no telling when they abandoned ship or where." He looked to Celestia. "Shall we continue our search pattern?"

Luna shook her head. "Nay," she said, cutting Celestia off. "Bring thy soldiers in; return to thy posts in Ponyville and thy regular patrols."

Celestia blinked. *That's twice,* she thought. She felt unaccountably miffed. She put the feeling aside as petty and addressed Luna instead. "Really? Why would you wish to halt pursuit, sister?"

Luna snorted. "Because it would provoke him," she said. "And he hath demonstrated a perfect willingness to elicit-- what did thy generals call it?-- 'collateral damage.' He would think naught of, say, unleashing another chaos-driven thunderstorm on the countryside merely because the sight of thy guards irked him."

Celestia nodded unhappily. "True enough. What do you propose instead?"

Luna touched the tip of her nose with her tongue... a gesture from her foalhood Celestia recognized; one Luna used when the lunar princess was feeling unusually thoughtful or introspective. "Let us ponder that for a little, sister," she said. "I have... an inkling of an idea, but would rather hear more before setting it out." She looked brooding suddenly. "Methinks we have made enough rash decisions with this creature."

There was a sort of universal muttering of assent... and a bit of flustered sulking on the part of Rainbow Dash. "I thought we were past blaming me for everything--" she grumbled, crossing her forelegs and hunching her shoulders.

"We weren't talking about you, Dash," Twilight said with a longsuffering air. "Besides, even if you did jump him without provocation--"

"Hey--"

"--even if, I said-- he's responsible for his own actions ever since."

"So," Celestia said, "That brings us to the point. What have we learned about Darth Vulcan? What sort of creature is he?"

For the edification of those present, Celestia and Luna had cast glamours that had played back their interrogation of the angry warlock. It had been enlightening for many, and shocking for more than a few.
"He's very angry, for one," Cadence said dryly. "Incredibly easy to provoke, too."

"Ain't that the truth," Applejack said. "And mean as a rattlesnake with a toothache if he thinks he's been wronged."

"Rude and loutish," Rarity huffed. "And foul mouthed."

"Temperamental," Luna chipped in. "Paranoid... Resentful." She looked away, eyes half-lidded. "Angry at the world."

"Egotistical," Twilight said. "In the extreme. Moody and arrogant. Sarcasm and contemptuous."

"So how is he kicking our butts?" Spike said bluntly. Twilight shushed him, but Luna chuckled and replied. "Give even a dullard enough power, and they will prevail," Luna noted. "And while he is tempestuous, he is not exactly a dullard. Though how much of his skill, and powers, and cunning are his own, and not granted by the Amulet, we cannot say for sure."

"More than enough, I think," Fluttershy said. She blushed when she realized she'd spoken up and hid behind the curtain of her hair. "Um, I mean..." she pawed the ground as she spoke. "One thing I know from caring for animals is that they have claws and fangs and scales and quills and poison barbs for a reason. You showed us him telling his story... and you heard him describing the world he comes from. It's a horrible place, with war and crime and violence and all sorts of awful things in it..."

"We're not exactly living in a nursery ourselves, Fluttershy dear," Rarity said.

"Compared to his world, we are," Fluttershy said.

"Strewth, he said it himself," Luna said. "I looked in upon his dreams from the outside, listened to his words. He sees us as... naive infants. No, worse than that-- as if we were... plush toys, created to entertain naive infants."

"Heck, Equestria's pretty plush even compared to other parts of this world," Spike said. "Those dragon dorks were all sneering about 'namby pamby pony princesses' the whole time I was in the migration with them."

"It's a common mistake among the rough and cruel to mistake kindness for weakness, Spike," Celestia said. "I think it escapes some people's attention that in a world full of dragons, hydras, minotaurs and gryphons, one does not oversee a millennium of peace by being weak."

Celestia sighed. "Even disregarding his power, he regards us with condescension. When the Knights of the Elements challenged him, he looked upon them with genuine amusement-- as if a foal dressed in his father's armor had challenged him to battle." A corner of her mouth quirked up. "I think he's modified that stance a touch once our dear Twilight blasted him the length of the village square... but he still regards us all as rather soft and naive, if not the pushovers he imagined."

"Compared to him, we are," Luna muttered broodily. "Though biased, he was not entirely incorrect- seeing how swiftly he swept our guards aside when he escaped. For all the monsters in our woods and the enemies on our borders, Equestria hath lived in a time of peace and innocence for a thousand years unbroken. And what travails we have suffered, our magic hath swiftly mended."

"His world, he did imply, has no magic. Whatever they have made of their world, they have had to hammer with their bare... appendages.... from unwilling earth, wood and stone. And whenever calamity has befallen them, they had to rebuild everything, from the first stone to the last, bludgeoning it back into shape by blood and tears and brute force."
"No magic?" Applejack said, stunned. "No wonder he flipped out when we used the Elements of Harmony on him."

"Or when he found I had walked into his dreams," Luna added. "Or when he learned that Twilight--"

"When he learned that I had brought along mind-changing spells to the hearing," Twilight winced.

"It must have been like finding out that somepony had been...sneaking into their room while they slept and rifling through their things." Luna said.

"Or thinking that we were going to... to cut open his skull and carve out parts of his brain," Twilight lamented. "He wouldn't have the cultural references to understand how mind spells do and do not work." Mind-altering spells couldn't fundamentally, permanently change a mind; but they could influence it.

"I can't say I approve of you using them either, Twilight," Celestia said, a trifle sternly. "Such spells should only be used by a trained and experienced doctor of the mind. And even then only carefully."

"That never stopped thee before," Luna muttered darkly. Celestia either did not hear or pretended not to.

Twilight winced but held her ground. "I only intended them as an absolute last resort," she said, defending herself. "And after what happened to Trixie Lulamoon when she wore the amulet, I thought it was better to have them at hoof and not need them, then need them and not have them."

"That would be the Great and Powerful Trixie, correct?" Celestia asked.

Twilight nodded. "She's going to therapy even now, dealing with what the Amulet did to her mind," she said.

"Yeah. She only wore the thing for like a day or two, and she was actin' a few bushels short of an orchard," Applejack said. "Goin' on about how wheels weren't trustworthy, and tryin' to make me grow apples without any peels. This Darth Vulcan fella has been wearin' it for weeks, months now. No tellin' what it's done to his mind."

"And yet... he seems coherent," Shining Armor mused. "Whoever or whatever he is, he's more resistant to the amulet's effects than this Trixie was. He's cruel, but not crazy."

"Yet," Twilight amended grimly.

"Be ye not so sure," Luna said. "He spoke, or more hinted at, voices." Her eyes were hooded. "Ones that goad him, quietly, subtly. I heard their echoes in his dreams."

"You mean the amulet has already started... making him go nuts?" Rainbow Dash said.

"I mean that the amulet has been speaking to him," Luna said.

This went over as joyfully as one might expect. "You mean the Alicorn Amulet is intelligent?" Twilight said in dismay.

"I would be inclined to think such," Luna murmured. "After I was...expelled from his dreams, defenses against my further intrusion fell in place, so that I could only observe from outside. Defenses I would judge to be beyond his own native capacity. And there was a... duality about the landscape of his mind. As if there were another there, echoing his thoughts-- or that he was echoing
"And you didn't think to mention this sooner?" Celestia said.

Luna shrugged. "I merely thought it the duality I often hear in pony's minds when they are conflicted, or introspective," she said. "When thou arguest with thyself, who art thou speaking to?"

The rest pondered that. "Please don't say that to Pinkie Pie," Twilight said. "She might implode." (The improbable party pony had wisely been excluded from the meeting and dispatched to the hospitals and temporary shelters to cheer up the colts and fillies there during the rebuild.)

"For all of his aggression, he has his soldiers' loyalty," Shining Armor noted.

"Only because he keeps them well-fed," Rarity said disdainfully.

"And you think that's a little thing, do you?" Shining Armor said, a trifle sharply. "Lady Rarity, no matter what species you are, an army marches on its stomach. And soldiers may start marching thanks to noble causes and pretty speeches by kings and queens, but it's a commanding officer who keeps them dry and warm and fed and alive that they'll follow right into Tartarus if he so much as whistles.

"Diamond dog tribes are often hanging on the edge of survival. They're not welcome in more civilized places, so they have to live in wildernesses and wastelands. They bend to the biggest, meanest 'dog around as ruler. They often get enslaved by some dragon or other creature to dig for gems-- and they think that's a good deal, because at least if you have a big nasty monster for a boss, the other big nasty monsters will leave you alone. They trade away their freedom for a hole in the ground to sleep in and whatever scraps fall from their master's table.

"This Darth Vulcan has ruled them with an iron hoof but he's also fed them off the fat of the land. OUR fat, unfortunately. But he's probably done more for them than the last five bosses they've had. Their pups go to bed with their bellies full... and that's more than enough to win their loyalty; enough loyalty for them to spend a week tunneling back and forth through solid rock just to rescue him. And I hate to admit it... but I think he earned it."

"It seems so... inconsistent, though." Twilight said. "One minute he's the next General Bucephalus, the next he's...."

"Oh let's just say it," Rarity said. "A teenage brat."

"I didn't want to be the one to say it," Twilight said uncomfortably. "but I didn't want to make any assumptions about his species' development. But... yes. His moodiness, his temper, his attitude--" her eyebrows tabled. "He's a teenager, all right. He could've walked out of the local Trot Topic. Confound it, he told us himself he was seventeen... but... I didn't want to assume anything outright."

"You're telling me that the Princesses, the Knights of Harmony, and the armed forces of Equestria and the Crystal Empire combined have gotten their flanks kicked by a half-grown colt?" Shining Armor said. His voice was rich with disbelief.

"A powerful teenager. A teenager from a world a good deal harsher than our own. But a teenager nonetheless," Celestia murmured. "So we now have an enemy with the maturity, ego and unstable hormones of a pubescent colt... and the destructive power of an alicorn at his beck and call." She shuddered.

"Don't forget to throw in the psychotic violence and appetite for wanton destruction," Twilight snarked. "he's more like a-- a teenage dragon than a teenage pony." Next to her Spike bristled a bit.
She bit her lip and resisted the urge to facehoof as she recalled that despite his still diminutive size Spike had just turned thirteen a short while ago. "Sorry, Spike. No offense..."

"Yeah, well," Spike grumbled. "Okay, yah. I can see it, with the aggression thing. He seems a little sharper than a teenage dragon, though. You remember the migration. Those guys were as thick as two planks. I sure don't see Garble and his goons pulling off this sort of stuff."

"I should have seen it myself," Luna confessed. "He is a childish and petulant mind, young and rash, far too inexperienced to even conceive of such shielding as he threw up in his mind. " She looked ashamed for a moment. "Twas my fault we lost any chance of gaining his trust. I entered his dreaming as a wrathful avenger, imagining him to be a black-hearted warlock of great experience and terrible skill, intending to smite him for his malice. I did not know till too late that he was merely a bitter, half-grown colt, lashing out at the world...for all his spitefulness, had I walked more softly--" She shook the thought off. "Now he is convinced that we are going to try and use our magic to invade and violate his mind, to render him as infantile as he imagines ourselves."

"I don't think it was avoidable by that point," Celestia said wryly. "From the moment he was blasted with the Elements of Harmony-- and escaped unchanged-- he has been convinced of our malevolent intent.... Or the Amulet itself has persuaded him of it," she added, a shade ominously.

"But shouldn't the magic of Harmony have convinced him we were trying to help him?" Fluttershy said.

"Why would it?" Luna said brusquely.

Taken aback, the shy pegasus stuttered. "W-well because the Rainbow of Harmony is good, and... um..."

"And thou supposeth it feels pleasant to be subjected to its power, then?" Luna said sharply. She got to her hooves and stepped away from the group a few paces. "Dost thou not remember mine own screaming when the light of Harmony purged me?"

A subtle air of horror settled over the assembly. "Princess..." Rarity said, horrified.

"We didn't know--" Fluttershy squeaked.

"Luna..." Celestia said, chastened. "Why did you never say anything?" She stood, started to approach her sister, hesitated.

"What would it have mattered?" Luna said over her shoulder dismissively. "What was done was done. Besides, it was necessary, was it not?"

"But yes, for those of us who have NOT been scourged clean by the light of Harmony... it hurts. A lot. It blinds, and it burns... and it's terrifying. And it strips you, leaves your body and your mind hanging naked while it... flays away all that should not belong. And it goes on and on...." Luna shivered. "I remember coming to; this tiny, shrunken thing, nigh all my power gone, even my body dwindled, and huge, blank holes, like peeled-away scabs, in my soul. Wondering how much of me was even left..."

Celestia stepped next to her and threw a wing over her withers. Luna drew a breath. "After it's over, it's better. But it's hardly a wonder that Darth Vulcan fears what it might have done to him."

"Especially as there was no corruption within him for it to purge."

"Come again?" Twilight said.
Luna looked at them. "The Nightmare was... merged with its host. The medallion is not. He is influenced by the medallion, not possessed by it. There was nothing for the Light of Harmony to strip away."

"That explains a lot," Twilight said grimly. "He didn't resist it-- he just didn't have anything for it to cure. The amulet, or whatever indwells it, must have retreated from the light into the medallion where the Rainbow of Harmony couldn't reach it."

"Soooo, does that make things better-- or worse?" Rainbow Dash said. "I mean, yay, he's not Nightmare Darth or anything, but doesn't that just mean he's a colossal jerk with or without the medallion?"

"It means there's a chance," Twilight said. "We might be able to reach him, to convince him to let us remove the amulet before it controls him completely."

"So how do we use all of this to our advantage?" Shining Armor said. "Cure him or not, first we have to defeat him and capture him. Does anything we know give us any kind of edge?"

"I would think that was obvious," Cadence said.

"Obvious?"

"Let's review," Cadence said with a half-smile. "What is he, first and foremost?"

"A jerk?" Rainbow Dash provided.

"A warlock?" Applejack said.

"A teenager," Cadence said. She got to her hooves and started pacing. "He's at that absolutely awful age. His glands all raging. He's moody, temperamental, emotional--"

"Horny," Shining Armor muttered. The others stared at him. He gave a half laugh. "Well come on! We all remember how it was back then. It was the pits! Your body and brain a mess, and then your glands start dragging you around-- and anything from the opposite gender could turn your brain to mashed potatoes..." his expression grew reflective. "Ugh. I wouldn't want to go through puberty again for anything. But let's point it out. He's an adolescent male and the nearest female of his species is in another universe. There's got to be a way to use that as leverage."

"Let's... stick a bookmark in that one to think about later," Celestia said. "Go on, Cadence."

Cadence rolled her eyes at her husband. "As I was saying, he's at that terrible age. Just after innocence is lost, but before he's gotten the maturity and experience to deal with it, and to move beyond it. Santa Hooves is a fake, the Tooth Breezy is a myth, and your parents turn out to be flawed, flesh and blood ponies just like everypony else. The safe innocent world of foalhood is gone- - if you don't have good parents, or family, or friends to lean on, it can make a colt or filly very cynical. Convinced that everything is a lie or a trick."

"So you're saying he's so hostile to us because we remind him of his childhood?" Twilight said incredulously.

"He did keep saying we looked like plush toys, or decorations for a little filly's bedroom," Celestia admitted.
"And that soft sweet safe world from when he was very little was all a lie," Cadence said. "Or so he's decided. So he sees our world, and he thinks it's all a lie too. Nothing could really be that... innocent."

Rainbow Dash laughed. "Us? Innocent?"

"Like Fluttershy said-- compared to his world? Yes," Cadence said. "Oh I doubt his world is really as terrible as he imagines, or at least not all bad... but I imagine it's bad enough that ours looks fairly idyllic." She frowned. "I'd wager that his home life wasn't very happy either. Did you notice how he never mentioned his home, his family, the life he lost? Don't you think that strange? Especially for somebeing stranded in another universe for weeks and weeks, away from everything he ever knew?"

"He's an angry, bitter teenager, full of pride, with a brittle, fragile ego, and completely alone-- and he doesn't know who or what to trust. He'd rather bite off his own arm than reach out to us. But if he's anything at all like our adolescents, he'll still be reaching out. Teenagers tear away from their parents and cling to their peers for that reason. It's why he bonded with the diamond dogs, and why he accepted the bond with the changeling rogues so readily-- even if he won't admit it. He won't trust us..."

"But he might trust somepony... or someone... something... unlike us," Luna said, a smile of understanding spreading on her face. Her horn lit.

"What are you doing, Luna?" Celestia said curiously.

"Summoning somepony, or rather someponies, who might be able to gain his trust," Luna said. A moment later, three batponies glided into the throne room.

The lead pony tried to hide his yawn and saluted Luna. "You summoned us, your Highness?" he said.

"I think I see where you're going with this," Celestia said with a smile. "He does seem to have a love for the gothic, doesn't he?"

Cadence nodded."Teenagers going through that phase seem to think anything dark, grim, or sinister is somehow more 'honest',' she said, making quote marks in the air with her hooves. "Um.. no offense," she said to the batponies, blushing.

One of the mares cocked an eyebrow and shrugged. "We have mirrors," she said. "We know we're right off the shelf for Nightmare Night."

"All the same, never doubt that thy kind are beautiful to me," Luna said warmly. "For now, thy darker countenance as children of the night is to our advantage." The batponies pricked their ears. "We have a mission for thee. Thou wilt be leaving thy armor behind, for thou must act as commonfolk. There is a warlock whose trust thou must win." She quickly explained the rough details of what she intended.

The lead stallion of the group was surprised, to say the least. "You want us to infiltrate Darth Vulcan's forces?"

The others stared incredulously. "Does... do you think that will even work??" Twilight said in disbelief.

"She can at least try," Celestia said. "Do not worry, my little ponies. Luna will have means to extract them from danger, if the attempt goes sour." She looked over and noted that the expression on Shining Armor's face had gone sour, as had that of her own Captain. "You do not look pleased with
"Trying to win his trust is all well and fine," Shining Armor said. "But I wouldn't bet my life on it working."

The current Captain of the Guard nodded. "I'm afraid I have to agree, Princess," he said. "My job is to defend Equestria's ponies from such monsters, not try to woo them. We have to be ready for when he attacks next... and we have to be ready to do whatever is necessary to stop him. And it doesn't look like zapping him with the Elements is an option any more."

Celestia looked unhappy, but nodded. "Very well," she said. "Do what you must to prepare for that--contingency," she said.

"The question is how to predict his actions," the Captain of the Guard said. "he has proven utterly unpredictable--"

Shining Armor did what he always regarded as the wisest thing in his life; he looked to his wife. "Any suggestions, love? Any way to predict what an unscrupulous adolescent with a dragon's hoard, a small army and cosmic power at his fingertips might do next?" His tone was light but he was far less than half joking.

"Oh he has scruples, dear; he just doesn't know it," she said, her own tone just as light.

"Yeah, I can see that," Rainbow Dash interjected.

"Where d'you get that? He acts like he was raised by timberwolves," Applejack said.

Rainbow Dash crossed her arms and floated in a slow circle overhead. "Yeah, he kinda does, but... I mean..." she huffed and started over. "Look, I'm... okay, I'm not the smartest pony in this group, not by a long shot. Okay? I'm not good with words, or... explaining why I do stuff, other than "it's cool." I... kinda get that about him." At her friends' surprised looks, she went on. "I mean, look, there's stuff he believes in and stuff he won't do, no matter what, so that's ethics, right? But he doesn't even know he has them." She pointed at Twilight. "Like that thing you told me, Twi, about the guy with the thing and the dog and the bell?"

"Pavlov," Twilight said.

"Right! It's like somepony long ago taught him right and wrong about SOME stuff, at least, and taught him real good," Dash said, smacking one hoof in the other. "I mean, my Mom did the same thing to me... there's stuff I still do just automatic, like. Like brushing my teeth. You know? He's the same way. Remember how he freaked out about slaves?"

"But whoever started with him, must've given up long ago. Or quit, when they got far enough that he didn't, yknow, pick his nose in public anymore. They trained him like a dog, but... they didn't teach him. So he's got , like, this loose toolbox of things he knows are right and wrong, but... no idea why. Or how they work together. He believes stuff, he just doesn't know what."

Celestia nodded. "I believe Rainbow Dash has put her hoof on it. Very insightful, Rainbow."

Rainbow Dash beamed at the unexpected praise. "Very well. It behooves us to figure out what that loose toolbox of beliefs is."

"He believes in... keeping one's word," Twilight said thoughtfully. "Most of his anger was about how Filthy Rich broke their deal..."
"He believes in payback, that's for sure," Applejack said.

"Loyalty to his men," Shining Armor said.

"He despiseth slavery," Luna noted. "It is noteworthy: he hath killed two slavers already, in the course of his misadventures, and stolen away those bound by a geas from a third-- albeit by accident, his wroth at such things brought him into conflict with them."

"Free will," Rarity said. "The sanctity of his own mind. To my recollection he's not used any mind-controlling tricks... and I'm sure that dreadful Amulet has several of them at least."

"His self esteem," Fluttershy said softly. "I... I don't know if that's a value or a virtue, but... he hates anything that insults his dignity."

"As any proud young male would," Cadence said.

"...And... look what he did to Diamond Tiara," Fluttershy went on. "She was a terrible bully and she did hurt a lot of other little filly's feelings all the time, looking down on them and stepping on them, and he was absolutely ruthless with her."

Cadence nodded. "So he hates bullies."

"Kinda hypocritical, ain't that?" Applejack said.

"Payback's a bitch, darling," Rarity said coolly, shocking her rustic friend. "One doesn't have to be a saint oneself to despise the petty and cruel. And I suspect this Darth Vulcan has suffered more than a few indignities himself-- remember, before he came here he had no magic. And there's nothing like suffering cruelty to bring out one's own mean streak."

"It brings to mind old Count Dragon's Son, from the Land Beyond the Forest," Celestia said ruefully. "Vicious old unicorn who liked to execute his enemies by skewering them on his horn. He had an obsession with chivalry... He once caught one of his nobles refusing to tip his hat to a mare in a village, said she was a 'strumpet.' " Celestia's mouth twisted. "Count Dragonson had his hat nailed to his head with an iron spike."

"My," Applejack said faintly. "Ain't history interesting."

"Suffice it to say, Darth Vulcan does have a moral code," Cadence said. "We can predict his actions. We just have to learn to use what we know of him."

"You have a lot of insights into this guy," Shining Armor said to his wife. He was obviously impressed.

"Former professional foalsitter, sweetheart," Cadence said with a smile. "Not as much experience with teenagers, but enough to be useful."

"For now, we have a course of action of our own to try. Walk with me, my night ponies. I will instruct thee on the details of thy mission..." she left the throneroom, the puzzled batponies trailing in her wake.

Shining Armor nodded, brooding over what they'd discussed about their enemy. "Whichever path we choose, we have to locate him first. He could attack at any time, or any location...."
Luna and her night guards continued on down the hallway, away from the throne room. "I am not so sure about this plan, my Princess," the stallion said. He shook his head. "Do you really think this Darth Vulcan would fall for a trick so obvious?"

Luna lowered her head. "Indeed not, dear Nightshade. But this is not a trick," she said, keeping her voice low. The three batponies looked more sober. "Thou wilt be joining his band. Thou wilt, for all intents, be leaving the service of the royal household. Thy mission is in earnest, my ponies. When thou leavest this place, thou wilt be engaging a plan that is mine, and mine own alone. Do you understand?"

The group got very quiet. Nightshade looked about discreetly. There was nopony in the hallway with them. "We are sworn to you, above all others," he said. "What would you have of us?"
It wasn't long before Darth Vulcan struck again. Once again, his target of choice was hapless, innocent Ponyville.

At dawn, the ponies of the town were rousted out of their peaceful slumber by the shrieks of dismay of Fluttershy, the village's number one animal expert. She was running through town raising the alarm. With winter closing in, Fluttershy had, as was her habit, been very busy setting up her countless animal friends at her home for the winter. Upon doing her rounds at her homestead that morning, however, she had discovered to her horror that nearly every adoptable pet was missing. Every coop, pen, cage, pet house, aquarium or terrarium was either vacated or missing entirely. Even Angel, Fluttershy's own irascible rabbit, had been nabbed.

It didn't take long to figure out who was responsible. Traces of changeling magic, plus hoofprints and diamond dog tracks, made it obvious that Darth Vulcan-- or at least his minions-- had been the culprits.

This was a devastating blow to the town; the overly-micromanaged local ecosystem-- or at least the cultural routines; the real ecosystem didn't give a tinker's damn what a bunch of anal-retentive ponies did-- would be thrown completely out of kilter for at least a year till the town's allotment of random cute and fluffy background animals could be brought in. Frantic queries from the Mayor as to how this would affect Winter Wrap-Up, Spring Startup, Summer's Running of the Rabbits and thousands of other complete wastes of tax dollars, labor and public time were deflected for now; Princess Twilight Sparkle and the other former Element bearers had their hooves full comforting the distraught animal caretaker.

They were gathered in the Golden Oaks library for an impromptu war council. Fluttershy wept into Rainbow Dash's mane while the filly athlete awkwardly patted her on the back. "How dreadful!" Rarity said. "Will that horrible creature ever leave Ponyville in peace??"

"You figure the scalawag is still nearby, Twi?" Applejack said.

Twilight shook her head. "He completely emptied out his old lair in the Everfree," she said. "I don't think he was planning on sticking around after he escaped. This was probably one final dirty deed on his way out the door." She scowled. "He could be anywhere in Equestria by now. Or further."

"It's kind of a weird thing to do, though," Rainbow Dash said from where she sat uncomfortably hugging Fluttershy.

"Yeah, I mean, of all the things to steal, why bunnies?" Pinkie Pie said.

"Who knows what horrible things that evil Darth Vulcan has planned for them?" Fluttershy sobbed.

"This is a bunny rabbit," I said, holding up a lop-eared blob of fur. "It is a device for turning carrots
into love."

In front of me sat a platoon of red-tinted changelings, the fiercest and deadliest soul-sucking spies and saboteurs in the world of Equestria (which wasn't saying much, but you went with what you had.) Each was holding a rabbit, puppy, or kitten in the crook of his or her leg. Some were awkwardly petting the discomfited looking animals with their free hoof, like a child in a petting zoo who'd never encountered an animal before.

Feeding Diamond Dogs was fairly straightforward. Timberwolves? Took some thought but a mix of wood and leaves doused with a bit of raw magic did the trick. Changelings, though? That had proven a challenge. We were fortunate that we had way more Diamond Dogs than we had Changelings at this point, but that could change... it seems that some of the Changelings were female after all. We could see some population growth, possibly.

Some careful questions about changelings and how they fed got... surprisingly disturbing answers. These weren't misunderstood little critters who just needed a little wuv to survive; these were vampires by any other name. Maybe not as bloody or vicious or even as lethal as the blood sucking kind, but bad enough. Their food supply was other people... That alone made them dangerous.

They were quite capable of draining their victims forcibly of love-energy. It wasn't a harmless process either. It started out leaving the victim feeling tired, weak and listless. Eventually they would become apathetic and emotionless; if the changeling fed on them long enough or drained them too deeply, the victim would start acting stoned, like mindless zombies with no will of their own. The'd recover their health in time of course; this was fluffy pony land after all, not Ravenloft. But it was still pretty creepy. Harmful, too; many of the victims were never quite the same again. The side effects of being a changeling's long term meal ticket read like a D.A.R.E. anti-drug leaflet-- anemia, memory loss, circulatory problems, vision problems, loss of fine motor control, impotence-- minor stuff. But still.

Changelings preferred to live solitary lives, hiding among other species and feed off the unsuspecting, posing as friends or lovers and then leaving for new prey when suspicions grew. Sometimes, if circumstances dictated, they would cocoon their victim for the long haul-- say, over a winter-- store them someplace hidden, feed them this sort of hallucinatory royal jelly, and then drained them of love energy slowly over months while they hung there in their own basement or attic, trippin' balls.

They preferred the solo thing. But every now and then, when things got sparse, they'd do the locust thing. They'd get a generation that was bigger, stronger, more aggressive... and they'd swarm. And then some smart cookie in the swarm would proclaim themselves Queen.....

Whenever they gathered together to form a hive, as they did under Chrysalis, feeding their numbers got more complicated. Issues of scale, I suppose... They would stuff whatever wild animals, monsters, or luckless travelers they caught into cocoons to feed the hive, freeing them months or years later, when they were too sickly to justify the effort of keeping them. Of course they eventually had to let their prisoners go-- but they were never the same. And if the changelings weren't careful, they could kill their prey.... a notion that revolted and horrified Black Fang and his crew, to my surprise. Putting someone in a coma-cocoon and draining them to a sickly husk was apparently okay, but outright killing them was apparently not. In fact one of the rumors about Chrysalis by her political enemies was that she didn't bother with releasing the victims from her own 'larder;' that she just drained them to husks and left their dessicated corpses in the bottoms of the cocoons. Cultural taboos. Go figure.

This had posed something of a conundrum when it came to feeding them. They couldn't go
kidnapping and cocooning up ponies for a snack while they were laying low. And understandably, the 'dogs weren't exactly enthusiastic about being "volunteered" to feed the troops. Dark Fang and his troops had resorted to feeding off the pups. When they'd revealed this, there'd almost been a riot: Big Mama threw a fit when I took the Changelings to task. I put my foot down, though. I told her I didn't care how restful it had been with all the pups sleeping most of the day away, I wasn't going to have their growth stunted.

Naturally I'd been in urgent need of an alternative to having one part of my mighty legion snacking on the other. Luckily, while we were still making our retreat to our new digs, one of my intel bugs let slip the fact that Ponyville had some sort of pet farm on its outskirts, packed full of cats and dogs and bunnies and other animals. Bingo. A quick raid in the dead of night, just before we pulled up stakes, and we had hundreds of cages full of all things fluffy and feathery.

A quick consultation with Black Fang revealed that, while convenient, cocooning a bunch of animals for their love energy wasn't exactly ideal. Making the pods took up a lot of resources and nutrients (the cocoons and royal jelly were, um, changeling excretions) and the energy you got from hive pods wasn't as rich or plentiful as you got from an awake, alert victim. Plus, hauling those pods around was a drag. But, then again, Black Fang’s platoon didn't have any experience with handling live animals...

So, here I was, giving a lecture to my dread changeling minions on the ins and outs of caring for puppies and kittens and birdies and bunny wabbits. @#$ my life. "That's right," I urged. "Pet the bunny. Feed the bunny. Love the buAAARGH!!" at that point, the rabbit I'd been holding revealed his true nature. Dunno what his deal was, I'd thought he'd looked dodgy when I first pulled him out of the chicken wire cage... like he was copping a 'tude. Anyway, he sinks his choppers right into my hand, right at the web between the thumb and forefinger. He didn't break skin through the glove, of course, but it sure hurt like the dickens.

I flailed him around a minute and finally pried him loose. I got him by the throat; the little bastard just glared and spit at me. "Fine, we'll do it your way," I hissed. I stepped out of the cave, sighted for the far side of the encampment, and drop kicked the little effer right over the entrenchments. He sailed right over the fence and disappeared into the woods beyond, squalling like... well, like a pissed-off rabbit. I heard a couple of the timberwargs tear off through the trees after the furry little football. No stomachs, but hey, instincts are instincts. Good riddance. The little twerp had way too much intelligence in those beady little eyes.

I returned to the class, picked another, much more intimidated looking rabbit out of the pen, and continued. "Now, where were we?"

A moment later, one of the scouts came running in. "Ponies in the woods, Dread One!" he said.

I blanched under my mask. Not good. We were still on the move, hunting for a new, permanent lair. I'd hoped for more time before Sunbutt and Moonbutt's flunkies found us--- the Everfree was hella big, after all, and not exactly easy to search-- but it looked like time was up. "Where are they?"

"Two miles that way," the scout said, pointing.

"That is far too close for comfort," Black Fang said. "Shall we break camp?"

"Stay calm, they may not be looking for us," I said.

"Pretty sure they are," the scout said.

"Why?" I said.
"They stand in middle of clearing yelling 'hellooo! We looking for Dread Lord Darth Vulcan!'" the scout clarified. I just stopped and stared at him. "Maybe they Fuller Brush Salesponies?" he suggested.

I resisted the urge to facepalm; I was resisting that urge a lot since arriving in this place. "Take a few guards, go see what they want," I said to Black Fang. "Don't let them see you arrive or leave. Don't let them get close enough to put a tracing spell on you." Black Fang nodded and took off like a shot, three or four other changelings trailing after him.

He came trailing back in during the middle of "how to feed the bunny". He had about a dozen bound and blindfolded ponies trailing behind him. They were a surprisingly rough and scraggly looking lot... well, for pastel mini-ponies. They were dressed in prison rags, and were moderately filthy. Several had scars, or notches in their ears. One had an eye patch. There were broken manacles clamped around several hooves, and the one or two with horns had rings clamped to them. I noted that three of them were bat-winged ponies, like the ones in Luna's guard. They all stood around, doing a terrible job of looking hard and tough.

I just stood there with a carrot in my hand. "....Why?" I finally asked.

"They have... an unusual proposition, Master," Black Fang said. It was hard to tell with those weird blank eyes of his, but he looked puzzled.

Okay, Black Fang wasn't stupid. He was probably the sharpest knife in the drawer around here, in fact, so this had to be something weird to throw him off his stride. I handed the rabbit and the carrot off to a changeling and flicked a handful of magic at a nearby stump. With a creak and a groan the rotting stump I'd gestured at grew and stretched, thrusting roots and branches out of the forest floor, and twisted itself into a gnarled wooden throne. I sat down. "...Ooookay," I said. "Let's hear it. Untie them--- but leave their horns capped and their wings bound." No point making a surprise attack easier.

The changelings untied the prisoners. They all flexed and stretched carefully. I ignored the hollywood backlot mix of pony "thugs" and focused on the three bat-winged pegas. "Interesting. Luna's batponies," I said.

"Thestrals," one of them corrected automatically.

I decided he must be the leader. He was certainly the biggest of the lot. "And what brings you out here?"

He snorted and shrugged. "The palace falling off the mountain," he said. "We were doing time in the dungeons when the wall sheared off clear down the line of cells." He grinned humorlessly, his fangs showing. "We decided to take the invitation to leave."

"And how did three of Luna's pet freaks end up in her dungeons in the first place?"

The three glared and snarled silently but minded their manners. The lead stallion snorted. "Her majesty didn't care for how we made a few extra bits on the side, squeezing the bookies and grifters to look the other way," he said gruffly. "We got drummed out and thrown in the dungeon for graft. If they catch us again, we go right back in the hole. Dunno about these others--" he tossed his head at the riff raff behind him-- "but once the palace took a dive into the lake, we decided to take our chances with you." There were grumbles of assent from the others.

I sat there and stayed quiet till the crowd of ex-con ponies started getting restless and nervous. "So three of Luna's exclusive, reclusive, pet bat pony elite guard just happen to show up on my
doorstep, resumes in hand and looking for a new job," I said sarcastically. "How did you honestly expect me to fall for such an obvious trick?"

"Because they prepared for it," someone in the group said. The group parted; a scrawny half-grown unicorn stallion, probably a teenager, stepped forward. He was pale white under the dust spattered on him, with a jet black tail and a scruffy mane that hung down over one side of his face. He shot the batpony a glowering smirk. "Hey, Sarge," he said to the lead batpony. "Remember me?"

"It's not a trick!" the batpony mare snorted. I could see the anxiety in her eyes though. "Use your magic to scan our minds if you want..."

"I didn't sense any falsehood in them," Black Fang murmured in my ear, letting his horn glow briefly.

The scrawny pony heard him. His smirk turned into a leer. "That's cause they chugged a couple vials of Liar's Tongue before they came here," he said. He pulled three tiny glass bottles from under his tattered prison shirt and rolled them across the ground in my direction. I could see a few droplets of glowing green potion clinging to the bottom of the glass. "Good stuff, if you can get it-- it makes you the world's best liar. It works by making it so even you believe the story you're telling." He gave the lead batpony a sneer. "Good thing it's so pricey only a princess could afford it, right, Sergeant Nightshade?"

The burly batpony lunged at the colt; two of the changelings restrained him. Black Fang stepped over and pried his mouth open with the edge of a hoof. "Yes, I can see it glowing at the back of his throat," he told me.

One of the other prisoners-- the one with the eyepatch-- swore. "I knew it was too good an idea... yeah, the colt ain't lyin.' This stuff is pricey; only way a couple guards coulda gotten it is if Luna herself gave it to them."

"You little worm!" the batpony stallion ranted at the colt. "You betrayed your own people!"

The colt sneered right back. "You mean the ponies that didn't give a crap about me? That threw me in a dungeon?" he said. "Shoulda thought about that before you arrested me, Sergeant." He looked at me. "I was locked up in a cell by this buttscrubber for stealing food from one of Prince Blueblood's garden parties! He was going to have my horn sawed off!"

I gave him a gimlet stare. The fact that it was through my helmet sort of diffused the effect, but Black Fang took the cue. He stepped over and pried open the colt's mouth and peered down his throat. "He's clean," he said. "And I'm sensing no falsehood either."

I looked over at Sergeant Nightshade. "You decided to try and pull this off with a pony whose horn you tried to have sawn off?" I said.

"It would have grown back," Nightshade said as a defensive aside. "We have to do something to stop repeat offenders--"

"I woulda been helpless as a foal till it did!" the colt howled. "It woulda been a death sentence where I live! The street toughs woulda used me for a punching bag!" He lunged for the undercover pony. The changelings restrained him.

I pushed them apart with my magic. "All right," I said to him. "Start... from the beginning."

He looked jittery at being addressed directly, but he manned up. "Like I said," he shrugged.
"Sergeant Numbnuts there arrested me for swiping some food from Prince Blueballs' party. They drag me down to the dungeons and leave me there. I was sitting in the cell, staring at the wall and waiting for them to come in with a hacksaw when the whole castle started shaking. Next thing I know the wall's gone and there's nothing between me and sweet freedom but a pile of rubble.

"A bunch of us make a break for it, we end up hiding out in one of the ruined buildings... and there were a LOT of ruined buildings. Then somepony in the group gets the brilliant idea to try our odds with the new Dark Lord of the Everfree." He tossed his head at the three batponies and snorted. "Imagine my joy when I found out it was these three tossers." The other fugitives glared at the guards with undisguised hatred.

"And you didn't recognize them before?"

"Without a helmet on their heads, their lips on some rich pony's butt and a poker up their plots?" the colt rolled his eyes. The guards glared but kept their mouths shut. "Anyway, I decided to stay up and listen in on them. Heard them talking about infiltrating your ranks... they'd figured you wouldn't look them over too close if they came in with a bunch of 'prison rubbish,' and that their spooky, spooky bat-wing look would make you think they were kindred spirits, or some crap." He smiled sweetly at them. "Looks like they guessed wrong."

"And then they'd wait until the right moment to betray me," I finished tiredly. I looked at the batponies, then at my guards.

"Take them away, chain them up. I will dispose of them later. Leave them unharmed otherwise. They will be taking my message back to their mistress for me." They knew they were had; they were led away without any struggle. "And what of the rest of you?" I said to the riffraff.

The eye-patched pony shrugged. "Ain't nothin' changed, I guess. We still got no place to go; if you'll take us, we're yours."

"Works for me," I said. "Black Fang, Mange, get those manacles and horn-rings off them. Arm them, armor them, equip them, bivouac them. Get them some food-- NO MEAT, you numbskulls-- and see to it that they get their tags."

"Tags?" Eyepatch said.

I reached over and lifted up a necklace around one of the 'dog's neck. A wooden tag with a couple of runes carved on it dangled from the end. "dream wards," I said. "Hasn't it dawned on you that Princess Luna could spy on us through your dreams?" He blanched; message gotten. They dispersed, herded away by the dogs.

I directed my attention back to the colt. "And you," I said. He hadn't moved. "What do you want?"

He looked back at me, obviously waiting for the other horseshoe to drop. "Well?" I said. "You ratted out the guard ponies. What did you hope to get from it? Gratitude? Money? Revenge?"

"I can get all that with what I really want," he said.

"Which is?"

"Power," he said. He flicked his freshly-unclamped horn; a spark dropped from the tip. "I'm a unicorn. I'm supposed to be one of the most magically powerful pony race in Equestria." I didn't correct him. Bull me no crap, we both knew the truth: super strength, green thumbs and wings are no match for the power to kill people with your brain. "But for all my wonderful marvelous magic I'm a stinking street urchin. I get by stealing bread to eat and snitching half-bit pieces out of fountains."
Meanwhile every horse-bird and yokel dirt pony can push me around and shake me down for what I have in my pockets." He kicked angrily at a pebble. He looked at me, a greedy light in his eyes. "I want what you have. I want respect. I want money. I want ponies to be sorry they ever pushed me around. I want power. And I'll take whatever you give me."

"And what can you do for me?" I said.

He hunched down defensively. "Whatever I have to," he muttered.

"A good answer. But what can you do?" I stressed.

He looked me in the eye. "I... I don't know a lot of magic," he confessed. "Not any really powerful stuff." His voice was a little shaky, but as he talked his confidence went up a little. "But I got spells that can pick a lock. Any lock. I can pick any pocket, too. I can steal a pony's watch, ask him what time it is, and he won't even notice. I can forge someone's signature, sweet and clean... cast another spell that would make a banker think a sink washer is a solid gold bit. I know a track-muddling spell that would make a bloodhound lose a railroad track. I can run any sort of grift or scam you name, too-- chase the lady, melon drop, Neighjing Tea...."

I held up my hand to stop him. Curiosity was eating me up. "Let me see your mark," I said. He turned to one side; on his flank was... a top hat? With three playing cards coming out of it.

"Got it when I was five," he said proudly. "Knew a pony in my neighborhood... He didn't have much magic either, but he always had one surprise up his sleeve or another. If he wasn't doing street performance he was selling bottles of tonic water or playing pennies with the city workers for pocket change or sweeping chimneys or playing a one-pony band.... never the same thing twice. I wanted to be like that more than anything-- I decided someday I was gonna have a thousand tricks under my hat." He smirked proudly. "Have just about that many, too."

"What is your name?" Even as I asked I almost knew.

"Dodger, sir," he said. "Art--"

"Artful Dodger," I finished for him, to his mystification. "It would be." Rolling my eyes to myself, I picked a large, broad leaf off a nearby bush; with a moment's concentration I'd turned it into a silk top hat-- a perfect match for the one on his flank. I floated it over to him. "You are my personal agent and apprentice now," I said. "What I say, you do. No questions. Where I send you, you go. No questions. Stay with me and I will give you that power you want-- and more." I upended the hat and dropped it on his head. "Welcome aboard, Mister Dodger. Do not disappoint me."

He gave me a scheming grin from under the brim of his hat.

It was two days later that Sergeant Nightshade and his two lieutenants staggered out of the Everfree Forest. Whether by luck or fate or chance or the fact that the Everfree Forest's magic seemed to have a malicious sense of humor, they found themselves on the outskirts of Ponyville.

The first cottage they encountered was Fluttershy's; the pegasus was out on the front step, tending to
her recently returned rabbit, Angel. The bunny was crouched down in an odd position and looking rather... constipated. Fluttershy picked up a pair of pliers in her wingtip and moved in. "Now hold still," she said in a soothing tone, "And I'll pull your tail back out. It's a ways in there, so try not to tense up... one, two..." There was a popping noise and a painful sounding squawk. "There," she said to the shaken rabbit. "You'll have to sit on a foam ring for a while, and we'll keep you on soft foods, but-- " It was then that she glanced up and saw the Princess' agents.

They were a sight to behold. Darth Vulcan and his minions had gotten creative. All three of them had been tarred and feathered from their noses clear back to their midriffs. From there on back they had been painted green. They were limping from where some of the fugitive recruits, angered at being conned by three undercover cops, had beaten them with sacks of moldy oranges. And, when you lined them up, one could see that the words "NICE TRY PRINCESS" had been shaved into their rumps. They were otherwise unmolested; during their trek back their bizarre appearance had frightened off any of the wildlife.

Nightshade regarded Fluttershy with the one eye that wasn't blocked with a cloud of feathers. "Lady Fluttershy?" he said.

"Eep? Um.... yes?"

"Inform the Princesses... mission accomplished. He's in."

"Oh.... my....."
Chapter 23

First order of business; finding a new lair.

I wasn't about to leave the Everfree. It was a fairly huge chunk of land, for one thing, with plenty of hiding places, and it provided its own natural defense against trespassers, which made my life easier. But we still had to re-dig. Too many outsiders had seen the old dragon's lair, and it wouldn't take much effort to rediscover it.

The flight from the lair had been textbook perfect. We had taken everything that wasn't nailed down with us, and pulled up half of whatever was left, so supplies and equipment and such weren't a problem. So what did we end up doing?

What diamond dogs do best. We stopped at a random location somewhere in the Everfree, and dug straight down. Upside, since it was in dirt rather than in rock, we quickly had a warren of spacious tunnels that went down hundreds of feet and stretched for miles. We finished excavating just in time, too; the autumn weather had imploded all at once, turning to hard, blowing snows. The ponies had been a little freaked, muttering about Everfree weather and winter being two weeks ahead of schedule. But hey, we were out of it.

Downside, it was in dirt. The old lair had been dug almost entirely in stone. Here, no such luck. It was dark and damp and even with stay-dry and waterproofing spells everything smelled of earthworms. Everything was shored up and reinforced with wooden beams and stone, but it was still dirt floors, dirt walls, dirt ceiling, dirt in your shoes, dirt in your food... It was kind of starting to grate on me that every time I won some sort of victory in this lousy world, my personal circumstances got a little bit worse. I did what I could with magic, fusing walls and ceiling into hardened clay, but there were miles of tunnels and chambers and more all the time...

The toilet worked, at least. Darn right I'd had them fit me out a proper bathroom. First to-do project after we dug everything out. One of the ponies had turned out to be a plumber. Heh. I had one throne of iron and one of porcelain. All it took was one ex-con pony with a plunger cutie mark and a pipe wrench. What the hell was this guy doing in prison? I had a tub, I had a sink, I had properly tiled walls, ceiling and floor... all it needed was a TV set and a mini fridge and I'd have the perfect man-cave. At the least, for a half hour or so each day, I had a sanctuary from the Candyland-meets-World of Warcraft insanity all around me.

Oh, don't get me wrong, the rest of my quarters were pretty sweet too. Big sumptuous bed, candelabras with expensive forever-last magic candles, plush rugs over the slate stone floor... all very plush. But... it still reminded me that I wasn't, well, home. On the other hand, weird as it is, a pony bathroom is pretty indistinguishable from the porcelain and tile fortress of solitude back on earth. Except for the bidet. Wooweee, was that a surprise the first time I discovered it. Makes sense, though. Fur and all. And how would they wipe....?

Note to self; never never never let yourself wonder how the Diamond Dogs handled the problem. No. Stop thinking about it now.

Anyway, it was another day in the lair, and I was in the bathroom of solitude taking a long hot shower and feeling fairly good. We were fortified and dug in. We were protected first by the
Everfree, and by the wild winter raging overhead as well-- no way Sunshine Butt and her Moon flunky were gonna send ponies out in this. We were stocked to the rafters with supplies. My trots had finally cleared up. I wasn't any closer to figuring out who or what had dragged me to this world, but at the moment I was feeling pretty much on top of it.

I stepped out of the shower, dried my hair, threw on a big fluffy bathrobe (stitched together by Big Mama's eldest daughter from several smaller pony-sized ones), and threw the door open.

Queen Chrysalis was lying in my bed. She was clothed in a lacy, fur-trimmed pink negligee and was toying with my discarded helmet. "Greetings, my lord," she purred.

I closed the door.

I don't know how long I stood there in my bathroom, my hand on the doorknob, while my brain tried to realign all its little gears. The hell had I just seen, again? That could not have been real. I opened the door and looked again.

She was still there, lounging like Scheherazade on my silk bedspread, doing her best to give me bedroom eyes. I don't know why I didn't fireball her then and there. I think too many parts of my mind were still running around trying to confirm whether or not I'd had a stroke and was hallucinating it all. I telekinetically yanked my skull-sword from the wall to my hand and leveled it at her while I stood there trying to look intimidating. "How did you get in here, Chrysalis?" (whoa, I'd managed the voice even without the helmet.)

She cocked an eyebrow at me and burst into green flame. When the flames cleared, she resembled one of my diamond dogs. In a pink negligee. "Point made, and never do that again," I said, rubbing my eyes. Another flash of green and she was back to herself again. It seemed I should have put my Changelings guarding the entrances and exits. "All right, you have gone to the trouble of sneaking into my lair. I don't hear fighting in the halls so I'm guessing it's just you. You didn't jump me from behind-- which was smart because if I didn't kill you my loyal minions would have- - so you obviously want something. Fine.


She lounged across the bed and made duck lips at me. "You."

It took me at least five minutes to say it. "What."

She stretched out like a cat. "It is the Changeling way. You have conquered me, completely. I am now yours..."

I said the words like I was cranking them out with a rusty winch. "And by that you mean...?"

She studied me under half-lidded eyes. "You're young but you've obviously gone through puberty. You're old enough to figure it out. What do you think?"

Oh what the flip de doo.

I went to my front door and stepped out of the room into the hallway.

"GUARDS!!"

Several diamond dogs and changelings came running, led by Black Fang and Artful Dodger. They were a little startled to see me out of my armor and wearing nothing but a bathrobe (yeah, I saw a
few grimace when they looked at my face) but I ignored it. I addressed Black Fang. "Chrysalis is in my room. She has just informed me that by Changeling tradition, she is my prize of war. Care to explain this?"

To my disgruntlement several of the changelings started cheering and making noises of approval. "Oooh, lucky drone--" "Whoa Momma--" "Congratulations--"


Black Fang shrugged. "She is probably telling the truth, Dark Lord," he said. "Female changelings are.... hard wired in certain ways. Swarm Queens especially so.

"Such as?" I made 'get to the point' motions with my hands.

"They become..." he waved a hoof, searching. "... attached to any male that subdues them. Or no, more like... bonded? It's hard to explain." He thought for a moment. "Let me start over from the beginning. You know that Changelings are all about subterfuge. Disguise, deception, stealth, striking from the shadows and running away. correct? Well, it is correct. Except," he paused. "Except when we're seeking a mate. We become more aggressive-- the same as when we're swarming-- and the females become more susceptible to dominance displays.

"Displays of courage, bravado, dominance, are incredibly rare in Changelings, generally speaking. When a male steps up and, well, subdues a female, or performs some powerful assertive act---"

"... it hits her right in the hormones," I finished for him.

"And in the case of Queens, for whom everything is a hundredfold.....makes them susceptible to a powerful instinctive bonding," Black Fang said. "For instance, having their army defeated, then being rescued from certain doom...." He trailed off.

I facepalmed. The events of the battle of the castle of the two sisters were playing back through my head. "Wait. So you're saying because I manhandled her, took away some of her changelings, and then rescued her from a swarm of giant man eating plants, she's, she's imprinted on me like some sort of giant baby duckling?"

"More like hormonally locked onto you. She can see you, and only you, as her ideal. She is determined to..."

"Pound you like a whack-a-mole game?" Artful Dodger contributed cheerfully.

Two of the changelings started sniggering. I pointed at them. "You. Beavis. Butthead. Shut up." (and thus they were named for the rest of their days.) I couldn't believe this. A giant alien cockroach-horse wanted to jump my bones because I went Alpha Male on her for a few seconds.

"I was going to say 'make you her brood partner," Black Fang said sarcastically to a snickering Dodger. "But yes, um, that generally follows."

Just then I noticed it was awfully quiet on the other side of my chamber door. WAY too quiet.

I motioned for quiet, leveled my sword, and pushed open the door.

Chrysalis was still on the bed. "Oh, my dark lord, you return--"

"Don't call me that."
"But you are. We are bonded. Search your feelings, you know it to be true!" She crawled across the bed toward me eagerly. "Imagine, Darth Vulcan, what our new breed of Changelings will be like—stronger, more powerful—"

"We're not even the same species!!"

"Changeling heredity is... rather more flexible," she purred. "We are capable of interbreeding with ponies, after all..."

Okay, that did not paint a pretty picture. I kept the sword between us. "And I repeat, we're not even the same species," I said grimly.

She rolled her eyes, the worldly-wise amused at the dilettante. "I am a changeling, my love," she said. "You think I'm ignorant of the role of appearance in physical attraction?" Green fire flared; she was a silky maned alicorn pony. "Just think." The fire flashed again and she was now a gryphon. "I can be any female you desire." Flash. She was now a butter yellow pegasus with a pink mane and a shy voice. "Any fantasy you have." Flash. She was a batpony. "Any at all." Flash. Now she was a minotaur--

I think she finally picked up on my facial expression. That or the strangled sounds of horror I was making. She clicked her tongue. "Oh. One of those. Your own kind only, hm?" She eyed me up and down. I hastily closed my robe. "Well, let's see if we can't get something closer to your filly next door... hmm, bipedal, sparse body hair, plantigrade, uhm hm..."

There was a prolonged flash. When the flames parted, I nearly swallowed my tongue. I stared, popeyed. She stood up by the bed gracefully, all but nude save for that see-thru negligee, hands on her hips. "Oh fine! What? What did I get wrong?"

"Well for starters," I said in a strangled tone, "Those don't go down there..."

She looked down. "Oh, then where?" I sort of pointed to her upper torso. "Oh the chest? Odd." With a quick flash of fire she moved them up where they belonged. "How's that?"

I can't.... I just can't describe how wrong she got it. It wasn't that she was wildly off--- well, except for the boob thing. It wasn't like her knees were on backwards or she still had holes in her limbs or anything. She was close. that's what made it worse.

Can you imagine a life size barbie doll? Okay, now try and imagine a barbie doll designed by someone who has never even seen a human female, not even a cartoon drawing, but who is working from a written description. A really really incomplete written description. Everything was disproportionate. Her eyes, her head, her limbs, boobs, butt, everything. She didn't just fall into the uncanny valley, she established a base camp, built fortifications and was now fording her way up the near slope with a horde of creepy baby dolls and horrifying clowns bringing up the rear.

My gargled response to her new form communicated the problem clearly. She gave a growl of frustration and turned back into herself, and the fact that I thanked God she did should say all that needs to be said about her "human" form. "Are your species' males so hard to please?" she snapped irritably. Then she softened and strode across the room-- bipedally, I noted-- crooning to me. "Oh well that doesn't matter, we can figure it out as we go. No matter my form I can surely please--"

I Snot Cannoned her to the wall.

"What? Again?" she screeched. "I do not believe this! I offer you my crown, my servitude, my very body and you reject me? How dare you! How dare you, you miserable, pasty, half-bald-- " she shot
a glance down and sneered-- "under endowed talking monkey! How dare you do this to a Queen of the--"

I found the door to the hallway and backed out. I re-tied my robe (that last remark stung), closed the door firmly and magically sealed it.

I just stood there and facepalmed, my temples throbbing. "Okay, gimme the straight dope," I said warily to Black Fang. "How much of a threat is she? Can she, I dunno, take the changelings over again?"

Black Fang shook his head. "She's completely cut off. Her only connection to the swarm... what there is of us..." he grimaced. "...is through you, now." I flinched; I thought I had imagined that odd Geas-like tendril I'd seen with my magic-vision. "For all her power and ancient knowledge, she is bonded to you as surely as I and my soldiers."

"Seriously?"

"Brood bonding is like that. It prevents defeated queens from re-taking power, while ensuring their loyalty... and their bloodlines... to the swarm." He shrugged. "Less of an issue during non-swarming generations, but there you have it."

We all paused. "Well, boss?" Artful Dodger said with a grin. "You gonna..."

I stuck my finger under his nose. "Finish that question and spend the next week shoveling out the hydra pens," I hissed.

"We no more have hydra pit," one diamond dog pointed out.

"I'll make a new one," I snapped. The crowd around my doorway got quiet. It was in that moment of chilled silence that I heard it.

She was crying.

"Aw @#$+. Now THIS crap?" I groaned. I stepped back inside, not lowering my sword. She was hanging there, blubbering like she'd lost the homecoming crown at the prom.

"What now?" she sniffled at me angrily. "Is not my humiliation complete? You take the Tree of Harmony from me; take my swarm from me--"

"How? I only severed a dozen or so from you," I said.

"There were only a few dozen left," she snarled soggily. "Then you broke the Geas. Cut its threads. You took what you wanted, and what you left behind unraveled like a cheap sweater." Her eyes turned wet and wobbly. "The instant they knew the Geas was broken they all left me. All of them. Not a one stayed, not a single one... not even the little fat one who picked his nose all the time..." Her head drooped. "M-my whole Swa-a-a-a-rm huh-ha-ted me..." tears gushed.

"And you expected loyalty from them?" I snorted. "You enslaved them, treated them like dirt-- you had them bashing their faces in against a force field!"

She didn't hear a word. "And then you step in and make yourself king of the swarm--- you defeat me, reduce me to nothing but a brood drone, bind me, then save me from the plunder vines, like some damned hero out of every changelingette's dream, toying with my affections..."

"Toying with your--??"
"And then when I offer myself to you, you reject me toooo-ooo-oooo!!" Her lament ended on a mournful howl. She was racked with sobs and tears, wailing and horking and blubbering.

"I've seen soap opera plotlines less ridiculous than this," I grumbled. "Fine." I stepped back into my room. Chrysalis was still sniffling and weeping. I found a handkerchief and jammed it up to her face. "Blow." Mystified, she blew her nose. I mopped her face off, more or less, and turned to the door. "DODGER!!"

Artful Dodger and not a few rubbernecking minions piled in. I saw one of the changelings stare at the ex-queen stuck to the wall, and then chitter something under his breath to his buddy. They both sniggered. I ignored them.

Well I ignored them after shooting the wall over their heads with a blackfire bolt. "Cut her down," I said. They moved to obey. "Find her a chamber. Outfit it as suits a Queen. All the amenities. Provide her with maidservants to see to her.

"Set four guards-- no more than two changelings at a time-- outside her door. Change them out twice daily. If she causes any trouble--- well, then, they can escort her to more fitting quarters in the dungeon."

They finished cutting her down. I stuck my finger under her nose. "You are under probation," I said. "set one hoof out of line, give your guards or your maidservants or me ANY CRAP AT ALL, and your next stop will be Celestia's throne room wrapped up in a ribbon and a bow. Got it?"

"As my Lord wishes," she simpered. The guards led her from the room.

I looked over at Artful Dodger. "Well what are you waiting for? Go round up some furniture and crap for her room!" He smirked and tipped his top hat to me before galloping out the door.

I waited until everyone was gone. Then I let myself do the heebie-jeebie dance for a few minutes. Cripes, I needed another shower.

Before you jump to any conclusions, some things had been running through my head after speaking with Black Fang. Words like "power" and "vast arcane knowledge." Chrysalis rivaled Celestia and Luna for power, and if Black Fang was speaking the truth then I had her on a handy-dandy leash. I could use that power. I could certainly pump her for answers to my questions about how I got here, and what the alicorn amulet had to do with it all. And if we stumbled across any more Changelings running around loose out there, having a Queen of sorts standing by my throne might come in handy to wooing them to the Darth Side....

All I had to do was keep her under control and devoted to me, get some useful work out of her, all whilst keeping her from climbing into my pants. "Great," I muttered. "Other evil overlords get a sexy evil sorceress wrapped around their leg, what do I get? A giant nymphomaniac pony cockroach."

I went and took another shower.

Day Court was going smoothly when proceedings were interrupted by the sound of Princess Luna approaching. The lunar diarch was using the Royal Canterlot Voice at full blast, and wasn't sounding
like she was going to stop any time soon. What made Celestia's ear quirk was that Luna wasn't using it in her usual fashion.

She was laughing.

Celestia dismissed the court and motioned for everypony to leave the throne room. The last courtier left just as Luna came staggering in, bellowing with laughter so loud it made the rafters ring.

"AHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!"

"Luna, is something the matter?" Celestia said.

"Her majesty has just received word from her agent in the field," said the batpony accompanying her. He watched with a grimace as his Princess threw herself over the arm of the throne, slapping the air helplessly with one hoof.

"AHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAN!!!"

"Excellent!" Celestia said, raising her voice to be heard over her hysterical sister. "What word do we have?" Luna's only response was to finally run out of air and droop over the arm of her sister's throne, squeaking.

"It seems Darth Vulcan and Queen Chrysalis have..." the batpony hesitated.

Celestia looked distressed. "Oh no, don't tell me they've formed an alliance??" she said.

Luna's contribution was a massive "Hyeeeeeeeeek" as she sucked in air.

The batpony grimaced and looked slightly green. "In a manner of speaking..."

"AAAAAHHHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"
Chapter 24

I'll cut to the chase. Winter sucked.

Winter over Equestria is apparently mild, with lovely gentle snowfalls with big fat flakes that covered the fields and cottages in a pristine blanket of white... a hallmark-card winter wonderland. Winter over the Everfree, not so much. The Everfree apparently boasted winters composed of an equal blend of sleet, hail, freezing rain, blinding snowstorms, smothering blizzards, antarctic temperatures, and undiluted suck.

We were all deep underground, thankfully, dug in like termites in a mound. We had ample food supply for the winter and a steady water supply. An added bonus, most of my minion army seemed to almost go dormant; the diamond dogs got slow, sluggish and slept most of the day, and the changelings literally went into a full on torpor. They clung to the walls and ceiling of their private chamber, virtually immobile, droning to themselves quietly. It was apparently a voluntary reaction; they were woke up immediately and remained fully alert for as long as I needed them, then went right back to sleep the moment they were finished with whatever task I gave them. Nifty. Black Fang alone remained fully awake most of the time, in order to be available to me-- but even he crashed into that torpor whenever he had an hour off.

That still left me with a lot of perfectly wide-awake ex-con ponies who needed kept busy. The close quarters and enforced idleness were leading to a lot of grumbling; I resorted to putting them to make-work jobs--- digging more tunnels for the lair, scouting topside around the Everfree, exercise drills, anything I could think of. I saved the nastiest jobs for the biggest complainers; the complaining tapered off quite a bit.

To my surprise, nobody ran off. At least I didn't notice anyone missing or our numbers suddenly dropping. Granted, I didn't bother keeping track of everyone. If they bolted, good riddance. It was highly unlikely that they would even get out of the Everfree alive if they did, anyway, especially in mid-winter.

It was a week or two after we had dug in that I found myself wondering where all my Diamond Dogs were. I was skulking around through the tunnels, vaguely taking inventory, and I noticed that I had seen the Changelings and the ex-con ponies I had taken aboard... but the 'dogs were making themselves scarce. Even Big Mama was missing from the make-shift kitchen cavern. I collared Artful Dodger and demanded to know what was up.

The scrawny unicorn shrugged at my inquiry. "Dunno," he said. "They all just started trooping outside a while ago. I asked, they said 'it Diamond Dog thing. You no understand. ' " He looked worried. "Didja want someone to follow 'em?"

"No-- I'll handle this myself," I said, slamming my helmet on and stalking my way to the entrance. I was disgruntled; Skank, Mange and Runt were supposed to keep me posted on everything their pack got up to, not go running off without so much as a post-it note telling me what was up.

It wasn't hard tracking them; they'd left a path of well-trodden snow behind them. I ventured out into the blistering cold, swearing. That was two strikes-- they knew not to leave trails like this. The last thing we needed with pegasi flying overhead was a bunch of tracks in the snow leading back to the
When I caught up with them, they were gathered around--- strike three-- an enormous bonfire. One that was probably visible from Canterlot. I could hear barking and howling, and saw them passing around more than one jug.... I stood among the trees, just out of the firelight, seething. I was going to beat the insubordination out of them

It took me a minute to realize that they weren't celebrating. The few howls that went up weren't jubilant, they were mournful. Even with the jugs passing around, they looked sad and sober as a mob of judges. Every tail and ear drooped, every eye was cast downward.

They stood there looking sorrowfully into the fire, swaying back and forth. As I watched, one whimpering female came forward and threw something into the fire-- a bundle of rags and straw, a dummy diamond dog... she watched the flames consume it, moaning and whimpering like the saddest dog in the world. She turned back to shuffle into the crowd; paws patted her on the back, consoling. Another diamond dog came forward, this one a male, came forward and took her place. He threw another straw dog on the fire.

I watched as 'dogs left the circling crowd one by one. Some tossed manikins dressed in diamond dog vests, others threw odd possessions on the fire, or bundles done up in bits of old blanket. What was this?

I thought about it for a minute, then crept around the circle till I was behind Runt. They must've been pretty deep into those jugs already; they're nearsighted as heck but they should have heard or smelled me a hundred feet away. I stepped out of the woods into the firelight; the moaning and whimpering stopped and every eye turned towards me. It was eerily still for a moment; no sound but the popping of the burning logs as the silent snow fell. I expected the guilty doggy faces--- they looked like my mom's pug dog when he got caught making a doodle on the carpet--- but instead of groveling, after just a second they turned back to the fire and resumed their low keening and moaning.

I was glad I was wearing my helmet so they couldn't see my jaw drop. These guys normally bit the dirt and began groveling at the drop of a hat. I made my way over to Runt. "What is this?" I didn't shout. I kept my voice serious, but low.

Runt kept his head down but turned his eyes up to me. "Mourning Day," he said. "We say goodbye to dogs who leave us. Not have time before..."

I misheard at first. "Morning Day...?" I shook my head. "Who are we losing?" Diamond Dogs breaking ranks. This did not bode well--


I felt like I'd been smacked in the head with a mallet. I took another look at the mourning faces of the dogs around me, counted the effigies burning on the logs. I wasn't breaking up a party.

I'd crashed a wake.
"How many?" I said, a lump of ice in my chest. Runt showed me the list. I counted at least two dozen names. The first half were mostly 'dogs who'd died under Big Boss's claws, but the rest--- the rest were Diamond Dogs who'd been killed on my watch. Ones who'd died fighting for me in the forest, or at the Castle of the Royal Sisters, or who'd died rescuing my sorry ass from the Pretty Pony Princess' dungeon.

I sat down heavily on a nearby stump. I thought I was going to puke.

I was a complete retard. I'd seen Big Boss kill someone; I'd hacked and slashed and blasted my way through a battlefield myself. I'd even seen Big Boss' head get splattered all over his cave. I'd looked around and sneered at the whole cartoon-land kiddy-safe illusion of this world. And still all that time I'd been thinking in the back of my head that God or the Fates or whatever would keep things all TV-Y rated. and I'd gotten all caught up in it myself. This was no saturday morning cartoon. People died. I'd gotten people killed.

"Why the bonfire?" I said, trying to distract myself from the thoughts pinwheeling through my head. "Why not just bury the dead?"

Runt shook his head and snorted. "Never," he said. "Ponies do that. It weird and sick." He snorted again and licked his nose. "we bury the dead, soon we have no place left to dig for gems!" An interesting perspective; It made sense for Diamond Dogs. It would be kind of traumatizing to start a new tunnel and run into Great Uncle Egbert in repose.

Runt saw me staring at the effigies in the fire. "We not... we not get bodies back, this time," he said. "Had to run. We burn their belongings on the fire in their place, say goodbye to them that way." Another 'dog shuffled forward, a crude dog-shaped bundle in his arms. I could see now it was made from old clothes, and filled with a few personal possessions-- old tools, a blanket, a collar, an old chew-bone... It was consigned to the flames with the others.

"We keep it quiet," Runt went on. "No howling. And we wait for dark snowy night--" he gestured around at the swirling blankets of snow falling out of the sky. "So they not see smoke, maybe hide flames from pony eyes..." He held one of the gourd jugs, fiddling with it as he looked into the flames.

I raised my hand. Out beyond the firelight magical darkness swirled through the trees. The shadows rose up in a wall around us, snuffing out even what little light that could be seen. I left the very top open to let the smoke out. "Howl your hearts out," I said. "Noone will hear." I took the jug from Runt's paws and took a whiff. Yeah, I recognized the smell; good old-fashioned rotgut like my Dad got whenever he tries to make craft beer or wine. Some things never change from world to world, like fermentation. I flipped up my visor and took a swig; it burned all the way down.

the first to howl was a half-grown pup. He raised his voice in mourning all alone. The others, encouraged, joined in. A dozen, two dozen voices raised in mourning echoed into the cold blank winter sky.

I sat with them. I watched as more effigies and odd possessions were tossed on the fire, while pack mates broke down whimpering and crying over lost pups, sires and dams, littermates and lifemates. I helped pass the gourd around... once or twice... or three times... listened while 'dogs told me about the dead, patted them on the back and told them 'he/she was a good dog...' passed the bottle again... Wept over the ones who'd died... I remember raising my own voice in a wolf-howl along with them; I think they were impressed... things faded together into the long winter night.
I woke up lying down. In a bed. Mine, maybe.


I'd had hangovers before. Well I thought I'd had hangovers before. My older brother would sneak some beer sometime; one time I managed to get ahold of his whole sixpack and... yeah well you get the idea. But the morning after that brilliant plan was nothing, I swear to you NOTHING but a lit match against the Sun compared to the aftermath of a Diamond Dog rotgut binge. Everything hurt the way only my head was supposed to. My mouth, throat, and possibly first two thirds of my esophagus were lined with fur. My stomach was roiling and my intestines were brewing up to do something unholy. Moving hurt. Breathing hurt. Thinking hurt. Existing hurt.

I managed to peel open one eye. Artful Dodger standing inside the door. The image entered my eye on beams of light that proceeded to destroy the core of my brain. "Glarrgh," I said. I sounded like Satan with a hangover. It was certainly how I felt.

He correctly translated. "You passed out at the Diamond Dog wake," he said. "after you chugged about a gallon of their brew all by yourself." He sounded impressed. "They brought you back here and put you to bed... um, well, after they hosed you down a little." I did feel sort of damp and manky, come to think of it.

I managed to sort of air-crawl my way to an upright position next to my bed. The room reeled as my sinuses pounded. I staggered. "Dear God, what was in that brew?" I rasped.

"Y’see, that's the sort of question I learned to ask before drinking out of a strange bottle," Artful Dodger pointed out smugly. "Nopony knows, by the way. Everypony has been afraid to ask after last time."

"Last time?" I urped.

"Yeah, A couple of the pony toughs tried some of it a while ago, and... well you're about to be glad I cleared a path to the bathroom--"

He wasn't lying. You know that feeling you get just before you puke? How about the one you feel just before your bowels are about to unloose? Imagine them both at the same time. I was in the bathroom, pants to my knees, almost before I realized I'd even lurched to my feet.

I found out at that point that I'd made a critical oversight in how the bathroom was laid out; there was only one toilet, and at the moment I desperately needed two... Life is bad when you can't make up your mind whether you want to put your ass on the toilet or stick your face in it. I made do by squatting on the bowl and holding my helmet upside down under my face. Many horrible sights, sounds, and smells commenced.

Artful Dodger came to the door and stood watch while I attempted to exorcise my immortal soul out of both ends of my body. "Aw man," he whined. "I rinsed that helmet out twice already..."

I wasn't paying attention. I was too busy fishing around in the Amulet for a make-me-sober-or-kill-me spell. One floated up before my mind's eye; I grabbed onto it like a drowning man and fired it off. It got really unpleasant then; this sober-up spell was efficient but it wasn't merciful. It worked by bypassing my liver and maximizing the amount of alcohol I expelled from my body--- by any means and orifices available. My heaves redoubled, and so did my bowel voidings. My bladder gushed, My eyes watered, my nose ran, sweat reeking of alcohol gushed from all my pores. For ten of the most
horrible seconds of my life I was hell's own lawn sprinkler. I couldn't even moan, I was too busy spewing.

When it was over, and the aftershocks had finally passed, I dragged myself off the porcelain throne and over to the sink, where I drank straight from the spigot till my guts sloshed. I felt better, mountains better, but I felt like I'd been rung out like a soiled dishrag. Actually, that's a pretty good description of what the spell did... I looked at myself in the mirror. Whoa. I looked like I'd aged fifty years in a day. I was gaunt and jaundiced looking, my hair was hanging in greasy strings and my eyes looked like boiled bacon.

I angled the mirror so I could see Dodger. He was still visible through the doorway, though he'd backed out of the potential splash zone. The look of horror on his face was comedy gold. "What was that?" he demanded to know.

"Evil Warlock Hangover Cure," I quipped. I began dragging my clothes off my body and tossing them in a corner. It was time for a thorough hosing-down. I regarded the mess I'd made (that porcelain bowl had done a hero's work, but-- no I'll leave it to your imagination. Just google "drunk and passed out" for similar laughs). "Get someone to clean this up."

Dodger's face wrinkled. "Can't ya just magic it away, or something?"

I would have snapped at him if I'd had more strength. Just for the hell of it I flipped through the Amulet's prefab spell list again. Well whaddya know. "Gruesome Aftermath Cleanup." And it was cross-referenced with the hangover cure. Whoever had made this Amulet had lived an interesting life. Purple-green energy scourged the tile, porcelain and chrome, leaving everything spotless... even my abused helmet. I climbed into the shower and cranked up the spigots for a thorough hosing down. Sweet judas on a stick, that felt better.

To my annoyance I could still see Dodger through the frosted glass, standing there. "What do you want, already?" I growled.

I could hear the shrug in his voice. "That's kinda what I wanna ask you," he said. "But first I figure you wanna know what everypony's up to, since you've been too drunk to pay attention."

I stuck my head up over the shower door and glared at him, my eyes flickering purple-green-red. "Don't forget your place," I growled.

"You mean 'Toady?" he smirked, crossing his hooves. How did he stay standing like that? "I know what I am-- I'm the little twerp every boss and bully boy with the real power keeps around so everypony'll hate the twerp instead of him. You need me to be a smart-mouthed jerk lieutenant just so everyone will blame things on me instead of you." His tone was smug but I could hear a little bitterness under it.

I stood still under the spigot. That was an interesting perspective, all right. And it was a pretty good guess on his part. Since taking him on board I'd had him fetch and carry and relay my orders... which meant any unpleasant jobs I handed out, they blamed on him instead of me. I'd like to think I was being clever but the truth was that I was turning into a coward. I shampooed up while I thought. "Fine. Report, then," I said. Might as well find out what bug was up his tail.

"Well to start off, the 'dogs think you're the greatest thing since sliced bread, of course. And you got major props for hanging with them at their wake. Dunno how many props you lost for puking, passing out and peeing yourself, though." He smirked. "But the ponies aren't too happy. I'm hearing them a lot of griping about how if they wanted to spend their lives living in a hole and breaking rocks, they could have stayed in the Canterlot prison." He shifted his stance, leaning against the
"Dealing with hungover Diamond Dogs hasn't made them much happier.

"The Changelings aren't too happy either. They're ticked off that their ex-Queen--- who basically ran their hive into the ground-- is sitting pretty in her own 'suite', getting waited on horn and hoof. It's a suite in a dirt hole and she's being waited on by ex-cons and Diamond Dogs, but... whatever." He shrugged again.

"And yeah, personally she's kind of a heinous nag, too. Treats me like crap whenever I gotta deal with her... of course nopony else is much better," he sulked. "The only reason I'm not getting outright kicked around is because I'm supposedly your 'apprentice.' Which still means I gotta deal with ponies and 'dogs pulling all kind of crap on me when I'm not looking. I'm getting tired of sleeping with one eye open..."

I grumbled to myself. These were all big problems. Villain Human Resources problems: not your typical P.R. situation. And it had all been going on under my nose. "And the general feel?" I said.

Dodger huffed. "Same question I got. Everypony wants to know what the buck you want. What's your plan? What's your goal?" He paused. "....well?"

"Well what?"

"What's the big plan?" Dodger said. "Conquer Equestria? Take over the world? Become all-powerful? That's what all the villains around here seem to want to do, in the end."

I couldn't help it. I blew a raspberry. "Rule this world? Not a chance, colt."

"Why not?" he actually sounded curious.

I scrubbed down with a loofah while I thought it over. Why not? How could I put it? "Let me put it this way, Artful Dodger," I said. "Would you want to be the ruler of a kingdom full of nothing but little diaper-wearing foals?"

I couldn't make out his facial expression through the glass, but I could guess. "Okay, uh, no?"

"Well neither would I." I reached over the door and got a towel. "To me, that's what Equestria is. A big nursery school full of silly-ass toddlers--"

"Hey--" Dodger said, offended.

"You asked. Cope." I toweled off my hair. "Everything is candy-colored and candy coated, and ponies frolic around without a care in the world-- even though their world has all sorts of monsters and villains and sinister magic waiting just off-screen.... and they come apart like wet cardboard whenever anything even remotely dangerous or different steps out of the wings into their lives." I remembered the screaming mob that had greeted my first appearance and snorted. "I don't want to rule them; I don't want to be responsible for them. And I sure don't want to be the dork on the throne when some wholesome little Hobbit with a ridiculously overpowered magic Macguffin shows up to turn the kingdom back into sunshine and rainbows."

"What's a hobbit?"

"A vaguely effeminate midget with foot hair problems and an affinity for ridiculously over-complicated quests," I said. Yes, I read Tolkein in school for a book assignment. When your epic sagas could be solved just by applying the sentences "poison the dragon" and "ride the eagles to Mt. Doom," you're a grossly overrated author.
"So what do you want?" Dodger said. "You wanna go home and rule the world there?"

I decided to answer him seriously. "I could probably make a go of it," I admitted. "There's no real magic in my world. If I moved hard and fast I could pull it off. Well, not the whole world, but maybe a good sized kingdom someplace." I gestured at him over the divider. "Even the little power you have could make someone a real contender." I rested my head against the tile. "It's real tempting. Thinking I could go back home, and noone would ever push me around again...."

"So why not?"

"Because my world has no magic," I repeated. "What it does have is science. And all sorts of bombs and planes and guns and missiles and crap--- weapons that could make what I did to Canterlot look like a frat house prank--- and lots and lots of dangerous, violent jerkwads who already rule the world and don't like to share." I tossed the towel back over the shower door and groped for my bathrobe.

"Good thing we're not going there," Dodger said. It sounded like a question.

"That's the thing," I muttered as I stepped out of the shower. "I can't help thinking of all the things that are there that aren't here... and how easy now it would be to get them, if I was there..." I held up the belt of my robe. It wasn't the usual belt; it was a gold chain studded with rubies, each as big around as a Chips Ahoy cookie. "See this? Just one of these rubies back home could buy a hundred room mansion on its own tropical island."

Dodger peered at the belt. "Really? Whoa..."

"Yeah. But you know what this is here? It's junk jewelry. Hell, it's a bedtime snack for a Diamond Dog." I cinched up the belt and picked up my osterized armor. "I sleep on a bed studded with gold and jewels. I sit on an iron throne and run my fingers through enough gold to buy mansions and yachts and limousines and twenty-course meals every day of the week... and it's junk.

"And don't get me started on what doesn't even exist here. Like cable TV and Netflix and the Internet and Xboxes. Like friggin' cheeseburgers. I caught myself drooling as memories of flame-broiled nirvana crossed my tastebuds. Then I thought of something else that was missing from my life. "And girls. Fraggit."

"Girls?"

"You know, girls, females, those of the sex of the opposite gender?" I said as I got dressed. "Man, if I was back on Earth with all this power and all this loot I could have any girl I wanted. Movie stars. Fashion models. I could have hot and cold running chicks in every room if I wanted."

"Your world's starting to sound a lot better," Dodger said a little wistfully.

I looked at him in surprise. "How old ARE you?" I said skeptically.

He scowled. "Old enough to be a stallion," he said as belligerently as he could manage. After a moment he looked down and scuffed his hoof on the floor. "Smart enough to know I haven't got a chance," he muttered. Ouch. For a moment there I felt a little human empathy. Fellow bro-dude with no girlage and feeling mighty low about it.

I snorted. "You'd be amazed at how fast a stack of bits changes everything," I told him. I snorted again. "Heck, you'd cut a swathe through the ladies back on earth just the way you are." He gave me a confused, skeptical look. "Swear to God," I said. "Squealing girls would be lined up three deep just to cuddle you and give you tummy rubs."
It was true. He was a sneaky, thieving, untrustworthy little Canterlot street rat. He was also a little white unicorn pony with big blue bambi eyes, cute little ears and nose, round tummy, adorable knock kneed legs and cute little hoofsies, all wrapped in a baby-soft coat and silky black mane and tail. And wearing (courtesy of my magical donation to his wardrobe) a simply adorable oversized top hat... He looked like he'd leaped fully formed off of Lisa Frank's worktable. I could have taken him walkies in a city park and raked in the babes like poker chips.

He turned pink in the face and pulled his hat down over his ears. "Ha ha, laugh it up," he said. "As if."

I was enjoying the joke. "No lie," I said, holding up one hand. "Scout's honor." He actually started looking hopeful. "But you might want to stick to trying with your own kind. Girls in my world aren't big into committed relationships with quadrupeds."

"So what's wrong with four legs?" he demanded. "I mean, you got the Changeling Queen on a ribbon and a string. And she's hot. Well," he amended thoughtfully. "So long as you ignore the fangs... and the holes in her legs..."

I shot him an unamused look. "I don't date outside my own species."

He let that skim past. "So you got all the stuff you ever wanted in one world, and everything you need to get it in another," he said. "And if you try to bring one into the other, I'm guessing everything blows all apart."

I grunted an affirmative as I cinched on my greaves. It wasn't like I hadn't pondered that idea: dragging all my riches over to earth. Or bringing cool stuff that I wanted from earth to here. I knew enough about the theory from the Amulet to know it wasn't exactly a quickie weekend project.... the only reason the Medallion had managed to yank me over to Equestria even as easily as it had was because it had just recently punched its way IN to my universe, and thus had a momentary weak point to punch its way back OUT, and opening a portal into a universe from the Between was much much easier than doing the reverse. Either way I'd still have to choose which side of the portal to be on when it closed. And if I was ever in a place where I regretted the decision, opening an escape hatch out of my universe-of-choice on short notice would be like trying to tunnel out of Alcatraz with a teaspoon.

Stay here? With cute widdle ponies and an enraged pair of demigoddesses hunting me down? No chance. But go back home? Back to the crap life I had there, with no power, no control... or trying to use the power I had here over there, only to bring ragnarok down on my head?

It clicked. I paused with my helmet in my hands. I had an idea. I flipped through the mental magical encyclopedia. Could it work? Possibly, if what the Amulet had planted in my head was correct. It wasn't nearly enough information for what I wanted to do...but... It would take a year or more just to set it all up. There were gaps in it-- gaps in my magical knowledge that had yet to be filled... and it would involve all sorts of risks, but...

I had an idea. Now I started putting together a plan.
Chapter 25

It was time to get my plan underway. It was going to be complicated, and risky, and take a lot of steps and a lot of time. Some of the bits and pieces I needed were going to take some work to get. But the first step in any plan-- as my dorky business class teacher in high school used to tell us-- was to make sure your staff were up to speed with it.

Problem one: Artful Dodger was acting as my Number One. My Number One was getting pushed around by the other ponies in my employ. This looked bad on me, and it meant my pony gang, at the least, was disrespecting me. Plus it was making him wonder when he was going to get all that power I kept promising him.

So, step one: Level up my minion.

This led to problem two: Chrysalis. The other changelings were getting torqued that their former slave driver was lounging around in my lair, living the soft life. Time to get her on board with the big plan-- or as much of it as I was going to reveal to her-- and to start tapping that presumably centuries-deep well of magical knowledge.

I marched down the hallway to Chrysalis' chamber, Artful Dodger in tow. I stepped between the two disgruntled looking guards and banged on the door with one mailed fist. "Open up, Chrysalis," I said. "It's time to earn your keep."

The door swung open with startling speed. There stood Chrysalis, a disturbingly eager look on her face. "Yes, my lord," she purred. "At last, you have decided to come to me--"

I noticed the guards giving me cockeyed looks. "Keep your distance," I growled at her.

Chrysalis frowned, then gave me a coquettish look. I think it was coquettish anyway; I think one of us was out of practice. "Why must you be this way?" she said. "I am yours, completely. Heart... and body. Haven't you ever felt like... being experimental?" She gave me a sly smile and batted her eyelashes.

"If I ever feel like experimenting, I'll go join a science fair," I drawled. "I hear baking soda volcanoes are all the rage." Dodger stifled a snort. "We have issues to discuss." I stepped through her door, pushing her back. "We are not to be disturbed," I told the guards. This earned me some more funny looks. I ignored them and shut the door.

I had little reason to fear her; I had her on strict rations of the stored love-reserves the Changelings had accumulated... enough to keep her healthy, but sparse enough so that she was forced to carefully husband every drop of power she had. It was a tricky arrangement, but one in my favor. Her imprinting on me made it hard for her to draw from any other source without my permission; the changelings brought me the love-nectar, I drank it, then she absorbed it from me. I had no use for the love-energy of course, so it nearly all went straight to her-- which ironically made the imprinting stronger. (Fastest way to a Changeling's heart is through her stomach, I guess. Heh.) It also made me immune to her more explicit mind-twiddling tricks, it seemed... and she wasn't going to try anything more messy (like a knife to the back, or poison in my beer) so long as I was her literal meal ticket.

Still, I'd chosen to hold this meeting in Chrysalis' little suite to maximize the psychological advantage. The main room was fairly small and I was dressed like a cross between a linebacker and a
space marine, so it wasn't hard to radiate an intimidating aura. She was already an unwelcome guest, which had to bother her and was therefore to my advantage, and having someone invading what little personal space she had would hopefully keep her off balance and intimidated. Still, the faint creepy fantasy creature decor was tipping things at least a little to her advantage. The room was dimly lit, and Chrysalis had obviously been adding her feminine touch to the place-- if by feminine you meant "hive queen." A few green cobwebby looking things here, some glowing pods there, just added to the creepy ambiance.

She strode across the room and picked up a pitcher and a glass. She made an offering gesture. "Something to drink, my Lord? Only the finest icemelt..."

I waved her offer down. She shrugged and drained the glass. "One learns to appreciate plentiful water in the wastelands," she said, with a chastising look. "But fine, be that way." She set the glass down. "How can I be of service, Oh Dread Master?"

I started to speak-- then my brain updated. "You're bipedal," I noted. The fact that she was almost eye-to-eye with me should have clued me in, really. She was just a foot shorter than me, not counting the horn, and had simple four-fingered claws instead of forehooves, as well as an almost-starving fashion model figure. A loose, sleeveless black dress hung on her slender frame. Otherwise she was the same. Well. Other than a couple of obvious secondary female characteristics...

She shrugged expressively and held up one clawed hand, examining it. "It seemed the thing to try around here," she said. "Helps getting things off the higher shelves anyway. The wider hips seem to help with balance a bit..." she looked down and jiggled a bit. "Did I get the cha-chas right this time? They're called cha-chas, right?" (A-cup, in case you were wondering, gentlemen.)

"Where did you..." Then I recalled an evening spent laboriously explaining or trying to explain to someone what, precisely, a human male sought in a female and why, precisely, none of the local dog and pony show even came close.

Artful Dodger shrugged. "Sorry, boss," he said. "She sorta picked my brain." Ah. He regarded her "Cha-chas" idly. "They're kinda interesting for some reason.... Still seems sorta inconvenient having them there all the time, even when she's not nursing."

Not as inconvenient as being constantly mistaken for a male, I thought idly. Though that was scarcely a problem here for her. It was obvious what she was really trying to do. At least this time her proportions were more or less correct. The last time she'd tried edging up on a human form she'd ended up looking like one of those hideous "bratz" or "Equestria Girls" dolls. One with jugs so large she looked like two balloons on a stick. I resisted the urge to rub my temples through my helmet. "Enough," I said. "There are things we have to discuss." I took a seat nearby and explained the issue with Artful Dodger to her.

She sat down across the room from me, putting an increasingly nervous looking Artful Dodger between us, and regarded him with narrowed eyes. "Hmm, yes," she said, stroking her chin. "I can see where this would be a problem. A toady who gets slapped around by your other underlings reflects badly on you." She looked up at me. "Why did you select this one, of all ponies?"

"The Diamond Dogs are loyal, but dim," I said. "The ex-cons are somewhat smarter, but not nearly as tough or hardbitten as they think they are. The Changelings are both smart and tough, within their limits, but their loyalties are tied to me magically, which makes them suspect." I gestured at Artful Dodger. "This one is fairly smart, has lived a life on the streets which makes him far more worldly than most, while he is currently rather weak, he take a licking and keep on ticking... and while his
ambitions mean he is only really loyal to himself, they are straightforward and obvious-- which means I can use them."

Chrysalis said "hmm" and nodded. "Far from perfect, but usable," she summarized.

"Essentially," I agreed.

Artful Dodger was looking more and more nervous. He was apparently starting to realize he was the subject of the attention of two of the most dangerous beings in Equestria, and he wasn't sure he liked it. "So," he said nervously. "What's the plan to buff me up?"

"Silence, grub, the adults are talking," Chrysalis muttered. "That is the question, though. I'm not sure how much my advice will be of use here. Ponies are so different..."

"Obviously," I noted dryly.

"Not just from Changelings," Chrysalis said, shaking her head, "But from each other. there are so many kinds of pony: races, shapes, colors, sizes, types, talents... what with their cutie marks, and everything else, pony culture revolves around being 'individuals.'" She made quote marks in the air. She was picking up human hand gestures quickly. "It's absolute chaos! With Changelings it's one-size-fits-all. You have to EARN individuality, not just get it handed to you the moment you hatch. The Changeling way is so much better; If I wanted a special agent for some particular task, I could almost pick some Changeling at random, infuse them with magical power or give them a badge of authority, and be done with it."

It would make sense, I realized. Ironic. They had to be able to mimic anyone, had to be able to step into anyone's shoes: pegasus, earth pony, unicorn, or even alicorn princess. And in order to mimic anyone they all had to be virtually the same underneath. Though I had my suspicions about Chrysalis' perspective of her race as interchangeable cogs. Black Fang had told me that their species was cyclical, with a more 'loner' lifestyle in one part of the cycle and a swarming hive in another. It seemed a little shortsighted to discount Changeling individualism entirely. And she had, after all, bombed at her one attempt at conquest. That sort of suggested some myopia in the leadership.

"Taking all that into account," I persisted. "Where would you begin?"

Chrysalis got to her feet and walked around Dodger, stroking her chin and regarding him narrowly. He stood stock still, his nervousness plain on his face. "Well, let's begin by knowing what he already does," she said. "What is his talents? What is his Special Talent, for that matter?"


He seemed to pluck up a little confidence at that. He proceeded to run through the gambit: magically picking a lock, pulling a deck of cards out and playing three-hoof-monte, disguising some pebbles as bit coins, casting a look-somewhere-else spell, picking loose items out of our pockets magically... the highlight of his performance was when he walked behind Chrysalis. She let out a startled "yeep" and he walked around her other side, grinning like the cat that ate the canary. He lifted up his hat and a pair of lacy underthings fell out. Chrysalis hissed like an enraged viper and snatched the panties up, face flaming, and retreated to her washroom to re-don them. "And what has that trick ever gotten you?" I asked him.

"Slapped," he admitted ruefully, wincing in memory. "Nearly lost a tooth, once." Getting slapped with hooves had to be a lot rougher, I guess.
I had a brief brainfart. "Wait," I muttered. "Why would ponies have lacy undergarments? They walk around naked--"

Artful Dodger looked at me like I was a moron. "What fun is a Hearthwarming Day gift without the fancy wrapping to peel off?" he said. I pondered that for a moment. "So why haven't you..." Dodger said, nodding in the direction of the bathroom and waggling his eyebrows.

I scowled at him through my helmet. "We went over this already," I said. "One: I'm from another world. She probably has more in common, genetically, with the mushrooms Big Mama is growing in her kitchen. Two: scary Changeling venereal diseases. Three: my species is the only sapient one on my planet, so over there sleeping with anything not of my species is bestiality, AKA disgusting. Four: she could get mad and sprout teeth someplace unholy." He cringed at that one. "Five: In spite of everything, thanks to magic there's a chance of pregnancy, and I don't want to deal with a hive of horrible little bug-human-pony abominations calling me 'daddy.' Six: first bro-rule, never have sex with crazy. Seven: she's a gross alien bug-horse. That's a boner-killing dealbreaker all by itself. Seven--"

"Okay okay okay!" Dodger said, grimacing and pulling his hat down over his ears. "No need to get into the details, yech."

Chrysalis returned. She glared at Dodger with glowing eyes. "Do that again and I'll rip your reproductive system out through your nose," she said calmly. "Are we clear?"

Artful Dodger gulped. "Crystal," he said meekly.

"So, any conclusions?" I said, getting the topic back on track.

Chrysalis finished smoothing out her ruffled temper and retook her seat. "His special talent is obvious," she said. "Deception, misdirection, to dodge and trick, avoid and evade." Her lips quirked in a near smile. "Almost like a Changeling in a way. My first thought is to push any... enhancement...you give him in those directions."

"That makes sense," I said. "It's easier to work with the direction his cutie mark is going, rather than against it. Go with his strengths."

Artful Dodger raised a hoof. "Hold on," he said. "Begging your Mighty Powerfulnesses' pardon, but I thought we were going to be working on my weaknesses. I already know how to run away and hide. I need to have a way to stand my ground and kick some butt!"

He had a point, I had to admit. He was already slippery as an eel and twice as evasive, but dodging and running only got you so far till they had you cornered. I brooded for a moment. So what was the solution? Special training? There would be that of course but that didn't help with the immediate problem. Casting a slew of protective spells on him might work, but, with a few special exceptions, those tended to have drawbacks or wear off fairly quickly. A weapon of some sort? Some sort of magic-enhancing artifact, like a dime-store version of my own Amulet? I brooded darkly. I didn't want him getting too powerful, too independent... but at the same time I didn't want him helpless at an inconvenient time.

Chrysalis was musing aloud along a similar vein. "Were you a Changeling, you could simply innovate," she said. "grow poison fangs or armor plating or enhance your muscles till you were strong as an ox. It would cost you dearly in love energy, but you could do it..."
"I dunno about learning Changeling magic anyway. Ponies figured out how to yank the plug on Changelings pretty quick," Dodger pointed out. "Their royal Cake-arses have anti-Changeling defenses out the wing-wong now. I don't wanna be no one-trick pony, especially when everypony knows the trick."

Chrysalis shrugged. "meh. I doubt I could teach Changeling magic to a pony anyway... though I do know some ways to use our magic to make more permanent, if cosmetic, changes..." she gave him a sly look. "Say, give you some poison fangs? or scaled armor? Or more subtle alterations..." She was looking thoughtful; he was looking apprehensive.

One trick pony. That gave me an idea. "Well, then," I said. "Who says we have to go with just one trick?"

*******

It was later that week. I was working on the bigger aspects of the plan, going over my notes and research, when I felt the draw on my power. I got up from what I was doing and hustled over to my work station and pulled up the security system.

Yes, I had a work station and a security system. Mindful of the need to keep an eye on things, I had set up permanent Vulcan Eyes everywhere in the tunnels. They doubled as lanterns, keeping the tunnels and chambers lit with a bright yellow-green glow--- very springtime--- and gave me instant surveillance over the lair whenever I wished. I had built a rune-covered throne out of rock and iron in my chambers and anchored the spell to both it, and my more public throne in the treasure room. It was about as comfortable as it sounds. I was seriously considering replacing both thrones with recliners. (Did ponies have recliners? There probably was some pony named Lazy Boy somewhere...)

Anyway, I felt the tug on my power and plopped myself down in my workstation, summoning up the screens. It took me a while to find where Artful Dodger was. He was in one of the unfinished tunnels, with two or three other burly looking ex-con ponies. It looked like they had hustled him down a back corner where they thought the Eyes didn't see. Operative word, THOUGHT. I had made a point of disguising about half the Eyes of Vulcan as ordinary lamps, glow crystals or luminescent fungi. Suckers. They were doing the usual 'big man on campus' routine, looming over him and giving him an occasional shove with an oversize hoof. I enlarged the view, turned on the sound and sat back to watch.

"--Don't take kindly to little runts giving me orders," the biggest one, a dark gray stallion who was apparently the leader, was saying.

"Hey, I'm just passing on Vulcan's orders," Dodger protested. He was trying to keep his cool but I could feel him pulling on the magical tether like a pyrophobe ringing a fire alarm. "He wants stuff done, he sends me to say it."

"What, he's too good to talk to us now?" the gray stallion snorted. "His Majesty, the king of Diamond Dogs and Dirt?" He gave Dodger another shove. "He wants something done he can tell us himself, instead of sending his little girlfriend to do it." The other toughs snickered, low and menacing. "I don't like your attitude, pansy boy, I don't care who you're cuddling up with. Get out of our faces before we kick your little fairy butt."

I checked the tether. Dodger's heart rate was going through the roof and his skin temperature was
dropping. Perfect, he was right at the peak of fight or flight. I sent a command through the tether, one only he could hear.

"Do it."

Dodger's hat tipped back. Black lightning boiled out of the tip of his horn and caught Big Bad Gray right in the chest. It enveloped him and lifted him off the ground, flinging him down the tunnel and into the wall at the end hard enough to leave a pony shaped indentation. He slid to the ground in a groaning, boneless heap.

The others gawked at him. Or rather they gawked at the horn-ring he was wearing; a thick gold ring set with heavy black gemstones. It was a simple booster ring, similar to ones used by the Canterlot elite to help pampered foals who were struggling with their basic magic lift-and-move, but much more powerful... and rather than drawing on Dodger's own magic, it drew on the power of the Amulet, mingling it with Dodger's own and giving him an impressive TK boost. It had drawbacks he couldn't use it too often or for too long. But it was certainly impressive. He could probably slap the rest of the little gang around just with that.

The other bullies apparently thought that using a magic booster in five to one odds was cheating. "Why you little weasel--" one snarled. They lunged for him, dogpiling the spot he was standing. And he wasn't there.

Rather than give him one amplification, or tackling the issue in one way, I had decided we would "buff him up" with a mix of tricks, powers and boosters. This was the contribution to the 'amplify his natural gifts' angle; I called it the Displacer Illusion. He had some rudimentary illusion skills; Chrysalis and I had worked together, teaching him to amplify and focus it into one simple illusion--the illusion that he was two or three paces away from his actual location. It took a day or two but he was already at a point where he could cast it by instinct, whenever he got startled or sensed he was in danger. I had hopes he could learn to cast multiple illusions of himself eventually, but right now that simple trick was startlingly effective. No pony could land a hoof on him, and because he could shift his illusory self around it was impossible to guess his location either.

With five-- no six, here came Charcoal again-- ponies thrashing around in a confined space, though, his luck soon ran out. A pegasus with ratty wings managed to outmaneuver him and jumped him from behind. By pure instinct Dodger lashed out with his back hooves, catching the pegasus in the collarbone. There was a flash, sparks flying everywhere and (I imagined) a strong smell of ozone, as the Pegasus in question began to do a mad flamenco dance as his mane and tail stood on end.

"Yeebadingdangringadingadingdingdangyabbabibbabbibbiddy--" he hollered, before collapsing in a heap, wisps of smoke rising off him.

Artful Dodger was now the proud owner of a clever little set of horseshoes. It had taken the Diamond Dog blacksmiths a couple of tries to get them right. They were an old Pegasus design, long fallen into disuse: lightning shoes. They stuck to the hooves without nails, of course (all pony shoes do; they don't like driving nails into their body parts any more than you do), and insulated the wearer against unexpected lightning (important when you walked on thunderclouds for a living) and skysteel made them light as a feather, but had a fatal flaw: they didn't just block electricity, they absorbed it. This meant they had a tendency of building up and releasing massive jolts of electricity. I had made a bug into a feature, making them thicker, increasing the capacity as high as I could manage and adding the ability to release the surges with a kick or buck. Just by walking around all day he could build up a massive static charge in each shoe. That gave him four hooves, four shots.
The results of just two shoes was a lot more potent than I'd expected. Some of the pegasus' feather tips had caught fire.

The thugs still standing had a unicorn among them. He started firing up his horn. Dodger didn't wait to see what he was about to do. A bolt of black energy leapt out and struck the attacking unicorn right in the horn. There was an explosion of sparks and the unicorn thug went down with a yell. It was much simpler than it looked; that black bolt had been an old dirty-pool trick for fighting unicorns, just a quick sharp blow to the horn to disrupt any casting. Normally a unicorn horn is as tough and nerveless as whalebone. But if you do it in the middle of a casting it's disorienting as hell--and hurts almost like a blow to the nuts, or so I'm told, if the spell is big enough. But with that black kinetic lightning it looked a hell of a lot more ominous.

I chuckled to myself as I watched the action. "And how goes it?" a voice said behind me. I spared a glance for Chrysalis; she was draped over the back of my throne, perforated arms trailing across the back as she watched the screen over my shoulder.

"Better than I expected," I told her. "Charcoal and his idiots tried to browbeat him just a minute ago, and now he's thrashing them up and down the hall." Quite literally at this point; he'd switched back to the TK ring and was heaving the entire half-dozen back and forth across the tunnel, smacking them into the walls so hard that dust was settling down. Chrysalis chuckled. "What are you laughing at?"

"You," she said slyly. "The proud father."

I grunted and returned my attention to the lopsided brawl. "He's not going to be able to keep that up much longer and-- yep, there it goes. The feedback headache got to him." Onscreen, Dodger's magic field sputtered out and his makeshift pony hackey-sack fell to the floor. He staggered back, panting and wincing from the pain. "Let's see if Charcoal and his goons have learned their... no, they haven't." The pony thugs had tottered back to their feet and were pulling knives. It looked ridiculous; nothing is so non-intimidating as a bambi-eyed pony trying to hold a knife in his mouth, but I knew from experience that they had surprisingly strong and flexible neck and shoulder muscles, and could wield weapons like that with unsettling effectiveness. These were critters who could drive nails with a hammer in their mouth, after all.

I had worked out that I could send messages to Dodger over the magical tether that fed the ring by sending vibrations down it... like one of those microphones that vibrated the occipital bone in the ear. "Enough," I said over the tether. "Take them out, now."

Artful Dodger whipped off his hat, holding it by the brim in his teeth, and waved it at the oncoming ponies, tilted so they could look down inside it. Black inky smoke poured out, and all hell broke loose.

This was my personal favorite among the bag of tricks we'd given him. Among the books I'd heisted from Twilight Sparkle's library was a comprehensive study of the tyrant King Sombra, and the magic he'd used to control the Crystal Empire with an iron hoof. It was an exhaustive research volume, written by none other than Twilight Sparkle herself, and had thousands of lovely clever and downright nasty ideas with potential that Sombra himself probably lacked the perspective to fully appreciate. Among the pages Chrysalis and I found a clever spell that, to quote the author, "apparently creates an intangible, light-absorbing mist that has particular psychoreactive properties demonstrable by its subjective responses to immediate observers." Translation: it reacted to your thoughts. And not in a nice way.
To my surprise, Artful Dodger had no problem at all casting the spell and generating continuous wisps of the black smoke, performing the feat almost immediately. Unfortunately that was all he could manage; wisps, which dissipated almost as fast as he made them. He'd groused that he couldn't do anything with a magic cloud that "wasn't any bigger than a Breezy fart." It was Chrysalis who hit upon the idea of storing those wisps up.... a quick look through the piles of junk we'd looted for an appropriate chapeau, and some careful magical reworking of the inside with a particular pattern of crystal and silver thread, Artful Dodger had a snappy brand new top hat that could hold gallons of the inky mist in reserve. He'd filled it right up and never went anywhere without it firmly upon his head.

I had dubbed it the Hat Full of Nightmare.

The mist that came boiling out of Dodger's hat was as black as sin, thick as ink and didn't billow through the air so much as it flowed. It coiled through the air like a living thing, forming blobs and coils that undulated through the air like sinister jellyfish.... And whatever pony looked at it, the smoke took on the form of their most horrible nightmares.

The pegasus apparently had a deep seated fear of Windigos; pale spectral ponies burst from the smoke and began flying around him, whinnying and screaming. He shrieked and curled up in a ball, shivering. Others had fears that were more subtle and personal; the unicorn stallion suddenly found himself facing a distorted, leering figure that stalked towards him, snapping an enormous pair of shears open and shut. "No, not my horn, not my horn!" he whimpered, rearing up and covering his head with his forehooves. Yikes, I didn't want to know the details of that particular foalhood trauma.

Charcoal was apparently a tough pony to scare. The cloud of inky mist before him took some time to form into anything. When it did, though, it was a humdinger. It was a hydra-- three heads, jet black with fiery eyes and mouths full of fire behind their fangs, large enough that it looked to fill the tunnel. He whinnied and backed up into the wall.

Note: you'd think ponies would be most afraid of dragons. Nope. Dragons are intelligent and can be reasoned with, at least sometime. Hydras on the other hand are stupid, vicious, and somewhere and somehow-- personally I think they were like large mouth bass, going after anything with bright colors--- they had acquired a taste for pony. Every pony's horror was the idea of one of these enormous eating machines wading into their town, their multiple heads snapping up ponies like popcorn. I'd not read any reports of any hydra slaughterfests; I suspect that hydras were a lot like sharks in my world, with a far worse reputation than the reality. But Charcoal must've had a close shave at some point because one look at that spectral hydra and he was screaming like a filly on helium.

The illusions blended together, crossing over, mingling, lesser fears and bogeymen springing in and out of the smoke on the fringes. A half dozen of Equestria's most wanted, reduced to shrieking fillies by a hat full of smoke. But Dodger had reached the time limit on his store of bottled nightmare fuel; the fog was already starting to dissipate around the edges. That was my cue.

As we had scripted, I reached out with the Amulet and took control of the hat, whipping it out of Dodger's mouth and making it hover in midair. I dispersed the nightmare smoke as well, sending the bogeymen it had formed swirling into nothingness. The tunnel suddenly grew still as every pony looked up at the hovering headpiece.

I had added a round stone, about the size of the palm of my hand, to the hatband. It split down the middle, peeling back like an eyelid, revealing a yellow-green, slit-pupiled eye. I cranked up the reverb and spoke through the Eye. "Artful Dodger," I said, my amplified voice booming out of the
hat. "For what cause did you release the Nightmare Mists?"

Dodger took his cue beautifully. He dropped to his knees, bowing to the hat, and said "Forgive me, Dark Lord. I know you told me to use it only in dire circumstances, but I had to defend myself against these ponies." He indicated the half dozen pony thugs scattered about the floor. "Charcoal and his friends here decided that they didn't like my face. Your Dark Lordship, sir." He gave a theatrically long pause. "Then they decided to rough me up to make the point."

"So I see." I turned the Eye on a decidedly shaken Charcoal. "So what do you have to say for yourself... Charcoal?" I threw as much disdain into that name as I could. "For what cause did you assault my underling?"

"He said he didn't care to be taking orders from no Dark Lord's catamite," Artful Dodger interjected slyly. "And if you had anything to say, you could come down like a stallion and say it to their face. Your Lordship. Sir."

Charcoal looked like his breakfast quit agreeing with him. He gulped and stammered. "We-- we don't care to be ordered around by some uppity little street rat-- we're grown stallions, we--"

"FOOL!" I thundered, making their manes blow back. The Eye blazed red. "I have known all along of your foreshadow behavior, your petty complaints and your pettier abuses. Artful Dodger is MY APPRENTICE. He is no longer merely pony. Already under my tutelage he is privy to secrets that could burst your mind asunder, and tear the flesh from your miserable bones. Be thankful that I ordered him to restrain himself when dealing with you!" The petty thugs had looks on their faces that told me they'd probably left stains on the tunnel floor.

"Hear my words and heed them. Artful Dodger is my minion. His voice is MY voice. His power is MY power. When he speaks, you shall obey him regardless. I ALONE shall decide when and if he has overstepped his bounds. If you assail him, I will know. If you refuse to heed him, I will know. And if I hear of further insubordination, I will grant you your foolish wish-- I will leave my throne, come down to wherever you are hiding, and deal with you PERSONALLY.

"Go about your business. You know your orders. Return to me, my apprentice, and fetch my lieutenants; we have much to discuss about..." I paused meaningfully. "...The Plan."

"Yes, Dark Lord." Artful Dodger bowed deeply. The eye winked shut and the hat fell neatly on top of his head. He put it at a jaunty angle and trotted out of the tunnel. Just before leaving he looked back at the shell-shocked ponies. I wondered if they noticed the slit pupils now, or the cats-eye gleam they gave off. I considered their faces. Yup, they did. "... You might want to get back to work," he said. There was a frantic scuffle of bruised limbs as the stallions scrambled to their feet and set about to be someplace else.

Back in my Man Cave I let loose an un-dark-lordish cackle. That had been absolutely hysterical. The best part was that Dodger hadn't even used half the new tricks at his disposal. He had drugg-tipped darts under his hatband, dipped in Changeling venom (provided by Chrysalis herself) that could paralyze a pony for up to an hour. He had a fire opal earring that enabled him to spit flame. He had Poison Joak in a squirt bottle in his vest pocket-- and a carefully acquired immunity to it. He had learned a teleportation spell that would jink him ten feet in any direction, and had a one-shot hearth stone that would instantly teleport him to its twin, wherever it was (currently in my Sanctum.) He could see in the dark, thanks to transformative magic from Chrysalis worked on his eyes, that also gave them their new unique cats-eye glow. He had an impenetrable undershirt that would turn arrows and knives. He had a derringer hidden in his hat. He had so many magic holdouts, backups
and trinkets that bands of roving Roleplayers (alignment Homicidal Kleptomaniac) should have been
marching down the tunnels hunting him down.

"Congratulations, my Lord," Chrysalis chuckled. "That went better than expected. And that was a
brilliant touch, dropping hints of a plan in your conversation."

"Yes, with any luck-- oh who are we kidding, these guys gossip like fishwives. It'll be all over the
lair by tomorrow: first that my Apprentice is a scary half-demon mofo who keeps living nightmares
under his hat. That should stop any attempts to push him around.

"Second, they'll all be convinced that I have some vast and secret mysterious Plan that we're working
on.... which will silence the ones claiming we're wandering around aimless."

Chrysalis folded her arms on the back of my throne and rested her chin on her wrists. "And do you
have a plan?" she asked.

I got up. "What do you think we were working on?" I said, waving at the table covered with charts
and diagrams. "It is ambitious, and it will take a lot of time, and a lot of risk. And I can't disclose all
of it at once-- there are some details I have to keep to myself, to keep our enemies guessing. But if I
pull it off... if we pull it off... we will have the treasures of entire worlds at our beck and call." I
couldn't help reaching out and grasping at the air with my mailed fist.

Chrysalis sighed and pretended to swoon. "Oh, and to think I would have settled for far less. Just
you, my Lord, and me, and our little foal Artful Dodger in a cottage in the woods--"

"Get bent," I told her.

"I'm betrothed to a monkey from another world. I thought I already was," she quipped.

"Rrrrrrr....."
I had a goal, a big bold broad-sweeping goal, but there were a lot of little steps in between. Buffing up my lieutenants and getting that top-dog hierarchy reinforced was the first step. The diamond dogs and the changelings already came with a ready-made hierarchy when I got them, which made things simpler. Black Fang ran a tight ship with the changelings, and Runt, Mange and Skank could at least thump skulls and keep the diamond dogs in line. Just to make things smoother I picked out a couple of thick necks in the pony ranks and made them officially head of the pony thugs. I didn't care much who was in charge at that level, actually-- if they gave me crap I'd bounce them and pick someone new. Besides, Second-in-Command was taken care of with Artful Dodger; after a couple more exhibitions of his new power-ups on some troublemakers, the rank and file were a lot more compliant. Dodger told them I said to jump, they asked how high.

I decided it was time to buff up the mooks, too. I had to mull that one over a while. Weapons and armor were in short supply among the horde, and mostly consisted of diamond dog pickaxes and shovels. Not good. Raiding or stealing weapons was sort of counter indicated too. Who would I steal them from? Celestia's troops were all cookie cutter, while I had earth ponies, pegasi, unicorns, changelings, and diamond dogs. I'd even picked up three or four minotaurs recently. Who knew what else I was going to have in the ranks eventually? Mass producing our own was kind of out as well, for the same reason.

It sort of brought up questions for me. I got the gist of cutie marks and special talents and all that. How the heck did you make a uniform military out of such an individualistic, Special Snowflake society without losing all the benefits of their skills and talents? I thought about the performance record of Celestia's cookie-cutter soldiers. Answer: you didn't. Individually they were impressive. As a uniform regimented force, they sucked. Whomped by Nightmare Moon, whomped by discord, whomped by the Changelings--- whomped by me... Kind of ironic that a herd species would be so bad at working as a cohesive unit. They seemed to lose a dozen IQ points whenever they did. Then again, maybe that's why whoever made them gave them those pony tramp-stamps in the first place; to emphasize to them that they needed to be individuals and not just mindlessly run with the group. After all, herd instinct has some severe disadvantages--- like stampedes, and cliffs.

I decided to split the difference. Big Boss had been kind of indiscriminate in his hoarding; most of his hoard was gold and gems of course, but there was a buttload of copper, nickel and zinc coins too, and not a few things made of tin and the like because they were "shiny." I put the blacksmiths to work melting it down, smelting it. We had tons of wood dragged in from the Everfree; I put dogs and ponies who were any good with a knife to work whittling staves, bows, arrows, crude clubs and flails. But mostly, they made... tools. Hammers, tongs, crude anvils, knives and hatchets and planes, metalworking tools, woodworking tools, stoneworking tools. I had them dig outward, expanding the blacksmithing cave till it was the size of an airplane hangar, adding several stone furnaces and workbenches. Then I threw open the doors and told my men "arm yourselves."

Every soldier was responsible for providing their own arms and armor, I told them. Whether they made it themselves with what I offered, or begged, borrowed, or bartered for it from one another, didn't matter to me-- whatever they did, it was what they were going to depend on for their very lives, so they'd better make the best of it.

The stockpile of weapons already in the armory went quickly. There was a lot of arguing and
complaining, not to mention a lot of swearing and fighting, but eventually under the rough tutelage of the diamond dogs they all set to with a will, making knives, swords, axes, hammers, crude armor and shields, winding cord for bowstring, fletching arrows and crossbow bolts, banging together shields and helmets out of wood and metal scrap. No two sets were alike and they were all crude; more than one had given up at making themselves some crude cudgels and potmetal helmets. The ones with any knack for it soon had one hell of a barter system going in their favor, the diamond dog blacksmiths in particular earning some grudging respect from the ponies for their craftsmanship. But they were, at least, armed.

Of more interest to me was the fact that while we didn't have much iron to go around at the moment, we had copper, tin and zinc. And I knew the recipe for red brass...

Or at least I thought I did. It was something I'd picked up from a renfaire/civil war reenactor who did the blacksmithing thing, a couple years ago. I was 99.44 percent sure I had the ratios right, so I went ahead and had a few things made. But I wasn't absolutely 100 percent sure I'd gotten it right until the day... well. THAT day.

It was the tail-end of winter. I had just overseen a duel of honor slash trial by combat between a diamond dog and an earth pony who'd been feuding over a sword, a particularly sweet piece of epic gear they'd found in Big Boss' hoard. This sort of thing had been a problem for a while, as diamond dogs generally solved arguments with a physical brawl. Of course the ex-con ponies weren't as well versed in the diamond dog etiquette of beating someone's face in and knowing when to stop, so things had gotten out of hand. I'd kept the bloodshed to a minimum by proclaiming that from now on, I was sitting in as referee. I'd had them lay out a fighting ring in the throne room, and then I'd laid down the law. I'd kept the ground rules simple: no weapons, no killing, and the two feuding parties had to agree ahead of time whether it was to first blood, first to yield, or last one standing... and I could overrule on anything if the mood took me. It had kept things controlled, if not civilized. It had the side benefit of giving the rest of the horde something to distract them from their cabin fever.

It was late afternoon. The two latest contestants on "the People's Court" were dragged from the ring, both bloody, bruised and unconscious. The earth pony had definitely gotten the better of the diamond dog in the ring. He was going to be mad when he woke up and found out that I'd decided the diamond dog won the sword, though. (Come on-- the diamond dog had hands.) All of a sudden there was a commotion at the entrance to the throne room. A couple of spear-wielding guards came rumbling in, surrounding a cloaked figure. That was interesting enough to get everyone's attention; all the bugs, 'dogs and ponies up in the galleries hollowed out of the cavern walls stopped arguing over their bets and leaned out to gawk.

Whoever he was, he had brass ones. He came clip-clopping up to my throne, slow and casual as you please, not even pausing at the bloodstains on the stone floor. At first I thought it was a pony under the cloak, but then he raised a long fingered hand from under the robes in a salute. I did my best not to show my surprise. A centaur? Well, why not? "Hail and well met, Darth Vulcan," he said in a reedy, whispery voice.

First the caravan ponies, then the ex-cons, now this guy. I was starting to get cheesed at the number of people who got waltzed into my lair unannounced. I gave him the full Dark Glowering Overlord routine. I sat back in my throne, Chrysalis on my right, Artful Dodger on my left, two burly minotaurs flanking the dais to my throne, my soldiers all around me with swords and clubs and spears at the ready. "And who are you?" I growled at him, my mask lenses glowing red.

The centaur made a placating gesture. "Merely... an admirer," he said. He stepped closer; I could see a toothy grin and two dim red sparks under the hood of his cowl. "And a potential friend."
"And I should care?" I said.

The grin grew wider. "You are a being of great power, and I suspect even greater ambitions. But the forces aligned against you are not inconsiderable. You are in need of allies. I am an individual of considerable talents, and many centuries of experience dealing with the likes of the alicorn sisters. Together we could achieve much."

"Oy, an' does the 'individual' have a name?" Artful Dodger snarked.

Chrysalis was standing beside me in her biped form, leaning over my shoulder. I felt her tense up. Bad sign. He never took his eyes off me as he stepped up the dais to the throne. He flipped back his hood, revealing a goat-like, bearded head with two stubby horns. "You may call me Tirek."

That galvanized the two ponies next to me. Dodger yelped and scrambled backward like the devil himself had popped out of that cloak and said howdy-do. Chrysalis hissed like a snake. "Kill him you fools!" she shrieked at the guards. "Kill him before--"

Before what, she didn't get to say. Tirek waved his hand and both she and Dodger went flying into the wall behind us. They fell to the floor, doubled over. That was my cue; I started pulling up a fistful of balefire to blast him. He lunged forward and grabbed me by the collar of my gorget, pulling me forward till we were almost nose-to-mask. The amulet objected to that, sparking and zapping. "Yess," he hissed. "The alicorn amulet IS bonded to you. As if that mattered to me. I want power---and you have it for the taking."

He opened his mouth and there was this whooshing noise like air being sucked down a wind tunnel. Purple-green-red-black energy began pouring out of me and into his mouth in a vortex. I heard a scream; a lime-green bolt of Changeling magic shot past my head at Tirek, only to swirl down the vortex in his mouth like a lime jell-o shot. A jet of Dodger's nightmare-smoke met the same fate. He swelled and grew, muscles bulging on his skinny arms and rippling across his chest, horns lengthening. Energy poured out of me....It felt like he was trying to suck my brain out through my eyeballs. I felt my limbs turn to noodles; the room started going black.

So I pulled out my gun and shot him in the face.

To review, I was a cosplayer, and I'd lurked around quite a few conventions and renfaires and the like at one time. So I'd picked up a lot of odd skills here and there. One of the things I'd learned about was historically accurate firearms. Did you know that most guns back in the day weren't made of iron? No, they were made of an alloy of copper, tin and zinc called "red brass"... or, alternatively, gunmetal. I'd never had the chance to try my hand at it, but I knew the ratios for smelting, and when I saw how much copper, tin and zinc were in Big Boss's hoard, I'd commissioned one of my diamond dog blacksmiths with a little private project.

The results weren't anything spectacular. It was really crude-- a twin-barreled, smooth bore flintlock about the size of a hog-leg shotgun, with barrels thick around as my thumb and loaded with lead ball. I'd kept it loaded and strapped to my shin since the day it had been finished. The moment I felt my knees giving, I reached down, pulled the hogleg out of its holster and shot him right between the eyes with both barrels.

The look on his face when those two enormous boreholes raised to his face was timeless.

There was a thunderous roar and the goat-centaur went flying backwards off the dais like he had wings. He hit the floor with a wet crunchy thud, dead as a stone. A half-second later the two minotaurs were on him, pointlessly pounding the dead body with their warhammers like they were playing the carol of the bells.
"Enough, you idiots!" I heard Chrysalis spit at them. I felt her pick me up off the floor. Wow, I hadn't even realized I'd fallen over. She and Dodger helped me back into my throne, cossetting and fussing. "Are you well, my lord?" "You okay, boss?" I nodded. Doggone, they actually looked concerned. I might have even thought they weren't faking.

I clung limply to the arms of my throne and looked down at the body. He had swollen up considerably, I assumed from the magic he'd sucked out of me. His chest had grown broad as a barrel, his arms thick and muscled. Now his battered corpse was deflating back to his original like an untied party balloon. Streams of magic leaked out of him, swirling around and racing away to who-knows-where before fading away. More than a fair share of it spiraled back into my own body, strengthening me. I took a shuddering breath and sat up. "Take that away and burn it," I snarled, pointing at the corpse. "And dump the ashes someplace disgusting." A couple of diamond dogs wrapped the bloody mess in his own robe and dragged him out.

I reholstered my smoking hogleg gun and sagged back in my throne. "All right," I said. "Who the flying @$#^$ was that?"

It took a short while for them to refresh my memory. I was less than thrilled with the revelation.

My lieutenants and I had a closed-room meeting shortly after sunset that day. I spent a few good minutes chewing them all out for being so freaking stupid as to let some stranger into the Lair like that. They all protested that he'd been inside before anyone had known he was there. "Then he should have been skewered before he got to the throne room!" I snarled. I was only partially mollified when I found out how he'd gained entrance; the on duty guards turned up, weak and shaky, reporting that they'd run into some strange figure in a cloak right before things had suddenly gone dark... I gave orders to collapse the entrance tunnels and dig new ones elsewhere, in the hopes of throwing anyone else off the track.

"This only underlines the problem," I growled, pacing back and forth in the war room. "Shoot, it's one of the laws of power."

"The laws of power?" Chrysalis said.

"There's a list back on earth on the internet called 'the 48 laws of Power,' " I said. "There are other lists: the Overlord's list, the Genre Savvy Guide, the Seventy Maxims of Maximally Effective Mercenaries..." I waved it off. "Anyway. Rules of power. One of the rules is 'do not build a fortress to protect yourself. Isolation is dangerous.'"

One of my lieutenants looked skeptical. "so you're supposed to wander around without any defenses at all?"

"What the law means," I said with exaggerated patience, "is that putting yourself up on a hill and surrounding yourself with walls and moats just means that everyone knows where you are, while you only know what you can see from your tower window." I gestured in a random direction,
presumably in the direction of Canterlot. "Look at the Pretty Pony Princesses. They sit up in that palace atop a mountain--"

"Or down in the lake below it," Dodger sniggered.

"--and they got no clue what's running loose in the rest of their kingdom," I finished. I nodded at Dodger. "or even in the streets of their own city. Meanwhile every villain with an axe to grind knows right where to find them, every day of the week." I tipped my head at Chrysalis. Brawn mulled that over.

"So Celestia and her sister should be traveling around Equestria in a caravan, perhaps?" Chrysalis said dryly.

"Or she should have more than one palace that she can be at, and a way to travel rapidly between each," I said. "And a constant network of communication between all of them-- something faster than pegasus mailmen and magic scrolls." My answer seemed to surprise her.

"And which rule was that trick with the pocket sized cannon under your cloak?" Dodger persisted.

I regarded him irritably. "Evil Overlord rule #4: Shooting is NOT too good for my enemies." He shut up. I continued. "We're hidden here, but we're vulnerable. Celestia knows we're here; hell, everybody knows we're here. The only reason she hasn't sent in the army to root us out-- or dropped a solar flare on our heads--" they all looked up at the ceiling and cringed. "--is because it's too inconvenient right now. But it won't always be."

"So what is your plan?" Black Fang said.

I rolled out a map of the Everfree on the table, and a map of Equestria next to it. "Eventually we're getting out of this dump of a forest entirely," I said. "But for now, we're going to spread out a little more. We're too small a group to scatter all over the place, but we can have fallback points... other lairs to move or retreat to. I've already got the tunnelers on their way, digging out locations here, here, here and here." I put stones on the map in the locations I indicated. "They'll also be digging out smaller bolt-holes and storage caches all around. We'll be stocking those with food, weapons, and staples for emergencies."

"How will we find them?" Dodger said. "We can't exactly all carry maps around..."

"The diamond dogs will mark some by scent," I said. "The changelings will mark others with changeling pheromones. A few others will be marked by unicorns using invisible runes, and so forth. No one person or group will know where all of the caches are, no one group will know where all the fallback bases are, either. Except me." I swept the stones off the map. It made no difference to me; I had a copy of the map magically stored in my own brain.

"The second half of this: we need eyes and ears... and hands-- hooves, claws, whatever--- outside the Everfree. I want to know what Canterlot is planning and doing. I'd sure as hell like to know ahead of time for once when one of Princess Cake Butt's canned evils has popped its seal and is about to land in my living room." Chrysalis snorted at that one. "I want spies and insiders in Canterlot, in Ponyville, in every major city and town in Equestria eventually. Sunbutt and Moonbutt cut a fart, I want to know it before she even has a chance to say 'excuse me.' "

"That will be... difficult," Black Fang said, hesitantly. "We once had changeling infiltrators all over Canterlot... before the fiasco at the Royal Wedding." He gave Chrysalis a pointed look. She hissed at him. "But the magic wave purged us all from the city, and they have instituted detection spells that would expose us immediately now."
"And Sparklebutt's wards won't let my Eyes anywhere near Canterlot or Ponyville," I agreed. "We can't exactly send in diamond dog spies, and all our ponies have their faces plastered on wanted posters all over Equestria." I paused. "We need people. Spies, infiltrators, inside men."

"A treacherous duke or baron?" Chrysalis ventured.

I snorted. "Not even. She'll be watching that lot like a hawk. No. We need... little people." I looked over at my street rat. "Low caste ponies. The nobodies. The people hanging from the bottom rung of respectable society. Ones she or her nobles or her guards have overlooked or undervalued or carelessly stepped on without even noticing. She's a queen; she's bound to have thousands of ponies who have been neglected or mistreated by her government or even by herself. Probably the very same ponies who sort her mail, make her bed, or pour her morning coffee. Forget the Captain of the Guard, give me the minimum wage schmuck who's in charge of raising the portcullis and I'll take the castle." I saw understanding flit across their faces; there was a gleam of admiration, especially, in Chrysalis' eyes.

"So how do we find these ponies?" Brawn said.

"There are ways," I said, trying to sound mysterious and foreboding. "We'll start by talking with our own. There are bound to be ponies here with friends and family and contacts on the inside. But if we play our cards right... we won't have to look hard. They'll come to us."
There was more than one road that wound its way to the capital city of Canterlot. The longest of these was the high mountain pass, an unpaved road that meandered its way among the hills and mountains skirting the Everfree to unspool at the foot of Canterlot. Only a handful of hillbilly ponies with more ambitions than common sense took that road, hoping for grand opportunity, fame and fortune in the big city; and more than a few of those who came that way returned the same way, sadder if not wiser, and certainly more bitter about their fellow pony.

Not long after the Royal Palace suffered its rather abrupt relocation, that dusty path was host to a strange procession indeed. The city guard, standing watch at the gates of the outer wall, bore witness as an elderly unicorn pony came trudging up to the gate. He was well up in years, with an olive green coat and a dust-grey mane and beard, and a tattered grey tail. He wore a prospector's panniers, vest and hat that had seen decades of use and an expression of grim resolve.

Trailing behind him was a house. It was a surprisingly cheery little cottage, painted in dandelion yellow with blue trim, and had obviously been the subject of much tenderloving care... at least before it had been uprooted. It now sat, along with a patch of lawn, a cobblestone sidewalk, and a chunk of picket fence, atop an enormous lump of earth and stone that floated along behind in the old stallion's magical grip.

The stallion plodded along, neither looking left nor right. He refused to answer anypony who spoke to him, ignoring queries and catcalls alike. He didn't even show surprise at the palace's new location in the center of the lake; he simply marched across the newly made bridge, floating house in tow. The watchponies at the gate clattered out in their armor, brandishing their halberds. "HALT!" they shouted, crossing their weapons in his path. Up on the wall, ponies readied crossbows. "Stand down and be recognized," one guard said. "You will proceed no further--"

The old stallion cocked an eyebrow and glared at them and levitated the gigantic house-capped stone up into the air till its shadow fell across the arch of the gate--- and the guardponies gathered there. The guards gulped. Till this point nopony had dared block his path, and with good reason: maybe a dozen unicorns in the world could lift anything close to the weight of the mass of earth and granite hovering over their heads. Twilight Sparkle would have strained to lift what he was effortlessly levitating.... They contemplated the sheer power going into keeping that titanic ball of rock levitated. They contemplated what would happen were they to strike the unicorn responsible down. They contemplated the likelihood of them, collectively, being able to catch that mass themselves before it squashed them flat. Message delivered: This was not a pony to be trifled with. They hastily backed out of his way.

He plodded wearily inside, the floating house barely squeezing through the massive gate behind him. The boulder passed through the sweeping hallways of the palace, sending servants and courtiers alike scurrying to clear a path and leaving a trail of scraped walls, cracked archways and crumbled masonry behind.

Nopony who caught a glimpse of the stallion's expression complained.
The gigantic doors leading to the throne room burst open with a boom. The stallion entered, his floating cottage right behind him. It hovered under the vaulted ceiling like the world's most ominously substantial chandelier. Celestia rose to her feet, wings outspread. "What is the meaning of this?"

The stallion glared death at her. "You know damned well what the meaning is, you sun-arsed bitch," he said. His voice was like gravel rolling downhill. Ponies scattered around the throne room gasped. One of the guards bridled in rage. "How dare you speak to the Princess like that!" He readied his halberd and made as if to charge the old stallion.

The olive-drab pony just looked at him and jerked his head toward the enormous mass of wood, earth and rock hovering overhead. "Care to play catch, boy?" he said. The guard stumbled to a halt, fuming. The old stallion snorted and looked around the throne room. "Din't think so."

"Why are you here?" Celestia said warily. "Why are you doing this? If you think you have been wronged, the doors of the palace are open to any petitioner--"

"Izzat so?" he shouted. "Lemme refresh your memory! My name's Heart Root, Princess. Remember me? I'm the farmor who spent two months waitin' to petition you last year."

"Ring any bells?"

Celestia winced inwardly. The prior year had been-- tumultuous. She remembered receiving so many letters of complaint because the Court had been closed for some emergency or other...

"Shoulda known I was wastin' my time," he growled. "You made up your mind already, looks like." He reached up with a tendril of magic to his hovering cottage and plucked a piece of government parchment off the door, flinging it at her feet. The legend in bright red letters was clear; a royal eviction notice. "You wanted my farm so bad?" Heart Root said. "Well, y'bitch, here it is!" With that, he brought the floating mass, house, earth, stone and all, in an arc overhead and down on the royal dais with a resounding smash, right at Celestia's hooves.

It would have been a rather dramatic statement all by itself. What happened next was merely icing on the cake. The shattered pile was not evenly balanced; after a moment's pause it slumped over, spilling the precariously balanced load of earth off its top. Before Celestia could do more than gawp in surprise she was completely buried in over a ton of top-grade equestrian topsoil.

All bedlam broke loose. Nobles and petitioners stampeded in panic; Guards galloped from every corner to exhume their buried matriarch. In all the mayhem nopony saw the irate farmer turn and leave. No one would stop him; despite the old stallion's slow, weary pace, somehow he would stay one step ahead of the mayhem all the way to the city gates. It was a bad day for the Royal Guard.

"Zounds, what is this uproar?" Luna, roused from her sleep early by the ruckus, came soaring in through an open window. She regarded with some surprise the small mountain of dirt, rock, and shattered building material sitting in the middle of the throne room. Several guards were digging away with their spears and hooves, shouting for someone to fetch shovels. As she landed, a familiar horn and muzzle poked free of the earth. "Pfui," Celestia said.

There was a long pause as Luna regarded the mound of dirt that concealed her sister. "Methinks, Sister," she said finally, "Thou shouldst clarify that if thy little ponies wish to bring a land dispute before thee, they do not need to bring the actual land..."

"Oh shut up and fetch a shovel," Celestia said.
It was nearing sunset the next day when Heart Root returned to what had once been his home. He had walked the entire way to Canterlot, then walked the entire way back. The return journey had been quicker, though he had been in no condition to appreciate it. The moment he set hoof on the land he seemed to age another twenty years. He plodded as slowly and methodically as he had the entire journey thus far, skirting the open pit where his house and the last acre of his land had been, and followed the trickling stream up into the holler till he came to a small gravestone. It was only then that he let his weariness show. He drank thirstily from the stream, then staggered up to the grave where his wife’s ashes were buried and sank to his knees. He rested his forehead against the gravestone. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry, Arrow Root." He bit his lip. "I promised I'd save our home. I promised t' keep fighting. I broke that promise.... I'm sorry...

"They took it all. we ain't got nuthin' left to fight for, and I ain't got nuthin' to fight with. It's all gone."

"Is it, then?"

Heart Root started and looked over his shoulder. He recognized the mare standing behind him almost immediately. He took in the green mane, the crooked horn, the holed legs. He couldn't even muster the energy to be surprised. He was beyond scaring, though. Hell, he was almost amused. "Figgers," he muttered. "One royal nag sucks me dry, an' along comes another to finish the job." He looked at her. "Well? You hear to drain the last of my love out of me?"

Chrysalis scoffed and tossed a bottle to him with a flip of her head. It landed in front of him with a thump. "Drink," she said.

Heart Root picked the bottle up. the liquid inside was an unsettling shade of green, but he uncorked it and drank it anyway. Not like he had anything to lose. Almost immediately, he felt energized and refreshed; his aches and pains vanished. "Changeling nectar," Chrysalis said to him. "One mixture of it, anyway. Your old bones won't hurt you in the morning now."

Heart Root nodded in thanks, cautiously.

Chrysalis looked over her shoulder at the remains of Heart Root's homestead. "It seems to me you have a story to tell," she said. From her tone it was obviously a command, not a request.

"Seems to me you know it," Heart Root guessed.

Chrysalis smiled, faintly. "Tell me anyway."

Heart Root shrugged. "Not much to it," he said. He gave her a humorless smirk, before letting his face drop back into a scowl. "Nigh on sixty years ago, after years of scrimpin' and savin', my wife and I bought us a little patch of land. I was an excavator and a ditch digger--" he indicated his cutie mark; a runic symbol for the element of Earth. "Spent years workin' in the mines. She was a earth
pony with a knack f'r roots and tubers. Taters, turnips, arrowroot... this was our dream homestead. Had it all planned out; me to till the earth, her to plant it. "He smiled briefly, wistfully, before letting his mask of indifference fall over it. "But it seems like God or Fate or somepony was dead set against it.

"It weren't never easy. But these past ten years..." He shook his head. "It was like Celestia herself had it in for us." He clenched his teeth. "Every year a new tax: a property tax, a road tax, a school tax. School tax-- HAH." He snorted. "They never laid so much as a single schoolhouse brick nor paved a single foot of road in those hills in all those years, but we was still payin' through the nose for it. My wife an' I half froze and half starved, tryin' to pay all the taxes. And every year they got steeper. But somehow we held on.

"That wasn't enough for her though, was it? After the taxes came the fees, and the licenses, and the regulations. Every other year there was some new law; some new rule or regulation or fee. Made our back forty into a nature preserve for Crumple-horned Snorlaxes and made us pay fines to fund some 'feasibility study.' Then she sent out ponies to do an "en-viro-mental impact report," and fined us for pollutin' the river with runoff from our land. Then she declared another twenty farmable acres a wetland! And... and still we held on.

"That weren't the final straw. No, the final straw was she up an' told us our land wasn't our own." Heart Root snarled. "We'd just paid the last few bits in our pockets to the tax collector when he up and hands us a letter proclaimin' 'Their Royal Highnesses, Celestia and Luna' were claiming the mineral rights to the land under our farm 'in the name of the crown." He seemed to seize up in a fit, then got hold of himself. "A twenty year mortgage, a lifetime of taxes, and fines, and fees, and regulations, and we didn't even own the dirt we'd been payin' for."

"Then..." he swallowed. "Then Arrow Root took sick. Doctor bills et us up. I... I went to Canterlot to beg the Princess f'r help, for leniency.

"Two months on th' waitin' list. Two months standin' in line in that damned palace. Two months gettin' pushed back in line so some Duke or Baron or other useless sack o' noble inbred horse turds could see her precious royal highness first, about some "urgent matter" or other. Two months gettin' halfway to the throne, only to have her or her moony sister slam the door in my face before I got there. Two months before I finally gave up, went home to my wife to tell her they were gonna take our farm.

"I had to stand there at my wife's sick bed... her death bed... telling her th' stinkin' Princess Celestia didn't give a rat's rear about neither of us." He swallowed. " I couldn't do it. I lied, told her I'd found a way to save our dream home. She died thinkin' I'd saved the day." His voice shook and his eyes were wet. "So yesterday I took that house and that land that Sun-arsed bitch wanted so bad, and delivered it right to her front door." He wiped his nose on his hock. "Gods rot her soul with it."

"I know. our agents saw your little... performance." Chrysalis said in amusement. Her eyes narrowed and she turned the screws a bit more. "You should know not five minutes after you left, she teleported the entire heap to a landfill outside the city." He looked at her. She paused to let the words sink in. "That's right. Your Princess took your symbolic gesture and tossed it on a midden heap, as casually as you or I would dump out a chamber pot, and went merrily on her way--- as if you had never existed."

The barb struck home. He made no sound, but tears of rage spilled down his face.

"And so we see," Chrysalis said, coloring her voice with contempt, "just how little her little ponies mean to her when they're out of her sight."
Heart Root rolled that bitter pill around in his mouth. He glared at her with his face streaked wet. "What d'you want with me?" he said. "Can't imagine a dried up old stick has much love to drain for your hive."

"Don't be so sure," Chrysalis said. "It's how I found you. I could hear and taste your broken heart from a mile away. Ponies forget that loving something you lost is a kind of love too. Love doesn't always feel good or make you happy." She shifted her stance. "But no, I'm not going to drain you of love for my 'hive.' If I had one. " At his puzzled expression a corner of her mouth quirked up. "Circumstances have... changed. You're not the only one who's fallen on hard times.

"Be that as it may-- I serve a new master. One who has use for you and your gifts."

"A ninety year old geezer with a dirt diggin' cutie mark?" Heart Root said scornfully.

"A ninety year old stallion who carried several hundred tons of rock and earth on a two day journey," Chrysalis said. "Even the legendary Twilight Sparkle would have been prostrated trying to duplicate that. Besides, ninety years old is not all that old for a unicorn. You have many years ahead of you, and you are far more powerful than you think."

Heart Root got a shrewd look in his eye. "And what does this 'new master' got to offer me?" he said.

"Allow me to present our opening offer." Chrysalis' horn flared green. behind her the treeline shimmered as an illusion fell away. Heart Root let out a yawp of astonishment; standing behind her was his cottage--- right down to the picket fence and the cobblestone walk to the door. Cursing his old knees, he got to his hooves and staggered over to it. He ran his hoof over the wooden door, marveling.

"It's real," he said. "But how--?"

"My master had his agents fetch it from the quarry, every last board, timber, stone and brick," Chrysalis said. "For his magic, reassembling it was little challenge."

Heart Root couldn't tear his eyes away from it "Amazing. It's perfect," he chuckled. Then his face fell to a scowl. "Till the Sun-arsed bitch's miners come and tear it all down again."

"We need not leave it here," she said. "This is what my master, Darth Vulcan, offers. When he rises to claim what is his, you will rise with him. You will be given a portion of his domain as your own, to rebuild your homestead---the finest portion of land, with a mansion or castle or even this very cottage sitting upon it. And noone, not a government, not an army, not even Celestia and Luna themselves, will dare try and take it from you. And it will be wrested from the grasp of those same arrogant dukes and nobles and Princesses who bled your own life away."

Chrysalis saw--- tasted--- the hope flaring within him. She smiled to herself. Hooked. He stepped away from the magically reassembled cottage and over to his wife's grave. His horn lit; the earth parted and a dirt-clod covered burial urn rose up out of the ground and into his hooves. He turned to the former changeling queen, the precious urn cradled in his foreleg and his eyes hard as flint.

"Where do ah sign up?" he said.
Heart Root was only the first. While his earthmoving talents did make him invaluable in the lair, I had Chrysalis recruit him for more subtle reasons. He had connections throughout the mountain communities: family friends, fellow farmers, and not a few malcontents like himself who'd been put between a rock and a hard place due to taxes or other misfortunes, and his rather theatrical gesture of defiance in Celestia's throne room... and his subsequent disappearance... made him something of an icon amongst the disgruntled. Through him we made contact with dozens of farmers, homesteaders and the like who'd gotten reamed by Equestrian tax collectors, regulators, and other local variants of good old unfightable City Hall.

What, doesn't sound like the sort of thing dear old lovable Celestia would allow? What part of "monarchy" don't you understand? She had most of her country run, hell, all but owned by hereditary nobility. And nothing invites corruption like a system where you can't get fired for doing a lousy job. Even if it was a system where everyone in power was benevolent and honorable and just, people would fall through the cracks... and the nobles running Equestria were certainly NOT a bunch of angels. And with Celestia playing the Golden Glorious Sun Empress--- well, most ponies were too wrapped up in crown-worship to ever blame her, but for a few, when things really, really went wrong... well, it's not that far a jump from blind worship to hatred. Heck, it seemed like half the homesteaders scattered in the Equestria hills where Heart Root lived were getting reamed one way or the other or had some grudge against the rest of Equestria.

It was so easy to buy their loyalty, too; a few handfuls of gold to pay their back taxes, a spell or two-- or maybe the loan of a couple of tamed timberwolves-- to chase off bandits and vermin... and even the most reluctant of them were won over. As Al Capone could tell you, the protection racket is danged effective when you're actually offering some honest-to-God protection. And did they ever need protection. I mean crap, Ponyville, which was within actual line of sight of the capital, got plagued by timberwolves and parasprites and rogue weather and monsters in every variety of animal, vegetable and mineral on a weekly basis. Imagine what it was like in places like Hollow Shades or the Hayseed Swamps (actual places, I lie to you not.) But thanks to Heart Root putting in a good word for us, and a few "good deeds" here and there, pretty soon we had a scattered, but solid network of ponies willing to give us a hideout or a helping hoof, or at least look the other way when we snuck through their neck of the woods.

Of course I wasn't satisfied. Loyal help from the Little House on the Prairie set was nice and all-- they certainly gave us lots of root cellars and barns to hide in, and there was lots to be said for their gratitude; most of us would be in danger of getting fat on country home cookin' that got smuggled our way. But the occasional bag of veggies and wheel of cheese (and jug or two of hooch) wasn't getting us closer to the goal.

Which brought us to the next level of recruiting. We needed contacts who could turn my gold and gems into goods. But who? Filthy Rich had stabbed me in the back because he thought of himself as an honest businessman. And honest businessmen didn't deal with the likes of sinister wizards...

Allow yourself a moment to savor the irony.

So, I decided to test that old saying about honor among thieves. I started asking my ex-con ponies about their old associates back before they went in the clink, and told the bitter "salt of the earth"
types to keep an eye out and an ear to the ground for a certain type of merchant. If I couldn't trust an honest businessman, I was going to see whether I could rely on a dishonest one.

The ramshackle wagon clattered its way up the winding mountain path, its two passengers dividing their attention between the perilous road ahead and casting nervous eyes back the way they'd come. The two were aspiring entrepreneurs whose last, ahem, itinerant business venture had proven FAR less popular than expected in their last stopover. In fact it had proven so unpopular that they had traded in their trademark striped shirts, bow ties and straw boaters for coveralls and hillbilly hats they'd stolen off a clothesline as they departed. Their garishly painted wagon had likewise had its gaudy painted sides draped with drab canvas sacks and tarp, its bold "Flim Flam Brothers" signage artfully concealed. Of course, the fact that the wagon was moving under its own power rather undermined their efforts to make it look inconspicuous, but the urgency of their departure had made them a bit inattentive to detail. They were too busy looking back for pursuers.

They were, in fact, so urgently focused on the village some four hours behind them that they didn't even notice the roadblock till they were right on top of it.

Flim turned around in his seat and saw the mixed gang of ponies and diamond dogs blocking the road. "Oh, dear," Flim said. "Brother, it seems despite our best efforts we have inadvertently encountered some dissatisfied customers."

"Indeed, brother," Flam muttered unhappily. "Good morning, or is it afternoon yet, gentlefolk," he said, raising his voice to be heard by the strangers before him. "I am Flam, and this is my brother Flim. How can we be of--"

The leader of the group, a half-grown colt with strange eyes and a top hat tipped over his eye, spoke up. "Oh save it," he drawled in a lower Canterlot accent(1). "We know who you are. Everypony from Ponyville to Canterlot knows who you are." He snorted. "You're the Flim Flam brothers. Inventors, entrepreneurs..."

"Ah, our fame precedes us," Flim said cockily.

"...And the two stupidest con men in the Equestrian hemisphere," the colt finished, eyes heavy with contempt. Flim and Flam glared at him, but he ignored it. "Maker knows why, but the Boss wants words with you. You're coming with us."

Flam leaned over the rail of their self-propelled wagon and quirked his mustache. "And if we decline this generous offer?" he said.

The top-hatted colt grinned, his slit-pupiled eyes flashing green. "Then we chase you down, beat you within an inch of your lives, and drag what's left of you to see the Boss anyway."

"....ah." The two hapless confidence ponies sat back, their bombast dramatically diminished. "Upon reflection, we shall accept your generous hospitality," Flim said.

"Smartest move you ever made." The tophatted one went over to the face of the hillside and kicked at it. As Flim and Flam watched, the rock and soil parted like a curtain, revealing a diamond dog tunnel large enough for them and their wagon to roll right in.

A moss-green unicorn was standing in the mouth of the tunnel, his horn glowing. "Well get a move
on," the oldster said. "I ain't gonna hold up these rocks all day."

The two brothers shared a nervous glance. "Look at it this way," the tophatted colt said. "At least this way you'll be sure to lose those angry townsfolk still after you..." The brothers gulped and nodded. They were highly allergic to tar and feathers. Silently they turned the carriage off the road and sent it rumbling into the tunnel. Their abductors followed, the tunnel opening flowing shut and sealing as if it had never been.

I had heard about these two and decided that recruiting them would require my personal touch, ASAP. That's why I didn't have Artful Dodger give them any sort of pitch other than "come with me if you want to keep your teeth." (I was saving his skills at that for later.) I just had them beelined straight to the Lair.

Or one part of it, anyway.

Not to say I didn't use Dodger's brains on this one. He'd had some clever ideas on wowing these two shysters over, and I'd rolled with them. They'd stored the Flim Flam's wagon in a side tunnel and made them proceed on hoof, blindfolded, on a twisting route through the tunnels... for a short ways. Then they un-blindfolded them. The first thing Flim and Flam saw was two enormous doors, guarded by four armed guards; two changelings and two minotaurs. It reportedly had the effect I was looking for; they were shaking in their metaphorical boots before the minotaurs even hauled the doors open.

The tour that followed was even more effective. By my orders Dodger took them to my throne room by the scenic route, trotting them past the barracks, the workshops, the armory, the kennels where Deadwood and the other timberwargs were kept... even past the storerooms. I had no fear they would reveal any information about our strength or resources to the outside world--- this was one of three "satellite" lairs we had made, so that we weren't all in one single vulnerable area. In truth we were spread pretty thin. We barely had a skeleton crew here. Dodger was clever and managed to take them on a circuitous route, back and forth past several points, making the whole spare lair look far bigger and better supplied and staffed than it actually was.

By the time they got to me, after a few harrowing 'close shaves' with the livestock (the timberwargs and one caged cockatrice), they were good and overwhelmed. The throne room pretty well finished them off. The cavern was a lot smaller than the original-- a closet to the original dragon-sized cathedral-- and the heap of treasure the throne sat upon was almost comically small compared to the original, the rest having been dispersed to boltholes and emergency stashes around the Everfree. But it was still pretty impressive... at least to judge by the looks on their faces when they were marched into my presence.

I couldn't help grinning ear to ear inside my helmet as they stood there gaping at me. I could see it all in their faces: Fear, intimidation, uncertainty, but all heavily seasoned with calculating greed and ambitious speculation. Yeah, I had them hooked. I looked down at them from my throne, my fingers steepled in front of me. "So," I said. "The infamous Flim Flam brothers are finally brought into my presence."

"I-indeed we are, your Greatness," the mustached one said, sweeping his straw boater off in a bow. "H-how is it that we have come to your, ah, illustrious attention?"
I glowered at them for a moment with my glowing mask eyes, letting them sweat. "Do you know who I am?" I finally said.

The other one gulped and nodded, hastily bowing. "We have heard word of a-an individual," he stammered, "who, ah, was at odds with the Princesses and, um---"

"I'll tell you who I am," I said. "I am Darth Vulcan. Leader of the Diamond Dogs. Master of the remnant of the Changeling army. Bearer of the Alicorn Amulet. Enemy of the State, and of the Princesses of Equestria." I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. "I come from a distant world beyond your comprehension. I conquered the Everfree, made it my domain. I bested three armies in the Battle for the Tree of Harmony. I slew a dragon singlehanded. Routed Discord. Tore Canterlot castle itself from the face of the mountain. Killed Tirek himself with my own two hands as casually as you would swat a bug." The two gulped. "All this I have accomplished within the course of a single year, and I am yet to achieve a tenth of all I have planned.

"Do you know what I see when I see you standing before me?"

The two looked at each other, then shook their heads. I got to my feet and glared down at them.

"Two. Idiots." They cringed. "My apprentice, Artful Dodger, was being generous when he called you the two stupidest con men in Equestria. I have lived in two worlds, and I've known dullards who, given a fraction of the resources and opportunities you two possess, would have been living lives of idle fortune within a year. But you two could bugger a county fair, couldn't you."

"N-now that's a bit harsh--" the mustachioed one started.

"No, it's understated," I said. On cue, Artful Dodger came up behind me with a sheaf of papers. I took them and began leafing through them: blueprints, formulas, notes. Flim and Flam recognized them immediately and began protesting.

"Now hold on, those are our confidential intellectual property!"

"I know," I said, uncaring. "Artful Dodger got them from your wagon. Look at this. This is precisely what I am speaking about." I held up one blueprint of something that looked like a cross between a calliope and a cuisinart. "A self-propelled, apple picking, sorting, and cider-pressing machine. A mechanical miracle, an incredible labor saving device. Do you know how labor-intensive picking crops is? You could have made millions just marketing the fruit-picking device alone to farmers across Equestria. instead, you used the thing in a two-bit scam to try and swindle some old granny out of her orchard. And you even bungled THAT; letting the old fool cheat at a cider-making race, and then panicking and overloading your machine when the race started getting close. Oh yes, I've heard the reports." I wadded it up and threw it at them.

While they grimaced, I picked a recipe out of the stack. "Miracle tonic. A world full of genuine magical zebra potions, with recipes for free in every library and ingredients that grow for free in any forest glen or roadside ditch, and you tried to peddle a fake miracle tonic made of apples and beet leaves. It cost you more effort to make the fake tonic than to make a real one!" I wadded up that one and threw it too; it bounced off Flam's nose. "Oh, let's see here-- parasprite repellant. Idiots. Everyone knows that parasprites can be lured anywhere you want with
polka music. You play a *calliope* in your roadshow. But did you think to market a musical parasprite trapping service? No, of course not." This one I flicked at Flim. "A self-propelled wagon. A world full of ponies breaking their backs pulling wagons behind them or living as slaves to the train schedules, and the only thing you use this for is to flee irate villagers? Morons!" I threw the armload of blueprints, recipes and confidence plans at them. They dropped to their knees and scrambled to scoop up their precious papers. "*Inventions and ideas that could have made you this world's version of Thomas Edison or the Wright Brothers, and you waste them on useless, made-to-fail penny-ante scams!*"

Flam (I was assuming the one with the mustache was Flam) spluttered at me. "What you do want from us, then?" he yelled in exasperation as his brother scrabbled for the scattered papers. "You didn't drag us all the way here just to insult us!"

My anger had been spiraling out of control without me even realizing it. I reined it in and collapsed back into my throne. "*No,*" I admitted. "*No, I did not.*" I regarded them. "I brought you here... first of all, because you are loose cannons. I have plans of my own, and I do not want my agents stumbling over the trailing ends of your confidence plans.

"But the main reason is because you represent one of the things that I absolutely hate about Celestia's little world more than anything...."

"Wasted potential."

They stopped and looked up at me, puzzled. "*Your kingdom--- your entire world, really, but your kingdom of Equestria especially--- lags. Despite having everything going for you--- wealth, resources, security, perfect weather and even flipping MAGIC--- you have slogged along for over a thousand years with almost no progress in any meaningful way. Despite having the occasional technological trinket, you're mostly still stuck at a technological level that my world reached and passed like it was standing still over a hundred and fifty years ago. In fact its those stupid little one-off trinkets here and there that make it worse. That just shows you KNOW what you could do if you applied yourselves. You ponies should be building skyscrapers on the MOON by now, but instead you doddle about as if it were still the eighteenth century.*"

What they said next surprised me. "*You think you're telling us anything new?*" Flim snorted. "*We LIVE this nonsense. Our entire lives my brother and I have watched brilliant achievements appear on the horizon, only to vanish without a trace within the year as if they had never been. And ever since we got our Cutie Marks, we've been on the road, stumping for our creations. We TRIED the whole "change the world" approach--- but the world doesn't want to be changed. *"

"*Why do you think we live like this?*" Flam agreed. "*We know we could revolutionize Equestria with our inventions. But nopony wants to use them. In Equestria, if you can't get the patronage of one of the royal houses, nopony else is interested.*" Flam's face soured. "*Did you know we ponies have re-invented the heavier-than-air flying machine five times over the past three hundred years? But within a decade it's discarded again like a cheap foal's toy.*"

"*Even bad inventors want to change the world, my good mister Vulcan,*" Flam said. "*But in Equestria we're not innovators, we're... novelty shop salesponies. A traveling potion and gadget show. So why NOT sell them junk, if that's how they're going to treat everything we invent?*

"*The average pony acts as if living in the past is the key to an eternal golden age.*" Flim sneered.
"Why should we waste our best efforts on ponies who think that Status Quo is God?"

I pondered that, brooding as the picture unfolded. I had a good idea of just WHY Equestria was so resistant to change: Peer pressure. Celestia and her sister were thousands of years old. They had kept their hoof at the helm of their society's cultural development every step of the way. Heck, they were the living iconic symbol of their society's ideal. They set the trend in everything--- culture, philosophy, manners, standards of physical beauty. And immortal or not, under those ageless bodies they were... well... OLD. The kind of old people that hated anything new and spent all their time lamenting about the good old days when everything was steam powered and toilet paper was still a novelty.

And at the same time, they were "the popular kids." The ones every other pony adored and revered and tried to emulate. Maybe it was the pony herd instinct thing. Maybe it was the fact that they were pretty much the center of the pony universe. But if Celestia and Luna weren't interested in something, it wasn't going to catch on. And, if the popular kids weren't interested in it, ain't nopony was interested in it. They didn't even have to be openly hostile to a new innovation they didn't like; they just had to yawn in the inventor's face and wander off to graze, and the rest would follow them. The whole damn race was stuck in a gigantic popularity clique, with their immortal nigh-goddesses as the prom king and queen and everyone else afraid to dress, talk, walk, act, look or even think too differently without their benevolent approval.

My proof? Oh, a couple of thousand years of uninterrupted monarchy would do. Any other civilization would have changed things up-- tried democracy or something, once in a while. Even the kings of England eventually got the Magna Carta. But these guys were more unchanging than the feudal caste system of ancient China. In fact ancient China was a pretty good parallel; those guys had gunpowder, seismic detectors, mechanical automatons and military rocket weapons before Columbus had set sail, yet they were still in the dark ages by the time the British Empire moved in on them. In a caste system, technology and invention become nothing but a vaudeville sideshow. It would take a massive social upheaval to goose the engine of progress into moving again.

Well call me Admiral Perry, then.(2)

I started to chuckle. They regarded me apprehensively. "You want to change the world, do you?" I said. "I think we can manage that much."

Flim and Flam finished stacking their precious papers together. "At this point we'll settle for just getting rich," Flam said uncertainly.

"Or at least moderately well heeled," Flim interjected.

I ignored the witty remarks and leaned in. "you two have potential," I said. "That is why you are here. Despite how badly you two have conducted your little enterprise so far, I have taken careful note of your... talents." Their ears pricked, genuinely curious.

"The first is this; you know what ponies want. You actually know your market, and manage to produce a pitch that has ponies clamoring to give you money. What's more, you do it to ponies who already know you. You hit Ponyville twice, selling them cider products both times. You didn't just sell snow cones to a polar bear, you talked him into coming back twice. Among bunko artists and con men, that is talent."

Flam puckered up like he tasted something sour. "You flatter us."

"Knowing what ponies want, selling it to them, being able to win back their trust even when
they should be riding you out of town on a rail... those talents are useful to me. You are well traveled, which means you can finagle your way into any community. And your inventive genius may be unappreciated by the dull-witted castes who rule this benighted kingdom, but they are quite obvious-- and appealing-- to me." I paused meaningfully.

"This is my offer to you. You will come work for me. You will go where I say. You will sell what I tell you to sell. You will buy, sell and trade on my behalf, and you will do it under the supervision of whomever I send with you. You will continue to invent--- but you will make your inventions for ME, at MY request, to meet MY demands. And they will work as advertised, oh yes. Or else."

They both swallowed noisily. "And... what's in it for us?" Flam challenged.

By way of answer I bent down and scooped up a fistful of treasure. I stood and let the coins and jewels trickle through my fingers. Their eyes gleamed and I could practically see them drool as the coins chimed and tinkled on the ground. "A nearly bottomless expense account," I said unnecessarily. "Those workshops you saw? They will be yours to command, and yours to staff. You will be permitted to pursue whatever research and development you desire, without limit-save that I supervise it. And needless to say, you will live... quite comfortably, while you do so.

"I have plans. Very specific plans. Those plans are going to turn Equestrian society completely upside down. And when they are completed, you will be flush with money, in possession of countless inventions of your own make, and in prime position to take advantage of the social upheaval that will follow in my wake. If you work with me, you will be able to market your Flim Flam inventions to the farthest corner of Equestria, and you will go down in history as the greatest geniuses of your age."

"After working with you?" Flam said, dubious.

I leaned in till my eye-glow illuminated his face. "Remind me to tell you a story sometime," I said. "It's about german scientists, a world war, and something called Operation Paperclip." I turned back and forth between them. "So, Flim Flam brothers... what's it going to be?"

"And if we decide no?"

I turned my back on them and mounted back up into my throne. "Then we dump you back out on the road where we found you, and take bets on whether you can outrun the angry mob that was in pursuit of you." Really. Marketing a do-it-yourself hair-cutting and styling machine? Clever. Letting the local constable be the first to try it out? Not so clever. "Permanently Bald" is not a well-liked hairstyle.

The two brothers shared a long look, then turned to me. "So," they said blithely. "Where do we move in?"

Celestia wandered the halls of Canterlot, fuming to herself. Normally she enjoyed the winter season, but the soft flurries of snow at every window were doing little to cheer her. It seemed that having the, er, rump of one's castle sitting in a lake tended to make keeping the rest of it dry and warm more of a
The normal winding-down of this time of the year had been nowhere in evidence, either... usually, even the plotting and scheming of the political set took a back seat to cuddling by the fire with a mug of hot cocoa. But every time she turned around there was a new political calamity unfolding. The recent spectacle with that one old unicorn farmer and his rather theatrical final deposit to the Equestrian Revenue Service-- in the form of literally dumping his farm, land and all, on the throne---had unveiled a horrifying mares' nest of corruption, legal negligence and terrible legislation in the Equestrian tax system. While a product of negligence rather than malevolence, it was still monstrous. Celestia and Luna's staff of advisors had been busy day and night untangling the mess, with the royal sisters having to uproot law after law-- only to find further snarls of red tape and tax code underneath. Celestia had been horrified. Centuries of neglect, untold generations of ponies who had been casually and mistakenly bilked by their own governments... it was going to take years, if not decades, to sort it all out. Federal, local, regional, village tax and asset laws.... It was starting to almost look like it would be easier just to declare the whole Equestrian tax code null and void and start over from scratch.

What the hell had happened to her nation? She could still remember when most of the citizens paid their annual taxes with a couple of bushels of potatoes. What had been wrong with that? Once a year, boom, potatoes, done.... or, of course, apples. Or corn. Corn was good... ah yes, that was it, now she remembered. Some of the barons had started arguing whether a bushel of corn should be on or off the cob, and that had been it. First a law on that, then a law stating all carrots had to have their greens chopped before counting, and the legislative arms race was underway. Next thing you knew, they had 400 laws governing the sale and taxation of cabbages.

To top it all off, the poor aggrieved pony who had started the whole landslide was nowhere to be found. They had found nothing but an empty crater where his homestead had once been, but no word of where he himself had gone. His nearest neighbors refused to even guess. They informed the investigating guards that the pony-- Heart Root was his name-- had been rather bitterly anti-Royalist for many years. Not surprising, all considered. More mysteriously, the remains of his house and farm had disappeared from the landfill where Celestia had teleported them...

Celestia had a faint, but growing conviction that their latest nemesis must had one five-fingered hand in all of it.

As luck would have it, she found herself passing her sister in the hallway just as these dark thoughts crossed her mind. Luna was trotting along, flipping through some royal documents and humming some oddly catchy tune to herself.

"Hmmm hmm hmm op-por-tu-nitee
In this hmm com-mu-nitee...
Hmm hmm hmm something hmmm...."

"Hello, sister!" Celestia said.

Luna started; for a brief moment Celestia caught a glimpse of annoyance on her face. Then she smoothed it over and the moment was gone. "Well met, sister," she said. "How fares the day?"

Celestia rolled her eyes. "Same as it has been since our mutual annoyance arrived in Equestria," she said dryly.

To her surprise Luna made a moue of disagreement. "Strewth, sister, for all his alarum, he has been
rather quiet of these past few months. Methinks thou dost attribute a bit too much of this season's vexations to his influence."

Celestia huffed. "Really, little sister? Unrest in the hills, reports of bandit raids on the upsurge, escapes from Tartarus?" She chuckled humorlessly. "You don't really imagine it's a coincidence that this all started with this human creature's arrival?" Her tone was chiding.

Luna huffed herself, frowning. "Methinks 'tis too easy to blame all our troubles on the latest villain," she said, needled. "Were not these troubles with the exchequer's office decades or more in the making?"

Celestia waved her hoof dismissively. Having spoken her thoughts out loud, now she was certain of it. "Ponies don't generally chuck houses at the throne to protest their tax problems, Lulu," she said. "No.... Darth Vulcan is... provoking this from the shadows, somehow."

Luna's barely muttered "Perhaps just by example" escaped her notice.

"Which brings to mind," Celestia said. She stepped closer, lowering her voice a bit. "Is there any news from your... informant?"

Luna sighed and shook her head. "Nothing of true use, sister," she said. "As I have told thee, I must needs contact him through many layers of defenses as it is. And my gift for piercing the veil Darth Vulcan hath laid about himself and his underlings waxes and wanes with the moon. I have netted but little bits and oddments from my agent of late." Besides which, I have been busy..." unraveling the mare's nest of your tax codes, she added silently, annoyed.

Celestia sighed, pursing her lips. "Vexing. But... nothing at all?"

Luna sighed as well. "An... impression that Darth Vulcan hath... recruited new allies to his side." She shook her head.

"Not good. Who?"

Luna shook her head again. "Too vague to tell. Just a strange impression of... straw hats. and bow ties. And a fervent wish that somepony would just stop singing...."

1)Think somewhere between Oliver Twist and My Fair Lady.

2)He's thinking of Commodore Matthew Perry, who opened trade to Japan, not China. But Ted didn't exactly ace world history class.
Chapter 29

Word started getting around. At first ponies out in the rest of Equestria were chattering in astonishment about the disappearance of "two minor yet notorious con artists" into thin air. Then the ponies in the back alleys and underground were chattering in astonishment when they heard word they'd reappeared--- making contact out of nowhere with their old friends: suppliers, bookies and brokers, grifters and shady creditors. They would pop out of the shadows, sometimes literally, paying off old debts, placing cryptic orders, arranging odd shipments, dropping an earworm or two about their new boss, then disappearing just as suddenly. More than one loan shark or black market dealer found himself sitting alone in his office, muttering in confusion as the smoke cleared about offers made by the two vaudevillian hucksters before they'd disappeared... or standing alone in a dark alley, sweating as they recalled the subtle hints they'd been dropped about how they'd best let bygones be bygones when it came to old debts or old injuries. Either way, pondering what they'd been told about this new mover and shaker out there in the dark nooks and crannies of Equestria:

He had money.

He had power.

He had plans.

And he could make things happen for you... in exchange for certain considerations.

There weren't many ponies out there in happy sugar pony land who wanted what the princesses couldn't provide... but there were enough.

Ponies started looking out through the winter snow at the distant shadows of the Everfree, and thinking...

The five young pegasi huddled together in the prison cell, trying to draw comfort from one another. It had gone poorly from the moment they had crossed the boundary of the Everfree in pursuit of their friend. The wild, unending blizzard-- some said it was the product of the dark wizard who had taken up residence there--- had frozen their wings, sending them plummeting into the forest itself. They'd barely gotten out of the storm and under the dubious shelter of the trees before they'd found themselves surrounded by timberwolves. Huge timberwolves.

Ridden by diamond dogs.

They had been netted, and dragged back to... wherever this place was, somewhere underground, and thrown in a stone cell with an iron grate over the door. There they had waited for hours, shaking in terror, while the brute dogmen had gone to fetch whoever or whatever was in charge down in these catacombs. The only light was the dim glowing crystal out in the hall, that cast deep shadows across
the barren cell. At least it was warm and dry.

They bickered together under their breath. Had they known how keen diamond dog ears were, they wouldn't have bothered; every word was audible throughout the dungeon. "Why did you follow me?" One of the fillies said to the others angrily. "I said I would do this alone!"

"Going into the Everfree? To look for a Dark Wizard? Alone?" a colt protested. "No freaking way, Eiderdown." Other voices raised in protest at the notion.

Eiderdown stamped in frustration. "It's not your responsibility!" she said angrily. "This whole mess, all of it, is my fault. I have to fix it..."

"No, Eiderdown." A filly, more of a young mare, spoke out. Her voice was sweet but sad. "We were all in this, together. Right from the start. Remember? 'Nopony goes it alone.' " She said the last like somepony reciting a slogan. Or a mantra. "We all started this together. We'll all... we'll all end it together."

Eiderdown's voice filled with tears. "I'm so sorry, Winky," she said, snuffling. "Especially for you--If I had just... if only..." Further words were smothered as the group huddled in an embrace around their distraught leader.

The moment was interrupted by the squeal of the prison door. The five huddled against the back wall, out of the light. Two diamond dog guards came in. Right behind them swaggered... a unicorn colt? He was about their age, in his teens. There was something different about him, though; something about the way he carried himself. Eiderdown got a better look at him and gulped. Black mane and tail, white coat, a cutie mark of playing cards coming out of a top hat. He wore a velvet purple top hat perched on his head at a jaunty angle, with a gem in the hatband that looked disturbingly like an eye, and more disturbingly, seemed to track her no matter which way his head was turned. His eyes were slit like a cat's, and glowed in the torchlight. Could this be the Dark Wizard himself?

The colt swaggered into the middle of the room. His eyes fell on Eiderdown. He seemed surprised at first, almost gawping at her. Then he caught himself and wiped the expression off his face, replacing it with a slow leer as he eyed her up and down. "Well hello, ducklin'," he purred, waggling his eyebrows. "Wot brings a toothsome lil' thing like you to our humble home?"

Anywhere else that performance would have gotten a roll of Eiderdown's eyes. Here, in a dungeon far below the Everfree, far from the safety of home, it sent chills like caterpillar legs jiggering down her spine. She steeled herself and curtseyed. "Are you the Dark Wizard, Lord Vulcan?" she asked. She was proud of herself; she actually managed to keep the quaver out of her voice.

To her surprise one of the guards snorted in amusement. The top-hatted colt shot him a dirty look and then replied to Eiderdown. "Sorry, ducklin'. I'm not him. I am his right-hoof stallion, though." He smirked. "My name's Artful Dodger, and I'm yer go-to pony for gettin' in the front door. I'm guessin' you want a little parlay with his Grim and Darkness, then?"

Eiderdown nodded and stood up straight. The others clustered behind her. "I... we heard he does... deals." She swallowed.

"Indeed he does, pretty lil' ducklin'," Dodger said. "So..." he leaned against the doorframe. "Tell us yer story, then?"

Eiderdown licked her lips, and began at the beginning.
As she told her and her friends' story, the change that came over him was startling. He barely moved, but his face spoke volumes; first amusement, then surprise, then blatant disbelief... then surprisingly a flash of outrage. His face slipped instantly into a mask, a complete poker face.... but a slow, cold, glittering something settled behind his eyes. "...and now, here we are," she finished lamely. She looked him in the eye. "Will... do you think your master will help us? CAN he help us?"

Dodger's eyes flickered, and he grinned in cold amusement. "Oh, he can," he said. "And I'd bet a bag of bits that he will. This sort of thing is just right up his alley." To her surprise he stepped up, doffing his flamboyant hat in a deep bow. "Come with me, pretty ducklin'; I'll see to it." He looked to the guards. "They're comin' with me. We're off to see a man about a horse."

Things were fairly boring that day. I was in the middle of taking reports from my underlings in the throne room when Artful Dodger came swaggering in with about a half-dozen ponies right behind him. He left his charges standing with the guards, staring wide-eyed around the treasure room, and stepped up to the foot of the throne with a flamboyant bow. "Yer Dread and Dark Awfulness... I got some petitioners for you."

The cluster of ponies flinched and huddled together. Ah, time to play the Great and Powerful Oz. What the hell, I was bored and it'd be fun. "Are they even worthy of my time?" I rumbled, turning the glowing eyes of my helmet on them. Dodger looked behind him without leaving his bow and gave them his best Sleazy Grand Vizier smirk.

"I'm sure we can find SOME use for 'em," he said. The mares cringed back into the colts. He looked back to me. "But you were sayin' earlier that you were bored..."

"And?"

"And the little favor they want to ask sounded to me like it was just to your taste," Dodger said. His smile was half leer and all teeth. I would have cocked an eyebrow at him if he would have seen it under my helmet.

"Well? Let them speak on their behalf." The group stumbled forward, one of the fillies in the lead. They were of varying ages, none of them more than barely adults and the youngest, the leader, still in her teens. They were all pegasi. What was most surprising was that they were all crippled. The leader was a young pegasus filly about Dodger's age with a blonde mane and tail, a blue coat, and a fluffy feather cutie mark. Her wing feathers were malformed; all of them, even the primaries, looked soft and fluffy like down feathers, so wispy her wings looked like feather dusters. I didn't have to be an expert in aerodynamics to figure out what this meant to her ability to fly. Another was a brown-on-orange filly with wings nearly twice the size of normal and a funnel-cloud cutie mark. Next to her stood, by way of ironic contrast, an enormous brown colt with wings the size of a foal's and a dumbbell on his flank. On his other side huddled a white-maned, pale blue-green mare with three dandelion seeds on her flank. She seemed entirely hale... save for one blind, milky white eye. The sorrow in those eyes, and the bags under them, hinted that there was more to this story... next to her stood another colt, with a steel grey coat, black mane and a cutie mark of a mask, half comedy, half tragedy. He had one feathered wing, and one wing webbed like a bat's...

"A team of crippled pegasi?" I said aloud. Several of them flinched; a sensitive issue for them, then? "I hope you did not come here hoping for some miraculous cure. I am anything but that
sort of Warlock."

The downy-winged filly shook her head. "Didn't think you were," she said, only faintly disappointed. "We are what we are. We came to deal with that years ago. Our problem is bigger than that."

Bigger than being a pegasus unable to fly properly? A pegasus' entire identity revolved around their wings, the way a prep's identity revolved around the fancy car his daddy bought him or a high school chick's revolved around the brand name on her clothes. Hell, their whole culture revolved around it. They were an epic culture of shallow, body-obsessed jocks. For a bunch of them to think something was more important than that... Now I was really curious.

"Boss." To my surprise Dodger stepped up to my side and spoke to me under his breath. He looked up at me. Then he looked over at the filly. Then back up at me. "Boss... even if you don't, I want this one."

"Indeed?"

"Trust me, Boss. You'll understand when you hear it. I want this one." His seriousness was almost alarming. I saw him dart another glance at the filly. She gave him a look that was confused, apprehensive... and faintly grateful?

Oho.

I waved my hand to the filly. "Then... I would hear this."

The filly took a deep breath. "My name is Eiderdown," she said. "This is Gale Wings, Welter Weight, Halfsies, and Winky. We're from the twin towns of Hilltop and Cirrus... a little Earth pony/Pegasus community. We are-- we were--- the Cirrus Academy's remedial flight class..."

"Remedial?" Chrysalis said. The little group of ponies nearly jumped out of their skins. They hadn't seen my sorceress-on-a-leash lurking at the shoulder of my throne. We really needed better lighting in here; not much point having a slinky female draped over your throne if noone saw her.

"C-Chrysalis??" Eiderdown gulped, eyes round.

"The one and the same," Chrysalis said, amused. "Bipedal or not." Yes, dearie, that's right, the former Queen of the Changelings is now the flunky of Darth Vulcan. My my my, aren't you in further over your head than you thought. "Explain. Remedial?"

"The dumping ground for the failures and washouts," the burly stallion behind her said. "Delinquent, dropout, or just handicapped like us." He flapped his undersize wings by way of demonstration.

"Ah," Chrysalis said, understanding. Clever of her, giving me cover for my own ignorance. Yeah, that sounded familiar. Back on Earth schools played that game too. The 'remedial' classes for my high school were supposed to help kids with learning challenges; they ended up being a dumping ground for all the students the teachers didn't want to give a crap about. If that was right, these guys had been half-screwed right from the start. I thought I could see where this was going.

It went downhill faster than I imagined.

Eiderdown went on. "We were all signed up at the same time, with a few others," she said. The aforementioned delinquents and troublemakers, I guessed. "We were lucky. We got a teacher who had gone through remedial flying herself. She was a good teacher. Before long she had us all up and flying." She smiled at the others. "We sure weren't going to be in the Wonderbolts, but we could
finally fly like regular pegasi. We had a shot at-- a shot at regular pegasus lives..." Her smile faded. "Then one day, we took a field trip to the local weather control offices. While we were there, a wild storm blew up out of the Everfree. Every weather pony in Cirrus had to scramble to Ponyville to tackle it. We were left there alone.

"So there was nopony there, nopony at all but us, when a cyclone broke free of the storm front and headed straight for Hilltop..."

There had been no time for them to send a message or even a warning to the town. So apparently the group of students, at Eiderdown's desperate urging, had improvised. They had dropped some bottled lightning into a barrel of expired rainbow juice, flown it out over the cyclone, and dropped it down the center of the funnel from above. It had worked; the explosion had blown the tornado apart, saving the earth pony town below from being ripped a new one. Parades and medals all around, right?

Nope. I couldn't believe my ears when she told me how the two towns had utterly screwed them over. Seems the blast wave from the explosion had reached the upper-crust neighborhoods of Cirrus, shattered a few windows, mussed a few flowerbeds and scared the crap out of a bunch of rich pegasi. The city council, looking for some scapegoats to sacrifice, had the entire class arrested, charged with and convicted of a laundry list of crimes-- vandalism, property destruction, unlicensed weather manipulation, underage use of etcetera, disruption of so on and so on...

The only way they got out of being sent to juvie hall or even jail, they were offered a deal. A complete BS deal. They were signed over as wards of a local cop, one of the cops that had arrested them, no less--- to be supervised while they did community service.

Who was, it seems, a complete raging prick. He ran their lives like a boot camp, sending them out to do their 'public service' in the nastiest, most grueling jobs he could find. His rules were absolute, his punishments draconian. While other kids their age were going on dates, going to the prom, spending the holidays with their families, he had them picking litter in Cirrus and shoveling cow crap in Hilltop. And this went on for five years. Their entire childhoods, literally, spent on punishment detail.

"You would have been better off," I remarked in disbelief, "taking the prison sentence."

"The deal was better," Eiderdown said. " Barely. By taking it as a group, our punishment would end when the oldest of us-- Welter Weight-- was a legal adult. And our records would be wiped clean, all at the same time..." her teeth ground together. "And... that's what happened. Technically."

"Except." I let the word hang in the air. I picked up a few gold coins and toyed with them.

"Except Lieutenant Sprinkles screwed us one last time," Halfsies spat bitterly.

"Our punishment ended last month," Eiderdown said. Her breath was catching and her eyes were watering but her voice was steady. "Because of that we were allowed to attend graduation. We stood up as a class together in Cloudsdale, accepted our diplomas... and Lieutenant Sprinkles stood up and gave a speech. Congratulating us, and informing the crowd..."

"Every pegasus in Equestria..." Welter Weight added.

"...That we had passed together, and now our criminal records were being purged of our involvement the tornado explosion incident."

It took a moment for me to get it. Why that sonuvabitch, I thought.
"Then he announced his retirement. Our records were cleared... and it didn't make a lick of difference, because he'd made sure every single pony on the planet knew we were the "violent juvenile delinquents" who set off that explosion. Our reputations are ruined--- there isn't a school, or business, or even a charity group that will touch someone with our record, expunged or not. And since he retired, we can't even get him fired for it."

"So this brings you to me?" I said. At this point I was practically wallowing in smug satisfaction. Celestia and Luna's perfect little fairy-tale world was turning out to be just as rotten as I'd expected. It was bloody amusing. I faintly noticed that the coins I had been toying with had been crushed into a ball in my fist.

Eiderdown's voice started to shake. "It gets worse," she said. She looked over her shoulder at Winky, who was crying freely now. "There... used to be more of us in our little group." Hold up, had one of them died saving their town? "Winky's special somepony, Jetstream. He was kind of rough around the edges, but he adored Winky--" she took a breath. "He and she were... intimate." Oh. Even worse. She looked down. "They... were gonna get married this year, when the program ended. But when the Lieutenant found out Winky was pregnant-- the Lieutenant threw them both out of the program." Behind her, Winky buried her face in Welter Weight's shoulder. "The program was Jetstream's last chance. He got shipped off to some military academy in the frozen North... none of us have seen him or heard word of him since..."

"And Winky?"

"They were lenient with her because of her... condition," Eiderdown said. "She got out of juvie early, got a job, even a little apartment of her own... she took good care of Twinkle. She's a good mommy! But when Sprinkles let the cat out of the bag-- word got back to Hilltop. Even there, they blame us. Her boss fired her. And now ponies who are still mad about the tornado explosion called Foal Welfare on her... yesterday they came and took Twinkle away." Her cheeks were streaked with tears. Her eyes had gone wide and desperate. She took a step toward me. "This is it. This is too much--"

"It's my fault. All of it. I was the youngest, but I talked everypony into trying to save the day. I led the way. And now-- I could put up with the cruelty and the hateful treatment and the endless work and only seeing my family one day a week and... I could even live with the truth coming out and going back to school and being called a criminal and a terrorist myself but-- Jetstream got shipped off to military academy and Halfsies got disowned and Welter Weight lost his scholarship and now they're taking little Twinkle away from her mommy and it's just too much--"

My vision went white. I was vaguely aware of standing up. I felt Chrysalis pull away from my shoulder; they told me she backed away from me with a look of absolute terror on her face. I could feel the Alicorn Amulet, cold as ice and burning like a red hot iron at the same time as something inside it rejoiced...

I suppose this was what they meant by the phrase "beside yourself." I hate bullies and I hate cops, and I hate bully cops worse than anything in life. City hall skidmarks ...judges and lawyers and elected officials, too cowardly to put on a badge and go out and beat homeless minorities with a nightstick themselves, standing behind the bully cops, pulling their strings from their nice safe offices...

I stood there in the white hot center of my rage in a sort of insane calm. Let's review, I thought. A bunch of crippled kids save their home town from a killer tornado. By way of thanks, they're put on a juvie chain gang, handed over to a sadistic martinet, treated like slaves for five years, and then after keeping their noses clean for all that time, have their futures destroyed in one fell swoop by the same
sadistic little crotch stain that helped frame them in the first place. Do we have all that down?

Oh yes. And for a final twist, let's steal a baby from its mother and ship its father off to dig latrines in the frozen north for Princess Sparklefart's illustrious Golden Army.

Oh yeah. Someone was gonna be screaming before this was all done.

My vision cleared. I looked down on the terrified pony in front of me. First things first. "What," I rasped, "do you all have to offer me?"

Her shaking stilled, even if her tears still flowed. "Nothing," she said. "Forget them. It's my bargain, it's all on me. I caused all this, I'll pay the price--"

The others started to raise a hue and cry, protesting. I drew my sword and jabbed the tip down into the stone floor. The resounding CLANG silenced them. "Well then?" I said. Purple-black light bled down my cheeks.

She swallowed and closed her eyes. "I'm a nopony," she said. "I lost everything. All I've got left is me. I'll serve you, and do anything you say." She shivered. "Anything."

"Anything?" Dodger blurted out. His voice rose in an unnatural squeak. Several males around the room chuckled. I didn't even move; I just sent streamers of purple lightning out from me in a halo, crackling around the room. That shut them up. We were going to have words later.

"So be it," I said. "Now... name your price."

She looked up at me, hope flickering in her eyes. She wet her lips. "I-- I want you to get Twinkle back," she said. "And-- and Jetstream--"

There was a throaty chuckle behind me. Chrysalis slid around me, hands trailing over my arm. Very slink-adelic. "She's lying," she said, never taking her eyes off Eiderdown.

"Anything?" Dodger blurted out. His voice rose in an unnatural squeak. Several males around the room chuckled. I didn't even move; I just sent streamers of purple lightning out from me in a halo, crackling around the room. That shut them up. We were going to have words later.

"What? No, I--"

"Oh dear, don't get me wrong. That's what you thought you wanted." Chrysalis said. "But I am an emotivore, dear. I can taste what you're really feeling like you can taste the salt of tears on your cheeks." She leaned over, hands on her knees, her fang-filled leer inches from Eiderdown's nose. "Is that ALL you want? Really? From a Dark Lord? Is that all you hunger for, after all this? After five years of injustice heaped upon injustice, by the very same ponies whose homes and lives you SAVED?"

Eiderdown started trembling. Chrysalis leered. "You know what I speak of," she said. "It's boiling in your heart, sitting like scalding bile on the tip of your tongue. Oh you want what you asked for already, but you want MORE."

I stood still and watched, mesmerized. Chrysalis put on a hell of a show. Eiderdown bit her lip, whimpering. "I... no... it's--"

Chrysalis leaned forward till her lips were an inch from Eiderdown's ear. "Wrong? Wrong to ask for a balancing of the scales? Why? Because Celestia, whose justice FAILED you, said so?"

"The pact is already sealed; put my Dark master to the test and see what he cannot accomplish. Stop lying to yourself. Say it. You want it. For your friends. For your lost future. For yourself."

Eiderdown was panting like a steam engine. "Ask for what those weak, simpering ponies-- those same ponies who betrayed you-- say you should never ask. More than your freedom back, your
names back, your lives back. Claim it and more. Say it. Tell the world what it is that they would never give you. *Say what you want!*

I don't know if Chrysalis was manipulating Eiderdown's emotions, but it was like a switch was thrown. I could almost see a light go on behind Eiderdown's eyes. Her expression of guilt and denial melted away to one of seething, un-repressed rage; she shook with fury. She put her head down, flared her wings and screamed.

"**I-- WANT-- REVENGE!!**"

"Whoa," Runt said from his hiding place behind the throne. "Mood swing."
"Your Highness! We've just received word-- the towns of Cirrus and Hilltop....

"They're gone."

I... was thorough.

The towns of Hilltop and Cirrus were... well named, I suppose. The earth pony town was, literally, situated on a hilltop, in the middle of rolling plains covered in snow. The town of Cirrus floated directly overhead, sunshine peeking down between the buildings and cloudways. It was charming and picturesque and (unlike Ponyville, crossroads to Monstertown) peaceful.

Was. So very much was.

It was a bright sunny Saturday that week. At high noon I sent one of my pre-packaged messages zipping into the center of Hilltop. It unfolded into a gigantic ghostly hologram of myself, so tall its feet straddled the hill and its head and shoulders poked up through the clouds. Screams, panic, various rook-out-its-godzirra style proclamations, the usual.

"PEOPLE OF CIRRUS AND HILLTOP," my alter ego boomed. "YOU HAVE DRAWN MY ATTENTION, TO YOUR WOE.

"SOME FEW DAYS OVER FIVE YEARS AGO, A ROGUE CYCLONE THREATENED TO DESTROY BOTH YOUR TOWNS. THANKS TO THE HEROIC EFFORTS OF A HANDBFUL OF YOUR OWN, YOUR VILLAGES WERE SPARED. BUT THEIR EFFORTS ON YOUR BEHALF WERE RECEIVED.... POORLY.

THEIR REWARD FOR SAVING YOUR HOMES, YOUR BUSINESSES, AND EVEN YOUR VERY LIVES WAS TO BE THROWN IN CHAINS BY THE SPOILED, POWER-ABUSING BRATLINGS IN YOUR CITY HALL, SUBJECTED TO SPURIOUS ACCUSATIONS, AND CONVICTED OF A HOST OF IMAGINARY CRIMES BY YOUR COZENING, CORRUPT LEGAL SYSTEM. THEY SPENT FIVE YEARS AT MENIAL LABOR AND BRUTE TREATMENT. LOST THEIR HOMES, THEIR NAMES, THEIR FREEDOM, THEIR CHILDHOODS, AND EVEN IN ONE CASE, THEIR MATE AND CHILD. AND IN THE END, EVEN THE PROMISE TO SPONGE THEIR RECORDS CLEAN WAS BROKEN. YOUR VENGEANCE AGAINST THEM FOR THEIR GOOD DEED WAS INDEED COMPREHENSIVE.

IN THE LIGHT OF THEIR WRETCHED TREATMENT AT YOUR HOOVES, I HAVE COME TO THE OBVIOUS CONCLUSION: YOU DID NOT WANT YOUR TOWN TO BE SAVED.

SO I HAVE COME TO CORRECT THEIR MISTAKE.
LET THE TOWNS OF CIRRUS AND HILLTOP BE NO MORE, AND LET ALL THOSE WHO SPEAK OF THEM DO SO IN SHAME.

Then the mayhem started.

Pegasi buildings are not made of ordinary cloud. The laborers add certain magical essences to the cloudstuff to make it stronger, more stable, and to make it hold its shape. Add enough and it will even support non-pegasi... and non-cloudstuff belongings. The moment the illusion spell finished, it burst, activating a time released spell... a slow-moving wave of magic that leached that special magical essence from every cloud in the city. Buildings slumped like warm whipped cream; arches and cloudways broke into drifting clumps. Furniture, private possessions, and more than a handful of unalert pegasi began raining from the belly of the city.

Hilltop had its own problems, above and beyond the raining furniture that is. No ponies were struck, as it so happens, because every Hilltop villager was evacuating as fast the hell as they could. One does that when buildings start disappearing down sinkholes one by one. It had been impressive when the diamond dogs had undermined houses in Ponyville, but with Heart Root leading the work it was a lot faster-- and a lot more dramatic.

There was no resistance. Probably due to the fact that the wave of destruction had been preceded by a wave of angry wasps, bees and hornets spreading through the town. Controlling insects? After controlling carnivorous trees and timber wolves, easy peasy. Purple clouds full of angry stinging insects drove the Hilltop ponies ahead of them, and swept the sky clean of any pegasi with delusions of heroics.

Once I'd driven every pony a good mile out of town, I left the clouds of bugs patrolling the perimeter. Then I sent the troops in. They looted and burned, smoke rising up to the ruins of Cirrus as more loot-- pegasi money and valuables-- rained from the sky. My orders were that not a single stone was to be left atop another; not a single stick of wood or tuft of thatch was to be left unburned. Pony or changeling, minotaur or diamond dog, they were happy to oblige.

Only a few select buildings were left standing, surrounded by swarm clouds. Three of them were being carefully emptied of their precious cargo, smuggled down dark underground tunnels to a safe redoubt.

The last one I left to Artful Dodger.

Sundae Sprinkles waited in his darkened living room, his old spear at the ready. A fine Saturday morning napping on the sofa with a good book had turned into a complete cluster-buck. The first indication he'd had that anything had gone wrong was when he'd been woken by the rumbling of the ground, followed by the shouting and screaming outside. He'd tried to go outside and see what was happening-- only to find the way blocked by a cloud of stinging insects. All the other doors and windows were blocked the same way. He'd kept his head and stuffed wet towels in all the door and window cracks, hopefully keeping the nasty buggers out, doused all his lights, and retrieved his old service helmet and spear from the closet. It'd been years since he'd seen combat, but he knew enemy action when he saw it. Rhythmic ground-shaking? Glowing purple insects that flew in formation? Take a guess, soldier.

The shaking and shouting (but not, unfortunately, the furious buzzing at the windows) had finally
stopped. All he could hear otherwise was the sound of his own breathing as he waited for the other horseshoe to drop. The bright day outside had gotten dark; he could smell smoke. Something, several somethings, hit the shingle roof with a crack. Some idiots in Cirrus drop something?

It was getting darker...

The windows went stormfront dark. The shadows in the room deepened, stretched across the floor. Something emerged from one of them. "'Ello, mate," it said, tipping a top hat to him. "Sundae Sprinkles, is it?"

Sprinkles jerked his head back as the Canterlot cockney unicorn appeared from the shadows. "That's MISTER Sprinkles to you, colt," he barked. "Who are you and how did you get into my house?"

"Oh, MISTER Sundae Sprinkles," the colt said with a leer. "I am so VERY pleased to make your acquaintance. So very, very pleased indeed." He sketched a bow and popped his hat back onto his head. "After all I'd hate to think I found the wrong fellow." His teeth glistened.

"Who are you?" Sprinkles said again, prickles crawling up his spine as he scowled at the colt. His glare had made grown stallions cringe; this snotnose just smirked like he thought it was funny.

"Oh, Artful Dodger's me name, guv," he said. "You wouldn't've heard of me. But we do have a mutual acquaintance." He held up a hoof. "Yea tall, pale blue, blonde, fluffiest wings you ever saw?" His smirk was cold as if it had been born with a fin atop it. He chuckled when Sprinkles' eyes went wide. "Oh yes... she sent me. Personal favor, from my Boss."

Sprinkles proceeded to call Eiderdown a very nasty name. Dodger tut-tutted. "And you kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"I knew one of those little shits would turn," Sprinkles said, snarling. "I figured the older ones would end up sticking ponies with a shiv in a back alley someplace-- figures it'd be the little rabble rouser who got them together in the first place instead..."

Dodger cocked his head and pursed his lips. "Wot? No regrets? No second thoughts about wrecking six ponies' lives? Sending one off to military? Another off to the poorhouse? No guilt over shafting them out of their clean slate after it all was said and done?" The house grew darker.

Sprinkles' eyes were full of disdain. "They were a bunch of brats out of Remedial," he sneered. "They wouldn't have been tossed there if they weren't already a bunch of worthless delinquents."

There was a long silence. "They were a class full of cripples, you twat," Dodger's voice said from the dark. "They were in Remedial because they could barely fly-- something that wasn't their fault. You stupid shit. I'm a frickin' unicorn and even I know that."

"Then they shoulda stayed with the groundpounders and out of the way," Sprinkle snorted dismissively. "First opportunity, and the bad breeding showed."

The silence stretched out even further. "You know, I wanted to bring her," Dodger said casually. "I wanted to let her watch. After all you did to her and her friends, she deserved to see what happened to you. I'm glad I didn't though." His voice shook.

Sprinkles' sneer grew and he hefted his spear, aiming the point for the black blot that looked like the unicorn. Big talk from a scrawny little horn-head. He blinked, trying to focus; the shadows on the wall looked like they were crawling. "And why didn't you, tough guy?" he taunted. Listen to his voice shaking with fear... he thought, amused.
He was wrong. So very wrong. It wasn't fear.

"Because," Dodger said. His eyes suddenly blazed green, two nightmarish pits in the dark. The ex-guard's soul shrivelled in dawning fear. "She might have forgiven you." The shadows lunged.

The screaming went on. Long. Loud. And far shriller than any stallion had any right to make.
Chapter 31

Help arrived by skyborne chariot in less than two hours. The Guard found the entire populace of Hilltop and Cirrus standing out in the snow, huddled around campfires, staring bleakly at the smoldering crater that had once been Hilltop Village. After the frenzy of looting and burning, the entire hill had collapsed inward, taking the burning remains of the village with it. Of Cirrus there was nothing left but a few stray wisps of cloud. Some few were weeping openly.

Once again, divine Providence—or more cynically, Darth Vulcan's meticulous planning—had spared them. There were no casualties, and while there were numerous injuries, they were relatively minor; bruises, cuts, some few burns and, strangely enough, a copious number of bee stings.

It was only as the rescue workers set to organizing everything that the worst horror Vulcan had inflicted came to light. Wails of despair went up as the citizens realized what had happened. The nursery school, the children's wing of the hospital, the orphanage, had all been evacuated---but none of their wards were anywhere to be found. Every single foal below the age of five had been abducted!

Chaos reigned outside. Tender Mercies, nevertheless, stayed at her post and kept at her work. Somepony had to organize the evacuation of the orphanage, and that somepony was her. She was in the middle of tossing the foal's files into a trolley when she felt an enormous clawed paw clamp down on the top of her head and slowly force her to turn around. She found herself face to face with an enormous diamond dog, and a one-eyed mare with a gaze that spoke volumes of how much peril Tender Mercies was currently in. "Where. Is. Twinkle?" the mare enunciated.

Tender Mercies recognized her immediately; the teenage filly whom the welfare board had found to be an unfit mother. It was hard to forget the screaming and crying and ruckus she'd thrown. "I-- they may have evacuated her already--" she stalled. She was a responsible government agent...

"Tell me where my daughter is, or I'll have Mongo here twist your head off." Mongo gave her a toothy grin and flexed his fingers around her skull.

"Oh you mean little Twinkle the unicorn filly back room to the left, third bassinet," Tender Mercies squeaked, eyes wide, face in a panicky rictus grin. That was all Winky needed. She galloped down the hall and shoved her way past the frightened volunteer workers.

"Ma Ma!"

"Twinkle!" The name was almost a scream of joy. Winky reappeared, cradling a little golden-maned, white unicorn filly on her back in her wings like she was the most precious thing in Equestria. "I've got her Mongo, I've got her," she said. Tears filled both her eyes, seeing and unseeing. "Thank you so much, Mongo...Let's go!"

The monstrous brute actually ducked his head and shuffled as if he were pleased. "Um, nope," he
Eiderdown stood with her friends in Darth Vulcan's observation room, watching events unfold on the glowing screens. They looked on, stunned, as the Dark Lord of the Everfree utterly dismantled their home town with ruthless efficiency, brick by brick, cloud sculpture by cloud sculpture. Chrysalis stood nearby, watching over them in turn. Eiderdown never took her eyes off the monitors. The haunted look in her eyes was unreadable.

Chrysalis spoke up. "So you have your revenge," she said, calm as could be. Eiderdown nodded in agreement. "At great personal cost, no less." Again, Eiderdown nodded. A shiver went through her wings, but there was no other indicator of what she was feeling. The former Queen of the Changelings stepped across the room to stand beside her. "And? Tell me... how does it feel?"

Eiderdown glanced at her. "Don't you know already?"

"I'm an emotivore, pony," Chrysalis said. "For me, this is a meal. And I learned long ago that emotions are... stronger... when the one feeling them tells you what they're feeling." She closed her eyes as if she was savoring some faint aroma. "So? How does it feel?"

Eiderdown kept her silence for a long time. Then her haunted expression firmed into something far more resolute. "How does it feel?.... It feels just about right."

Her pegasi friends were stunned. "Eidy...!"

Eiderdown looked back at them angrily. "What, am I supposed to feel sorry for them?" she said. "Am I supposed to feel guilty that lots of innocent ponies are suffering right now that didn't have anything to do with what happened to us?"

"...Well, I do." She turned back to the screen nearest to her. "But we were innocent too, and WE suffered. And who there is crying over what happened to us?"

"But..." Welter Weight started to say.

"Our town was screwed up, Welter Weight!" Eiderdown stamped her hoof. "It was a town full of bigots and racists and apathetic hypocrites. The pegasi looked down on the earth ponies, the earth ponies looked down on the Pegasi. And they all the treated poor fliers like cripples and parasites. They saw us as...as sub-standard earth ponies, with feathers.

"The ones that didn't do anything to us... they stood and watched. Their Mayor and their Guard and their judges shafted us, and they didn't raise a hoof or a horn or a feather to help us. They framed us and betrayed us and lied to us and nopony cared. Anywhere else in Equestria, the horseapples that went on would have been the scandal of the century!"

"And do you think we were the only ones? If it happened to US, it sure as Tartarus happened to others. I've heard stories about how the donkeys and mules and cows got treated.. Bigots and jerks don't just turn it on and off like a faucet.."
She stared at images of the last scraps of Cirrus blowing away, of the burning coals of Hilltop vanishing into a gigantic diamond dog sinkhole. "Maybe a couple of innocents got caught in the backwash. Maybe. But when does saying "I didn't do anything myself" start becoming a pile of horseapples? When do you START being responsible for what happens in YOUR town, on YOUR watch?

"This isn't just me getting even. This is them, reaping what they sowed. The scales finally balanced. I'm not happy that ponies are hurting.... but I won't lie and say I don't feel better."

No pony made any comment.

They stood stewing in their thoughts, when suddenly they heard the faint sound... of foals crying. Chrysalis held up a finger. "...Hold that thought." She left the room, the door booming shut behind her.

She followed her twitching ears and her empathic senses. What she found nearly floored her. One of the vaulting chambers was filled with babies. Babies babies babies. Baby unicorns, baby pegasus, baby earth ponies, even a few baby donkeys and cows. Dozens, maybe hundreds, ranging from nearly newborn to nearly five. They were everywhere, crawling, toddling, sitting on their diapered bottoms staring at nothing in particular. And a sizable percentage were crying. There were a few terrified looking pony nurses scattered among them, trying to tend to them all--- though as for that she had to reassess their expressions as a mix of terror and plain old fashioned overwhelmed. Most of the diamond dogs, with their sensitive ears, were fleeing the room with their paws clamped over their heads. Those made of sterner stuff found themselves being roped into lending a paw by the harried nursemaids. As she watched the percentage of babies who were crying went up by a few voices.

She looked over to Darth Vulcan, who was standing in the middle of the room, impassive. "What IS this?" she said, waving her arms.

Vulcan looked at her, then held up his hand. He reached under his helmet and pulled out two balls of cotton. "Augh. What was that?"

She marched over to him. "What is THIS?" she waved her arms again, indicating the room.

"We retrieved the child-- but circumstances prevented us leaving with just the one."He waved a free hand. Tiny fluttering clusters of light floated from his fingers. They danced over the foals' heads, glimmering and sparkling; nearly all the foals ceased crying and stared, entranced.

"You couldn't tell which one she was," Chrysalis said dryly.

Vulcan growled but didn't deny it. He waved at a corner; Winky sat there, cradling a tiny blonde and white unicorn foal in her forelimbs. "By the time we regrouped, and figured out that the mare had found her foal herself, we couldn't exactly turn back and return them."

"Do you have any idea how badly Celestia is going to freak?" Chrysalis hissed at him.

"Calm your temporary tits," he said. "They'll be gone within the hour. Oh don't give me that look, I won't harm a hair on their heads," he went on, annoyed at Chrysalis' expression. (Changeling or not, she was female. Never stir up a woman's maternal instincts.) "They will be returned to the ponies, and reunited with their rotten, bigoted, irresponsible parents and/or caretakers. But I intend to milk one last thing out of this entire situation."
"And that would be?" Chrysalis said.

Darth Vulcan waved his hand. The circling sparkles drifted down over the foals, cloaking them in color-changing glitter. "An object lesson."

"That monster," Celestia said. "That sadistic, heartless monster!" Luna stood next to her in silent agreement. Messengers had flown back and forth between Canterlot and the rescue site, each incoming one a bearer of bad news. The latest one had left them both reeling in shock at the ruthlessness of it; Darth Vulcan had kidnapped every foal in Hilltop and Cirrus. Not a trace was to be found of any colt or filly below the age of five. The refugees of Hilltop and Cirrus were already on their way, via train, to Canterlot. They would receive sanctuary there till better arrangements could be made-- and until the frightened, grieving parents could learn of the fate of their children.

Celestia remembered the cruelty with which the warlock had handled his earth filly hostage and shuddered. What would that brute do to those poor, frightened babies?

"Look, I said no."

The diamond dog bitch looked up at me with sad, huge eyes.

"No! It's a bad idea."

She held up the wriggling bundle in her arms.

"I don't care if it's one of the ones from the orphanage. Ponies are going to be looking for it."

The foal, a scruffy brown earth pony colt, waved his hooves and made baby pony noises.

"Look there's just no way a diamond dog can adopt an earth pony! Thats---"

"Mama!" the foal said. "Wuf Wuf, Mama!" He giggled and crowed. Oh that was dirty pool.

The bitch whined faintly.

"OH FINE!" I yelled, exasperated. "Keep him! But I'd better hear you took proper care of him-- ask one of the pony roughnecks what to feed him and junk..." I facepalmed over my helmet. "Dodger, add a postscript to that letter..."

Celestia returned to the palace with a heavy heart. It had been painful beyond measure, greeting the ponies that had been so horribly exiled, trying to comfort the ones fearing for their children with false confidence and empty words. She could only hope that her presence had inspired some small crumb
of hope with them.

She alighted at the front gate, only to find Luna waiting for her with a most peculiar expression on her face. "Sister! Do we have further word from the Guard on the search?"

Luna's expression was indecipherable. "One might say that..." she said. She turned and led Celestia back to the throne room... then wordlessly passed it, heading for Celestia's private quarters. "Shortly after your departure, another of Darth Vulcan's boastful missives arrived in the throne room," she said. "He informed us of many things behind his recent actions, mocked us for our inaction and incompetence-- the usual one would expect."

They entered the royal tower and began ascending the stairs. "He meandered for some time before I realized that it was a ruse... a flamboyant distraction. When I finally dispersed the sending, I scanned the castle with all due haste, fearing he had breached our defenses in some manner. He had."

For some reason there were a number of servants and nurses in the stairwell. They raced past with barely a 'your highness'. "Sabotage?" Celestia said. Luna shook her head.

"A delivery," she said. "And a message." She opened the doors to Celestia's suite.

Celestia goggled. Her opulent quarters were filled with foals. sitting, standing, crawling, being fussed over by nerve-wracked nursemaids. They were on the bed, on the floor, everywhere; through the doorways to the rest of the suites she could see even more. One of the nurses, a haggard, stressed out looking unicorn mare, came up to Celestia, curtseyed shakily, and levitated a sheaf of parchment up to her. "It's from Darth Vulcan himself," she stammered. "H-he told me to give it directly to you, and nopony else..."

Celestia took the stack of loose pages and began to read.

Greetings, Celestia.

In case you haven't guessed, I am hereby returning the "kidnapped" foals of Hilltop and Cirrus to your care, personally. You see, unlike your wretched, corrupt, self-righteous agents, I would never steal a child from its mother's arms... at least not permanently.

But, In the face of the callous ingratitude and cruelty of the citizens of Hilltop-Cirrus, I felt the need to subject them to a little object lesson. You see, some five years ago a handful of your little ponies were subjected to the tender mercies of judicial corruption and bureaucratic incompetence. (detailed in the following pages for your amusement.) As a consequence of that, an innocent mother-to-be lost her fiancee, her home, her job, and her child. Were it not for my intervention--

That's right. MY intervention. You useless cow.

---she would have spent the rest of her life grieving, looking into the face of every foal with just the right color of coat or mane, wondering if it was hers. Her so-called fellow villagers subjected her to the worst agony a mother can know. So I decided that it would only be fair that they suffer, for a short while, the smallest inkling of what they tried to do to her.

Have assloads of fun sorting them out, bitch.

Sincerely,

Darth Vulcan.

While reading she had laid down on the bed; several of the foals had curled up along her side,
nuzzling close. Puzzled at his final sentence, she looked down at them. Oh, they were sweet. A little unicorn foal with a white coat and gold mane... And another little unicorn foal with a white coat and a gold mane... and a pegasus foal with a white coat and a gold mane...

Her eyes widened as she looked around and realized that every last one of the foals had the same coat, mane-- and yes, even eye color! "That sonovabitch," she blurted out.

Luna was lying on the floor, playing with three of the foals. "Iss widdle piddy went to market, iss widdle piddy stayed home--- Tia! Language!" she scolded, putting her hooves over the nearest foal's ears.

"Augh. He cast an illusion on them. They all look alike!"

"We know," lamented one of the nursemaids. "We tried to dispel it, but we can't figure out how! We don't want to try any stronger disillusion charms, they might hurt the baby!"

Celestia faceplanted in the mattress. "We'll never figure out which foal goes to which parent. They're perfectly identical!"

One of the nursemaids looked up from changing a diaper. She looked down, then back up again. "Well, um, not perfectly identical..." she said, snickering a little.

"Fabulous." Celestia groaned. She did a delicate scan of one of the foals crawling on her. Yes, it was a complex and knotty spell; it would disperse on its own in about a week... a week of the foals' parents going spare with worry as to whether they had the right child. She looked at the note, hoping for a clue.

*P.S. deduct three foals from the headcount-- two fillies and a colt-- for the orphanage. They have found adoptive homes with members of my horde, listed on the back of this page. You'll excuse them if they don't file the proper paperwork --D.V.*

Celestia stared. "You've got to be kidding me."

The haggard nurse who'd delivered the letter spoke up. "Nope," she said. "He even had me give them a new baby care package and a copy of 'Your New Foal and You.' "

Luna scrutinized her curiously. "Thou seemest strangely unperturbed."

The mare shrugged. "Compared to some of the real parents I've seen? They could have done worse."

Luna turned to her sister. "We hath made the strangest enemies over the years," she said.

Celestia scowled at the quip. She began reading the rest of the missive, hoping to learn more of this incident that had provoked Darth Vulcan's wrath. Her silence lengthened and her face grew thunderous as she read. "Luna," she said in an all-too-calm voice. "Is this account of what happened... correct?"

"I know not, Sister," Luna said. "But Vulcan believed it enow to raise his wroth."

Carefully extricating herself from the napping foals, Celestia got to her feet. "I believe I am going to send for Twilight," she said. "I think it would do her good as a Princess to conduct an inquiry into the events surrounding this." She paused. "Because I do not trust myself to remain in control, should I start asking questions of those responsible myself."
Down in the throne room, much to the fury and vexation of the Captain of the Guard, a pony was found. It was Lieutenant Sundae Sprinkles. Nopony saw him brought in, and nopony saw whomever brought him leave. It was clear that he had been brought, rather than arriving under his own power: nopony could walk on four broken legs, or fly on two plucked wings. He lay at the foot of the throne, whimpering and twitching, his eyes staring into nothing, curled as far into a fetal position as the splints on his leg would allow.

He would recover in time for the hearing. But he would never be the same.

"To begin at the beginning, I don't think I can even list all the laws, codes of professional conduct and internal regulations that were violated in the course of these events," Twilight Sparkle said, glaring down from her throne. Her investigation had been thorough, and her shock, disappointment and outrage had been unflagging.

Gathered on the bench before her were the ponies she had determined were the most direct culprits; the former mayors, judges, city councilponies, weather bureau authorities--- let it be cut to the chase and state that she had basically all of Hilltop and Cirrus' former City Hall sitting in front of her while she read them the riot act. none of them looked defiant or confrontational: after the devastation of their towns they didn't have the energy for that. Their defensive bluster stripped away, they sat silently while the Princess of Friendship flayed them with her tongue.

"I can't even start to list them all," she repeated. "But I can darned sure give you the highlight reel." She got down off her throne and began pacing in front of the row of erstwhile public officials.

"First off your Remedial program is a farce. It was funded by the Crown and was intended to be a fallback class for those who, due to physical handicaps or other hardships, were struggling to learn flight, rudimentary magic, or elementary Earth pony skills. Instead it has become a dumping ground for your juvenile delinquents, truants.... and worse, for countless colts and fillies whom the staff merely didn't wish to bother over. So much so that the class itself has a stigma that clings to the few who manage to survive it. Upon further investigation it was discovered that this was due to underfunding and apathetic hiring practices on part of your school board-- the teacher's slot itself was a dumping ground for those with tenure, but dismal educational skills, who could not be fired. Those few good teachers who worked there were given the dregs of the school budget, and expected to work miracles with it. The Remedial Flier's teacher at the time of this incident is to be commended for her near-heroic efforts in getting those colts and fillies airborne under those circumstances.

"The next in this parade of incompetence was your local weather bureau--- which was understaffed, undertrained, and undisciplined. Weather Bureau regulations state that the lookout post be staffed with at least six ponies at all time. This was more than you had on the ROSTER. When the reports of the rogue storm rolled in they took off to the last pony to respond, abandoning their post and leaving the students in question there alone... so when part of the storm deviated and turned into a cyclone, nopony was there to even sound the alarm.

"The students in question acted in good faith, tartarus, they acted heroically-- knowing that they were the only ones on hand, and that if the tornado was not diverted or stopped, homes would be destroyed and ponies would die. They managed to jury-rig a funnel depth charge, flew over, and
dropped it inside, dispersing the tornado and saving your town. This of course violated a laundry list of safety regulations and laws..."

"HOWEVER! There is a precedent in Equestrian Law known as the Greater Good clause, the Urgent Imperative, aka the Good Deed Law... It states that if a pony commits an unavoidable criminal act in the course of saving a life-- for example, breaking and entering to rescue a pony from a burning building--- they cannot be charged with that crime. There are also multiple laws on the books covering the waiver of various minor laws in a state of emergency...." She spun and stuck her face in that of a humbled-looking pony in judge's robes till their noses scrunchedy. "Which you should be fully aware of, Judge Weighty Scale. The moment those charges were pressed they should have been dismissed. Instead, you carried the case forward-- and made your utterly laughable and unlawful judgment."

She returned to pacing. "Why? It seems there were a litany of complaints-- petty complaints-- from certain influential ponies about broken windows, disturbing the peace, and other such rubbish. And, from what I've gleaned from internal memos I found in your files---" several blanched--- "A commonly voiced concern that somepony might make note of how understaffed the Weather Office was, and start asking where all the Crown's funding for salaries was going." She glared at them poisonsly. "And hints that you might want a scapegoat. I didn't find anything that was definitive... but I am turning what I have found over to the Equestrian Revenue Agency and recommending an investigation for embezzlement." Several ponies swallowed.

"The colts and fillies were railroaded. They were given no representation, no legal counsel, and were interrogated without their parents or guardians present-- in clear violation of Equestrian law, again-- and bullied into accepting a wretched, crook-shanked "deal" that shafted them twenty ways from Sunday, just to get their names cleared of a crime which they had not even committed, much less should have been convicted. Five years-- FIVE YEARS of 'public service' to 'pay off' their alleged debt.

"If they had been employed by the City at the going wage for that type of work, they could have paid the city off for all the damages, out of their own pockets, after ONE!

"They were then turned over to an old-school Pegasus Ableist-- a sadist and a cretin who was on record from his service in the guard as despising the less-able as "useless eaters and breeders". He is one of those thick-witted brutes who mentally equates physical handicap with being morally defective. ---He thinks that being lame or sick or weak is proof you're wicked, stupid, and a thug," she translated for the peanut gallery.

"And he decided that, since he could not legally raise a hoof to them, it was his job to emotionally abuse the wickedness out of them. He subjected them to five years of emotional and verbal abuse, with draconian restrictions on their lives and broad-sweeping punishments for any 'disrespect'. In the first year alone, his wards submitted over a dozen documented complaints about his behavior...

"Which, I have determined, were promptly ashcanned the moment they arrived, or sent back with warnings that further "intractibility" would result in them forfeiting the deal they had made. Two of them, in fact, were thrown out of the deal, because of 'violating rules about interpersonal conduct' which were a load of illegal tripe-- yes, Mister Sprinkles," she said over her shoulder to the wheelchair-bound pony, "it is illegal to forfeit a plea bargain because one of the signees got pregnant."

She stopped in front of her throne and faced them. "Any and all of the above would be enough to utterly screw the lot of you over," she said, eyes blazing. "But the piece de resistance, the rotten cherry on top of this elephant turd sundae, was that after all this was done, you still welshed on the
agreement. Mister Sprinkles here arranged for the contents of their criminal file-- which were supposed to be sealed-- to be publicly broadcast to the entire population of Hilltop Town and Cirrus Town, by way of a speech given during a graduation ceremony.

"For which action NONE OF YOU penalized him in any way."

She sat down wearily in her throne, her anger all but spent. "I've never been so angry," she said. "Never been so angry, so furious, so... disappointed. I investigated, I spoke with your townsponies, read reports from those who'd passed through your community. I wanted to scan your entire population for Changeling infiltrators when I was done! The Remedial Class incident was only scratching the surface. Never have I seen a community of ponies with such institutionalized prejudice, callousness, hard-heartedness, corruption, and--- and utter indifference to injustice done in their name." She shook her bowed head. "For whatever reason, at some point, something went wrong. Callous prejudice and cruelty grew where harmony was intended. There was something ugly and toxic endemic to your twin community, and rebuilding it would only be an invitation for it to bloom and fester again." She gave them the gimlet eye. "And anyway, it is my guess that most of the ponies from your civic infrastructure are going to be busy with criminal trials of their own." The ponies in the front row cringed.

Twilight sighed, and lifted her gavel. "It is going to be my recommendation to Celestia and Luna that full criminal investigations be set into motion on the conduct of the leadership of Hilltop-Cirrus township--- and that not one red cent of the Crown's money be spent on rebuilding either Hilltop or Cirrus." The gavel came down.

A hue and cry went up from the gallery. Some few of the civic authorities-- former civic authorities-- of the demolished township tried to protest. Most were too subdued. It was with a heavy heart that Princess Twilight Sparkle left the courtroom.
I read the newspaper, stunned, as the newest inductees into the Darth Vulcan diamond dog tribe played around my feet. The colt, at least, was already picking up his parents' more doggy habits; he was attacking my boots and chewing savagely on the buckles. "They're cutting them loose to swing?" I exclaimed. "This is not exactly what I expected."

Chrysalis looked at me, puzzled. "Why not? Wasn't the destruction of those towns your goal? Didn't you decide that they deserved to be wiped off the map?"

I folded the paper. "Yes." I brooded for a second.

"You weren't WANTING them to rebuild that hole, were you?"

"No--" I reflected. "Actually, maybe? It certainly would have tied up more of their resources, which would have been to our advantage." I frowned behind my mask. "And this decision by Sparkles seems unusually ruthless for her..."

"And you disapprove?" Chrysalis asked. She was clearly baffled. "Odd that you should get so soft hearted after the fact."

"I'm not soft hearted," I snorted.

Artful Dodger looked up from sorting the daily reports and squinted at me. "This is one o' them 'human' things again, innit?"

"No. Yes. Maybe?" I scowled. "---I'm just a little confused that the Powder Puff Princesses decided to cooperate with me on destroying one of their own villages. I expected her to come down on the judge and the mayor and the like, but the whole town?"

Chrysalis and Dodger traded a look. "It rather sounds like it is a 'human' thing," Chrysalis said. She stroked her chin with a finger. "Tell me... what would you have expected a human to do?"

"Rebuild the town," I said, with a verbal shrug. "I expected the usual response; that the town was full of 'innocent people' who didn't have anything to do with what happened to that class full of pegasus kids." I hoped my snort of disdain got across what I thought of that excuse. "A slew of firings and jail sentences, and then all the good people of Hilltop get their houses rebuilt."

Dodger nodded. "A human thing, yep."

"Definitely," Chrysalis said.

I threw my paper down in my lap and looked that them. "All right. Explain."

Chrysalis spoke carefully. "Lord Vulcan, do you know what a 'Poisoned Herd' is?" At my blank stare she continued. "It's a pony term, but changelings carry a similar idea, 'anti-synergy.' It's the idea that, even though all the individual parts are passable, sometimes, something about putting together this place, in this time, with these ponies, produces something... toxic. Dysfunctional." She tossed her green mane. "Some would say that was what happened when I took lead of our Swarm..."
crossed her arms defensively. "Any way, something about that community just doesn't work. It's even self-perpetuating... different leaders, new ponies, changes in the rules, nothing seems to change it."

"And so the only solution is to break up the system," I concluded. "Dissolve the municipality, or whatever. Scatter the ponies to the four winds, so that whatever went wrong, dies."

"It happens, guv," Dodger insisted. "Ain't there no human towns or cities that just never seem to get any better, so bad that the only solution is to ruddy burn it to the ground?"

I considered that one. There were certainly a lot of legends of cities like that in human folklore; places so decadent or depraved that the gods had to destroy them. Sodom and Gomorrah, the Tower of Babel, Atlantis, Nineveh, ... and a lot of real ones, too, if the theologians are right about God's opinion of those cities. Ubar, Port Royal, Helike, Pompeii... kinda showed a predilection in human nature to approve the divine 'kill it with fire' approach to city renovation.

There were more than a few where the human race didn't sit around waiting for God to clean the slate, too: The sacking of Carthage. The destruction of Troy. Flattening a town or city to rubble was a standard practice back in the bad old days. City rebelled against the Emperor or the Khan? Make sure there wasn't any city left to ever rebel again.

"Still. In this case. Did they really think the town was that far gone when I showed up?" I asked.

"Better to lose the town easy than to wait and let it kill itself, I suppose," Chrysalis shrugged. "Think about it. Think about what the ponies there did to their own children. All that petty cruelty." She sniffed disdainfully. "You and I may agree that ponies are soft and sugary and insipid. But they're certainly not cruel to their own. What happened there-- does that sound like normal ponies to you? Cruel, sadistic, unfeeling? It was certainly enough to send you into a rage. Something about that town was so abnormal that the ponies living there stopped acting like ponies."

Now that was a thought to ponder.

"Do you truly stand by this judgment, Twilight?" Celestia asked, her brow creased. "Even as heartless as their treatment of those poor foals was, to deny them the aid of the Crown?" She looked worriedly at her student over her cooling cup of tea.

"Forsooth, we did not think thou didst have such steel," Luna said from her own divan. "Art thou certain this is not.. excessive?"

Twilight took a deep breath, let it out, and nodded. "I stand by my judgment," she said. "The Crown should not give a single plugged bit to Hilltop or Cirrus."

"But what of the ponies there?" Celestia protested. "What of the many families, and children, and businesses? Do you truly believe that the guilt of their leaders extends down to all of them? What possible corruption could be so deep that you, of all ponies, would condemn all of them?"

Twilight sighed again. "I'm not condemning them," she said. "I'm just cutting off the source of the problem."

The alicorn sisters shared a look. Celestia cocked an eyebrow. "Explain."
Twilight looked into her teacup. "Prin... Celestia... did you ever hear the story of Zekwantu and the snake hunt?"

"I... can't say I have," Celestia confessed. "A zebra folk tale?"

"Zebra history, actually," Twilight said. "Zecora taught it to me. Zekwantu was a great chieftain in the Zebra lands. He ruled many tribes. There came a time when one of their lands became overrun with poisonous snakes. Cobras. They got into the henhouses, bit foals, became a deadly nuisance. To solve the problem, Zekwantu offered a bounty of one silver bit for every cobra caught. He offered it for many years, and handed out many thousands of bits... but the problem did not lessen. In fact it only got worse.

It wasn't until he investigated that he discovered that his generous reward money had funded the creation of a whole new industry in the land." She paused for dramatic effect.

"And that would be?" Celestia asked.

"Do-it-yourself snake farming," Twilight said dryly. It took Celestia a moment to get it, but when she did she exploded into gales of laughter. Luna joined in, snorting in amusement. "I assume he ended the bounty," Celestia said, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Yes," Twilight said. "Of course the farmers just released all their snakes into the wild... and thus they ended up with more poisonous snakes everywhere than when they started out." Celestia exploded into gales of laughter again, Luna joining in. When the laughter finally tapered off, Luna looked at her sister's protege'.

"Tis an amusing tale, but what doth it relate to the fate of yon Hilltop?"

Twilight set her cup down. "Did you know that the Crown has a special fund for communities that set up remedial education programs?" she said. "And that the amount of the payout is directly proportional to the number of 'at need' students in the program?"

Luna paused. "Dost thou mean--"

"Yes," Twilight nodded. "Hilltop-Cirrus' 'Remedial Flyers' class was a dumping ground for even the most mildly inconvenient students. It was poorly staffed, perpetually underfunded... at least according to the town treasurer... overcrowded, and a perpetual cash cow for the city. Every year, for every 'troubled' student in that class or any related class, the Crown dropped a lump sum straight into the city treasury."

Luna swore, and Celestia looked like she'd bitten down on a lemon. "That was just the beginning of the mess," Twilight said. "Did you know that Hilltop-Cirrus was the recipient of a special grant for towns at risk for weather disasters? It seems they're right in what my friend Rainbow Dash calls "tornado alley." The town actually lost out on a substantial cash payout when those children stopped that tornado.

Their weather patrol payroll is funded entirely by a grant from the Crown. Their orphanages and child welfare services get another royal grant as well. They're on the short list for farming subsidies--we literally PAY them to grow nothing but empty fields... " she shook her head. "Even their founding was due to a royal handout. They heard of a royal subsidy for 'dual tenancy' towns and literally pushed Cirrus over top of Hilltop so they'd qualify!

"When Zekwantu put a royal bounty on snakes, he got what he paid for: more snakes. When the government hands out bags of money to people to solve problems, it gets what it paid for: more
problems to solve. Hilltop-Cirrus was a community whose backbone was built on a chronic flow of 'compassionate help' from the crown in the form of gold coin: grants, relief funds, subsidies. And the constant promise of Royal help, Royal handouts, and Royal solutions made them more and more heartless. I spoke to the refugees from those towns. I saw how they would scarcely lift a hoof to help each other, not even to help carry a box of belongings. Do you know what the most common response was, when I pointed out that they had neighbors in need?

"...Ain't there a program from the Princesses for that? What do I pay my taxes for?"

Twilight sighed, like a pony setting down a massive load. "That's why I cut them off. I didn't revoke their municipality; I just told them the Crown wasn't going to give them a plugged bit. If there was anything like a real community there, if they have any compassion for their neighbors, or pride in themselves, if they can learn to stand on their own four hooves and learn to lean on one another, they'll get together and rebuild. And they'll be better ponies and a better town in the end for it."

The three Princesses sat in silence, mulling over what had been said. Celestia reflecting painfully on the thousands of royally funded handouts and gratuities she had created over the centuries; Luna brooding darkly over how her sister's overweening compassion and clever plans had produced such a bitter crop... "So tell us," Luna said finally. "How did Zekwantu get rid of the snakes, finally?"

The corners of Twilight's mouth curled up as she took a sip from her teacup. "He didn't," she said. "The village idiot from his home town did."

"How?" Luna said.

"He got tired of getting bit, and bought a mongoose."
The Remedials.... I really needed to come up with a better name to call them... stood in front of me, in the throne room of the main lair. They all looked up at me apprehensively-- well, except for Winky; she was too busy nuzzling and fussing over Twinkles to care what something as inconsequential as a Dark Overlord had to say. I looked down at them from my throne.

"Eiderdown. Step forward."

Trembling slightly but with her head held high, she stepped out in front of the group. "Your vengeance is complete. Now comes the settling of accounts."

She nodded, and knelt before me, her soft-feathered wings spread in the traditional pegasus supplication. Her eyes dropped to the floor. "What is thy bidding, my master?" she said.

I nearly shat myself.

"HNRGHK! -- I-- have decided--" I wheezed, straining so hard not to laugh I though I was going to prolapse. I got control of myself. "Wheeze.... I have decided," I said calmly, "On your disposition.

"You have offered yourself, your servitude, as payment. I accept. But I have little, if any need at the moment for what few abilities you possess. I have decided therefore that you shall repay your debt to me... as a servant to my most loyal follower and apprentice. Artful Dodger, step forward."

"Me?" Dodger said. Or tried to, I suppose; all that came out of him was a startled adolescent honk. Nevertheless he obeyed. He stepped down off the dais and stood in front of Eiderdown. He tried to hide it with an adolescent swagger, but I could practically see the nervousness rolling off him in waves.

I chuckled to myself. This was going to be good.

"This is your master," I told her. "You will serve him, tend to his needs, and do anything he commands, the same as you promised to me." I waved a hand. "Artful Dodger, from this moment forth she is yours. Her duty is to you; her care and keeping are your charge." I flicked my finger, sending a tiny bundle of dark magic to light on Dodger's horn. It was a little trick I'd worked out; it vibrated his horn, using bone conduction to send him private little messages or instructions only he could hear. She is your charge, I repeated silently. I may need her later, so she'd better not come to harm. ANY harm. From ANY pony. Understood?

He got the message; I could see it in his eyes. He nodded his head, swallowing.

She made no attempt to hide the dismay on her face. Around the crowded throne room, low chuckles and a few muttered rude suggestions were made as to what "anything" included. Dodger snapped his attention to the commenters and casually flipped them the unicorn equivalent of the bird. "Hello again, Ducklin'," he said to her, giving her what he obviously thought was a cocky grin. "Don't worry luv, Oi'll take care o' you." She turned her head away, biting her lip-- but she nodded. "Here,
ducklin'." He flipped his hat off and pulled something out of it. It unfolded in his grasp, a silver choker with a gemstone cut to match his own slit-pupiled eyes.

Fumbling in his eagerness, he fastened it around her neck. "There now, safe an' sound." He leaned in. "Boss gave me that...means you work for me. Means nopony will fuss wi' you." He raised his voice. "Take a good look, you lot. See that gem? She's MINE, long as she wears it. So HOOVES OFF!" Some of the men jeered. The smarter ones shut up and nodded.

The other broken birds (that might be a good group name... hmm) watched the proceedings with unhappiness. "Wait!" Gale Wings said, breaking away from the group. "You can't do this! You can't just... give her to him like a..." she sputtered to a halt. "Please, don't do this!"

"Galey, please, don't," Eiderdown said. "I made the deal, I'm paying the price..."

Gale looked at Eiderdown. "Five years, Eidy, five years we were practically slaves! We can't let you be made a slave again, not for us--!

"I AM NO SLAVER!" I roared, slamming my fist on the arm of the throne. The room fell silent; I'd apparently scared the hell out of everyone with that outburst. Hell, I'd scared the hell out of myself. I sat back, smothering that burst of anger back down. "She is indentured, payment made and accepted, of her own free will. She will go free again, but only after I have determined the scales are balanced."

"How long?" Gale demanded.

I was about to answer when I was interrupted. "Don't matter," Welter Weight said, moving forward. "We'll share the load." He stared at me, jaw set. "That's the deal I wanna make, Darth Vulcan. Whatever the payment is she has to make... we'll split it between us. I'm not gonna walk free and leave her carrying the load. We're in this together. I'll... I'll trade my freedom to you, in exchange for that." The others made loud noises of agreement.

"I don't think you kin render all the same services, bub," someone hollered from the background. Hoots and jeers followed it. I fired another levin bolt into the wall to silence them... man, this room was getting a collection of scorch marks.

I couldn't help facepalming. "You... don't quite get the scenario, do you," I said. They looked at me, confused. I explained, slowly. "You were already outcasts. Now you are fugitives from the law. All of you. Your home town was leveled, and Celestia and Luna know for whom it was done, and why. They're probably already out looking for you, along with me. If they find you, they'll blame you for what happened and throw you in the nearest dungeon. Your only sanctuary is either in exile, or here with me. You can't barter with me with your freedom because you don't have any."

The light dawned in their faces. Gale Wind's eyes went wide with shock... then she broke down into tears.

"Aww, man-- we've been shafted again!" Halfsies yelled. He jumped into the air and shot towards the throne, hooves swinging. "You con-artist creep--!"

I caught him in a ball of magic. He hung there in the air, trying to punch and kick me for all he was worth. "No, you little asshat," I said. "I didn't shaft you. I'm just stating the realities of your situation. I told you, I don't take slaves. I'm giving you sanctuary because that was part of the deal Eiderdown made with me-- safety for you all. But if you want a deal with me you're just..."
going to have to barter with something other than your freedom." I set him down. "Nice try by the way. Gutsy. I approve." Intimidated, and a little confused by the compliment, he backed up to rejoin the others.

"Now let's try again. You are exiles. For now. Leave me, and you are free to go anywhere you wish. Stay in the Everfree, I will give you sanctuary and free passage, as Eiderdown was promised.

"But if you serve me... if you become my agents... then you will share in the spoils." I held out my gauntleted hand and clutched it into a fist. "When you leave my service you will carry the wealth of kings on your backs, and noone will dare lay hand, hoof, horn, wing or claw on you."

"He means it," Chrysalis said casually. "If you doubt it, look around you. These diamond dogs? Once starving slaves to a dragon. Those ponies? Prisoners from Celestia's own dungeons. And even though he defeated me, and took mastery of my changelings-- he spared my life, saved me from Sombra's cannibal vines, and set me at his side as his mistress--"

"--Phrasing!--" I growled in warning.

"-- mistress of sorcery. Ahem." She gave them a slow suggestive wink.

"Rrgh!"

"Be that as it may," Chrysalis said clearly disappointed, "Those who serve my master, thrive. Those who betray him... suffer." Her eyes flashed green in warning.

"So... cross you and we die. Work for you and we leave rich and powerful?" Welter Weight said.

"In brief, yes."

"All of us?" Gale Wing demanded. "Eiderdown too?" Her eyes were wet and her voice was wobbly. Geez, these ponies could give Charles Dickens pause with their glurge.

"Eiderdown too."

"For how long?" Halfsies asked suspiciously.

"My ambitions are great, my plans... mercurial by necessity," I said. "But let us set the pact at one year. Then, we shall see."

They looked at each other. "We agree," Winky said, cradling Twinkle close. The others voiced their agreement.

As I did with all my petitioners, I had been monitoring them closely... through the tenuous connection I held with my Changeling guards and Chrysalis herself. It wasn't mind reading, but it enabled me to read their emotions, their intent and sincerity. They seem sincere, Chrysalis sent to me, confirming what I sensed.

Agreed. looks like we have ourselves some more pegasi, I replied.

Of what use will they be? Chrysalis wanted to know, genuinely curious.

Chrysalis, these five have been seriously underestimated. I sent back.
A lot of that going around, is there? she said.

Chrysalis, they flew into the heart of a tornado, carrying a live bomb they jerry-rigged from a barrel and some leftover industrial waste. That's the kind of teamwork crazy improv the A-Team couldn't pull off. I knew she wouldn't get the reference, but I enjoyed using it anyway. With a little makeup or some minor illusions, most of them could pass for normal ponies. They have weather handling know-how, and I bet a grab bag of other clever little skills they picked up as "juvenile delinquents" in the system. They're fiercely loyal to each other, to the point of being willing to sell themselves into servitude for each other... and my personal favorite prerequisite, a massive grudge against 'The Man.' We now have an aerial team capable of demolitions, sabotage, and espionage who can work anywhere from Ponyville to Cloudsdale. And all they wanted was a fair shake. If I can't find a place for these guys, and win their devotion doing it, I'm a bigger idiot than that Sundae Sprinkles buttwipe.

And they remind you of a certain somepony, she added with a twist of amusement, that believes he too got shafted by 'The Man...'

I didn't get my winning personality by being my community's favorite son, I sent back. "So be it," I said aloud. "Artful Dodger, get them all settled. Rooms, amenities, so forth. Make sure they are comfortable and fed. You might put Winky and Twinkles in a room near Big Mama's wing... ask Big Mama where she keeps the nappies and other baby needs. Do not," I advised Winky in an aside, "let Big Mama babysit.

"Arrange the rest as you see fit; try and keep them close together if you can. And your charge--" Eiderdown's wings shivered briefly. "--will share quarters next to your own."

Dodger cocked an eyebrow. "Right. All together, scattered apart, near one wing and situated in another, with completely separate quarters for one that I'll share with 'er. Got it." I growled, he ignored it. "Fine. I'll work summat out. Heart Root, I might need a new tunnel dug. Come on, you lot, let me show you to your luxurious accommydations." He trotted off jauntily, the nervous Broken Birds following close in his wake. "Don' worry, ducklin,' I heard him say to Eiderdown. "I got some right luvverly quarters for a pretty bird like you..."

I couldn't help it; I started to chuckle. "Something amuses you?" Chrysalis said, giving me a quizzical look.

I cut off the Voice of Doom and responded to her under my breath. "Artful Dodger and his new playmate," I said. "This is going to be hilarious."

"Not the term I would have used," Chrysalis said with a faint curl of her lip. A whiff of disgust and... disappointment?... came down our connection to me. "You claim to despise slavery, yet you give this filly over to him as a-- a plaything?"

"As a personal servant, and nothing more," I said calmly.

"And we all know how personal that's going to be..." she started to say.

I waved my hand at her and brought my fingertips and thumb together in the 'shut up' gesture. "This is something of a test... or a lesson. Bit of both, actually." I chuckled again. It was too dang funny. "But I got a really, really good guess how this is going to pan out. Didn't you scan him when this went down?"

"I didn't need to," she sneered, crossing her arms. "There's a particular aura to 'sweaty eager teenage male.'"
"You should have paid more attention," I said. Due to the Alicorn Amulet, I had a sort of 'tether' connecting me to every Changeling under my command, including Chrysalis. I'd learned I could get information--sensory information, feedback, that sort of thing--through it. And while Chrysalis had the empathic powers of one, I had the data feed from dozens of them. It was like being connected to an entire radar or camera array instead of just one: I had way better "resolution" than even Chrysalis did. With all the changeling guards in the room, I'd been able to read Dodger like a book.

"Ever since I took Dodger in and started mentoring him, I've been listening to him brag about how he was going to have himself a whole harem of the prettiest mares bits could buy, once we made our move out into the open," I said. "Hour after hour of typical skinny little teenage Facebook B.S. about how smoooooth he was with the ladies, and how they'd all be eating out of his hoof once he showered a little swag on 'em.

"I paid attention to him, not just his running mouth. Oh he's got swagger, all right, a nice thin layer over top a lot of puberty-laden sweaty eagerness. But it's all talk. You know how much actual experience with girls he actually has? Zero. Less than zero. He's more virginal than virgin olive oil pressed by a score of vestal virgins in a virgin monastery built on virgin territory in the Virgin Islands.

"Oh, I'm watching him. But you know what I picked up when I handed his new lovely bondservant over to him? Under all that bragging and swagger?

"....Pure, unadulterated terror."

She looked at me. I looked at her.

"Oh this is going to be good--" she said.

"You get the nachos, I'll warm up the monitor room," I replied, getting to my feet.

"Deal!"

Hey, what's the point of being Dr. Evil if you can't enjoy it?

Damned if Chrysalis didn't get back with the nachos just as someone knocked on the monitor room door. "Oh bloody hells, WHAT?" I shouted.

"It Mongo, Dread Lord." Mongo--? Oh, right, the huge 'dog that had tagged around after Winky and Twinkle. He'd apparently taken a shine to them and followed them around like a lost puppy. A really really big, mongoloid lost puppy who could twist watermelons in half with his paws. "Winky, um..." I listened to him pause as his mental gears, rusty even by Diamond Dog standards, ground forward. "Winky want ask you some ting."

Ah, Winky had a question for me. "I told everyone I was not to be disturbed," I said threateningly.

"Mongo can not help it," the diamond dog lamented. "Mongo just pawn in cruel game of life."

I sighed and facepalmed. "Keep the nachos warm," I told Chrysalis.
"Sure, whatever," she said, lounging back in the sofa and snagging a chip.

I got to my feet, slapped on my helmet and went to the door. I stepped out into the main throne room and glowered down-- well, up AND down-- at the hulking diamond dog and the cringing pegasus mare. I toned the volume down when I saw Twinkle still asleep on Winky's back. Babies scream when they get woken up and screaming babies give me a headache. "What?" I said.

She quivered but stood her ground. "I'm, I'm sorry," she quavered. "But... in all the talking... you didn't say anything about Jetstream."

Oh. Right. Her mate. Loose ends, and all that. This could be trouble, actually. "I will send my agents to try and retrieve him," I said. "But be warned; it may prove... difficult. If they can even find him, it will be difficult to extract him from the clutches of Celestia's military. And with the fall of Hilltop, he will be a... person of interest. They may be watching him. They may even now be taking him into custody, to interrogate him or to use him as bait. I give you my word that I will do all in my power to return him to you, but I may find the task insurmountable---"

The guards at the entrance to the throne room spoke up. "Petitioners for the Dread Lord," one droned. (Pun. He was a changeling.) Crapballs, it never stopped.

"Enter!"

One of my pony ex-cons came trudging in. "Think we hit the motherlode this time, Boss," he growled in amusement. "Got a couple of soldier boys here who decided the military life wasn't for them." in came four Equestrian soldiers in royal cadet armor, looking jumpy and disgruntled. Pegasus, unicorn, earth pony and a thestral with a slightly tattered wing. They looked half-grown into their armor, half-frozen from the weather outside, and completely pissed off at the world. "The Guard thinks they're discipline problems, apparently. Maybe they'll suit your tastes better," the ex-con chuckled.

The thestral apparently elected himself spokespony for the group. He stepped forward, flaring his punctured wing. "Yeah, we're AWOL," he said. "had our fill of it. They got tired of making us scrub latrines in the Great Frozen North, and shipped us down here to scrub latrines here. Some big planned combat engagement--"

"JETSTREAM!" Mongo suddenly found himself holding Twinkle in his massive paws while a feathered missile shot across the room and hit the batpony amidships. they tumbled across the room in a ball.

"W-Winky??" the batpony exclaimed in disbelief.

I regarded the two nuzzling ponies. "Orrrrr I could pull a ridiculous deus ex machina right out of my armored backside," I muttered to noone in particular.

Winky babbled out her and Twinkle's life story to her mate (batpony plus pegasus equals unicorn? Pony genetics are deranged) to a litany of "What?" "They didn't!" "They DID?"... and the big highlight, "...my DAUGHTER?" At which point Mongo handed baby Twinkle back over. Jetstream looked like he was half-euphoric, half-terrified, as he took a happily squealing Twinkle in his arms. What a scene. Laughing, crying, the whole Lifetime Network Special Moment bit. Even his fellow fugitives from military justice were smiling....

Jetstream looked up from smooching his kid. "You got my girl and my baby back," he said. "You
gave those buckers a working over and you took my babies in. You got my oath, no matter what else happens." His eyes burned with tears.

I wasn't exactly moved. "**Celestia had your oath too,**" I pointed out.

Jetstream's face twisted into a sneer. "All she got was me reciting a bunch of words to a drill sergeant," he spat. "And she got that much by holding a sword to my neck and demanding it. You didn't. You're getting my loyalty because you **earned** it." He went back to nuzzling his wife and his foal.

"**Fine. Great. Sign him up. Sign them all up.**" I pointed at the happy couple, who were getting increasingly amorous right in the middle of my throne room floor. "**Get them a room. Soundproofed, preferably. Carry on, or whatever.**" I turned to leave.

"Boss? Er, Sir?" the other three turncoat rookies stared at me. "Um.. we just wanna say--"

"**Save it. Talk to Mange, Runt, or Skank, they'll debrief you,**" I said. "**Me-- I got Nachos.**" I marched out of the room before anyone decided to try and tell me what a noble and good-hearted person I was for all that I'd done, or some other crap like that. I swear this universe bleeds treacle.
I returned to the monitoring room and flung myself back down on the couch. "Anything so far?" I said, snagging a handful of chips and sour cream.

"Still getting them to their rooms," Chrysalis said, noshing idly. It was unsettling how easily the former tyrant of the changelings had fallen into the slacker bro-chick routine whenever we were offstage. I had my suspicions why; changelings were mimics and empaths, after all. Picking up how to fit in with others was probably second nature to them. Being a changeling meant you had to chillax with commoners and hobnob with dukes and kings at the drop of a hat. It might not even entirely be a performance.... but I wasn't relaxing my guard around her entirely, anyway.

Fake mask or not, it was good to have someone to veg out around. I turned my attention to the big main screen that was tracking my apprentice through the tunnels.

Dodger led the rest of the Broken Birds down the winding tunnels of Darth Vulcan's lair. They kept close behind him, wings flaring nervously. The tunnels, though well lit with crystals and phosphorescent moss, were close, at least too close for a pegasus' taste, and crowded with rough, dangerous looking beings who growled and hefted their weapons as they sidled past. "tuck yer wings in," Dodger said. "Tunnels are a mite crowded. Don't worry, though-- Heart Root and the 'dogs are working on widening 'em all out every day."

Nevertheless, I couldn't help noticing that even the biggest, most battle-scarred minotaur there gave Artful Dodger the widest berth they could manage.

He'd already found a room for Winky, Twinkle and Jetstream close to where Big Mama and the other Diamond Dog bitches congregated with their pups. Right around the corner he found four more rooms, still bare and freshly excavated. With a few shouted orders to fetch and carry, he had procured simple but sufficient furnishings for them and had them all situated in surprisingly pleasant comfort. Good bright lighting, plush, overstuffed chairs and couches, four-poster beds, and, shock and awe, a fully functional sink, shower stall and toilet in each room. "His Dark Overlordship's rather proud o' that bit," Artful Dodger remarked in passing as he demonstrated the amenities.

"If you gets any troubles with the plumbin'... which can, does and will happen... turn off the main valve here..." he pointed to the pipes running up the stone walls "....an' tell yer commandin' officer... er, that's me for now, I guess. Or just stick yer head out in the hallway and look for a pony with a plumber's helper on his bum.

"Note also if you will, that each room has fire sprinklers and what all. It also has two exits, what for emergency safety purposes. In case of said emergency, follow the lil' red lights in the tunnels to the nearest exit to the surface."
"They're very cautious," Welter Weight noted.

Dodger smirked and stuck his head out in the hallway. "Oi, Bluntnose! Wot's that old Diamond Dog prayer you told me, again?"

A somewhat grey-muzzled 'dog in plate armor looked up. "It go like this..." he held up his paws to the ceiling. "Oh Great Maker of All Diamond Dogs, what dark, smoky, and not much fun? Fire in the mines! Please no send us any." Several dogs in earshot bowed their heads and made fervent genuflections.

The broken birds stared, speechless.

"Amen," Dodger said sincerely. He blithely went on. "Anyway, we have a chow hall, an armory, medicine hall, storage-- just follow the arrow signs to whatever you're looking for. Oh, and ya might wanna hit the loot chamber soon."

"Loot chamber?" the lot of them said.

"Where we sort the take from the latest raid or pillage," Dodger said with a smirk. "Seein' as it's full of boodle from your home town, you'll get first pick if you elbow for it." You could tell by their expressions that they hadn't thought about how the remains of their hometown was now stacked in heaps in my lair. Some looked stricken with guilt. Others, not so much so. I saw an opportunistic gleam in more than one eye. I took careful note of which ones did and which ones didn't. Not like I faulted them. They were all hard luck cases; you don't wave a plate of food in front of a starving man and expect him not to drool.

Speaking of drooling: I kept catching Dodger giving his new "servant girl" looks out of the corner of his eye. Chrysalis didn't miss it either. "It's easy to see what's on his mind," she muttered. She wasn't even sarcastic; she might as well have been announcing the weather report.

I took a second look at his expression. "Yeah, but he's male. That's like saying you can tell it's oxygen he's breathing," I said. "Of course he's thinking about that. But he's also thinking about other things."

"Such as?"

I pointed as he proceeded to stick his chest out and chuff a few idle orders around to nearby mooks. "Look at him; he's struttin'."

Chrysalis chewed thoughtfully. "Yes, you're right," she said. "Every time he gives an order or shows them something in the lair, he shoots a glance over at her."

"He's trying to see if he impresses her," I agreed.

"Too bad she's not picking up on that," Chrysalis noted, her amusement dry as ginger. "She flinches any time she catches him looking at her. She knows what to expect later. Or at least thinks she does," she added.

"You think he will?" I kept my voice neutral.

She looked at me as she dug for another fistful of nachos. "I remember you laying down the law about... taking advantage of females. I think the question is 'do you think he will?'" she said bluntly. "And what will you do if he does?"

That sort've laid the cards all on the table; I didn't know. Why was I doing this? Sure it was funny to
watch, but it could go bad, really fast... could go off-script before I knew it.

Plus, we were using two screwed up teenage kids for shits and giggles. I should have been upset about that. Slave chains had made me furious. People in power shafting the little guy had made me go ballistic. What was it about this scenario that wasn't pushing my buttons? Was the idea of one of these cartoony little ponies... exploiting another one... too surreal for me to consciously accept?

And what about Chrysalis? Did she care one way or another? She was from a race of creatures that lied, deceived, and exploited the affections of other species just to survive. Did she consider me a hypocrite or was I just typical in her eyes? I turned away from the 'screen' and looked her in the eye. 

"...that's what we're both sitting here watching to find out, isn't it?" I said.

There was a long pause, then we both returned our attention to my errant apprentice and his awkward mating dance.

"Aand here comes the ditch..." she murmured.

"Grab yer bunks, you lot," Dodger said to the Broken Birds. "Eidie-- I kin call yew Eidie, can't I? Course I can, heh-- come with me. Lemme show you our quarters." The swagger in his voice was cartoon-worthy. Eiderdown shrank in on herself, but obeyed. She shot one last look back at her friends. Not all of them could meet her eye.

He led the shivering filly back down to his own chambers, back through the mobs, strutting like a peacock.

"An' naow we see the young adolescent male cutting his pick out of the herd," I said in my best Crocodile Hunter voice. "Walking her safely past certain dangers...

"Letting her know she's all alone and has to depend on him," Chrysalis said cynically. "Though from the look on his face I doubt he's aware he's doing it."

He wasn't too aware of his surroundings, either. Several of the ponies he passed smirked and made suggestive gestures--- at least I'm assuming they were suggestive gestures, I don't know pony sign language-- to Eiderdown behind his back. They were obviously broad enough to intimidate her; she was practically treading on Dodger's back heels.

Then one of them got brassy, reached forward and nosed her in the rump. She screeched and bucked, jumping forward into Dodger and nearly knocking both of them over to the floor. Dodger caught his balance and stood still, Eiderdown cowering at his flank. Those witnessing the act hooted.

"Ding ding," I said. "Round one."

Dodger didn't even turn around. "You fink I'm blind, mate?" he said over his shoulder. "You fink I'm stupid?" A goblet of nightmare mist oozed out from under his hat and zipped back to the offending pony, latching onto his face. The tough let out a panicked "MRPH!" of alarm and reared, trying to shake it loose. At first I thought the glob was taking the form of a grasping hand, then I saw it was actually a tarantula the size of a bowler derby. The pony screamed in panic and thrashed about as the thing exploded into a swarm of skittering, biting spiders the size of my thumb that crawled all over him.

"Ohh, nice touch," Chrysalis said.

"Hm?"

"He mixed some nightmare mist into his telekinesis, making the illusions solid for a second or two,"
she said. "See? The spiders have a silhouette in his horn color."

"Clever. I'll have to remember that one."

Dodger stomped over to where the unlucky stallion was rolling about screaming "get 'em off get 'em off get 'em off". "Did I MUMBLED when I told you lot?" Dodger yelled. "Was I talking to a lot of DEAF ponies?" He pointed back at Eiderdown. "She's MINE, got it? Hooves OFF. You don't TOUCH her, you don't TALK to her, you don't even LOOK at her funny, and if she complains about ANY of you I'll feed what's LEFT of you to the cockatrices as jerky strips!" He gave the offending party a vicious kick, sending him into a mad breakdance routine as Dodger's thundersteel horseshoe discharged into him. "Somepony toss this idiot in a cell for the night," Dodger snarled. "We'll see if he can recover from his case of horny and stupid by dawn tomorrow." He stalked back over to Eiderdown while a nearby minotaur picked up the stunned pony and carried him off tucked under one arm. "You all right, duckling?" Dodger asked.

Eiderdown blinked, still shocked at what happened, and nodded.

"That's gonna leave her wondering," Chrysalis said.

"Quit hogging all the toppings."

"You snooze you lose, Dark Overlord."

Dodger, knowing what side his bread was buttered on, had put his own personal quarters fairly close to mine... just one level below, give or take a few feet of rock. That way he could use his little short hop teleport to pop right into my quarters and back again if I summoned him. Anyone else would have to take a circuitous route through the tunnels to get to his front door. He was also within blink distance of at least one emergency escape tunnel, and one ventilation shaft to the surface. He had a whole network of "short cuts" like that; I'd wager within a day of learning that trick he'd mapped out every place in the lairs where the tunnels came within a few feet of each other and kept them in mind just in case.

That said, I'd never actually looked inside his quarters since the day they'd been excavated for him. He'd certainly availed himself of the plunder we'd taken to fit it out. I found myself curious as to what he'd done with the space.

He'd obviously decided not to let any moss grow on him once I'd issued my decree. He'd been handing out orders to flunkies left and right from the moment he'd heard me say that Eiderdown was his. I saw Heart Root and a couple of fetch-and-carry 'dogs leaving his room just as he arrived. "It's all dug out and done up," Heart Root said to him as he passed. Dodger smirked and tipped his hat to him mockingly. The old geezer just gave him a sour look and kept going.

"And now, ducklin," Dodger said, giving her a bow, "Allow me to present... our little domicile."

"This should be interesting," I said.

"You haven't been keeping a magical eye on him?" Chrysalis asked.

I shot her a look. "Do you know what teenage boys DO most hours of the day in the privacy of their rooms?" I asked.

It took a moment, but she got it. "Ugh, I did not need to visualize that," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Neither do I. I don't want to spend every hour of my day watching my minions sleeping, eating or taking a dump. If he's conspiring against me in the privacy of his own room, he's doing it through
several feet of rune-covered rock. I know where he is at all times, and that's more than enough to keep him on a short leash." I added a little dig. "It's enough to keep YOU on a short leash." She growled at me and munched ferociously on a chip.

Dodger threw the door to his chambers wide. Eiderdown timidly stepped inside. Dodger followed behind her. The view switched to the interior just as the magic lanterns around the room lit up.

"Pretty posh, ey?" Dodger said smugly.

Chrysalis and I stared open mouthed for a minute. Then we both lost it. Chrysalis fell right off the couch, clutching her sides, nearly taking the nachos with her. I couldn't help her; I was too busy trying to recover from shooting soda out of my nose. "He's been vandalized," I said. "By Elvis!"

"It looks like Sapphire Shores exploded!" Chrysalis cackled.

I'm not exaggerating. It just-- no words can describe the full effect. I saw lava lamps. I saw throw rugs in wild animal patterns-- at least, I really hoped that wasn't a REAL zebra skin rug. There were a couple of fake marble statues standing in corners, holding bird bath bowls or clusters of grapes. A disco ball hung in one corner. Pillered neon signs hung on the walls next to velvet paintings of mares in provocative poses and black light posters of ridiculous pony rock bands. A garish teardrop crystal chandelier hung from the too-low ceiling, so low ponies would have to duck to keep the dangling crystals from brushing the top of their heads. An overstuffed sofa in eye-hurting patterns, a couple of beanbag chairs, and of course an enormous four-poster bed fit for a color blind arab sheik, covered in silk sheets and yet more animal-print coverlets and throw pillows.

"Did we loot a casino?" I asked.

Chrysalis rolled on the floor, clutching her eyes. "No, no, augh, turn it off, it burns..." she giggled.

It seemed Eiderdown was similarly minded. Leastways she was stunned speechless. Dodger took her stunned expression for awe, and kept on with his verbal swagger. "Yeah, working for His Dark Powerfulness means we get the best of everything," he said. He tossed his hat over on a bust of some Equestrian general, and slipped his horn ring over the dour-looking statue's horn. "Fine clothes? We got 'em. Best food and drink? Got those too. Just about any little luxury you can ask for."

He led her by the hoof over to the bathroom door and let it swing open. "All the, ah, humbler comforts o' home, too," he said with a smirk. He was being truthful; while not as sumptuous as my own bathroom or even Chrysalis', it was well turned out. Tile floors, fired clay walls and ceiling, a bath big enough for a full grown clydesdale much less a pony, wide sink with a smooth, glossy countertop, a shower basin, and---

Kafwooosh. "Oh thank goodness, it works," Eiderdown murmured, letting up on the flush handle.

"Course it works," Dodger said, a little wounded. "And look-- magically heated seating... eh?" He lifted up the lid and patted the seat with a hoof.

"They make those?" I said, miffed.

"You don't have one?" Chrysalis said. "First thing I asked Plumber's Helper to install." She sighed luxuriantly. "Maker bless those pony plumbers..."

"I didn't think to ask, I was just glad to get the thing flushing properly," I grumbled. "Though frankly I'd rather worry about getting the bidet heated. First time I used it, I nearly launched myself through the far wall..."

Chrysalis snorted through a mouthful of cheese.
"...Lots of towels and them fluffy bathrobes you get at hotels. The maids keep 'em stocked up, just toss 'em in the hamper. Oh, and plenty of space in the medicine cabinet for... um, filly stuff. Mane stuff, and... stuff." He waved a hoof. Moving on hastily as any wise man would, he opened up the door on the other side of the bathroom. "And here are your quarters," he said.

When I said he moved fast, I wasn't kidding. In the time it had taken him to lead the Broken Birds on their little tour, shuffle them off to their quarters, and make his way back here, he had made arrangements for a whole new chamber to be carved out, painted, and furnished. The clay walls were painted in hues of pink. There was a wardrobe, an ornate vanity, and of course an enormous four-poster bed; lamps in pink-frilled shades, pink fluffy rugs on the floor, statuettes, fancy fake baroque paintings in gilded frames, the works.

_The decor was... um... unfortunate. Even Chrysalis, the original utter heartless beast, was facepalming in sympathy as she hooted. "Oy," she moaned. "He decorated her room to look like---like---"

"A bordello," I finished for her.

"But how?" I muttered, staring at the image. "I mean, he wasn't even there--"

"Think about it," Chrysalis muttered. "He probably told the workers to 'fix it up all classy.' And what's the closest he, or most of those thugs out there, have ever come to 'classy'?"

"The higher-class end of the red light district, right," I acquiesced. "...And... Ponies have brothels?"

The shrivelled husk of my childhood innocence was taking a beating today.

"Not really," Chrysalis said dismissively. "Oh, there are a few...It's the whole 'love and harmony' thing, I suppose. You've seen how strong their friendship bonds are; imagine what their romantic bonds are like. Sex without some sort of emotional connection just doesn't appeal to most of them. Pretty much the same reason Changelings don't bother with infiltrating brothels, come to think of it. We feed on love... The stuff that goes on in brothels? About as nutritious as wallpaper paste." She stuck out her tongue. "And about the same flavor."

He showed her the wardrobe; it was filled to bursting with every sort of pretty dress imaginable a girl could ever want... if the girl in question was an exotic dancer. We nearly strangled at the expression on her face when she took a look at what was provided.

"No way he sized those," I chuckled. "Oh Lord, are those fishnet stockings?"

"And minus twenty points for the ostrich feathers..." Chrysalis said.

The vanity, however, probably made up for a lot of it. It was covered with dozens of random makeup articles and expensive-looking bottles of perfume. Front and center was an enormous jewelry box literally overflowing with earrings, necklaces, pendants. The sparkle of gemstones reflected in Eiderdown's eyes as he set her down in front of it and picked out a necklace. "Jewelry, silk, my girl wears the best or she don't wear nuthin," he said, putting it around her neck.

"And ah look good in both," Chrysalis breathed in her best Mae West, fluttering her lashes.

"No comment," I muttered.

She sat staring at her reflection in the mirror, brushing the necklace with a hoof. The plum-sized rubies clashed with the green gem in her bondservant's brooch, but that was hardly the point. "...okay," she whispered.
"Okay, what?" I asked.

"Ssssh."

There was a pause. Dodger was apparently wondering what she meant by that as well. "So," he finally said. "Shall we have some dinner? You can order anything up from the kitchens any time you want, by the way. Just nab a guard out in the hall."

"All part of the friendly service here at Chateau le Floozy," Chrysalis singsonged.

"So what do you want?" Dodger asked eagerly.

Eiderdown didn't look away from the mirror. "Anything's fine."

"...Okay. I'll send down for something. Anyway, 's been a long day, maybe we should go take a shower."

"Ah hurr hurrr de hurr..."

"Shush!"

You could literally see the words travelling from his mouth, to his own ears, and from thence to his brain. His eyes went round for a second. "Once. One. At a time, that is. Not that there isn't enough room for two. Heh. I mean-- I'll go first, that way you kin take your time. Afterward. By yourself."

He literally shoved his own hoof in his mouth to shut himself up. He bit down on his hoof for a second then spoke around it. "G-g-give you time to, uh, pretty yourself up afterward...."

Eiderdown nodded.

"Look up, girl, you're missing a great comedy performance..." Chysalis catcalled. "No? Oh well..."

He frantically dragged his 'cool and suave' mask back up over his face. "Well, ducklin," he said. "If you'll pardon me." He left the room in the fastest saunter I'd ever seen. The door slammed, and we could hear the shower running. There was a long minute of silence, then truly awful noises started coming through the door. Chrysalis and I looked at each other.

"Splitscreen!" we both sing-songed.

I waved a hand and the image split. To the left we had Artful Dodger, standing in his sumptuous bathroom with his back to the door, steam already rolling up around his hocks from the shower. He was hyperventilating into a shower cap like he was dying. To the right we had Eiderdown, who was staring at the bathroom door and to judge by the aghast look on her face could hear Dodger's pornographic wheezing of "eeeee, aahhhh, eeeeh, aaaaahhh" right through the bathroom door. Chrysalis and I were dying.

"What on EARTH is he doing in there?" I mimicked Eiderdown in a bad falsetto.

"We know what he's doing in there! Stop thinking, Brain, stop it right now!" Chrysalis retorted in the same falsetto.

"Are you all right?" Eiderdown called out.

"NO," Chrysalis and I answered the screen.

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" Dodger said. He got his panic under control and rushed through his shower. He dried off and stuck his head back through the door. "Bathroom's free. Take your time, duckling." He
then bolted for his own room. I switched the view back to one screen and followed Dodger. We watched as he went through hastily combing out his wet mane and tail and donning his own robe, of monogrammed purple silk. It was monogrammed with the wrong initials of course; no telling whom it had belonged to before my raiders had snatched it from a store or shipping caravan. He stuck his head out his front door to bark his dinner order at a passing diamond dog, then commenced pacing around the room muttering nervously to himself.

Eiderdown took her sweet time; enough that Dodger had calmed down and regained some of his confidence. Their meal arrived, a medley of mismatched covered dishes on a battered serving cart pushed by a diamond dog from the kitchens. Dodger set the plates on a little round table by the fireplace, and set out cushions to sit on. He was just setting up the candles when Eiderdown came out.

The look on Dodger's face when he saw her was like a cat up to its whiskers in cream. Even I could tell she cleaned up well. Her coat was glossy blue, and her mane tumbled down her neck in curls and gleamed like gold. She was wearing a ruffled silk robe that had been hanging on the corner of her wardrobe, and had donned earrings and anklets that complimented her bondservant necklace well. She'd also daubed on a touch of makeup, her dark eyelashes bringing out her eyes in the candlelight.

Dodger's grin spread across his face as he lit-- and promptly knocked over-- the candles on the table. A frantic juggling act, though, and he had them set aright. "Dinner... is served," he said, covering up his fumble by sweeping the cover off the main dish.

And setting his sleeve on fire in the fireplace.

Thus commenced a frantic Lord of the Dance routine. He flailed around the room in a circle in his smoldering robe, hooves flying in every direction, grimacing in panic, his smoldering sleeve writing a trail of smoke in the air, before finally gaining presence of mind and diving into the bathroom. There was a loud splash, followed by an all-too-informative flush. He reemerged, his blackened sleeves dripping, and a disgruntled look etched on his face. Without a word he stepped behind his dressing screen and reemerged wearing a new, unburned, robe. Throughout this entire performance Eiderdown had stood frozen in the middle of the room, wings flared in alarm. She was still standing there openmouthed when he reemerged.

"Well? Have a sitdown and eat," he said, deadpan.

She sat.

This date had better end soon, I thought as I struggled to breathe, or I'm going to have a heart attack.

The romantic dinner, such as it was, went fairly quietly, with her picking at her food and him doing his best to throw passionate looks at her across the candlelit table. But eventually things had to reach a payoff. They were only half-done eating when Dodger began edging his cushion around the table to her side, and was now leaning into her, murmuring and trying to nudge her in the direction of the bed.

"Oh oh, this is it," Chrysalis said in a monotone.

Eiderdown abandoned her untouched plate and let herself be herded to the bed. They sat down on the edge, sinking into the pillows. Dodger leaned in, nuzzling into her neck. She stiffened as he brushed her wings with the pad of his nose. "G-gosh your wings are soft" I heard him murmur.

I could see her squeezing her eyes shut, biting her lip as she tried not to lean away...
In an instant everything changed. He froze and pulled away from her. He got to his hooves and tottered away from the bed, legs as stiff as if he were a barstool. He stood there with his head hanging, turned away from her.

She looked at him fearfully. "Did... did I do something wrong?" she asked.

"....Get out," he said. "Just... just go to your quarters."

"I...?"

Every line of his body radiated anger, but he didn't raise his voice. "Just...fine, do whatever you want. Go there, stay here--- I don't care." With that he vanished. Looking fearful and more than a little confused, she got to her own hooves, retrieved her plate, and retreated to her room.

"Well, that took a dramatic swerve," Chrysalis said, disappointed. She looked over at me, then down at my hand. "And what were you going to do?"

"What?" I looked down and saw that purple-green-red-black energy was dancing around my fingertips. I realized I'd unconsciously begun drawing magic into my hand. The moment I saw them move to the bed, I'd started preparing to---

-- Do what? Intercede? Blast Dodger? turn off the scrying spells and look away? I didn't know. That bothered me more than it should.

"I'd better go see where he's gotten to," I said, while I tried to decide.

I found him in a little alcove, a short hop down the hallway from his chambers. He was still wearing his silk robe, pacing in a circle and swearing to himself. "So," I said. "What brings you out here?"

He shot me a look that was absolutely filled with hate. The next instant he was charging me, punching and kicking at my legs. It made me glad I was still wearing my armor. "You knew this would happen!" he snarled. "You knew it!"

I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and held him up off the ground. He kept swinging and kicking at me. "Yeah, I kinda figured something like that would happen," I said, amused in spite of myself. "You aren't the first guy with a big mouth bragging about how much dick he slings around to fold when things got real. But I just wanted to see for myself."

His eyes blazed. "You were spying on us??" His thrashing redoubled. "You jerk you creep you---" I think he invented some of the swear words he used next.

"Of course I was watching what you were up to," I snapped scathingly. "You think I wouldn't know? I can hear an earthworm's heartbeat in the walls down here! I know where everyone is down here, what they're doing, what tune they're whistling while they work!" (That was mostly brag, but close enough to the truth and it never hurt to enlarge your reputation.) "We've had spies, saboteurs and infiltrators down here--- Darn right I'm keeping an eye on you with your new piece of arm candy! I had to make sure you weren't going to do anything suicidally stupid!" I dumped him on his rump. "The fact that it amused me was just a side benefit."

He slumped into a ball and looked up at me with big, tearful pony eyes. Oh screw you, foal. "Why
would you do this to me?" he said. His lower lip crumpled.

...The entire time I'd plotted this out, I hadn't really known for sure what I was doing. Or what I planned to do, if it had gone wrong. I think that question, that look on his face, finally helped me spell out, consciously, what the whole thing was about. "I didn't do anything to you," I growled. "I just let something happen that was gonna happen anyway." I conjured up a seat out of the stone and sat down wearily. "Look, kid, you're a boiling bucket of hormones right now. Sooner or later some cute piece of tail was going to come along. I had to know how you were gonna handle that kind of responsibility BEFORE it happened."

"Responsibility?" Dodger said scornfully, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

"Don't do that, silk stains. Yeah, responsibility. Like I said, sooner or later some cute piece of tail was going to come along--- and lead you around by the nose. Or worse, you were going to let your groin do your thinking and make a grab for some tail that wasn't yours for the taking. There's about a thousand ways that your hormones can get you into trouble, from angry relatives to catching something nasty to popping out a foal.... and that's not even counting the extra troubles peculiar to OUR situation. Squeezing info out of the enemy with secret agent poon is the oldest trick in the book and it stays in the book because it works so well. I bet you that right now Princess CakeButt and Moony the Flunky are racking their alleged brains with Princess Valentine, trying to figure out how to lure me to my doom with a juicy pair of boobies." That got a snort of laughter out of him.

I snorted. "People think that because we're young, that we're stupid and that we only think with our balls. Back home they treat teenage guys like they're all mindless heat-seeking dick missiles and teenage girls like they're all inevitable flatback sluts-- they ply us with rubbers and pills and say 'play safe kids!' and then act surprised when most of us live down to their expectations. And that's the GOOD people; there are other people who figure they can get rich by leading us around by our crotches, and exploit us every chance they get.

"We gotta be smarter than they think we are, if we're going to survive."

He looked downcast. "Not like it matters," he muttered bitterly. "They already laugh at me and say I'm no better than your catamite. You might as well have gelded me..."

I got mad and dope-slapped him in the back of the head. "Why? Because those illiterate retards are laughing at you? And you're going to agree with them? " I yelled. "They think they're better than you because they managed to find a warm wet hole that didn't struggle too much and managed to stick it in on the first try! Any unsuspecting knothole in a fence could do, if that's all it takes to be a man!"

"Tell me something. You had her right there. She would have let you do anything you wanted."

"So answer me one question: why didn't you?"

The little alcove got awfully still. He wouldn't meet my eye. "I-- I don't know--"

I pointed at him. "No. You know. You're the only one in the world who DOES know. Why. Didn't. You. Do. It?"

He took a breath. "Because I saw her face!" he blurted out.

I waited. He went on in a quieter voice. "I saw her face. In the mirror. I..." He grimaced like he was spitting something sour out. "I didn't have a dad growing up. It was just my mom and me. Things were... kind of tough.
"She'd make ends meet by... she weren't no whore, but she... she had lots of 'gentlepony friends,' she called 'em. One after the other. They called on her lots. Gave her money. Gifts. Favors. She.... did whatever they want. None of 'em stuck around long, and she'd be out lookin' for a new 'gentlepony friend'..." He ground his teeth. "I hated them. I hated them all, so much.

"I remember one. Some rich swot. She couldn't stand him, but he was 'generous.' I walked in on 'em once by accident. He and her were gettin' frisky, or at least he was. And she had this look on her face... like it was all she could do to keep from bein' sick, from pushing him off and running away." He looked me in the eye, sad as the world. "It was the same face Eiderdown had in the mirror."

"She... she looks at me the way my Mom looked at that rich swot. I think I wanted to die when I figured it out."

"I couldn't. I just couldn't. I... I want it to be with a girl who wants me." He smiled fleetingly. "Who wants me as bad as I want her. I won't... I won't have her any other way."

I leaned forward and looked him in the eye. "And you think those other a-holes would even care? Artful Dodger, that makes you more of a stallion than the rest of those hooting jackasses combined."

His ears perked up a little at that. "You mean that?"

"Doesn't matter if I do, it's the truth. My Dad always said 'anything with a pecker can stick it where it goes. It takes a man to NOT do it when he shouldn't.' " I grunted. "A real class act, my Dad. But he was right."

Dodger looked abashed. "Well... what do I do now? I got a beautiful filly sharing my suite with me, and she's..." his ears drooped again. "She's disgusted by me."

"Meh. No, just a little frightened," I said. "You could hurt her bad right now, after all. So she's scared. It's gonna take a while for her to trust." My cynicism piped up at that point. "And whatever you do, don't let her cock-tease you."

"Wait, what?" He squinted at me. "Why would she do that? She---"

I interrupted him before he could start moping about how she had shrunk back from his touch. "Because she's a female, and they do that," I said, in as cynical a tone I could manage. "It's how they get what they want out of us. They'd be stupid not to; it works too good."

"So what do I do??" he pressed.

"How should I know?" I said, exasperated. "What am I, the Lonely Hearts Advice Column? Just... treat her nice, don't take advantage of her, give her space, all that other crap. And well, if it gets too hot, get out of the kitchen. " At his uncomprehending stare I said, less than patiently, " If she tries to cock-tease you, and if she's got even a teaspoonful of brains she'll at least try it, get out of the room, go take a cold shower, or whatever... but walk away. 'Never let them think your dick is a handle bar.' " I grunted and shrugged. "Another little bit of advice from my old man."

"Oh. Right. Think I'd know that...." He looked disgruntled, the face of someone who had seen the seedier side of things far too young. He gave me a sidelong glance. "That why Her Bugship's not got you by the libido yet? Because you're keeping her at arm's length?"

"No, because she hasn't even got the right pot holders to grab the handle," I grunted. "She can't seem to get that biologically, to me she's got all the sex appeal of a lawn chair."

"You've... never been in a, um, I mean, with a girl---?" Dodger asked, cautiously.
"No, I haven't."

A bit of his cheek came back. "Then don't that make your advice a little suspect?"

"I don't need to be an engineer to recognize a train wreck," I said dryly. "Besides, this is crap my Dad would say every boy ought to know before he becomes a man, anyway."

"Any other bits of advice about relationships from your old man?" Dodger said.

"Yeah. 'If you get married, be the ugly one.'" Dodger let out a snort of laughter at that one. "But seriously. Just treat her nice, don't take advantage--but don't take no crap--and be patient." I got serious. Grim faced serious. "And be ready to protect her. You've already seen that some of these sad sacks here aren't above getting grabby."

He nodded. Then looked at me, squinting. "But... what do you care?"

I stood up and let the stone flow back into the floor. "Protecting my investment," I said. "It's already paid off; Winky's boyfriend has spilled his guts, let us know that Celestia and Luna are massing up troops for an offensive. We're going to need her and her little flock of broken birds somewhere down the line, probably very soon. I can't rely on them if they're not loyal, and they won't be loyal if they're frightened of us or don't trust us or have been hurt by one of us." I got to my feet. "Mister Rump-Nose from earlier today doesn't realize just how much trouble he's in yet. But he'll learn." Purple sparks dripped from my eyes, and Dodger shuddered. "Go on. Go back to your room, tend to your... roommate. She's probably terrified she did something wrong; it'd be a good idea to reassure her." Dodger nodded, and vanished in a blink of light.

I strode off down the hall, letting my cloak billow behind me. (Ahhh, dramatic presence.) That smoothed things over with my apprentice, but it did reveal the ugly nub of a surfacing problem. I had a large, almost entirely male force of roughnecks, thugs, mercenaries and ex-cons who'd been bottled up like a pressure cooker all winter long. I was going to have to find some way... no, some place, or some TOWN... where they could blow off some of that testosterone-laden steam, or things could start to get ugly.
Ahh, spring. Season of rebirth, renewal, replenishment and... other words that start with re. Despite all expectations to the contrary, it penetrated even to the depths of the fell Everfree forest, bringing growth and life, cracking the ice and sweeping the snow away. It was not much of an improvement. Don't ask me how, but that accursed forest actually managed to transform a wretched winter into an even more wretched spring. It went from a forest lashed with bitter, lifeless cold and snow and ice to one lashed with warmth-sucking rain and clad in greyish skies and cold mud.

And oh yes, teeming with blooming, crawling, chirping life. The kind that should be greeted not with odes to the beauty of nature but with flamethrower blasts and high, girlish screams. I saw a patch of daisies skeletonize a squirrel. No lie. And the less said of the crawly things that tried to burrow through our lair walls, the better. Tried, that is. Remember, I mentioned the flamethrower. And the girly screams, but we won't dwell on that. Magically hardened those walls to a foot thick after that, you better believe.

The irony was that, as ferally unpleasant as springtime in the Everfree was, it was still in our favor. I was flabbergasted when I learned that, while spring was springing all over the Everfree, the rest of Equestria was still locked in a winter wonderland. It literally cut off at the edge of the forest, going from drizzly greening muck to snowy white picturesque countryside, as sharp as the edge of a holiday greeting card.

"It's the Equestria Weather Bureau," Artful Dodger explained to me. "They start springtime proper on Winter Wrap Up, and not one minute sooner." It wasn't until that moment that I mentally linked the memory of seeing little pegasi ponies pushing around cute little poofy clouds, and got the implications. I knew they had weather control, already. But this went beyond that. They had outright climate control... and apparently even controlled the turning of the seasons. So Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter all happened precisely on the same days every year when the little ponies all got together and did a happy little song and dance number and You-Can-Do-It hard work montage. Never mind, of course, that the seasons would change anyway as Celestia changed the orbital path of the sun.... and yes, I confirmed this with a few pointed questions to my non-pony minions.

I hate this planet.

Anyway, we had at least a month of (wet, damp, drizzly) Springtime ahead of the ponies. We had to take advantage of every single second of it.

I knew the Princesses were ramping up for a military campaign against us. It was apparently the biggest military mobilization in living memory if not Equestrian history. Garrisons were popping up in towns and villages on the borders of the Everfree. I needed to get spies into those garrisons, and better yet into Canterlot itself, and find out just what Celestia's plans were for my little old self. Finding some way to deal with those garrisons would be a good idea too.

I also needed to resupply. We still had a fair amount of back stock thanks to our down-to-the-flagstones looting of Cirrus Hilltop, and our scattered sympathizers were always open to barter and trade. But the dragon hoard, while still huge, was dwindling fast. It was time to start producing some new revenue streams...

...once I'd depressurized my minions. I'd paid them, and paid generously. But now they were all sitting on their pay and grumbling about having no place to spend it. I needed to find a Port Royale---
someplace not under Celestia's control or influence, that was busy enough to entertain a bunch of violent criminal roughnecks, and shady enough to turn a blind eye to where those roughnecks might have gotten all that gold they were spending. Flim and Flam had been helpful in that regard, as had the minotaur mercenaries: both groups had their fair share of bolt holes and ports of call, so I had a list of options. But I was still stumped for how to get my fleabitten horde from here, to there, and back again without wading through Equestria's angry little ponies both ways.

Basically it all added up to all of us having epic levels of cabin fever. Everyone was snarling and snapping at each other, and I was the leader of the pack. I've always had a temper, and by the time our early spring rolled around my fuse had been trimmed dangerously short. The minute, the instant the temperatures warmed enough to be tolerable I took to going on day-long walks alone through the forest. Come rain or shine, I would be out stomping through the forest, taking my bad temper out on the wildlife still stupid enough to get in my way. It helped, a little; hacking, smashing, or blasting the landscape with eldritch power was incredibly satisfying. I didn't have to worry about leaving a trail back to the lair entrance either; the Everfree could soak up all the damage I could dish out, and within a couple of days it would heal over like nothing had passed that way in a century.

It was one day when I was in a particularly foul mood. There was a full blown thunderstorm raging over the forest, but I was in no mood to care. I just threw a cloak over my shoulders and stomped out into it. Frankly after a day wasted sitting on my thumbs listening to others complaining about having to sit on THEIR thumbs, it suited my mood.

A mile's trek into the woods and I was feeling... well not better. I was cold, my underwear was damp, my boots and cloak were muddy and I was spattered with leaves and detritus from thrashing through the undergrowth, and I was still cranky as hell. But at least I didn't feel like I was going to explode into a berserker rage at any moment. Stomping the monkey snot out of the various monsters and critters that got in my way helped burn off a lot of steam. I swear, the random encounter table for that forest makes World of Warcraft's wilderness look like a petting zoo. You couldn't go ten feet without running into something animal, vegetable or mineral that wanted to kill you in any of a hundred colorful ways. Well, fine by me. I hadn't even tried out half the ways the Alicorn Amulet could return the favor.

Anyway, one highly active one mile trek and I was feeling... closer to human. I stood there in the rain, the crispy kibble that used to be a cragodile pattering to the ground all around me, while the smoke drifted away from my hands and my breathing slowed. I tipped my hood back and let the rain run down my face (my studies had advanced; I could summon and dispel my helmet and armor at will now) as the thunder rumbled overhead.

I'd come to a fairly quiet spot in the forest (either that or I'd scared every living thing in the area into hiding. Six of one...). I stood there enjoying the relative silence, taking a breather and using my magic to dry my clothes and wring out the worst of the mud. It was right about then I heard the scream.

Ever heard a rabbit die? I did once... Birthday party when I was a real little runt. Birthday girl let her pet bunny out in the yard, right about the time a chicken hawk flying by decided to have lunch. It swooped down and snatched that bunny up in its talons right off the picnic blanket in the middle of a bunch of eight year olds. It made this horrible shrieking noise... Holy crap, you never forget that sound.

Anyway I was standing there in the rain when the silence was split by that sound. It sounded like it came from a hundred yards or so away. I saw some shaking in the undergrowth where it came from, and heard some snarling. I didn't think much of it, I just figured a rabbit just bought it and some predator had gotten lunch. But it wasn't the rabbit's death-shriek that caught my attention. It was the
sound of a pony's voice that came with it.

Now in case you didn't notice, for all that the natives of Equestria look like animals there's a pretty explicit divide. The "talking" species are regarded as people and part of civilization; the non-talking species fill the role of feral animals in the wild--- and it's a difference that runs deep to the bone. It's very C.S. Lewis, really. The ferals just... lack something that makes ponies and other talking races different. A conscience, maybe, or maybe a soul? I dunno. But you can literally tell the difference between an Equestrian animal and an Equestrian person, often without looking.

Among the talking races, and I chalk this up to typical Equestrian magic weirdness, they sound intelligent even when they're not trying to. Ever heard a lion roar, then heard a kid trying to imitate the lion? You don't even have to look at them to tell the difference. Sapient Equestrians may try to grunt and squeak and squawk with the animals but they still sound... well... human.

That snarling coming from the undergrowth, as bloodcurdling as it might be, still sounded like a human voice.

I went to investigate. Then I reconsidered, summoned my armor and sword, and THEN went to investigate. Carefully.

I'm no ninja, especially not in my Heavy Metal underoos. But between the wind and rain and thunder picking up again, I managed to sneak up on my quarry. I parted the undergrowth and braced myself.

It was a batpony. Thestral. Whatever they call 'em. She was skinny and scruffy looking and had obviously been out in the weather for a while and hadn't had much of a fun time of it. She was also fangs-deep in the corpse of a rabbit. From where I was standing I could hear the wet, sucking noises as she fed.

Every. Damn. Hair. on my body stood on end. I must have said or shouted something--- I couldn't hear myself over the sound of the Willies jitterbugging up my spine and going "WooOooOOOoooo" in my ear-- because she spun around to face me. She didn't bolt; she just crouched over her kill and snarled at me. Ohhhhh wrongwrongwrong. WRONG. I can't TELL you how wrong it was to see a kewpie-doll cute pony snarling at you with blood-covered fangs. My sword was usually an oversized, too-heavy pain in the ass, but this time I was having no trouble keeping the point up and leveled at her. One-handed, too; my other hand was already clutching a ball of balefire ready to toss.

She mantled her leathery wings and hissed, her red, cat-slit eyes wild. Yeeeeeeeeee. I was glad my helmet was hiding my face because my heart had gone from "calm but alert" to "six cans of Red Bull" in half a second. We froze in that pose for a second. Then she reached out a hoof and dragged the dead rabbit to herself possessively. I realized she wasn't about to attack. I took in how skinny she was. She looked sickly. And her eyes were full of desperation.

I got a tiny glimmer, an inkling of an opportunity.

I let the fireball dispel. I kept the sword up, though. "I won't harm you," I told her; I kept my voice low and steady. "Who are you? Why are you in my woods---?" She didn't answer; she just grabbed her kill up in her mouth and turned to bolt. Oh no, I wasn't having that. No 'who was that stranger in the woods' mysteries for me. I flicked my hand and vines whipped out of the brush, trussing her up from neck to tail before she made three steps. She shrieked in frustration and flopped about like a landed fish.

"Sorry, kid," I said. "I want answers, and you're going to give 'em to me." I threw a sleep spell over
her and she was out like a light.

I had two batponies in my ranks, technically, if you counted Hallsies, the Broken Bird with the single webbed wing. I hadn't made any inroads on recruiting Princess Luna's favorite underlings to my side beyond that, and it had been long months since any of them had seen one of their own kind outside of each other. You can imagine their surprise when they were summoned to the throne room and found me there with an unconscious and hogtied female batpony lying at my feet.

They stared at her, then at me. I stared back at them. I kept it simple. I threw the remains of the rabbit on the floor at their hooves, gestured to the unconscious and obviously bloody-mouthed filly, and said "Explain."

Jetstream swallowed and looked up at me. "You... know how thestrals came to be," he said. It sounded more like a question. I motioned for him to continue. "Back before Princess Luna fell, she saw Princess Celestia's Solar Guard and decided she wanted her own Guard--- one at home in the night, like herself. She took a hoof-full of volunteers and used her magic to transform them, infusing them with the essence of creatures of the night: bats." He flapped his webbed wings. "And thus the thestrals were born."

I motioned again and he continued. "The thing is," he said, swallowing, "She wanted our genome to be robust, so she didn't use one kind of bat. And there are several different kinds of bat. Fruit bats, insectivores..." he swallowed again. "Vampire bats."

"It means," Hallsies said, "That any ponies with Thestral in 'em... crave meat. And blood." He looked down at the dead rabbit. "Especially blood."

"After Luna's fall, Thestrals were exiled from Equestria," Jetstream said. "Nopony wanted 'Nightmare Moon's carnivore ponies' around, so they threw us out." He snorted. "They only let us back in about a century ago, at Celestia's urging. My guess is she knew her sister was about to return, and wanted ponies loyal to her there to welcome her. But the House of Lords only agreed to let us back in when we took an oath to no longer drink blood. They even passed a law making it a crime to buy, sell, or consume blood in any form. They refused to budge an inch on that."

I stared at them silently for several seconds. It felt like the universe was facepalming. "They made it against the law for you to eat?!" I said in disbelief.

"We don't need the blood," Hallsies protested. "Not really. Not... not really." His eyes darted to mine, then away.

"The doctors say we don't really need it," Jetstream said. "But we do, um, crave it. A lot, sometimes. Some of us."

I wondered cynically to myself how long it took them to re-legalize blood transfusions. Even more cynically, I decided probably about five minutes after a unicorn noble needed one. "Then what have you been getting by on?" I said.

Jetstream fished a bottle out of his pannier. "The alchemists mix up a substitute for us," he said. "Every Thestral in the Guard, and their families, gets a ration of this stuff." watery, reddish orange liquid glimmered in the light. I levitated the bottle to my hand and looked at it. Then I gave everypony present the shock of their lives by uncorking the vial, dipping my pinky in the stuff and tasting it.

I spat it right back out. I know what blood tastes like; I like my steaks rare enough to moo, for one thing, and I'd had my lip bloodied enough times in my life. This stuff tasted something like blood; a
little salty and coppery. But it was off. It was like the difference between a glass of fresh, whole milk and powdered milk mixed in a glass of tapwater. "How have you been getting this?" I said.

Jetstream looked uncomfortable. "I swiped several month's supply from stores before I bailed from the garrison," he said. "And the Flim Flam brothers think they can whip up some more, once they get some ingredients. I've been... trying to wean myself off it. Taking a little less each day. I can beat the craving, your Lordship, I can!" he pleaded. "I promise it won't be a problem--"

I motioned for him to shut up. He shut his mouth so fast it clicked. "Why didn't you just go down to the kitchens?" I said. "Big Mama butchers enough meat, she could get you buckets of what you need-- the real stuff, too, and fresh..." the look on their faces told me volumes. It was a mix of shock and revulsion... and guilt... and hunger. They looked at each other and at me, shame and hunger warring on their faces. Oh, was I getting a picture painted here. "For crying out loud," I burst out, "Why would anybody care? You're among CARNIVORES here! The Diamond Dogs eat meat; I eat meat. Even the changelings eat a little. Are we supposed to get the fainting vapors because you batponies like the juicier bits?"

"But..." Halfsies looked sick. "They say if we drink it, it'll make us... feral," he said. "Violent and savage. Turn us into vicious predators--"

I waved him off. "Fine, do or don't, I don't care," I said, irritated. You just can't help some people. "We'll speak of this later. For now, return to your posts." They left.

I levitated my unconscious prisoner in a cloud of magic and left the throne room. "I will be in the Doctor's wing if anyone needs me," I told the throne room guards. "Don't disturb me if it isn't important."

Some time ago, I had been out in the forest midwinter, doing some darn fool thing or other, I don't remember what, when I ran into a royal guard patrol who had wandered off the beaten path. I escaped, obviously, but one of the minions with me had taken an arrow to the gut. By blind luck we'd been close to a small town with a doctor's office on the forest edge. The resident physician was Doctor Sawbones, a portly old unicorn with a grey coat and tufts of white mane around his ears who was just on the edge of retirement. I'd burst into his living room-cum-waiting room, a bloody diamond dog in my arms, and informed him in no uncertain terms he'd either mend my minion or be buried with him. He informed me in no uncertain terms where I could stick my offer, and to get the Tartarus out of his way while he saved my minion's life.

Of course I hired him.

His office was spacious, meticulously clean and tiled in gleaming white marble and stainless steel, and stocked with medicine we could lay hoof, horn or claw on, more than a few pills and herbs that would cause conniptions among the legally or ethically fussy if they saw them. Sawbones didn't give a damn about what medicines and treatments were legal or where they came from any more than he gave a damn about whether his patients were loyal citizens of Celestia or minions of a dark overlord; all he cared about was whether or not the patient healed. That had apparently gotten him in a lot of trouble over his career, and he clearly took some unsubtle glee in being able to practice medicine as he pleased in our employ.

He was already waiting for me when I came into his examination room and laid the unconscious mare out on the operating table. "What have we here?" he said in surprise.

"I think you'll have more to tell me than I you," I said, untying the mare so he could examine her. He began cleaning her up, giving her a brief sponge bath, then giving her a physical as I described our little encounter, and my suspiciously enlightening meeting with Jetstream and Halfsies. I gave him
the half-empty vial of alchemist's blood substitute. He barely glanced at it, snorting in disgust, before setting it aside and resuming his brief examination. When he was done he stepped away from the table. "So what can you tell me about our little bloodsucker?" I said wryly as he washed his hooves.

He snorted again. "For starters she's like every other Equestrian thestral I've examined," he said. "Malnourished."

"Malnourished?" I said.

He nodded, then shook his head in disgust. "Been this way ever since my days in the military. I figured out in no time that this 'blood addiction' nonsense was a pile of horseapples. They're part vampire bat. They need it; it's a necessary nutrient for them, along with good solid meat. The need varies from individual to individual, depending on their heredity, but it's real. This one, going by those fangs--" he pulled her lip back to show me."--and other little signs, she's far over on the vampiric scale, probably almost purebred vampiric...

"....And this 'blood substitute?' " He picked up the vial in his magic and shook it, sneering in disgust. "It's to real blood what margarine is to butter, or saccharine is to sugar. It can cover the craving but it can't give them what they need. That's like telling you or me that we're 'addicted' to vitamin C, and making us compensate for it by eating wax fruit."

"I guessed as much," I said. "I tasted the stuff; it was like licking the bottom of a test tube." He raised his eyebrows in surprise but said nothing. "So why aren't they all keeling over dead?"

"Because it's just enough to keep them alive. Plus they gorge on soy, buckwheat, and other vegetable sources of protein," he said. "It's almost enough to give them what they need, but you get less than a tenth of the protein per serving than you do from meat. Plus thestrals burn almost as much protein and nutrients digesting all that bulk as they get back from it. There's no way around it; they need meat, and they especially need blood." he shook his head. "I spent half my military career trying to convince my superiors that thestrals are obligate omnivores. But the REMBOs--- that's 'Rear Echelon Mother Bucking Officers' to you--- are all convinced that ponies will go into squealing hysterics if they find out that thestrals aren't herbivores. So I spent the second half of my career sneaking bottles of blood to the thestrals in my command and fudging the paperwork. That's the other reason thestrals aren't keeling over dead; they can get a buddy to sneak 'em some of the good stuff. They'll latch on to a gryphon in the ranks who'll slip them some of their meat ration under the table...."

"Can't be easy to get away with," I said, fishing. "I'd think someone would notice thestrals getting hopped up and crazy on blood and flesh--"

Sawbones exploded. "They're still teaching that load of horseapples to ponies?" he said, throwing his forehooves in the air. "What poppycock! Of course they get more active and aggressive. They also get clearer eyesight, better reaction time and stamina and a stronger sex drive. That's what happens when a sickly pony starts getting healthy! Bucking Tartarus, It must be like coming back to life from the dead."

"She was certainly feral enough when I ran into her," I said.

"You obviously haven't had many encounters with thestrals," Sawbones said dryly, rolling his eyes. "they do that hiss-and-snarl routine whenever they get frightened or upset.... largely because they know it freaks other ponies out. Tartarus, if I was lost in a storm in the Everfree and your black-clad flank came bombing out of the undergrowth at me, I'd hiss and snarl at you myself. Trust me, it was an act."

I backed up a few sentences mentally. "Wait wait wait," I interrupted him. "Are you saying that all
the thestrals under Luna's command are operating at half capacity?"

"More like one fifth, if that. They're running on dregs, half the time." He started pulling bottles and vials down from a shelf. "And 'Thestrals under Luna's command' basically means 'all the Thestrals.' Same thing. This stuff is rationed out, remember?" He waggled the vial of fake blood at me. "It's free!... so long as you join the Night Guard. And it's heavily restricted and controlled by the government. So either you join the military, or you struggle to afford it on your own. Clever little game, that," he added, his lip curled in disgust. "What better way to control somepony? Outlaw their food supply, and then enslave them to you by making yourself the only supplier...

"Or of course you could do like this one and go out and hunt for blood and meat when the hunger gets to be too much, and pray that nopony ever catches you. The criminal penalties for drinking blood-- or selling it to a blood drinker-- are pretty brutal. Heavy fees. Loss of business or medical licenses. Years of imprisonment. Coerced 'addiction treatments,' where they dry you out... which means in a thestral's case, slowly starving you back into a malnourished stupor, then calling you 'cured.'"

"And this is how Luna treats her loyal minions," I said scathingly.

"Oh don't blame Luna too much," Sawbones said as he filled a syringe. "It's not her fault she doesn't dare to try and change things just yet."

"And why not?" I demanded.

"Because she's scared to," he said. "'Ruling as sisters together' blather or not, the reality is that our dear Princess Moonbutt is still on probationary status."

"And Princess Celestia probably convinced her that pushing the issue of her thestral's rights might be... bad for her image," I finished for him. That was probably true enough; ponies freaked out when they saw a dude in a scary halloween costume. God knows what would happen if they found out the 'former' Nightmare Moon had a flock of bloodsucking batponies at her disposal. So long as she played Vegetarian Vampire with the thestrals, the ponies at large would stay calm. But if she ever insisted on them being allowed to drink blood and eat meat like they needed...

"So her most loyal followers, who waited in exile a thousand years for her return, get rewarded by being forced to live their lives weak, sickly, and half-criminalized." Sawbones stepped over to the patient. "All that misery, for want of a pint or two of blood each week and a pound or two of steak.

"This," he said, brandishing the syringe, "Is a B-vitamin shot, mixed in with a few other goodies that will help get her back on her hooves and her metabolic systems up to speed." He unceremoniously stuck the needle in her cutie mark (a halloween pumpkin if you must know) and depressed the plunger. "Otherwise she's in fairly good shape, and will soon be healthy as houses." He gave me a sharp look. "IF she's allowed to eat a proper diet."

"I'm not a fool like the Royal Sisters," I said.

"Nah. You're your own unique special kind of fool," he snorted. "Just give her plenty to eat when she wakes up. She's going to be hungry. Lots of red meat, and lots of blood fresh off the butcher block." He waddled towards the door to his private rooms. "And see if you can't convince those two other batwinged blockheads of yours that they're not going to burn in Tartarus if they drink a cup of the red stuff every now and then. They've been so repressed by whoever raised 'em that they practically faint at the sight of a ketchup stain."

He closed the door behind him. I regarded the sleeping pony on the table before me. "Now what to
do with you," I muttered to myself. I levitated her up off the table and headed for the exit. I
buttonholed the first changeling I found in the hallway. "Tell my lieutenants to meet me in the Feast
Hall," I said. "Summon the Broken Birds as well. We are going to have a little... celebratory meal."

"What shall I tell the kitchens to lay out?" the changeling asked.

I couldn't resist. I leaned in towards him, flipped up my visor, and gave him my best psycho slasher

A while back, during a particularly boring winter week, I had hollowed out a new cavern and made
it into an old school, viking style mead hall. This was separate from the dining hall used for the riff
raff; it was something for special feasts and celebrations, for only the upper echelons and the
occasional honored guest. I had gone all out. Carved pillars with celtic knotwork lined the walls, and
huge iron chandeliers hung from chains from the ceiling. A single low, wide oaken table ran the
length of the room, with a huge ornate chair at either end and seating running down either side. I was
seated at the head of the table. To my left sat Chrysalis, in her own slightly less ornate chair; to my
right sat Artful Dodger. Next to him was Eiderdown, who huddled next to him on the bench, head
down. Next to Chrysalis sat Runt, Skank and Mange. Across from them and next to Dodger and
Eidy was Black Fang. Then came the Broken Birds, across from the earth pony, pegasus and
unicorn lieutenants I had recently selected, and the leader of the few Minotaurs on my payroll. And
placed in the large seat of honor at the other end of the table, discreetly flanked on either side by a
changeling guard, was our still-sleeping guest of honor, our mystery thestral.

The table was stacked with simple fare at the moment; heaping bowls of fruit, plates of vegetables,
fist-sized loaves of bread, pitchers of wine and water, and the specialty du jour— heaping bowls of
cubed meat, marinating in a mix of salt, pepper, diced garlic, onion and sardine, raw egg, olive oil
and capers. Several people at the table looked confused; more than one looked nauseous (except for
the Diamond Dogs, who had already left puddles of drool on the table.) There was a heaping bowl
right in front of myself, and another in front of our guest.

"Well," I said, "Let's get started. Start eating, ladies and gentlemen." I dispelled the sleeping
aura on her as the rest of the table, with seriously varying degrees of enthusiasm, dug in.

She woke up with a snort and a half-jump, her head popping up like a jack in the box. The confusion
on her face was almost hilarious. She jumped into a half-crouch and looked around, obviously
bewildered to find herself sitting in a mead hall surrounded by feasting creatures. She looked around,
looked down at the food in front of her, then looked up at me.

I waited until her eyes locked with mine. I had flipped the lower half of my visor up, baring my
lower face so I could eat. Without taking my eyes off her, I dug around in the bowl of bloody meat in
front of me with my fingers, pulled out a chunk and popped it in my mouth, chewing deliberately.
Hydra tartar, yum yum.

I could see the wheels turning in her mind. She was surrounded. She couldn't fly away, there was a
stone roof overhead. There were large, armed, dangerous looking creatures all around her. But
nobody had harmed her; nobody except the big half-bald monkey thing at the other end of the table
was even paying any attention to her (per my orders.) They were all just... eating.

"Sit. Eat." I said. She hesitated. "You will come to no harm here. You are sick and hungry, you
need food. Sit. Eat." I magically nudged the bowl in front of her. Cautiously she lowered her rump
back to the seat cushion. She caught a whiff of what was in the bowls and her nostrils flared; she
looked down in the bowl, her pupils dilating till they seemed to fill her face. I heard her stomach
growl all the way from the other end of the table.
I could practically read her mind. It was a trick, it had to be. She looked around again. Yes, the ponies and minotaurs were lashing into the fruits and vegetables. A couple of the ponies were looking at the bowls of meat like they thought it was going to bite them, yes, but everyone else--- the bug ponies, the diamond dogs, even the strange ape-creature at the head of the table-- were digging into the meat with obvious relish. And the others didn't even react. As if it were no thing.

Hesitantly, she reached out and pulled the bowl closer....

I suppressed a grin as she started eating, cautiously at first, but pretty soon she was gobbling her way to the bottom of the bowl. There was a good two inches of blood still in the bowl when she was done; she started to slurp it up but froze, looking around the table, obviously waiting for somepony to react. I locked eyes with her, deliberately picked up my own bowl and drank from the rim. She took the hint and began slurping greedily.

She burped, wiped her mouth on her hock, and sat back with a sigh of contentment. Then she did something I wasn't expecting; she started crying. She sat there, staring ahead silently, big fat tears rolling quietly down her cheeks.

I looked over at Chrysalis, not quite sure what to think. She leaned toward me slightly. "Relief, mingled with guilt, anger, shame... self loathing," she said. "And more than a dollop of defeat."

Yeah, I thought it was something like that. If Chrysalis kept up this on-the-fly psychic analysis thing I was going to change her name to Counselor Troi.

I could piece together what was wrong from that. Apparently pony society had done for hemovores what the Victorian era on Earth had done for sex: turned it into something sick, horrifying and shameful. Little Miss Vampony here-- like Jetstream and Halfsies too, for that matter-- had probably spent her life suppressing her desperate craving for meat and blood, being told she was a vile, sick monster if she ever gave in... and she had finally broken down, gone out in the woods and killed something to slake her thirst. And now here she had sat down at a table full of monsters and gorged herself on the forbidden fruit as if it was nothing. She probably felt absolutely filthy, like she had sat down and supped with the Devil. She just sat there with her face streaking with tears of despair.

If this was what the rest of Equestria's batponies were like... that inkling of a grand opportunity grew. Showtime.

I rapped my stein on the table for attention. "It's time we introduced ourselves," I said. "I am Darth Vulcan. What is your name."

She looked at me. "Pumpkin Patch," she said in a monotone.

"Pumpkin Patch," I said. "I won't ask what you were doing in my forest; that much is obvious. You must have been pretty desperate to go hunting in the most dangerous forest in Equestria." I paused, took a drink, set my stein down."I know about the thestral vampire bat heritage. I know about the blood hunger. I know you think you're a monster, because that's what... everypony... has told you that you'd be if you ever "gave in" to that evil hunger. And now you think you've fallen in among monsters like you deserve.

"What if I told you that it's all a pile of horseapples?" She blinked at me. I folded my hands in front of me. "Let me tell you a little story.

"Once upon a time there was a young woman of my race," I said. "She was a vegetarian. Now vegetarianism is a silly-ass religion invented by some of my people, who love fluffy little
animals and who, despite the fact that we are obligate omnivores, feel terribly guilty that we
eat meat. So they try to invent a diet where they can live on nothing but vegetables and fruits." I shrugged. "They can get away with it for a while--- by buying pills and tablets and, essentially, slowly digesting their own livers. And by sustaining themselves on phony moral superiority." Some of those at the table chuckled.

"Well this young woman had decided to be a virtuous vegetarian, and to love all animals and never ever eat one, because that was wicked. And one day, because she loved animals so much, she got a kitten. She loved and doted on it, and made it a little bed and gave it little toys. But she got a stupid idea in her head. That stupid idea went something like this: if it was so noble and virtuous to be a vegetarian, then her sweet little kitty should be a vegetarian too. So she stopped buying proper cat food for her cat, and started feeding it nothing but stewed vegetables and soybeans and the other half-edible rot that good little vegetarians ate instead of meat. And the little kitten got sicker and sicker, and she just couldn't understand why--- and the veterinarian was no help because he just kept telling her to feed it that wicked, wicked meat... until finally, the poor little kitten died. And she buried it in the flower bed and cried for days and days."

"Let me tell you another." I pulled the vial of synthetic blood out of my pocket, held it up to the torchlight. "Once there was a little old lady who loved hummingbirds. She hung a bird feeder filled with sugar water by her window so she could watch them feed, flying about like little winged jewels.

"But one day she had to go on a trip. And she asked her daughter to keep the little hummingbird feeder filled for her, so the hummingbirds wouldn't fly away while she was gone. Well the daughter was a good, proper healthy woman who never let unhealthy things like sugar cross her lips, and it appalled her when she realized she was mixing up bottles of hummingbird food that were so full of nasty, unhealthy sugar. So she left the sugar out, and replaced it with NutraSweet. And the little birds, who burned thousands of calories an hour just flying, ate and ate and ate--- but there was nothing in the hummingbird nectar to feed them. And so they starved to death with their bellies full to bursting. And the little old lady came home to find little dead birds lying on the ground all around their feeder."

I paused to pop another chunk of raw meat into my mouth. "My cousin was a F#$%ing moron." I paused. "And so are the idiots who keep telling you that your blood craving is wrong."

"You. Are not. A monster. Oh, don't take my word for it-- I'm the evil warlock of the Everfree, after all." Some of my lieutenants chuckled. "Take the word of my physician who examined you. Your blood craving is no more evil or unnatural than any other natural carnivore's. Would you think a bird evil or corrupt for eating worms or bugs? Or an otter evil for eating a fish? Or a cat for catching mice? Or a fox, for hunting the hare?"

"I'm a pony," she protested, looking away.

"You're part vampire bat," I corrected." Just like every other thestral. Your body needs blood just like it needs water or air or sleep. That is not evil, no matter what the squeamish might say. You are no more a monster than that poor starving kitten; you are no more unhealthy than those poor hummingbirds. You. Are. A thestral. And thestrals need meat and blood to be truly healthy." I held up the vial. "The ones who have made it a sin and a crime for you to eat
what you need, who have been poisoning you with this crap chemical substitute--- they are the
ones who are unnatural. Damn them, and damn their squeamish ignorance." Shock at my
words flooded her face; her tearful despair slowly giving way as long repressed resentment, finally
given permission, flooded in. You could almost see her heart hardening against them.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jetstream. He was staring at the bowl of meat in front of them with
a conflicted look on his face. Slowly, almost guiltily, he reached into the bowl and pulled out a
gobbet of meat, tasted it-- then with an expression of defiance, stuck it in his mouth, chewed,
swallowed. His pupils dilated till his eyes were almost solid black, and he gave a moan of
satisfaction. Renewed vitality almost visibly flowed through him. He grabbed another. Haldsies
followed suit.

I kept my poker face and returned my attention to Pumpkin Patch. Her expression was shifting from
one of guilt to one of slow dawning acceptance. It was sinking in that she was accepted here. Time
to work this to my advantage. "Do your friends or neighbors know you are out here?" I asked.

She shook her head. "This is the first time I've ever gone hunting," she said. "My... dealer... Gyro.
He's a gryphon. He's the one who gave me my first taste of the real stuff. He got caught selling bread
soaked in blood to one of the thestrals at the garrison, and he had to bolt for it. I'd kept myself down
to a pint a week with him, cutting it with the fake stuff... my parents were in the Guard so I get part
of their ration.... but it'd been two weeks and--" she swallowed. "Once you've tasted the real stuff,
the fake stuff just doesn't cut it anymore. You just feel more alive. "

"I'm guessing you weren't his only customer," I said.

She saw where I was going. "I'm familiar with most of them," she said. "Some have been asking me
if they know where I can score a pint..."

I gave her my best ominous chuckle. "Care to help them out?" I said.

She was savvy. "I'm guessing you're offering me a job as a dealer?"

"Dealer. Distributor. Recruiter." I quit fiddling with the alchemy vial in my hand and tucked it
away. "But that's all negotiable, for the future. For now we'll keep it simple. You swear loyalty
to me, and I'll give you meat and blood, in plentiful supply. By the barrel, even, if you want.
What you do with the surplus, that's entirely up to you. Share it, hoard it, sell it for a tidy
profit, it makes no difference to me.

"But make no mistake, you will work for me. I will have tasks for you. If you do good, you will
be rewarded. If you bolt on us, or rat on us... we cut you off. And that will be just the first of
your regrets." She flinched at that. "But if you're loyal, you will have an army to back you up
or to bail you out. And I promise you, you will never go hungry again.

"Or, you can forget all this. Go back to whatever little garrison town you came from, and
spend the rest of your life half-starved, sucking down Celestia's chemical swill while her sister
turns a blind eye to your suffering and her sun-dappled subjects look down their noses in
disgust at you. Your choice."

She looked down at the table. Her expression firmed up and she looked up. "What's my first job?"
she said steadily.

I pulled another vial out from under my cloak. The liquid in this one was the real deal; you could tell
by the full, dark red. I slid it down the length of the table to her. She stopped it with her hoof and looked at it. "You're going to go back home, find the other thestrals... and offer them a taste," I said.

"Oh, and... welcome aboard."
Twilight was deeply rattled. She'd not known Luna for nearly as long as she'd known Celestia, but she'd always felt she had grown to know the night princess quite well. In the few years they had been friends she'd seen Luna exuberant, thoughtful, depressed, pompous, affectionate, even angry, but she'd never seen her as she was seeing her now: reduced to rage-filled tears.

"Fifteen of them!" She raged. "Fifteen, Tia! An entire garrison's worth of my Children of the Night forswore their oath to me and fled to the arms of this wretch Darth Vulcan--- all because of YOU!"

She flung the furled reports against the wall violently. The loose papers fluttered down like leaves in a storm.

"This is not my fault, Luna!" Celestia shouted back angrily.

"Oh, are there MORE lies you would like to add to the list?" Luna seethed. With a pop she summoned a beaker of the alchemist's blood substitute. She bobbled it in the air in front of Celestia's nose. "When I returned, you told me of the ridiculous blood-ban those noisome Lords put on my thestrals. You told me of this, this drek you forced them to drink instead of the fluid of life they need. You swore to me that it was as good as the real thing. You SWORE to me that it would do them no harm!

"And fool that I am, I believed you." Her eyes narrowed to slits. "More the fool I, I never did investigate for myself-- till I heard of my little night ponies abandoning me, in desperation to quench their hunger. Surely it could not be this bad?

"Oh no, it was WORSE. I secured vials of the potion for myself, and tested them. Dost thou know what I found?" The bottle shook in rage. "It was SWILL! Not half of the vital essences of real blood or meat, and mere traces of those... stirred in with a potion to suppress the appetite. This, this colored water would not nourish a starving stoat!" The bottle sailed across the room to smash against a hanging tapestry.

Twilight, who had been trying to gather the scattered papers, yelped and dodged the flying glass. "But that can't be true," she protested. "I studied the blood substitute in my alchemy classes. It's made of proteins, vitamins, amino acids..."

"And sawdust," Luna gritted, "Is vegetable fiber." She glared into Twilight's gawping face.

Celestia looked stricken. "Luna, I swear to you I did not know," she began.

Luna whirled on her. "How could you not?" she shouted. "They were under your wing nigh on a century ere I returned! Did you not question why my thestrals seemed so lethargic? So much weaker? Why they left the service for "health reasons," near a decade sooner than thine own Solar Guard? Why after returning from exile, they began slowly dying out? Nay, Twilight," she said,
tossing an aside to the Princess of Magic. "Malnourished mares cannot bear foals, nor nurse them." Her face crumpled a bit. "To think that the mares, my night ponies came to me on the very eve of my return, querying why they struggled so hard to bear... and I could do nothing but stand there, making promises and platitudes like a fool..." she wiped her eyes. "Well, I kept my promise. I tarried sore, but I have learned why. The question remains, why did not THEE?"

Celestia shook her head. "Luna... Lulu... I never knew the inner workings, the alchemy of your thestrals the way you did. My physicians and alchemists, the best minds swore to me over and over that the synthetic blood was doing them no harm..." She shook her head again. "It was never meant to be a permanent solution-- just a temporary thing, till the ponies were used to them again. I knew the alchemist's blood was a poor substitute, but I felt it was more important to have your faithful followers returned to Equestria, and waiting for you when you returned...."

"Then why did you banish them in the first place?" Luna accused.

"I didn't! The Nobles did!" Celestia turned her gaze away. "Even in my own ears it sounds like blame-shifting," she said ruefully, " but it is the truth. The lords and barons, the knights and generals, they would not heed me. They drove the thestral tribes out, swearing that they would not give Nightmare Moon's loyal minions a chance to take vengeance. Had I resisted, defied them..." she shuddered. "Better exile than outright riot and revolt." She looked pleadingly into Luna's teary eyes. "It took every one of those nine hundred years before ponies had forgotten enough. Even then I had to compromise, accept the Blood Laws--- you have no idea how frightened ponies were of the thestrals, Lulu--"

"Why?" Luna shrieked. "Did you tell everypony that THEY ate foals, too?"

Sometimes words can draw more blood than any knife. "Luna..." Celestia said, heartbroken.

Luna didn't care to hear what she had to say. "This folly ends, sister. I will not have my Foals of the Night left half-dead on pills and potions, because your whey-blooded subjects are too full of the faints and the whimpers to see a little blood!" She stamped her hoof so hard the marble cracked. Lightning cracked in reply in the skies outside. "Either end the Blood Laws, or I will end them for you by calling a Wild Hunt!"

Twilight had never seen Celestia's eyes go so round. "Luna, no, you cannot--think of the pony's reactions---"

"I care not!" Luna stamped again. Fangs grew in her mouth. "My thestrals will fly and feed again! It is their birthright, and I will lead them as is mine!"

"NO YOU WILL NOT!" Celestia thundered. Her eyes turned white; her mane and tail turned to a corona of flame. "I FORBID IT, LUNA! I WILL NOT HAVE YOU THROW EQUESTRIA INTO A PANIC IN A FIT OF PIQUE!"

The dark princess... quailed in fear, cringing down before her sister. It was brief, barely a moment, but the effect was instant. Celestia's flames died and her terrible white eyes faded to her own pain-filled lavender ones. "Oh Luna..." she said, holding out a hoof, beseeching.

Luna straightened up, holding herself stiff. "So," she said, her voice trembling ever so slightly. "It is to be thus."

"Luna I am so sorry, I..." The younger sister turned and walked away as if she'd said nothing. "Luna, please, I promise you we will fix this."
Luna looked back over her shoulder. "Your promises would matter to me," she said, her voice wobbling dangerously, "if you ever kept any of them." She looked ahead and continued walking. Her walk turned to a canter, then to a gallop as she raced from the throne room, tears streaking down her midnight face.

Celestia stood in the middle of the room, head hanging low. "Oh, Celestia..." Twilight said, moving to Celestia's side. They stood that way for several minutes, wordless. As the silence stretched, Twilight fished for something, anything to break it. "...A Wild Hunt?" asked.

Celestia looked to her former student. "A. feasting hunt, for all the thestrals in Equestria," she explained. "It was a festivity for the entire thestral tribe. They would fly out at night, following my sister, bringing down great beasts together and ending the night in a massive feast." she smiled faintly. "There are far fewer monsters in Equestria today than there would be, thanks to those little hunting jaunts."

"Why haven't I ever heard of this, or seen anything commemorating it?" Twilight asked.

A fleeting look of amusement crossed Celestia's face. "You have. Remember that giant mummified hydra in the Equestrian Natural Museum?"

"Yyyyyyyyysss...?"

"It wasn't exactly mummified. It was drained of blood."

"Yeeek," Twilight said faintly.

"AAaaaand most of the meat carved up and served," Celestia continued. "Before the skin was stuffed and mounted..."

"Ork," said the Princess of Friendship, turning faintly green.

"It... would have been just the thing needed, back a thousand years," Celestia said. "But if she flew a Wild Hunt now, ponies would panic-- there are already fears, with the news of the thestrals defecting... if ponies see them out there, hunting and killing and feeding, even just on squirrels or pigeons, there would be riots, violence---"

"I understand," Twilight hastened to say. "Poor Luna. Having her ponies... abandon her... and to join Darth Vulcan of all creatures..." she shivered.

"A drowning pony will grasp at anything, even the point of a sword," Celestia said mournfully.

"Can't we just... revoke those laws?" Twilight asked. "Or issue a decree or something?"

Celestia shook her head. "It was passed by the house of Lords, and written on the books," she said. "I could issue an executive order suspending them, but they could reverse it after mere days.

"And it isn't just the Blood Laws. The average pony in the street doesn't even know that the thestrals aren't strict herbivores; the fears that would arise would have to be dealt with. The medical community has preached for years that the blood hunger is a deviant throwback that needs to be suppressed, rather than a natural appetite that needs to be fed--- we would have to change the minds of nearly every influential doctor in Equestria on the matter. Tartarus, more than a fair share of the thestrals themselves believe that!

"Then there are those who profit directly from the Blood Laws: the alchemist guilds who make the blood substitute, the few doctors who specialize in "blood addiction therapy..." they would lobby
fiercely and donate heavily to keep the Blood Laws on the books. And the scaremongering by the press---" she groaned. "It would be a nightmare."

"But what happens when word leaks out why the Thestrals are abandoning their posts?" Twilight said.

"And there it is," Celestia fretted. "Throw out the laws, cause an anti-thestral panic. But do nothing, and watch an anti-thestral panic unfold anyway...and watch the thestral's loyalties fade away, and rightly so---" She swore suddenly. "DAMN that Darth Vulcan! He's thrown the cat among the pigeons this time..." She rubbed her forehead with a hoof. "Do you suppose he is truly this cunning, or does he just make it up as he goes along??"

Twilight bit her lip and scowled. "There must be some way to turn this to our advantage," she said, brooding. "We have to undo those laws, cut off Darth Vulcan's leverage, and win back the Thestral's loyalty..." She blinked suddenly; her horn even lit up briefly. "Wait, I think I have it... Celestia, I don't know if I remember correctly, but isn't there something in the law about the disposition of the Guards in time of war...?"

It only took a brief run to the law libraries to find the volume in question. The tome slammed down on the library table, somehow failing to raise the requisite cloud of dust, but raising a stern "SSSHH!" from the attending librarian.

"Sorry," Twilight said, grinning sheepishly. Her purple aura enclosed the book; pages fluttered till she found the section in question. She read aloud as a curious Celestia peered over her shoulder. "In the events of a proclamation of war or indeterminate police action or other yadda yadda yadda... ah here it is. 'the sovereign of the land shall render final dictate on the provider of all soldier's provisions, chosen from those decreed acceptable for commission for the necessary provender by the government, by issue of a contract form etcetera, etcetera.' Perfect!"

"Twilight, I'm not quite sure where you're going with this," Celestia said. "All this states is that I can pick which government contractor provides supplies and provisions for our troops in time of war."

"Or protracted police action... and seeing as Darth Vulcan has a small army camped out in the middle of the Everfree smack dab in the middle of Equestria, I'd call dealing with him a protracted police action at the least," Twilight said.

"And how does this help us?"

Twilight smirked. "It helps us negotiate."

Flask and Beaker's Alchemaical Goods was about one would expect from an alchemist's lab; dusty, dimly lit by amber lamps, lined with beakers, bottles and tubes and books of recipes. The owner of the shop was likewise predictable; an older, rangy pale green stallion with a grey bottle-broom mustache and a wispy mane that curled around his head like a cloud, and a slightly bemused expression. Of course the slightly bemused expression may have been due to having one of the three
reigning princesses of Equestria standing in his office, while several very severe-looking guards stood watch at the doors and windows.

"As I was saying, Mister Flask," the small, purple alicorn was saying cheerfully, "We wished to be the first to congratulate you on your creation of a new, improved formula for the Thestral Vitae Potion. You've made quite the discovery."

"I have?" Flask said.

"Oh indeed. Why it's going to help revolutionize the market." A folder containing a very flamboyantly worded commendation from the Princesses and an extremely obtusely worded "recipe" in alchemic code that was, when translated, the equivalent of 'put the lime in the coconut' materialized on his desk, alongside a small bag of gold bits and gems. "And to think that it has such simple ingredients...." An empty flask, a small bottle of food coloring, and another flask of a dark red liquid the alchemist recognized almost immediately as definitely not being tomato soup, appeared on the desk. The bottles slowly and deliberately levitated and emptied their contents into the empty flask, producing a vibrant reddish-orange liquid that was... still not tomato soup. Another bag of bits and gems appeared to set down beside it.

"It is?" he said.

"Of course you don't need to worry about your secrets being revealed," Princess Twilight said. "As the sole alchemic provisioner for the thestral divisions, your, ah, recipe would of course be a protected state secret. And you would of course be subject to a nondisclosure agreement.... For security reasons." Another bag of bits appeared on the table. "As would the names of your suppliers." A list of names floated onto the table. Mister Flask recognized several; none of them were in the alchemy business, but quite a number of them were in the meat packing and pet food processing business that traded with the gryphon kingdoms, or were gryphons themselves.

"They are..." He nodded thoughtfully. He knew that those fellows had trouble disposing of certain byproducts of their trade. It would only be good business relations to provide them with an outlet.

"And the crown will be making a significant advance payment," Twilight said. "After all you will be the sole provider for this particular contract for the foreseeable future, and due to the Darth Vulcan crisis we will be seeing a huge increase for demand of this particular advanced potion. Increased rations, expanded rations for extended family, so on. So you will have to expand your operations quite a bit." A rather LARGE bag thumped down on the desk. "And we are going to make sure the contract is quite generous." A government document popped into existence and fluttered down to land next to the growing pile of coinage.

His eyebrows nearly flew off the top of his head when he saw the figure in the bottom line. But he hesitated, still uncertain. "Oh, I'm always happy to help out Equestria," Flask said. "I'm just concerned that this particular, ah, product, might cause some... misunderstandings. Ponies getting the wrong idea..." the idea of putting him behind bars, for instance, he thought.

A pre-signed Royal Pardon appeared. Heavens, it was almost like magic. "Since it will be a Top Secret project, you will of course have marvelous amounts of leeway," Princess Twilight said. The mare spoke from experience: it was amazing how the words "On a mission from Princess Celestia" removed obstacles. "If anyone has any questions or ah, misunderstandings about your stock, just show them this and refer them to the palace."

Flask considered the proposal before him. The princesses apparently wanted him to use his license as a government contractor alchemist to put fresh blood and food coloring in bottles, label it "Secret Formula X," and then sell it to the Equestrian government as high-octane thestral rations. Frankly, he
had no real objections; He'd never bought the "Reefer Madness" hysteria of his colleagues about what would happen if thestrals got real blood. He knew they were part vampire bat, and he darned well knew you couldn't raise a lion to eat straw.

He did wonder though why the Princesses were going to such roundabout lengths of subterfuge. Why not just get the House of Lords to revoke the thestral Blood Laws?.....Then he contemplated the last time he tried to get a new dandruff shampoo recipe approved... "Where do I sign, and when do you want the first shipment, your Highness?"

Princess Twilight pointed to the bottom of the contract with her hoof, and smiled smugly. "It's a pleasure doing business with you, Mister Flask."

"...So for the foreseeable future, all thestrals in the Equestrian Royal Guard will be switching over to these enhanced synthetic blood rations," Celestia concluded. "They will also be given double the normal ration, and the 'family and loved ones' policy will be enlarged and extended as well. It's a necessary move, because of the crisis of the moment--- due to our enemy's tactics of subterfuge and sabotage, the Night Guard will find itself sorely pressed; they will need the extra vitality. We cannot afford to have them weak and sickly for lack of sufficient nourishment."

The circle of physicians seated around the room nodded soberly. Caduceus, the Surgeon General and the most respected medical pony in Equestria, spoke up. "I may be reading between the lines here, Your Highness, but you seem to be implying that the enemy, this Darth Vulcan, has some sort of advantage for which the Night Guard has to compensate."

"Yes," Celestia said, bowing her head. "Our intelligence informs us that Darth Vulcan has gained thestral minions, and he is supplying them with fresh blood."

This revelation was greeted with near-unanimous cries of horror. "This is terrible!" one mare exclaimed. "They'll be practically feral! Savage!"

"I've seen ponies hopped up on rhubarb and jimsonweed," one proclaimed sonorously, shaking his head. "This will be worse. They'll be killing machines... Heaven help the pony that meets them out in the dark!"

Celestia had to suppress the urge to roll her eyes. "Many are given to fear that, yes," she said.

One labcoated pony, to her surprised gratification, blew a raspberry. "Poppycock, you lot," he said. "Ignore their hysterics, Princess. They greatly exaggerate to say the least. That old Blood Frenzy story is just a gross exaggeration."

"Rubbish," Caduceus snapped. "The consequences of blood consumption by thestrals is common knowledge!"

_Because you repost it in every medical journal on a regular basis, thought Celestia. How strange I went back to look and never found the initial research that proved it._ She was steadily growing more angry with herself and with them. These were the ponies whose opinions she'd trusted so much? "Be that as it may," she interrupted. "The ponies in Vulcan's thrall will be refreshed with real blood, which will give them an advantage on the battlefield over their kind. Faster, stronger, more aggressive... We need to be sure that we have counteracted this edge."
"And how can we be of assistance, Your Highness?" Caduceus asked smoothly.

"I will need you and your colleagues to monitor the Night Guard as they are introduced to the new Alchemist's Blood. Strength, stamina, reflexes, mental and emotional state... I need you to thoroughly document everything, and be ready to give a full presentation on any change in their overall health and performance due to the new potion."

"Will all the Night Guard be participating in this?" another pony asked.

"Yes. You will be monitoring the civilian members of their family too, as they will be partaking of it as well. We could hardly expect them to not share with their mates and families, after all. This is why we went ahead and increased the ration. So effectively all of them, yes." she paused, savoring the dramatic reveal. "Except for one control group, of course."

"That being?"

"My sister Luna's own personal guard, and their immediate families," Celestia said. "They will be provided, under special Royal permission, genuine blood." The uproar at this pronouncement redoubled the first. Celestia merely stood and weathered the gale as hooves, protests, and more than a few clipboards and papers flew up in the air. At least one pony fainted. None of it disturbed her serene smile; nopony was close enough to notice that behind it there was an absolutely wicked glitter in her eye.

"Have you gone mad, Princess?" Caduceus finally spluttered out. "There's no telling what those bat-winged menaces will do if they're hopped up on blood--"

'Bat winged menaces,' hmm? I won't forget that, dear Caduceus, Celestia thought. "--Which is why they are to be monitored, Doctor," She said with the longsuffering air of one explaining to a foal. "We must know how much of an advantage, if any, Darth Vulcan's own blood-fed minions will have. My sister's personal guards are perfect for this; they are the most disciplined soldiers in the ranks of the Night Guard, and known intimately to her, so she will be able to spot any changes in their behavior first. She will control their blood supply, and will be watching them closely herself along with the doctors you assign. We could ask for no safer group of test subjects."

Several of the doctors gathered looked very displeased. Caduceus looked to rebel, but stifled himself and relented. "Very well, Your Highness," he muttered. "But it's hardly any mystery what the results will be. Mark my words, I could write out a forecast of the consequences of the Blood Frenzy without ever seeing them!"

And you would, Celestia thought, her anger simmering under a heavy lid of guilt and disappointment. Which is precisely the problem. I am ashamed that I put so much blind faith in your words and the words of your predecessors. All that remained was to tell Luna her part in this... Celestia felt a twinge of regret, but it would work best if Luna did not know the whole truth. Forgive me, Luna, for this little deception, she thought. Go ahead and hate me for a little longer. Just a little longer, and we'll put paid to this.

Her Mona Lisa smile tightened ever so slightly into a vindictive smirk. She was going to relish their expressions when this little experiment was concluded, and they unveiled the results of their testing---only to have it revealed in turn that the potion given to the Night Guard regulars and the real blood given to Luna's Guards was the exact same thing. In one stroke the medical establishment's bias would be revealed, the 'Blood Frenzy' myth would be dispelled for good, and the Blood Laws would be rendered null and void.... all while getting Luna's poor thestrals back in the true pink of health along the way.
Ponies often wondered why she only claimed the title Princess. Really though. Crowning herself Queen?

Why would she settle for being a piece on the board, when she could be the Chessmaster instead?

Luna's six personal guards stood outside her chamber door, regarding each other in silent puzzlement. They had been summoned at this hour without warning or explanation, to find themselves waiting with their comrades for her Highness' pleasure.

Princess Luna's voice finally came from behind the double doors. "Enter," she said. The doors opened on a wisp of magic; the six thestrals stepped into Luna's quarters. They found her seated in the middle of the room, next to a table. On the table sat a pitcher filled with dark liquid, and seven glasses.

"There are things ahoof these nights," Luna said. "My little ponies, I..." she closed her eyes briefly as if in pain, then opened them again. "I have just this past night learned of a wrong done against you. I have sought to undo that wrong.

"But once again, I have failed you. Once again, my sister has denied me the right to act. Once again I have been forced to bend the knee before her--"

She stopped and bit her lip; her hoof stamped as she struggled to herself. After a moment she went on. "But what little I can do for you, what little she has not denied me, that I will do.

"Be seated," she told them. Obediently, the six stallions sat at the table, one to a glass. With careful, deliberate movements, Luna levitated the pitcher and slowly filled each glass. Nostrils flared as they caught a whiff of what was in the glass; slit pupils dilated till their eyes were almost solid jet. "Is this...?" the first one asked, shocked.

"Yes," Luna said. Distressed, several of them moved, as if to get up and leave the table and get away from the dark temptation. "SIT!" ordered Luna. Obediently, silently, they sat. "I know what nonsense they have taught thee, my Children of the Night," she went on, gently. "I know that they have shamed thee, and lied to thee, about thy hunger. That they have made thee quell it with potions and philtres, to thine own hurt. And to the hurt of thy loved ones," she added with dark emphasis.

Her guards started at this emphasis. Then their eyes narrowed as the gears behind them started to turn. She took the pitcher again and finished pouring. The liquid was dark red and warm and fresh, preserved by magic on the pitcher. "This is part of thy heritage," Luna said. "There is no shame in it. Thou. Art. Thestrals. My Children of the Night. And fie on those who would quaver and whimper at it." She set the pitcher down... and to their ever growing shock, picked up her own glass of crimson. "Now," she said. "Drink with me." ... And she tipped the glass back and drained it in one go.

One by one, they took up their glasses in wingtip and joined her. Several of them had to struggle to swallow, and one even sputtered and choked. But once the flavor hit their tongues, instinct and appetite took over. They sat back, their glasses drained, their pupils dilated wide. "Your Highness?" one said, his voice giddy and alarmed, his breath panting. "Th-this... my heart is racing--"

"No, my loyal guard," Luna said sadly. "It is merely truly beating for the first time." She motioned for them to remain seated. "Gently now. Take time to get used to the rush." She watched as they looked at one another, their wings fluttering, their eyes brightening as the drink spread its
nourishment through their suddenly revitalized bodies. She got to her feet and walked to the balcony. "Accompany me." With a flap she took to the night air.

A heartbeat later her guards were alongside her. The change was startling beyond measure; She knew their senses were far sharper now, too, their eyes clearer, their ears undulled. The grins on their faces told her all she needed to know about how they were feeling. Till now it had been common wisdom that thestrals were weaker fliers than regular pegasi. But already their wingbeats were stronger, their flight more steady.

She reflected on her previous ignorance and lamented. To think she had once cruelly chided them for having become so weak in her absence...!

The castle had its own small stockyard, where chickens and cows were kept for milk and eggs for the castle kitchens. Luna had already made arrangements with the keeper. A dozen or so hens had been turned out into the yard; they were milling about, clucking idly. She swooped down on the chicken yard, landing lightly in the fenced in area. Her guards landed around her.

This would be hard for some of them.

"Stand here," she said quietly. Her guardponies fell still as shadows. She trotted to the center of the chicken yard, the pullets clucking and pecking all around her. She drew a blade from the aether and flourished it around her head. When she was certain her thestrals' full attention was on her, she picked out a pullet from the group-- and lunged.

The guards watched in horror as their beloved Princess seized the struggling, headless bird in her magic by the severed neck, pinching off the spurting blood, and lifted it up. "This, too, is part of thy heritage," she said. She banished her killing blade and summoned a crystal flask in its place, and began draining the blood of the dead pullet into it. "Though thou art ponies, thou'rt not like others. The blood of the bat-- the night hunter, the predator-- runs in thy veins as well. To hunt, to kill-- not merely to defend, but to feed and survive-- is the bat pony's legacy. Thy ancestors knew this; thou shalt have to learn it anew." She stoppered the bottle and held it out. "Shadow Storm? How fares thy wife?"

"Moon Mist? She does...fine, your Highness," Shadow Storm said, his face lighting up briefly. "We're both hopeful. Of course pregnancy is never easy, but she's much further along--- this time..." the pain in his voice was fleeting, but nopony could help but catch it.

Luna felt her anger flare. "Celestia, you feckless foal, this is more heartbreak you have to answer for. She held out the flask to him. "I give you more than hope," she said. "Bring this to thy bride, let her drink her fill. When it is empty bring it back, and we shall refill it, as often as needed Do not spare it, let her drain every drop as oft as she craves it, till the child is born. And then bring her more, till thy foal is weaned." She smiled briefly. "Do this, and thy wife and thy foal shall be hale and strong."

Shadow Storm took the bottle. "But... But the blood potions--"

"Are nearly worthless," Luna said. Her inward seething bubbled to the surface. "They malnourish thee, even in surfeit."

Shadow Storm was not a stupid pony; he quickly made the connection. "You mean," he said, his voice shaking, his hoof holding the bottle shaking, "That all this time... all Moon Mist needed was..." He sat down. He couldn't speak, choking as he looked down at the crimson bottle clutched in his forelegs. Cold, burning anger filled the eyes of his comrades.

"I learned of this myself only within this past day. Tis a chain of folly and incompetence and willful
lies forged link by link, yard by yard, decades in the making... all because ponies feared panic, should it be known that thestrals needed blood." Her sneer was more of a snarl. "Even now my sister claims to have "corrected" the error, that a proper blood potion hath been fabricated. She moves to use my Children of the Night as a proving ground for this new noxious philtre.... save for thee."

"Save for us? Why?" The guard who asked looked confused.

"Why, dear sister has given us gracious permission to let thee, and thee alone, feed as thou should," she said, her voice mocking. "So that her leeches might poke and prod thee and see what changes thy filthy, barbaric habits have on thee." Her guards stiffened angrily. The injury was grievous; the insult, insurmountable.

Shadow Storm's voice was cold. "What do you intend, your Highness?" he said. He felt the warm blood glowing in his belly, his own hot blood singing in his veins.

Luna looked away. This part was the bitterest pill. "For now, nothing." Six pairs of bat wings mantled in astonishment. Six pairs of wounded, betrayed eyes looked on her. She could not meet their gaze. "Our Twilight Princess has pleaded with us," she said. "She begs us to make no rash move.... She swears to us that Celestia has a plan in motion. One that will come to full fruition by this year's Summer Sun Celebration, that our injuries will be recompensed." She lowered her gaze and scowled. Damn my sister's never-ending Clever Plans, she thought. "I... gave my word to her. I will upset no apple carts, rock no boats. I will bide my time for now." She turned her gaze, stern and demanding, on them. "I would have you do the same. Take no action, make no rash move. Let my sister's cunning plot play out; a few months more will not worsen the damage." She forced a smile. "For now, e'en if you have no faith in my sister-- have faith in Twilight Sparkle. Princess Twilight has never led us astray, I will give her my faith at least this far."

"What do we do for now?" Shadow Storm asked.

"For the nonce--- we do as asked. We submit meekly to their tests and prodding, as the price to pay for giving succor to thy family and loved ones." She summoned the killing blade and another bottle. "Feed, and grow strong. Take the surfeit home, share with thy parents and siblings and wives and children, that they may grow strong. And bide our time.

"One way or the other....Come the Summer Sun Celebration, there will be a reckoning."

The killing blade flashed.
"This... is not what I was aiming for," I grumbled. I sourly regarded Pumpkin Patch and the twenty-odd thestrals standing behind her, ready to swear eternal fealty to me in exchange for the promise of blood. Pumpkin Patch immediately looked like a kicked puppy.

"I-I'm sorry, your Dark Lordship," she said. "What did I do wrong? I thought you wanted as many thestrals loyal to you as possible!" She swept her hoof out, indicating the twenty-some batponies gathered in the throne room. "Look, I got you every single one in the Northwest garrison!"

I rubbed the temples of my helmet and slouched in my throne. "What I wanted was as many thestral infiltrators as possible," I said. "Agents under my control, as close to the Princess' thrones as possible."

"You wanted us t-to spy on Princess Luna--- and Celestia?" One of them blurted out.

I couldn't help but stare at him. "Hello?" I said, pointing at my own face with both hands. "EVIL VILLAIN? BAD GUY? What, were you expecting me to have you sell cookies door to door?"

Several of them started looking decidedly upset as they realized that they were into it way up over their heads. It was confusing sometimes. These ponies went from grade-school naivete to R-rated adult cynicism and back again without any warning. That's what you get from creatures whose crown rulers double as mother figures, I suppose.

"Oh unclench," I growled, waving my hand. "Not like I'm going to have you do anything more treasonous than abandoning your posts." That for some reason didn't seem to make them feel any better. "Go for now. If I have need of you I will send Pumpkin Patch or Jetstream to summon you." Muttering among themselves, they started to shuffle their way out of the throne room. I sat there cradling my head in my hands. "Dammit," I said to Chrysalis. "They're no use to me as infiltrators now. Their faces and cutie marks will be on wanted posters from here to Canterlot."

"And they don't exactly seem enthusiastic," Chrysalis agreed. "I doubt they are completely trustworthy."

I ignored the irony and just grunted in agreement. "I noticed."

"Your Dark Eminence!"

"A moment if you please!"

"And now we come to the vaudeville portion of the show," I growled in annoyance. Dealing with the Flim Flam brothers could be tiresome. Their habit of introducing all their new inventions with a rollicking song and dance grated on my nerves. Tunnel drill? Fantastic. But two WEEKS and there were still Diamond Dogs humming that damned "Subterranean Excavator Six Thousand" song... "WHAT?" I snapped as the two boater-hatted ponies came galloping up, waving items around themselves in their magic aura. "And if you start singing I swear I'll break your kneecaps." Did ponies have kneecaps, I didn't know, I'd figure it out.

They balked at that, but pressed on. "Your Sinister Preeminence, we apologize for disturbing you--"
the mustachioed one started.

"--But events have conspired to render one of the projects you assigned us null and void," the other one finished.

"You requested we find a way to discreetly deliver the, ah, sanguine cargo to your miscellaneous thestral minions..."

"So we noodled it over, and came up with a rather ingenious plan."

"A variation on our old 'Miracle Curative Tonic,' " Flam (I think) finished, waving a labeled bottle in his magical grip. A dark purple liquid sloshed within. "Thstral Revivative, we were thinking of calling it--"

"Just a bottle of blood with some food coloring and flavoring added to throw ponies off," Flim said waggling his eyebrows. "Clever, no?"

"But confound it if Her Royal Solar Prominence didn't beat us to the punch!" Flam huffed through his mustache, throwing down a newspaper. I picked it up and my eyes drifted to the circled article.

"Major reformation in Night Guard benefits," I read out loud. "New potions to be distributed. Upon revelation that the most commonly used thestral nutrient supplements were proven insufficient for their needs, the Crown moved rapidly to correct the issue. Among other corrections being made, a new liquid supplement has been synthesized for distribution--"

"No prize for guessing what the secret ingredient is," Flim snorted. "She stole our idea. We should sue!"

"---total ration increased, yadda yadda yadda.... family benefits enlarged and extended... looking into compensation for any loss or hardship caused by the inferior product... amnesty for those who have had to resort to desperate measures? Oh it's obvious what THAT means." I folded the paper and let it fall to the armrest with a slap. "Well, that's buggered. She outmaneuvered us." I was ready to spit. It never occurred to me that she could just hold out a cookie and say "Mommy forgives you" and the lot of them would fly right back to her.

I began fishing through the Alicorn Amulet, searching for memory-erasing spells. I still wasn't going to kill unless absolutely necessary, and it wasn't if I could get away with giving them amnesia, dropping them on somepony's doorstep and pulling a Ding-Dong Ditch.

"Are you sure you want to give them up?" Black Fang said suddenly, startling me. He spent most of his time standing silent watch next to the throne; he was so quiet and unmoving sometimes I forgot he was there.

"Hardly," I said. "But I can't trust them."

"Their loyalties are already divided," Chrysalis agreed. "Even more so than these two." She pointed at the Flim Flam brothers, who bristled. "Meh, don't bother. We know that when you two are bought, you stay bought." They scowled but relaxed. "These Thestrals... we have no way to secure their loyalty to us... to Darth Vulcan."

"I heard that little slip," I said idly.

"Maybe not," Black Fang said. He stepped out of his place and to my side. "But... perhaps you should see something before you decide, Dark Lord. If you would accompany me to the training room?"
"Very well," I said, curious. "Lead the way..."

A minute later we were in one of the chambers that had been set aside for physical training. It wasn't much, just a few crude weights and makeshift punching bags and a couple of sparring rings. Some few of the ponies, minotaurs and diamond dogs were there, staving off boredom by pounding the snot out of the bags... or each other. I stood in the doorway out of the light, so we didn't interrupt anything. "So. What am I looking for?" I said, casting around.

Wordlessly he pointed across the room. I first saw Jetstream. He was sparring with one of the pegasi in one of the rings. Both were airborne and dueling it out with wings and padded hooves. Jetstream was flying literal circles around his opponent. He was a gray-and-black blur, striking from twenty different directions at once, swift as a hawk and agile as a hummingbird.

Wasn't he one of the remedial fliers....??

Further along was Pumpkin Patch. It looked like she'd taken her bungle personally, and was taking her frustrations out on a sandbag. My eyes went round behind my mask as the petite little pony hammered away at the bag. She was growling and hitting it with her forehooves so hard that the entire wooden frame it was suspended on was shaking. With a bark of anger she spun around and delivered a two-hoofed buck. The ropes snapped and the ruptured bag sailed halfway across the room, generating shouts of anger from those nearly struck by it. She winced sheepishly and went to clean up her mess.

Behind me, one of the Flim Flam brothers whistled. "As you can see, they may be useless for infiltration, but they do have certain... redeeming qualities," Black Fang said. "Night vision. Supernal hearing. And when they have recently fed on fresh blood..."

"Strong as an earth pony and fast as a pegasus," I finished for him. "Stronger and faster," Black Fang corrected. "We changelings have stealth, but we are not much of a physical challenge... six mares fought their way through dozens of us at the Battle of Canterlot, after all. The minotaurs are strong, but few. And slow, and ground-bound. Likewise the diamond dogs. And even the roughest of the ponies lack a certain.... killer instinct. You would be remiss to let these ponies slip away."

"I'm curious, dear Captain," Chrysalis said, sarcasm practically dripping from her fangs, "as to how he is supposed to retain their loyalty. Or even their presence, when they learn of Celestia's benevolent amnesty?"

Black Fang was about to retort when a changeling came trotting up behind us. "Your Lordship," he said to me. "An earth pony named Harvest Seed waits in the throne room. He says he is calling in his marker." He passed a small scroll to me. I recognized it immediately. I'd taken to giving these little tokens of gratitude out to the ponies whom I owed a favor-- for giving my minions a hiding place, or misdirecting the Guard, or spotting us some grain or dried apples or whatever during the winter. I remembered Harvest Seed, vaguely. Bad tempered skinflint who wasn't above trading whatever was valuable under the table. "So what's he calling it in on?" I said.

The changeling told us. I rubbed my chin. I looked at the newspaper in my hand and gave it to the messenger. "Take this. Let the thestrals see it."
"Let them?" Chrysalis exclaimed.

"Let them. I don't want them thinking I hid anything from them. I have a plan, but... they have to know about this, first.

"I think I can actually work this to my advantage..."

---

Harvest Seed was the living dictionary definition of a sore loser.

He was a blue earth pony farmer with a white mane and muttonchops and a perpetually sour expression. He lived just one township over from Ponyville, and he had a bitter competitive streak a mile wide. He seemed to regard every other farmer as his rival and enemy. If any farmer of note grew anything or gained a reputation for growing anything, Harvest Seed seemed to regard them as a rival and did his damnedest to outdo them. If a neighbor grew a bumper crop of corn, one of Harvest Seed's fields would be planted with corn the next year. If they grew a prize-winning pumpkin, he'd be out there in his brand new pumpkin patch, sweating and swearing and trying to coax enormous gourds out of the earth. And if it turned out he couldn't outdo them... which he usually couldn't... he'd spend every minute he could complaining about his "competition" and accusing them of every kind of chicanery he could imagine, up to and including sabotage.

Just this once, though, he had a fairly legitimate grievance. Among all his other efforts to outshine his neighbors, he had one of the largest fruit orchards in Equestria, with everything from apples and pears to cherries and citrus. If he'd focused on that alone, he probably would have made a name for himself, because he had a rare streak of genius that other ponies thought made him certifiable: he grew a large portion of his orchards in greenhouses. Plastic tents, actually, each the size of a circus bigtop. That let him grow and harvest year-round, giving him a big jump on every other farmer in the region.

Unfortunately his main rival (of many) in the fresh fruit business had pulled something absolutely boneheaded that threatened to cost them, him, and probably every other fruit farmer for miles their livelihood.

I arranged to meet Harvest Seed that night, in the greenhouse tent nearest the Everfree. When I arrived, he was already there, in his straw hat and grungy overalls and mad enough to bite nails and spit staples. "Fruit bats!" he yelled at me, the trees around, the sky above and nobody in particular. "Again!"

I stood in the shade of a 100 year old pear tree and stared at him through the glowing lenses of my helmet. "Fruit bats," I said.

"Not just any fruit bats, but vampire fruit bats! Dang them Apples!"


"Those dang fool Apples over in Ponyville got a case of the stupids, I swear," Harvest said. He pointed in the direction of the named town, which lay just over the next couple of hills. It took me a second to realize that he was referring to another pony clan, not the fruit. "They already got one o' their shoddy orchards infested with fruit bats, and they were too soft-headed and soft-hearted to run the little thieving beggars off. And sure enough they spread to my orchards too... took me forever to
smoke the little sods out and chase 'em off. Them strawberry and blueberry ones were a pain but
dang them raspberry bats 're mean..."

Wait? What? I blinked my eyes, and kind of wished I could blink my ears too. I had the feeling I was
going to be doing some covert questioning of my advisers about the flora and/or fauna, bats and the
fruit thereof. I managed to resist the urge to rattle my head and kept listening.

"That orange brainless bimbo what runs the place---" Wait, was he referring to...? Oh right,
Applejack, the Element of Honesty. Small world. Now he had my curiosity as well as my confusion.
" she up and gets her farm infested with VAMPIRE fruit bats. And she gave 'em an orchard to breed
in! And danged if they didn't spread over to my orchard too!"

He stopped and pointed up into the branches next to my head. I looked up and made my
acquaintance with a genuine vampire fruit bat. In the name of the ancient chinese sage, Ho Lee Shit.
I've seen bats before, giant flying foxes, even vampire bats. This was worse. This thing was the size
of a toddler and was as fugly as Satan's bunghole. It was hanging upside down in the branches not
five feet from my head-- God only knows how I managed not to scream and jump out of my armor---
and was glaring at me with a face made for hate.

As I watched it shot out its tongue (ohshitohshitkillitwithfire) and snagged one of the early pears
growing next to it. It pulled the fruit to its mouth and began doing something absolutely pornographic
to it. A few seconds later the shriveled remains of the pear fell to the ground with a wet, mushy splat.
Ahhh, I get the joke. VAMPIRE fruit bats. I remained stone still. No way in hell I was taking my
eyes off that thing. "And why has she not dealt with them?" I asked.

"That stupid treehugging yaller ninny that hangs out with her--" ah, the Element of Kindness. "--
Convinced her to give up half an orchard for 'em. Cause the poor li'l darlin's was HUNGRY." Harvest Seed glared in the direction of Ponyville, his teeth gnashing so hard they were grinding the
wheatstalk in his teeth to dust.

Now I had to cradle my forehead in my hand. "You mean the Element of Kindness arm-twisted a
struggling farmer into giving up a chunk of her land to a bunch of ravenous vermin..."

"You guessed it, as BREEDING GROUND." Harvest Seed hawked and spat. "Some 'friendship.'
Better them APPLES have a friend like that than me! She got them to give up the orchard to a
buncha thievin' pests... and gave 'em nuthin in return except some bushwa about better trees growin'
from the seeds they spit everywhere. What a load o' Hoo-Ha-- like a seed will grow better just
'acause it came out a fruitbat's ass! And Jim DANDY, that, if you come along twenty years from
now..., too bad they'll have eaten the Apples outta house and hearth by that time." He smirked
humorlessly. "Couple more years of them buggers breedin' and eatin' Ain't gonna be nuthin' left o'
Ponyville except a big ol' wet fruitbat fart."

He shrugged. "Couldn't care less what happens to them, but their cute fluffy li'l friends are already
spreading over HERE. AS you kin see." He waved a hoof around. I glanced around; I could see
several bats silhouetted against the dark, and spattered bits of drained fruit all over the ground. "You
an yer min-yuns gave me your affyditav that ifn' I scratched your back, you'd scratched mine. Well,
this is it."

"Very well. I will return tomorrow night with a solution." I turned and transmuted into smoke,
swirling through the sky like a rocket trail to the Everfree. Ugh, I hated traveling like that; it was too
disorienting to use very often, and only for short hops. But I had things to get ready.

We were back in the same location the next night; me looming over him, him glaring up at me. The
vampire fruitbat was back too, sucking on more fruit and glaring at us both with a sneer on its ugly little gargoyle face.

"I assume you wish me to dispose of them." I said to Harvest Seed, pointing to the bat not five feet away from my head.

"Course I want that!" Harvest Seed bawled."G'wan. Use yer dark magic whammydoodle and git rid of 'em!"

"I prefer a different approach." I gathered a glowing crimson dot at my fingertip and flicked it into the sky. It burst with a pop and a flash of light. Then I waited.

After about two seconds, Harvest Seed snapped. "Well? When's it gonna-- YEEP!"

He was cut short when a grey-black blur flashed through the boughs of the tree I was standing under. The poster child for Fugly Anonymous hanging next to me disappeared; the blur swooped up into a nearby apple tree. There was a squeal and a wet crunch.

"Whut in Tartarus...?" Harvest Seed gulped. I decided to enlighten him. I cast a Vulcan's eye and sent it up into the apple tree. The green foxfire glow revealed Pumpkin Patch. She was hanging upside down by her tail, wings mantled around her as she drained the dead fruit bat the way it had drained that pear. Her glowing blood-red eyes never left Harvest Seed's own.

I stepped closer to the farmer. "Here's the deal," I said. "My thestrals need blood. They need flesh. They need to hunt. They will purge your orchards of your little fruit bat problem... and any other pests."

"By... by killing 'em?" he said, shocked. Ah, Equestrians. "Couldn't you just... magic 'em away? Chase 'em off?" he pleaded.

"They would come back in a matter of days," I pointed out. "And I would be leaving my magical signature all over your farm as well."

"but--"

"Are you as softheaded as that yellow pegasus twit?" I snapped. "If we just chased them off or magicked them away or turned them into a different kind of vermin that didn't eat fruit, they would just fall prey to predators anyway. That's why they breed like they do; they're food for something else. Nature doesn't stop working just because it happens out of your sight." All around us the night came alive with web-winged pony silhouettes and fleeing bats. The bats weren't doing too well.

"We won't be able to get them all," I said. "Nothing will. But we will come by regularly to thin back their numbers." Pumpkin Patch finished her lunch and dropped the shriveled bat corpse to the ground. She licked her wing claws and burped. "Oh, and you would be wise to keep your mouth shut now," I added. "Moreso than ever. After all... you wouldn't want the authorities to find out you've been hosting illegal thestral hunts on your farm, now would you?" I couldn't help gloating a bit as his pupils shrank.

I leaned in till the brim of his straw hat almost touched my helmet. "Tell me the truth. Do you really give a rat's ass what happens to these little overbreeding parasites? You want that hippy dippy politically influential yellow idiot to come around and make you give up a few
greenhouses for the cute little darlings? Or are you interested in saving your farm?"

He looked at me then scowled. Behind all the cranky curmudgeon, I could see the desperation in his eyes. "...Do it," he said.

"That's already happening," I said. "Welcome to the other side of the bridge you just burned."

There was nothing but silence for a minute, save for the sound of ugly little mutant hybrid bats meeting their fate. "I... might know a few other folk with varmint problems," he said, his voice low.

I nodded. "Pass on the word. We'll solve them," I said. "...fee negotiable."

Back on Earth we have a saying about how farmers deal with 'endangered' species on their property..... "Shoot, Shovel and Shut Up."

Maybe someday the treehugging idiots will figure out that if they want to help save some bird or rat or bug or worm, it's not a good idea to turn it into a liability to have it on your land.

"So this is the deal," I said to the gathered thestrals. "Celestia is offering you amnesty. You can go back, return to your jobs, your homes, your position, nice, quiet, and legal. And I'm sure Celestia and her little sister--" they bristled at the slight to their Night Princess-- "will welcome you with open arms. They're even increasing your rations," I put an emphasis on the word rations, "So that you don't get too peckish anymore.

"They're even going to introduce a new, improved formula." I paused. "Who knows? This one might actually work." They stirred at this, a pointed jab to remind them that they'd been lab rats for years, at the cost of their health, fertility and even their virility. "Increased benefits, compensation, yes, Celestia is going to great lengths to win back your loyalty.

"So long as you're willing to go back to living the lie."

Bat wings mantled and flexed. I reached down beside the throne, pulled one of the old potion bottles out and sloshed it back and forth. "So long as you go back to drinking your dinner out of a bottle, and forsaking meat, and you never hunt again. So long as you go back to telling your foals they are sick in the head for craving those things. So long as you go back to playing the charade that Celestia and her nobles forced on you, that you're all nice little grass eating ponies like everyone else. So long as you go back to pretending that the lion can eat straw." I dropped the bottle back into the piles of treasure around my throne.

None of them spoke.

"Tonight, a marker has been called in," I said. "You will be going with me. You will be hunting. You will get your first true taste of flesh and blood, hot from the vein. And then you will get a choice.

"Those who decide that they are not up to this, that they can't cope, that they want to go back to Celestia's side... they will be let go. I will take no revenge nor exact any penalty. Those who
choose to leave will be given a potion that will addle their memories for the past few days, and be left near a pony settlement. No harm, as they say, and no foul.

"But get this straight; any pony who stays with me, stays to the bitter end. After that, I will brook no betrayal. And my wrath will be terrible." I paused for effect. "Be ready to choose."

Pumpkin Patch and Jetstream stepped forward. "I already chose when you helped my wife and daughter," Jetstream said. "This? The Blood Libel? That's just the clincher."

Pumpkin Patch nodded. "I spent my whole life weak and tired, being told I was sick in the head by lying doctors, being forced to gag down those worthless potions," she said. "Being treated like a disease. Luna didn't have a clue and Celestia didn't care. To Tartarus with them both." Several others raised their voices in agreement.

I held up a hand for silence. "Nevertheless," I said when they'd calmed down. "We will wait till after the hunt tonight. Then you will decide whether you have it in you to be a true predator. Whether you have... a taste for blood."

We lost five that night; three females, two males. Couldn't blame them; they had large extended families, too many things to worry about and too many years living as nice quiet little pseudo-herbivores. The Mayor of Whinnyton was going to have a hell of a time figuring out why there were five drunk thestrals sleeping it off on the steps of the town hall.

But that left us with fifteen. FIFTEEN who, with a bellyful of blood, were as fast as any pegasus and strong as any earth pony, and stealthier and more cunning than both put together. Stealth fighters in a world full of World War II prop planes. That gap in our favor wouldn't last long as Celestia got her own thestrals back in the pink. But by the time she had parity, if the rest of my plan went accordingly, it would no longer matter....
Okay, okay, fine. My turn to tell a story, ey? Price of a pint, is it. Okay, okay, fine.

So yer wantin’ t’ know how I ended up with this lot? Well, it’s a bit of an odd one, streth. ...Oy, Wolftooth, out o’ me drink! There’s a pint comin’ for you an’ your crew, just keep yer wings on, aright? Aright.

Now you all know how I ended up in Darth Vulcan’s crew, right? I show up with a gang of fugitives of justice, squeal on some flathoofs hiding in our number and the next thing I know I’m his right hoof pony, a dozen tricks in either saddlebag and a hat full o’ more, Pretty little filly for a maidservant, quarters fit for a king, bits drippin’ out of me pockets, the works. And he’d barely gotten out of the gate, even. And Darth Vulcan he has plans, big plans... conquering the world? Psh. Bigger.

Well, like I said. He was just starting out. And I hadn’t been with him all that long, and well, I was hidin’ it but I was kind of jumpy still. Lots of dark overlord type blokes come and gone wot had big big plans, and now where were they? More important, where were all their loyal followers, then? Mister Big Bad ends up as a statue in Sunbutt’s front yard, but the rest of his mooks don’t get even that. His Nibs has been lucky so far, but....

Hey now, don’t be thinkin’ that. I’m loyal to His Nibs, leastwise I ain’t dumb enough to try and double cross him. But come along a few months and one long winter of sittin’ idle, I started thinking that the good times might stop rolling someday, and I’d better be ready to jump off when the ride came to a stop.

Was only a fiddly little idea at that point. Didn’t really have much to build on it, though. I could stash some gold for if Eiderdown and I had to bugger out, and I had the bag full o’ tricks Vulcan taught to me and gave me... but that weren’t much. Even a saddlebag of gold would go fast and tricks are just that.. tricks.

I was payin’ attention, see. The first thing I learned from Darth Vulcan is that no matter who you were, you needed a crew. Family, minions, best mates, it’s all the same... you need folks who had your back, even if they did it for what you paid em. This, in my case, was problematic. I was His Nibs’ right hoof pony, but I din’t have a crew of my own. I had ponies who jumped when I said frog, but they did because they was loyal to His Nibs, not me. Aaaand because I could make their lives merry hell if they gave me trouble... but that’s not a crew. Even Eiderdown was still kind of....

Well.

Anyhow, I needed to do summat about that, right? At the time, though, I was havin’ other, more immediate troubles...

With a moan that was half-shout, Dodger thrashed to wakefulness. Pillows and coverlets were flung aside. He sat bolt upright, panting.
It took him several minutes to become aware of his surroundings. He was in his chambers, in his bedroom, lying in the enormous four poster bed, swimming in silk and satin. All the familiar, gaudy if swanky decorations of his room were around him, the lights dimmed for the night. Everything was where it was supposed to be. Including himself.

Eiderdown was standing next to the bed, looking alarmed, hesitating to step any closer. "Dodger! Are you all right?"

"Wha?" He looked at her, blinking stupidly.

She bit her lip. "It... was it another nightmare?" she asked.

Dodger groaned and rolled over onto his belly, nodding. He'd been having them almost every night since before winter started. "Back rub," he said.

Eiderdown quietly climbed up on the bed next to him and began kneading his withers with her hooves. "Do you remember anything?" she asked.

He shook his head. The dreams were always the same. "I'm in my old flat. The one me and me Mum used to live with. But I'm not alone; there's somepony else there with me. A guard, or one of the ponies me mum used to date, or some roughneck like what lived on me street when I was a foal. Dunno. Just someone big and awful and scary. I know who they are, I even know their name, but I can never remember later. They're rifling through things, dumping stuff on the floor, looking for summat, and they keep asking-- I can't remember what. And I can't stop them. And then I wake up."

The nightmare was always the same, and he always woke up with his muscles knotted from stress, from the base of his skull all the way down his shoulders and spine. Eiderdown's massage was the only thing that helped it go away. In a way he was almost grateful for the dreams; he'd never gotten the nerve to ask her for anything more than a back rub.

And it was really the only time she seemed to be friendly to him... to act like she liked him. With a mental pout he pushed the thought away. "Bugger all," he grumped. "His Nibs put up all them dream-blocking spells to block Princess Luna from spying on us. gave us these runes..." he tapped a hoof tip on the wooden tags hanging around his neck. "I thought it was supposed to keep us safe from nightmares!"

Eiderdown's hooves paused. "No, wait. That's backwards," she said suddenly. "Princess Luna is supposed to chase away bad dreams. Maybe that's why you're having nightmares. Because the runes are keeping her out."

Dodger lifted his head up off the bed. "D'you really think?" he said, surprised. "That really could be it. I'm hearin' His Nibs has some trouble sleepin', too..." then he scowled and let his chin fall back to the mattress. "Meh. No matter. Better just to deal with some bad dreams, than risk Her Mooniness getting in our heads and finding out where we are." He shuddered.

There was a long pause as Eiderdown's hooves worked their way up his neck, untangling the knot at the base of his skull. "Why... why is the dream so scary to you?" she asked. "I mean, it's not a nice dream, but..." she left the question hanging.

He lay there and scowled at one of the pillows. "Because I can't do anything," he said. "I'm helpless. I just have to stand there watching them turn the place inside out, smug as you please, and I can't do anything. Because I'm weak, and I'm all alone." His scowl deepened, turned reflective. "'Cause I've got nopony who's got my back." He brooded. "Why I hate th' Guard so much. Tossers used to do raids in our street, lookin' for this thief or that smuggler or what not, or so they allus said. They'd
roust us out of our own house from time to time, tearin' stuff up, knockin' stuff over lookin' for 'contraband.' An' more'n one left with more in his saddlebags than when he came. " His scowl deepened. "Ain't nuffin but bullies wit' badges. Like to give all of 'em what they gots comin' to 'em."

He sat up suddenly. "Reminds me. Summit I been meanin' to give you," he said, his mood brightening suddenly. His magic pulled his panniers over to the bed. He flipped them open and began fishing around inside. "Bit o' memento from when we balanced accounts with yer hometown an' that tosser Sergeant who made your lives hell." He pulled out a set of dog tags dangling from a thin chain. He held them out to her, almost shyly.

She reached out a hoof, then drew back. "Are those...?" she said.

He nodded, and gave her a smirk. "His tags," he said. "Took 'em as a prize o' war, you might say." He put them in her hoof, suddenly serious. "Nopony messes wit my doll, ducklin'. Anypony ever messes with you, you tell me. I'll make you a charm bracelet out of their teeth."

She didn't look up from the puddle of chain and tin cradled in the frog of her hoof. "Did... did you really break all four of his legs...?"

He grinned, started to speak, grimaced, closed his mouth, started again. "Not really," he admitted. "Plucked all the feathers out of his wings, scared the whole year's worth of road apples out of him---" she snarked in spite of herself. "But he did the rest to himself."

"To himself?" she stared at him.

Dodger shrugged. "Got so scared he flipped his lid and jumped out a second-story window," he said. "Heh. He kinda didn't realize 'ow many feathers I'd yanked out in the fight, and...." he drew an arc down to the ground with his free hoof and whistled on a descending note. "'E's in a wheelchair, but 'e'll be on his own hooves again. Eventually."

She stifled a spluttered laugh. She clapped her hoof to her mouth. "Oh, I'm horrible for laughing," she said, horrified. She looked down. "I'm... glad you didn't. Didn't break his legs yourself, I mean."

"Why? He deserved it! Believe me, I talked to the tosspot. 'E was even worse than you all said!" It came out a little angrier than he meant; he still felt guilty that he hadn't given the bullying ex-Guard a proper thrashing himself.

"I know! And it's hypocritical of me, I know it." She shook her head. "Just... breaking somepony's legs like that. You could cripple them for life. That would have been going too far--!" She looked at him, suddenly sad. "I've got one thing I've learned from all this. Once you go past a certain point... there's no going back to where you were. Ever." Her eyes were filled with worry.

His face fell. He got up and threw his panniers over his back, and summoned his horn ring and hat and other odds and ends to him. "You got no idea how far I've already gone, ducklin'," he said. He looked around. "....Clean this place up while I'm out."

"Where are you going?" she asked. "In case Lord Vulcan asks," she added hastily.

"Out," Dodger said. "I got some thinkin' to do."With that he trotted out the door.
It was one of the rules that anypony going in or out had to go past the armory and pick up-- or drop off-- a weapon. A subtle, but easy way to keep track of who was in the base and who was not. Dodger stopped off at the armory, slapped on a monster repellent charm and a bone knife, and went out.

The winter had not been spent idle, nor the early Everfree spring. Thanks to the Flim Flam brother's tunnel digging machine, the outposts, sub-lairs, drop points and emergency supply stashes were now connected by a rambling web of tunnels and surface paths. Early on, Dodger left the safety of the tunnels for the (relative) safety of the trails above. The Everfree was still as dangerous and filled with dangerous flora and fauna as before, but most of it had learned to avoid the trails along which Darth Vulcan and his minions walked. Most of the forest could now be traversed in the relative safety of the earthen tunnels...

Dodger wasn't in the mood for that. It was day, and he needed fresh air and sunshine to think. He beelined for the nearest surface door and started his walkabout.

One might question the wisdom of going out alone into the Everfree. To which it can only be replied that Artful Dodger was, after all, a teenager, with a teenager's arrogance and illusions of immortality. Then again, Artful Dodger was no soft little townie. He was a street rat, born and raised on the roughest streets in Canterlot. (1) He was also magically armed to the teeth, with a literal stormcloud of nightmares stuffed under his top hat, bottled lightning in his horseshoes, and enough assorted trinkets, nasties and a steadily growing library of dirty pool magic tricks at hoof to make crossing him in a dark alley a regrettable proposition. So his self-confidence wasn't entirely misplaced.

Still, he would have been wiser to remember that the Everfree had a few nasty tricks of its own, yet, and that there were more than just nasty animals and toxic plants. There was magic loose in that forest, and fey things that thrived in it, and they had agendas of their own.

It was nearly an hour after starting his impromptu nature hike that he realized that the trail he'd been following had gone and wandered off on him. He was well off what passed for the sunlit path, and deep into the gloom of the trees. Cursing, he sat down on a fallen log (after giving it a sufficient beating with a stick to make sure it wasn't housing anything with claws, fangs or stingers, and for that matter didn't have any of its own) and contemplated his situation.

Or, more accurately, sulking. "Ruddy heck," he grumbled. "Mares. Don't understand 'em. She calls for vengeance on a whole town. Whole town gets leveled, and bob's yer uncle, she's all fine with that. I goes out, take vengeance out on the stallion who'd tormented her right personal, get my own hooves bloody, and when I give her a trophy of it she acts all sick and horrified about it!" He puffed out his cheeks and stewed over it. Somewhere in the back of his mind the idea nibbled that maybe a hundred empty flattened buildings was a statistic, but a single broken leg was a tangible reality? "I got no clue, do I," he muttered.

He wanted her. Desperately. Wanted her to love him, Tartarus, just to LIKE him. It was maddening. She was there, just within reach. But she still looked at him like she thought he was going to... pounce on her and have his way with her, or flip out and hurt her, or something. Like he was...

"Like I'm a sleazy street rat," he said aloud. He went from a sulk to a funk. This was supposed to clear his head, not make him feel lousier. "No girl, no mates, no plan for what comes next." He looked around. "And lost in the Everfree. Bugger." He wasn't particularly concerned even now; he could easily send out a magical cry for help to Darth Vulcan through the ring on his horn. The only reason he hadn't was because he was too disgruntled at looking the fool in front of the minions. He could practically hear them laughing now.
His ears twitched. No, he could actually hear laughing. Curious, he looked around. Something small and bewinged fluttered through the air around him, tittering at him in a high, bell-like voice. He blinked. "A Breezy?"

It was. One of the tiny fairy ponies was fluttering in front of him. She was bright yellow, with translucent wings and a billowing cloud of yellow, dandelion-fluff hair that floated around her head. She was dressed in a leaf, folded double like a poncho, and tied around her middle with a string of white beads. She flew up to him and yarbled at him in Breezy-speak. "Blimey," Dodger said. "What're you doin' way out 'ere in the Everfree? I fought you lot were too frail to be running about round places like this?"

He didn't know if she understood him, but she yammered something back at him anyway. She bobbed her antennae at him and, with a sly look, darted away among the trees. Caught by surprise he leapt to his hooves and galloped after. He was baffled. How was she flying so fast? Weren't breezies supposed to be weak and fragile? A single leaf or a gust of wind was supposed to be enough to knock them for a loop.

She slowed down after a bit, keeping him following at a slow trot. Soon other breezies made their appearance, following along, flitting from bush to flower to tree, chattering to one another and giggling at him. He was starting to go from fascinated to wary. That laughter didn't sound entirely friendly, and some of the smiles they were giving him made him uneasy.

After who knew how many twists and turns, they led him stumbling into a glen.

The glen was cast in twilit gloom, overshadowed and roofed in by gnarled trees and bedded with mossy boulders. Standing at its center was an enormous oak, riven by lightning and hollowed by age. A faint glow came from inside.

All around were breezies. They floated around the little clearing and especially around the lightning blasted tree, going about Maker only knew what breezie business. They saw him standing at the edge of the clearing and came floating over, chattering and laughing, and slowly surrounded him. They seemed very excited to see him.

He stared openly at them. He'd never seen anything but pictures before, but these breezies looked rougher, somehow. Their manes and tails were carelessly groomed, either bound up with twine in stiff braids or flying loose around their heads and haunches. Their clothes were increasingly alarming; it wasn't just made of leaves and flower petals. He saw ragged scraps of fur, bits of crude armor made of bark lashed together with dried grass, even a bit of what looked like shed snake skin. He saw crude spears and knives, and all of them, like the first he'd seen, were wearing (for their size) outlandishly large bits of white beads or....

He stiffened. No. Those weren't beads or pebbles. Those were teeth.

As they gathered in a cloud around him, cutting off his retreat, he started getting an idea of just how he lost track of the trail he'd been on.

One of them flew up to hover in front of him. It was a tiny blue stallion with an enormous shock of red mane that stood out like he'd been struck with lightning. Dodger guessed it had to be their...chieftain? He carried himself like one, anyway, and wore an enormous wolf's tooth on a thong around his neck. "Vhu ere-a yuoo, Beeggoon? Vhy yuoo here-a? Vhet yuoo du? Eha, yuoo theenk yuoo cun Infede-a oooor terreetury!" he crowed.

Dodger jerked back. "Oy, now, I ain't invadin' nobody's territory! Mindin' me own business, I was--" He looked back the way he came, and noticed that the path behind looked nothing like it had before.
In fact it was fading away even now. He'd been tutored by Darth Vulcan long enough to put two and two together. He glared at the breezies floating around him. "Least I was till somepony put a glamour on my path." He fixed his eye on the little yellow-haired breezie he'd first seen. She had the grace to look embarrassed.

"Dun't cere-a hoo yuoo gut here-a! I, Cheeef Vulfftuut, sey yuoo Trespesseeng noo!" The redhead crossed his forelegs and smirked triumphantly, as if that settled the matter. "Noo yuoo hefe-a tu pey zee tull !"

"What toll?" Dodger said, scowling.

"Vut yuoo pey ef'n yuoo effer vant to find yer vey oot agin," Wolftooth said, waving casually at the surrounding trees. Even as Dodger cast around looking for a path out of the glen, the breezies' feelers glowed, and the paths between the trees suddenly became hard to make out.

"Why you little cobberson!" Dodger snarled. "SO that's your game is it? The old toll-road con!" The setting may have been odd but the gambit was old hat; detour people down a back alley, have a few tough standing there to collect a "toll" from anyone unlucky enough to take that wrong turn.

"There'll be tea parties in Tartarus afore I pay you little shites any 'toll!'"

"Oh, yuoo be peyin', Biggun," Wolftooth said. "Yuoo be peyin' in gold, uor in vork--- uor in TEETH." His smug little smirk turned into a malevolent, toothy grin. All around, the breezies began chanting.

"Teeth! Teeth! Teeth! Teeth!"

They edged closer. To Dodger's alarmed eyes, the tiny crude tools and weapons they were carrying started taking on a decidedly dental look. "Oh bugger this for a hearthwarming lark," he said. His horn flared, and a blast of magic swept the tiny bloodthirsty mob back. They screeched like angry chickadees as they went tumbling. Before they could right themselves he whipped his hat off and flourished it around him, spraying Nightmare Mist in every direction.

In an instant, the glen was festooned with cobwebs. Then came the skittering, the glittering of multiple tiny eyes, and dozens of ghostly spiders big enough to catch songbirds in their webs began descending from the canopy. The breezies shrielled in terror and flew into a panic, darting in every direction trying to flee the illusory predators. Dodger indulged in a little schadenfreude and let them race about in a panic for a minute or two before dispelling the mists. Those breezies had some seriously coherent fears; some of the black inky fog was forming into something huge, unpleasant and multilegged when the mists dissolved and the illusions faded.

While the others dashed for safety, Dodger lassoed Wolftooth and the blonde one with his magic and dragged them back to himself. He held them tight in his grip as the illusions dissolved. He gave them both a shake. "Thot you'd 'ave a giggle, did ya?" he yelled in their faces. "Try and roll ME, will ya? I'm the bloody right hoof stallion o' Darth Vulcan, Lord of the Everfree, you li'l pigeon turds... Oy, none o' that!"

...For the female had started crying. She was outright bawling, dewdrop sized tears rolling down her tiny yellow face. "Ve-a veren't gueeng tu hoort yuoo--oo-oo," she boohooed.

"You were gonner yank me teef out!"

"Nut. ... nut reelly, joost vunted tu scere-a yuoo!" Wolftooth insisted, shaking his head. "Ve-a deedn't ifee vunt yuoo guld, reelly. Ve-a joost vuookda mede-a yuoo du sume-a vurk fur us, zeen let yuoo gu. Hunest!" His antennae drooped. "Ve-a needed a Beeggoon tu du zee vurk fur us... tu help
"Well foalnappin' blokes an' threatenin' to do amateur dentistry on 'em ain't the way to get it!"
Dodger snapped.

At this the mare burst from wails into outright howls, tears practically spraying everywhere. "Veer so-o-orrry," she howled. "Ve-a deedn't meen it..."

Dodger blustered, but he'd been hit dead center in his biggest weakness: weeping females. He turned red, his cheeks puffing out, and gave up. "Don't matter 'ow wrong she were or 'ow right yer were, the minute a mare starts cryin' a stallion might as well just give over, lie down and DIE," he growled to himself. He lessened his magic grip on them, summoned a kerchief from his pannier and dabbed at her face. "Aright aright aright," he muttered, face flaming. "Turn off the waterworks, tiny." She snuffled and finally blew her tiny nose in the silk. "Aright, now, wot in ruddy heck was this mess all about anyway?"

Wolftooth slipped out of his grip and fluttered towards the lightning-split tree. "Come, Goldenrod und I, ve show yuoo," he said.

"No tricks!"

"Nuu, nuu moar tricks, ve promise..."

The tree was tilted steeply to one side; it wasn't an easy climb for a pony, but it was at least possible. Dodger clambered up the trunk till he reached the split-open top, panting and clinging to one of the dead limbs. There were tiny tree houses all over, braided up in the branches, dug out of knotholes in the trunk and limbs, even down inside the hollow. It was rather charming, in a sort of fairyland-meets-jungle-cannibal-tribe sort of way. Wolftooth fluttered up beside him and pointed down inside the hollow of the tree.

"Wots all this then?" Dodger said, looking down in surprise. Down in the bottom of the hollow tree was a huge pile of teeth. Animal teeth, pony teeth, snake teeth, he didn't know all the kinds. The pile glowed from within like a heap of coals.

Wolftooth hovered next to his ear, stage-whispering. "Thees is zee suoorce-a ooff oooor mehjeek," he said.

"I fought breezies got their magic from the chuffin' pollen they gathered," he said. "Evry year they leave their magic portal and travel across Equestria, and gather---"

Goldenrod made a rude noise next to his ear. "Those breezies?" she said. "They eez a bunch of vussies!"

"Dey use plant mehjeek, seed mehjeek," Wolftooth said with a snort. "And look vere it gets dem. Most mehjeekal pollen frum all ovar Ekvestria, und it's barely enough to keep dere little pocket realm vorking. Und dey're so weak und frail a stray leaf or a puoff of vind can knock them oot. Thees," he said proudly, "Thees is old mehjeek, bone mehjeek. Strongker den any pollen. Makes us ten, tventy times stronger den any flower breezy." He spat derisively over the side of the tree. "Dose veenies run us off t'ousands of years ago. Baneesh us. If it veren't for tooth mehjeek, ve couldn't survive."

"Why'd they run you off, then?"

"They said usink teeth vas too creepy," Goldenrod said sadly. "Voosies" a breezy in the distance shouted.
"Fer a vile, vay back ven, ve had goot deal mit der Princesses," Wolftooth said. "Der little vuns, giff us their teeth, ve giff them a shiny coin, und use our breezie dust to geef dem sweet dreams. But vun day der princesses haff a big fight... und den der castle vas abandoned. Then der town. Und der Efferfree grew, und spread... ve haff to fly farder und farder to find der Biggun villages, und little vuns, und pretty soon ve usink more magic to get dere den ve gets back from der tooth ve find..." he shrugged. "Ve vas stuck here."

"Aaaand why don't you move?" Dodger said.

"Cause ve dunt haff enuff magic no more!" Wolftooth said. "Look--" he pointed at the tooth hoard. As Dodger watched, two or three of them crumbled to ash. "Tooth magic dunt last furevar. Ve gather animal teeth, lizard teeth, fish teeth... it's nevar enuff. It takes all ve haff to fend off der preadators in der woods...." he looked at the forest pressing in on the hollow fearfully. "If ve try to move to a new place, efen if ve find vun...

Dodger got the picture. Dwindling magic. Plenty of magic to protect their little hollow for now, so long as they piled it all up in one heap. But not enough magic to sustain them till they got to a new place. Fending off the forest predators as they traveled would probably eat through their tooth supply in no time.... even if they had some place to go.

Wolftooth hovered beside his ear. "Und ve haff tu muove soon," he said, his voice low. "Der vards protecting the glen are failink. If der Nuupspaiders retorn again---"

"Noop whats?" Dodger said. Before he could get an answer a chorus of screams rose all around. Breezies who had been hiding in the foliage came swirling in towards the tree, fleeing something in the shadows. Something that chittered and skuttled and had hundreds of tiny, red eyes.

Whatever it was came swarming out of the gloom. Dodger felt his heebies join his jeebies and do a twenty-million leg dance up his spine as he learned just WHERE the Breezies had gotten their nightmare images.... dozens of spiders came skittering out of the tall grass. Spiders bigger than his hoof. Spiders with a quite explicit resemblance to *eight-legged, fanged skulls*. 
And these weren’t made of nightmare smoke.

"Oh, NOPE NOPE NOPE NOPE NOPE!" Without realizing it he’d gotten twenty feet higher and was now hanging by his forehooves from a dangerously creaking branch. The breezies had taken the cue and were flying upward to the imagined safety of the boughs, but their retreat was cut off when a dozen more of the horrid spiders dropped down out of the canopy on lines of gruesome silk. The breezies stopped, their escape thwarted, but not all of them were fast enough to veer off. As Dodger watched several of the tiny ponies were snared by the dangling silk and dragged into the grasp of the spiders. Their screams of horror were heart-wrenching. One filly nearby wailed "no no no no" over and over as the spider proceeded to wrap her in silk.

Dodger and Darth Vulcan had more in common than either of them knew; her cries of horror transformed his fear into an alchemy of rage. "Oy, claws off, ya arse-faced wanker!" he yelled. Borrowed dark magic from his ring lashed out, splattering the offending spider into crunchy bits. The tiny filly was still bitten and half-cocooned, but she was safe for the moment... he looked around
and saw at least half a dozen others fighting for their lives. He could almost swear he could hear the venomous spiders chuckling.

"I SAID SOD OFF!" he roared. Among the other toys His Nibs and Her Buggyship had given him was a red ruby earring stud. As well as being a snazzy accessory, it had one other ability. With a flick of thought the gem glowed red, flared like a star. Pencil-thin flames lashed out in every direction, and every bit of spider silk in a hundred yard radius burned. Spiders tumbled to the ground, legs flailing, and every cocoon flashed to ash without so much as singing a single breezie hair. Every breezie flew to carry their wounded kin to safety, swarming around the half-treed Biggun.

Dodger kept lashing the scuttling mass below with shots of flame. "Hah! Take that, yew ugly cobbers--" and with an unhappy, final CRACK, the branch he was clinging to broke through and he tumbled to the ground. He was fortunate, very fortunate. One or two smaller branches snapped under him as he tumbled, breaking his fall.... and he landed hooves down, foursquare, on the spiders.

Deep in the unconscious mind of all Equestrian ponies is a full set of horsey instincts. And one of the oldest is that when something nasty, say a rat or a nest of snakes, is around one's hooves, one proceeds to stamp, vigorously. At the moment Artful Dodger was ankle deep in skuttly, legged-y, red-eyed Nope-Spiders right out of his nightmares that were big enough to wear doggy sweaters.

And thus was Equestria introduced to Riverdance.

Dodger promptly, as Wolftooth described it later, "Vent completely buggerdeboo." He proceeded to bounce around the glen screaming and yodeling, kicking and stamping and doing a mad tarantella like Micheal Flaherty on amphetamines. Lightning shot in every direction from his jackhammering hooves; magic, both borrowed from his horn ring and straight from the horn, lashed madly in every direction. Legs and other crunchy bits flew. The ground boiled like an ink-pot with nightmare fog; it was doubtful whether the crab-sized spiders had the intellect to have fears but, if they did, the scrawny pony of trampling doom surely featured in the spidery nightmares of the survivors from then on.

Wolftooth watched Dodger's rampage for a moment. The biggun was keeping them away from the tree. He was driving them back! But more spiders lurked in the shadows... as powerful as the unicorn was, he would be overrun---

With his mouth set in a grim line, Wolftooth dove down into the breezie's hoard. He began chanting, his antennae glowing. The coal-fire light grew and redoubled, became a blazing bonfire, molars and fangs and baby teeth crumbling to ash by the dozens to feed the light. With a final shout, the spell was released. There was a silent explosion, and a wave of golden light burst from the tree, sweeping the grass and the trees, sending Nope-spiders flying with their carapaces cracked and their legs shattered.

Finally the carnage stopped. Bug guts were splattered everywhere. Here and there a disembodied leg twitched; anything larger that hadn't fled had been stamped upon twice, then stamped upon again just to be safe. Standing in the center was Artful Dodger. His hat was askew, his mane was in disarray, and his legs were stained to the knee with bug juice. He stood spraddle legged, wall eyed, going "Eeeh, Aaaah, EEee, Aaaaah" as his spasms slowed.

High above, the Wolftooth clan clustered together in the boughs of their home tree. A speckled breezy colt spoke for them all.

"Hu Lee Shmidt...."

The breezies exploded into cheers. They swarmed down around Dodger, shouting his praises. He
found more than one filly showering his face with tiny little kisses of gratitude. "Ey now, you'll make me girl jealous," he said, blushing.

Not every breezie was celebrating. Wolftooth floated dolefully over. The cheering faded away. "Vell, thet's pretty mooch dune-a fur it," He said dully. "Zee tuut peele-a is elmust boomed oooot. Oooor megeec isn't strung inuuoogh tu fend ooffff zee munsters uny mure-a. Oonce-a yuoo're-a gune-a, Biggun, zee speeders veell be-a beck, und vurse-a. Und ve'll be-a overrun."

Countless tiny faces fell, feelers drooping. "Vat do ve do?" somepony cried. Nopony answered.

"Veel lead yuoo to der path back, Biggun," Wolftooth said. "Ve owe yuoo a debt uff gurtitude, und der Vulftoot tribe fureffer owes yuoo a boon. Nut dot I knows how ve can pay it nu more mitout our meegic...."

Dodger blinked. Then a slow, sly grin spread across his face. "Well now, how about this," he said. "Instead of a boon-- how about a deal?"

Wolftooth looked up at him, head cocked and eyebrow raised. "A deal?"

"Aye. You need a new home, right? Well, I needs me a crew.... blokes. Minions, ponies wot works for me, and has my back. You lot come works for me, give me an oath o' loyalty and all, and I'll give you a safe new place to live. Warm, dry, plenty of space...." the breezies started looking interested. "And, I'll keep you flush with food, and gold.... and teeth."

Wolftooth looked skeptical. "How?"

Dodger's smirk could have split his head in two. "Howsabout a down deposit?" he said, and pulled his dagger out of his saddlebag. A quick flick of his horn to sever the thong binding the grip in place, and stuck the blade in the ground before them.

Some time ago, Darth Vulcan had slain a dragon in rather spectacular and messy fashion. There had been nothing left of the skull, but there had been more than enough teeth to go around. They had been gathered up from where they had been scattered, along with the rest of the dragon's head, around the treasure cave, and made into stout daggers. The largest ones had been given to Darth Vulcan's highest ranking diamond dogs and were prized possessions, but there were still quite a few lying about the weapons stores.

Wolftooth gasped and landed before it. He stepped forward and laid a hoof on it, almost reverently. It was easily three times Wolftooth's height. "A draguun's tooth," he said in awe. "Eet vuld giff us half the mageec uf our old hoard by eetself, and vuld last years---!" The others drifted down to circle the monolithic fang, cooing in awe. They lifted their forehooves in the air and began raising a ululation that made the mane on the nape of Dodger's neck stand up. Yes indeed, they were happy with that tooth.

After a minute the ululation died down. They lifted off and gathered together in a flurry, swirling about and chattering to one another in breezie-speak. When the commotion died down, Wolftooth flew to the fore and addressed Artful Dodger. "Biggun--"

"The name's Artful Dodger," the colt said blithely.

"Urtful Duodger, I geef yuoo our oat uff loyalty. Der Vulftuut clan is yuoors tu command!" The breezies met this with a rousing cheer.

"Well then, mates," Dodger said cheerfully. "You lot had better pack up. We got us a bit of a walk ahead of us!"
Being a Dark Overlord has a lot of, I don't know, issues that come with it that most people never think about. Like, for instance, everyone knows about the whole “never looking weak” thing. Most writers and authors assume that just refers to never letting anyone see you’re sick or injured. Yeah, that’s obvious. But how about never letting them see you go to the can? Or wondering if cracking a joke with a minion or not-so-trusted lieutenant is going to make them think you're going soft? You had to keep up this larger-than-life routine every second when you were in public. Granted, this was Equestria; their idea of tough was having your breakfast cereal without any milk. But It was still a constant strain.

Yeah, I relaxed that part of it around Chrysalis, but.... with her it would have been pointless anyway. She was an emotivore, she could tell by my emotions whether I was nervous or scared or needed to go take a pee. It just so happened that for now her agenda coincided with mine, or at least with keeping me alive and in charge, so she helped cover for me when she sensed my iron mask was slipping. Between us, we had the corner market on big, bad and scary.

Of course there are some things you just can't compensate for. There we are, in the throne room (again, sigh), Me in my Conan the Spaceball armor sitting on the throne, her in her slinky black outfit draped over it, Eiderdown at my elbow with a serving tray in her wingtips, piles of gold at my feet and armor clad warriors all around, resplendent in our dark and sinister glory, with some seriously intimidated petitioners before me--- and in comes Artful Dodger, fashionably late, swaggering jauntily along with his hat cocked to one side, and surrounded by a gaily colored cloud of fluttery cute tinkerbell fairies.

The garland of meadow flowers around his neck certainly didn't help.

"Greetin's, Yer Dark Lordship," he said cheerfully. He took a deep bow even as giggling pony pixies continued planting daisies in his mane.

I facepalmed. I was doing that lots, lately. "Dodger," I said, waving one hand hopelessly. "What...?"

"Allow me to present me staff an' crew," he said, standing up. "These are the Wolftooth clan, tooth breezies of the Everfree forest." At the words 'tooth breezies' Chrysalis let out a strangled squawk and scooted back behind the throne. I took a moment to cock an eyebrow at her odd behavior but didn't say anything. "This here," Dodger went on, pointing at a wild-maned redheaded minipony that had landed on the crown of his hat, "Is Wolftooth, clan leader."

Ve are de Vulftuut clan, Ve haff sworn our service to der great and mighty Artfool Dujjer, und vill serv mit our meager lifes! bork bork bork! The others took up the chant. "Bork bork bork bork bork!"

Dammit, I had just taken my goblet from Eiderdown's serving tray and taken a drink when I heard him speak. I just barely managed to direct the spray from the spit-take away from anyone. You're just not prepared to be addressed by a tiny flying Swedish Chef. I hastily wiped my chin and set my goblet back down. "Dodger, you'd better explain yourself-- Chrysalis, what the hell is wrong with you?" I was interrupted in mid lecture when I noticed that Chrysalis was all but hiding behind the throne, and weirdly enough scrunching up her muzzle trying to purse her lips over her fangs.

"Are you out of your mind??" she somehow managed to mumble at me out of the corner of her mouth. "Those are Tooth Breezies!"
I stared at her. "What, like tooth fairies?" I said under my breath. "Collect baby teeth, leave bit coins under your pillow, that sort of thing?"

She gave up on trying to talk with her mouth closed. "Yes, that's what ponies say about them now," she she hissed in my ear. "But in the really, really old stories, they didn't always wait until the teeth fell out." She went back to hiding her fangs behind her lips and covered her mouth with her hands for good measure.

My mind raced. I also thought about the fact that their chieftain was wearing a wolf's fang around his neck on a thong; a whole wolf's fang... roots and all.

I didn't have time to think much beyond that; the ponies in front of me started chuckling. Artful Dodger had come waltzing in while I was in the middle of talks with... let's call them emissaries... from a Manehattan gangster who was interested in buying safe passage through the Everfree for smuggling stolen and illegal goods. Their leader-- a fat black pony stallion in a cheesy looking leisure suit and gold necklaces-- was chortling like an evil Santa Claus. "Well la de dah," he said. "Ain't DIS somethin."

That was just the wrong button to push with Dodger. "You 'avin' a giggle, mate?" he said, his eyes slitted.

"Yeah," the mob pony said. "Laughin' at you, Flower Filly. Boy, wait'll the boss hears this... Big Bad Darth Vulcan of the Woods and his sidekick--- the Pansy Princess of the Breezies." He chortled till his fat belly shook.

Dodger just smiled. "Wolftooth? Teach this cobber some manners." Wolftooth took to the air. Almost as one the breezies gathered in a swarm around him and flew over to the jeering mobster. They circled over him, sprinkling golden dust down on him. To his alarm he began floating up off the floor. "Hey, what th-- hey! Lemme go! Cut it out!" They only giggled creepily and kept circling. soon he was six feet off the ground, dangling in midair like a piñata.

Then several of them lunged for his face.

The swarm descended on him, chattering and screeching. He disappeared in a cloud of wings, screaming like a little filly. It was impossible to see what was happening clearly, except that he was struggling madly as he howled. It went on for a few seconds before Dodger finally shouted "ENOUGH! Let 'im go." Immediately the swarm dispersed. The glitter covering him faded and he dropped to the floor like a sack of wet mush. He was covered from head to toe in bites, scratches and cuts, and there were several noticeable gaps in his bridgework. He curled up in a ball, clutching his hooves to his face. "My mouf! My mouf!" He moaned.

Five of the breezies were now holding brand new--- and slightly pink at the root-- teeth. Except for the fifth; he was holding a gold tooth and looking somewhat disgusted. I decided to play to the crowd and held out my mailed hand; one of the breezies took the cue and landed on my outstretched finger like a pet parakeet. "I am Darth Vulcan, LORD OF THE EVERFREE," I said to the moaning mobster and his badly intimidated flunkies. "Even the most innocent looking things in my kingdom are deadly. Mock me, or my subjects, at your peril." Next to me, Chrysalis made a whimpering noise and buried her muzzle in the crook of her arm. "Depart from my presence. Return to your Boss Hoss," I spat the name, "and tell him I shall decide at my leisure whether he will cross my domain. BEGONE!" They be-left, carrying their moaning head goon with them, a handkerchief clutched over his mouth.

"Well," I said to Dodger after they were gone. "It seems your new underlings may be useful
I regarded the one perched on my hand; it was their chieftain. "There was surprisingly little blood," I noted.

Wolftooth snorted. "'Ooff cuorse-a," he said contemptuously. "Ve're-a tuut breezeees. He-a vuooldn't effen hev felt it, iff ve-a hedn't vunted heem tu."

Interesting. A flock of miniature dentists. That could definitely come in handy if any of us here need a root canal. "I was under the impression that breezies were virtually helpless," I said.

Dodger grinned. "depends on if'n they get their magic from," he said. He flipped his saddlebags open; they were filled to the brim with teeth. On top sat one of the dragon tooth daggers from our weapons lockers. The teeth were glowing dimly, like banked coals. the dagger itself was glowing from within. "Bone magic. Makes 'em a good bit stronger than the pollen-collecting lot. I figure, keep 'em in fruits and flowers tae eat, bits of gold to swap, and wotever teeth from the hunter's kills, at sort of fing. Them leftover dragon teeth should do 'em up for ages...."

"Or," I suggested, "from anyone here who needs a tooth pulled..."

"Coo, that too. Got ter be a few loose teef walkin' about the lair, strewth. Anyway, I'll cover 'em out o' me own pocket, set 'em up in one uv the greenhouses, and Bob's yer uncle." He shrugged, looked a little nervous. "Figgered it might be a good idear for me to have a few follow-uppers of me own..."

I could see his point. I had plenty loyal to me, but that didn't translate as loyal to him. If I got taken out, he could be left hanging if he didn't have a fallback position--- like a handful of ponies loyal to him. It was a lucky balance for him; they were enough of a posse to give him a leg up, but small enough that — disturbing tooth yanking abilities notwithstanding — I wasn't going to feel too threatened by him having a private army of pony pixies. "Foresightful," I said. "Well done. Take Eiderdown; go see to the situating of your new underlings." With a proud lift to his head, he went to where Eiderdown stood, entranced in spite of everything by the gossamer-winged creatures flitting about. Guess you can get away with anything when you're tiny and whimsical.

Dodger walked over to where Eiderdown stood. She was standing, staring openmouthed at three or four of the fluttery-winged miniponies, utterly entranced. "Oy, everywun," Dodger said. "This here's Eiderdown, me main filly." Warbled greetings came from the flock. He was struck by a quick inspiration. "You four-- Goldenrod, Jasmine, Honeysuckle, Snapdragon... you stay wiv her; you're her hoofmaidens now. Look after her, 'elp her wif things, doin' up her mane, that sort of fing. Aright?"

The four breezies addressed happily chirruped their understanding and gleefully dove into her mane, primping and braiding and arranging her locks. Eiderdown squeaked and giggled her amusement. Her laughter made Dodger's heart flutter.

He glanced down and saw she was wearing something new. Along with the cat's eye choker and the ruby necklace from before, she now had a thin beaded chain hanging about her neck, with two familiar tags. She saw where he was looking and lowered her eyes, blushing. She tapped the dog tags with her hoof.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It took me a while to understand." She lifted the crude tin tags in her hoof. "You got these when you went, all by yourself, after somepony who'd hurt me. When you gave them to me, you weren't just bragging about what you did. You were trying to show me that... that you cared about me. That would protect me. Weren't you."

Dodger ducked his head. "Give or take."
She leaned in and planted a peck on his cheek. "Thank you."

The grin that spread across Dodger's face threatened to split his head in half. "Well. Um. Heh. Well then. Wot say we go an' get this lot settled in, then?" She smiled and nodded.

With a bounce in his step and a warm, inner glow from his cheek to the tips of his hooves, he set off down the tunnel after her.

---

1) We will now allow the reader a brief moment to stop giggling.
The chain link fence was made of the finest Equestrian steel. It stood over fifteen feet high and was topped with coils of concertina wire on both sides. Every support pole was cut with runes that glowed faintly even in daylight, protecting against rust, wear and tear, and (considering what lay on the other side) chewing. It was magically electrified as well; every now and then one could see tiny sparks as some bug or no-see-um brushed up against the fence and promptly met its maker. A road ran alongside it on its near side, and teams of armored guards patrolled along its base every hour or so, moving between the lookout towers placed every few miles along the perimeter. It was quite an impressive looking bit of security.

Of course, thought Applejack as she watched a passing patrol from a nearby hill, the fact the trees beyond loomed hundreds of feet taller than the fence kind undermined a pony's confidence in it. It made it look like they were trying to fence in an angry bull with a length of kite string and some wishful thinking. "Ah cain't say I mind too much, them putting alla that up between us and the Everfree," she said, finally. "It'll at least keep the timber wolves outta my mane during zap apple season. But I am kind of wondering who all's payin' for this and what my taxes are gonna look like next year." She gave Twilight Sparkle a skeptical look.

Twilight chuckled. "Actually, the Everfree perimeter fence is already covered in the national budget," she said. "You remember what happened to Cirrus Hilltop."

Applejack looked dismayed. "Aw, now Twi, don't tell me the money that shoulda gone to rebuildin' that town went to this here fence!"

Twilight shook her head. "It's more than that, Applejack," she said. "The Cirrus Hilltop investigation was just the start. Remember that pony who threw his house at Celestia? Both of those cases revealed a whole slew of problems with the Equestrian revenue system-- both on the taxing side and on the spending side. " She shrugged her wings. "We decided to make a virtue of a necessity, and unloaded a ton of reforms. While everypony else was doing Winter Wrap-Up, Celestia Luna and I were doing spring cleaning in the Equestrian budget." Mostly Luna and I, Twilight amended mentally. With Celestia's blessing, but still...

Applejack chuckled ruefully. "Ah kin imagine the paperwork," she said. "Better you than me. So how bad was it?"

"Ugh. It was at least three or four centuries overdue," Twilight said, her ears laid back and her eyebrows tabled. "Pretty much every city, town and village in Equestria has been featherbedding--yes, even Ponyville," she said before Applejack could ask. "Cronyism, make-work projects, redundancies, completely unnecessary expenditures... the Crown doesn't exactly smile on the practice of hiring somepony to sit in an office and go 'darned if I know!' " when asked what his job is."

"I kinda wondered why the to-do list for Winter Wrap-Up was so much shorter this year," Applejack said with a cynical sigh.

Twilight chuckled. "Last I saw Mayor Mare she was hitting the cider, trying to figure out how to explain to her brother Gravy Train that Ponyville wouldn't be renting his snow-plows anymore." She paused and regarded the fence with heavy lidded eyes. "I wonder how many hangovers it'll take before it occurs to her that he can rent them out to the Guard to plow the perimeter road all winter..."
"D'you really think that fence will hold that Darth Vulcan feller in?" Applejack said doubtfully.

"No," Twilight said, shaking her head. "But it's not meant to. It's meant to give us a last minute warning if he leaves the Everfree. Anything that flies over, digs under or squeezes through that fence bigger than a field mouse sets off an alarm." She pulled out a map of Equestria and showed her the fence line drawn on it. She pointed again. "There will be one fenced-off road, in and out, leading to the Castle of the Pony Sisters and the Tree of Harmony. There's already a permanent garrison stationed there, protecting both.

"Once everything is finished it will completely circle the Everfree Forest. His army of bandits won't be able to enter or exit without us knowing. We will have encampments completely surrounding him. Then, we will cordon off more and more sections of the forest every day, cutting it into sections, restricting his movements." She smirked, rolling the map up with a snap. "Then... we strike."

Applejack pursed her lips. "That's gonna take an awful lot o' time," she pointed out.

Twilight deflated a little. "Yes, it is," she said. "But Darth Vulcan isn't like our usual villain. And it's going to take a lot of time and patience and slow, methodical planning to take him out." She let her head drop. "I think... I think we've gotten too used to having our problems easily fixed."

"Easily?" Applejack said.

"Yes, easily." Twilight raised her head and looked out over the horizon. "Think about it, Applejack. Every problem we've had, every villain we've faced, we've managed to declare victory in a matter of days, if not hours. Nightmare Moon? Chrysalis? Discord? Done and done, and home in time for dinner. But Darth Vulcan? He's..."

"Hung in there for months, yeah," Applejack admitted.

"When we interrogated him, I found out his species has been in countless wars," Twilight went on. "Ones that went on for years, decades even. There have been bloody feuds going on in parts of his world that have gone on for centuries. They do that sort of thing naturally as breathing, according to him. If one of his cities had been invaded by an army of changelings, they would have hunted the changelings down, for years if need be, till they'd crushed them out of existence.

"Us? We practically forgot the changelings existed not one day after Cadence and Shining's love-spell swept them out into the Badlands. And now Darth Vulcan has changelings under his command! If it isn't right there bucking us in the face, we stick it in a tomb or a statue or up on the moon for a thousand years, if we do anything at all, and forget entirely about it. Out of sight, out of mind..." She chewed her lip. "Darth Vulcan was right. We're like little foals who never grew up."

"If endin' like him is the cost of 'growin' up,' I'd rather not 'grow up' at all," Applejack said scornfully.

Twilight just looked troubled. "Maybe. But what's the cost of not growing up?"

---

Things were very different among the colts and fillies of Ponyville. Before Darth Vulcan, there had always been a certain predictable dynamic: a perpetual Cold War, with the Cutie Mark Crusaders at one pole, Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon at the other, and all the little individuals and sub-groups in between, wavering from one side to the other as peer pressure and passions drove them. It wasn't
a good dynamic, but it had been predictable. Now it was completely gone, and it left the colts and fillies unsettled, not sure of who was friend or foe.

Diamond Tiara had been changed after Darth Vulcan. The brash, loud, pushy, obnoxious filly with the flashy tiara and the royal hairdo was gone; It was almost like she had died. In her place was a sad-eyed little filly with a short bob-cut mane who rarely if ever spoke, and never put herself forward. Much of those first few weeks had consisted of Diamond Tiara going about town and apologizing to many of the ponies she'd hurt or been rude to in the past. It had been almost unsettling to see the change in her. More than one adult found themselves torn between relief that the aggressive little filly had finally been cowed, and guilt at feeling that way after they knew how it happened.

The change in the Cutie Mark Crusaders was even more startling. It was expected of Silver Spoon to stick by Tiara's side, but the Crusaders had closed ranks around Diamond Tiara, like a tiny herd closing protectively around one of their own. Their astonishing compassion toward their former bully had gone a long way in healing the wounded filly. Still, months later, she wasn't seen anywhere in town when she wasn't in tow behind one or more of her adopted herd.

Another sight that would likely leave ponies bemused was the increasingly frequent sight of the CMC at Diamond Tiara's manor, and even more so, the sight of Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon at the Cutie Mark Clubhouse. A genuine, if initially awkward, friendship was growing between the two rival groups, one that heartened many.

The former Terrible Twosome were at the CMC clubhouse even now. They were all gathered at the Cutie Mark Crusader Clubhouse. Objective? Celebrating Babs Seed's new cutie mark: a pair of beautician's scissors. Procedure? An overnight campout, featuring junk food, gossip, the latest music, cheesy movies (courtesy of Diamond Tiara's home movie projector), and, of course, makeovers, so Babs could practice her hairdressing skills. She was currently giving Twist a shampoo, massaging out the candy filly's cloud of cherry-red curls in warm soapy water, While the others sat in towels or curlers, inexpertly daubing hoof polish and makeup on each other.

And, of course, stomping the merry hell out of the Bechdel test. "Shining Armor," Diamond Tiara was saying as she re-braided Silver Spoon's mane. "Definitely Shining Armor."

Applebloom rolled her eyes. "He don't count," she said. "He's already married, and 'sides, ANY filly would want HIM to be their first kiss. C'mon, pick again."

"Yah, c'mon, DT," Babs said. "Pick a colt a little closer to the can-do range."

"It'ht gotta be a colt in Ponyville," Twist insisted firmly.

"Oh fine, fine." Diamond puffed out her cheeks. "Um, Rumble." There were giggles of agreement around the clubhouse; Diamond Tiara wasn't the only one to have noticed that the younger brother of Thunderlane was shaping up a lot like his older brother. "Okay, how about you, Twist?"

"That'ht eaty," Twist said. she crossed her forehooves on her chest. "Truffle."

"Yah, we saw you trading cards on Hearts and Hooves day," Applebloom teased.

"Wait wait." Diamond Tiara looked up, disbelieving, from where she was re-braiding Silver Spoon's hair. "Truffle? Little round colt, fork and knife cutie mark, wears a fez while he reads the newspaper?"

"Is that what them things are called," Applebloom murmured.
"That's who you'd want to be your very first kiss?" Diamond Tiara's nose wrinkled. Twist turned pink and nodded.

"And what's wrong with that?" Applebloom demanded.

It said much that DT backed down as much as he did. "Well, fine for her," she said, scrunching her nose and looking away with a toss of her head. "I just like my colts hunky, not chunky. Okay, I mean, he's not as bad as Snips or Snails, but--- oh you're kidding me," she said, her head whipping around. "Snips and Snails?" For Silver Spoon had, when Diamond mentioned the colt's names, unmistakably cringed.

"I, well, it...." Silver Spoon stammered. "...Snails is... kind of sweet..." The other girls giggled. "He is! He's dumb, okay? But he always tries to be nice. He holds open doors for me and says nice things and offers to carry my books..." She looked away. "He's always been nice to me! Even-- even though we're... not very nice to him." She looked shamefaced.

Diamond Tiara tucked her forehooves under herself and bit her lip in reflection."...Yyyyeah," she said. Her memories flew back to dozens of little run-ins she and Silver Spoon had with the 'dorktacular duo.' Snails didn't seem to care how often she or Silver Spoon snubbed him; he'd be back there again next morning with a goofy smile, telling Silver Spoon she was pretty and asking how her day was-- She was feeling a little ashamed of it herself, if she was honest with herself. "You're right," she confessed. "I don't think Snails has a mean bone in his body."

"Maybe you should give him a chance," Applebloom said. "Or at least be less mean to him..."

Silver Spoon winced again. Diamond Tiara wasn't the only one who'd had a few band-aids painfully pulled away from her ego these past few months. "Maybe," she admitted. She blushed a bit, fiddling with her half-completed braid.

Sweetiebelle primped at her enormous beehive of curlers. "But shouldn't somepony give Snips a chance, too?" she squeaked. The others grimaced. "Oh come on!" Sweetie said, slapping her hoof. "Fair's fair, you know."

"Yeah, but who would YOU see with Snips?" Scootaloo said. They all had to stop and painfully ponder that one.

"What about Babs?" Twist said suddenly.

"Why me?" Babs said, alarmed.

"Well you have the same cutie mark..." Twist said.

"That ain't no reason!" Babs protested.

"Sure it is! Mr. and Mrs. Cake both have cake cutie marks," Sweetiebelle said. She nodded firmly, confident of her unassailable logic. "Now that you moved to Ponyville, maybe you and he could hang out--"

"I'm Aloe and Lotus' apprentice trainee as a beautician. Snips' dad is a barber. Not. Happenin'." She scowled, daring anypony to compare the illustrious beautician master race to the lowly barber peons.

"Well, whatever colt I'm with has gotta be cool. Why are all the colts in this town weird?" Scootaloo lamented.

"Button Mash is not weird!" Sweetiebelle said, hopping to her feet angrily--- then blushing madly as
she realized what she'd said.

Applebloom deadpanned. "Last week in art class he covered himself in glue, rolled through the craft materials and ran around yelling that he was a Katamari Damashi."

Sweetiebelle hunkered back down. "Okay he's weird." She mumbled. She gave everyone a defiant look. "But he's still sweet!"

"Calm down, we know y'all are sweet on each other," Applebloom chuckled, running a brush through her mane. "I swear, you two are even cuter than Dinky and Pipsqueak." The fillies all giggled. "But yeah... the colts around here do tend to get strange. Like that one with the orange mane who drools all the time? Or the one with the tubs of jelly?"

"Well, like Twilight says," someone said from the trapdoor. "The odds are good, but the goods are odd. Heh." Spike appeared in the trapdoor, holding a heavily laden tray. "Nachos are up, ladies!" The nearest foals fell on the platter with a will, sing-songing thank yous to the dragonling.

Among the changes the grownups in town had instituted was that foals were no longer allowed out and about without chaperones. In the case of the Cutie Mark Crusaders, they were fortunate enough to have Spike to tag along. More than one parent breathed a sigh of relief that he had taken the task in claw; despite being only a dragonling he was strong, tough, armored with fireproof scales and armed with claws and teeth that could crush rock and flaming breath. There were bank vaults that weren't as safe as the colts and fillies under Spike's easygoing watch. At the moment he was playing chaperone for the sleepover: camping out below the treehouse in his own little tent, keeping an eye out for trouble... and coincidentally making himself handy making and fetching snacks.

"Hey, Applebloom, we haven't heard who you'd like to be your first kiss..." Sweetiebelle said.

"Not too many options left," the farm filly replied around a mouthful of guacamole.

Sweetiebelle got a sly look on her face. "Well there's always Spike..."

Applebloom choked and sprayed nacho crumbs. Spike did some spluttering too. "Hey, leave me outta this!" he said. He shot alook around as if expecting Rarity to be standing there listening in.

The others started laughing at his appalled expression. Even Applebloom started giggling, too. "Aww," she said, leaning in and batting her lashes at him. "And here ah thought you could be mah sweet baboo..."

"I am not your sweet baboo!!" Spike half-shouted before collecting himself. He glared at the circle of giggling fillies and stomped to the trapdoor. "That's it, I'm outta here..."

They waited till he had descended out of sight. "Alas, a love that was never meant to be," Sweetiebelle sighed dramatically. The others lost it.

"Shouldn't you all be talking nonstop about cutie marks like always?" Spike shouted from below.

They snickered at that. Babs gave a sort of wry grin as she did Twist's damp mane up in curlers. "Kinduva awkward subject, right now," she said, regarding her own brand-new cutie mark over her shoulder.

"Why?" Silver Spoon said naively.

Scootaloo rolled her eyes up to her foil-wrapped mane (dye job; she wanted some cool lightning bolt highlites.) "Oh, I dunno why us blank flanks would feel awkward talking about that around certain
Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara both flushed. "We said we were sorry," Tiara said, pooching her lip out a little.

Babs blushed a little too. "No, not dat. I mean, I'm not exactly guilt free about dat, myself," she said. "I meant... well, now that I got my cutie mark, I... guess I ain't a Cutie Mark Crusader no more, am I."

"Oh. Oh yeah, right," Applebloom said. "That's right, isn't it?" She and the other 'blank flanks' in the room looked a little downcast.

Then Diamond Tiara let out a snort. "Are you kidding? That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard of!" The others looked up at her in surprise, and a little annoyance.

"Diamond !" Silver hissed unhappily.

Diamond Tiara waved her off. "Sorry, sorry," she huffed. "--- but-- it is!" she insisted. "You're going to throw Babs out of the Cutie Mark Crusaders because she finally crusaded her Cutie Mark? That's crazy! It's like.. like..." she fished for a metaphor. "Like throwing somepony out of the Wonderbolts for doing a Sonic Rainboom!" Scootaloo, at least, seemed to get it.

"But now that she's got her Cutie Mark, she can't cruthade for it anymore," Twist protested.

Diamond shook her head firmly. "So what? You don't fire your best talent when they can't work on the floor any more, you promote them," she recited authoritatively. "Put them in charge of teaching others how to do what they did! So what if Babs can't get her own Cutie Mark anymore? Who in Equestria would be better at showing you how to get your Cutie Mark than somepony who just got theirs?"

The Crusaders mulled that over. "YYYeah, I guess she's right," Sweetiebelle said. "The Cutie Mark Crusaders isn't just about getting our own cutie marks, it's about helping each other get them." She held up a hoof. "I propose that from now on, any pony can be in the Cutie Mark Crusaders, so long as they're willing to help anypony else earn their Cutie Marks!"

"Seconded!" Scootaloo said, holding up a hoof.

"And that makes it unanimous!" Applebloom said.

Babs was all smiles. "Cool. Thanks, Diamond," Babs started to say.

Diamond just turned red and looked away. "It's-- it's just common sense, don't read anything into it," she huffed. Still there was a hint of a smile on her face.

"So what's the story with your cutie marks?" Sweetiebelle said, pointing at Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara.

"Y'know, all this time an' I never heard what your cutie marks are for," Applebloom said.

"I always just thought it meant they were rich," Scootaloo confessed.

"No. That's my dad's thing," Diamond Tiara said. "He's aces at making money and profit and making businesses grow-- um, or he was before..." she finished quietly. Things had been rough since Filthy Rich's run in with Darth Vulcan. Filthy Rich's businesses were suffering; quite a few ponies still blamed him for angering the evil warlock and refused to shop at his stores. Other business..."
ponies, suspicious of the pony who had allegedly had 'financial dealings' with the warlock, were leery of doing business with him, and Mr. Rich had lost a lot of the edge he'd used to have. They were far from poor, but for the first time in her life Diamond Tiara was seeing signs that the lifestyle she was so accustomed to could just disappear, and it frightened her.

"Well, mine is for having excellent taste in food," Silver Spoon said, preening a little. Diamond Tiara felt a little relief at the topic being deflected.

"Really?" Babs cocked an eyebrow. "You're good at tasting stuff?"

"She is," Diamond Tiara said. "She can taste a spoonful of soup and tell you all the ingredients, and how much salt and pepper it needed."

"Our family chef says I could be a great food critic or a restaurant manager or a cordon bleu." Silver Spoon said proudly.

Applebloom gave her a look. "Ah'm gonna test you on that when ah get my hooves on some o' Granny's apple fritters," she said skeptically. "Okay, so what about yours, Diamond?"

To everyone's surprise Diamond Tiara actually looked... embarrassed. "It's nothing," she mumbled.

Everyone present gawked at her. After an incredibly long, awkward silence, Applebloom finally spoke. "Whut?" she said.

"I don't really wanna talk about it," Tiara mumbled louder.

Applebloom's jaw nearly hit the floor. She got to her hooves, pulling her tail out from under Bab's brush, and walked over to where Diamond Tiara lay cringing. Her eye was twitching.

"After all this time," she said, unbelieving.

"After all that teasin', and hecklin', and bullyin', and makin' fun o' me an' the girls cuz we didn't have our cutie marks, an' all that buffalo brownies about how special an' wonderful you thought you were 'cause you had yours--- and now you don't wanna talk about it? Oh that is IT!" She threw a foreleg around Diamond Tiara's neck in a mock hammerlock and began noogying her for all she was worth. Diamond squealed and wriggled like a worm.

"Hey hey hey!" Babs complained. "I spent half an hour on that 'do!"

"Talk! Talk! We have ways to make you talk, so TALK!!"

"AAagh! All right all right! I got it-- I got it playing a board game!!" The answer surprised Applebloom so much she let her go. Diamond Tiara rolled away and began fussing with her mane. "my bob-cut," she whined.

"A board game??" the other fillies present all said in disbelief.

"What. The HAY. Does a sparkly tiara. Have to do with a board game?" Scootaloo said.

Diamond Tiara huffed and waved a hoof. "It's not just a board game," she said. "It's 'the Princess Gala Game.'"

"The Princess Gala Game?" everypony repeated.

"It's a game where you try to... ugh, it would take too long to explain..."
Silver Spoon brightened up. "It's okay, I brought it!" She hopped to her hooves and trotted over to her saddlebags. A bit of digging and she pulled out a large game box and a rulebook. "I was... kind of hoping you'd all want to play," she said, blushing a little. "It used to be Diamond Tiara's and my favorite game ages ago."

The others started shuffling through the box and the rulebook. There was a large board, playing pieces, several kinds of cards, scoresheets, toy money, and a toy tiara made of plastic. "Wow, this looks really complicated," Applebloom muttered.

Diamond Tiara had perked up considerably since the game had come out. "It's really simple once you get into it," she said. "The idea is, all the players are Princesses, see? And you're competing with each other to host the Grand Galloping Gala. The pony who gets the most points wins— and gets to wear the tiara, ta da," she said, putting the toy tiara on her own mane and primping for a moment. "One day Daddy had a bunch of his rich friends over. Their daughters came along, and I had to entertain them, so me and Silver Spoon set up the game. We played for hours. and after the third time I won the tiara and put it on--" she pointed to the matching crown on her flank.

"Tho how do you play?" Twist said, leaning over the game, her towel turban wobbling dangerously.

Diamond Tiara started arranging the board and the pieces. "Okay, you get to host the Gala if you get the most points. There are three kinds of points you can earn: for being rich, for being famous, and for being powerful...

They soon found themselves hock-deep in a round of the game. Had Darth Vulcan been observing, he would have compared the game to a mish-mash of Monopoly, Life, Risk, and quite possibly Cards against Humanity. What looked on the surface like a fluffy, "mystery date" style girly board game was in truth more akin to A Game of Thrones, with only slightly fewer beheadings and burst eyeballs. You had a little kingdom to maintain to make you wealthy, and you had to win points for your social-fu not just from the board but from the other players. And winning the right to wear the tiara and host the Gala was only the start; how everyone played the gala helped decide where they started out relative to each other in the very next round.

And Diamond Tiara was an absolute shark at it. Four rounds in and she was still wearing the toy tiara. Scootaloo finally threw her cards down in frustration. "I give up," she snapped. "No matter what I do I can't get enough points!"

Diamond Tiara shrugged. "It's 'cause you do everything Rainbow Dash style," she said. "You focus all your attention on doing stuff that'll make you famous, but you don't pay any attention to forming alliances or to your budget--- you're broke and nopony wants to do anything for you," she explained.

"Applebloom, on the other hand, she pays all sort of attention to making her kingdom grow, but nopony knows her name. And Sweetiebelle... well, she makes lots and lots of friends, but it's so easy to come in behind her and turn her alliances against her or buy them away."

"It's just a fluke," Scootaloo fumed. She picked up her board piece and glared at it, then picked up her cards and glared at them. "She just knows all the rules better than us."

Silver Spoon shook her head. "No, she's always been like this," she said. "anything with strategy. Board games, card games, chess and checkers..." she dimpled and giggled. "Remember that time you beat your father's army friend at a tabletop wargame?"

Diamond Tiara's eyes went wide at the memory. "Old General Blowhard?" She snickered. "He couldn't believe he'd been beaten by a little filly!" she snickered. "Of course that was what made it so easy." she opened her eyes as wide as they could go and fluttered her lashes. "Oh my oh me, Mister
General sir, I don't stand a chance, I'm just a little girl, la la la..." They all had a belly laugh at that one.

"He FELL for that?" Twist hooted.

"Hook, line, sinker, and half the fishing pole," Diamond Tiara giggled. "He nearly bit his corn cob pipe in half!"

"I'm startin' to see how you managed to stay the most popular filly in school for so long," Applebloom said, half in amusement, half in disgust.

Diamond Tiara smiled a little wanly. "Yeah. It's easy if all you care about is having a crown."

Applebloom bit her lip. She finally ventured the question that had been preying on her ever since Diamond Tiara's cuteceneara. "Diamond, why did you do it, anyway?" she asked. "Why'd you, why'd you pick on me an' Sweetie and Scootaloo all this time about our cutie marks?"

The smiles died. Diamond hung her head, face burning. "Because you were there," she said. "I was always... rotten. I always figured..."

"You figured the only way to stay on top, was ta kick somepony else back down to the bottom once in a while. Right?" Babs said, smiling abashedly. Silver Spoon winced, too. Diamond Tiara had been a bully, but she and Babs were in their own way worse; they'd been bullies just to curry favor with a bully. There was more than enough guilt about past sins to go around the room, it seemed.

Diamond Tiara nodded. "There's no real reason anypony starts bullying, Applebloom," she said. "Other than they do it and it makes them feel good to-- to make other ponies hurt. You were there, you were a blank flank, and Cheerilee was talking about cutie marks, and--" she shrugged.

"Everything else was just an excuse."

"The funny thing was, well not ha-ha funny, but if it hadn't been for how it all went down at the cuteceneara, Silver Spoon and I would have probably forgot all about you in a couple of days." The corner of Tiara's mouth curled wryly. "But then we picked on you three at the party... and the next thing we know everypony at my cuteceneara was eating right out of your hoof. We... I... got obsessed."


"I saw what you did at the party and I just knew that you three could be the most popular fillies in Ponyville. I mean, you coulda mopped the floor with me and Silver Spoon, popularity-wise. You still could, even now, if you just half tried. Especially you, Applebloom. Your family is everywhere, you host all those parties and special events-- the Sisterhooves Social, Cider Season--- and everypony you meet seems to like you. You would've been the most popular filly in school. And if you were the most popular filly in school, where'd that leave me?" Diamond Tiara looked shamefaced, poking at a stray nacho that had fallen to the floor.

"I think everypony's got other thuff on their minds right now," Twist said. She was leaning on the windowframe, looking out over the orchard. The light was fading, but the new border fence girding the Everfree and its watchtowers was still visible in the darkling light.

Silver Spoon shivered. "Don't remind us," she said. "Can we please talk about anything but Darth Vulcan?"

The others nodded. Babs shook her head. "Dunno, Silvie," she said. "I tink we're better off talkin' about him and gettin' it outta our systems, than sittin' here shakin' and afraid to say anything." She
looked at Diamond. "That's what bullies want; everypony to be too scared to say anything behind their backs."

"This guy's a lot more than a bully, Babs," Diamond said fearfully. "He's a lot meaner than that."

"Diamond? Can I ask something?" Sweetie said. She was laboriously trying to undo the curlers in her mane. "I mean, why couldn't you get away? His gang is just a bunch of Diamond Dogs, and even Rarity got away from them once. I mean, they're really cowardly and really really stupid..."

"He didn't just have Diamond Dogs, Sweetie," Diamond Tiara said. "And these dogs weren't like those. The ones that kidnapped Rarity were just bullies and dum-dums. If they'd tried to do anything but boss her around, Lady Rarity could have messed them up."

Sweetiebelle cocked a skeptical eyebrow. "My sister?"

Diamond Tiara rolled her eyes impatiently. "Don't you watch what your sister does? I did, when I got my cuteceneara dress fitted. She made razor-sharp scissors and needles and junk fly around her head in a cloud. She didn't even have to look at what she was doing! If those Diamond Dogs had tried to get rough with her-- ew. I mean, don't you remember that movie we watched, 'Kiss of the Spider Mare?' Remember what she did to that one stallion with just a hat pin?" The fillies present all cringed; one of the side benefits of having DT and Silver Spoon in the herd had been access to (ahem) contraband, such as certain forbidden movies. The aforementioned movie had been rather graphic in what a vengeful mare with telekinesis could do with a needle and thread.

Sweetiebelle buried her face in her forelegs. "Great, I'm never gonna get to sleep tonight now."

"Sorry," Diamond said. "But it's true. Those diamond dogs were weenies."

"Weenie dogs," Scootaloo quipped. The girls giggled at the bad joke.

"These guys aren't. I tried to escape. I did. I tried every trick I heard Rarity used. It... it just got me punished." She swallowed, ill at the memory. "Then I tried other things: faking sick, picking the lock on my chain, everything. There were just too many dogs watching. And they weren't falling for anything I tried. I even tried hiding behind a door and breaking a jug over somepony's head like in Daring Do." She grimaced. "It was Darth Vulcan, and he was still wearing his helmet.

"He didn't even care. He sat me down and told me what I did wrong. Then he chained me back up and punished me again." She shook her head again. "This guy isn't like you think. He's not clowny like discord or loud and noisy like nightmare moon or wacky crazy like the mane-iac or Ahuizotl. He's smart. and cold. and hard. He's always thinking, always making plans. And he's scarier than anything I've ever seen."

"You don't gotta be afraid no more, Diamond," Applebloom said. "The Princesses and the Elements of Harmony will fix his wagon!" She pointed out the window at the steel fence. "They're gonna fence him in and round him up. See?"

Diamond Tiara shook her head. "Do you really think that dumb fence and those dumb guards are gonna stop him?" she said. "He's not a pack of gophers, Applebloom." She glared at the fence. "It's stupid. You know what it's gonna do? It's gonna make him mad."

"So what, you think he'll smash it down?" Scootaloo said.

Diamond Tiara shook her head. "No. He's too proud. Putting a fence around him like he was a herd of sheep, he's going to be insulted. He'll find a way around that fence like it wasn't even there, just to
"He'll bribe somepony to open the front gate for him, just so he can walk in and out right under the Princess' noses. Then he'll make himself a magic portal or something, so that he doesn't even have to look at the fence. *Just to show the Princesses that they can't stop him.* Then he'll take revenge on whoever decided to build the fence, for insulting him," her eyes were grim.

"Is that what *you'd* do?" Scootaloo said, a trifle scathingly.

"If I was an Evil Overlord, yes," Diamond Tiara shot back. "Or at least, if I was *him.*"

Silence fell over the treehouse as the fillies brooded over that thought. An odd glint suddenly filled Scootaloo's eye. "Say, Diamond Tiara," she said. "You say that you know what Dork Vulcan is gonna do next?"

Diamond Tiara had been around the CMC long enough to recognize that gleam and be wary of it. It usually was in Scootaloo's eye, and it usually involved cutie mark crusades with the highest probability of grievous bodily injury. "Yeah! Well, I can guess pretty good," she said cautiously.

"Sooooo.... If you were in charge of stuff.... how would *you* go about beating him?"

"Well, I can think of a lot of things," Diamond Tiara said, "and none of 'em involve building a big fence around him."

This caught the others' interest. "Scoot, what're you up to?" Applebloom said.

"New party game, everypony!" Scootaloo said. "Everypony get out some paper and something to write with. Each pony has to write down what they think Darth Vulcan is gonna do next, *and* they have to come up with an idea how to beat him. The best idea is the winner." She snatched the toy tiara off Diamond's head. "And gets to wear the fancy princess hat all day at our next sleepover."

Applebloom gave Diamond Tiara a sidelong glance and leaned over to Scootaloo. "Are you sure that's a good idea, Scootaloo?" she murmured. "I mean, it might open up old wounds for DT..."

Scootaloo shrugged. "Hey, it's better than sitting around all night thinking about how scary he is," she said. "And who knows, maybe we'll come up with an idea that'll thwart the villain and save the day, or something."

"Doubtful," Sweetiebelle deadpanned. "Unless thwarting him involves getting him covered in tree sap."

"Why does that happen to youse guys so much?" Babs commented.

"We hang out in a treehouse in the middle of an orchard," Applebloom pointed out. "It kind of comes with the territory."

"But who gets to judge?" Twist asked.

"That's easy-- Princess Twilight!" Sweetiebelle squeaked."She's really nice, I'm sure she won't mind judging which one's the winner."

"Cool. So pass out the paper and pencils already!" Scootaloo said. for the next half hour, pencils and paper flew. More than a few collaborated, whispering ideas to one another. When they were done, Scootaloo gathered up the surprisingly large stack of paper and stuffed it into a manila envelope. "Now to get this to Princess Twilight," she said.
"So, Applebloom," Babs snickered, kicking the trapdoor open. "Think you can sweet-talk your boyfriend into mailin' a letter to the Princess for us?"

Applebloom snickered and leaned out over the open trapdoor. "Ohh Spiiiike," she sing-songed. 

"I'm not your boyfriend!!"

---

Zecora muttered to herself as she swept out her new shopfront. She was in a foul mood. Oh she knew she should be more grateful; after all, the little shack had been given to her basically for free by the Princesses, due to her status as a refugee from her home in the Everfree. They were even waiving the first year's property taxes, just to make the transition easier. But oh, how it rankled that she needed the help at all!

"An' bein on da Ponyville tax rolls now ain't exactly makin' me smile at-tall," she grumbled as she pushed the broom around. "Buncha crazy no-stripes got taxes tru de roof. Small wonder wit all de monsters and disastuhs dat roll tru this village every udda week, and now dey got dat huge fence and those soldiers marching and that road and those watchtowers, the mayor gon' use dat as an excuse to rack de taxes up tru the roof, just you wait and see!" She gave a snort. "At least in de Everfree I only had to worry about a cragodile or a manticore biting mah ass awff...."

"Awww, c'mon Zecora, it's not that bad! " Pinkie Pie said as she set a row of bottles and beakers out on a worktable. Zecora had just received a shipment of new equipment for her potion work, and Pinkie was making herself neighborly by helping her set it all up. In Pinkie's opinion the kitchen full of glassware and pipes and stuff wasn't nearly as cool and spooky as the hollow tree with the gourd bottles and clay pots everywhere... at least Zecora still had her big bubbly cauldron, even if it was sitting on a gas burner instead of a wood fire. "You've got a shiny new kitchen to work in, and now you don't have to walk all that way into town to do your shopping, and you don't have to worry about taxes going up because the whole town has to vote on those and Mayor Mare once told me that they'd hang her in Effigy if she ever tried. I dunno where Effigy is, but I think Mayor Mare better stay away from there anyway...."

Zecora chuffed ruefully. "Oh, y'all are right, it could be a whole lot wuss," she admitted. "But things hain't exactly been goin' smooth foa me since dat crazy Vulcan showed up. Bein' right in town hain't such a good deal. Now ah gotta sneak back in to de Evahfree--- wid a permit slip from her highness Princess Purple, an' a escort o' guards, an' ain't dey about as useful as tits on a bull-- to get my potion ingredients."

She kicked a counter in passing. "Not dat nobody's buyin' no potions. Go out into de creepy forest to get a bubbly potion from de spooky ol' Zebrabwe voodoo Zebra? Why shoa nuf. And don' you fool yo'self; ponies was sneakin' out to my hut ages before Twilight came 'round here, dey just din't talk about it." She paused in sweeping and chuckled. "Probly cause half of 'em was like Mr. Cake, wantin' dat potion to get his rooster ta crow, if you know what I mean. Hah. Mister 'I swear it's foah mah cousin.' " She attacked the floor with the broom. "But buy da same stuff from a Fillydelphia zebra living on main street? Not a chance."

Pinkie rubbed her chin. "Maybe if you hung more of your spooky masks around..."

"I did. Da Mayor came by an' told me it's too early to decorate for Nightmare Night!"
"Aww. Plenty of ponies still think you're spooky..." Pinkie consoled, pushing the cauldron across the room so she could polish it.

Zecora snorted in amusement. "Da flower sisters don't count." It was something of an issue that the three most skittish ponies in Ponyville were now her next door neighbors. "You know them crazy mares open up shop the same time I do every morning, look over an' see me openin' mah shutters, scream an' faint? Every single time? One look and it's "EEEE, the HORROR" And BOOM, down they go like three fainting goats." She finished over Pinkie's gales of laughter. "It. gets. OLD."

"That's the Flower Sisters for yooOoooo," Pinkie started to say when she was suddenly interrupted. She began to vibrate violently, a full body spasm that started at her nose, worked its way down her body to her tail, then went back the other way. When it was finished she stood akimbo, eyes crossed. "Woeeoo," she said.

Zecora watched warily. She'd been told about the pink pony's strange precognitive senses. "Your Pinkie Sense?" she asked.

Pinkie shook her mane out. "Yeah. Woo. That's one I haven't felt in a while."

"And that was?"

Pinkie stuck her head out the window and looked around, spotting a sparkling purple cloud zipping its way to the Golden Oaks library. "It means somepony's just brought in a game changer," she said.
Chapter 40

It was well after midnight. Celestia, finding sleep eluded her, was pacing the halls of the royal quarters, brooding over the day's events still stirring about in her mind as she glided with false serenity through the now-moonlit halls.

Whom should she meet coming the other way but Luna. The Princess of the Night was not so much walking as *sauntering*, all but swaggering up the hall, singing a wordless, cheerful tune under her breath. She met her sister halfway and halted with a feigned look of surprise. "Why sister!" Luna said. "What has thee up and about at this hour?"

"I might ask the same thing, Luna," Celestia said. "I haven't seen you all night...nor your Night Guard..." She regarded her sister's slightly tipsy appearance, pondered her own words and had a sudden sinking feeling in her gut. "Luna... what have you been up to?"

Luna smirked at her. "Why, my royal duty," she said mockingly. "A princess must take care of her faithful little ponies, must she not?"

Celestia caught a whiff of a familiar coppery tang on Luna's breath. "Oh, Luna, you didn't---!"

"Did!" Luna said cheerfully. "Oh yes, twas a grand hunt. A nearby village did lament the depredations of a family of wild boars, so we did render aid. Oh, fie thee and thy horror-struck looks," she huffed, scowling at Celestia's dismay. "Thou didst want my loyal Guards to feed on blood, didst thou not? So thy addle-heads and leeches could observe what *ghoulish monsters* they became? AH booga booga booga..." she sat down and waved her forehooves mockingly at Celestia.

"Under controlled circumstances," Celestia said. "Not... howling through the night in full view of all the world. Do you have any idea what the press will be saying in the morning if even one pony saw your Guards eating wild boar--"

"Pork, the other white meat?" Luna suggested in barely restrained glee.

"Luna!"

"Fie on them and on thee! I care not! My Guards nourished themselves on meat and blood, and yes--I partook as well, as is my place and duty!" She got to her feet and sauntered to the door of her suite. "We did fest and fete with meat and mead. My beloved thestrals sleep tonight with full bellies, and the memory that their Princess supped with them unashamed." She turned around and leaned in till her nose was almost touching Celestia's. The smell of blood and honey mead on her breath made the Sun Princess' eyes water. "And now," Luna said triumphantly, a wide, smug smile on her face, "I am going to go into my bathroom, lock the door, and throw up." With that she slammed the door in Celestia's face.

Celestia stood staring at the door in disbelief. After a minute or so she could hear a muffled voice coming from the other side.

"HYuerlgph."
Celestia shuddered. "I'm going to have to give the chambermaids another raise, aren't I," she lamented.

"Transcribe."

The tattered book floated up in front of me, surrounded by a cloud of glitter. Next to it a blank-paged journal hovered. The pages on both flittered and began turning with supernatural speed, threads of light streaming from the old to the new, magically copying the text on the original as fast as the pages turned. With a thump they fell back to the table in front of me. I picked up my new copy of "Clever Cantrips for Quick Casting" and leafed through it. Every word and drawing, copied perfectly.

This spell was darned handy. It could make multiple copies of a single page (I had used it to make bulletins to pass out to the horde) or compile a pile of loose pages into a single volume. With work you could make a permanent version, cast it on a journal, and use it to copy down notes, drawings, or writing you found elsewhere. Material didn't matter either; Daring Do used such a notebook to record hieroglyphs she found on temple walls, or so I'd heard. Once I'd learned the spell I'd set to sprucing up my library, making copies of the older, more faded and tattered books. I'd spent most of the morning, testing the spell, and was pleased with the results.

Black Fang stepped into the room. "Your Lordship, I bring a report."

Well, crap, there went the day down the drain. "Proceed," I growled through my mask, setting the book down.

"Dread Master... they have completed another mile of fencing today."

I growled and drummed my fingers on the arm of my throne. This was going to complicate things.

Things were starting to go South again. The frost had been barely off the ground before Celestia's work crews had moved in and begun girdling the Everfree with miles of towers and chain link fence. It was laughable; enchanted or not (a few of my spies had come back with bad facial tics and mane or fur standing on end), it wouldn't even slow me down if I decided to leave. But it did make leaving the forest surreptitiously almost impossible.

This was not going over well with the Thundering Horde. Promises of access to some would-be den of ill repute to splurge their ill-gotten gains had been made, and this fence was making it obvious that those promises might be curtailed. Tempers were boiling over, and mutterings were rising. I'd found a few locales--- harbor towns, a couple of skeazier griffon cities--- but getting to them was about as likely as reaching the far side of the Moon.

Without the Elements, that is.

Worse, the Guard were getting more savvy. They still had miles of fence yet to lay, so the raiding parties and the spies (like the pony in front of me) were still getting in and out. But the Guards were responding faster than before-- too fast. A couple of parties of Diamond Dogs had just avoided capture, and two of my spies had escaped by the skin of their teeth. Too close, too close to be coincidence. Chrysalis, bless her paranoid little swiss-cheese heart, insisted this was proof we had a traitor in our midst... and it was looking like she was right.

If it was one of my spies, I was probably screwed, I thought. "Anything else to report?"
Black Fang nodded. "Your agent in Manehattan has discovered a few things," he said.

I straightened up in interest. This had been a field test for the Broken Birds; I'd send them out in disguises to one city or another to do a little scouting around. Nothing intensive or important; it was a test of their initiative and loyalty as much as anything. Thus far the information had been fairly banal. Welter Weight had been sent to Manehattan; a bit of mane dye and a couple of saddlebags to hide his undersized wings and he easily passed for an earth pony day worker. "Oh? And what did he learn?"

"He took a job at the harbor, loading and unloading freight," Black Fang said. "He happened to help with a load of fencing meant for the Everfree border... among other things, he learned the name of the supplier and contractor." Black Fang paused. "It seems it is our would-be partner, Boss Hoss."

I had a sinking feeling. "I think I know where this is going." I said.

"I suspected you would," Black Fang said. "It seems Boss Hoss has a great deal of political clout, both above and below the board. When the plan for the fence was announced, he threw his considerable weight behind it immediately-- even offering to provide the building materials at or below cost." He paused. "He was apparently influential in getting the project underway..."

"I bet he was." It seems Boss Hoss didn't take my rejection of his offer of partnership-- or his obnoxious spokespony being roughed up for being rude and stupid-- with good grace. The two-bit gangland wannabe was going to show the dread Darth Vulcan who the real crime boss was.

I just silently added him to the mental list. When I had a spare moment I was going to demonstrate to this big fish what a teeny, tiny pond he lived in. "Anything else?" I said.

"Flim and Flam report that construction proceeds apace. For a given value of apace, they said."

I let my helmet do the staring. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

"They say they'll run short of certain metals and other materials soon. Not immediately, and they are supplementing with what they find from the tunnelers. But...." he left that unfinished.

Crap. Quick mental review: Celestia was closing off the border around me. It would take about a year to completely fence in the Everfree at best, but it was slowly cutting us off from easy coming and going. I'd managed to bungle and turn a potential ally into an enemy-- bruised his ego hard enough that he was cutting his own nose off to spite his face, if that wasn't a mixed metaphor. I'd also bungled the opportunity to infiltrate Luna's Guard; they'd caught on to my 'blood bargain' almost immediately. Even the batponies that stayed loyal would be under suspicion.

To top it off, now we were running out of supplies. "What do they need?" Black Fang slapped a sheet of paper down in front of me. I picked it up and grumbled as I read over the list. A lot of it was common bulk stuff--- iron by the ton, copper by the same--- but I spotted several items that I was sure I'd sent out teams to buy, borrow, beg or steal. Very particular items. Items I recognized from another list I'd made. I got a nasty chill. "I know I sent out ponies and 'dogs to fetch these," I said. I pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of my pocket and unfolded it. It was a list of names; the names of the ones sent, and what they'd been sent for.

Black Fang looked over the lists and clicked his tongue. "Those are the supply parties the Guard captured," he said. "Every one." He blinked in surprise. "How did you know, Sire?"

I felt the ice in my veins start to boil. "Because I made a point of it," I said. I wasn't stupid; I knew Chrysalis was probably right about there being a traitor. Heck, she was on the suspect list.
So I'd set up a little test, a little trap.

I'd picked out several groups of diamond dogs, ponies, changelings and minotaurs, and sent them out to retrieve the more exotic supplies that the Flim Flam brothers needed. Or rather, I'd had each of my not-so-trusted lieutenants each send some of them out. And only I had the master list of all the groups, what they were fetching, whether they were to go, whether they were to buy, barter, bargain, or pilfer what they were getting... It wasn't a particularly clever trap, it was just something I'd done half on "evil overlord list" autopilot. "Never let any one person know everything you do."

But our traitor had fallen right into it. Of all the parties sent out, only one Trusted Lieutenant had sent ALL of his out to be captured or routed by the Guard. The Princesses were utter rookies at this. If they'd been even a little clever they would have spaced it out-- let a few slip past. But no, they'd gone and snapped up every little fishy their double agent sent their way...

And now I knew exactly who he was.

"Black Fang, summon Chrysalis and the other Lieutenants to the War Room," I said, the papers in my grip starting to smolder. "It's time for this trap to close on a rat."

I was sure. I was 99.44% sure, anyway. I was perfectly willing to take care of it right then.

I don't want to be right

But if I was wrong...

I don't want to be right

I crammed the thought down under a surge of anger. I'd had it. I'd played softball so far--

take some BLOOD this time

This betrayal was too much. It

hurt too much

Why would they do something so

cruel, breaking my heart

don't care WRING THEIR NECK

STUPID....

We were all gathered in the War Room. I'd layered this chamber with every anti-spying, anti-scrying spell and trick I could come up with, and then doubled them. It had taken more labor than the rest of the lair combined, but was hopefully a complete magical blind spot, even for the Celestial Sisters. If not, I'd wasted a few tons of rune-etched iron plating. (yes, I cut ventilation shafts. I'm paranoid, but not paranoid enough to risk suffocation.)

Everyone was seated around the table. I had the incriminating papers in front of me. The last to arrive was Artful Dodger, Eiderdown in tow. He swaggered jauntily into the room, swaggering, not a care
in the world. The foot-thick doors boomed shut behind him. "So, your Dark Awfulness, wot's the ruckus?" he said, flopping down in his overstuffed seat and pulling Eiderdown next to him. It took him a few moments to realize that the rest of the table was staring silently at him. Some faces were cold. Others were smug. All were angry.

Oh yes, I'd taken time to clue them in. The smarter ones knew that it was their necks in the noose.

"...wot?" he said, looking around, his smile slipping to half mast. Nobody answered. I sat silently at the head of the table, glaring at him through my mask. He lost his cocky attitude, seeming to shrink in his seat. "Wha... what..." he said, uncertain, staring back at me.

I held up the papers. "**Did you think you wouldn't get caught?**" I said. His eyes widened; ah there it was.

*He knows he's guilty just kill him*

"Caught? Wh-- what are you talkin' about--" he stammered, trying to muster a laugh. The chuckle died in his throat as I got to my feet.

"**It was easy enough to catch you,**" I said, keeping my voice even. "**I mean, are you stupid? You knew that only I kept track of all the raids and sorties we ran--**" I shook the papers in my hand. "**That I only told each of you here a handful of what was going on. And I knew who knew what.**

"**Your princesses must be retarded--**"

"My princesses??" he scoffed, faking scorn and shock.

"--- to think I wouldn't notice when they intercepted every single mission I assigned to you and **ONLY you!!**" I brought my fist down on the table; it didn't so much split down the middle as shatter, sending flinders flying. Everyone seated to either side scooted back out of the way; Eiderdown screamed. Dodger tried to shrink back into the cushions of his chair, his eyes wide with terror and fixed on me. He pushed Eiderdown out of the way when he saw me moving towards him; she went sprawling off to one side, out of the way. Not that it mattered; all I could see through my haze of purple-green-red rage was him.

I crossed the remains of the table in two strides. A wave of my hand stripped him naked, his hat, horn ring and other oddments flying. His horn sprayed fear-induced magic sparks and trickles of nightmare smoke; they bothered me no more than flies. I seized him by the throat and lifted him out of the chair, the fuse behind my eyes sputtering. "**AFTER ALL THIS, YOU BETRAY ME??**" I screamed, my voice cracking.

I felt hooves tugging at my arm. "**Don't kill him, please, don't kill him!**" Eiderdown screamed. I shoved her back one-handed.

"**WHY?**" I howled again.

I hadn't QUITE started squeezing yet. Dodger's eyes bulged out at me in terror. "I never-- betrayed you! I swear!" he choked out.

"**TED!! STOP!!!**"
The sound of my name, my real name, cut through everything like an ice cold knife. I whipped my head around and glared at Chrysalis. "...*WHAT?*

Chrysalis was standing next to her toppled chair, holding one hand out to me. "*Lord Vulcan, he's telling the truth,*" she said. Her eyes were fixed like gunsights on mine, and her voice was as firm as... well, as firm and commanding as a queen's. "I can sense it from here. He's confused, scared mindless, but he's not lying. Believe my word as your Queen. Let. Him. Go."

I could still hear the voice in my head screaming for blood anyway, even as the adrenaline crash-dropped out of my system. With an effort, I opened my hand, dropping Dodger back down into his seat. Sobbing, Eiderdown rushed in to cradle and nuzzle the shellshocked colt. I turned to face Chrysalis. "*Then... what of this?*" I croaked, holding up the remains of the papers.

"I don't know," she confessed. "But there's more here than meets the eye." She stared at Dodger with narrowed eyes.

"More than meets the eye... that ignited a thought, a glimmering of an idea. I turned back to Dodger and *Looked* at him. Not just *looked,* LOOKED. With mage sight, or second sight, wizard sense, Octarine-o-vision, whatever you want to call it. Nothing. His aura was about the same, with various edges and ripples left behind by all his magic holdouts and doodads, but nothing out of the ordinary.... Wait. I almost missed it, it was cleverly hidden in one of the meridians, covered up by the brightness of a cluster of acupoints at the base of his neck... *a slightly darker area in his aura...*

I reached over and grabbed him. Eiderdown let out a little scream-- so did he, to be honest. "*Hold still,*" I snapped. I bent his head forward, exposing the back of his neck. He whimpered, but I snapped for him to hold still again. I extended one of the claws on my gauntlet, shaping it into a razor-sharp flat edge, and carefully shaved away a patch of his mane. There, right on the pink skin, was a tiny rectangular tattoo. "*Look at this,*" I said to Chrysalis. "*What does this look like?*

"What?" Dodger quavered, his head still down. "What is it??"

Chrysalis stepped carefully over and looked. Several of the others gathered and peered curiously as well. "Thats... a very tiny and very complicated rune pattern," she said. "I've never seen one so fine... interesting...."

"*What does it do?*" I demanded.

Chrysalis shrugged. "I can only guess. But I see what looks like--" she fetched a magnifying glass from one of the map tables and squinted. "Yes. Runes for 'sleep', 'dream,' 'key'... and 'door.'" Cue one heck of a dramatic pause.

"*Princess Luna,*" I said, filling in the blanks. "*She put a... back door into his head. A door into his dreams.*"

"Yes," Chrysalis said. "A keyed door, too. One that would let the Moon Princess bypass the anti-nightmare runes we wear, the dreamcatchers decking the halls, all of our defenses as if they weren't even there.... just to get in this one pony's head."

"Buh.,?" Dodger said.

"He's been having trouble sleeping," Eiderdown said suddenly. "Bad dreams. About somepony breaking into his home, rifling through his things."

"Three guesses which somepony that is," someone said, a hint of fear in their voice. I glanced at my
other sub-bosses. Charcoal, the leader of the ex-con ponies, his eyes were round as saucers. Ironhide just stood there flexing his fingers around the haft of his battle axe and growling. The mood had swung rapidly; where everyone had been focusing their malice on Dodger, now their hostility was focused on the Princess of the Night.

"But... when...?" Dodger stammered. He was looking more bewildered by the second.

To my surprise, Charcoal grunted in understanding. "Easy enough," he said. "You were in the royal dungeon, they could get at you easy enough. My guess, they put knockout drops in your food, put you under for a couple hours, put that little mark on your neck, and then stick you back in your cage, and you none the wiser." He shrugged. "They even have spells to make your mane grow back."

"I remember bein' sick," Dodger said. "Wakin' up in my cell all groggy and nauseous and..." his eyes went wide at the realization.

"Then they set up a 'great escape', with a few undercover guards mixed in to make sure you get away... and that you end up in the hands of His Darkness," Ironhide, the minotaur commander, grunted.

"She put... a back door... into my head," Dodger said. "A door. In. my HEAD..."

I found a chair and sat down heavily, letting my cloak fall to hide my shaking hands. I'd almost...

"They bugged you," I said. "It never even occurred to me."

"Bugged me? They bloody well've pissed me off!" Dodger exclaimed. I didn't have a changeling's senses but I could almost see his fear and confusion transmute into rage. "That bloody %$@$ $ Luna put a #$/#%@ back door in my @%@ %#^ HEAD! The bloodless Q@$^%^@ five-bit dockside@#%@#er's been walkin' in and out of me bleatin' HEAD while I slept like it was a RENTAL ROOM!" He was staring at the floor, shaking with fury and stress and fear. Eiderdown tried to him a cooldown hug, but it wasn't working too well.

"Then why Moon Princess not find us yet?" Skank asked over the ruckus. A good question. I thought.

Chrysalis tossed her head. "Dreams aren't exactly like reading a book or a map," she said. "It's a mish mosh of symbolism and allegory and vague recollections shuffling around in the head. They're a product of the right half of the brain... the intuitive, artistic side. Mathematics, language-- those are on the left. that's the reason you can't read anything clearly in a dream.

"She could pick up enough from Artful Dodger's dreams to know what plunder we were after and a vague idea of when--- After all, if a mouse dreams of cheese, it's a safe bet to check the pantry. But guessing our exact location? Not likely. Besides," she tossed her mane. "why bother tracking down our lair in the Everfree, when they're already fencing the whole Everfree in?"

I sat there, sagging in my chair in stunned silence, staring at Dodger while all this sank in. He wouldn't look in my direction. Every time he slipped and glanced my way I saw a look in his eyes that made my guts twist. "Check the others," I said. "All the ponies that were with Dodger when he joined us. If she was smart she would've put that little mark on at least two or three others, just to even the odds." I saw the pony second-in-command flinch and unconsciously rub the back of his neck, eyes widening. "In fact, check everyone. Let's cover all the bases. Covertly." Black Fang nodded and went to pass the order down to his next in command outside the room. In the next 6 hours, every neck-- pony, diamond dog, minotaur-- would have a bald spot on the back of his or her neck.
We sat there for a while. I stewed over what I'd just learned. They might be in charge of Candyland, but the princesses could be hella sneaky. I kept forgetting that.

Celestia had managed to erase her own sister from the history books... and even made ponies somehow forget that she herself was the elder sister and had been ruling their country for a thousand years. Not even her own star pupil had ever connected the dots between the Elements, the legend of the two sisters, the story of Nightmare Moon, and the Sun Princess, even with the Sun Princess staring her right in the face. That took either epic level subterfuge or epic level obliviousness, and even the dumbest of the unwashed masses isn't THAT obtuse.

And Luna... hell, nobody knew anything about her, which made her a bigger threat than any other backstabber in the game. And for obvious reasons she was pretty obviously very, very comfortable with doing all her work in the shadows, unseen, in the dead of night. This little dream-hijacking trick was obviously her work. And she'd been cunning enough to use her own guards to bait-and-switch Dodger through my front door. The fact that he'd ended up in a position as my right hand man was just dumb luck.

At least I hoped it was dumb luck. I'd hate to think she could read me that easily. I looked around the room; people were looking seriously intimidated. Not good. If this slipped out of control, we'd all go crazy with paranoia. We'd all spend our days staring suspiciously at the back of each other's heads till Celestia's gold-plated goons burst through the ceiling on us.

I fished for something to say to boost morale, no matter how stupid. "This... will work to our favor." Everyone looked at me and waited for the other shoe to drop. I improvised. "Chrysalis. Can you break the enchantment on him? Close the door?"

"Easy enough," Chrysalis said. "just deface the rune. A knife scar or a little scribble with a tattoo needle and it will be done. I could do as much right now." She held up one hand, a finger extended out into a thin needle-like claw. Dodger winced but made no objection.

I held up a hand, stopping her. "Can you tell when the door is being used?"

Chrysalis hesitated. "I... think I could," she said. "When changelings cocoon a victim, they fall into a deep sleep. We can monitor their dreams from outside... change the ichor in the cocoon to keep the dreams sweet."

Ideas tumbled through my head and I started to chuckle. Creepy as heck, as always. "Now tell me," I said. Already I was pulling up spells in my memory, so I knew what the answer likely was. "Can we make the door swing the other way?"

Chrysalis actually froze, her jaw slack. "Oh, you cunning bastard," the minotaur captain chuckled.

I turned my expressionless helmet to Dodger. "Artful Dodger..."

"I'm in," he said. He was hunched up, Eiderdown clinging to him. He was rocking back and forth a little in agitation. He shot a look at me, then cast his eyes down, obviously still afraid to look me in the face. I felt stupid for how much that stung. "Whatever it is you're gonna do, I'm in. That moon bitch used my head for a flippin bird blind. " He bared his teeth. "I wanna get her back for that, I wanna make her sorry she ever even looked at me sideways!"

"I think we can manage that," I said. I already had half a dozen ideas competing with each other. "But when we're done we'll have taken a whole lot more than revenge."
"We're going to take EVERYTHING from them, right down to the little gold horseshoes on their little hoofy feet."
We sealed up the room and gathered around the war table, and around a very nervous Artful Dodger. "All right," I said, keeping my voice low entirely out of instinct. "We have an incredible opportunity, but time is running out fast."

"Why?" someone demanded.

"Because the minute Dodger here falls asleep, Princess Luna will come dreamwalking and find out that his cover is blown," I said. "Suggestions, people."

"Simple, we erase his memory," Chrysalis said offhandedly. Dodger looked alarmed at this.

"How?" I flicked mentally through my mental library looking for memory charms.

Chrysalis tossed her head. "I can handle that," she said. She magically summoned up a flask from the laboratory and—oh how charming—proceeded to spew a mouthful of liquid into it. A few gathered at the table made gagging noises, but she ignored them. She swirled it around in the vial. Rather than the expected neon green, it was a pale blue white.

"And what is THAT?" I said.

"We Changelings call it "'Oblivionem Lacte,'" Black Fang offered.

"And what is that in English? Or Ponish. Or whatever we're all speaking?" I said.

"Roughly translated, 'Milk of Amnesia,'" Chrysalis said.

"Milk of Am---" I let my helmeted head thunk on the table. "...Of course you would. MOVING ON," I said, desperately wrenching my hurting brain back on topic.

"Changelings use it all the time," Chrysalis said. "As our nectar is a liquid version of our stored love-energy, so this is a liquid version of our most common memory charm. We find a... donor... use trickery to get them someplace quiet, drain them, and then dose them to blur out the past few minutes or hours. It's handy if we have to obviate more than one pony at once; simply add it to their food or drink and wait. How do you think I kept control of Shining Armor for so many days before the wedding? When he started getting suspicious and we were someplace I couldn't cast the spell on him, I dosed up his tea and told him to forget what he was worrying about..." She regarded the flask. "Yes, this much should blank out at least a full day."

"Oy now wait a MINUTE---" Dodger protested, pushing back from the table and as far from the glowing liquid as he could get.

Chrysalis scoffed at him. "Oh calm down, it's perfectly harmless," she said. She frowned. "Though it does have drawbacks. The larger the dose, the more likely their memories will fade back in. The brain doesn't like losing big chunks of time. Blank out more than an hour and they slowly start to regain the "lost" memory... first as dreams-- then a waking epiphany." She shrugged. "Most Changelings..."
prefer to just bite their victim and knock them out. But bites show, so..."

"So once he takes that," I concluded, "We have what, a week before his memories come back?"

"Four days certain," Chrysalis said. "A week at the farthest outside."

I waved it off. Close enough for government work. I sat there, my brain percolating. Okay, I could try the old fake-plan-real-plan routine... but I'd already done that to them once, maybe twice depending on how you counted Hilltop-Cirrus. So they'd be expecting it... but... oh. That gave me the start of ideas.

"Okay," I said. "So we need a plan. We need two plans... one to feed the Princesses through Dodger... and one that's for real." I regarded the map of Canterlot (updated for its palace's new mid-lake locale). "So... what particularly shiny targets do we have here in Canterlot this week?" Skank raised a paw. "What?"

"Why Canterlot?" he pointed out. "Why we no hit Manehattan, or Philydelphia?"

"Good question, Skank," I said. "Shows you're thinking. But Philly and Manhattan are a bit far from our lair to target... for now." Several at the table chuckled darkly. "Besides, the Princesses still do everything important through the capital, probably because they want to keep an eye on it. Crap, they had a mad demigod as a lawn ornament in their front yard, instead of chucking him in a cave at the bottom of an ocean someplace a thousand miles away like sensible people.

"So, what insanely valuable, potent and/or dangerous prizes are going through Canterlot THIS week?"

"The Equestrian National Bank is getting a huge shipment of gold bullion," the minotaur leader said, jabbing a thick finger down at one point on the map. "Nothing out of the ordinary; they trade jewels to the dragons for gold, get a load of bullion every few months. But this load is coming up the river by boat and will unload on the lakeshore, from there straight to the bank vaults. The Guard will be stretched thin for it, and off their footing--- earth ponies, pegasi, and unicorns, and none of 'em suited for dealing with combat on the open water."

I hmmed. "And are we?" I pointed out.

"Some of my minotaurs have worked on sailing vessels and river barges," he said. "I think we got a few sailors among the ponies, too."

I put a pin in that one. It certainly wouldn't hurt to replenish the hoard, and yanking a few million in bullion out of their economy would leave Equestria and the Princesses reeling. But would that really help my long term goal? I wanted to stick it to the Princesses, but not just by blindly breaking stuff. "Anything else?"

Black Fang cleared his throat. "My agents inform me that several large shipments of construction materials from our mutual friend in Manehattan have been passing through Canterlot by train, on way to the construction sites currently girdling the Everfree." He made a chattering noise that was half chuckle. "And apparently he himself is accompanying the final shipment, in order to secure a large bulk payment from the crown."

Ahahaha. So, Boss Hoss was taking a little ride, was he? "I thought he was backstabbing us at a loss," I said.

"He is," Black Fang assured me. "Or rather, at cost. The payment is to cover the cost of materials. If he loses that, he could go bankrupt." Black Fang paused. "Or at least his legitimate front business
would..."

"Oh, that IS tempting," I said.

"As it so happens, he will be arriving in Canterlot at the same time as the bullion shipment."

"Well darn the luck," I said sarcastically, snapping my fingers. "Gold or revenge. Decisions, decisions."

"Care go three for three?" Charcoal said. He slid a newspaper across to me. "Crystal Empire to Pay Royal Visit," the headline blared. A surprisingly sleek looking bullet train made of crystal was pictured below. "His Nibs Prince Shining Armor and Her Nibs Princess Cadence are doing some sort of semi-official visit."

"Or at least that's the cover story," Pumpkin Patch said smugly. "I got better info. The trip is a cover for delivery of something VERY important." She let the phrase hang in the air.

I sighed and played along. "And that would be...?"

"A mirror," she said. "A magic mirror. One that opens a portal to another world." There was a collective held breath around the room. I was having a little trouble breathing myself.

"And you know this how?" I said carefully.

"I actually did manage to get a few 'clients' for your potions on the inside," Pumpkin Patch said. "One of 'em likes his locoweed..."

I didn't know much about pony drugs but I knew what Locoweed was. Oh lord, I'd created a pony crack dealer. I shoved the thought away, cranked up the 'stay cool man' effect on the Amulet, and kept my voice level. "And?"

"...He used to be in the royal guard, got a sideways boot into the Crystal Empire," she said. "He was stationed right in the room the thing was kept in. Saw the whole thing. Princess Twilight herself had to chase some fugitive into another world through it--"

Aaaaaaand there went my boner for the thing. I knew all about that mirror; I was no brony, but Sparkle's little dimensional jaunt had been a movie in my world, remember. I had made efforts to confirm the story once I recalled it--- a large bribe of gold, and a castle maid had pilfered some of Twilight's notes and photographs from the trip. It was just like I'd figured; it was a magic mirror that opened to another dimension that was, and here's the catch, almost exactly like my own world. So long as you ignored the fact that the "people" there were in bright pastel colors and had legs twice as long as their torsos. The fact that Princess Sparkle had found identical counterparts for all her pony friends was unnerving too. It was a mirror universe of Equestria-- a funhouse-mirror universe. The fact that she actually used their internet and DIDN'T have her head explode from what she saw hinted it was another crapsaccharine world like this one. I expect I would have gone even more screaming psycho THERE than I was being driven HERE.

I really couldn't believe the little dimwit had spent an entire month at a public high school trying to become prom queen, rather than just grabbing a brick, smashing that display case, grabbing the Element and getting the heck out of dodge. It made me wonder if that universe had some sort of High School Movie aura that gave everyone who went there a case of the Hollywood Stupids. The only way I would visit Equestria High was to hide in the rafters at the prom with a bucket of pig blood.

And maybe a couple of well-placed firebombs.
On the other hand... it might be possible to learn more about getting to other dimensions by examining the mirror. It might even be possible to reset it to other locales. At the very least it might be handy to have someplace to buy modern technology and goods... like saaaay, quality toilet paper? Or a few AK-47s and a few thousand bullets? Okay, a definite maybe. "A tempting target," I admitted.

"There's... one catch," Pumpkin Patch went on. "According to my inside guy, Shining Armor and Princess Cadence themselves are standing guard over it the whole way there."

Ironhide snorted derisively. "A pampered pink princess and her boy toy colt?"

I didn't get the chance to retort. Chrysalis did it first. She stood up and slinked around the table to where Ironhide sat. Then her hand whipped out, grabbed one of his horns and with astonishing strength she slammed his head into the table so hard his head bounced him back up into a sitting position. "One of the four alicorns and the second most powerful unicorns in a generation, fool," she spat at the dazed minotaur, shaking his head a little by the horn in her grip. "Either of them can shield a city singlehanded. That princess held off King Sombra by sheer force of will for days, without sleep or rest. That unicorn shielded all of Canterlot even while I was draining him spit dry. And both of them, at the absolute dregs of their strength, managed to blast my entire army clear to the badlands." She paused and added with dry amusement, "--- And then they went, got married, and boogied the night away at their reception as if it were no big deal.

"Those two can smash armies without aid," she concluded. "You would be wise to remember that when planning to confront them." She let his horn go and returned to her seat. Ironhide clutched his head, groaning.

"A good point to remember," I noted. "It smells like a trap as well."

"How could it be?" Dodger had gotten back some of his pluck. "If it was, they wouldn't ruddy let you know it was protected by Their Royal Romanticnesses."

"A point," Black Fang said. "But then again, ponies underestimate those two... they would expect Lord Vulcan to do the same." He made a sweeping gesture towards Ironhide.

Flim and Flam chipped in. "Oh no, my beamish boy," Flim said.

"If one wishes to see what an obvious trap looks like--" said Flam.

"One needs look no further than here." Flim had his own newspaper; he flipped it over to a section in the middle and slid it across the table to me. I picked it up and looked over the article he'd circled in red. "Canterlot Royal Library to put Historical Grimoires on Display," it said. It went on to describe the ancient texts that were going to be on display at the library for the next few weeks, listing their authors and some of their accomplishments. Starswirl the Bearded was among the notables; also listed were several gryphons, a couple of dragons... I was surprised to see that more than a few had been mages well on the Dark side of the Force, including some outright villains. "Krastos the Glue Maker?" Yeek. The accompanying picture showed the volumes on display in sealed glass cases.

"All these other things? They're more or less regular day to day business in Canterlot. Gold shipments? Equestria's wealth funnels in and out of Canterlot. Magic artifacts? They've been hoarding magic doodads there under lock and key since the day the first foundation was laid."

"What, they run out of crumbling buildings to abandon them in?" I snarked under my breath.

"But this?" Flam reached over and tapped the paper with a hoof. "Pulling those tomes out of
whatever dark airless vault they hid them in? Putting them out where ponies can see them? This is unusual in the extreme." He put his hooves together. "And well, Your Dark Overlordship, you have a reputation for loving books."

"A pretty obvious clue that it's a trap," I agreed. I read on and rolled my eyes. "That, and when they were asked about me possibly trying to steal the volumes, they apparently gave a long speech about how 'We shall not be intimidated by the crass, craven likes of the low-born vulgar etcetera etcetera...' Could they be more obvious? They might as well have been yelling 'Neener Neener, we double dog dare you.'"

Then it hit me like a bolt from the blue. Oh. Oh yes. Oh yessssss this was going to be good. I started to chuckle. "All right, ladies and gentlemen," I said. "Here's the plan..." I broke it down for them. They looked confused at first, then suspicious, then looks of dawning wonder spread over their faces. I was going to have a reputation as the next Napoleon after this was all done.

Artful Dodger heard the outline, and cackled madly. "Oh, wot I'd give to see the look on their faces--!" he said.

"Glad you approve. And now... to plant the fake info." I picked up the bottle of Milk of Amnesia and set it in front of him. "Bottoms up."

He looked at the liquid, his face turning a little greenish. "Is this part really needed?" he said wistfully to me. I made no reply. With a groan and a nervous swallow, he picked up the bottle and, face scrunched like a dried apple, swiftly chugged it down in one swig. He set the bottle down. "Bloody 'ell, that tastes like--"

CLUNK. He faceplanted into the table. Chrysalis watched as Eiderdown quickly moved to nurse his bruised face, her mouth set in a moue of disappointment. "I still don't know what they think it tastes like," she said with a sigh. "They always pass out before they get to that part."

"You never asked them after they wake back up?" I said.

"They never remember," she replied.

Dodger sat back up with a snort. "I'm awake, I'm awake!" he yelped. He looked at me guiltily.

I didn't miss my cue. "You fell asleep in the meeting," I said. "Again."

He looked sheepish. "Did I miss anything?"

I turned the newspaper with the article on the grimoire showing around so he could read the headline. "It seems Celestia and Luna bungled," I said. "We have a new mission six days from now, and you're central to it. This will be your target..."

I quickly outlined the false plan for the library heist, stressing Dodger's role, and that he would be the leader of the team that pulled it off. I told him the ponies that would be in on it, how and when he was to proceed, every detail I could think of. He ate it up eagerly, totally thrilled at getting to head up an entire mission by himself. When I was sure he'd soaked up every detail, I dismissed the meeting and unlocked the war room doors. "Go on," I told him. "You have things to prepare. The rest of us have other details to discuss. Oh Eiderdown, could you stay back a moment? And Dodger, send Wolftooth to me; I need to speak to him." Dodger gave me a tip of his hat, gave Eiderdown a peck on the cheek, and sauntered from the room. The doors boomed shut behind them.

The moment he was gone Chrysalis rounded on me. "I told you that the Milk would only last for four days before it starts fading," she said. "This is all going to take place a week from now-- he will
start regaining his memories by then. *In his dreams, first.*" She didn't need to say Luna's name to get across what that meant.

"Good, that's part of the plan." I grabbed a sheet of paper and began writing hastily. "All right, everyone," I said. "Now for the REAL real plan..." I got a round of confused looks, but as I wrote, I explained. They'd been surprised at my first plan. Now they were flabbergasted. The guards cracked the door open a short while later and Wolftooth came floating in, alighting on the table as I stuck the letter I'd written in an envelope. "All right you two," I told him and Eiderdown. "Your Master is going to be pulling off a covert operation in a few days. It's so covert even he doesn't know about it. I'm telling you this next bit in order to make sure everything goes as planned."

I dug around in my cloak pockets and pulled out something tiny, hard and black. Several seconds of careful spell-weaving and I was done. I dropped the enchanted bit of plastic into the envelope and sealed it with a blot of candle wax. "Eiderdown, you need to give Dodger this letter when he gets to the lookout point. But not a moment sooner, understand?" She nodded. "Wolf Tooth, I'm telling you this next bit so that Dodger will know that this is for real. He's going to be very confused, and you and Eiderdown have to persuade him to trust the letter. Got it?" The pixy pony saluted. "Good."

I rested my elbows on the table and laced my gauntleted fingers together. "Now, Dodger thinks he's going to be breaking into the Canterlot Library to steal some very valuable books. He's NOT going to be doing that. This is what he's going to be doing, instead..."
Seven days later, we were ready. I'd spent those days stressing over and over again to everyone who would listen--- or rather, ranting about it whenever Dodger was in earshot--- how I WANTED THOSE BOOKS. It apparently sank in as I'd hoped; Eiderdown reported Dodger complaining of literally dreaming about the mission, and of being chased down endless library corridors by angry librarians with moon cutie marks... I kept my fingers crossed that was a sign that Luna had picked the bogus info from Dodger's dreams, and proceeded as planned.

I'd been busy elsewhere too; I'd had Pumpkin Patch, Black Fang and my other lieutenants who'd made outside contacts start dropping gossip back in their contacts' ears that I was frothing at the mouth to get those grimoires. It worked like a charm; word trickled back that Celestia and Luna had taken all of their Royal Guard but a skeleton crew and put them on duty guarding the grimoires--- or rather, had half their guard standing around looking militant and the other half lurking in the corners of the library with cartoon hammers and butterfly nets, ready to pounce on me the moment I stuck my black helmeted head through a library door.

Perfect.

The day of the big heist, Artful Dodger, Eiderdown (both disguised and with full-body dye jobs--- Eiderdown had saddlebags over her wings and was dyed pale green, while Dodger was consigned to wearing a much less ostentatious bowler derby and had been dyed by Eiderdown's Breezy attendants a lovely shade of periwinkle) and WolfTooth (hiding in the aforementioned saddlebags) had arrived in Canterlot, posing as day visitors and strolling idly around the city. They meandered their way to a small park within an hour of sunset, just across from the Library in question. They shared a snow cone and pretended to watch the slowly setting sun, while they watched the guards marching patrols around the library, and waited.

Dodger didn't know it, but they were waiting for two entirely different things. Dodger was waiting for the small team of thestrals and diamond dogs he'd been told he would lead on the heist to show up in the shrubbery behind them. Eiderdown was waiting for a signal.

As the sun crept down toward the horizon, Dodger got steadily more fidgety and agitated. He cast around, frustrated. "Where are the buggers?" he muttered more and more frequently. he got up and paced around the park bench, fretting. Eiderdown bit her lip and said nothing. It was just as the sun touched the horizon that Dodger finally burst out:

"Devils bugger it, where are they? What in Tartarus is going on?"

Then the city alarms started ringing.

Celestia had never had the sense to set up a proper communication network. She did have a system of alarm bells throughout Canterlot for the Guard. They were ringing now, a clanging din audible from anywhere in the city. Dodger yelped and nearly bolted out of his own skin when the tintinabulation rose all around, but Eiderdown stopped him. "WAIT!" she shouted.

Neither of them knew what the rhythm ringing out meant, but results were obvious. Guards boiled
out of the Royal Library, galloping off down the streets or winging through the air, headed for the watchtowers as if Tirek himself were on their tails. In minutes, the once ridiculously overprotected building was empty of all but a hoof-full of guards. Dodger gawked at the fleeing mob of lawponies in confusion. "Bugger all's going on--??"

Eiderdown put a hoof on his chest and pushed him back to the bench. "It's okay, it's part of the plan," she said.

"Wot...?"

She gave him the envelope. Dodger tore it open, confused and began reading. It took several minutes; it was a rather detailed letter. His confusion only grew as he read; then it clicked. He sat there motionless, stunned.

"That cheeky bugger," he said in awe.

Eiderdown winced. "You're not angry, are you?" she asked. "About me not.. telling you?"

Dodger regarded her with a poleaxed expression. "Nah, nah," he said. "'Ad to be done, dinnit." He pondered for a minute.

Wolf Tooth wriggled out of the saddlebag. "Is der time noo?" he asked.

Dodger looked down at the letter. "No," he said. "Not yet."

"Den vot dus ve doo?"

Dodger looked at the letter again. "According to this, we wait till just after the sun sets. Then step two."

Several miles away on the Canterlot River, a river barge captain was having a very bad day. He'd taken the job to haul the gold bullion to the capital with aplomb. He had years of experience cruising up and down the river in his ironclad boat. He had cannons fore and aft, he had spear-carrying guards on his decks starboard and port, he even had two or three pegasi flying overhead on lookout and a pair of seaponies swimming below.

What he didn't have was a plan to cope when none of this mattered.

Changelings can grow manes, tails and coats of any color, unicorn horns, feathered wings, fur, scales, porcupine quills even. Gills were barely a challenge. The three seaponies swimming escort below the barge never had a chance; red, glowing eyed bugponies exploded from the riverbed mud like lobsters from Hell and overwhelmed them in seconds. They were bitten and left bound and anchored by ropes to the river bottom, drifting in a blissful stupor, while changelings crawled up the sides of the ship.

The ponies aboard went into a panic and rushed to stab at the horrifying boarders with spears. This however was a distraction. On the underside of the boat changelings worked feverishly, bolting a heavy chain to the ship's iron underbelly. The craft jerked to a stop. The Captain swore and struggled with the engines to no avail. The sternwheel churned but the boat made no headway.
Then it started *sinking*. The aft of the boat began sinking lower and lower in the water. Baffled, the captain looked back. To his horror he realized that the changelings had thrown a cable into the wheel, and the boat was literally winching itself down into the water. In seconds the prow of the flat-bottomed boat was several feet above the waterline as the stern threatened to pull below the waves.

He shut off the engines just in time, the stern barely an inch from being flooded. He glared back at the changelings battling all over his decks behind him and laughed. "HA!"

The changelings looked at him, looked at each other, and as one ran back to the stern of the ship and jumped onto the railing. That was just enough weight. The stern sank and river water flooded in. The captain howled his laments as his boat began to sink in earnest. Fortunately for his livelihood, the pallets of gold bars, subjected to the sudden change in direction of gravity, snapped loose from their moorings and slid backward, smashing through the railing and plunging into the river, taking the railing, the sternwheel and the cable with it. The riverboat's nose splashed down in the water, righting the ship and saving her from an early, watery grave.

The guards were either tumbled about like jackstraws, fighting to untangle their limbs from one another, or running about in confusion. The captain of the waterlogged boat looked back along the river; he could see the other two barges, under attack as well. Cursing, he grabbed a signal flare and fired a shot off into the sky.

Canterlot was only three miles away as the crow flew. The reinforcements flying in would arrive ten minutes too late.

---

On a train winding its way from Manehattan to Canterlot, Boss Hoss was about to have a very bad day. The sun had started to set, and he had retreated to his private car at the back of the train. He had nothing to fear; he had a car full of made stallions between him and the rest of the train, and a bunch more riding behind him in the caboose. Both doors were solid steel and bolted; the windows were magic-proof glass and covered with steel shutters; he had a loaded crossbow within hoof's reach of his bed. He took his repast, climbed into the silk sheets of his oversized bed, and drifted off almost instantly, soothed to sleep by the sound of the clacking wheels as his freight train full of money, power and influence steamed its way to Canterlot.

He never felt it when his car gently glided to a stop.

He awoke to near pitch blackness. There was no motion, no sound of clacking wheels or chugging of the distant engine. Instantly his heart was in his throat. Even before his eyes adjusted, even before the circle of glowing eyes around his bed opened and fanged mouths gleamed, he knew he was not alone.

He was surrounded by batponies. Friggin *batponies*. He lunged for his crossbow and fired it at the smirking mare standing in the center at the foot of his bed. That was a mistake. He had no way of knowing it, but they had fed very, very recently.

The bowstring twanged; the batfilly's head *blurred*; the next instant she was standing there, STILL smirking, with the crossbow bolt clenched between her fangs like a rose in a dancer's teeth. He tried to lunge out of bed; the batstallions standing to either side pinned the burly crimeboss in place with their hooves as effortlessly as if they were holding down a foal.
The mare spat out the bolt. "Guess what. You dun goofed."

"KNEECAPS! BLACKJACK!" Hoss bellowed frantically. The mare shook her head.

"Forget it," she said. "We disconnected the caboose twenty miles back. And we disconnected YOU from the train five miles back. You're all alone, Hossy." She crossed her forelegs and rested on the foot of the bed. "Now, you're sitting in a little spur off the main track, about ten miles from Canterlot. We could have just left your little car sitting on the track, and your wakeup call would have been the next Canterlot Express smacking into your little rolling boudoir at fifty miles an hour. " Boss Hoss shuddered, his fat frame jiggling.

"Now we're sending you a little message from Darth Vulcan," she went on. "You can work WITH him, or work FOR him. But you work AGAINST him--- well, whistle whistle, choo choo, SPLAT." Hoss shuddered again. "Now, as compensation for the Dark Lord's pain, suffering and inconvenience, we'll be taking... umm, pretty much the train and everything on it. And Darth Vulcan will call your accounts balanced. Try and shaft him again, and penalties will apply." She patted his leg with a hoof and trotted for the nearest window; its steel shutter had been peeled off its frame like an orange rind. "Now be a good little colt and send off your distress flare." With that, she and the others jumped out the ruined windows and disappeared into the night.

The instant they were gone, Boss Hoss grabbed the pull cord hanging by the bed and yanked. Rocket flares shot from a pipe on the roof, sending a distress dart up into the night sky.

His fury that the Guard took nearly twenty minutes to reach him and his stranded men was only surpassed when he discovered that his train, and its countless tons of cargo, had apparently turned off onto a spur track a mile on-- a spur track that hadn't been there the day before--- and disappeared from the face of the earth.

I was having a bad day.

Well, I'd been having a fairly nominal day up to a point. The plan had been sent into motion, there hadn't been anything epically disastrous occur, at least noone from my teams had sent out a distress signal yet, and my group, let by yours truly, had managed to teleport aboard the Crystal Express as it slowed through a long set of hairpin turns through the Unicorn Mountains. It was dicey for a second, but I pulled it off. We appeared in a cloud of purple smoke in the first car of the train, right behind the engine. Mongo tore the door off and we charged into the engine room, catching the engineer and his crew completely off guard. Skank, Runt and Mange leveled their guns on them, freezing them in place.

"Keep this train rolling!" I roared, the eyes in my helmet glowing hellish red. "If we stop, if we slow, you DIE!" The engineer gulped and nodded frantically. I left Mange and Mongo in the engine and led the others with me back into the train. The mirror was being kept in the middle car of the train, guards on either side. The plan was for me to bull a path to that car, subdue Shining Armor and Cadence, and secure the mirror. Then push any ponies on the train into the last one or two cars, disconnect them and make our escape. We had thirty minutes max before the train reached the end of the line... we had to accomplish this before that clock ticked out or it was over. I raced down the length of the train, a load of custom-made Flim-Flam knockout bombs in my belt, flash and stun spells tingling in my fingertips.
At first I thought we were in luck. The first two cars were empty. Then I realized: the first two cars were empty. There were only seven so where were the guards---

Then a rainbow-and-cyan blur shot up the length of the train and cracked me right in the jaw. "Gotcha!" she crowed.

I lay flat on the floor, momentarily blinded by pain. *Sonuva fraggin monkey buckin' ramjammin' frickin jock she-male pegasus frickin clocked me AGAIN...*

Of course. *The Mane Six were on board the train.*

I staggered to my feet, reeling from pain and seething with rage. Friggin' facemask was dented in--- I spent a second and used my magic to bend it back out again.

And got clocked in the BACK of the head. *Sonuvabitch!*

She pulled a hairpin turn and shot out an open window just as I lost it. With a roaring eruption of power, I turned the passenger car into an open flatbed. Shredded bits of train car and shards of crystal rained down. "GET THAT PEGASUS!" I roared.

When the smoke cleared my team hustled to obey my order. Guns boomed; the shots didn't even come close to the pegasus, who was now flying figure eights over the train and yelling mockery down at us. The two batponies with me went airborne; they and Dash were soon tangled up in a dogfight high overhead, zipping around each other almost too fast to follow.

At least she was preoccupied. I yanked the door open, only to get nailed in the chest by two orange hooves. I did a backflip halfway back up the length of the car and landed on my back. "Gotcha, ya varmint!" I heard someone say.

Oh that tore it. I got to my feet and charged, only to have to hit the floor as a lash of purple magic shot over my head. Hurray, Princess Sparkle was up in the mix. I saw her standing in the door, wings flared and horn flaring. I got to my feet AGAIN and pulled up a shield of dark energy... and she slammed the door shut and magically sealed it. I ran up and banged on it like an idiot. It had about as much give as the rock of Gibraltar. One of them actually put her face to the glass and stuck out her tongue at me.

"Oh screw this," I said. The car with the mirror was just beyond this one. I couldn't go through? Fine, I'd go OVER. I stepped backward and, with a burst of earth pony magic, jumped up on top of the car. If there was a tunnel coming up behind us I was gonna be pissed...

No tunnel behind us. But somehow, the biggest frickin' circus cannon I'd ever seen was up on the roof of the car ahead of me. A pink mare with a frizzy mane peeked over the top of the cannon at me, firing cord in her hoof.

**BOOM!**

Yeah, I know she only loaded that thing with confetti and ribbons and party crap. Ever get hit by a bunch of party hats or a stack of paper plates coming out of the barrel of a cannon? I tumbled backwards the full length of the car, arse over teakettle. I hopped back up to my feet, shellshocked but still raging.

"PARTY POOP-PERR!!"

**BOOM!**
"PARTY POOP-PERR!"

BOOM!

"EVERY PARTY NEEDS A POOPER THAT'S WHY THEY IN-VI-TED YOU! PARTY POOP-PERR!"

BOOM!

"PARTY POOP-PERR!"

BOOM!

I'd braced myself with Earthen strength, and staggered into the blasts, stomping forward one step at a time. Every blast still knocked me flailing, but I was making progress. The second blast dented my chestplate and left it spattered with cake. The third ripped my sword from my hand, leaving me clutching a fistful of streamers. The fourth blew my helmet clean off my head.

The fifth, My control over my shield wavered, and I took a load of confetti straight to the face.

"AAAAAARRRGH!" Ever see those pictures of loose straw embedded in telephone poles after a tornado? That's what that confetti did to my face. I screamed, falling to my knees and clutching my face. My eyes had been closed, lucky me-- but I had taken a cannon blast at almost point-blank range. The paper, tinsel and confetti had all but ripped off my skin. Almost instantly gloves went slick with blood.

I writhed and thrashed on my knees as pain exploded through my skull. I opened my eyes and saw Pinkie looking down at me, her eyes round and her jaw slack with horror. Her poufy mane had gone completely straight and flapped in the wind like a mourning shroud.

Pain turned to rage. Still screaming, I came up off my knees swinging. I caught her completely flatfooted; I landed a punch square on her snout that blasted her off her hooves. Teeth flew. She tumbled backwards, flopping like a ragdoll over the side, but I grabbed her by the tail and dragged her unconscious body back up with me. Her party cannon took a steel-shod boot from me and went sailing off into the bushes racing past.

Still reeling from the pain and shock, I looked around, trying to focus my rage on my goal. Where?

There, the next car. It was covered in a shimmering coat of magic that rippled pink and baby blue. They'd better have kids soon or that color combo is going to be awkward to explain. Why hadn't they cut the car loose when we'd boarded?

I hefted the weight of unconscious pony in one hand. Oh, right. Didn't want to abandon their sister and in-law and her friends... I dropped down to the narrow walkway, dragging Pinkie's unconscious form behind me, and banged violently on the shimmering magic covering the door. The crystal wall of the carriage actually went transparent, revealing Shining Armor and Cadence standing inside next to the covered mirror, horns glowing. Their looks of defiance turned to shock and horror when they saw my bare, bloody face.

There was a thud from the roof. A bound and gagged rainbow pegasus had been dropped on the roof by a pair of batponies. "You caught her?" I said, surprised even through my pain.

They blinked in shock at my injuries, but rallied. "She got overconfident and t-boned a railway sign," one of them said. The pegasus glared at him fruitlessly.
I jerked my head. "Get up front, tell them to chuck the engineers over the side at the next slowdown," I said. They saluted and flew off.

The door behind me rattled as the rest of the mane Six tried to come to the rescue. Turnabout's fair play: I heated the door behind me till it glowed like a blast furnace. I heard cries of pain and thumping as they hastily backed away. I magically sealed the doors and windows, then turned back to the royal couple. I held up Pinkie's limp form and smiled humorlessly. No words needed to be said.

They stared at me in shock, then in anger... then in resignation. The forcefield fell and the door opened, and I stepped inside. I never released my hold on Pinkie for a second. "Hello again," I grated at Shining through pain-clenched teeth. "I think I'll be taking that, now." I pointed at the mirror.

"It won't do you any good," Cadence said. "Even Celestia doesn't know how it works."

I dragged it to me, magically. "Good," I said. I wrapped the drape covering it around it tightly, doubled up my gauntleted fist and shattered it. They let out a cry of shock. I picked up a shard and regarded it. "Don't look so surprised," I said. "I can't use it now, but neither can Sunnybutt." I threw Pinkie bodily at them, sending Shining Armor tumbling to break her landing. "I will be taking a consolation prize though." With a massive push of effort, I teleported myself two cars ahead. A bolt of magic severed the hitch between the Mane Six's car and the shattered remnants of the one I was in. We were on an uphill grade; their uncoupled cars rapidly fell behind.

"Your train makes a nice souvenir!" I shouted back at them. As a parting gesture I fired off the royal distress flare. The guards would send out another swarm in this direction now, just in time to be tied up rescuing the royals... and nowhere near soon enough to ever catch us.

Flim, Flam and Heart Root had been busy the past few days. For months they had been trundling machines up and down the tunnels in the Everfree on rails; the past week they had spent ripping up those rails and laying out new, unmapped spurs on the main Canterlot lines. Ones that branched off and dove down into carefully dug subterranean tunnels...

 Barely sixty seconds later the Crystal Express took an unscheduled detour down one of those unmarked tunnels. The instant the last car on the train disappeared down those tunnels, teams of diamond dogs collapsed the entrance. Now two entire trains of the Equestrian line had vanished from the face of the earth without a trace.... along with all their cargo, boxcars, passenger cars, loads of coal, steam engines, and all the other recyclable goodies one could get out of several thousand tons of magically enhanced Equestrian engineering.

I dragged myself up to the first car, where the rest of my little raid team was-- save for Mongo, who was "driving the choo choo." We had a mile or so to go before we rejoined the tunnels in the Everfree; the magic that kept the smokestacks from polluting the pretty Equestrian sky would also keep us from suffocating on the smoke. The others looked at me. I wasn't sure if it was the blood, or what. Oh yeah, it was the blood. "What?" I rasped.

"Why did you smash the mirror?" one of the batponies asked.

I leaned against a bench for support. "Useless," I said. I gritted my teeth as my face flared with burning pain. "World wasn't my world. It would just screw us all up if we used it... turn us all into magicless humans, or house pets, or crap like that when we passed through." I'd managed to get my meathooks on more of Princess BookHorse's endless friendship reports (Let's hear it for tiny, insect-sized spy networks) and gotten the lowdown on the mirror. Man, that Spike kid really needed to go
on strike; he was seriously getting screwed hanging out with those magical pony bimbos. Spending a month as a DOG... I shook my head and focused. "Worse, there was another group of Element Bearers on the other side. Last dang thing I want is Celestia getting clever and bringing them over here. Six of 'ems a pain in the ass, no way in hell I want to deal with TWELVE of 'em."

"So, this trip a bust?" Skank said.

I grinned through bloody teeth and held up the magical mirror shard still clutched in my fist. "Oh, might not be a total loss," I said. Things went grey and fuzzy. "Okay, take over Skank... I think I need a little rest..." I slumped down as blood loss finally made the world fade out. "Hope the real target pans out..."

Up in her tower, Luna was seething with anger. They'd been suckered! Somehow Darth Vulcan had not only seen through the trap at the library, he'd somehow managed to use Artful Dodger to trick them into thinking that he'd fallen for it. Instead of going for the bait, the weasely human had taken advantage of their guard being concentrated at the library and hit multiple targets scattered all around Equestria--- just out of reach of quick response. She'd already gotten reports of a gold shipment being stolen, of an entire freight train being plundered... not just the cargo, but the whole thing, train and all...

She growled and brooded some more over the dream-crystal before her. The glass globe was replaying her infiltrator's last night of dreams. They had continued much as expected.... It had been fairly easy to tease out that Darth Vulcan had taken the bait of their little trap, and would attack soon. But something about the dreams the past night or two had changed, ever so slightly. As if there were a second layer to the dream being revealed, as if old memories were surfacing that changed its content.

The dream reached the critical point in the replay. The spectral trespasser (herself in disguise) was chasing Artful Dodger as always... except now he stopped. What he did next had varied the past few days, but it was always peculiar. This time he stopped, held up a hoof to her, and proceeded to set up a little card table that the vengeful princess regarded with curiosity.

Luna's eyes went round. She was a thousand years out of date, but gambling games were as old as history, and even she couldn't miss the symbolism when Artful Dodger set up a ball and three cups and began shuffling them about... only to have Darth Vulcan sneak up from behind and switch the ball to another cup.

Then, when the "mark" proclaimed she had spotted him moving the ball, sneaking up again and moving it back.

Luna scrambled to her hooves and galloped for her sister's chambers. "Sister! Sister! We have been flummoxed!

"The wretch is pulling a double fake!!"
The library, which had just a short while ago, had been a teeming mass of guards, was now eerily quiet. Nearly every guard on duty had been pulled away to respond to the multiple alarms.

Up on the roof, a feathered form settled in ghostly silence next to the skylight. Eiderdown hunkered down in the shadows, and as Darth Vulcan’s letter had instructed, waited.

It didn't take long. Who should come soaring down to land in front of the royal library but Celestia and Luna themselves. "Open the library immediately!" Luna shouted at the unicorn guards at the front door, her voice ruffling the crest on their helmets.

The guards saluted--- and looked from Luna to Celestia, as if seeking permission. "Your highnesses, we have magically sealed the building for the night---"

"Your concern is appreciated, soldier, but time is of the essence," Celestia said. "Quickly, break the seals and open the door." The guards nodded and complied. Even from her perch Eiderdown could see Luna stifle a seethe at the subtle slight to her royal authority. The seam around the door flared, then went dark... along with the seam around every other door and window. "Stand guard here," Celestia ordered them. "And reseal the other doors and windows. Whoever entered may seek to flee behind us." With that, the Princesses galloped inside.

That was it; that was the narrow window of opportunity Eiderdown had been waiting for. The security wards on the windows and doors were all shut off. The moment they were out of earshot, Eiderdown hurriedly pulled a screwdriver out of her saddlebag and pried open the skylight next to her. She propped it open a few mere inches with a stick, just seconds before the guards reset the seal. When the wards went up, the already-open window didn't trigger the alarm. She breathed a sigh of relief, then resumed waiting.

Inside, the Princesses galloped to the center of the library... and skidded to a halt. The display cases were there, untouched. All the grimoires were inside. No sinister armored figure awaited them; no team of trained minions, no ghostly avatar or servant, nothing. All was as it should be.

The two circled the room warily, horns glowing as they searched for signs of their enemy. When after several minutes' search revealed nothing, Celestia let her horn wink out. "Sister, all is as it should be," she said. "Are you sure?"

"As certain as the sunset and the dawn," Luna said grimly, still scanning. A hint of levity crept into her voice. "Assuming thou hadst not been drinking the night before."

"Ha, ha, Luna," Celestia said dryly. "But seriously... are you truly certain you understood the symbolism of the dream?"

Luna rolled her eyes. "Tia, as I have told thee before-- it would take weeks of teaching you about dreamwalking and dream symbols for you to even understand the explanation," she said. "Trust me, I knew."

"Yet everything here is undisturbed... Perhaps that was Darth Vulcan's plan, but it has been interrupted," Celestia proposed. "I have received word that he was involved in one of the raids outside the city personally tonight--- and that he may have been injured. Perhaps grievously."

Eiderdown stifled a gasp.
"Mayhap," Luna said reluctantly. "But twill be prudent to keep a weather eye on this archive of tomes for a few days yet at least."

"True enough," Celestia admitted. "Let us leave and let them reseal the building, Luna. We've got our hooves more than full dealing with the calamities that wretch has already unleashed tonight."

With that the two of them trotted out of the building.

Eiderdown let out her breath. Darth Vulcan had been hurt? What did this mean for the rest of them....? She shook her head; now was not the time for that. She scanned the streets below, searching. She spotted Dodger, hiding in the shrubbery surrounded in a cloud of his own magical darkness. He was serving as her lookout from the street level. After a few minutes he waved the high sign at her. All clear. After a moment, the familiar buzz of the sealing spell was back. The only difference was now the building was magically locked with one skylight a few inches open. One of the tiny flaws in that kind of security.

Eiderdown let out another breath and opened her saddlebag. 'It's all you now, WolfTooth," she whispered. "Good luck." The tiny breezy saluted and dove down through the skylight.

Another flaw in the security was that it wouldn't react to anything smaller than a foal. Noone wanted to be roused from their sleep to go chasing spiders and moths... so the motion spell didn't even react to WolfTooth fluttering about.

Once he was inside, he flew to the grimoire display. The glass cases were arranged in a star-like pattern at the center of the room, directly under the single largest skylight. Rows of book-filled shelves clear to the ceiling could be seen going off in every direction, and beyond them, open wings of still more books. WolfTooth carefully hovered in the dead center over the display and pulled something out of his little breezie haversack.

It wasn't much to look at; just a tiny rectangular chip of plastic, not much bigger than a thumbnail. I had found it and a couple others in the bottom of my costume pockets one day while I was idly fishing around, seeing what I might have brought with me from my home dimension. And up until now, it had been effectively worthless. Thanks to magic, though, it was about to become the most priceless artifact in Equestria:

A single, brand spanking new 1 Terabyte SD chip.

I'd experimented with one of them, of course, so I knew this would work. But it was still pretty mind boggling to think about. I'd been told by Chrysalis that what I was about to have done was preposterous (her word); that the Royal Library of Canterlot contained over a million volumes.

I'd savored the look on her face when I told her that a one-terabyte chip... which I'd bought to use on my laptop at home... could hold up to four.

And the awesome thing about magic was that it didn't discriminate between different types of storage media. I'd pre-enchanted the chip, so all WolfTooth had to do was trigger it. He held the chip overhead and spoke one word three times.

"Transcribe."

A misty web of glowing lines shot out of the SD chip, linking to every book in the room, spreading onward down every hallway and cubby-corner, till the room was filled with misty, intangible gossamer threads. Beads of light—words, names, pictures—began racing down the threads, pouring into the seemingly bottomless chip with the literal speed of lightning.
This was the tricky part. While the jimmed skylight had let him past the seal on the doors and windows, and his size had let him slip past the motion sensing spell, there was no way to conceal this from the magic-detecting enchantments. Alarm bells sounded all over the library. Of course, by the time what few guards were there had even responded the transcribe spell was already done, but the doors and windows had been sealed-- again, this time with a spell that wouldn't be fooled by a two-inch gap. WolfTooth quickly found a potted plant and hid amongst the blooms.

Outside, the two guards were just unlocking the door when clods of magically propelled dirt hit both of them in the back of the helmet. "Hey!" they shouted. They spun around to find a gangly white colt in a bowler hat leaning against the fence, smirking at them cheekily.

"Ello, lads," he said. "Wot's the word?"

"Halt! Stand your ground, colt!" They brandished spears at him. "Who are you?"

Dodger actually looked annoyed. "Oo am I? I'm Artful Dodger, you gilded knob polishers, right-hoof stallion to his Nibs, the Dark Lord Darth Vulcan." He sneered. "An two bits says you fillies can't lay a hoof on me."

The guards glared. "Halt! You're under arrest for treason to the crown!"

"Treason to the crown? Which you mean, the fat cake-arse who's been sittin' on 'er duff for a thousand years, or her moon-arsed bitch of a sister who finks nuffin' of usin' black magic to poke around in ponies' heads?" Dodger's sneer practically dripped. "You an' them both can go get bent--iffen you aren't already."

The guards growled and charged. Dodger ran off down the street and ducked down an alleyway. The guards followed in hot pursuit, leaving the unlocked door behind them.

The library was lit up like day inside, and the few guards that had been ordered to stay were prowling the shelves with spears and magic at the ready. Eiderdown panted with relief when she heard the seal-spell fizz out. She whistled like a nightjar. WolfTooth heard the all clear and flew like an arrow for the skylight; not a soul saw him. The moment he was clear of the skylight Eiderdown stuffed the plucky little tooth breezy into her saddlebag and flew off, silent as the night on her cotton-soft wings.

In one fell swoop, they had literally stolen the entire Royal Library of Canterlot, and not so much as creased a single page.

They rejoined Dodger trotting down a side street, his periwinkle disguise restored. She alighted and trotted along next to him, both of them trying to look casual despite their hearts racing. That was it, just two ponies out for a night stroll... "The guards?"

"Left 'em down a back alley, chasing their own shadows," Dodger said, letting a puff of nightmare smoke drift off his horn. "Anyone spot you or 'Tooth?" at Eiderdown's shaken head Dodger grinned. "Bee's knees. Let's get back to our little rent room, rest up a bit, then catch the next train to Ponyville."

"A nap sounds good," Eiderdown said. She leaned against Dodger wearily, the adrenaline crash catching up to her. It would be while yet before they got back to the lair, and learned if everything they had stolen had been worth the cost...
I woke up lying on my bed, staring at the stone ceiling of my private chambers. I could hear people shouting at one another; Mange and Skank yelping and barking, Chrysalis screaming at them, boy she was seriously upset, Black Fang saying something, trying to calm them down by the sound of his voice... Someone, a unicorn going by the horn, was looming over me, silhouetted by the light, wielding a pair of tweezers. The tweezers dipped toward my face.

I immediately became aware of how badly my face hurt. I howled and arched my back as the burning pain covering my face all focused in on one point where the points of the tweezers were digging into my cheek. I would have taken their head off if my hands hadn't been tied to the bed. Immediately hands, hooves, paws were on me, pressing me back down to the mattress. "Hold still, Ted!" Chrysalis shouted in my ear. "It's the doctor, he's trying to help!"

"Hold on, I've got something for the pain," I heard Sawbones say, and something sharp pierced my arm. It took a minute but the tooth-grinding pain peppering my face got fuzzy and distant. Of course, everything else sort of got fuzzy and distant too... "what, no magic?" I mumbled.

"If I knew more about what that sort of magic does to you," Sawbones grunted. "From what I've heard, it can get a bit dicey around you and that amulet." His tweezers went back to work, plucking things out of my face. "It's probably why he got injured in the first place."

It could? I thought about it. Discord came to mind. My magic and his fizzled each other out somehow. Luna had trouble dreamwalking with me-- at least after the first attempt, anyway. And of course the Elements of Harmony had failed against me, big time.

"What does that 'ave to do wif him gettin' blasted in the mug??" I heard Dodger say.

"I've heard of that pink pony and her 'party cannon,' " Sawbones said. "Something like that can only work with Earthpony Strange Magic. Don't look so surprised, you all-- I'm a pony doctor. We have to know at least a little something about all the kinds of pony magic out there."

"Earth pony what what now?"

"Strange Magic," Chrysalis said testily. She sounded as sharp and snappy as ever, but her hand on my shoulder was surprisingly gentle. "Most people don't know it, but Earth Ponies don't just have magic with earth and growing things. They all have a touch of what the scholars call 'Strange Magic'--- a sort of wild magic. Everything from unlikely dice rolls, to giant mallets popping out from behind their backs, to machinery and gadgets that shouldn't possibly work, but do anyway. The pink one's party cannon was almost certainly one of those. She's a powerful Earthpony mage... probably the match of Twilight Sparkle herself, considering she's one of the Elements."

"But with Darth Vulcan's magic aura attacking, clashing with hers..."

"Her party cannon stopped working like a party cannon, and started working like a real cannon," Dodger said. I could almost hear the cringe in his voice.

"Thanks, Chrysalis, important safety tip for the future there," I mumbled. I kept talking, saying
"anything I could think of to distract myself from the feel of tweezers plucking at my face. "Those trains aren't earth pony made, are they? Not likely to explode on us if I get too close, or anything?"

"Doubtful," Chrysalis said drolly. "Unless you do something stupid to the boiler. They're trains, they're supposed to be trains, and they're built to work like trains--- not like high-velocity party dispensers. If there's any Strange Magic in their workings, the most that will happen is that they'll work a little less efficiently for us than for an earth pony."

"Again, good stuff to know." At this point I couldn't feel anything. Not my face... or my fingers, toes, butt.... "How bad is it, Doc?" I muttered.

"Bad enough," he muttered. "Your face got peppered, frankly. You didn't lose your lips or ears or anything, but there will be scarring. Nothing particularly gruesome but... it will be there." He plucked at my face with the tweezers one last time and set them aside. With a grunt he magically levitated me into a sitting position, cushions behind my back, and began the process of bandaging my face. I could see everyone now-- Mange, Runk, and Skank, standing there looking anxious and mournful; Pumpkin Patch, looking intimidated by the ponies around her but trying her best to fake it; Black Fang, standing by the door and looking enigmatic and sinister; Artful Dodger on one side of the bed, Chrysalis on the other, her face a careful mask but her eyes full of an emotion I wasn't quite sure of.

I could also see the tools Sawbones had been using on me on a tray. They were spattered with my blood. I shuddered and looked away. "Why'd you do this in my room? We built you that clinic..." It had to be more sanitary than my personal Man Cave.

"It didn't seem a good idea to let the underlings seeing you weak and wounded," Black Fang said. I wanted to protest that it wouldn't do them to see me later with an infection eating my face, but decided to let it go. "Point," I grunted. I sat up and threw my legs over the side of the bed, despite Sawbones' cranky complaints. My head swam; I felt wrung out like a rag. My face felt stiff. I traced my fingers over the mask of bandages; every inch of skin down to my neck and back to my ears was covered. I gathered my wits for a second, trying to thing what was next... oh right. "Report," I said. "The raid?"

Dodger had been standing there fidgeting, looking unsettled. Eiderdown was next to him... they never seemed to be apart anymore; my that progressed quickly. At my words he went from nervous to an air of confidence. "Smoov as buttered silk," he said. "We--"


The changeling captain smiled thinly. "The gold heist went flawlessly," he said. "No fatalities, only minor injuries for them or us. We dumped the majority of the gold into the river, and then flew off with a few token bars. A simple illusion made us look like an entire swarm flying off with the haul. It was a simple matter to lose our pursuers after a few miles, circle back and retrieve the gold from the river mud. You now have enough gold bars to build yourself a new throne."

"And a living room suite," Dodger added. "And a gold-brick swimming pool...."

"We did however end up with an unexpected addendum... We were only supposed to tip the boats to capsize the gold into the water... but one actually took on water and sank. It is now waiting at the river bottom for your retrieval."

"Great, always wanted a river barge," I mumbled sarcastically. I looked over at Pumpkin Patch. "And Boss Hoss?"
"Busy congratulating himself that he's alive, and that his pants are washable," she said. Dodger snorted back a laugh. "We got all but the last three cars, counting the caboose, without so much as a scratch on 'em. Flim and Flam are happy as clams; there's enough bulk everything in that load to last them from now to the end of the project. Plus a few extra boxcars of stuff that Boss Hoss was hauling for somepony else to make a little extra cash on the side. Dry goods, stationery, stuff like that."

I nodded. "Good. Very good. Have them make an inventory of all that-- oh, good," I said as she stuffed a list in my hands. I felt my mood brighten considerably when I read down the list. "And our team?" I looked at Skank.

Skank scratched his head and rolled his eyes. "We not get mirror. We gots train... um, engine and three cars--- if you count one you blowed up."

"Though that wasn't a bad steal, all told," Chrysalis said. "Flim and Flam were drooling over the Manehattan freight train, but the engine of the Crystal Express has them in spasms. They've been alternating between hopping up and down in glee and chasing off the Diamond Dogs who keep trying to steal the shinier bits."

I looked down at my hand suddenly. It was bandaged. "The shard," I said. "Where's the shard?"

Chrysalis looked puzzled. "You didn't throw it away--"

"That broken piece of mirror you were holding? No no, it's right there," Sawbones said, pointing at the night table next to me. "You were clutching it in a death grip, we figured it had to be important for some reason." I looked; there was a flat, irregular slab of something, about the size of my hand, wrapped in cloth. I picked it up and unwrapped it hastily; crystal-bright mirror surface gleamed. I sighed in relief.

"What good is that?" Chrysalis said disdainfully. "The mirror is shattered, along with the spell linking it to another world."

"Yeah, but the magic isn't," I said. I regarded my bandaged face in it for a moment. I looked like a cross between a bloodied prize fighter and a mummy. How badly was I messed up under those bandages? I wondered. I pushed the fears down. It wasn't like I was handsome before, I told myself. And if it's bad enough-- I was sure that it could be patched up with the right spell. I hoped so, at least.

"I'll get to this later. For now..." I wrapped the glass shard back up and started to stick it in my shirt pocket, only to realize I was stripped to my underwear. "Get my armor," I said. "And my helmet--- " I recalled my helmet was probably smashed all over the railroad tracks someplace between here and Canterlot. "---my SPARE helmet. I'll worry about a sword later."

"Not a good idea," Sawbones protested. "You're doped up and you lost a good bit of blood..."

"I have to make an appearance," I said. Dodger set to fetching my gear and helping me put it on. My drug-numbed fingers fumbled a bit, but my control was getting better. "And now the grand finale'. Dodger?"

Dodger grinned and lifted his hat. WolfTooth flew out from underneath and hovered before me, holding the SD chip in front of him. I carefully plucked it from his tiny hooves with thumb and forefinger. "It went well?"

"Without a hitch," Dodger said, beaming. His grin faded a little. "I... did she really? Use me like that?" He rubbed at the back of his neck. I could see a little bald patch and a bandage where the rune
tattoo had been. I just nodded. He shuddered all over. "Stupid nag," he said under his breath. "If I wasn't an enemy o' the state before, I sure as heck am now."

I put the SD chip into my belt pouch next to the glass. "If she'd been smart she would've just bribed you," I said. "I guess she was afraid the evil Dark Overlord would read your mind or something." Dodger snorted at the tone of my voice. I looked at Chrysalis. "You saw the rune. Did you copy it down like I asked?"

She nodded. "Though I don't see why," she said.

"I'll explain later," I said. I lowered my helmet over my head and clamped the faceplate down, covering my bandaged face. "First, let's go address the unwashed masses." I got to my feet, wobbled, steadied myself, and gathered my cloak around me.

We were back in the main lair. The minions were all gathered in the main chamber, waiting uneasily for news. More than a few had seen me dragged in, unconscious and bloody-faced, and anxious rumors were starting to get around. I could hear them murmuring even before I stepped into the room. But when I did, the whole chamber fell silent. My bandaged face was hidden behind my iron helmet, and if I walked slowly it was gravitas, not injury. Absolutely. But I was running out of steam fast, so I kept it short.

I climbed up the dais to my throne, faced the crowd, and amplified my voice till it rang off the walls.

"MY PEOPLE!" I shouted. I lifted one of the gold bars from the loot over my head in my two hands.

"VICTORY!"

The room roared.

"But what did he DO?" Twilight fretted for the thirtieth time.

Celestia, Luna and Twilight were in the Royal Library, overseeing matters as guards and mages tried to figure out what, exactly, had happened the night before. Twilight Sparkle in particular was in a dither. She heard that Darth Vulcan had attacked the library and had gone into hysterics. She'd nearly needed medical intervention, she'd hyperventilated so badly. The moment they'd arrived at the library she'd started going over them in a panic like a mother over a toddler that had taken a tumble.

It had only made what they had found all the more baffling: nothing. None of the books were missing, none were damaged, none had been magically jinxed or cursed or boobytrapped (except for some of the Dark grimoires on display but they had been that way already), none had (as Twilight had suddenly, frantically feared) been magically erased, leaving nothing but a library full of blank pages... Luna had actually caught her cradling one of the tomes in her hooves, cuddling it in relief. There would be much teasing later on about that.

Still, it was... disgruntling. Even Celestia's feathers were ruffled. It was bad enough that Darth Vulcan hadn't taken the bait. His avarice for books, especially magic tomes, had dictated his every move since his arrival. His first misdeed had been to loot the Ponyville library. He should have gone after a display of rare grimoires like Pinkie Pie after a tray of cupcakes.
Instead he had gone after... well, at first it had seemed like he'd gone after everything BUT the
grimoires. One of the treasury's gold shipments, the magic mirror on its return trip to Canterlot, a
random freight train... And little of it made sense. The gold shipment she could understand, even if it
seemed a bit greedy. He had a dragon's hoard after all; he couldn't be going broke this soon. She'd
inquired with the dragon kingdoms about Big Boss, and his hoard was rumored to be measured in
hundreds of tons--- Darth Vulcan would have to be the Emperor of wastrels to have spent it all this
quickly. Still, gold was gold. But the freight train was full of bulk goods and construction materials.
And the mirror-- it led to a parallel world with creatures similar to him, perhaps he might have
thought of trying to return to his own world through it... or of conquering the world on the other
side... but then why had he smashed it?

And then he HAD seemingly gone after the grimoires, after all. The alarms had gone off not ten
minutes after Celestia and Luna had left. They had rushed back to learn that Darth Vulcan's
loathsome toady had put in an appearance--- only for them to be left utterly baffled, trying to figure
out what the traitor to Equestria had actually done. Their bafflement had only doubled when they
learned that his master had been somewhere else entirely, and had been grievously injured in the
course of his misdeeds...

Thinking of that unpleasant incident... Celestia looked at Twilight, who was suspiciously scrutinizing
the shelves around her. "How is Pinkie Pie doing?"

"Indeed, how fares she?" Luna said, frowning. "What happened with Darth Vulcan had to be... most
terrible for her."

Twilight was actually distracted from her precious books for a moment. "Not good," she said,
shaking her head. "Zecora had a potion that fixed up her teeth on the spot, and other than a bruised
tail she's fine... but it isn't her injuries that are bothering her." She cast her eyes down. "I don't think
she's smiled once since what happened. Believe me, she'd never willingly harm a living soul--"

"Indeed," Luna said sympathetically. "To have the earth pony magic on her cannon of festivals fail
in such a ghastly manner must have been... shattering." Luna looked almost as distraught as Pinkie
had been. The pink one had always gone out of her way to lift the night princess out of her gloomier
moods. "I will make a point of watching over her dreams in particular these next few nights, to keep
them sweet."

"Thank you, Luna," Twilight said sincerely.

A unicorn guard came trotting up to them. "Your highnesses," he said. "We've checked most of the
books in this chamber and are moving out into the wings. Do you have any orders?"

"None yet," Celestia said. "Continue as you are. Have you found anything at all?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary. At least nothing we can detect," he replied ruefully.

"What of you, Twilight?" Celestia asked.

Twilight shook her head. "Nothing, not so much as a creased page or a cracked cover," she said. She
hefted the book she was examining in her magic. "Not even a hint of magic, except for a few traces
of an old transcribing spell. But you get those on library volumes all the time." She set the book
down and picked up the next. "Hmm. And on this one too. Must be a popular section...and this one
too?" She swept her horn lightly over the row. "All of these have been transcribed rather recently."

Celestia frowned. With a feeling of dread she let her magic sweep down the nearest aisle. Her eyes
went wide. "And so has every volume on this aisle!"
Luna turned and trotted to the display of grimoires. Her magic swept delicately over the volumes, careful not to trigger any of the various lingering Dark spells on some of them. "And so have all the Grimoires," she said. The sentence was so portentous that it should have had an accompanying lightning strike outside.

"That clever bastard," Celestia swore. They had all missed it. Libraries used transcription spells all the time, from students copying (or plagiarizing) notes for their studies to archivists making replacements for worn-out copies. It was as much a part of the background in a library as the smell of ink and paper. But a second look revealed that every book in the collection had been copied at the same time. "Check the stacks," she said to the unicorn guard. "Tell them to check for when they were last hit with a copying spell. We have to know what he went after." He nodded and galloped off, barking the order. The three princesses started scanning the shelves as well.

In moments voices began calling from every corner of the building. Then still more. Celestia, Luna and Twilight finished screening the room they were in and stood aghast. "All of them?" Twilight said, speaking what they were all thinking and not believing. "He transcribed every book in the library?"

"And of course the tomes on display," Luna said grimly. "Our foe is cunning beyond belief. The transcription spell was made centuries after these volumes were written: it would have bypassed all the curses and protective hexes the sages put on their volumes, and given him a clean, un-hexed copy to read at his leisure."

"But HOW?" Twilight protested, her mane popping strands loose. "He's copied everything! The Starswirl wing, the restricted section, the fiction volumes--- even the trashy paperback novel rack! It would take a warehouse full of paper to copy it all!"

"And bathtubs full of ink," Luna agreed. "And yet, he has done it."

"But how?" Twilight yelled. "HOW?"

I stepped into the new chamber, leaning discreetly against Chrysalis. The drugs and the stress were taking a lot out of me, but I couldn't stop to be weak just yet.

The chamber was the size of a train station. Technically, that was what it was, what with two trains inside it. Minotaurs, ponies, and diamond dogs were teeming like ants, unloading the cargo and either stacking it on the other side of the enormous room or scurrying off with it to storerooms scattered around the complex. Heart Root was there along with his diamond dog diggers, all piled around one of the Flim Flam's idle tunneling machines and looking particularly exhausted. "Hope you're satisfied," he grunted wearily when he saw me. "We was up all night diggin' this out. Even with the tunnelers it was a job and a half."

"Is this all of it?" I said, eyeing the growing stacks of stuff.

"Nah," Heart Root said, pointing to a nearby doorway. "New storeroom through there. Them two carny ponies saw what was in a couple them cars, figgered you'd want what was in 'em stashed separate." I nodded and made my way to the door.

I came to a halt just inside the doorway. It was a room as big as the one before, and despite how it hurt my cut lips, I smiled when I saw what was waiting for me in it. Boss Hoss had apparently been
hauling a shipment of stationery for someone...

"Books?" Chrysalis said, puzzled.

"Journals. Blank writer's journals," I said. "Four boxcars full. Eight by ten, hardback, two hundred pages. And half a flatbed of ink in fifty-gallon drums." I walked past the rows of pallets and drums and contemplated the room, the pallet, the general dimensions... "hmm, okay, should be enough room in here-- ceilings are nearly 10 feet high... " It might get tricky, I decided; I was going to have to do a construction spell on the fly while the other spell ran, and I'd have to summon more wood and nails from the piles of cargo--- but I thought I could do it.

"Okay, let's do this," I said. I reached into my belt pouch and pulled out the chip; I readied another spell in my spare hand.

"Transcribe."

Magic began flowing through the air. The valve on the first drum opened and ink began flowing through the air as well. Lines were etched on pages, drying instantly; In mere minutes the first pallet of books had been printed out. I stacked them neatly in one corner and continued. The moment the pallet was emptied it was magically ripped apart and reassembled as crude shelving in the back of the room, and books flew to stack themselves neatly on the rough boards. More boards and tubs of nails (accompanied by yelps of surprise) began floating in from the next room in a steady stream; clattering boards and jingling nails assembled themselves into still more shelves as self-writing books stacked themselves neatly in place.

I could have never done this on my own back then; it was far too many things for one mind to keep track of at once, and I lacked the skill to make such carefully constructed spells on my own. But the Alicorn Amulet did most of the heavy lifting there, automatically tracking and assembling paper, ink, boards and nails for me as smoothly and methodically as a computerized assembly line.

As for those with me, they could only gape in awe as I literally recreated the largest library in Equestria from scratch with a wave of my hand. Tremble in awe of the Great and Powerful Darth Vulcan, suckers.

It took nearly half an hour. The last shelf was crudely nailed together, the last book inked and stuck on its shelf. I used the last few boards to build a chair, dispelled the magic, and slumped down into my seat. "Done," I croaked.

Artful Dodger, Chrysalis, and the others stared in awe at the shelves of shiny new volumes. "I don' believe it," Dodger breathed. "I mean, I saw the spell at the library, an' I just saw this--- but I still don' believe it!"

"This is incredible," Chrysalis said. She broke into a cackle. "You did it. You literally stole Princess Celestia's entire royal library--"

I had a flashback to those moronic "anti-piracy" ads that the greed-sucking RIAA had come up with a couple years back. 'You wouldn't download a car, would you?' What are you, a moron? Of course I would. Don't piss on my leg and tell me it's raining; I knew the difference between copying something and stealing it for real. I chuckled out loud. "Copied, not stolen," I said. "But they can't be too happy I have it anyway." I got to my feet and regarded my work. "I have every book of magic and more, even those 'forbidden' grimoires she put on display," I made a sweeping gesture. "All of Equestria's knowledge--- magical, scientific, historical, whatever--- right at my fingertips!"

Dodger got an odd look. "Uhhh, yeah," he said, poking at one shelf with a hoof. "But, umm, yer
Darkship, if you don't mind me askin'...." He hesitated.

I looked at him, annoyed. "What?"

He waved his hoof at the shelves. "How are you gonna find anything?"

I looked up at my countless thousands of books. My countless thousands of brand new, black-bound, unlabeled, perfectly identical books.

"Well, SH---"
You can imagine how relieved I was to find the title page and the Dewey Decimal information was written on the inside. I put several literate minions to work putting the titles and numbers on the OUTside of the covers, and left for the day.

Despite that little snag I was really pleased with the results. The grimoires from the exhibit were easy to find: the transcription spell worked on "first in, first out," and since they had been the nearest books to Wolftooth when he'd triggered the spell, they were all together on the very first shelf. Books that were longer than 200 pages carried on over to the next journal; it made for many volumes with several blank pages at the end, but what the heck, that made room for notes. Pictures and images were copied as well, shrunk to one-page size--- but only to a size that was still legible, otherwise it divided the image between pages. Font size, kerning, page numbering, indicators when the book carried on to the next journal... It was a very sophisticated spell. Heck, it was practically Adobe Acrobat in magic form.

I kept the chip, and used the spell to copy it to one or two of the others. Always have backups.

Meanwhile.... It was sunset, and I decided to take a nap. There was a door someone had opened, and they needed it slammed in their face.

"Considering how you refuse to bed me, this is awfully intimate a request," Chrysalis snarked next to me in bed.

"Oh quit wisecracking and finish already," I said. "You can do it, can't you?"

"What do you take me for?" Chrysalis said. "I have centuries' worth of experience at this sort of thing." She brandished the magic marker and sealed the cap with a snap.

I was lying face down in my luxurious bed, stripped to the waist. Chrysalis was seated next to me. She had just finished drawing a copy of the rune pattern on me that had been on Artful Dodger's neck. It was a lot larger than the one he'd had; it trailed down my neck and between my shoulder blades. But since we weren't concerned with concealing it, it hardly mattered. Plus, drawing it larger had made it much easier to put in the little changes and additions that branched and swirled off over my shoulders.

I rolled over on my back, picking up the bottle of pain pills I'd dug out of my pockets and a glass of water. "Well," I said. "Moon is up. Nighty Night..." I popped two tablets and washed them down. The throbbing in my face faded to nothing, but that wasn't what the pain pills were for. I had an unscheduled meeting and I didn't want it interrupted.

My eyes closed. Almost instantly I found myself drifting through a funhouse rendition of my home town, the streets rising and falling like waves around me, people with blurred faces walking past on either side. I tried to focus on them but the more I focused, the further they drifted away. I focused my will as best I could, pushing and half-running, half-swimming through the landscape, pushing for it to become what I wanted.
Soon I was standing alone in the middle of an open field, nowhere to run, the horizon bent around me like a fishbowl lens. It didn't take long after that. A portal opened in the air in front of me, swinging open like a gate, and Luna floated through. The instant the tip of her tail was past the threshold it slammed shut, with an iron clang loud enough to make her jump. "Hello, Luna," I said. "Having a nice night?" 

She wheeled around, gawping in surprise. "You!" She lowered her horn and pawed the fuschia grass with a hoof. "How are you here? I should have known you would be versed in forbidden dream-magic--"

"Oh me? NEVER," I sneered. "After all, violating other people's minds is for Princesses only." I moulded a copy of my old staff out of dreamstuff and leaned on it.

She actually reacted to that jab. "The dream realm is my domain, and my duty," she said. "I patrol these dreams protecting my ponies from nightmares, from dream creatures that would prey on them-- and from lawless vandals and invaders such as you." Ah, that made sense. If she could dreamwalk, other unicorns could probably manage it too, and there was probably more than one dreamwalker out there who wasn't exactly an upright moral law-abiding pony to begin with. She probably saw herself as the local sheriff, keeping the streets of Dodge safe from people like me.

"Even a cop walking the beat doesn't get the right to break into people's houses without a warrant," I said. I walked in a slow circle around her. She turned in place, keeping her horn leveled at me. "But like I said-- I guess your laws are just for OTHER people." I sat down on a park bench.

"A princess must needs do what is necessary," she said smoothly, her voice cold as an ice sculpture. "I would never do what I did, save your presence made it so. It was the only way I could devise to place a spy in your midst without imperiling his life. So long as he was unknowing, he would be safe from your Changeling minions' gift for sniffing out fear and guilt."

"And did you think about what would happen if I figured it out anyway?" I snapped, feeling my blood pressure rise. "You dumb cluck, Even a toddler could figure out he had a spy in the ranks-- and who it was-- when every mission I told your double agent about was thwarted out of the blue by you."

She stifled a groan as she realized her mistake.

"Well, I found the spy, I found your little back door into his head. And I'm here to let you know that little gate is permanently and officially closed. And if you even TRY to find a way into any of our heads, I'll make you regret it."

She snorted in anger and swelled to double her size. "You would dare try to threaten the Princess of Dreams in her own domain??"

I got to my feet and walked up to her, sticking my helmeted face right in hers. "That's not a threat, Princess Flunky, that's a promise," I said. I held up a gift wrapped box.

She looked at it, baffled. "What mummery is this?"

"A warning. And a little taste of what you'll get if you cross the line into our heads again." I wiggled the box at her, indicating she should take it. She hesitated for a second, then with a snort of defiance she took it in her magic and ripped the wrapping off.
She popped open the lid, looked inside and screamed in horror. She dropped the box and stamped on it, rubbing her eyes with her wings. "Odd gods, what was THAT??" she wailed.

"A little thing from my world called a meme. This one was known as 'Goatse.cx,'" I said. "And that was the MILDEST thing I had floating around in the back of my brain. I've planted little gift-wrapped memories like that all over the place, inside Artful Dodger's head, little landmines of horrible just WAITING for you to trip them." Her jaw dropped in disbelief. "Oh they're wrapped up nice and tight. They won't even bother Dodger, and they certainly don't bother me--- but he knows where they are, and even how to set them off right in your face if he has to. There are things I've seen that would give Lovecraft the dry heaves, so I don't suggest you go trespassing where you're not wanted ever again."

"Augh. You have won this round, villain--" she turned and made a motion with her hoof, as if she were trying to push open a door. Nothing happened. The sky above turned red. "What is this? How are you holding me here inside his dream?"

"Mistake number two, sister," I said. "We're not in Dodger's head anymore. We're in MINE." The sky turned red, and began to bleed. "And I locked all the exits."

She spun and faced me, terror just starting to show in her eyes. "It avails you nothing, villain," she said. "I have but to wake you--"

"BEEP, wrong answer number three," I said. "See, right before I went to bed, I took a couple of Oxycontin. I'm not waking up for at least six more hours." My helmet melted and ran like dribbling wax, revealing my bloody, bandaged face underneath. "Oh, and funny thing; I don't take oxycontin anymore because it always gives me rip-snorting acid trip nightmares. It's just your bad luck I had a couple of leftover pills in my pocket from my last prescription." The ground turned black and the trees began lashing in epileptic seizures. "Of course I've been on this roller coaster before... but I bet YOU haven't. Hope you enjoy the ride, sister."

Red, flayed-looking tentacles sprouted from the ground, lashing her hooves to the ground and pinning her in place. all around her the memes I'd warned her about began going off, swelling up out of the ground and in midair like pus-filled blisters before bursting and spraying her with their awful images. She screamed in horror and thrashed like a madmare.

I wasn't having much more fun. My costume had burned away in bilious green dragonfire, exposing my leprous, hole-filled flesh. The screaming of the trees filled my ears. But I wasn't about to let her see it, not for a second. I dropped to a cross-legged sitting position and focused with all my might on my breathing, working hard to maintain a tiny bubble of lucid dreaming around me.

I hated Oxycontin. I was going to wake up feeling stressed out, unrested and exhausted. But Luna was going to wake up feeling like Satan himself had crapped directly into her brain.

---

It was a shattered Luna who woke at noon the next day. Despite her screaming in her sleep awaking half the castle, nopony had been able to awaken her till dawn. Several minutes of hysterical babbling had gotten an explanation out to her frantic sister, then sobbing, the princess of the night had fallen right back into an exhausted sleep. She awoke now to find Celestia sitting at her bedside, watching
over her.

When she saw Luna was awake, the creases of worry smoothed from Celestia's face. "Thank heaven, Luna," she said. "Are you all right? What in heaven's name happened?"

Luna groaned, rubbing her bloodshot eyes. "Oh sister," she moaned. "The vile churl was lying in wait for me in the dream realm. He has booby-trapped his own mind, and the mind of the agent I had planted."

"You can no longer reach the colt's dreams?" Celestia said.

Luna glared. "That path is closed to us, sister," she said. "Permanently." She shuddered and gagged. "The horrors and grotesqueries I witnessed..."

"Oh, Luna, you poor thing," Celestia said, heart wrung with sympathy. "I had a feeling you'd want some comfort food..." she turned around and took a bowl off the breakfast tray. "Here you go, dear," she said with a smile. "Your favorite-- chocolate ice cream!" She took a spoonful and ate it. "Mmmmmm...."

Luna stared at the cup of ice cream and let out a strangled whimper. The next instant she vanished, a midnight blur that slammed the bathroom door before the coverlet had even fallen to the floor. Celestia sat there, spoon and ice cream hovering in midair, befuddled. "Luna, what..."

"BLEEEEEARRRRRGGH," said the bathroom door.

"My word! Luna?"

Four choked words came out. "Two... girls... one... cup--- O'ROURKE!!"

"What on earth does that..."

"BUiiick!!"

"Good Heavens--!"

"ONAMOTAPEIEA!!!"

"Oh what could possibly..."

"ALOHA 'OE ALOHA 'OE E KE ONONAHA NOHO I KA LIPO !!!!!!"
The next morning I had Dodger and Chrysalis help me scrub the magic marker off my back with rubbing alcohol. That was one threat dealt with... two bazillion to go. Yes, I did "plant" those memories in Artful Dodger's brain. I also showed him a few of the images I was planting, so he knew what sort of booby-traps I was placing in his head. He took one look at goatse.cx and laughed his plot off. What kind of people am I working with?

Anyway, the next week or so was kind of quiet. Metaphorically. Flim and Flam were hard at work, and the work was growing as a web of tunnels spread out beneath us. All day and night you could hear drilling, digging, tunneling, and the clanging of hammers on stone and metal deep down below...

I kept myself busy studying up. Among other things studying those magical doodads I'd pilfered all those months ago--- floaty rock, chaos-in-a-bottle, the cloudwalking potion, and Shard-O-Magic-Mirror. That last one I had some VERY particular ideas about.

I'd already made some interesting discoveries about the rock. I'd cracked it open, and found out that it was actually a sort of geode. The "floatiness" came from the core of glowing blue crystals inside that my books said was something called "loftite." Turned out to be the main ingredient in the cloudwalking potion as well.... tiny tiny traces dissolved in mineral water (literally mineral in this case) and doped up with unicorn magic. Those loftite crystals had become the core of my next big plan.... which was going to have to wait several more months, till construction was finished.

So at the moment, I was obsessing over the mirror shard. I had my librarians (who were still sticking labels on all the books in my Library of Awesome) set aside any books they found having to do with magic mirrors and alternate worlds. After a few moments' thought I'd added glassmaking to that list.

Research was proving... well, just like what it was when I was in chemistry class back in school: boring and annoying. I'd only joined that class to see if I could learn how to make stuff out of the anarchist's cookbook, only to find out it largely consisted of incomprehensible gibberish and "math" that consisted of multiplying the square root of French grammar by half a carrot. That and staring at droplets of liquid in a bunsen burner flame and trying to pretend you saw the different colors or could tell the difference in smells between one evaporating drop of water and another.

Yeah, I wasn't exactly Marie Curie, you know? With or without boobs.

Of course, science in Equestria turned out to be a lot more-- um, action generating than the stuff in Chem 101. I mean, MAGIC everywhere. And in everything. Equestria was a world where you could be doing an experiment with dandelions and colored water out of "Fun Science for Tots" and something in the water could turn the dandelions into eight foot tall vegetable monsters with lion faces and bad attitudes to match. That or make them sprout feet and arms and start dancing the Macarena.

I swear I'm gonna kill whoever put Poison Joke sap in the water if I ever catch them.

Still for the most part my experiments with the mirror were fairly quiet; hours of grinding up bits of glass, various crystals with magic properties, melting them to droplets an open flame and observing
the result. Experiments with hand mirrors soon followed. Later on, still more hours were spent commissioning large panes of glass from the workshops... and if you think it's easy making smooth, perfectly flat glass panes the size of your front door, you've got another think coming. Half the time was wasted sweeping up and re-melting the remains of something that hadn't even made it out the workroom door.

By the final phase, I was standing over the glassmaker, carefully adding measured ingredients as he poured the molten glass out on a flat bed of sand. But the results were STILL not good. The glass wasn't doing what I wanted it to... or much of anything, except lying there looking vaguely magical.

Finally I bit the bullet, smashed the last shard to splinters, ground several chunks of it to powder and added a single drop of Liquid Chaos to the mix. That did it.

Soon I had my followers gathered in the throne room, gazing in puzzlement at the tall, drape-covered frame standing in front of them. Chrysalis and Dodger looked wearily patient. The rest looked nonplussed. I stood in front and addressed them.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," I began. "Some time ago, after we began our little enterprise, we found ourselves running into something of a minor snag. It seemed that their Royal Highnesses did not approve of our traipsing about Equestria at our will. Can't imagine why." Some grunted, others chuckled. "Well, after long research, I have secured our freedom of movement once more. Behold." I pulled the drapes off, revealing two enormous full-length mirrors.

Everyone stared at their reflection. Ironhide raised a hand. "Yes?" I said.

"What, exactly...." he hesitated. "Are you saying--- did you-- make new magic mirror?"

"That is exactly what I'm saying," I confirmed.

A unicorn in the back spoke up. "How?" he said disbelieving. "Even Celestia and Luna didn't know for sure how the magic mirror they had worked. And everything I ever heard in magic kindergarten said they couldn't be made anymore!" Sounds of agreement and suspicion rose up. "nopony can make portals anymore," someone said.

"That's true," Chrysalis said, waving a hand in negation. "Noone can. Unicorns and other magic creatures have been trying for centuries. But the results were almost always bad. Their notes said they had no way of controlling when the mirror opened up, or where. Sometimes they open twice a day, sometimes twice a century. Sometimes they opened up underground, inside solid rock. Or at the bottom of the ocean. Or out in airless space.

"And those that tried to open them to other worlds-- well, even when they worked they merely opened up into the Void between the universes. That never went well. And many of them were a one-way trip... you could step through, but you couldn't step BACK. Or worse, you had mirrors that let things from the other side come THROUGH, but you couldn't send them back the way they came. That's supposed to be how Tartarus ended up with many of its more famous tenants..."

I tapped one mirror. "But I have found a way to turn those problems into advantages. In a moment you will see."

"What are we waiting for?" Pumpkin Patch said.

The mirrors had been set into ornate, lacquered wooden frames with a bas-relief crescent Moon at the top. At that moment, the moon at the top of the mirrors began to glow with a blue-white light. Hurray, perfect timing. "For Moonrise," I said. The reflection of the room disappeared from the
mirror and was replaced by an alien landscape; a barren, star-lit desert that glowed with a faint blue-white light. In the distance was another mirror exactly like this one. A blue-green, cloud-covered marble could be seen hanging in the sky.

"Where is that?" someone exclaimed.

"The surface of the Moon," I said casually. You should have heard the eruption of noise at that. I finally had to bang my new walking staff on the floor for silence. "It was actually easy enough to open a doorway to the Moon's surface," I went on. "After all, the Moon is tied to this world many ways, magically. Luna controls it from Canterlot. The Elements banished her there. There's something of a beaten path up there and back." A few chuckled. "A touch of moondust added to the glass, and the mirrors are harmonized to the Moon. They open when it rises, and close when it sets. I've been there myself." (And went crazy bonkers for an hour like a little kid. Jumping around the Moon going "Wheee!" and "Bite me Neil Armstrong!" But I wasn't telling any of THEM that.) "Fortunately, while there is little else there, there is plenty of air..." (which I confirmed by the simple expedient of opening the mirror the very first time and NOT being sucked out into the cold void of space...)

"I don't see how that helps us any," Charcoal griped. "Great, so we can visit Nightmare Moon's prison any time we want. What's the point?"

"An easy answer," I said. "I bet Artful Dodger here can figure it out." For his part Artful Dodger looked really doubtful of that. "Come on, Dodger, think about it. Here's a clue. One mirror will get you there and back..." I pointed at the mirror on the left, which had an arrow carved into its frame pointing up at the crescent Moon at the top. "So what's the other one for?" The other mirror had an identical arrow, except it was pointing down.

You could see the lightbulb go on. "Oooohhh," he said, his face lighting up. "Now that's ruddy nifty!" The others looked at him, expectant. "Oh come on, you lot! Fink about it. You keep one mirror here, send the uvver one wherever you want to be, step thru this one onto the Moon--"

"... and step off the Moon and out of the other," Chrysalis said. "HAHA! Perfect!"

"I'm guessin' you got at least two or three other sets like this un, right guv?" Dodger asked me.

I nodded. "Several. Each mirror here has a twin already on the moon. Two pairs of twinned mirrors gives us a shortcut to anywhere in Equestria and back, so long as one of the mirror sets is there and the Moon is in the sky. And now, a practical demonstration. Dodger?" I pointed at the scene through the "up" mirror. He nodded. "Step through the mirror, walk across and step through the other mirror."

He froze. "....This isn't some 'trust' exercise fing, izzit?" he said cautiously. I said nothing. "I thought so," he said. "Hello?" he said to the rest. "Lookin' fer a volunteer? Five bits in it for ya..."

The others jeered. He gave them a rude gesture and a raspberry. "Go on, quit stalling," I said. He looked at me, then back at the mirror. With a gulp and an effort at a brave face, he stepped through. We watched as he clipity clopped across the Moon dust, shrinking in the distance... meanwhile in the other mirror, his image grew larger and larger as he walked toward us, finally stepping through the mirror and back on Equestrian soil. He blinked and grinned in relief. He was greeted by applause and cheers. "Congratulations," I said. "You're the first non-royalty pony to set hoof on the Moon. Unless Celestia's been practicing her shot-put and not telling anyone." There were hoots of laughter at that.

While the others were laughing and thumping Dodger on the back, Black Fang was regarding the
mirrors with a thoughtful expression on his face. He spoke up. "So this will give us easy access to anywhere we send the other mirrors," he said. "What's to prevent our enemies from coming the other way?"

That certainly got an awkward silence. Fortunately I had an answer. "Simple." I reached up and gave the Moon-decorated knot a twist. The view of the moon's surface winked out, replaced by a plain reflection. "We can lock them out. We can turn the mirrors down here off, OR we can turn the ones on the moon off. We'll set up a guardpost on the moon, to make sure nopony turns our little shortcut against us, and other guards by the mirrors down here."

"And if we gots trouble, we can switch 'em off and leave anyone trying to sneak in stuck up there," Dodger said, cackling. "Sweet!"

"The mirrors with the control switches, of course, will stay with us," I said. "No sense in tempting naughty little hooves." I flicked it back on. I rubbed my chin and pretended to peruse the mirror in front of me. "As to our first location, I have already picked one out. The mirror is already on its way. By tomorrow, the way will be open...."

The moment they heard me drop the name they set up a cheer they could probably hear all the way to the Moon without the mirrors.

Every world, most likely, has a Port Royale. A location just off the edge of the map called "civilization" and halfway into the region marked "here there be Dragons." A place notorious for its criminal class, its cutthroats, its license and debauchery, its free flowing gold and its seeming immunity to the distant touch of Law and Order.

Equestria had a Port Royale. It was, by one of those less-than-cosmic coincidences, actually named Port Royale. Other cities of that name and pedigree throughout the multiverse would have laughed, handed it a lolly and told it to go home to its mama, but for Equestria it was the picture of a wild, lawless harbor city.

The Mayor of Port Royale, such as he was, was a former privateer who had retired ten years ago, permanently set himself ashore, took a berth in the office of Lord Mayor and proceeded to gain a hundred pounds, an illicit fortune in gold bits and crooked political power, and any number of enemies who were nevertheless smart enough to leave him in the mayor's chair rather than foolishly take his place and have his enemies become theirs. He was (for a mayor of a city full of pirates and mercenaries) fairly well liked, because as mayor he had the advantage in the public's eye of not wanting to rock the boat. He had grown comfortable in his life, and wished it to continue for many years just as it was.

Unfortunately while he did not like rocking the boat, the boat seemed to have taken a liking to rocking on its own. With the return of Princess Luna and the subsequent division of the royal workload, the throne had finally started finding the time to look towards stifling out such places as Port Royale. Celestia's peaceful and formerly distant reign had started becoming uncomfortably close. Fewer ships were coming in loaded with booty and leaving with new crew; fewer and fewer mercenary bands were finding their careers profitable or their gold easy to part with. Many were grumbling that the stream of money and rum that had once flowed under Port Royale's stained boardwalks were drying up, maybe for good. The good Mayor was hearing complaints and demands that he do something.... but dogged if he knew what.
He was sitting in his office, broodily working his way down to the bottom of a bottle of port, when the mirror arrived. He had it set up in the office and puzzled over who might have sent him such a thing. It was quite ornate and grandiose, and he had to admit they suited his baroque decor, especially in the light of the Moonrise through the chamber window, but-- what could they mean?

As he pondered these things the silver Moon at the top of the mirror began to glow, and the image in the mirror changed. A sinister, heavily armored bipedal figure was striding towards him out of a moon-white desert. Before the Mayor could do more than gawp in surprise, the figure stepped OUT of the mirror and loomed over him, large as life and twice as real. The Mayor stumbled backwards, falling to the floor, his plumed hat tumbling off his head. Before he could panic and reach for his jewelled cutlass, the figure stretched out its hand... and poured a handful of diamonds onto the Mayor's desk. The Mayor stared, fascinated, as the glittering treasure piled on his ink blotter.

"Mayor Galleon," the red-eyed apparition growled in a voice like a dragon gargling gravel. "I hope that you and I can reach a mutually beneficial arrangement..."

"Confess," Chrysalis said, amused. "You made that connection to the Moon entirely by accident."

"Got it in one," I muttered from the bed. It was time to remove the bandages. Doc Sawbones was unwrapping them slowly and carefully. "It was the only result I COULD get, in fact. Tried a dozen times before it dawned on me that having an elevator to the Moon could be useful." I snorted. "After a dozen mirrors, the formula didn't even work anymore and I still don't know why. I dabbled around, fiddled and faddled, and got lucky. But I'll never be able to make another mirror like those."

Chrysalis chuckled. "You can't always be the infallible genius," she said. "Not every plan can live up to that brilliant one with the library..." she paused. Dang, never let your emotions hang out around an emotivore. "All right, what?" she demanded.

I sighed. "Confession time?" I said. "I got that plan from a TV show." She blinked. "Like movies. Except at home, instead of the theater. About a superhero who could run at super-speed..."

She gawked at me wide eyed, her mouth hanging open in a silent laugh. "You got that plan from a foal's cartoon movie?" Then she laughed for real. "I don't believe it! That's so stupid!"

"If it's stupid but it works, it ain't stupid," I growled, annoyed. She just laughed all the louder. "Glad you're amused. You," I pointed an accusing finger at Sawbones. "Doctor-Patient confidentiality!"

"Didn't hear a thing," Sawbones said, his voice rich with humor. He peeled off the last of the bandages and stepped back. "Hmmm," he said, noncomittally. He passed me a mirror.

I picked it up and got a good look at my new face. I'd expected worse, a lot worse, but.... I didn't recognize myself. The skin was... cragged and pitted. My cheeks and forehead especially, thick with pockmarks like pumice. Little thin linear scars marred it here and there, one through my eyebrow, one across the bridge of my nose. The most vivid was one that went up from one side of my mouth, leaving a white line through my lip and a faintly puckered line halfway up my cheek. My eyebrow was white where the scar cut through it. My right ear had a notch missing from it.

My face looked like someone twenty years older. Funny thing was it looked familiar. It took me a minute to realize it looked like my dad's face when he got back from the Gulf war; not scarred in the
same way but---weatherbeaten, leathery. Like he'd seen some shit and didn't want to talk about it. I guessed now I'd seen a few things myself.

Fanged abominations of tangled wood, lunging for my throat...

Dragon fire searing through my armor, licking at my skin....

Swords and axes flashing, the spray of hot blood and severed limbs flying...

The moan of a troll falling dead to its knees, a sword pierced through its skull...

That cannon mouth, large as the Grand Canyon, that deafening roar, the feel of the blast ripping at my face--

My hand wavered and I let the mirror drop. Chrysalis' hand caressed my cheek, cool against my pocked skin. She turned my head toward her. "You are strong," she said. "Stronger than this thin layer of flesh." her alien, slit pupiled eyes locked with mine for several seconds. I finally let my eyes drop.

"Not exactly the grand plan I had," I said. Meaning the lair. The weatherbeating of my face. The whole situation--with the diamond dogs and the ponies and the changelings and with her and everything.

She sighed and slid in close beside me, resting her chin on my shoulder. "None of it is what any of us had planned," she said. "But it will have to do, for now."

I suppose she was right.
Chapter 46

It was going to be one of those mornings, Twilight thought blearily as she stared at the reports piled on her desk. For not the first time in her deepest of hearts she secretly, privately, almost blasphemously questioned Celestia’s decision to make the wretched law that proclaimed all alicorns to be royalty. Ascendancy? That Twilight had earned. But a crown? What sin had she committed to deserve that?

From the first day of her alicornhood she had learned that being a Princess in Equestria automatically meant that she was continually dealing either with ponies far more experienced than her deferring to her on every fool thing, or dealing with ponies who decided that since she was the youngest and most inexperienced princess, that meant she had no REAL authority and they could snub, sidestep or completely ignore her with impunity.

It was a tossup as to which group drove her up the wall more. Some days she would have merrily strangled both.

The latter problem, at least, meant that the ponies who had been snubbing Princess Luna were now snubbing her, instead. Joy of joys. She shuffled through the piles on her desk when she caught glimpse of a small stack of papers, crudely written in a childlike scrawl. "Spike?" she said. "What is this?"

Spike came shuffling into the room, carrying a stack of yet more forms and paperwork. He looked at the papers hovering in Twilight's magical grasp. "Those are the entries from that slumber party story contest they asked you to judge," he said. "Remember?"

Twilight made a noise of comprehension and began flipping through the papers. "I forgot all about that," she said. "Did I ever pick out a winner?"

"Nope," Spike chuckled. "But no time like the present, right?"

"True. Better late than never," Twilight agreed. She started reading the 'stories' from the CMC in earnest. She did let herself get roped into it, after all, and a promise was a promise. Besides it was the perfect excuse to take an unofficial break from the all-too-official paperwork in front of her. "I'll just take my break early and do this. Oh, and Spike? Tell the Duchess GlowerBrows I reached a decision on her proposal to raise taxes to cover her proposed over-expenditures..."

"And?"

"Take a guess."

"Right." Spike dropped the forms, whipped out a quill and a blank parchment and began writing. "Dear... Duchess... GlowerBrows. When the... Appleoosa... Desert... freezes... over. Sincerely, Princess Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight chuckled as she started reading. "He learns quick," she said. What was this? Oh yes; the CMC and their friends were seeing who could figure out Darth Vulcan's next sinister plan. A bit grim for a foal's game, but foals these days... "Okay, Scootaloo's is certainly interesting. She thinks he's going to try and steal Celestia's crown. And her plan to capture him involves all the Wonderbolts
and a really big net..." Twilight chuckled as she read. They certainly had vivid imaginations.

Her chuckling faded away when she got to Diamond Tiara's entry. Her smile faded to a frown of puzzlement, then a wide-eyed expression of disbelief....

"Spike, take a letter---"

"Am I in trouble?" Diamond Tiara said faintly.

It was an understandable question. Diamond had been in the middle of classes at school when Princess Twilight had teleported right into the middle of the classroom, spoken quietly to Miss Cheerilee, and then with Miss Cheerilee's permission teleported away-- taking Diamond Tiara with her. Diamond Tiara now found herself sitting in the middle of the Golden Oaks library next to her father, surrounded by all four princesses and Shining Armor, all looking very stern. Out of plain habit Diamond began going over the past few days in her memory, trying to think of any shenanigans she might have gotten up to-- she'd been trying to be good!

"I'd like to know that myself, Your Highnesses," her father said. He looked tired, there were bags under his eyes. Rebuilding his business since Darth Vulcan had attacked had been difficult. Some ponies blamed him for the disaster; other ponies were afraid to do business with him because they thought Darth Vulcan might come after them, next... "Please, my daughter and I have been through so much, we just want to be quit of all this."

Princess Twilight's dragon Spike went around the circle of chairs, quietly handing out cups of tea and milk and biscuits. Cups were pressed into Mr. Rich's and Diamond Tiara's hooves. "We do understand, Mr. Rich," Celestia said sympathetically. "You have suffered much at Darth Vulcan's hands. Nopony with any sense blames you for what that wretched being has done."

"And no, Diamond Tiara is not in trouble," Twilight said. "But we think she might know something that will help us against him."

"What could she know that she hasn't already told you?" Mr. Rich protested.

Princess Twilight hesitated. "We'll... explain in a moment, Mr. Rich..."

Shining Armor leaned forward in his seat. "Tell us, Diamond," he said earnestly. "When you were Darth's prisoner, did you hear him talk about his plans? His strategies? What was he going to do, or wanted to do? Anything like that?"

Diamond Tiara shook her head. "No," she said. "Nothing like that. He kept me locked up in his room; he didn't meet with his minions or anyone there. He'd do all that--" she waved her forehooves around and pulled a snarl. "Rarr, curse those ponies, arr, I'll show them all...’ but it wasn't like he told me all about his dastardly plans." She scowled. "I know, I waited." She had known better of course, but while she'd been his prisoner she'd kept her spirits up by pretending she could get a chance to be the plucky heroine like in the movies, overhear the villain's sinister plan and reveal it to the heroes when she was rescued. No such luck; Darth Vulcan had probably seen the same movies.

Some of the grownups looked amused; even Celestia dimpled a bit. Diamond Tiara expected them to have disappointed looks in their eyes; instead, they looked perplexed. "Mayhap the filly o'erheard something that she forgot," Princess Luna said suddenly, "and it lay in the back corners of her
"We would have to enter her subconscious mind in a dream-delve to determine that," Princess Twilight said; her tone said she didn't like the suggestion. Several of the adults stiffened; Princess Luna flinched and scowled like she'd been scolded.

Diamond's father bristled slightly, but he spoke in a calm voice. "I won't have my daughter's mind trespassed on," he said firmly, glancing at Princess Luna.

The Princess' expression soured even more. After the debacle with Darth Vulcan's minion and the regrettable consequences, it had been leaked by somepony in the castle staff... most likely one of the servants who had helped clean her up after her... accident... that Luna had, indeed, used her powers to invade a pony's mind. The laws and traditions that governed dreamwalking were considered sacrosanct by ponydom; the difficult circumstances behind her bending them were lost in the sensationalist uproar that accompanied the news that the Princess of Dreams herself had trespassed against them. Despite Celestia's best efforts, and Luna's own contrite explanations, the scandal had spread like the smell of soured milk; more than one noblepony or politician had sought to use it as leverage against the Crown, and trust in the younger Princess had fallen to an all time low.

"Your daughter's mind shall not be trespassed upon," Luna managed to say evenly, though inwardly she seethed. "I defend the Dream Realm; I do not exploit it. I have done so once in all my centuries... in cause against our current foe, who is unlike any other that ponykind has faced before. For that reason and that reason only, did I allow myself to bend the rules by which I govern the dream realm and all that walks there." She looked Filthy Rich square in the eye. "Unless you think there is some cause here?"

Filthy Rich looked abashed, but said nothing.

"What we're trying to determine here," Shining Armor said, less than artfully dragging the conversation back to the topic, "is how Diamond Tiara knows what she DOES know."

"Wh-" Diamond Tiara blushed. "Why do you think I know anything at all, Prince Shining?" she squeaked.

In answer, Princess Cadence pulled out a familiar looking stack of papers. "Do these look familiar to you, Sweetheart?" she said kindly, showing them to Diamond Tiara.

Diamond Tiara blinked in surprise. "Those are the essays we-- the Cutie Mark Crusaders and I-- sent Princess Twilight," she said.

"What are they?"

"We were sort of playing a game at a sleepover," Diamond Tiara admitted sheepishly. "A contest. We were trying to see who could guess the best what D-- Darth Vulcan would do next, and how we'd catch him if we were the Princess. We sent them to Princess Twilight to pick a winner, but she never sent them back..."

"We read them," Shining Armor said, eliciting a further blush from Diamond Tiara. "I think my favorite one was the plan to wait until Darth Vulcan tried to steal the crown jewels, give Spike presents until his greed growth kicked in, and then trick him into stomping on them."

Princess Twilight picked up the papers, conjured up a pair of reading glasses, and looked at the essay through them. "Just to review, what exactly did you think he was going to do, and why?"

Diamond Tiara squirmed a little in her seat. "Well, I heard about the Grimoires, and I knew he'd
want them bad," she said. "I mean, he's bonkers about books. He made me spend my whole time when I was his prisoner just teaching him how to read, just 'cause he wanted to use magic books and do more magic. So I knew he'd have to go after them. But he'd have to know it was a trap. I mean, it was pretty obvious. I mean really...." She started to give the Princesses a sarcastic look, caught herself and went on.

"Ahum. So he wouldn't go for it... he'd fake everybody out, and go for another target while everyone was guarding the library." she leaned forward, eyes brightening as she got into her subject. "But no way that would be good enough for him. He'd do a double fakeout. He'd go after some other target, or a whole bunch of them, all at once, so everypony would HAVE to come running... then while everypony was running one way, he'd run back the other and take the books. I just knew that was what he'd do."

"But how would you know?" Princess Twilight demanded.

"Well, I didn't KNOW, know," Diamond Tiara averred. "I mean, I didn't know how he was going to steal the books, i just figured he'd "magic" them away somehow... " she gave the typical earth pony shrug at 'magic' and went on. She missed the look the Princesses gave one another. "and I really didn't know what his other targets were going to be, I just guessed at a bunch of stuff that sounded really valuable..."

"Still..." Twilight pressed.

Diamond Tiara shrugged and rubbed the back of her head. "Well... I mean... it's kind of obvious, isn't it?" she said. "I mean, if you know anything about him, or you've listened to him." At their uncomprehending looks she burst out. "Come on. He's smart! Or... he likes to THINK he is. And he hates Equestria because he thinks it's lame and stupid." She waggled a hoof like a puppet, imitating the ironclad villain. "This world is so dumb, the Princesses are so dumb, I could conquer this whole country with nothing but a butter knife, blah blah blah, durr durr durr...'

Shining covered a snort. Diamond gave him a funny look and went on. "And, well, he IS smart. But that's not good enough for him. He wants everypony else to feel STUPID. To get even with them for being so dumb and so lame." She looked shamefaced for a moment, casting her eyes down. "...I... used to feel that way, a lot. I couldn't just win. Everypony else had to lose." a particular group of fillies crossed her mind. She shook off the guilt and went on.

"So any plans he makes, he's gotta TRICK somepony. He could probably just smash in and take whatever he wants... but it'd be hard and dangerous, and it wouldn't make any of you," she looked at the Princesses and the Prince, "feel dumb or embarrassed. If he's got two plans, one simple one that tricks you once, and a harder one with all sorts of steps and loops that tricks you twice, he'll take the second one."

"Because it reaffirms what he already thinks about us even more," Princess Twilight said dryly.

Diamond Tiara nodded. She paused and looked up. "You know, now that I think about it, I'd bet that after he got the grimoires, he'd go back around behind you again, and got all the other things that he was pretending to go after too," she said. "While everypony ran back and forth between the museum and everything else."

The grownups exchanged startled looks. "She got it in one," Shining Armor said, amused.

Filthy Rich cocked an eyebrow. "Beg pardon?..."

"Where this is going, Mr. Rich," Luna said, "Is that somehow Diamond Tiara guessed every single
move that Darth Vulcan made in his most recent and most successful raid on Canterlot."

Filthy Rich's jaw dropped. The actual thefts had been public news, but the Crown had done its best to keep the most salient details out of the public eye. As the rulers of Equestria proceeded to describe in full detail just how Darth Vulcan had hoodwinked the Princesses not once, not twice, but at least three times in a single night, he started to realize just how out of the ordinary this situation was. Was this Darth Vulcan creature raised on a planet of criminal masterminds?

Diamond Tiara was equally astonished. "Oh my gosh, I was right!" She actually started bouncing up and down in her seat in glee, clapping her forehooves. "I was right, I was--- right... and... that was bad..." she stopped bouncing and grinned sheepishly, face tomato red. "Sorry, your Highnesses..."

"It's all right, Diamond Tiara," Princess Celestia said. "Even if what he did was terrible, it was terribly clever of you to figure out what he was going to do." Diamond Tiara beamed at the praise. The solar princess leaned forward; her tone did not change, but the atmosphere in the room got suddenly intense. "Now comes a more interesting question: how would you have caught him, in our place?"

Diamond Tiara's confident smile faded. "I don't know," she admitted. "That's the part I didn't finish. I wanted to come up with a really good idea but Scootaloo was in such a big rush to send the letters off--"

Princess Twilight looked at the papers again. "I can see," she said. "It starts off with 'cut him off from--' and then trails off."

"Yeah. It's s'posed to be 'cut him off from the Everfree,' " Diamond Tiara said.

"But he wishes to leave the Everfree," Celestia said carefully. "Didn't you say as much?"

Tiara snorted. "Yeah, but not right now," she said. "The Everfree's where he keeps all his stuff. With all those different targets he could hit there's no way to tell where he'll go next...."

"But everypony knows where he'd go BACK to," Shining Armor said. "A good sized magic dome dropped down behind him while he was out on a raid... It would have cut him off from all his stockpiled resources. He would have been fit to be tied."

Diamond Tiara shook her head. "Yeah, but then what?" she said. "He would still have all his magic power, and a lot of his soldiers--- and I bet he's got a lot of allies OUTside the Everfree too."

"Who would work with him?" Spike scoffed. On more familiar ground talking with somebeing closer to her age, Diamond Tiara scowled at him.

"He tried to set up a deal with Daddy, remember? He probably went right out and found somepony else who would deal with him. It's not like he stopped wanting toilet paper," she said scornfully. "There's lots of bad ponies out there who would trade with him--- criminals and robbers and stuff..."

Celestia and Luna traded a glance. It was disturbing how cynical the filly was, at such an early age. What was more unsettling was that she was probably right; Equestria had its thieves' guilds and black markets, its gangsters... and more than one or two would-be evil overlords.

Their estimation of the filly's cynicism sank to a new depressing low at her next words. She sat back and crossed her forehooves. "Betcha that Boss Hoss pony was one of 'em," she said. "He probably tried to make a deal with Darth Vulcan but messed up and made enemies with him."

"Now pumpkin," her father said. "Boss Hoss might be a ..." the financial mover and shaker
hesitated. "A not very nice stallion, but he's just a businesspony who got robbed... and he was building the fence around the Everfree..."

"Daddy, come on," Diamond Tiara said. "Darth Vulcan doesn't go after anypony like that unless he thinks they crossed him. He didn't take revenge on the ponies building the fence, or the guards who've fought him, has he?" She looked at the Princesses. "He doesn't just... take stuff out on random ponies. Does he?"

Celestia looked thoughtful, but Luna was the first to speak. "As a matter of fact, he does not," she said. "Not truly. He is callous and careless and free with his sword and his sorcery, but if tis conflict in the course of battle, he cares not either way. But if he perceiveth his injury to be personal..."

"He makes it really, really personal," Diamond Tiara said. She shivered as unhappy memories flitted across her mind, and pressed herself into her father's side. "I mean, holy cow. He stole an entire train cargo and all right out from under Boss Hoss' hooves, peeled his traveling car like a grape, and scared Boss Hoss so bad he pooped himself!"

"Pumpkin!" Filthy Rich scolded.

"....Well that's what I heard," Diamond Tiara said defiantly She looked disappointed. "I... I guess that's the best idea I can really come up with, after all. Just chipping away at him till he wears out."

"Still, a worthy strategy," Luna muttered. "Twould have halved his forces, at the least, and upset an unknown number of his machinations... had we thought beyond attempting to trap him like a foal with his hoof in the cookie jar," she added with a snort of annoyance.

"Thank you for your time, my little ponies," Celestia said to Diamond Tiara and Filthy Rich. "While it gave us no easy answers, it was at least enlightening. You may go now." Filthy Rich and Diamond Tiara got to their hooves and trotted for the door.

In the doorway, Diamond Tiara stopped and looked back. "Your Highness... Princess Celestia..." She paused. "Darth Vulcan-- Discord couldn't stop him. Sombra and Chrysalis, they didn't stop him. the Elements of Harmony didn't even work on him. And they work on everything." For whatever reason she felt she was compelled to emphasize it. She stared, her eyes boring into Celestia's. "He's not the kind of bad guy you can beat with one big shot. If you keep trying to beat him like that, he'll just keep on winning." With that, the door closed behind her with finality.

More than one pony found themselves somberly regarding the filly's ominous words.

Cadence sighed. "A missed opportunity," she said. "If we had thought to cut him off from the forest-! The only bright spot in this mess is that he didn't get Starswirl's mirror. Even though it did get shattered--- better that, than in his hands."

"I think it can be repaired, by the way," Twilight said. "It will take a long time and a lot of work, but once it's reassembled it should work fine, even with that... big chunk missing. Oh no." Twilight's eyes went round. "That shard. When he fled he had a huge shard of the mirror in his hand. I'd bet my horn he kept it. Oh this is not good!"

"What could he do with it?" Cadence asked.

"Any number of things," Twilight said, gnawing her lip. "He hasn't got much of the magic glass, so he can't try too many times. And the results are always unpredictable. But if he's got the right know-how, and is really really lucky, he might open another portal --- to anywhere in the world, to Sunset Shimmer's world, to his own world, to another plane of existence entirely...."
"And all of those," Luna said in alarm, "would be dire indeed, each for its own reasons. Any one of those possibilities would be a terrible weapon in his clutches."

A peculiar look crossed Celestia's face. "And yet," Celestia said thoughtfully, "his first thought was not to fight to take the mirror... but to destroy it. Why?"

"He said it himself," Shining Armor said. "If he couldn't have it, he sure wasn't letting you have it."

"But why?" Celestia said. She rose to her hooves and began to pace. There wasn't much room in the library for it.

"Obviously because he thought we would use it against him," Twilight said. Then she reflected on her own words. "But how did he think we would? If he thought we were going to use it to make more mirrors, he wouldn't have left the shards with us...." She tapped her chin with her hooves.

"Reinforcements," Shining said suddenly. "He thought we would use the mirror to bring help from the other world. That world's elements of harmony, or Sunset Shimmer..." he nodded. That sounded more than right.

"As powerful as my former student is... at least when she is in her unicorn form-- I doubt he feared one more unicorn allied against him," Celestia said. "And the Bearers of the Elements proved to be little more than an annoyance to him... forgive me for saying so, Twilight...

Twilight's eyebrows tabled and she sighed. "Not like I can deny it," she said in a dull monotone. "Even when we had the Elements we might as well have been shining a flashlight on him. And twelve flashlights isn't going to do much more than six. Annoy him more, maybe."

"Maybe he thought we would... summon an army from that world," Cadence said. "That was Sunset Shimmer's plan, after all."

"I doubt he would be afraid of an army of school students, even of creatures similar to his own species," Luna said skeptically. Really, an army of a few hundred brainwashed school children against the armies of Equestria; what had this Sunset Shimmer been thinking?

"Similar?" Cadence asked.

"Similar," Twilight said. "But the proportions were off, and he confirmed that his race didn't come in pastel shades."

"But against those of his own kind, from his own world, he might not have been so confident," Celestia said suddenly, looking over her shoulder at them.

"Pardon?" Shining Armor said.

"He said it himself," Celestia said. "In his own world are beings and forces so powerful they would dwarf him at his mightiest. Monsters so horrible that merely describing their deeds to that poor guard left him catatonic. He outright laughed at the idea of conquering his world, even with the power of the Alicorn Amulet at his disposal."

"What art thou driving at, sister?" Luna said warily.

"Don't you see, Luna?" Celestia said. Her enthusiasm was growing by the moment. "In a world of such great and terrible perils, there must be even greater and more valiant heroes. He must have feared we would use the mirror to reach his world and gain the help of one such. One fit to match
him-- and defeat him."

Luna's apprehensive look turned into a scowl. "Sister, you are not suggesting..."

"I am." Celestia nodded firmly.

"My little ponies, we need to summon a Champion."
"...And I have to say that, in conclusion, this updated thestral potion has been a resounding success!" Dr. Caduceus said, beaming as cameras snapped and flashed.

The press release for the thestral potion couldn't have come soon enough. Pony society had long known of thestral's particular dietary needs, but the scandal of thestrals abandoning Equestria to join Darth Vulcan... and Princess Luna's precipitous reaction... had created an unfortunate upswing in public awareness that the batponies among them actually supplemented their diet with meat and blood. Something of a sensationalist uproar had swept through the press, lighting fires of agitation and wild rumormongering in every pony community.

This final stage of review, Luna had wanted to keep behind closed doors. But Dr. Caduceus had seen through that ploy and insisted that the final findings of the study be revealed in a royal press release. Princess Luna's hunting flights with her night guards had only stirred things up more, on two occasions almost inciting panicked stampedes in towns they overflew when they weren't expected. This in turn had only made the Night Princess more mule-headed and belligerent about the matter. Things had started to get ugly. But the Doctor wasn't about to let the Night Princess sweep this under the rug, oh no. He was savvy enough to demand the press attend the final review. The trial period was over, and this bit of political theatre could finally be brought to a smashing close.

"Truly?" Princess Twilight said, smiling artlessly. "No negative side effects? No... deficiencies?"

The press meeting to release the findings was being held in one of the larger laboratories. Luna and Twilight were overseeing things; Celestia had decided that it would be best if they took care of the matter without her interference. Besides, Celestia was busy laying out the preliminary steps for a certain very important Summoning, and it would be unwise to interrupt that process...

"Quite the opposite," the researcher enthused. "In fact, the batponies... er, thestrals, who have been put on the potion have demonstrated a marked uptick in their physical scores, athletic ability, mental sharpness, and in their general health overall when compared to the control group."

"To quite a startling degree," said another, poking idly at some of the exercise equipment scattered about the lab. It was a dumbbell; from the looks of it, it had been bent in half.

"And what of the blood lust?" Luna said.

The lead researcher adjusted his pince nez. "We performed multiple psychological tests on the test population," he said. "The ones on the alchemical substitute showed perfectly normal and well-balanced behavior, naturally, and no signs of feral impulses." He gave Luna a condescending and rather judgmental look. "Unfortunately we could not say the same for those that Princess Luna insisted on feeding pure blood--"

Twilight's eyes narrowed; one could almost see the gods of scientific ethics watching over her shoulder and sharpening their long knives. "You mean 'the control group,' I believe, Professor?" she said icily.

The broccoli-colored stallion huffed and scowled. "Yes, technically-- though having a control group in this was completely pointless..." Tzing! went the whetstone as it slid down Occam's Razor. "We
could have predicted the results in our sleep."

"Too true," a mare among the labcoats said. "Increased aggression... irritability..."

"Recalcitrant behavior among the foals in that group," another added. "Hyperactive, no attention span..."

"Outright hostility from the adults as well, taking offense at even the most innocuous questions--"

"One cannot imagine WHY my loyal subjects would become hostile at continual pestering by ponies in labcoats," Luna said in a voice dry as moon dust. "But please, do continue."

"Princess, we are just reporting our findings," Professor Broccoli said loftily. "No disrespect."

The lie, Luna thought to herself, should have shriveled his tongue. "Apology accepted," Luna said sweetly, baring her teeth.

"WELL!" Twilight interrupted cheerfully. Oh this was going to be good... She turned to face the gathering of reporters. "As you can see, the results are in. I myself have reviewed the Doctors' research and I would just like to confirm for all of Equestria...

"...that every bit of it is completely and utterly false."

Somewhere a record needle screeched across tortured vinyl and came to a halt. Jaws dropped. "I--Bwah?" the lead researcher said.

"I did look over your work," Twilight went on. "Thoroughly." She stalked toward the lead researcher, brandishing the manila folder in her magic. "Your research was rubbish, your questioning of the subjects was blatantly biased, your interpretation of their responses hypocritical. What got labeled as "healthy vigorous energy" in one thestral got labeled as "jittery and agitated" in another; angry responses to biased, invasive or outright insulting questions was given as proof of belligerence in the subject. And I caught several of you outright fudging the data you collected, skewing your charts and graphs towards the results you expected-- and wanted... and outright deleting the data from the doctors and lab technicians who disagreed with your findings." Two or three ponies to the back of the group looked gratified. "You have abused your position and driven your supposed 'research' towards a foregone conclusion of your own choice. You, sir, are a terrible scientist." The last part was delivered nose-to-nose, in tones one would usually expect when describing an especially disgusting skin disease.

"I-- I am outraged!" the professor blustered. "I conducted my research conscientiously on both test groups---"

"Well that's interesting, because there was no second test group!" Twilight retorted.

"Bwah?" Caduceus said again.

"That 'improved' potion was nothing but ordinary animal blood from local gryphon butchers, spiked with food coloring. The 'nice healthy safe' Thestrals and the 'scary blood drinking Thestrals'," Twilight said, making scare-quotes in the air with her forehooves, "Were BOTH drinking the exact same thing." The stallion's jaw hung to his collarbone while cameras flashed and a dull roar of reporters jockeying for position and shouting questions filled one end of the room. ""That's right, professor. The only substantial difference between the groups in your little social engineering experiment---"

"The only difference between them," Luna cut in, rising to her feet, "Was thy own prejudices against
my little ponies of the night." The Night Princess, as dainty as she was, *loomed*. She stamped slowly towards the group of labcoated mares and stallions, who were beginning to look like they were seriously reconsidering their choice of career paths. She addressed them all. "You have conducted scientific and medical fraud against my loyal subjects-- propagating the lie, the LIE!" she stamped, cracking the tile floor, "-- of the Blood Addiction...denying their vital need for it as sustenance... to their suffering and injury." Her eyes flashed. "Explain yourselves, if you can!"

Several of the researchers puffed up and glared. Caduceus huffed and blustered. "Our work was methodical and diligent! And it is well known that the so-called "need" for blood is just a byproduct of the miniscule portion of vampire bat in their makeup. The medical literature on Thestral blood addiction is---"

"PIG CRAP," Luna thundered. "It is biggest, foulest, most pungent pile of hog dung I have ever seen. I would call it HOGWASH, but that would imply it was fit for washing hogs." She leaned forward and glared at him, her muzzle nearly touching his. "I *designed* the Thestral form; oversaw the firstborn of the race. When I returned and learned of their misfortunes, 'twas utter bafflement to me how anypony could think that their need for blood and meat was aberrant to their natures. I sought to find who had started this erroneous assumption, and how. I searched thy 'medical literature,' as did Princess Twilight and our secretaries. Dost thou care to guess what we found?"

"In all thy voluminous documents, neigh on a hundred years' worth of scribblings by senile old Leeches, *not once was there record of the original research into the thestral blood hunger ever taking place!* Merely an endless circle of doddering fools proclaiming it to be a mental sickness endemic to the thestrals, referencing one another in an endless looping maze of incestuous citation!"

"It's true," Twilight said to the teeming reporters. "Nopony ever actually *proved* the blood hunger was abnormal--- they just started *saying* so. And when anyone demanded proof, they merely cited some other expert, who would cite somepony else, who would cite somepony else..."

"The true test has been done," Luna said. "The night ponies have NOT gone feral, NOT lost control, NOT become unstable. In fact, with the essential nutrient, the fluid of life, returned to their diet, they have flourished. And the bias blinding so many of our nation's healers hath been laid bare." She stood there, wings flared. "What say you, Caduceus? Wilt thou yield the point, and assert what we have proven?"

This was the point that Twilight had been waiting for. The point she expected Dr. Caduceus to fold his cards and yield. Any medical scientist worth two spits would do so, for the sake of scientific truth. But to Twilight's absolute flabbergastment, the pompous fraud actually grew more defiant!

"OF all the OUTRAGES! You interfere with our work...." he looked over at the teeming reporters. "Princess Luna *deliberately* tampered with our research!"

Luna's jaw dropped. Caduceus bulled ahead. "This is the very thing we have all come to fear from the Court of the Night!" he said. "Self-serving BIAS, a callous hostility towards modern science and scholastic efforts--- and this is only the latest. Since her return the Night Princess has constantly undermined our efforts in countless ways, hindering us, blocking our research grants--"

This generated a disturbing shift in the tone. To Twilight's sickened fascination, the mood in the audience visibly shifted; She could almost measure the moment when the crowd's sympathies started to sway towards the scientist. And Luna's rage only seemed to shift them further.

""Frauds!" Luna thundered. "Frauds! Bunko Artists! Fearmongers! Gabblers of superstitions and gossip and lies! Thy ranks art more rife with Quacks than a DUCK FARM! Thy framjammery hath
caused untold suffering amongst mine own beloved thestrals--- sickened foals, barren wombs, and early graves! And thou wouldst perpetuate thy villainy anew merely to assuage thy snivelling bigotry against them, e'en with the proof of thy error staring thee in the face!"

"PROOF?" The professor roared back. "What proof? Faked potions and fabricated evidence? Your anti-science prejudices are well known--"

"ANTI SCIENCE?" Luna bellowed. "Thou puffed up toad! I was studying the turning of the heavens, learning the healing arts and writing treatises on the mechanisms of reality when thy ancestors were still curing the pox with LEECHES! I blocked thy grants because thou wast rifling the pockets of the kingdom and the Crown for supercilious drivel!"

"And this is just an example of how science has to be conducted now," he sneered to the reporters, waving a hoof at the Princess. "The chilling effect of having our research vetted by this parsimonious mare--"

"Thy fellow scholars spent three thousand bits on a study to see if ponies should carry umbrellas when it rained!" (1)

Twilight facehooved. So THAT was what this was really all about? Really? Seriously?

The truth unfolded before her mind’s eye like the petals of a rancid skunk cabbage. One of the few duties Celestia had permitted to Luna upon her return to the throne had been reforming the Royal budget. It had been meant as a preparatory step-- Celestia had figured that the long-absent lunar princess would have an easier time dealing with numbers and figures than with the subtler nuances of actual ponies.

But she had forgotten; In the ancient world Luna, due to her status as something of an outsider, had been a patron of many perennial outsiders: scholars and artists. Some of the greatest and most eccentric minds of the age had gathered together at her Collegium, fringe thinkers seeking sanctuary with one another, debating the great thoughts of the day and challenging the mind and spirit with the arts and sciences.

Luna had hobnobbed with the pony equivalents of Socrates, Da Vinci, Galileo; She knew great minds from merely inflated ones. And since her return she had found the 'intellectual' community of Equestria sorely lacking. She had no patience at all for all the tomfoolery posing as academics in the nooks and crannies of modern academic society, especially when it was on the taxpayer's bit. Her cuts had been, no argument, draconian... and again, no argument, equally necessary, felling countless trite research programs like wheat before a scythe.

It had been a bit too much all at once, though; The academic community had handled the sudden slashing of hundreds of research grants, regardless of how trivial, in the typical fashion such things are handled by the privileged: rather poorly. A mix of paranoia for their own precious grant bits and sullen resentment at the Princess' parsimony had set spiteful tongues and poison pens in motion, pushing the sullen muttered narrative that the Night Princess was stuck in the past, a science hating luddite who wanted to return Equestria to the Dark Ages.

Could it be, Twilight wondered briefly? These ponies, these researchers dedicated to science, couldn't be that shallow could they?

"What now, you penny-grubbing luddite? Are you going to sic your blood-sucking bully-colts on us? Or maybe just prowl around in our minds while we sleep? You propagator of superstitious fears---"
Eeyup. They could. At least the feud between the Night Princess and the academics had for the most part not trickled down to the pony on the street...

"Thou ninnyhammered braying JACKASS!"

...Until now. And Luna just said the J-word in front of the press pool, hadn't she. The simmering cold war between the featherbedding scholars and the disgruntled Princess had just gone hot, it seemed. Twilight could do nothing but groan and watch as the carefully orchestrated plan to slip the Thestrals back into the Equestrian mainstream unraveled like a sweater in a taffy-pulling machine.

After a bit more yelling, Twilight shot a magical firework from her horn into air. The flash of light and earsplitting bang bought her a moment's silence; she dove into that moment with all four hooves. "This interview is over! A press release from the Crown concerning the results of this study, the investigative hearing concerning the ponies involved--" here several white coated ponies flinched--"and the subsequent changes to the thestral laws will be made available to all the reporters in attendance; any further questions will have to be submitted by hoofwritten letter to the Crown until then. Thank you for attending, please leave by the marked exits." With that, the guards began firmly pushing the herd out the doors in one direction, the still-fuming Dr. Caduceus and his colleagues out the other. Soon, only Luna and Twilight remained.

The two princesses retreated to a small tea room. Servants were summoned, trays of cakes were fetched, calming blends were selected and brewed, and one princess served while the other fumed and seethed and spent out her anger, managing to eat her tea cakes and sip her tea with surprising ferocity even as she muttered imprecations against all pretentious scholars and leeches under her breath.

Anger eventually faded away, to be replaced with a growing tint of regret. Luna turned to Twilight with haggard eyes and flung herself at her. "Oh what have I done, Twilight?" Luna moaned, on the verge of sobbing. "Curse my temper, I have undone everything--!" She clutched the younger princess in a rib-cracking hug. "When the common ponies hear of this fracas, their hearts will set in stone against my thestrals-- and against me!"

"Hnrgh," Twilight said. She started to say something curt, then sighed, lacking the ire. It wouldn't really be fair... "No, Luna," she said. "This wasn't your fault--"

"Truly?" Luna pulled away to look at her with weepy eyes.

Twilight grimaced. "Mmmmaybe a little," she confessed. "The yelling didn't help--- but I don't think Dr. Caduceus was going to let things turn out any other way." She scowled. "It was obvious he'd already made up his mind before the study ever began what the results were going to be. And everything else he said--" her expression soured even more. "It's pretty obvious he had more than one axe to grind to boot."

Luna hucked and wiped her eyes on her fetlock. "They're like foals," she said angrily. "Spoiled little foals who are angry that their candy money has been taken away!" Her heat turned to disappointment. "I cannot believe our little ponies would be so spiteful as to hurt their fellow ponies just to get even with me!"

"They don't see it that way," Twilight said. She gnawed her lip as she looked for the words. "To them, the blood ban is just an... an abstract number on a piece of paper. The hurt it causes is invisible, spread out over years and over thousands of ponies... not right up in their faces. The thestrals aren't actually starving, after all... just suffering a bit of malnourishment... nothing really serious-- or so they'd say. So it's not important to them." Her tone got bitter. "Not like a princess who slashes the crown's funding, or who, horrors, tries to get them to admit that they were wrong about
something in front of the press that their teachers' teachers' teachers said was true." She shot a dirty look in the direction the stubborn doctor had departed.

Luna snuffled again. "You speak more than truth, Twilight," she said glumly. "Would that I had been mindful of it beforehoof. I know from personal experience such." She cracked a half-hearted grin. "Did thou know that the pony who discovered the platypus took years to convince the sages of the olden times that it was real? He finally went so far as to purchase a pelt from a gryphon hunter to bring back to the Collegium."

"And what happened?" Twilight said.

Luna grinned openly now. "The eldest Professor savaged the hide with a pair of scissors, trying to cut the "stitches" he swore he could see holding the duck's beak to the beaver hide."(2) Twilight burst out laughing. Luna continued. "Strewth. The pony who found it was a simple earth pony farmer, so what could HE know that the prideful Professor could not? Twas years later before the Collegium as a whole was finally convinced, when an explorer brought back a live one... and gave it to me as a pet." Luna sighed wistfully. "Poor Quackles, I do miss him..."

"The platypus, I'm assuming," Twilight said, amused.

Luna gave her a wry smile but ignored the jibe. "Truth did have her vengeance though. Twould seem that male platypi have envenomned barbs on their back heels, and when the militant skeptic stuck his hooves into Quackles' tank to poke him, he got stung. Swelled up like a balloon from nose to dock..." Twilight laughed even louder at that.

The brief amusement turned back to melancholy soon enough. "Twilight," Luna lamented. "What am I to do? What am I to do in this latter age? A thousand years under my sister's golden reign, and our kingdom has become naught but naive, carelessly cruel children... and I am now even less honored than I was before I fell to the Nightmare."

Twilight's heart went out to the dark princess for whom it seemed it was always one trot forward, two trots back..."At least the word is out," Twilight reassured her. "The truth is out, even if some ponies don't want to believe it. They can't stop the revoking of the thestral blood laws any more."

"No," Luna said dolefully. "But they will not hesitate to twist the tale to their advantage..."

Twilight sighed. "Probably. But even controversy is better than blind consensus," She said stoutly. "Come on, we'd better get back to Celestia and see how the Summoning is coming along..."

---

1) I wish, how I wish this wasn't true.... it was to see if people in the military should carry umbrellas, to be precise.

2) Again, true story, from the Smithsonian. except for the getting stung part. Too much poetic justice to have actually happened, alas.

*For those who might wonder, this chapter, and the entire 'Blood Libel' plotline, was inspired by the true story of Ansel Keys and the Lipid Hypothesis, one of the most disastrous examples of medical science fraud, that has caused the premature death of millions since the 1950s.
"Oh, Luna," Celestia lamented. "I am so sorry. I knew I should have been there--- !"

"Tis of no difference, Sister," Luna said, her voice impassive. "The cards have been dealt, let them fall where they may."

"Still," Celestia said. "I could have softened the blow..." she shook her head. "Our little ponies are far less stubborn with me..."

"I know," Luna said flatly. "I would rather not dwell on that." She gestured around her. "Besides, thou wert busy with... this."

The princesses and the Mane Six were gathered together in the chamber of the Tree of Harmony. A large, flat area had been cleared out in the floor before the tree. A complex star-like diagram, an enneagram, had been sketched out on the floor, and nine crystalline obelisks, each of a different shape and hue, had been placed in a circle around it...with the Tree taking the open, tenth, side. The others, Twilight in particular, were scrutinizing the layout curiously.

"Indeed," Celestia said. She cleared her throat as one preparing to give a lecture. "This, my little ponies, is the Enneagram, used to summon beings from other dimensions. With it, we shall summon a champion from Darth Vulcan's homeworld. A match, a counterpart to him that will reestablish the balance between our forces and his... and enable us to tip victory in our favor."

Several in the group looked to each other. "What?" Celestia asked. "Go on, speak your minds."

Rainbow Dash was the first to raise her hoof. "Um, Princess, I'm sure you thought of this already but-- why don't we just use this Ennyma thingy to send Darth Vulcan back home?"

Celestia shook her head. "I did think of that," she said. "If only things were so easy. There's a long complicated magical explanation for why, Rainbow Dash, but--" she tapped a hoof and pursed her lip, thinking. "The closest metaphor I can think of is that it's easier to pull a string than to push it. To use this method to return him, we would basically have to find his world, go to it, and pull him from our world to his. Not...exactly feasible."

"I am curious about something, Sister," Luna said sourly. "Did thou not hear the words of the filly whose advice thou sought? How dost one leap from hearing the sage advice that twill take more than a single fierce blow to unseat our enemy, to this?" She swept her hoof about, indicating the Summoning of the Champion. "How is summoning some random 'champion' from the aether anything but doing the exact opposite of what thou was counseled to do--- putting all on a single throw of the die?"

Celestia lowered her head, sighing unhappily. "We really don't have time--"

"Make time." Luna's reply was curt, and brooked no argument.

There was a painful pause. "Very well. Simply put, little sister, I am NOT putting all our eggs in one basket. I do not in the least expect a Champion to defeat Darth Vulcan out of hand. But Vulcan... he is too alien to us. A Champion, one of his own kind, from his own world, familiar with his way of thinking will, at the least, occupy him while we put other plans into play."

Luna's eyes widened. "...A pawn to sacrifice," she said. The words, the accusation, hurt to say. The room got painfully still, the other ponies present regarding Celestia with wide uncertain eyes.
Celestia gave a half-smile. "I would say rather a knight, to place him in check," she said. She lowered her head to the summoning pattern, her magic moving stones and vials and other items into place on the chalk lines. "I have no intent of throwing somepony to the wolves. We will give the Champion all the support and aid that we can in his mission. He will either defeat Darth Vulcan or counter him, but either one is to our greater advantage."

"It is still a great deal to hang our hopes on, Auntie," Cadence said. "All or nothing, on one shot..."

"Which is why we will attempt this more than once," Celestia said. "We have enough power... just enough... to attempt this three times within this Solar Year. We will have to space the summonings out over considerable time, and the Champions will each only remain a limited time--- from one or two weeks to a month--- before the window of opportunity closes and they must return home. But three chances is better than none."

She straightened. "There, that does it," she said. "Everypony take your places." With a considerable amount of pointing, stepping, moving and switching places, every pony present was soon standing in place around the circle. "While we cannot specifically know whom we shall pluck from the currents of space and time, the Enneagram will make our search... more selective. It will search first for one who embraces the values embodied by those in the pattern. Kindness, Generosity, Laughter, Honesty, Loyalty, Love, Friendship..." She nodded to each in turn. "And while 'Sun' and 'Moon' aren't exactly virtues," she chuckled, "It will mean that the Champion will respect the balance in the Cycle, and our authority as rulers.

"And not, one hopes, seek to take a crown for themselves?" Luna said dryly.

"Ahem. That as well," Celestia confessed. She gave Luna an irritated look. "MUST you spoil the moment?" Luna merely shrugged and looked away. "I have already put in other parameters into the search as well," Celestia continued. "They must be in fair health, neither halt nor lame, in the prime of their youth, and they must be willing to come of their own free will if summoned. I have no desire to someone old, crippled, sickly, and angry at us for yanking him out of his bed." Nervous titters greeted this. "But now, to complete the Summoning, each of us must name an attribute for this Champion... what each believes to be a vital characteristic, above and beyond what we have already listed. Choose carefully; you only get one, and once named, they cannot be undone." She nodded to Cadence. "You first, Niece," she said.

Cadence blinked and nodded. She wet her lips, thinking. "The Champion must be chivalrous," she said. As she spoke, a ball of lavender light floated out of the branches of the Tree of harmony, entered the circle and hovered before her. The tree of Harmony chimed.

Next was Fluttershy. She shuffled nervously, peeking out from behind her mane. "The Champion must be brave," she said. A pale yellow light formed at her place.

Rainbow Dash tapped her chin, scowling. She wasn't the sort to list vague things like 'brave' or 'noble' or the like... "The Champion must be good with weapons," she said. "Swords and shields and stuff." The tree chimed again, and a blue spark floated in the air over the enneagram.

Dash's practical thinking seemed to inspire Applejack. "He's gotta be a big feller," she said. "Don't need a shrimp for this hoedown." The tree chimed even as Celestia winced. "Whut?" Applejack said.

"You might have chosen your words more carefully, dear," Celestia said. "By saying "he," you pretty much eliminated half the candidates."

"What? Oh, dang, I meant 'He or She...' what? Too late?" The orange light in front of her remained unchanged. "Well nuts."
Twilight bit her lip. Now she was really, REALLY nervous about her choice of words. "Um.. the Champion must be--- well educated, to within the top one percent of his race," she said. Some of the others rolled their eyes at her or hid smirks. She made a "Well?" face back at them. They didn't want some illiterate savage, did they?

"The Champion must have absolutely no allergies and be immune to everything," Pinkie Pie said with a confident smile. A pink spark appeared. The others stared at her. "Well? What good would it do if we got some big brave burly super-warrior who took one bite of a muffin and keeled over dead? Duh. Am I the only pony who thinks of these things?" That put a thoughtful look on several faces.

Rarity surprised them. "The Champion must be well-versed in battlefield strategy and tactics," she said primly. The blue-white spark before her seemed to agree.

Luna nodded in approval. "Indeed. The Champion must be a seasoned veteran of many campaigns!"

An indigo star floated before her.

Celestia gave her a nod. She had thought over her own words carefully. She wasn't quite sure where they came from, but they fit, of that she was sure.

"The Champion must be willing to explore strange new worlds, to walk among new life and new civilizations..." she paused. "...to boldly go where none have gone before." A pale pastel light formed before her.

All nine of the lights floated to the center of the diagram on the floor, merging into a single white light. It hovered over a tiny pile of items; a brass key, a few copper coins, a bus ticket, other odd bits and bobs discreetly plucked from Darth Vulcan's pockets while he had been a prisoner in Canterlot. The light danced over them briefly, absorbing the fragments of quantum signature from the inert matter, then plunging into the lines of the Enneagram. The light raced along the chalk lines back to each of the mares in the circle, levitating them off the floor and haloing them in a nimbus of light. The ball of light at the center became a crackling pillar, and flared a blinding white...

The light winked out. All of them fell to the floor, landing on their butts with loud OOFs and cries of complaint. Rainbow Dash was the first to shake it off. "Did it work?" she said, getting to her feet and looking around. She looked to the center of the circle. "Ho-lee horseapples...."

The others looked where she was staring and gawped in shock. A bipedal figure stood there. He was enormous--- not merely in height, but in width.... He had on tennis shoes with knee-high socks, khaki shorts, a fanny pack, and had a t-shirt stretched over his girth that proudly proclaimed "New York Renfaire 2015" in fancy black script. He wore a horned helmet that looked to be made of pot metal, and a pair of thick rectangular glasses. A foam padded broadsword was strapped to his back, along with a round wooden shield, and he was currently clutching a stuffed dragon and a cheesecake-on-a-stick in his terrified grip. His gaze was locked, riveted on the Tree of Harmony before him, which glowed and chimed serenely as ever.

"Oh.... my...." Fluttershy said. She YEEPED as the strange figure's head whipped around, fast as a striking cobra, to rivet her with eyes that bulged like boiled eggs over his fat cheeks. She-- and everyone else on that side of the room-- jumped back a pace or three in alarm.

Celestia took a couple of hesitant, cautious steps towards him. "Ah, Hello?" His head whipped around to face her now, making her jump a bit. She decided to go for Enigmatic Smile Number Three. "Ah.... we welcome you, Champion of Equestria."

He made a sound like a strangled seal. He toppled over like a felled tree, hitting the stone floor with a
splat.

"Well," Celestia said, looking down at her brave, chivalrous, intelligent, land whale of a Champion. "...Buck."
The ponies stood in a circle, staring in bewilderment at their beached and unconscious would-be champion. "What the heck happened?" Rainbow Dash said, giving the prostrate form a wary poke with a hoof. "This is supposed to be our Champion?" She snorted. "This guy couldn't be a champion of anything!"

"Except maybe a pie eatin' contest," Applejack said ruefully.

"Oh, DAMMIT!" Celestia shouted, stamping her hoof and tossing her head. The others jumped at the thunder-crack that accompanied her swear. She looked alarmingly close to bursting into tears. She stared up at the roof of the cavern and blinked her tears back, grimacing. "I can't believe I forgot the Literal Genie Boundary!" she said, frustrated. "I got in a rush, the current extraplanar conjunction was so ideal--"

"Literal what?" Rarity said, confused.

Every uninformed eye turned to Twilight Sparkle. She was nosing over their unconscious guest, and had managed to detach and unzip his oversized fanny pack and was going through the contents. She looked up. "Ugh, the Literal Genie Boundary," she groaned, shifting into lecture mode even as she continued hoofing through the bag. "It's a sort of... magical backlash. Generally speaking, magic is compliant and cooperative; your thoughts give it a form and an intent, and it tends to flow in that direction, get the results you want or as close to it as possible. But sometimes, just sometimes it gets-- contrary. Instead of doing what you MEAN, it does what you SAY. Oh, magic isn't intelligent or anything, but it's controlled and directed by thoughts... You put an idea in it, and it goes looking to make that idea happen. And words and ideas are connected in odd ways.

"That's why so few unicorn magic spells use words, and why focusing on a mental image is so important; because saying a word automatically makes you think, in the back of your head, of its alternate, related, or even opposite meanings.... synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, autoantonyms are REALLY a pain...."

"And the more ambitious or complicated a spell is, the more carefully you have to construct it... or you get things like this happening," Celestia lamented. " There are ways to compensate, but, well.... I summoning is a whole new level of complexity. You have to account for what the words mean HERE, and what they mean over THERE, and make sure the spell looks for what YOU think your words mean and not what they think it means in the other dimension."

"That's the boundary," Twilight said. "The difference between what words mean here, and what words mean there, ideas and concepts that don't exist in one that exist in another--- some ideas just don't translate. I mean, Zebras have no word for "Snow" in their language, but Crystal Ponies have fourteen---"

"So how far off WERE we?" Cadence said.

"Bad enough," Twilight muttered. "Look at him, it's obvious how the spell interpreted 'Big Feller.' Applejack flushed, but nopony said anything.
Twilight continued digging. "Oh boy," she groaned. She tipped the bag out. "I'm starting to get an idea of how far off." A handful of folded papers and three or four odd polyhedrons rolled across the floor, followed by some cleverly painted pewter figurines. "I recognize these," she said. "They're not exactly the same, but they look an AWFUL lot like the dice and character sheets from my brother's "Ogres and Oubliettes" days." At everypony's uncomprehending stares she burst out, "the roleplaying game! You know, where they sit around a table and pretend to be warriors and wizards and battle monsters in dungeons--- my brother and his dorky friends played it all the time," she sniffed disdainfully.

"Wouldn't let his annoying kid sister play, huh?" Dash said, smirking.

"No, he did once in a while," Cadence dimpled. "He'd give her a character, let her roll the dice, and then tell her a Bugbear ate her."

Twilight growled and pretended to ignore her. "And these character sheets look well used, so he's played a lot of sessions," she said, poking the obviously erased and re-erased papers. "What my brother and his friends called 'campaigns'--"

Luna facehoofed. "A veteran of many campaigns," she muttered. "Dost not the spell distinguish between the real and the make-believe??" She demanded in an angry shout.

"Well, um," Twilight tapped the pewter figurines. "There is sort of a.... blurred line. I mean, a lot of military training involves wargaming out battle scenarios--- and if I don't miss my guess, these little guys are part of a wargaming set. To go by the little mace and battle axe."

"Well versed in battlefield strategy," Rarity groaned. "If one is waging war on inch-high armored trolls."

"But what about being good with swords and stuff?" Rainbow Dash exploded.

"Look at the one strapped across his back, Rainbow Dash," Rarity sniffed. "You never specified they had to be METAL swords..."

"How?" Celestia said, more distraught than ever. "How?? How could the spell have gotten every single attribute wrong??"

"He'd better not have any allergies," Pinkie Pie said dourly.

Leo slowly swam upwards out of the void to semi-consciousness. It was dark, for some reason--- oh, he had his eyes closed. That would explain that. It didn't however explain why he was lying face down on a cold, gritty stone floor. "Oh what a bungle," he heard someone say... a woman, from the sound of her voice, and a rather high-class lady at that.

_Probably one of the in-costume nobility_, Leo thought.

"Strewth," another, younger voice said. She sounded befuddled, even a little astonished. "E'en tho I had mine misgivings, sister, this... this is..." words apparently failed her.

_Definitely one of the Renfaire actors_, Leo decided muzzily. _Probably one of the Court ladies from the CSA. That bunch were fanatical about staying in character. She was pretty good, too--- got the
pronunciations and the thees and thous all right... Had he had an accident at the Renfaire? Tripped and fallen? What the heck had happened? "I didn't miss the Caber toss, did I?" he mumbled blearily.

This seemed to generate a reaction. "Look, he's waking up!"

Carefully, he opened his eyes. There was a rough stone floor not an inch from his nose. He glanced from side to side--- his glasses had fallen off, but he could make out legs surrounding him. Legs, with-- hooves? He groped about for his glasses. Someone slid them under his grasping fingers. "Thanks," he mumbled, putting them back on. With a groan, he rolled over onto his back and heaved himself into a sitting position.

And looked straight into a face he never expected to see anywhere outside his own wildest imaginings.

Luna stretched her head out to the creature. Despite everything her heart went out to it. "What are we to do?" she said, her voice full of pity. "This poor thing is no Champion. Why he fainted dead away at the sight of us! He will be stranded on an alien world for a full moon, surrounded by alien creatures. Surely he will be terrified out of his mind..."

The creature groaned and sat up, pushing his spectacles up his rounded nose. His eyes locked with the Moon Princesses...

"Oh my gosh," he whinnied. "Princess Luna??" Before the princess could even respond, he reached out, placing one beefy hand on the pad of her nose.

"Um," Luna said, nonplussed. "N'ello...."

The burly champion let out a squeal. "Oh my gosh, you're REAL!" He threw his arms around Luna's neck in a gleeful embrace.

"Huagh," Luna said. "Or mayhap he will cope? Agk, not so tight!"

"Oh, sorry sorry sorry--" he quickly released her, leaving one hand patting her neck. "Ohmigosh, best pony is real... I gotta be dreaming!" He looked around and saw the others. "Pinky Pie! Applejack! Rainbow Dash! Twilight and omigosh omigosh, Fluttershy! and..." his eyes fell on one particular mare he sucked in a gasp that threatened to empty the room of air.

"Princess Celestia..."

The mares started, stared, or eeeped as was their wont. Celestia, for her part, gave him a nervous smile. "Ah, welcome..."

He gave a sudden start. "Oh, uh, omigosh, where are my manners--" He scuffled a bit, lumbering up to his feet and bowing with surprising alacrity for one his size. "Your Highness," he said, bowing to Celestia with his arm across his chest. "Oh, and uh, your Highnesses--" he bowed to a flustered Twilight Sparkle and a bemused Cadence. "And Your Highness," he bowed especially deep to Luna. He popped up again like a bobbing bird. "Oh I can't believe this is really happening, it's like a fanfic come true!" He started chattering questions at the mane six, not stopping for breath or, for that matter, answers.
"How does he know us?" Rarity said as an aside to Twilight.

"'What is reality in one realm, is merest fantasy in another, ' " Twilight quoted. "'Yet both are true, and both are myth.' "

"Ah, that is right," Celestia said. "Darth Vulcan indicated that he comes from a world where we are merely characters in a story. And a rather popular one as well if I remember him correc--- oh dear," she said, suddenly dismayed anew as this sank in.

"What is it?" Twilight asked.

Celestia realized the Champion had stopped gabbling and was now looking at her. "Later, Twilight," she said. "Yes? Oh, and may I ask your name?" Her smile was just the tiniest bit strained.

He bowed again. "My name is Leo Hart, Your Majesty," he said, beaming. "And it is so incredible to be here... Um...." he paused. "But... why am I here?"

Celestia braced herself. It would be best to be honest from the very beginning. "Leo, our land faces a terrible threat. An enemy the likes of which we have never faced before. In desperation, I chose to summon... um, Leo?"

Leo wasn't paying attention. He was, for the first time, taking in his surroundings: the chalk diagram on the floor, the obelisks, the shining crystal tree. "You summoned a champion," he breathed. "Equestria is in mortal danger. And you used the Tree of Harmony and the Elements to summon a champion-- and for some reason, some crazy reason, the magic chose me."

She could see it in his eyes; he'd put it all together. "That is the gist of it," she started to say regretfully. Poor human, she thought. But before she could start into the spiel explaining how the Literal Genie Boundary had buggered them all, there was a meaty thump.

The enormous human had taken one knee. The stuffed dragon, unheeded, dropped and tumbled across the floor. He whipped his shield and boffer sword off his back and presented them to Celestia and Luna, head bowed. "I gladly pledge my sword, my shield, my good right arm and my honor to the Court of the Moon and the Sun," he said in an orator's tones, his voice reverent. "To defend her people-- er, ponies-- against this enemy, whomever he may be, so long as I am able!"

Celestia and Luna stared at him, jaws slack. "Ergk?" Celestia managed.

He looked up at his boffer sword. "Um." he said. "I'll probably need to borrow a better weapon, though."

The silence stretched on for a second or two. He seemed to realize he was holding a chocolate-covered stick in one of his hands. "Where'd my cheesecake on a stick go..?" A quick look about revealed nothing but Pinkie Pie with cheese and chocolate smeared cheeks, chewing something and trying to look innocent.

"Pinkie...!"

Celestia spoke before Luna could. "I couldn't tell him, Luna, I simply couldn't!" she said under her breath as they marched along the forest path. "It would have been just too cruel."
"I agree, Sister," Luna said reluctantly. She looked up ahead, where the being known as Leo Hart plodded along, chattering like an excited foal with the Elements. "To be summoned to what is, to you, a world of wonders, for a great and noble task--- only to be told in the next moment that it was a mistake? It would have been too much." She set her lips in a thin line. "But we must tell him, the instant we have him back to Canterlot."

The original plan had been to whisk the champion away from the Castle of the Two Sisters in the flying chariot by which they had arrived. Alas, that was unworkable; much to Leo's mortification, his added weight had been too much; they were simply all too heavy for the chariot to lift. Given the choice between having the charioteers make multiple trips back and forth and increasing their odds of being spotted by Darth Vulcan's lookouts or worse, his archers--or giving the chariot pegasi hernias--they had instead opted to take the (mostly) secured short path back to Ponyville, where the Friendship Express would whisk them to Canterlot with all due speed. Accompanied by a sextet of guards, they had set out by hoof on the path, their new garrulous guest happily chatting with the Elements and rubbernecking as he took in the "awesome" and "incredible" Everfree Forest. "Awesome and Incredible;" two adjectives none of them had heard used to describe the sinister eldritch forest before, to be sure.

"Agreed," Celestia said. "We will make him comfortable during his stay, and explain.. gently... that he is..."

"The worst possible candidate we could have chosen?" Twilight said next to her, making her jump. "Sorry, Celestia."

Celestia sighed. "No, it is tragically true," she said. "I'm sure he's quite a nice person--- he certainly seems friendly enough-- but... a bit too off-kilter. " She nodded at the bipedal figure ahead. "He is obviously a devout follower of this 'television show' about us--"

"I know," Twilight said, mouth twisting. "He keeps blurting out all these details of our lives he couldn't possibly know; it's kind of creeping me and the girls out."

"Do try to be patient with him, Twilight," Celestia urged.

"I will, I will..." She rolled her eyes. "I'm... going to go back up there and get to know him a little better," Twilight said doubtfully. "He comes from Darth Vulcan's world; he could have some knowledge, some skill that will help us..." she trailed off and trotted to catch up with the lumbering human.

Twilight came trotting up next to the little group. Leo was walking along, surrounded by her friends, chatting animatedly about everything and anything. Which, unfortunately, seemed to consist of a large number of rather personal questions.

"Rarity, do your parents go on a lot of vacations? It seems Sweetiebelle spends an awful lot of time with you."

"Is Big Macintosh dating Miss Cheerilee, because I sorta pick up that vibe..."

"Are any of you dating for that matter?"

"Does Twilight really do that 'sunshine sunshine' dance all the time with you, Cadence?"
He seemed oblivious to the fact that just because he knew about them through some bit of fiction in
his world, it still might be invading their personal space. She hadn't seen her friends looking this ill at
ease since Maude Pie had come to visit. She sidled up and interrupted the one sided conversation.
"Do you mind if I ask you a few questions, Leo?" she said with her most brilliant smile. "I just have
some things I was wondering about."

"Oh, uh, sure." He had skinned the foam covering off his "sword," and was using the thick dowel
rod to batter vines and branches that had crept over the fence line out of the way. "Ask away."

"So what do you do for a living?" she asked. "Back in the human world, I mean."

He shrugged. "I'm a student right now, so I work part time at Wal-Mart... a big chain store, if you
know what those are. Cashier, stockboy, that sort of thing. It pays the bills."

"A... stockboy." Twilight said. He nodded. She seized on a salient point. "Oh, but you're a student?
What are you studying?" She cleared her throat and looked apologetic. "The reason I'm asking is that
the spell was supposed to search for someone who was well educated..."

He nodded, beaming confidently. "Absolutely! Well I've not got my degree yet, but I'm majoring in
Medieval History and Literature!... with a minor in computer programming," he added. "Gotta get
those STEM fields."

There was a snort from overhead; Dash was hovering nearby (of course) and had picked up the
conversation. She hadn't understood half the words the guy used-- heck, she suspected even Twilight
didn't know what a "Stem Field" or "Computer" thingummy was. But she'd gotten the gist of it. "You
were going to school to be an old book nerd?"

Leo bristled and seemed to swell up. His educational career was an obvious sensitive point.
"Medieval and Renaissance literature and history are demanding courses of education, Lady
Rainbow--"

The 'Lady Rainbow' thing hit the wrong button. "Yeah yeah," Dash said, waving a hoof and rolling
her eyes. "Whatever you say, fella..."

Leo turned red. "Hey! At least I didn't drop out, Miss Thing," he snapped. "And that's especially
pathetic in your case. How the hell does a creature born with wings flunk out of a flying school?"

Now it was Dash's turn to get her feathers ruffled. "HEY, back off, fatso!" she said, getting up in his
face. "I got my G.E.D. ages ago. And they don't just teach flyiiiing," she said snarkily, landing and
flittering her wingtips," they---"

"GUYS!" Twilight yelled, making them both jump. "Enough of that! Now apologize."

Leo was the first to relent. "Sorry," he grumbled. "I don't like it when people make fun of my
education." He tried to scowl, but with his pudgy face it looked far more like a pout. "I'm sorry. That
was a cheap shot."

"Yeah, whatever," Dash said, looking away and rubbing her leg with her hoof. "Sorry," she went
on, a little more sincerely. "I know how that is..."

It was then that Twilight's language centers decided to pop that little bubble of simpatico, and once
again run ahead of the rest of her brain. "But you were supposed to be well-educated," she blurted
out. She slapped her hoof over her mouth but it was too late.

Leo's scowl deepened, but then he sighed, looking sad. "Well, I suppose I'm incredibly well
educated... compared to most of the other seven billion people on Earth," he said.

Twilight's pupils shrank to dots. "Seven billion...?" Instantly she realized her tragic error. She couldn't begin to guess what the educational system was like in his world, but in the world of Equestria, just being able to read fluently in your own language put you in the top fifty percent. An Equestrian High School diploma put you in the top thirty, maybe the top twenty percent in the world. But in a world of seven billion....? Statistically, he could be dead last in a group of seventy million and still be in the top one percent. How many of a one percent that large would be super geniuses, and how many would most likely have an education barely sufficient for bagging groceries and picking fruit?

And all else being equal, even among the best educated in the world, the likelihood of their being educated in something USEFUL for this crisis was infinitesimal. Thanks to the odds, they'd ended up summoning a champion whose education was probably as useful as a chocolate teapot.

He confirmed her suspicions a moment later. "Yeah, seven billion. And.... well, a lot of the world isn't really as civilized as my country. Just having a grade school education probably puts me up in the top, I dunno, ten, twenty percent... even if it is mostly an academic education." He saw the look on her face and laughed. "Fret not, Your Highness. I am well educated enough, and I am no dullard," he said, taking on what she was coming to recognize as a slightly flowery affectation in his speech. "Besides, it's not like I'm going to be defeating Equestria's nemesis with my GPA, is it?"

While Twilight stood there, trying to digest this horrifying blasphemy to the virtues of higher education, Rainbow Dash moved in. "Well yeah, maybe," she said. "But you were supposed to be good with swords and shields and stuff, too. And looking at you, well--" she hovered about, waving her hooves to indicate all of him in general.

Applejack chipped in. "She means you don't exactly look like no warrior, feller. no offense."

"Well that's where you lucked out," he said, cheerfully amused. "Back home, I'm probably the best man-at-arms in the tri-state area."

Rainbow Dash eyed his girth. "You're joking."

"Nope." He held up his wooden sword. "I'm a member of the Society for Creative Anachronism."

"The who?" This came from everypony.

"The S.C.A. The Renfaire people. Here, can we take a breather?" He went over to a stump and, after some careful pokes with his sword to check for anything liable to bite, took a seat. "One thing you gotta know is, for the most part in our world, swords and shields and other medieval weaponry have been out of use for hundreds of years. It's only a rare handful of people who really know anything about them. The S.C.A. is an organization of people who like to reenact stuff from that time---jousting, archery, fencing, tournaments, even full-blown battles with armored knights on both sides. Padded weapons, of course--" he waved his un-padded sword-- "but they take it serious. I have me a sweet set of tournament armor back home... I usually carry a warhammer for official tournaments, but this was a casual renfaire, so...."

He shrugged. "Course I also do a little LARPing--- that's more for people who want to do stuff with wizards and ogres and roleplayed magic and junk. Not as realistic obviously." He stopped and looked around at his audience of unicorns, pegasi and talking ponies. "Um, for a given value of realistic..."

"Okay, that's kind of cool, actually," Dash admitted.
"Do a lot of people do this?" Rarity asked.

"Better believe it. Shoot, you guys nabbed me right out of the middle of a RenFaire!... Eh, that's a sort of Medieval-Renaissance themed festival. Lots of reenactments, period costumes...you'd like that part, Rarity... food--"

"Like cheesecake on a stick?" Pinkie said, licking her lips nostalgically.

"Yeah," Leo said dryly.

"Sounds like a fun party!"

"Wait wait wait," Twilight interrupted. "You're saying you don't have any MAGIC in your world either? No wait," she said to herself with a badly strained little laugh. "That's right. You're from Darth Vulcan's word... he told us they have no real magic there, so nopony from your world would have even an inkling of magic. Oh wait. Except for Darth Vulcan himself." Several strands of her mane sproinged loose as her pupils dilated. "Oh, could it possibly get any better...?" she said, her voice stress-ascending to a near-ultrasonic squeak.

It started to sink in, then. "So y'all are sayin'," Applejack ventured carefully, "that th' only humans who fight with swords an' shields an' spears and magic an' what not for the past hundred years... are humans like you who're playin' a game?"

"Athletic event," Leo stressed. "You go out there and, padded weapons or not, you'll raise some bruises , and work up a sweat, too! Still I've got enough tournament experience that I'm not going to stab myself in the foot by mistake, at least." He bent down to fiddle with his shoelaces. "Go on ahead, I'll catch up in a second. Got a rock in my shoe." Reluctantly, the rest of the group trotted on ahead, leaving him behind with Fluttershy and two of the guardponies.

"Do you think the ponies in Ponyville will like me?" they heard him ask.

"Oh, I'm sure they will," Fluttershy said kindly. "You're a very, um, nice human..."

"Oh, well thank you.."

The others clustered together, speechless. Celestia and Luna allowed themselves to catch up with them. As one the group turned on the celestial diarchs and began whispering frantically.

"What do we do, Celestia?" Twilight said frantically. "He's no general or leader or even a proper scholar--"

"He doesn't realize how serious this is, your Highnesses--"

"This fella ain't no warrior--"

"No kiddin', he thinks running around the woods boppin' people with foam rubber swords is a battle!"

"That Darth Vulcan guy is gonna tear him apart!"

Celestia shushed them hastily. "We know, we know, my little Ponies," Celestia said. "Once we get him back to Canterlot, we'll... explain the situation to him properly. That we made an error in judgment, and we will let him stay as our guest, and keep him out of trouble...then send him home before the thirty days has passed." She sighed. "It would be just too cruel to tell him right now..."
The others looked troubled, but nodded. None of them had missed the willingness, the sheer joy with which he had made his oath of fealty. More than one was afraid that the human, had he learned that Darth Vulcan was in these very woods, might actually grab a spear and shield from a guardpony and march off into the trees to challenge the dark warlock immediately.

"He acts as if he imagines himself in an enchanted comic book," Luna muttered, frowning. "And worse, that he is the destined hero. This could be excessively bad, if he takes it in his head to do something suicidally stupid because that's what he thinks the hero of the story is supposed to do."

Celestia shook her head. "He is still giddy now," she said. "But hopefully when he calms down he will be more rational."

"Well, we'd better keep an eye on him," Applejack said, nodding up the path.

"Indeed, guardponies or no, fences or no, this forest is dangerous," Rarity shuddered. "I am loth to think what might happen if--"

She never finished the thought. The air was split by the sound of a filly's scream... followed by a faint "aw HAIL naw!"

"To arms!" one of the guardsponies shouted. His compatriots galloped to join him.

In an instant everypony was galloping in the direction of the sound, up around the bend in the trail. Thus far, the fence-builders had managed to fence in the immediate surroundings of the Castle of the Pony Sisters, and a broad if winding trail that led from there to Ponyville. But keeping those fences maintained was proving a problem; one of the Everfree's intermittent storms had felled trees and branches up ahead, flattening a long section of the protective fence and neutralizing the shocking spell that ran through it... And at least one of the Everfree's numerous predators had gotten up the nerve to examine this gap and see just what tasty meaty treats the ponies had been sheltering from it. An enormous manticore was pounding down the middle of the trail, headed straight for them--- and barely a step ahead, heads down and running for their very lives, were Zecora and Applebloom.

Immediately, the guards formed a phalanx in front of their charges, spears planted and lowered. "To us quickly, ma'am!" One of them shouted to the running ponies.

"DA HAIL YOU THINK WE DOIN'?" Zecora howled. She grabbed Applebloom's scruff in her teeth, threw the filly over her back, and floored it, barely outracing the creature's flailing claws.

"Fluttershy, do something!" Twilight cried.

Fluttershy started to fly ahead-- then she saw the manticore's maddened red eyes, and the mossy green tendrils, flecked with froth, hanging from its lips and knew there would be no reasoning with the creature. "Oh no! Madroot! Run, Zecora, run!"

She was right; the manticore in its hunger had taken to chewing Madroot. In small amounts it was almost like catnip... but in excess it could trigger a dangerous derangement. The beast was hungry, angry, and beyond reason, and it had fresh meat running in front of its nose. It would not listen to even Fluttershy's blandishments.

Zecora was almost to the safety of the soldiers' spear line when she tripped over an unseen root and tumbled to the ground. Applebloom tumbled on ahead. The guards rushed forward to engage the beast, yelling. The manticore reared up and swatted the guardponies away to either side with a single blow of its paws. It roared, and prepared to spring on the downed zebra.

Then something massive flew past the gathered ponies and struck the manticore amidships like a
thunderbolt.

"Leo!!" somepony cried.

It was; the lumbering human had picked up a felled log as thick as his arm and as long as he was tall and charged, slamming into the manticore in a full-on tackle... placing himself between the monster and the ponies. The Princesses acted quickly, snagging their little ponies in their magic and dragging them back to safety behind the spear-ponies. Why none of the unicorns or alicorns present thought to slam down a magic dome over the group was the question to be begged; some may have hesitated, waiting for an opening to drag Leo to safety as well...

...the more likely answer was that they were too astonished at what they were seeing to think clearly.

Leo had the drug-maddened manticore in a full grapple, his shield wedged in the manticore's jaws, the thick tree-limb locked against the monster's neck, pinning its forelegs back so it could not bring its claws into play. The monster roared, struggling; Leo roared back, straining till the veins stood out on his thick neck. The manticore's barbed tail whipped about, seeking a target. The tip grazed Leo's calf, eliciting a yell from him as the poison sizzled on his stockinged leg.

"I SAY... THEE... NAY!" Leo bellowed; his foot jerked up and stomped down, crushing the tail tip to the ground. There was a crack like breaking shell, and the scorpion-cat squalled in pain. Leo took advantage of the monster's distraction; he broke the clinch, fell back, and brought the log in his hands around in a mighty swing. There wasn't so much a crack as a BOOM as the length of wood shattered against the side of the manticore's head with such force that it flipped the beast clean around and over on its back. It hit the ground with a tremendous thud, dust and leaves flying in the air.

The beast had had enough. It staggered to its paws, shaking its head drunkenly, and fled in a limping run till it vanished among the trees.

Leo fell to his knees, his chest heaving. He picked his spectacles out of the dust, wiped them on his shirt and donned them, then looked back at the others. His eyes fell on Fluttershy and he saw her anguished face. "I'm Sorry, Fluttershy," he gasped. "I-- had no choice, I..."

The next moment Fluttershy illustrated that she could still be misjudged. "You're HURT!" she cried out, running to Leo's side. She began digging frantically through one of her panniers. "Let me see that leg, oh dear oh dear oh dear, roll down that sock-- Manticore poison is nasty stuff--- wha...?"

The manticore's sting had indeed scored his leg... a bright red line of blood ran down his calf, and the poison had sizzled his stocking. But there was no sign of inflammation around the wound, no blistering, none of the signs of manticore sting anypony knew to recognize. The gathered ponies gaped at the impossible wound, even as Fluttershy cleaned and dressed it. "Are you feeling dizzy? Short of breath?" she asked him anxiously. He shook his head.

Pinkie Pie was the first to speak. "Absolutely no allergies," she said, smirking smugly at the others. Rainbow Dash gave her a disgusted look.

"It figures," she griped. "Out of ALL of us, Pinkie Pie would be the only one to get what she asked for-- with a cherry on top." Pinkie showed her mature side by giving her a raspberry.

Twilight was the first to Zecora's side. "Are you all right, Zecora?" Twilight said, fussing over the fallen zebra.

"Oh, jest FAAAAAHHN," Zecora drawled, rolling her eyes. She got to her feet and looked her self over, then checked her wicker panniers. "Fuh sho dat mofo manticore almost had him a zebra..."
sandwich wif a gillyweed salad. Dang it, most of it musta spilt out when we was a-runnin.' " The others moved to help her gather the remnants of her harvest out of the road.

Twilight saw Leo's head whip around to stare at the zebra. She had to suppress a giggle; the human was blinking his eyes at Zecora's accent and looked like he wanted to blink his ears, too. *Guess the all-seeing Television didn't tell him everything*, she thought mischievously.

"Dude," Rainbow Dash said. "That was incredible--"

"Astounding--" Rarity added.

"...Brave," Fluttershy whispered with a smile as she finished binding the dressing to his leg. Leo's flushed face blushed even redder. He ducked his head, grinning.

Applejack had Applebloom in a near death-clinch, her eyes wide at what had almost happened. The rattled filly wasn't objecting. She was too busy babbling about it. "... just came out here with Zecora to pick some gillyweed an' we heard this roaring an' all we could do is run--"

Applejack patted her on the back and murmured words of reassurance. She looked over where Leo still sat on the ground, her face wide open with disbelief. "Great Maker and Heaven above, I cain't hardly believe what I saw," she said. "Ah never woulda thought--" she stopped suddenly, cheeks reddening.

Leo chuckled, coughing a bit. "Didn't think a big fat guy like me was that strong?" he said, grinning. Applejack's face got a little redder but she didn't deny it. "I'm in a lot better shape than I look. Heck, I was thinking of competing in the Caber toss(1) at the RenFaire when you abducted me. I took up power lifting a few months back-- it builds you up like a barrel, instead of giving you big muscley shoulders and a skinny waist. You don't look as pretty but you're loads stronger." He flexed an arm and smirked.

Applejack regarded the splintered remains of the log Leo had broken over the manticore's head. "You ain't just whistlin' Dixie, feller," she murmured in awe.

Applebloom peeled herself away from Applejack's side and approached Leo warily. "Who-- who are you?" she asked.

Leo took a knee. He seemed to swell with pride. "Little one, I am Leo Hart, the Champion of Equestria. Your Princesses have summoned me from another world to defeat the evil overlord who threatens you all, and to SAVE EQUESTRIA!" He sounded, Twilight thought, strangely like the Great and Powerful Trixie.

Applebloom's eyes went round. "Really?" she gasped. She began hopping up and down in place. "Omigosh omigosh omigosh--!!"

In the back of the group, three princesses whispered together. "So much for keeping him out of trouble," Cadence said. "Little pitchers have big mouths; this is going to be all over Ponyville in an hour and all over Equestria in a week."

"Mayhap," Luna murmured, looking off in the direction the manticore had fled. "It seems Leo Hart has some surprises for us."

Celestia was grinning from ear to ear. "Indeed, Sister. He may not be what we expected, but there may be some hope for him yet!"
1) A feature of the Highland games. It basically consists of picking up a telephone pole by one end and throwing it. Go ahead... tell that kilted scotsman he's wearing a dress.
Chapter 50

The topography of the multiverse, contrary to what one might expect, resembles neither a four dimensional branched tree, as visualized in the 'alternate timelines' model, for experimentation has determined that all universes are temporally sovereign. Nor is the multiverse “planar”, though every universe does contain one or two unique extra planes above and below its baseline, giving a false illusion of that topography to early rudimentary extrauniversal explorers.

As each universe, despite correlative similarities, is demonstrably temporospatially sovereign, they are self enclosed--so thus they could be described more accurately as self-enclosed 11-dimensional spheres, suspended in an inversely curved extradimensional matrix. The matrix in which they are suspended being the phenomenon commonly known amongst hyperspatial theoreticians as the Void...

It was a study day. At least, that was what I'd taken to calling them, privately. Ever since I'd gotten my new library I'd taken to hauling a few dozen volumes back to my chambers for a day of not-so-light reading. Knowledge is power, power corrupts, study hard and be evil, kids. Today I was boning up on all the theoretical timey-wimey, spacey-wacey stuff that had been involved in dragging my behind from one universe to another. It was slow going, even with the Amulet juicing up my long-term recall and my pattern recognition. There weren't that many theoretical thaumaticians in Equestria mucking about with alternate dimensions, and the few and rare venerable equestrian researchers who delved into this stuff hadn't exactly been writing their notes in a “For Dummies” version. Most of what I got was from Starswirl the Bearded, and his two thousand year old prose was as purple as a prairie dawn.

The general gist of what I'd pieced together was this: all the universes, alternate timelines, higher planes and all, were self-contained little blobs, like lumps of monkey bread squashed together in a pan. But the Cosmic Monkey Bread has nooks and crannies in between all the cinnamon bread chunks of universe, and filling those nooks and crannies between was the melted sugar-and-cinnamon stuff they called the Void. AKA, that weird purply space I went hurtling through on my way here.

Anyway, it turns out that the universes, well, leak; Stuff---energy, matter, ideas---leaks out of the universes in a sort of regular osmosis. Generally in tiny, tiny amounts, mostly a few molecules here, a few milligrams there, some coins and buttons, a missing pencil---nothing nobody notices. That sock you lost and never found? Yeah, small but non-trivial chance that it's floating out there somewhere. Of course the larger the object, the more energy it took to make the wormhole spit it out of the universe and the more dramatic the lightshow when you did it.

Remember the little floor show when I got tossed off my home planet? Yeah, like that.

Of course stuff leaks back IN, too. But due to the fact that the Void is really small, with less volume than any “real” universe, and there are LOTS of universes out there leaking stuff into it, it's still pretty full of loose matter. Huge swathes of it, especially between two closely interconnected universes, even have breathable atmosphere...which is basically the reason I didn't pop like a zit on my unprotected ride through the backside of outer space.

This was all fascinating, and pretty much confirmed some of the things I'd guessed. The big takeaway important information I'd gleaned thus far though was this. There were three possible outcomes if you popped out of your universe and into the Void.
One: you could pop right back in. If your 11-dimensional trajectory wasn't too high, you'd basically fail to escape something they called the Clover Threshold--- a sort of cosmic surface tension--- and you'd skim along the outside surface of your universe a short ways like a water strider on a puddle till you got sucked you back in or till you poked your way back in. This apparently was (kinda sorta) how unicorn teleportation worked.

Two: you could drift in the Void forever. If your 11-dimensional trajectory WAS high enough, you'd go hurtling into REALLY outer Outer Space and just float there until you died (by thirst, starvation, etc) or until one of the universes you were stuck in between had a wormhole rip large enough to cross the Clover Threshold and let you back in (not particularly likely.) Of course here and there in the Void are semi-inhabitable places where you could end up--- nodes really, like little LaGrange points, where the loose matter of the Void accumulates in nuggets, like chunks of chopped walnut in the Monkey Bread of Space...

I really probably should have had lunch before I started reading....

Three: If you were really lucky, you could end up in another universe. First off, similar universes tended to cluster together-- whether they were close because they were similar, or similar because they were close, none of the eggheads could seem to agree on, but that was how it worked out. Plus, for whatever reason, any leaky spots-- not so much weak places as spark-gap points-- in the external surface of a universe which tended to be close to a planetary body on the inside; a wormhole opens in one universe, it will tend to form a tunnel to a mathematically similar place in another universe. One end opens on a planet, the other end will open on a similar planet. Third, apparently all universes have a sort of fingerprint on the subatomic, quantum-foam level. Or maybe a better analogy would be a unique pass-code. If, when you opened up a wormhole into the void, you broadcast that pass-code into the void, and there was a universe out there somewhere that matched it, and they had a spark-gap point relativistically close enough to you, then the energy/timespace/whatever would arc across the Void and form a connection. Generally in the form that I'd fallen afoul of; a tunnel that sucked in stuff at one end and spit it out at the other like a gigantic pneumatic tube. Of course, if you were drifting untethered through the Void, and drifted close enough to one of these spark points and the quantum signature of your body's raw matter matched, you could be sucked in too...

It was easy enough to guess how I'd gotten here--- Princess BookHorse had tossed the Alicorn Amulet out a wormhole into the Void, hoping to lose it forever... only to have it drift over and get slurped up by my universe... which for whatever reason happened to be close enough to her universe that stuff (like, oh, ideas for little girls' cartoon shows?) were getting swapped all the time.

The Amulet obviously had a built-in homing spell, complete with the quantum signature for Equestria. When I'd put the darn thing on, it had triggered the spell, opening a portal and flinging the Amulet back to Equestria--- with me still attached to it.

This knowledge did little to soothe my disgruntlement.

All of this was fairly simple, straightforward, and very very informative. But not much use to me, in practical terms. For one thing I didn't have the exact Key to my own universe, nor the method for extracting said key from my own personal body matter, so I couldn't get back home. And from what I understood, the Key in question could change, if you stayed in one universe or another long enough. Inanimate objects took a fairly long time to "forget" their old home address...but living things, seeing as they were constantly taking new matter in and expelling the old, lost it a lot faster. That old gag about how you replaced your whole body every 7 years? It's actually a lot faster than that for most of you. And the quantum foam re-Keys way faster than that.
Didn't have any record of Keys to my universe, or any other universes, either; I was reading my way through the library hoping to find they'd been written down someplace. I was getting the unpleasant suspicion that Princess Cake-face had spent the last few thousand years redacting that particular information. Benevolent Dictators-for-Life don't exactly like escape routes out of their Utopia being publicized.

For another, take all the information above, and to every paragraph add about four or five pages of advanced arcane mathematics. Even with the Amulet turbocharging my synapses and forcibly cramming the information into my brain meats, it was a slog just learning enough to understand what it was I was trying to learn.

This did not make anything at all easier for me. But for the Big Plan, I had to get a working grasp of this stuff...

I groaned and rubbed my temples and looked at the other stacks of books around me. Exotic magical pony timespace physics was just one thing I was trying to cram. Maybe I should switch topics for a while, I decided. I started perusing the titles of one of the stacks. “Ancient artifacts of History,” “ Legendary Magical Items,” “Darke Mages and the Tools of Their Power...” It took me a second to remember why I'd picked those titles. I'd been meaning to look up the history of the Alicorn Amulet, hadn't I? Learn more about its powers. Crazy that I had gone this long without researching it. I really needed to get down to that--

I was distracted by the sound of splashing. I looked up from my desk. For reasons indecipherable, while I had been immersed in my reading an enormous claw-footed bathtub had been moved in and was now sitting in the middle of my room. Drippy scented candles were arrayed around the rim of the tub, and an end table with a stack of volumes from the library, a glass of something bubbly and a box of chocolates stood close at hoof. Chrysalis, former queen of the Changelings, was sitting in it, buried up to her chin in soapy suds. She was balancing an open book in her foreleg, idly reading.

“...What are you doing?” I said.

She glanced over at me. “...Experimenting.” I gave her a blank look. “Back when I was posing as Princess Cadence, I kept hearing these references to this sort of thing, all these sorts of luxuriant, decadent, sensual pastimes that one could engage in. Lounging in a bath of bubbles, eating bon bons, reading 'trashy novels'...” she waved a hoof, indicating the whole setup. "Figured I'd give it a try."

“In my workroom?”

“You said you wanted me close....” she said defensively.

I rolled my eyes. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“What's it like?”

“...Soggy.” She lifted a leg out of the water and lazily blew bubbles through the holes. “Glad I'm not actually an insect(1); it would probably make an insect carapace all squishy.

“I keep getting soap on the chocolates,” she continued, “And I can't imagine any mare relaxing with burning candles all over the place, waiting to burn a stray hoof or tip over and start a fire...the books are an enlightening experience, though.” She turned a page and gave the book she was reading a heavy-lidded smirk. “Man, I had no idea ponies were so sleazy.”

The hell was she reading? I tilted my head and read the spine of the book she was holding. Fifty
Shades of Hay. Of course. “Is that,” I pointed at the volume, “what I think it is?”

She merely flipped to the next page. She gave what she was reading a salacious leer “Wow. Ponies are disgusting.”

“Give me that!” I magically yanked the novel out of her hooves and began scanning the pages (huzzah for Amulet-induced speed reading skills.) It was.... just a typical laundromat bodice-ripper. It was knee deep in euphemisms and double entendres, and the narration was written with all the artistic grace of a spastic falling down a staircase, but it was a far cry from its namesake.

I glowered at her. “You did that on purpose.” She merely cackled and flicked soap foam at me.

Before I could retaliate by dunking her head under the surface, A minotaur came stumping into the room. “Your Dark Lordship,” he rumbled, thumping his fist to his chest in salute. “The brothers Flim and Flam have sent me to affirm that they are ready for your inspection.”

I swiftly scooped up my helmet and snuggled it on. No sense letting the hoi polloi see my naked face, after all. “Excellent,” I rumbled back. “If they are as far along as I hope, we may actually be ahead of schedule. SNIFFLES!” I barked at the droopy looking basset-hound-esque Diamond Dog lurking around the workshop with a feather duster. She jumped, ears and dewlaps flapping. “Tend to the Lady Chrysalis... and get that bathtub drained and out of here.”

“Spoilsport,” Chrysalis pouted.

“What about books?” Sniffles asked.

I stared at her. “What books?”

She pointed.

Next to the chair I had occupied was a small table with a somewhat dusty stack of books. I started perusing the titles of the stack. “Ancient artifacts of History,” “Legendary Magical Items,” “Darke Mages and the Tools of Their Power...” It took me a second to remember why I'd picked those titles. I'd been meaning to look up the history of the Alicorn Amulet, hadn't I? Learn more about it's powers. Crazy that I had gone this long without researching it. I really needed to get down to that-- “Maybe later,” I muttered.

Sniffles must have heard me. “Shall I leave that stack where it is again?”

“...Again?” I said. She nodded. I started to frown behind my mask. Was there something odd about this....? It slipped away in the next moment. “Fine, then, leave them there,” I said, waving my hand dismissively. “Return the rest to the library, I'll see to these later.”

forget that the big plan is almost ready

Sniffles set to work stacking the rest of the books onto a trolley. I strode out the door after my Minotaur escort, my robes billowing and just a teensy bounce in my step. To heck with book learning, the grand master plan was underway!

“And what is your assessment of our new ally?” Celestia said to her Captain of the Guard.
The grizzled earth stallion swallowed nervously. Despite being a bit longer in the tooth than the former Captain Shining Armor, Captain Phalanx was still terribly new to his rank. He was finding it difficult to get his hooves under him, especially when dealing with the two immortal rulers-- three! He reminded himself-- of Equestria. The youngest, the apprentice Princess as he thought of her, he could discount. She was fussy and obsessive and could get in one’s mane, but she was for the most part still a fairly normal pony, and those he could deal with.

The Two Sisters, though. The younger sister was as mercurial and enigmatic as the lunar body she controlled. Her mood could range from moodily ethereal to almost operatic bombast. Her discomfiture with her own checkered past, and her displaced state in this (to her) distant future made dealing with her and her Night Guard a daily... or nightly... misadventure into culture clash.

The elder on the other hand.... the elder was like the Sun-- predictable, constant, eternally benevolent... and usually as firmly set in her ways as if she were cast on cart tracks. Except when she wasn’t, he thought to himself dismally. From time to time she would suddenly betray some quirk or change of course, some sudden variation in her approach. Of course once set upon this new path she would drive down it as relentlessly and unswervingly-- as the Sun in its path, his subconscious taunted him-- as she had her previous course till she got what she wanted out of it.

This time, she had set her personal Day Star on the phenomenon of this new human, this Leo Hart, as the Champion of Equestria. This made any attempt to dissuade her from what he and many others in the Guard saw for varying reasons as a bad idea... a bad idea. Not that she would ever be vindictive or harsh with the Captain or General who insisted on bringing her undesired news or opinions. Oh no. She would simply turn her smiling face on some other, more agreeable pony, and the one who displeased her would find himself slowly and gently falling into shadow...

It got really fun when she demanded that you tell her “the unvarnished truth, really, yes, you can tell me, I won’t be angry.” How Shining Armor had stayed in her good graces all those years, he would never know.

“Much to my surprise, I can find no fault in him as a fighter,” he said. He was being completely honest. He had put the human through a typical cadet review upon his arrival, and revelation of his role as champion. The results, adjusting for oddities of size and species, were... well, above average. “I only observed him for a day, but I’ve trained bipeds before-- minotaurs and the like. He handles most weapons with a fair amount of skill, avoids the most common mistakes, such as tabling his shield or overreaching his blows. And despite his girth he has an astonishing amount of stamina, if not much speed. And his strength is...”

“I know,” Celestia said, admiration plain in her voice. “I told you of the feat he performed in the Forbidden Forest. He defeated a manticore in single combat-- a manticore!-- with nothing but a length of wood and his native strength. Imagine.” She tossed her mane and gave him an impish smile. “Were he a stallion, after such a feat he would have his choice of mares, I would think.”

Phalanx harrumphed. Celestia did like to tease. “Well, beyond that--” he labored on. “He... doesn't seem to have much of a military mind, your Highness. I quizzed him on his military education. Even the most basic military stratagems-- column formation, line formation, phalanx, siege placement-- it was all cryptic gibberish to him. He knows his way around a tournament, yes, but leading an army on a battlefield?”

“That is the thing, Captain Phalanx,” she said. “He will not be leading our forces into battle against Darth Vulcan.”

Phalanx started. “He won't? But how...then why...?”
“That task is for another,” Celestia said. “His purpose here is... different.” She looked over the balcony, lifted her cup from its saucer in her magic and took a sip. “He is here to fight as our Champion. To face Darth Vulcan in single combat, and defeat him.” She glanced at his stunned expression out of the corner of his eye. “You do not think he can do it?”

“I think it would be suicide!” Phalanx said bluntly. “Darth Vulcan is a warlord with an army of Diamond Dogs, Changelings, Minotaurs, and outlaw ponies of every tribe at his back, and lairs deep within the Everfree in an underground stronghold... a network of strongholds... that would take a hundred years to root out. Even discounting all that, he is a dark sorcerer with the raw power of the Alicorn Amulet at his disposal. He would leave nothing of Sir Leo but a slightly smoking smear on the ground!”

Celestia said nothing at first. She smiled and took another sip of her tea. “Do you know that Sir Leo comes out here to train each day?” She said. She nodded over the rail of the observation deck, down at the training ground below. Ponies were scattered here and there, training with wooden weapons and straw dummies. “When he arrived here and learned of his mission, and we offered him any reward he wished, he went down on one knee and begged favor of the crown, only that we should provide him with shield, armor, helm and weapon suitable for the task. The moment we granted his wish, he began training. I have made a point to watch him. It's quite the spectacle.” She nodded. “Ah, they're setting up for him now.”

Phalanx looked down on the training grounds. The soldiers-- all of them-- were clearing the field, shouting back and forth with odd enthusiasm as they dragged the training equipment back to the walls and began wheeling out new equipment of an entirely different form than burlap and straw. “Are those stone pillars?” he said, his eyebrows rising.

“Indeed. Ah, here he is now.” The training grounds were an open field some hundred yards long, enclosed on all sides by the high castle walls and a roofed in galley and open to the sky. The huge double doors at one end swung open and through them strode an enormous bipedal figure. It was obvious whomever had outfitted him had been forced to innovate; he was clad in a mix of old minotaur training armor and sporting equipment, strapped onto his broad form with numerous cords. They had at least managed to craft him some appropriate footwear and the pauldrons fit well enough, though the shin and hip guards he wore were far too small and the pads and plates straining at their straps around his girth seemed more a hopeful gesture than genuine coverage. The helmet was almost farcical, being hammered out for a much larger and differently shaped head and one adorned with horns, at that. They had stuffed padding inside to make it fit. He wielded a sledgehammer in one hand, and bore a rough wooden shield on his arm. Both looked to have been kludged out of scrap in some workpony's shop at the last minute.

Phalanx would never have called the figure an object of hilarity, though. The gigantic maul he wielded in one hand made him anything but that. The iron head of the hammer was the size of some anvils he'd seen, and the handle was as long as Phalanx was tall and thick as his foreleg. The gigantic figure, tall enough to look even Celestia in the eye, wielded the enormous weapon one-handed as easily as if it were a toy. The crude wooden shield strapped to his other arm was the size of Phalanx's own front door.

The guard ponies down in the field began shouting encouragement. Leo needed no further invitation; he strode over to the first stone pillar, hefted his hammer in one hand, and attacked. With a roar they could hear up on the Princess' balcony, he leapt forward, the hammer whirling in a deadly arc. The stone plinth, carved of the hardest granite, did not merely shatter; it all but exploded in a cloud of flying shards and rock dust.

Phalanx yelped and ducked below the railing despite himself. Celestia chuckled in amusement as a
few tiny pebbles pattered against her casually erected shield. Phalanx got to his hooves and watched
in astonishment as the human, his hammer whirling around him in a blur, proceeded to reduce the
row of human-sized stone pillars to gravel. Twelve enormous stones were shattered with hammer
blows in as many seconds. “Great Maker!” he gulped, his eyes round. “He was nowhere near this
strong when I reviewed him! I mean, yes, he was strong, but nothing like this!”

“Being here has transformed him,” Celestia said. “When he first noticed his newfound strength it
startled him as well; he spoke at length of ‘Krypton’ and something he called ‘the Superman effect...’
about our having different gravity, or some such.” She gave another enigmatic smile and took
another sip of tea. “It’s as good an explanation as any, one supposes.”

Phalanx noted silently that she did not say whether or not Leo Hart's supposition was correct.
“Regardless,” he said, doing his best to keep the dry snark out of his tone. “I’m not sure mere brute
muscle, even this much, is enough to tip odds in his favor. Even after seeing what I just did, I
wouldn’t bet a tin bit on his odds, were Darth Vulcan to appear and challenge him now.”

“But that's the thing, my dear captain,” Celestia said. Her eyes never left the human; he had finished
destroying his granite sparring dummies, and now was harnessing himself to a sled filled with bags
of sand. He began towing the sled across the training field, the runners cutting deep furrows in the
rock hard soil, his feet digging wedges out of it as he leaned into the load. Several of the soldiers on
the field leapt aboard the sledge, whooping. The added weight didn't even slow him down.”We have
some considerable time before the conflict. And you have already noted something that will tip the
scales in Sir Leo's favor. Something Leo himself doesn't seem to have realized.

“...He's getting stronger.”

“No, no, no, NO!”
The half-finished breastplate flew across the room to crash against the wall and fall to the floor,
where it joined a pile of its predecessors. Princess Luna stamped her hoof and snorted in vexation,
glaring at her failed craft. She huffed, the hot metal and ozone scent of the runic forge behind her
filling her nostrils. Why wasn't this working?

She and her sister had agreed: they and only they would forge the weapons and armor for their
champion. With all that they were placing upon his shoulders, the brave human deserved no less. In
one age, the two sisters had been known across the realms as masters of the magical forge, their
works treasured for their durability, keenness of edge, and the efficacy of the magical enhancements
woven into them. Even now there were remnants of their craft-- a helm here, a dagger there-- that
had been handed down from generation to generation since their crafting a thousand, two thousand,
three thousand years before.(2)

But here and now, her artistry was failing her. Had she truly grown so rusty in her thousand-year
absence?

“What was wrong with that one?” Twilight Sparkle said from her safe position behind the spare
anvil.(3)

“'Twas completely unsuited for him!” Luna said, shaking her head as her smithing tools orbited it.
“His girth notwithstanding, Sir Leo is far more flexible of joint than most ponykind— and bends in different directions as well. That plating, bound about his middle, would have made him stiff and immobile.”

Twilight trotted over and examined it. “Yes, I see what you mean,” she said, poking at the armor roundabout where its wearer's midriff would be. “It's a bit too long. He would have been unable to bend or twist at the waist.” She tapped it again; it slid off the pile of battered, misshapen failures and fell to the floor with a crash. “And I'm no expert on armor... yet... but it seems rather... thin and bendable for its intended purpose.”

Luna sighed. “I was trying to compensate for the weight of the alloy by hammering it thin and enhancing it magically,” she confessed. “Good Leo is fairly slow of limb; twould be fatal to slow him any further. But the metal was too thin to hold spells within it of such might as needed.” She scowled. “To say naught of how the enchantments I was laying upon the mithril would have clashed with-- that.”

Luna shot a glare across the room; standing there was a weapons rack, empty save for a lone weapon. When the two sisters had consulted, they had agreed that Celestia would be the better choice to craft the weapon, while Luna would turn her hoof to the armor. Much to Luna's annoyance Celestia had taken little more than a day to craft her gift to Equestria's champion. It was crafted of an impossible alloy of electrum and oricalcum, and woven down to its core with powerful runic spells; Canterlot Mountain would be weathered down to sand and dust sooner than this armament would break or wear out.

And it would be just as garish as the day it was first forged, Luna thought with a sulk. Her ever-radiant Sister was up to her old tricks; anyone who looked at the dratted thing could tell it was crafted by the Princess of the Sun by the gilt alone. She hadn't checked but she'd bet the last slice of cake it probably glowed "with the warmth of the Sun" even in the dead of night. Leave it to her sister to find a way to shine her plot in everyone's faces even in her own absence. Grandstanding glory-hogging...

“It's certainly an unusual choice for a weapon,” Twilight said, interrupting Luna's thoughts. “I would have expected him to want something more elegant, like a sword or a pike or even a war axe...”

“ And such was suggested,” Luna acknowledged. “But he declined such, saying such weapons required far more training and ept on the battlefield, and he would rather not let the battle turn upon a fumble of his own martial skills. He even went so far as to request that the enchantments upon the arm be kept as uncomplicated as possible... I must respect him for that bit of wisdom.” She rolled her eyes. “Much to my relief; he could have been another Guy of Gisborne.”

“Who was he?” Twilight said, curious.

“A 'king'--- actually a minor lord-- of a small fiefdom, back before my sister and I became rulers of Equestria,” Luna said. “But a, I believe the term is “big shot?” back in that time. He had designs upon a jungle island not far off the trade routes common in the day, and commissioned- , or rather commanded us to craft him an enchanted weapon to his specification so that he might conquer it.” Her eyeroll and groan was theatrical.

“Let me guess; he wanted everything on it and hayfries on the side?” Twilight ventured, amused.

“Strewth,” Luna said. “He demanded not one weapon, but a half dozen all rolled into one-- mace, longsword, war axe, shortspear, longspear, lance, staff, climbing hook, battering ram--”

“Battering ram??”
“Battering ram. Not only that but he wanted the sword to be flaming, the staff to be healing, the mace to emit an aura of awe and fear so that the natives would fall down and worship him...and of course the battering ram to extend to any length he wished.... ” she snorted.

“And let me guess; it turned out like the time the girls and I tried to make Rarity design our Gala dresses to order, didn't it?” Twilight smirked.

“Nay. Believe it or not, we accomplished the feat,” Luna said. “We crafted it, and against all odds we made it work. He paid a king’s ransom for it, too. A pretty penny for the fool and his tool.”

Twilight blinked. That could not have been intentional. “What was this legendary weapon called?” she said, shaking her head to rid it of the mental image.

“Wouldst thou believe he dubbed it his Rod of Lordly Might?” Luna said disdainfully.

Twilight restrained a snerk. “His what?”

“Thou didst' hear me. He strutted about everywhere with it out and waving about--”

Twilight smothered another snerk. Her eyes watered.

“--trying to intimidate all the stallions and impress all the mares with his glorious Rod...”

Twilight sputtered.

“Forsooth, never did I see a stallion so unduly proud of the tool hanging from his belt--”

“PffffHAHAAHAHAH oh YOU DID THAT ON PURPOSE...” Twilight staggered, her face a mix of hilarity and outrage.

Luna's veneer cracked and she hung her head, sniggering explosively. “Doubt it not, the prat truly was compensating for something,” she cackled. “His court jester made merry of it for weeks.”

“And did he conquer that island of savage ponies he wanted?”

Luna sighed and shook her head. “What happens to any device made with too many moving parts?” she asked rhetorically. “One day he was pursuing some tribesponies through the island jungle, fumbled with his Rod--” Twilight sniggered but controlled herself. “And by mishap did activate several of the features at once. It sprung open and jammed, trapping him in a tangled cage of bent and twisted enchanted metal.”

“And that's how he died?”

“No, he was entangled, but unharmed.”

“And how--”

Luna shrugged. “One of the natives found him and clubbed him to death with a length of firewood,” she said. “Believe me thankful that we do not find our new friend another like him.” She heaved a sigh and looked at her furnace. “But as amusing as this reminiscing may be, it places me no closer to finishing our champion's armor. For reasons mysterious I cannot achieve a balance between all the necessities of such a crafting.”

“Strong, light, mobile, pick any two, huh?” Twilight said.

“Thou didst forget “magical,” Luna added. “Thin, light, free-moving armor would not hold the runic
enhancements that would make it the equal of the weapon Celestia hath crafted for him. I could forge him something worthy,” Luna complained, “Were I able to be more liberal with the thickness and weight. But e'en as strong as he has become in our world, it would fatally encumber him!”

Twilight bit her lip. “That... might not be a problem for long,” she said.

Luna pursed her own lip and frowned at her. “What sayest thou?”

Twilight glanced away furtively. “I'm not sure I should say anything,” she said. “Celestia has been close mouthed about it--” her courage visibly firmed up. She took a breath. “Leo isn't just strong. He's still getting stronger.”

“Strewth?” Luna said, her ears pricking forward and her brow furrowing.

Twilight could see in her eyes that the implications hadn't quite sunk in, so she pressed on. She pulled some parchment from her saddlebag. “I've had Spike watching him training and practicing, taking measurements and noting them down,” she said. “Leo's muscular strength has been climbing on a predictable nonlinear curve. When he first started training, he could smash a log as tall as himself and thick around as my middle with two or three strikes. Now he's shattering granite pillars to gravel with a single hammer blow.

She came clean and confessed. “He thinks it's because his native strength is naturally greater. That we have a different gravity or air or sunlight... but that's not it....After the royal doctors gave him a physical I, um, borrowed the data. And some of the samples they've taken, back then and recently.” she fidgeted uncomfortably. “All the data was indicative of him coming from a world whose environment--- its gravity, air, and sunlight--- is identical to ours. He's not naturally stronger than us; our world is changing him.”

Luna's eyes met hers. Our world's magic. The words hung silently in the air, unspoken but understood all the same. “Are you certain?”

“The signs are all there. His increasing strength. His endurance and toughness-- he's taking and giving blows on the training grounds that should shatter bone, snap tendon and rip the flesh from his hands, but he barely even bruises. Even his healing is speeding up; those bruises fade within hours...”

“How far...” Luna started to say.

“---How far will the changes go?” Twilight said, biting her lip. “If my calculations are correct, it will eventually taper off in a few days. But even then, by that time--” She kicked at a loose scrap of armor. “By that time he'll be strong enough to fold that mithril breastplate in half with his bare hands.”

“Have you told him?”

“No. Neither has Celestia. And that's the problem. She's... keeping things from Leo. It's wrong. Just wrong! She listens to him ramble on about different gravity or richer oxygen in the air, and doesn't SAY anything. She's misleading him, lets him spin off these wild theories and doesn't correct him when he draws all the wrong conclusions--” Twilight stopped, realizing her voice had gotten sharper and louder.

“Luna... the Summoning will send him back, eventually... the books imply that it will reset everything back to normal. We go back to our lives, he goes back to his. But... what if it doesn't?”

The atmosphere in the workshop grew a bit darker as the two considered the possibility. “Either or
neither,” Luna said. “He needeth these arms and armor in the here and now.” She went over to her drafting table and pondered her notes. “If I can but surpass this artist's block that stumbles me...”

Twilight pursed her lips. She had to struggle to hold back her habitual desire to keep digging at the issue, but Luna was right; it was neither here nor there right now. Leo needed his armor. "You said the main problem was balancing strength and weight, didn't you?” she said. “Well as strong as Leo is becoming, I think you can pretty much ignore that problem. You could probably make the plates as thick as you like and he'll be able to carry it with ease... What would be the second biggest problem?”

“Harmonizing its enchantments with the ones upon the weapon, so that the two work in tandem,” Luna grumbled, scuffing out a series of numbers on a nearby blackboard. “Otherwise the two differing flows of power could drag him hither and thither, working at cross purposes.” The frown never left her face, but it was now touched with regret. “At one time we worked so well together,” she lamented, looking over the formula. “Now, our instincts are off; our magics clash like-- like Night and Day.”

“What kind of enchantments are they?”

“Durability, mostly. Multiple layers, interleaved and connected. No force feasible can break, bend or even tarnish it, no fire melt it, no cold can shatter it-- it glows from within with the life-fire of the sun. no magical assault can damage it, and it can fail not in delivering a blow, no matter how much force is behind it.”

“Indestructible?”

“For as much as the word means, yea verily.”

“That's all? It doesn't.... shoot lightning or anything?”

“On the battlefield, dear Twilight, 'tis all that matters,” Luna said. “Countless brave warriors have fallen never to rise again, for lack of a blade or haft that did not break in time of need.”

“That actually sounds ideal, though. Why not make a suit of armor with the same properties?”

“I didst say the weapon would never break or fail. But the hand holding it... let me demonstrate.” With a flash of her horn Luna summoned an egg from the kitchens.(4) She picked up a metal box full of nails on the worktable and emptied out the nails. “Our invulnerable armor,” she said, holding up the box in her magic. She then held up the egg. “Our not-so-invulnerable champion.” She put the egg inside the box, sealed the lid and then slammed the box on the table. Yolk oozed out of the seams in the bottom of the box. “Tis not enough that the armor survive, dear Twilight,” she said. “It must absorb, contain, redirect the forces directed against it. Tis another tale of farce, the number of foul warlocks who discovered that their armor being indestructible did not prevent them from being battered to a pudding inside it... or cooked alive like an egg in a pot, or frozen solid, or... thou dost comprehend, I imagine.”

“How many evil warlocks have you and Celestia defeated?” Twilight said in passing curiosity.

“Enough to state that their most common last words are 'Haha, thou shalt never defeat me, for I am wearing my invincible magic arrrrgh,’ ” Luna said. She drawled the last word with a curl of her lip.

Twilight snorted with laughter. Then she made an 'ick' face as she contemplated the oozing egg, and just what kind of forces would render an armored warlock in the same condition. Yes, a suit of metal chain and plates would channel all that force right to the wearer, wouldn't it?
Channeling... Channeling and shielding... “Luna,” she said. “Maybe you should go one step at a
time.... with the opposite side of the scale. Celestia crafted his weapon, maybe you should start with
the shield?”

“Thy advice is sensible,” Luna acknowledged. “Break the task into smaller parts, then piece the
whole together.”

“And...” Twilight fidgeted again. Artists could be touchy about this sort of thing. “Is it possible for
you to make changes in the weapon?”

Luna's head whipped around so suddenly Twilight feared she was offended. She didn't look angry,
though, only surprised. “Tamper with Celestia's craftsmanship?” she said, turning to face her, her
ears pricked forward and her eyes wide, as if the very idea were audacious.

“Well, if you want the arms and armor and all to work together in harmony, you may have to.
Besides, she never said you couldn't work on it too,” Twilight pointed out. “She just said that she
was finished.” she smiled hopefully.

A sly smile spread across the moon princess's own face. “Tis true, she did not, did she?” she said.
She still couldn't resist the impulse to dart a glance backward as if expecting a huffy and upset
Celestia to appear from nowhere. She lowered her head conspiratorially. “Very well. How shalt we
begin?”

We. Twilight gave a tiny pronk, but stepped on the impulse to squee. “Like I was saying,” she said,
leaning in conspiratorially herself, “We should start with the shield...”

1. I shrugged the information off; I'd long ago learned that the Changelings were basically
pseudo-insectoid; in their base form they were warm blooded creatures with internal
skeletons--- the carapace like features were actually closer to the plates on an armadillo or
pangolin. In fact they were a bit of a mish-mash; some insectoid features, some mammalian, a
touch of reptilian, and their insides incorporated even stranger features. But what else would
you expect of creatures that basically perform photosynthesis with emotional energy? We're
definitely not in biological Kansas anymore, Toto.

2. It got embarrassing sometimes; stumbling across one's earliest, most shoddy apprentice-level
works put on display as a treasured heirloom in some gryphon or minotaur's home...

3. A girl can never have too many anvils, Luna believed.

4. Badly traumatizing an innocent chicken for life.
Leo Hart, Chosen of the Princess Celestia (and, oh yeah, Luna too), the human Champion of Equestria, strode into the palace whistling cheerfully. His training session for the day was completed and his muscles ached with that pleasant burn he associated with a gym session that had gone well. He was fresh from the Royal Guard showers (which had perturbingly if not unexpectedly closely resembled horse stalls in a tile-lined barn), and was dressed in a fresh tunic and breeches (let's hear it for Renfaire costuming; it had been easy as breezies for the palace seamstresses to whip up the simple outfit from Leo's descriptions, and far easier than trying to cobble together anything more “current”, or resize and refit anything from pony haute couture), and was in general feeling good.

He was making his way through the craftspony's quarter. That was where all the royal mechanics, engineers, smithies and outfitters were, and where the final touches on his gear were being made. All around him the light of furnaces, shouts and clamor of workers and assistants, the ring of blacksmith’s hammers and, one couldn't quite be sure it was so drowned out, the faint yet clearly anachronistic sound of power tools echoed from workshop doors.

He tossed a casual glance through a few of the doors he passed. One near the end brought him up short. Inside the workshop was a half-disassembled yet still very familiar pony-sized circus cannon. Standing over the cannon, doing something incomprehensible to its exposed innards with an oversized wrench, was a very familiar bright pink pony. He didn't recognize her at first. When he realized why it was a bit of a shock; her mane and tail, normally poofy and springy, were lifelessly straight and flat... and the expression on her face would have been more suitable on someone burying a friend.

Leo hesitated to get her attention. He almost turned to leave without saying anything-- better just to avoid sticking another foot in his mouth entirely-- when Pinkie Pie glanced up and saw him. Immediately her mane and tail sproinged back into their normal brillo-pad wooliness and an enormous smile plastered itself across her face. Maybe it was just Leo's human perspective, but it didn't quite seem to reach her eyes. “Leooo!” she cheered, waving a free hoof at him. “It's nice to see you!”

He still hesitated. Contrary to what many My Little Pony self-insert fanfics might lead one to believe, his social skills had not spontaneously improved with a mere change in locale. He was painfully aware he'd spent the first few days of his arrival geeking out at everything, asking awkward questions and generally making most everypony uncomfortable. Even the Mane Six. ESPECIALLY the Mane Six. It had been the third day, when he had unthinkingly scratched Princess Celestia behind the ears, before he ruefully realized that, official diagnosis or not, he'd once again put the “ass” in “Asperger.

Things were a little... awkward now. Kind of hard to sit down and be comfortable around people whose personal space you'd violated.

“Well come on in silly!” Pinkie dropped the oversized wrench and bounced across the workshop to him, all but bowling him off his feet with a tackle-hug. Leo relaxed a bit. Of course this was Pinkie Pie, and she had about as much sense of personal space as a Greyhound bus terminal. She wouldn't notice a faux pas from him if he wore it for a hat. She leaned up against his leg and wiggled her ears suggestively. “Ear scritchies,” she commanded.

“You like that?” he asked, surprised. It certainly hadn't gone over well when he'd tried it before.

“Well Celestia seemed to like it,” Pinkie said. “Even if those fuddy duddy courtiers got all huffy. So,
I figured I'd try it. So, SCRITCHIES!” Leo chuckled and dug his fingers into the pony's mane behind the roots of her ears. “Mmmm, nice!” Pinkie said, her eyes squinched shut and her back hoof drumming on the floor.

For the first time Leo noticed that her smile was rather obstructed by a wire frame around her head. “Is that a retainer?” he asked.

Pinkie almost seemed to flinch. “Umm, yeah,” she said. “It's to hold my teeth straight. Since-- the thing on the train.” She tapped at the silver wire with her hoof. “Twilight magicked all my teeth back in place, but Colgate-- that's our dentist in Ponyville-- she looked at them yesterday and said they're still coming in crooked so she put this on me, and I have to wear them until they're straight again...”

“Grow back in?” Leo exclaimed, his eyebrows climbing. “What happened?” It was a good question. Even in the short time he'd been in Equestria he'd seen ponies walk away from accidents that should have left them with broken bones at the very least. Something that would break the teeth of a pony who ate rock candy made of real rocks had to be pretty brutal.

Pinkie suddenly became reticent. “I'd-- rather not talk about that right now.” She refused to meet his eye. “So what are you doing down here, Lee-lee?” she chirped.

“Going in for my final fitting for my armor,” Leo said. “And you?”

Pinkie's smile looked a little more forced. “Oh, just-- fixing my party cannon,” she said, trotting back over to where it sat. “I asked and the princesses said I could use this little workshop for it since we were all in Canterlot so much visiting you.” The hatch in the side still gaped open. She reached inside and started tinkering with something unseen. “You know, tightening things up, making some adjustments, fixing some p-problems...” She leaned in further, up to her withers, hiding her face as pops, sproings and clangs came from inside the cannon.

“Problems?”

“It isn't working right,” she said. She no longer sounded bubbly. Not like herself at all. “I haven't used it once since the train. I mean I've tested it, and everything seems fine, but after what happened on the train—” the clanking and clanging stopped. She extracted herself from the hatch and sat on her haunches. Her mane was deflating rapidly. She stared at the floor in front of her. Her eyes haunted. “It's a party cannon. It's supposed to make parties. It's supposed to be safe--!”

“...What happened on the train?” Leo finally asked.

“Darth Vulcan,” she said. “We found out he was going to try and rob the Crystal Empire Express. So we set a trap for him.” She gave him a watery smile. “He got on board the train, him and his diamond dogs. We were waiting for him in the last few cars. I tried to stop him with my Party Cannon....” her smile crumpled and fat tears started to pool up. “Twilight said later it was his magical aura. My special pony party magic apparently is part chaos magic too... and when Darth Vulcan used his magic too near my cannon--”

She broke out into a sob. “I shot the cannon-- and-- and it hit him in the face-- and he was screaming, and there was blood everywhere , and he was holding his face and blood was coming out through his fingers and I never heard anypony scream like that and--” She looked up at him. “He-- he-- hit me then,” she said between gasps for air. “That was how all my front teeth came out-- but it didn't hurt half as bad as that sound he made--”

Leo stared at her. Countless episodes of the show hadn't prepared him for this, for anything so far out of character for them. There were no theatrical boo-hoos, no ocular gushers spraying water
everywhere; just all too real tears and snot and horrible pain that a poor little naive pony was never meant to bear. He didn't know what else to do; he scooped her up in his arms and cradled her like a puppy, her rump cradled in the crook of his arm and her head and forehooves draped over his shoulder. He patted her gently on the back while she sobbed her heart out. “It's okay,” he said. “It wasn't your fault, Pinkie.” He scowled fiercely. “And you were just defending yourself. This Vulcan guy sounds like he got what he deserved—”

“Don't say that! It's awful!” Pinkie whimpered. “I never wanted to hurt ANYpony. What if it happens again?”

“It won't—”

“But what if it does?”

He'd heard the stories; the kidnappings, the pillage, the violence and destruction that Darth Vulcan had caused. (And hadn't it been a shock to find Canterlot Castle ripped from the mountainside and dropped into a lake in the valley below...) But as he patted a weeping Pinkie and tried to soothe her, Leo finally realized the worst part of what Darth Vulcan had done. He'd brought the worst parts of his and Leo's world here, to this place. With his very presence he'd stripped Equestria's innocence away. If this guy could break a pony like Pinkie Pie... what sort of damage could he do to the rest of Equestria? What damage had he already done?

Pinkie couldn't see it, but his face darkened into something thunderous.”Don't you worry, Pinkie,” he said. “I'll make sure it never happens ever again.”

I entered Flim and Flam's work chamber with my usual flair, cape flaring and stompy goth boots clacking on the stone floor. Scared the poop out of the pony standing guard at the entrance, heh.

This was the newest of their workshops, and possibly the largest... a vaulted chamber carved out of bedrock by magic and by the brothers' machines. It was packed from wall to wall and floor to roof with machines, tools, and equipment in a huge mish-mash ranging from beep-y, boop-y looking things one associated with old sixties cartoons about “the future” to things covered with runes and hammered together out of ropes and wood and stone in what I always thought of as “Fred Flintstone chic.” Any human archaeologist who dug up this cave would probably have a seizure.

There were other, larger structures as well, interspersed in and over and around the other contents of the chamber, that would probably make an architectural engineer sit up and take notice. Stuff WAY outside even the ingredient list for Equestria's typical anachronism stew.... As part of the master plan, I had deliberately stomped all over the Prime Directive and fed the Flim Flam brothers, and the other technically inclined riff raff under their supervision, every bit of information I could recall about Earth's more advanced science and technology. Which wasn't much, frankly; what could I say, I was only a high school student when I got yanked over here. What little I had consisted of half-remembered class lectures, magazine articles, school field trips to various museums and Youtube videos, and even that I had to glean from the folds of my grey matter with memory-enhancement and recall spells through the Amulet.

Then again, what the brothers and their flunkies had done with what little I had was actually a little scary. Among other things, I had a smattering of memories of a field trip to the Buckminster Fuller Museum when I was, like, ten-- they had rhapsodized over the dribs and drabs I recalled of his
system theory, his dymaxion models, his concept of tensegrity, and utilized them to a frightening degree; radically changing and improving the architecture of the network of lairs. I had dredged up half-remembered lessons on boolean logic; within a week they had their first crude integrated “computer circuit”... one that ran on thaumic energy and carved from runes rather than electricity and silicon. The recipe for guncotton yielded a leap forward from the crude blunderbusses I had been arming my mooks with up to this point... and an entire line of innovative incendiaries and explosives that had any of us bunked in the catacombs wondering whether the maniacal cackling or the intermittent hissing of fuses and unscheduled kabooms was the cause of our insomnia. A vague description of space age materials like organic polymers and carbon-diamond fibers had them magically kludging up materials out of gemstones and spider webs that were lighter than balsa and stronger than steel.... It was like teaching a caveman how to start a fire, and coming back the next day to find they'd built their first automobile factory. It was pushing the master plan ahead faster than I'd ever imagined.

Of course, this would be about the point we would hit a little snag. “Progress report,” I barked through my helmet. The brothers were standing on either side of a large worktable covered with blueprints, maps, and hoof-crafted models. Flim (Flam? Argh, which one had the mustache again? I'm going to hang dog tags on them, I swear it) faced me and bowed with his usual flamboyant vaudeville air.

“Ahh, Dread Lord,” he said. “We are happy to report that Phase One proceeds apace.”

“Indeed,” said... said... screw it. Said the other one-- “With the aid of the Diamond Dogs--”

“And of course that most talented Heart Root fellow--” his brother chipped in.

“We have scouted out the locations for the twelve primaries and all twenty secondaries, and dug the initial shafts.” They paused, looking a little less elated. “...However, we are hitting something of a... minor setback.”

“Ahem. Or two.”

I didn't cut them any slack; I just stared at them through the eyeslots of my helmet. “What?” I demanded in the most 'Your-Lack-Of-Faith-Disturbs-Me” voice I could manage.

They both cringed and gulped. “It's an issue of.. economies of scale, Your Dreadfulness,” Flim (the one without the mustache? Name tags for everyone in my lair, I SWEAR....) said.

I gave him my undivided Displeased Overlord stare. “Explain.”

“We're having trouble ramping production up to match construction,” he said. He waved a hoof at the furnace standing in the corner. “We simply do not have enough furnaces to smelt all the ore we need.”

“And if we build more--” Flam said. I made no comment; I knew what he was driving at. It was already a trick and a half hiding the smoke from the furnaces we had. Even with the soot-filtering runes I had copied from the locomotive smokestacks (there was a reason Canterlot wasn't as soot-covered as 19th century London, after all), there was still something of a smoky haze overhanging certain areas of the Everfree. Completing construction within any reasonable time would require building tons more kilns and ovens and furnaces, at which point we'd be chuffing smoke like a second industrial revolution, and there'd be no hiding that. Magic powered kilns might be an idea...? I mentally slipped into my Alicorn Amulet interface and did a quick rundown of the numbers. No, they'd take forever to build and they'd be pretty finicky to run... and they'd bugger up the magical properties of some of the alloys. We needed a new way to smelt those ores.
I wondered briefly if we could hire or bribe a dragon to do the work---

not the dragon, where the dragons live

I paused. “We may have an alternative,” I said. “How far is it from here to that caldera the dragons migrate to...?” the brothers’ faces lit up with knowing smiles; they got where I was going.

“What else?” I demanded.

“Something a bit more fundamental,” Flam said. He motioned me over to one of their worktables. Tethered to its surface by lengths of twine were several floating clusters of glowing blue crystal. “As you can see, we've managed to cultivate the loftite,” he said. “However--”

“However the soil of the territories you've taken thus far---” his brother added.

“Which consists of little more than the Everfree Forest---”

“Is somewhat poor for this particular gem growth. They'll grow, mind--”

“But far too slow for the master project,” they concluded simultaneously.

"We saturated the seed crystal with enough magic to light up Las Neighgas...it still took a week to grow even these specimens.” Flim said. He disdainfully flicked one of the soccer ball sized clusters, making it bobble at the end of its tether.

I nodded while I brooded over the problem. Only in Equestria would this discussion make sense. The environment is so saturated with surplus magic that gemstones crystallize spontaneously out of the soil. Good thing too, considering dragons eat them. There are families of earth ponies-- Rock Farmers-- who grow everything from quartz to sapphires, rubies and diamonds out of the ground like potatoes. Apparently though this particular type of crystal, with its unique properties, didn't “cultivate” easy.

“However, if we dope the crystals with Accelerite, the results are MUCH more satisfying,” Flam continued.

“Accelerite,” I echoed. I was getting tired of prompting them to speak. No help for it though; I think they were genetically predisposed to be vaudevillean.

“An extremely rare magical crystal,” Flim said. “Difficult to find. Even more so than Loftite.”

“But among its many many highly coveted uses, it can amplify the growth of crystals, even innately magical ones,” Flim said.

“And where would we find this... magical crystal super-fertilizer?” I asked. “The Crystal Empire?”

Flam shook his head. “Perhaps a couple thousand years ago, yes,” he said. “But King Sombra's mines played out long before he was even conquered.”

A map floated up in Flam's aura and unfolded in midair. “The remaining known deposits of Accelerite are tiny traces, scattered all over the globe,” he said, using a pointer to poke at the map. “Few yielding more than a few tons of the stuff. Most yielding maybe a few pounds.”

“--Except for one,” Flim interrupted, wagging his eyebrows dramatically and stabbing with his own pointer at the far side of the map... right in the middle of the Western ocean. “The legendary Island
of Blue Fire.”

“A volcanic island located somewhere within the Mare Incognita,” Flam said, his eyes gleaming with excitement. “It’s supposedly so inundated with Accelerite that the lava flows from the volcano glow a radiant midnight blue. Sailors and merchant marines have stumbled across it again and again over the centuries, come back with samples of the gems and crystals there, maps and charts—”

“... only to lose it again, no matter how they searched, no matter how meticulously they charted its location,” Flim said. “Some blame the storms that lash that part of the ocean, others blame the sea monsters rumored to live in that corner of the ocean; some blame the sheer raw magic in the air around the island for confounding the cartographers. many a ship has been lost in that region, never to be found again...”

I took note of the inscription under the Mare Incognita: HC SVNT DRACONES. “A Lost Dutchman’s Mine,” I murmured. “In the center of a Sargasso Sea, and ringed by a Bermuda Triangle. Of course. No kill like overkill.” I looked at the two brothers. “What possible reason is there for me to believe that this Island of Unobtainium is worth the time and effort and danger of hunting?”

Smirking, Flam held up a tiny glass vial. In the bottom of the vial were a few crumbs of dark bluish-purple crystal, the largest no bigger than my fingernail. “Behold; a sample of Accelerite. rumored to be from the legendary isle itself.”

“We’ve been holding onto it as a sort of emergency-slash-retirement fund,” Flim said cheerfully. “You could buy a house with what’s in that test tube.”

I didn’t even have to examine it. I could feel the potency of the energies swirling invisibly around the vial. “And is it useful for our purposes?”

“Well,” Flam drawled. “We used a flake about this size on one of the Loftite seed crystals...” he rolled his eyes upward and pointed at the ceiling. “And you can see the results for yourself.”

I looked up and realized for the first time why the cavern was so well lit. Floating near the ceiling of the cavern, anchored to the floor by a boat chain, was a glowing blue-white loftite crystal the size of a ballroom chandelier.

“Gather the men,” I said. “Select those who have any experience at all at sea. We’re going to Port Royale.”

It took some time for Pinkie Pie’s weeping jag to end. Leo finally left her cried out and napping on one of the benches in her borrowed workshop, and made his belated way to the sanctum sanctorum of the palace craftpony quarter: The Princesses’ own royal workshop. It had been many centuries since this workspace had been opened and it showed; the large double doors and the floors of the hallway leading to it were patinaed with age, and dust and cobwebs clung to the corners despite the castle staff’s hasty cleaning.

He stepped through the double doors and found Celestia, Luna and Twilight waiting for him. Standing behind them was a manikin frame covered by a tarp. “Ah, here you are at last! We were getting worried,” Celestia said with a smile.

“Apologies, your Highnesses,” Leo said, flushing. “I was... distracted...”
“Think nothing of it, our Champion,” Celestia said magnanimously (drawing a carefully hidden roll of the eyes from Luna.) “But let us proceed.”

“Tis time for thy final outfitting,” Luna said. “Behold.” With a flourish she removed the tarp.

Leo could only stand staring in awe. Standing before him was a suit of armor fit for a knight of the round table, if not King Arthur himself. It was gilded, and chased in dark indigo. There was chain and mail intermixed; gleaming plate pauldrons, vambraces, gauntlets, cops and greaves, laid over top a chainmail hauberk of thick interlocking rings that extended to the knees. A wide belt supported a short fauld of overlapping plates to protect the groin. The helm was a bullet-shaped barbute, smooth and sleek, with a T-shaped opening for the eyes and mouth, and a slitted visor that dropped down over top of that. The breastplate and backplate were broad and thick, and shone with a mirror sheen. The suit gleamed golden in the sunlight streaming from the windows.

He stepped closer and marveled, hardly daring to touch it. “May I... try it on?” he breathed.


Half-suspecting what would happen next, Leo stood with his feet apart and his arms akimbo. “Sol Invictus!” The armor lit up from within and dissolved into a cloud of glittering gold light. The cloud rushed to Leo, swirling around him. He got a bit of a shock when the clothes he was wearing briefly vanished --”yeek!”-- and were replaced with a close fitting body suit of padded cloth. The armor then re-solidified one piece at a time on his body with solid-sounding thunks and clanks, till he was clad from head to toe in it. From seemingly nowhere a white cloth tunic, embroidered with a golden sun on the chest and a moon on the back, settled over his armored frame.

The three princesses visibly started. Twilight even took an involuntary half-step back. The transformation was remarkable; to this point, massive size and epic strength or no, Leo Hart had never seemed intimidating in the least. Now, with his deceptively doughy body and his soft, rounded face clad in gleaming gilded steel, he had become something formidable indeed. He looked hard, solid and immovable as a mountain.

“Huzzah,” Luna gave muted cheer. “I didst get the measurements right on the first try! It is adjustable, to accommodate... err... considerable changes in physique-- ahem.”

“Quick-donning enchantment, with size-varying straps. You can reverse the process by saying ’Nox Imperius,’ ” Celestia said while Leo caught his breath. “It will pile itself neatly on the ground next to you, wherever you point.”

“Or,” Twilight interrupted, “Inside this handy-dandy extra large Pannier of Holding!” She stepped up with a thick leather bag in her mouth. Leo took it awkwardly and threw the strap over his shoulder. He dared a quick peek inside, lifting the flap; his quick peek was rewarded with a disorienting vision of an interior that looked bigger than the trunk of his car back home. He quickly closed it. The latch, he noted, was crafted in the shape of a familiar cluster of purple stars. “The standard enchantment we use on our own saddlebags, but ramped up quite a bit. “ Leo nodded. That would explain how Pinky Pie seemed to carry enough provisions for a fully equipped birthday bash at all times, he reflected.. “Plenty of extra room too,” Twilight prattled on, “for field provisions, first aid supplies, a few dozen extra books...”

“Ahem,” Celestia said, cocking her eyebrow at her interrupting ex-pupil. “Of course you can remove the armor and put it on by hoof, the old fashioned way--- but this is obviously a bit quicker.”

Twilight Sparkle stood next to him and chattered. “We-- that is Luna and I-- well mostly Luna but I did contribute a few--”
“Twilight,” Luna chided.

“Um, okay, WE.” The self-conscious purple pony flushed. She forgot her chagrin and began trotting around Leo, looking over his armor. “We debated a bit over the flexibility and lightness of chain versus the better protection of straight up plate, and ended up splitting the difference.”

“The metal is forged from a stainless, uncorrodable alloy of starfall iron and Sunmetal, virtually unbreakable, and further enchanted for invulnerability beyond that,” Luna said. “E’en dragonfire will not melt nor scorch this metal, and ’twould turn e’en their diamond-crushing claws and fangs unscratched.”

“And the undertunic is padded for comfort. Of course I added a collection of self-cleaning, self-repairing and climate control spells to everything as well.” Twilight said. “Stainproofing, humidity and moisture repelling, cool and dry in summer, warm in winter—”

“Indeed,” Luna said, smiling in amusement. “Whilst my sister and I undertook to strengthen and harden the armor itself, Fair Twilight hath been most meticulous in assuring the convenience and comfort of the whole.”

“And it shows. It's marvelous,” Leo said, flexing his arms and hands.

“And now... your weapon,” Celestia said.

Her horn glowed, and the weapon in question floated off the rack next to the denuded manikin and into Leo's outstretched hand. He gripped it, hefting its weight. “Yes... it feels... right,” he said.

“It is an unusual choice of weapon,” Celestia said leadingly. “We would have expected you to choose a sword, or perhaps an axe...”

Leo hefted the golden mace in his hand, firming his grip. The spiked ball at the head was as large as his helmet; the thick haft was as long as his arm. It was all one solid piece of metal, from the tip of the spiked ball to the grooved grip. He twirled it effortlessly in his hand. “Swords and axes-- I'm okay with them, but it takes years of training to be really GOOD,” he said. “But a basic club? That's practically written in human DNA. I'm going to need every advantage I can get, and I'd hate to lose this fight because my sword-fighting form was off at a crucial moment.”

“Press the stud in the handle!” Twilight burst out, hopping eagerly.

Leo complied. There was a rattle and a clank, and suddenly the spiked head of the mace was dangling from a thick chain. “My idea,” Twilight said smugly. “I know you wanted super-simple but I couldn't resist adding a little bit of modular functionality. The chain can magically extend out up to fifty paces—”

“Turning it from a mace into a morningstar-- or even a meteor hammer,” Leo chuckled. “Won't that be a nasty surprise for the other guy.” He fiddled a moment with the stud; with a rattle the chain retracted and the mace was a mace once again.

Celestia frowned slightly. She nosed forward, giving the mace a second look. “Luna... I see you've... made some other modifications as well,” she said, her voice carefully neutral. “May I ask why?”

She was correct. Leo did not know it, but the original weapon had been entirely crafted in golden alloy. It was now decorated along the haft with runes etched in dark gleaming blue; evenly spaced between the spikes on the ball were palm-sized nodes of more of the midnight blue metal. Celestia tapped one of the spots with her horn meaningfully.
Luna smiled. It didn't quite reach her eyes. “Sister, the arms of a soldier are part of a set,” she said. “Thy golden sun mace, marvelous though it was, would be... unbalanced. Twilight and I did recraft it so that it was Twinned.”

“Twinned...?” Celestia asked. She seemed less than amused.

“With this,” Luna said. Her horn lit and from behind her rose a large round shield. It drifted over to Leo, who eagerly slid his arm through the straps. It was a tall kite shield, bordering on a tower shield, curved and smooth, the edge rimmed in silver metal and the center made of more of the dark midnight metal, and emblazoned with a pale crescent moon and a rendition of the crystal tree. The shield gleamed, yet at the same time seemed to draw the eye and drink in the light from all around it.

“Thy design for the mace was.... flawed, sister,” Luna said apologetically. But in a tone that was not quite so apologetic. “There was a hole in its protections. Thy Sun-Mace is strong and durable as the mountains, and channels some of the strength of the Sun itself.... no physical force could ever o'erwhelm it, no flame could melt it, no cold could shatter it. But there are more... esoteric forms of attack against which it was little or no defense, which it could not parry.”

“Magic,” Twilight contributed. “Attacks against the mind, or the metaphysical. For that matter, lightning, or fire, or extreme cold, or radiation...the first time Darth Vulcan flung a lightning bolt at him, the weapon itself would have channeled it directly to him, electrocuting him. Or a fireball, that would have roasted him alive. Or a shapeshifting spell--- armor isn't much use to a warrior transformed into a frog.”

“Nyerrgh,” Leo muttered unhappily.

“Had I followed the pattern laid out by thy craftings of the Mace in the crafting of the armor, it would have inherited those blind spots,” Luna said. “Thus... the shield.

“It is crafted of mithril and moonstone.... it draws in any energies flung at it, absorbing and nullifying them. Observe...” She flicked her horn at Leo, sending a gobbet of magic spiraling through the air at him. Almost instinctively he raised the shield, cringing--- the magic bolt struck. It did not splash off or deflect--- it sank into the gleaming indigo metal, disappearing into it like a dropped stone into the depths of a bottomless well...

“It is all of a piece,” Luna continued. “The armor and the helmet are lined with protective runnels and runes, etched in the same metal. So long as he wears the helm, his mind will be shielded... from at least the more obvious and common attacks. And his body will be protected from any baleful polymorphic attacks, or any energies arcane or common that might get past his shield.”

Leo suddenly let out a yip. The Princesses looked over at him; he was holding the mace out in front of himself. The head of the mace was glowing, golden flames intermingled with a spectral blue-white light. “What is this??”

Luna smirked. “Energy, whether mundane or magical, must go someplace,” she said. “So why not back into the teeth of the foe who flung it? By Celestia's hoof, thy weapon could already call up... well, an inkling of the sun's fire.” She glanced at her sister, who pouted at her tone. “But now the energy cast against thy shield can travel to the mace and stoke the flames even higher.”

Leo chuckled louder. “Clever.” He gave the mace an experimental whirl overhead, and brought it down on a nearby anvil. There was an almighty clang, and when he lifted the mace again the anvil was dented in the middle, and glowing red around the edges from the heat. “Oh yes,” Leo said gleefully. “I do think our enemy is in for an unpleasant surprise or three.”
“Then we're ready?” Twilight said.

Leo turned and stood facing them. He looked at Luna, then Celestia, and nodded. Leo kneeled, his armored knee hitting the floor with a clank, the head of his now-quiescent mace resting on the floor. He looked up at both Celestia and Luna, never taking his eyes off them. Memories flashed behind his eyes... of ponies speaking fearfully of a terrible foe. Of the burned out ruins of buildings in Ponyville. Of the wreckage of Darth Vulcan's passage through Canterlot, and a once golden castle left sitting dismal and forlorn, half-drowned in a lake.

Of a laughing, bubbly pink pony reduced to tears.

For a brief moment Leo's eyes burned. Then he spoke.

“I am sworn to valour.
My heart shall know only virtue,
My word shall speak only truth.
My weapon shall defend the helpless,
My might shall uphold the weak...
My wrath shall undo the wicked.
This I so swear.”

The three princesses stared at him, momentarily speechless. It was that moment they had an inkling of what they had done; They had taken a man who had fought a manticore barehanded with nothing but a stick of wood, and had him trade in his stick of wood in for weapons fit to kill a sorcerer-king. More than that, they had taken that man and given him a cause. For the first time they each felt the tiniest little bit afraid of what they might have created.

Celestia stepped forward, and gracefully touched her horn to each of his pauldrons.

“Then rise, and take up thy weapon in the cause... Sir Lionheart.”
Wet planks creaked underfoot as I strolled down the rickety boardwalk. It was midnight; an untamed storm had rolled in off the ocean, drenching everything, then rolling on just as swiftly, leaving behind a steady drizzle that pattered on the ramshackle rooftops and danced across the puddles. The fresh air of the rain mingled with the tang of the sea— the smell of old fish and other, less savory scents that normally clung to a harbor town mercifully washed away for awhile by the preceding storm. Though the streets were bare, every window seemed to glow with red-gold lamplight, and voices, raucous laughter and the occasional strain of music drifted from the open windows down to the street below. High above, Luna’s moon glowed faintly down through the clouds and chimney smoke, making the wet rooftops and boardwalks glimmer. It was a perfect night for a stroll through Port Royale...

“Your money or yer life, matey,” a voice growled from a darkened alleyway.

...So long as you didn't mind risking a dagger in your gizzard, that is. I stopped in my tracks, surprised. Who the heck, even in Ponyland, would be stupid enough to try and rob someone who looked like me? Granted, I'd gone for a more “casual” look for this little visit to my minions' favorite playground, draping myself in a cloak, and there were plenty of other bipeds around a port city, minotaurs and such--- but still, I was cloaked, armored, had glowing eyes, and even at five foot six I literally towered over the natives. Who the hell tries to mug a freaking RingWraith?

Artful Dodger was with me, and he was apparently thinking the same thing. He looked at me, looked at the shadowy figure in the alleyway, and snorted. “Did yer mum drop yeh on yer head, fellah?” he said.

The figure growled. “Ye'll laugh outta the other side o' yer face, lubber,” he said, and stepped out into the light. It was a red-on-gray earth pony, and yes, he was dressed like a pirate. He had a bandanna on his head, an eyepatch, a bloousy if tattered and greasy shirt under a leather vest, a sash around his waist and buccaneer boots on his back hooves. And his forehooves, for that matter. Well, one of them; his right front leg was a wooden peg. He had a cutlass in his teeth and a greedy leer on his face.

And of course, like every other idiot in Port Royale, he talked in a “pirate” accent. “Now, yer gold or your lives, ye bilgerats,” he said around the cutlass clenched in his teeth. I didn't groan or facepalm, but I indulged in an eyeroll inside my helmet. If I'd been a historian I probably would have been beating my own brains out on the nearest lamppost and weeping in despair. I'd thought it ridiculous that back in Ponyville that orange pony and her family spoke with a Southern twang, while her best friend the frou frou unicorn spoke in a Trans-Atlantic accent-- even though both of them had been natives of Ponyville, where everyone spoke in a generic Middle-American accent, their entire lives.... but Port Royale took the cake. Peg legs, parrots, rum guzzling, eyepatches, treasure maps of questionable pedigree, the clothes, the music, the lingo, the dialect-- It was like every citizen in Port Royale had somehow gotten a bootleg copy of Treasure Island and dedicated their lives to imitating every ridiculous pirate cliché in it, right down to Robert Newton's hammy West Country accent.

At least we weren't dealing with the Buffalo tribes. I'd seen one picture of the Appaloosa herd thundering across the plain, their chieftain's full ceremonial feathered headdress blowing in the wind, and I'd nearly had an aneurysm.

I was debating on what to do with this idiot when Dodger stuck his oar in. “Whuzzat, guv?” he said with a half-smirk, peering around my leg at our would-be mugger. “Can't unnerstand yew...”

The pirate mugger glared. “I SAID--” the cutlass clattered to his hooves and slipped through a gap
between the boards. There was a splash as it landed in the drink below. The expression on his face was hilarious. He looked like a toddler who’d dropped his ice cream cone. “Aww shiver my--”

We never found out what of his got shivered, because I brought my mailed fist down on the top of his head. There was a sound like a coconut being hit with a mallet and he dropped, knocked cold. “Well, that were entertained,” Dodger said. He levitated the unconscious buccaneer up and dumped him headfirst in a nearby trash can, slamming the lid after him. “So, what now, oh Dark and Terribleness?”

“Now we see a man about a boat,” I said. “If Ironhide has done his job...” I peered down the crooked way. “Ah, there he is.” The minotaur was standing in a pool of lamplight, leaning against the post with his arms crossed and obviously waiting for someone. He caught glimpse of us coming our way down the boardwalk and stood, his battle axe hanging casually at his side. He gave me a bow as we stepped into the light.

“I have completed the task I set you?” I asked him. I had selected Ironhide for this job because besides being a mercenary he had also served on several seagoing vessels… not all of them the lawful and legitimate sort. He wasn’t Captain Jack Sparrow, but at the least knew his way around a ship and knew portside from starboard.

He paused. “...Almost,” he confessed. “We have found a vessel suitable to your needs, Dark One, and a crew, a bare bones one, mind. They apparently have been docked for some time. And their coin, I suspect, is growing thin.”

I nodded; that was all to our advantage. They’d be more willing to negotiate with empty pockets, and I could fill any holes in the ship’s crew with what few “salts” were among my own minions; that would keep the buccaneers from getting any clever ideas. “And the problem?” I said.

Ironhide grimaced. “I tried to be discreet, only stating that I was seeking a captain and crew familiar with the Mare Incognita… but when I met him, he already knew. And it was not much of a leap for him to guess as to why.”

“An’ Captain, O my Captain is suddenly decidin’ to ‘old out for a bigger slice o’ pie,” Artful Dodger contributed in a droll voice.

“That’s the gist of it,” Ironhide grunted.

I grimaced to myself. Thanks to the mirror portals, there was a small but steady population of my minions out on leave, carousing around Port Royale. Not to mention a small but steady stream of smugglers, freebooters and privateers exploiting my little magic mirror as a shortcut into the Equestrian interior with whatever illicit goods they could carry. It wasn’t the Silk Road, but it turned a tidy profit for all involved. But with all that back and forth between the Port and our own lair, it was probably inevitable that some freebooter overheard something he shouldn’t.

“I assume he wants to negotiate,” I said. “So be it. Where is this illustrious captain and his crew?” By way of answer, Ironhide gestured to the tavern behind us. It was like most other buildings standing in Port Royale; a ramshackle two-or-three story building that looked to be built half out of the timbers of shipwrecks dredged in the harbor, and lit from within with dozens of amber lanterns. Music (someone inside was making an effort at playing a concertina, from the sound of it) and the smell of ale and smoke wafted out into the porchlight.

“Well,” Artful Dodger said. “The old salt’s waitin’. Let’s go negotiate.” He pulled his hat brim down over one eye and sauntered in. I followed, with Ironhide bringing up the rear, his hand resting all too idly on the head of the battleaxe hanging at his hip.

The entryway was awash with light, making me squint briefly as the eyelenses in my helmet
adjusted. I realized I was standing in a pool of light, right in the doorway. Clever; not only could everyone in the room see whoever just stepped in, the person in the doorway would be unable to clearly see anyone in the room or even safely take a further step into it until their eyes adjusted.

Unless you were clever. I glanced down and saw that Dodger had stepped out of the light pool. His hat brim, which had been over his left eye, was now covering his right. Clever kid; he’d preserved his night vision in one eye so that he wouldn’t leave himself open coming through the door. Ironhide, who had entered behind me and stepped around me to one side, had entered with one eye squinted shut and again, had moved hazily out of the spotlight.

---While I was standing in the doorway woolgathering. Dammit. Well, I could either look like a dumb rube or try to pass it like I was too bad a dude to care that I was effectively standing in a big bullsye… I deliberately stood an extra second or two more in the light, my cloak hanging around me, and slowly-- SLOWLY-- scanned the room, letting everyone there get a look at the twin glowing eyes under my hood.

The place was not exactly what you’d expect of a tavern in this harbor city; Port Royale was a city of opulence and decadence from the plunder of a thousand pirate ships, and those that did business there were at pains to put that on display. Architecture slapped together out of shipwreck planks, draped with the clashing décor and plunder from a thousand different ports. Hookah pipes from Saddle Arabia sat in the corners, incense burners on the shelves from Neighpon, gryphon weapons warred for space on the walls with tribal masks from some forgotten minotaur island, silk curtains from the far east and tapestries from some unfortunate Canterlot nobleman’s island manor, a handful of nautically themed decorations flung hither and thither— an oar, a life preserver, an anchor--- just in case anyone present forgot they were near the ocean.

It looked like a private party: there were buccaneers of every species scattered about; hunched over tankards or lounging on cushions next to the hookahs, pawing at the serving wenches hustling by. I tried to guess their ranking by their plumage— bandannas and breeches for the humble crewmen; plumed hats and Captain Morgan coats for the captains… It wasn’t hard to figure out who the biggest admiral of the fleet was; he was a fat orange stallion in a captain’s coat and enormous plumed hat, one with no less than three vividly colored plumes, a gilded saber at his hip, and a captain’s coat covered in gold braiding and epaulettes. His sartorial splendour was somewhat undermined by the scuffed and worn nature of his presumably ill-gotten clothes and by the numerous stains left by sweat and grease and other things. He was holding court from the biggest pile of cushions in the room, nursing a hookah the size of a hot water boiler. Two, ahem, females of negotiable affection were snuggled up next to him, one a zebra, one a donkey, both wearing outfits from central casting, presumably off the racks labeled “dance hall girl/pirate floozy.”

I resisted the urge to shake my head in disbelief. This world… it was schizo. The ponies were worst about it, but no matter where you were the atmosphere could swerve from a cloying sugarbowl into a nasty round of Reality Ensues without warning. Were they children playing at adults or adults playing at being children? I stepped down into the room and stalked over to where he lounged. The pony pirate gave me a leer through his scraggly beard; gold-capped teeth glittered. “So, the dread an’ terrible Dark Lord, Darth Vulcan, I presume,” he chortled. The smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“You’ve heard of me, then,” I said, carefully noncommittal.

“Oh, a bit o’ this an’ that,” he admitted, waving his hoof dismissively. “Twar not hard for any salt here to guess yer name. Not many a creature— what be ye, some sort of minotaur?-- would have the brass ta walk into ol Orangebeard’s little den o’ pleasures wit’out an invite.” Ahh, so this perfumed pirate parlor was his. A retirement package of sorts for a tired old privateer, perhaps?
“I’m sure,” the old salt continued, “ye feel like yer right welcome anywhere in Port Royale, seein’ as your deal with our most honorable Mayor--” several sailors scattered around the room snorted and chuckled “--- has led to gold flowin’ through the streets again.” His smile turned into an unfriendly sneer. “O’course, there are those what argue that you and your shenanigans in Canterlot are the reason no gentlemen o’ fortune can make an honest day’s living these days in the first place...”

I noticed that several of the pirate crews scattered about were eyeing me with less than loving affection. Hands, paws and hooves drifted towards cutlasses and other weapons, and the murmuring in the room was turning to a discontented rumble. He was right; my tweaking of Celestia’s nose had led to her stamping down hard elsewhere, in a show of strength. Among other things she’d opened the royal coffers to the Equestrian Navy, letting her dink of a nephew splurge on it to his heart’s content. There were now twice as many warships cruising the Equestrian waters than there had been a year ago. I’d better play my hand before someone here decided that it was a brilliant idea to work out their frustrations by giving me a blackjack to the skull and handing me over to the Equestrian Navy for whatever price the Princesses had put on my head.

“Not my problem,” I said. “Not my fault either. Anyone who can’t outsmart Prince Blueblood’s navy isn’t much of a pirate.” Ponies around the room bristled at this. I ignored them and sat down opposite Orangebeard, swirling my cape regally.

“Admirals come and Admirals go, and their little shows of strength get forgotten. If it weren’t me, it would be some other crisis or cause they’d have as an excuse.” I had seen samples of the Equestrian Navy; if you didn’t know Celestia’s flouncy twit of a nephew was in charge of Equestria’s fleet, you could guess it just by the sheer amount of gilded macaroni decorating their ships, their armaments and their officer’s uniforms. He was more interested in putting on a fashion show than actually doing anything effective.

Orangebeard let out a brief humorless chuckle. “True enow,” he admitted, shifting his bulk on his cushioned throne and taking a pull on his hookah. “That pointy-headed popinjay be his own true kind of fool,” he coughed, “but he’s smart enough to tug on Celestia’s teat when the opportunity arises. They’ve almost doubled the size of his fleet, an’ he’s still a-whin’gin’ for more. He’s finally doin’ with numbers what he could ne’er do with brains-- ‘es chokin’ us off, little by little.” He gave me the eye. “I dasn’t see how that helps your current state o’ public relations though, landlubber. All these lads know--” he waved his hoof at the room around us “--is that ye showed up, an’ now the Sun Bitch’s ships ‘re nosin’ around our coastlines in greater numbers than ever before. Yer men spend their gold freely here, matey-- but that does little fer the salts marooned here. Ye’d best have one truly golden opportunity ta proposition us with.”

“I do.” I pulled a small pouch from my belt and emptied it on the table next to the fuming hookah. Chips of loftite glittered among gemlets of blue-white diamond, seed-sized fire rubies, and red-green emeralds. The centerpiece though was a shard of accelerite as long as my index finger. I flicked my gauntleted fingertip through the pile idly.

Orangebeard clapped his eyes on that accelerite shard. I could almost see his eyes light up with understanding. “The Blue Fire Island,” he said, his voice a low rumble of surprise. “Yer plannin’ an expedition to the Blue Fire Island!”

This certainly caused a stir. “The Island of Blue Fire?” someone shouted. “Is he daft?”

“Sailors have wasted their lives away looking for that island,” Orangebeard scoffed. “What do ye think the odds are that a landlubber like YOU will find it?”

Wordlessly I reached inside my cloak and pulled out my trump card. It was another of the Flimflam brothers’ trinkets: a disc about the size of the palm of my hand, maybe a half inch deep, with raised numbered rings around the edge. A single shard of crystal floated above the open face, pulsing
slowly with a faint, yellow light like a sleepy firefly. The tiny shard wobbled back and forth like a compass needle, and the rings around the rim turned back and forth freely of their own accord. “Far better than you think,” I said.

It was something of a scam; the turning rings and their runic numbers meant nothing. Neither did the pointing of the hovering “compass needle;” it was all show. The Flimflam brothers couldn’t get the thing to point in the direction of the mysterious island any more than they could get a four-star credit rating. What their little wonder widget could do was indicate distance. The only activity of significance was the firefly-pulse of the light; it would grow stronger and brighter and more rapid the closer the widget--- or rather the crystal in it-- got to the island.

But I wasn’t about to let this bunch of pirates know that. No, exactly how my “magic wonder compass” actually worked was going to be kept on a strictly need-to-know basis. All the bells and whistles were to convince the rubes that it worked the way they thought a magic crystal dowsing device ought to.

Some minotaur bravo in the back spoke up. “And what do you think are the odds that you’ll walk out of here with that wonder gadget still in your hands?” he smirked, crossing his arms and leaning against a post.

I barely had to nod my head. Without a word Ironhide’s hand swooped to his belt and then flicked out. There was a whirring sound followed by a distinctive THUNK, and a steel throwing axe sprouted from the wood between the bravo’s horns. The tavern got VERY quiet. “Oh, better than average,” I said casually.

“That’s cool,” the bravo squeaked, his eyes crossing as he looked up at the blade parting his hair.

I didn’t give anyone time to recover from their surprise. “I will need three ships,” I said. “Three. You may crew them as you wish but myself and my own lieutenants, along with anyone I think they need to maintain discipline, will be on board. Your captains and crews will answer to me and to them. Without question. If they are not I will be... most displeased.” I threw a meaningful look at the minotaur who was still standing frozen with an axe embedded in his hair.

“When we find the Isle, we will load all three with all the crystals they can hold. We will then part ways: I will take one ship, and you will take the other two and their cargo as payment.”

Orangebeard shifted in his seat, a calculating look in his eye. “Now why would either of us be willin’ to settle for one shipment o’ golden eggs, when we could always lay claim to the goose? Whoever leaves last could lay claim to the island, an’ leave the other high and dry.”

Oh hurray for ridiculous greed, I thought. “A single shipload of rock from that island will make you rich beyond imagining. But if you desire to return to the island at some future time, that is no concern of mine. Me, I have no intention of setting up a summer home there. I will take what I want, no more, no less.”

Orangebeard’s smirk spread across his face. I could tell he was having visions of planting his flag on the highest peak and claiming the whole of the island as his own the moment he’d seen the back of me. Eh, let him. He’d learn his mistake soon enough. “A generous offer, Yer Lordship,” he drawled. “However, I don’t hear ye comin’ up with a plan for gettin’ three galleons past Their Majesty’s royal blockade.”

That was in fact the catch. The blockade was the thorn in the paw, or maybe the stone in the hoof, for Port Royale. In response to all the ruckus I’d managed to kick up, Their Royal Majesties, Sparkly
Sunshine Butt and Sparkly Moon Butt had started cracking down on things like law enforcement and national security… and anti-piracy measures. They had not precisely located the hidden harbor of Port Royale, and because it was sitting in non-Equestrian territory could not search any closer, but the Equestrian Navy did have a general idea of its location and had dispatched a portion of their fleet to patrol the shoreline as close as international waters would allow. Said patrol fleet included not only warships but airships and reportedly one or two submersibles, cruising up and down with every shipmates’ eye peeled for illicit craft. Reports came back of ships going down with their hulls ruptured from below...

It wasn't nearly one hundred percent effective. Not even close. But it was effective enough that Port Royale’s once steady stream of incoming and outgoing ships was choked down to a trickle. Many Captains had been reduced to sneaking their cargo past the blockade in the dead of night on longboats, while their once proud pirate vessels hid in makeshift river-mouth ports miles away.

Those who had been unlucky to be caught in port when the blockade went up simply sat in the docks, counting the barnacles on their hulls and their dwindling bits and fuming impotently at the Princesses and their poncy sailors…. Or made a break for it, risking their ships and their hides to run the blockade and make for the open sea…. Only to have to run it again on the way back...

Kind of like what I was proposing Orangebeard do for me.

Of course, I had a plan for dealing with the blockade.

“I have a plan for dealing with the blockade;” I said.

“That bein’…?” Orangebeard demanded.

“Nothing I will disclose here. Only on board, once our deal is sealed” I said. “After all… loose lips sink ships.” I let my eye lenses flare red and purple at him. "But remember this; I've gone up against the crown a half-dozen times, and I have out-fought, out-magicked and outsmarted the best that Celestia could throw at me, and left her standing with egg on her face every single time. My reputation speaks for itself. You'd better decide now whether you're going to bet your chips on it."

That seemed to get through to him. He hemmed and hawed, but the glitter of the pile of gemstones before him was already in his eyes. He grudgingly agreed to the terms I set. We shook hand and hoof on it, and he named three ships for the voyage. The Eenie, the Meenie, and the Mynie. “We used to have a fourth galleon,” Orangebeard said. “But it sank. Now we ain’t got no Moe.” His grin as he delivered the punchline was positively crap-eating.

I suppressed a wince. Thankfully my own groan of pain was covered up by those of his crewmates. He was apparently very fond of that joke and had been for a long time…

“Very good,” I said. I turned to the door. A telekinetic shove cleared a path to it. “My lieutenants and their men will begin loading their gear tonight. Be ready to set sail in three days.” I stalked to the door, my cloak billowing behind me.
The next morning found me inspecting the three ships, claiming the captain’s quarters on each for myself and for my lieutenants. Orangebeard and his two, er, under-captains (perhaps I should call Captain Orangebeard an admiral, instead?) bitched and moaned, but I made it clear this was necessary, and not just for our personal comfort. Great and terrible arcane labors would take place there, I warned them, and if I was not provided a secure space for such things, if some errant cabin boy or foolish first mate were to bumble in upon it… A few vague hints of Dire Doom, delivered with trademark Burning Eyes and Looming Shadows, got the point across. That nightfall the rest of the minions I’d picked for this mission came trooping through with the luggage and gear I’d picked out for this little sea voyage.

The next night Flim and Flam came through the magic mirrors in the Mayor’s office, along with their underlings and trainees, and a few tons of hardware and equipment. They quickly made their way aboard and got to work…. At which point the Captains threw up a REAL hissy. This took a bit more than a few glowering looks and ominous threats to calm down…. In fact it took throwing around (still MORE) gold-- and a long, locked-door explanation with Orangebeard and the other captains and their first mates what precisely the Flim Flam brothers were doing to their precious ships…

They appreciated my idea better once I explained. I could have done without the demented cackling….  

---

We pulled out of harbor the next day the instant the tide came in, winding our way around the hairpin turns between the cliffs that guarded the inlet to Port Royale’s hidden cove. Ironhide was my representative aboard the Eenie, and the Flim Flam brothers stood as my proxies aboard the Mynie, while I led the way aboard the Meenie (har har.) Each of us were accompanied by a dozen Diamond Dogs, who whimpered and clung to the rails desperately whenever they came up from belowdecks (for a subterranean race, their most common encounter with large bodies of water was when something went very wrong down in the mines), and a handful of heavily armed minotaurs, who kept a glowering eye on the ship’s regular buccaneer crew, just in case they got any clever ideas.

We did make a rather grand procession, sweeping out of the hidden harbor and out onto the open sea under full sail. Orangebeard’s ships weren’t just some pirate’s sloop; they were genuine, full blown Spanish galleons, with three masts, three decks-- two of them gun decks-- a half deck and forecastle and hold, thirty six guns, and crewed by almost two hundred men. Each one could carry over 300 tonnes of cargo, and reach maximum speeds of about eight knots…. Whatever the hell a knot was.  

Therein lay the problem.

See, back in his early career, Orangebeard had been a wildly successful pirate with just a couple of navy cutters under his flag. The Equestrian seas were wide open, Royal ships were few, and the trade ships were easy pickings. Like the rest of the humble souls in Port Royale, he had become irrationally exuberant and had traded in his sleek cutter ships for first one, then two, then three enormous galleons. (by pirating them, of course.) He had believed that the huge floating fortresses would more than pay for themselves when he filled their sunken bellies with plundered treasure.

Of course, this was about the time that Their Majesties had started paying more attention to policing their trade routes, but that wasn’t the worst of it. You see, while they have thick hulls and plenty of guns, galleons hit a maximum of only eight to ten knots on a good day… while most other sailing
ships can easily hit up to fourteen. You can see where this was going, I think. Pickings soon got a bit slimmer, as he now could no longer run down his prey and had to spring traps and ambushes to take down the trade ships he hunted. If they got out to open water, pursuit was almost always a lost cause.

Then it got worse. the Royal Equestrian Navy began supplementing their own gunships with faster, sleeker sloops, cutters… And then the Navy started wheedling the crown for blimps and dirigibles from the Equestrian Air Force…

With the balloons acting as their eye in the sky, there was no way we were going to be able to sneak past the patrols. With their newer, faster ships, there was no way we could out-sail them. While the Eenie, Meenie, and Mynie were armed to the teeth, we wouldn’t be able to outgun them for very long before a half dozen ships on both sea and air had surrounded us. So if I wanted to get this little flotilla out on the open water and all the way to the Island of Blue Fire, I was going to have to be clever.

Of course, as always, “be clever” always seemed to translate for me as “apply an unbelievably shocking amount of brute force to the problem.” Shock and Awe, gotta love it.

We were barely a mile out into open water when things started coming to a head. I was on deck, standing next to Orangebeard at the helm, when the pony in the crow’s nest cried out “Ships Ahoy! Royal ships ahoy, ahead port and ahead starboard, half a league out and closing fast!”

Orangebeard cursed and clapped a spyglass to his eye. “Arr, two of the Royal Nags’ warships,” he said. “They’re lookin’ tae pincer us atween ‘em. Between the two of ‘em they’ve got enough crew and guns t’ scupper us if they do.”

I zoomed the lenses of my helmet in on the ships. The one to starboard was a schooner, but the other was a galleon fully as large as any of the three we were on. Both were painted brilliant white with gold trim and had sails as bright and flawless as new cotton sheets. I could just make out figures running about on deck, hauling cannon into place. There were bright flashes of light, probably a signal mirror; the two ships were signaling each other, coordinating their efforts.

“Oh hells, there’s the bloody ponce hisself,” he said, looking at the ship closing from port. I followed his gaze. There on the forecastle of the gleaming white and gold ship stood a gleaming white and gold unicorn, his chin lofted proudly and his blonde mane blowing in the wind. He wore a spotless white admiral’s coat and hat, and was festooned with more gold braid and brass buttons than a marching band. “Prince Blueblood,” Orangebeard identified him. “Shoulda recognized that galleon. The bloody HMS Daughter of the Sun. Figures we’d run into the flagship of the blasted fleet the moment we stuck our noses out of the harbor.” He folded his spyglass with a slap of his hoof and glowered at me.

“How did they spot us so soon?” I said.

Orangebeard tapped my elbow and, when he had my attention, pointed up at the sky to the few clouds dead ahead. “That’s how,” he said. I zoomed in again. Peeking out from behind a cloud was a blimp, maybe large enough for a dozen men. I was embarrassed at myself for missing it. “Where there’s more’n one o’ Prince Blueballs’ ships, there’s allus at least one balloon, acting as their eye in the sky,” Orangebeard said sourly. “Those cowardly cloud-skippin’ nancies can spot a sail a hundred miles off and have a man-o-war bearing down on it in two shakes of a seapony’s fin. Thank Davy Jones they’re not allowed any closer to Ja-Mare-Can airspace, or they’d have spotted Port Royale for sure.” As we watched, the airship abandoned its cloudcover and began closing distance with us. Not good. An airship wouldn’t even have to use its cannon; from that altitude it could wreck our whole day just by flying overhead and dropping its ballast on us.
I scowled at the enemy ships, tried to estimate how fast they were moving. “They’re moving awfully slow for ships set on closing with us,” I noted.

Orangebeard’s brows furrowed. “Aye, indeed they are. What do those jumped up landlubbers have up their sleeve…?”

We got our answer in the next moment. A loud, angry drumming noise arose, as if a large number of very angry people were hammering on our front door… With large wooden mallets, from the sound of it. We both looked around, confused for a moment, trying to figure out where the sound was coming from before one of the sailors let up the cry.

“Seaponies!” one eyepatch-wearing crewpony shouted, pointing over the side. There was a general rush to the rail. Down in the water alongside the ship were dozens of ponies with dolphin-like tails where their hind legs should be. They were dressed in the silly looking sailor’s blouses and hats that were part of the Royal Navy’s uniform, and were pummeling our hull violently with their forehooves. This was a lot more alarming than it might sound. I had seen ponies kick over foot-thick saplings with those hooves. If they managed to stave in a few planks below the water line, things would go bad for us very fast. I looked behind us to where the Eenie and the Mynie followed our wake; judging by the froth being splashed up along their flanks they were having the same problem as us.

Orangebeard swore. “So that’s ‘ow they’re doin’ it,” he said. “The scuttlebutt about a submarine was wrong. They don’t have a submersible boat scupperin’ ship, they have a whole barnacle-blasted submersible CREW!” He galloped down to the main deck and leaned over the rail, shaking his hoof at the underwater saboteurs. “Belay that, ye fish-arsed bilge suckers!” In a fit of fury he pried a cannonball off a nearby brass monkey (Yes, I know. Urban myth-- back on EARTH. But that was what they were actually called in Equestria) and flung it down over the rail two-hoofed, looking to brain one of them. He missed, the sea pony diving out of the way; the ball hit the water with a bloop and a splash, water fountaining in the air as the cannonball vanished into the depths. The sea pony in question surfaced, blew a raspberry at him and resumed battering at our hull.

This threw Orangebeard into a paroxysm of rage. Bellowing in fury he seized another cannonball from the pyramid stack next to him, and then another, chucking them down at the sea ponies in blind fury. A couple of his crew joined in, sending still more cannonballs ker-plunking their way to Davy Jones. It did slow the jackhammering of hooves a bit, but not by much.

“Captain, stop wasting your cannonballs,” I snapped, the volume setting on my helmet’s voicebox at maximum. He quit, leaning against the rail and heaving and blowing like a beached whale, and looked up at me. “We prepared for this, remember?”

The light went on behind his eyes. “Well then what are ye waitin’ for, Warlock?” he said, baring his teeth in a savage grin.”Work yer magic an’ get us out of this!” He began bellowing for his crew to strike sail.

I grinned to myself behind my mask, even as I ever-so-cooly raised a chunky walkie-talkie from my belt to my mouth. “Gentlemen,” I said into it. “Start your engines. Full throttle.”

There was a reason I’d managed to keep my cool even with a school of angry seagoing ponies trying to stave holes in my ships. For one thing I was one of the few people on board who knew that they weren’t going to get far; the hulls had been magically and physically reinforced before we’d left port, as part of the hasty modifications the Flim Flam brothers had been overseeing.

When I’d made contact with Port Royale through the magic mirrors, it had nearly driven me up a
wall to realize that Equestria’s schizo tech culture had struck again. Here they were living in an age with flying machines and crystal powered high-speed trains (so nice I’d stolen one for myself), and the world’s navies were still operating almost entirely under sail, and God only knew why. (Wild guess: Celestia thought billowing sails looked “prettier” than smokestacks.) It was ridiculous. The idea of wandering back and forth across an uncharted ocean every bit as large as the Pacific in search of the Island of Blue Fire at no better than five to ten miles an hour had me tearing my hair out.

I’d ranted at the Brothers, demanding a solution. Disgruntled, they’d told me just how difficult it would be to retrofit one of those old style sailing ships with a proper steam engine… to say nothing of the impossibility of getting the hundreds or thousands of tonnes of engine, boiler, and the like through the magic mirror to Ja-Mare-Ca in the first place.

I’d pointed out in annoyance that magic was something of an option after all. Still no sale: a magic powered engine, along with its other quirks, would still be nearly as huge, heavy, and take just as long and tearing up just as much of the ship to install.

Then I had a spark of inspiration, and started describing to them a form of propulsion from Earth called the jet-ski…

The aft-most section of the hold was now a makeshift “engine room.” The engine in question was little more than a collection of wide-throated pipes covered in runes and socketed crystals, that pierced the bottom of the ship and then curved up to jut out through the stern on either side of the rudder. They were manned by a quartet of ponies and diamond dogs, who upon getting the signal from my walkie talkie began flipping butterfly switches and throwing levers, lighting up the crystals and opening the valves in the pipes to full throttle. The pipes gurgled as they began sucking water up through the bottom hull and blasting it back out through the stern.

It was then that I learned I had seriously underestimated just how effective a propulsion method a hydrojet really was.

Prince Blueblood stood tall and proud on the forecastle of the Daughter of the Sun, his brass spyglass fixed on the lead of the three pirate ships. He tossed his head with a scoff, nearly unseating his enormous admiral’s hat. “Hah! The cowardly blackguards are already throwing in the towel. Look, they’re lowering all their sails!” He smirked, already celebrating his imagined triumph in his head. Three pirate ships captured. Auntie Celestia was going to be so pleased…! “Prepare the boarding parties, Captain!”

The captain of the ship, a blue-grey earth pony with a short-trimmed beard and a stony, longsuffering expression on his face, began shouting orders to his crew. Once sufficient numbers were galloping back and forth, he turned back to the prince taking up space on his forecastle. “We’ll be within cannon range in a few moments, Admiral,” he said. He choked a little on the word “Admiral,” but hid it admirably. “And our airship is almost overhead.”

“Excellent,” Blueblood said. “Be ready to fire a warning volley across their bow.”

The captain winced at the thought of such a dishonorable deed as firing on ships that were readying to surrender. He spoke slowly and carefully, with the tones of one whose rapidly flagging hope is that common sense words might sink through a thick skull if they were applied methodically. “Admiral, that will most likely panic them into returning fire,” he said. “They’ve struck their sails and are becalmed in the water...”
“They haven’t raised the white flag yet, have they?” Blueblood said. “Well, the sound of our guns will encourage the cowardly cutthroats to hop to it, then!”

“Admiral, I must protest,” the captain said, grinding his teeth. “Her Highness wants pirate vessels captured, not sunk! Which is what will happen if we spark off a gun battle with three cornered ships!”

“Are you disobeying a direct order?” Blueblood squawked. But before that brewing squabble could get underway, it was pulled up short. To every onlooker’s astonishment, and to a great number of sea ponies’ consternation, there was a loud roar and the ocean around the pirate ships exploded into an inexplicable froth. Sea ponies leapt in every direction, fleeing with great leaps-- some of them assisted with an unwanted boost that sent them tumbling through the air. The captain and his erstwhile admiral watched, jaws hanging, as the water at the stern of each of the pirate ships in question suddenly fountained into the air in an enormous rooster tail, and the formerly becalmed vessels began plowing through the water at rapidly increasing speed.

“They’re making a break for the open sea! Quick, bring us about! Cut them off!” Blueblood yelped.

“Hard a lee!” The captain roared to the helmsmen. “Bring us across their bow!” Their very rapidly approaching bow, he thought silently with growing alarm.

One thing was sure; if our water jets had caught the Royal Navy’s ships half as much by surprise as they caught us, then we had them flatfooted. When the water jets kicked in, we darned near lost several sailors over the aft rail. Everyone, myself included, grabbed for something solid and hung on as we surged forward, water fountaining up behind us and parting before us in a huge bow wave. It certainly ruined the seapony saboteurs’ day; I saw several pulling some radical midair endos as our bow-wave tossed them aside like bath toys. The Eenie and the Mynie were right behind us on either side, churning the ocean to a froth as seaponies fled for their finny lives.

Her Majesty’s Navy wasn’t giving up, though. I saw the two ships come about, changing course to cut across our bow. The airship above was dropping rapidly to intersect our path as well. I didn’t need to look through my binocular lenses to guess that their crews were scrambling to load their cannon or rack up drop-bombs to teach us the error of our ways.

I readied a couple of spells…. Or tried to. It wasn’t a smooth ride, and casting magic over the open sea was trickier than on dry land-- the mana over the ocean was different than on dry land, and it could react in unpredictable ways if I wasn’t careful. I could try and cast a lightning bolt, for example, only to have it arc in unpredictable directions or even pull down a lightning storm from the clouds overhead. I cursed as the sea spray and the tossing of the deck kept breaking my concentration. I was going to have to cross my fingers and hope we could outrace the ships closing in, because waving my hands at the problem wasn’t going to help at the moment.

We were accelerating with every passing second, but the other ships were closing fast.

“Enemy ships, five lengths and closing, port and starboard!” came from the crow’s nest.

“Airship twelve o’clock high!”

“Four lengths!”

“Three!”

At the last possible second, the hydrojets we built into the three ships surged. Cannons on either side
of us roared, firebombs fell from above-- and both went wide, splashing into the water all around us. We’d been moving too fast for their bomb-men and gunnery crews to get our range. Eenie took a couple of cannonballs high above her water line and Mynie got grazed by a firebomb, but the damage looked minimal-- or so I hoped. We all three of us roared ahead, passing between the two Royal man-o-wars so close that the bow waves of Eenie and Mynie washed over their forecastles, sending the ponies standing there running.

All except for the blonde-haired pony in the admiral hat, who got out one panicked squeal before he got drenched so hard he got smacked to the deck. I saw him stagger to his hooves, a sodden mess, just in time for the rooster tail from the Mynie’s engine to catch him square in the teeth. He all but flew backward onto the main deck, landing with a splat I imagined I could hear even at that distance. His dashing admiral hat and half his gold braid were gone over the rail, never I suspect to be seen again.

I snapped my helmet lenses back to normal and realized the Royal warships-- who were practically in one another’s laps, they had come so close to colliding-- were already shrinking in the distance aft of us. Their difficulties were multiplied by the airship, as it had dipped so low in an effort to strafe us that it actually had gotten tangled in their rigging. I could only imagine the cloud of swearing rising up from all three crews as they struggled to untangle their sails and lines. They seemed rather busy trying to fish several of their crewmates out of the drink as well; apparently some of them hadn’t ducked fast enough when the Eenie and the Mynie swept their decks with their jet’s backwash.

The raggedy crew around me set up a cheer. Orangebeard ran up and slapped me on the back, yelling something nautical-flavored or other in my honor. I didn’t respond. I couldn’t breathe; I was laughing too hard.

Sunset eventually came. After the first hour I’d had them throttle the ships back to a more stately speed. The Flim Flam brothers and I had reinforced the hulls out the wing wong, but reinforced or not they were definitely not built to roar along like a cigarette boat for hours on end. Their tall, wide cross section made for a seriously uneven ride, especially when we were moving so fast that their prow came close to rising completely out of the water. I cut speed to the relief of every stomach on board, especially my own.

Even at half speed, though, the Eenie, Meenie, and Mynie were still half again as fast as anything the Princesses had in their fleet. What’s more they could maintain that speed consistently, watch after watch without stopping. The fact that they were no longer at the mercy of the wind had Orangebeard tickled every shade of pink.

The moon rose. I retreated to my quarters, leaving orders that I was not to be disturbed. Once the cabin door was locked and barred, I quickly pulled the dustcloth off my most important piece of carry-on luggage: one of my magic mirrors.

I sighed in relief; it had come through all the ruckus without a chip or a crack. It was bolted upright to the wall in a heavy wooden frame, carefully protected. It had taken some shuffling about of the setup, and the consumption of the last of my powdered World Mirror to craft more, but I’d managed to pull three mirrors from the array bridging the lair, the moon, and Port Royale and install them on all three ships. Now I had daisy-chained together all three ships to the moon, and from there hence to
Port Royale and my own lair in the Everfree.

The moon sigil glowed. I took a deep breath, sighed, and stepped through the mirror. Two short hops later and I was now back in my throne room. Artful Dodger was waiting there for me, lounging in my throne with a typically insolent smirk. “Welcome back, yer Dreadfulness,” he said. “All going well?”

“Very well indeed,” I said. “I see you returned home early. Didn’t want to stay and watch our grand escape?”

Dodger grimaced. “Thanks but no thanks,” he said. “The last time I were on a boat I puked so hard my back hooves nearly popped out me mouth.” He gave a dramatic shudder. “I think I’ll be watching your grand pirate adventure from this side of the Magic Mirror, if it’s all the same.” He hopped off the throne. “Wot’s next on the agenda?”

“Now,” I said, “We secure our new forge at the Dragon’s Caldera.”
Celestia and Luna stood on the parapet of the highest tower as Celestia nudged the sun up past the horizon and Luna lowered her Moon below it. They were looking in opposite directions-- one to the East, one to the West. It wasn't truly necessary, they could have easily stood side-by-side. But after so many hundreds of thousands of sunrises and moonrises, they could get inattentive... It wasn't too long ago they had gotten distracted by their morning chit-chat and had accidentally raised and lowered the Sun and Moon from the same horizon-- to the North. That had been rather embarrassing. So they faced their respective points on the compass, just as a personal reminder.

As it was they had made the palace staff chisel arrows labeled "East" and "West" into the tower stones, just to be sure.

The atmosphere was terse; even this regal duty had not interrupted the conversation, to use the polite word, that had begun a short while ago. "Time grows short, sister," Celestia chided. "Our Champion has only a limited number of days with us."

"I am well aware, sister," Luna said over her shoulder, her teeth clenched at her sister's oh-so-infuriating, I am the Wise One tone of voice. "Our Champion also has but one life. I would fain see him lose it because we sent him out-a-crusading when he is still so... so..."

"Lacking in ept?" Celestia said, in a rare show of concession. "That he is. He is no field general, that is certain. Or even a soldier. That I fear is nothing we can change in the time we have. But that is not his role..."

Not the one YOU chose for him, Luna thought, gritting her teeth as the Moon finally inched below the horizon. Guilt ate at her. What her sister had planned--! And she knew it was not just her own misgivings. Leo had, at his own eager request, taken the Friendship Express down to Ponyville 'to see the sights.'

His reception had been cheering. Despite his... regrettable tendency towards over-enthusiasm?... he had been well received (as one could expect of the ponies of Ponyville, of course.) He had even made himself of use, dealing quickly with one or two timber wolves (regrettably, the Everfree was not the only breeding ground for the magical predators; Whitetail Wood had one or two it would seem) and even driving off a young two-headed Hydra that had tried to break through the Everfree fence. Most of the ponies there had been heartened by his bravery and his cheerful chivalry.

Most. Not a day after clapping eyes on him, their tiny tiara-wearing strategist had sent both Celestia and Luna a yard long missive, pointing out the very flaws in Lionheart's qualifications they had been just now discussing, and ranting in detail what an absolute disaster it was going to be if they fielded this goodhearted, yet feckless Champion against Darth Vulcan and his forces. Luna was forced to remember some of the idle ramblings Darth Vulcan had gone on while he had been their captive; the Rules for Evil Overlords, or some such, he'd called it.

"I will have a five year old child on my staff who will review all my diabolical plans. If said five year old child finds any problems with that plan, I will scrap it immediately and start over from scratch."
Luna snorted to herself. She was about to repeat that witty bon mot with her sister when Celestia spoke up. "I say, what is that?"

Luna turned to look. Out of the glow of the false dawn something was flying towards the Castle, staggering badly through the air. Luna squinted as it drew closer, subtly enchanting her eyes to increase their keenness. It was a dragon; a female, and a young one at that, maybe a head taller than their own Spike. She had sharp features, the slim proportions of a young adolescent. There were horns that curled downward on either side of her head, and her scales were a dark shade of teal...Those that weren't scorched or smeared with soot. She cradled her badly broken left arm against her side. In her right she held a staff nearly as tall as herself, capped with the shattered remains of a bloodstone.

She was shouting something as she flew. She apparently saw the Princesses atop their tower and flew toward them; pegasus guards rose to surround her, spears ready but hesitant to intervene. "It is Princess Ember," Celestia shouted. "Let her through!" Obediently the Guard escorted the young dragon. She was heedless of them, she seemed heedless of anything but what she was shouting and the tears streaking her soot-covered face. She finally drew near enough that Luna could understand what she was shouting, and when she did she felt her heart sink to her hooves.

"The Dragon Lord Torch is dead!!"

24 hours prior

I was seriously reconsidering the idea of the volcanic forge at this point. Contrary to what I'd been expecting, the Dragon Caldera wasn't exactly a hop, skip and a jump from the Everfree. We were going to have to dig a lot of tunnel and lay a lot of track to make shipping ore out to the caldera in bulk a worthwhile effort, and even running it all through underground tunnels the entire way would mean sticking our necks WAY out. The hope was that, once we got there, the Diamond Dogs could use their natural talents (such as they were) to find a minor branch of the main vent underground...what are they called, a fumarole?...that could be opened or redirected someplace closer to our territory in the Everfree (Diamond Dog vocabulary of the day: "HAIEEE!": "We found molten lava in the mine.") There HAD to be something; there was the Flame Geyser Swamp, after all, which suggested there was more than one and possibly a good long line of "hot spots" running through Equestria. (I would have gone there instead, but it lay in the wrong direction and far too close to several pony settlements. What is it with Equestrians and building their villages right next to monster-laden disaster areas?)

(Then again, maybe I shouldn't judge. We humans have a bad habit of building in places with flood plains, earthquakes, active volcanoes, Hollywood celebrities...)

As it stood though, when I returned via mirror-gate from my little boating trip, the tunnel and tracks
to the caldera were almost complete. Between the 'Dog's maniacal digging speed and the Flimflam brothers' "DrillDiggerOmatic" they'd built from one of the train engines we had stolen (DrillDiggerOmatic! From FlimFlamCo! Accept no substitutes!) They'd managed to get within a handful of miles of the Caldera before I'd returned. We were speeding... well, chugging determinedly... along that track now, in a couple of the rather posh passenger cars we'd swiped from Boss Hoss' train. Heck, we had 'em, might as well use 'em. "You've made serious progress," I said to the Brothers as we rolled down the torchlit tunnel. "I'm pleased. Though I'm uncertain this is the best way. We could rearrange the Mirrors to give us a portal directly there--"

"--And that would be bad," Flim (Mustache pony, anyway) said. "Begging your pardon, your Dire Darkness."

I paused long enough to give off the 'you had best speak carefully to your Dark Overlord" vibe, for the benefit of the Diamond Dogs, ponies and minotaurs crowded on the train car. "Explain."

"Your, ah, current commute between the deck of the jolly ship "Eenie" and here has sort of underlined a shortcoming--" Flam said.

"--with depending too much on the Mirrors," Flim continued. "You see, as you are already aware, the Mirrors are only viable when the Moon is in the sky..."

"Which is already a problem, as we would only be able to ship ore to and from the lava pits--"

"--through those rather small mirrors--"

"--by hand--"

"--a few hours each night. Far better to take it by trainloads over the slow road, as it were."

"Hm. Fair enough."

"Also, we felt we should remind you," Flam said, holding up a warning hoof. "Your own clever ability to shuttle back and forth is growing more limited as you travel."

"Due to the globular nature of the planet, moonrise and moonset are at different times in different parts of the world."

"...and the further West your little flotilla of pirate ships travel, the less time the Moon is in the sky over both places at the same time."

"In a few more days, you will have almost no time at all between the time the Moon rising in your
location... and setting in ours."

I grunted. They'd told me that before; I'd put it out of my mind. I'd have to carefully watch the time tables they'd given me, unless I wanted to end up trapped in one location or the other-- or better yet, stuck on the Moon in between. This could make certain things complicated. Man, I bet the other kingdoms and empires just LOVED the fact that, even halfway round their world, everything just HAD to revolve around Princess Sun Butt, Princess Moon Butt and their mentally challenged little peons.

The train slowly screeched to a halt. I disembarked, the Brothers and the troops and workers piling out behind me. A handful of Diamond Dogs were at the end of the tunnel beyond the tracks, digging away frantically, dirt clods and rocks and dust flying. Unicorns were magicking the dirt piles away-- teleporting it, shrinking it, temporarily transforming it into daisies--- and loading the results into mine carts to be hauled away. One of the workers, no less than everyone's favorite unicorn earth-mover Heartroot, trotted over. "Greetin's, your Lordship," he said. "You're here just in time. We'll be breaking through to the surface any minute now."

"How far from the Caldera?" I said.

The greying former farmpony ruminated for a minute. "Eh, no more than a mile," he said. "Should have a clear view from here."

The pony foreman (wearing a hard hat, carrying a clipboard, and trying to look like he was in charge) chipped in. "We'll march there from here, as planned. Once we get there we'll be able to drop some magic probes, try and find an underground fissure we can tap--" there was a loud rumble, and the rock and earth wall in front of us crumbled away. "Ah, here we are." I stepped to the opening. In the distance, as he'd said no more than a mile or so away as the crow flew, was the rising wall of the Dragon Caldera. I dialed up the magnification on my helmet lenses and swept the horizon, back and forth. Several of the smarter minions raised binoculars and spyglasses and scanned as well. "No sign of dragons, Lord Vulcan," the minotaur next to me rumbled. "The coast is clear."

"Good. Very good." I said. I'd been very careful to research the Great Dragon Migration, making triple extra sure there was no way the centennial migration was occurring this year and that there was no way there would be any dragons in the Caldera now. Big Boss had been more than enough dragon related excitement for a lifetime. If I'd read the calendars all right, we'd have another ninety-plus years to build our refinery, process all our ore, and be gone, the dragons none the wiser. We formed up a caravan and marched for the Caldera. I was in the lead by a good long stretch; Image or not, I had to be the one to scout out the trail. was the the fireproof one after all, and we were entering a volcanically active region. Plus I was the only one not hauling a wagon or humping a load of equipment.

I was halfway up the slope to the rim when something came zooming through the air overhead.... something with scales and wings. DRAGON! I nearly crapped my armor before I realized that the dragon in question was barely bigger than that pet hatchling of Twilight Sparkle's. Jeez, my heart.

"Who goes there? Halt,trespassers!" It shouted, hovering overhead. It had a high, feminine sounding
voice, and looked a lot thinner and sleeker than Twilight's dumpy dragonling. Was it female? She was waving some sort of scepter at me, topped with an enormous red stone. Badge of office of some sort? "Who are you?" She squinted at me. "Are you some sort of dragon? This is the off season! The Dragon Caldera is empty now-- no visitors allowed!"

"I am Darth Vulcan," I said. I carefully skipped over 'are you a dragon.' Let's not draw attention to that. "Who else is here that I may speak to?" Bargain, bargain, bargain, with the angry fire breathing reptiiile....

She blinked. "--No! No one here for you to talk to. So no visitors, no way no when no how!"

I breathed a little easier at hearing that. The last thing I wanted was for a dozen dragons to come pouring over the ridge to find out what the ruckus was about. "Well--"

I never finished that sentence. There was an unholy rumble from beyond the ridge, and a steady THOOM, THOOM, THOOM of something walking up the inner slope. I saw splashes of lava go flying up. Something... enormous... rose up over the lip of the Caldera and glared down at me with mill-wheel sized eyes. It had enormous, drooping rams' horns on either side of its head and what looked like a crown resting on its beetled brow. "OH WHAT NOW?" it roared, no, erupted. I felt the heat of its breath wash over me seconds later. It was over a hundred yards upslope and it still felt like I had one foot in the door of a blast furnace. It flicked a gobbet of lava off its shoulder. "I CAME ALL THE WAY OUT HERE TO HAVE A MOMENT'S PEACE FROM EVERYDRAGON'S NATTERING--"

Remember the 747 that wants to eat you? Say hello to the thing that ate that.

I looked downslope to where my idiot entourage was cowering, trying to hide behind some boulders. I caught the eye of the minotaur with the binoculars who was looking awe-struck, terrified and sheepish all at the same time. "Coast is clear, is it?" I yelled.

He shrugged, then flinched and ducked down behind a boulder far too small for him. I saw Heart Root throwing up a massive earthwork-- a dirt firewall-- as fast as he could.

The dragon threw one elbow over the lip of the Caldera like a man lounging in a tub. "SO, TRESPASSERS! HOPING TO FIND A LITTLE DRAGON TREASURE TO STEAL, EH?" the impossibly huge dragon snorted. By way of demonstrated he lifted up a taloned paw the size of a steam shovel scoop and tossed a heap of gemstones in its maw. "EMBER! SUMMON A FEW DRAGONS TO TEACH A LESSON TO THIS THIEVING... WHAT ARE YOU, SOME SORT OF GIANT COCKROACH?" He eyeballed my armor, then waved it off. "EH, WHO CARES. EMBER, CALL OUR DRAGONS NOW!"

"Yes father!" The dragonette raised her staff and the gemstone began to glow.
Okay, I'll admit it. I panicked. I turned and lashed out with a fistful of magic missiles, aiming for that glowing staff. The gemstone shattered, snuffing the light, and 'Ember' went tumbling. Understandably, the apparent King of All Dragons took that poorly.

"EMBER!" The older dragon's roar blew me backwards down the slope. From my prone position I saw him rise up, his wings spreading to blot out the sky. That massive mouth opened; I saw a cauldron of Hell rising in the back of his throat.

"Aw crap," I moaned as a tsunami of fire roared down on me and my screaming minions. "Not again..."

---

Ember lay in a bed in the royal hospital. She had been bathed, her wounds cleaned and bandaged, her broken arm put in a cast. She was surrounded now by the Princesses-- FOUR of them, good grief-- the Elements of Harmony, and one strange armored biped, who were all listening to her tragic tale. "He... he struck me out of the sky with some sort of magic bolt," she was saying. "It shattered the Bloodstone. Lord Torch, he blasted him with fire... but..."

"But what?" Celestia pressed.

"Ice," Ember said. She choked back a sob, covering her eyes. "He used his magic to fire a ray of ice that... that killed my father!"

Every pony gathered there gaped in shock. "But that's impossible!" Twilight said. "Even the coldest ice in existence would melt under dragonfire--"

"Well it DIDN'T!" Ember snapped through her tears. "It didn't melt. It froze him. It froze him from the inside out. It froze the rocks, it froze the ground, it even froze the fire coming out of his mouth!"

---

I had my fireproofing wards in my armor. I had several fire-repelling and cooling charms on various bits and bobs I was wearing. I had my shield up, stopping the torrent of flames in midair a dozen feet away. And I was STILL cooking where I stood! It was unbelievable; the convection alone was turning the air into a rapidly-heating oven. My minions behind me were screaming and turning to flee as their hides began to smoke.
I hadn't been idle since the time I met Big Boss; I'd made the point of learning a double fistful of spells I thought would be especially effective against dragons and keeping them in a ready-to-fire menu. I'd even come up with some pretty impressive synergies and combinations that I thought would be especially effective....Well, all that planning went kaput. I grabbed the first spell on the list, fired it straight into the inferno and poured everything I had and everything I didn't into it.

Flame Freezing charm.

It was an odd little cantrip, and the way it worked would have the Bad Movie Physics Guy screaming and throwing popcorn at the screen. Somehow, it used flame to generate cold--- and if you don't know what's wrong with that sentence, I don't know what to tell you. What's more, the more flame you pour onto it the colder it gets. And it spreads until it's consumed all the fire touching it, leaving behind flame-shaped sculptures of ice.

For a split second I was engulfed. My armor heated up to sizzling in a flash; the fingers of my outstretched gauntlets turned cherry red. I screamed--- and then the heat vanished. The wall of white hot flame had been replaced with a wall of ice, ice so cold that the very air was freezing. dry ice fog rolled off it. And it screamed as it spread. Some weird effect of heat and cold and flame and ice interacting made the ice squeal and screech at ear-splitting volume. The ice-flame shrieked like a thousand iron nails dragged across a thousand blackboards as it shot up the pillar of flame.

"Torch" didn't even have a moment's warning. The ice-flame devoured his vomit of fire and shot down his throat. He had enough time to widen his eyes in surprise before he froze in place, hoarfrost spreading over his body and ice crystals bursting out through his skin. The tableau held for a long moment; then with a groan like a frozen river breaking up he shattered, frozen chunks and shards exploding in every direction. I heard the female dragon scream in despair, then the sound was lost as an avalanche of burning stone, ice, and frozen chunks of dragon-king came rumbling down the slope.

It was a miracle that none of us were buried. I was certainly no use protecting us; the instant the flame stopped I fell to my hands and knees, shaking from exhaustion. That was why the Flame Freezing charm was so outdated and so rarely used; the energy from the transformation had to come from somewhere-- and that meant it came from the caster. Otherwise unicorns would be using it to snuff house fires and forest infernos and inconvenient volcanoes all the time. If they'd tried it they'd have killed themselves in the process. As it was, freezing that much white-hot dragon flame had sapped me clear down to my toes. I lay there in the dirt as boulders of dirt and ice and frozen meat tumbled all around me.

After a great long while everything was still again. Hoarfrost coated the ground in places, mingled among burning embers. A dry ice fog rolled downhill around me like a phantasmal waterfall. My minions, some of them looking pretty crispy round the edges, crept out from behind their charred cover and gathered around me. "The second dragon has fled," the minotaur with the binoculars said. "The Caldera is ours."

"Great, fabulous," I said with a shaking voice, pulling my gauntlets off with my teeth and letting the smell of cooked meat out. I started mentally pulling up my latest list of healing and flesh-growing spells. "Go ahead and have the Brothers start scouting out those lava vents while I re-grow my
The group gathered around the hospital bed stood in grim silence as Ember wept, mourning her dead father and King. Spike had taken to patting her on the shoulder in an awkward attempt to comfort. Leo barely moved, his face grim. "It's time," he said to the Princesses.

They looked at him, startled. "Leo?" Twilight said.

Leo took a deep breath, as if he were bolstering his courage. Then, to everyone's surprise, but especially Princess Ember's, with a clank and crash he took a knee by her bedside. She stared at him through wide teary eyes. He pounded his breastplate with his fist in salute. "Princess Ember," he said with feeling, "I give you my word: In the name of the Princess of the Sun and the Princess of the Moon, I and my men will avenge your father." He got to his feet and turned to face Celestia and Luna.

"He's at the Caldera," he said. "It's pretty much a wasteland. He's miles from his lair and most of his army, and there's no innocents around to be caught in the crossfire. There's not going to be a better time for me to challenge him than now." He put his helmet on. "Take me there."

Celestia and Luna looked at one another and nodded reluctantly. "He is right," Luna said, though it pained her to say it. "Summon the sky chariots. Tis time for our Champion to fight."
The war chariot flew swiftly over the landscape. Already Leo... Lionheart... could see the Dragon's Caldera in the distance. He seethed. He could see a few small bipedal figures, Diamond Dogs or possibly Minotaurs, scurrying over the rim. The bastards had just left the pieces of poor Lord Torch's corpse scattered over the Western slope!

"Drop me at the large overhang on the Northern side," he shouted to the two Guard pegasus pulling the chariot. They gave a quick nod, indicating they understood. No more needed to be said; the plan was already laid out. There were a good twenty five pegasus chariots with him, each hauled by two pegasus and laden down with pairs of earth ponies or unicorns... a full Centuria of Equestria's finest. If Princess Ember's report was accurate, more than a match for the rabble of diamond dogs, minotaurs and pony outlaws that made up Darth Vulcan's current work crew. The Guardponies would engage them, keep them occupied, while Lionheart engaged the greatest threat himself: Darth Vulcan.

The chariot touched down, and was already wheeling around to go airborne again as Lionheart leapt out. His armored boots hit the volcanic stone with a boom, sending fractures crazing through it. He stepped to the ledge and looked out across the basin. There, across the pit scarred and dotted with steaming fumaroles and pits of lava, sat a dark armored figure, lounging arrogantly in a throne carved of rock.

Leo remembered Ember's tears. He recalled ponies, some of them little more than foals, shaking in fear as they described Darth Vulcan's rampages. He remembered pictures of the scorched pit that was all that remained of Hilltop-Cirrus. All those innocent ponies, dragons, donkeys and more, suffering... his blood boiled.

He ran his fingers across his throat over his gorget, activating the amplifier spell, and roared out his challenge as the flight of pegasus raced overhead and down to engage the minions on the Caldera floor.

"VULCAAAAAAN!"

It was the second day of the expedition. I sat on yet another throne, carved out of an unsuspecting boulder on the Southern slope of the Caldera, scarfing down some of the rations we'd brought with us and supervising as Heart Root and the FlimFlam's work crew set to work. Yeah, supervising. That was my excuse and I was sticking to it. I had burned a lot of body fat and muscle repairing the damage Lord Torch had done to me, and I was still shaky as hell from the calorie burn and from the aftershocks of the pain. Despite the heat there was a hell of a lot of activity going on, so I was assuming that things were going well.
Foreman Pony was trotting over to me, apparently to give me my first report when, of COURSE, everything went to hell. A couple dozen of Celestia's flying chariots, no bigger than houseflies at this distance, came soaring over the far rim of the Caldera, armor flashing in the sun.

"Oh shi-- TO ARMS!" I shouted. Everyone in earshot took up the cry, passing it on. The workers dropped their tools and went for their weapons, or in the case of many of the Diamond Dogs, simply hefted their pickaxes and prepared to go from splitting rocks to splitting skulls. I was just drawing my greatsword when a booming roar echoed across the Caldera:

"VULCAAAAAN!"

I looked up. Bounding down the Northern slope of the Caldera was an armored, bipedal figure, carrying what looked like a mace and shield--- I let my helmet zoom in... a human?! Here?? Celestia and Luna had found another human??

And apparently sent him out to challenge me. It made sense, in an Equestrian sort of way. Big bad evil human terrorizing the countryside? Get a big bad "good" human to come kick his ass. Really unpleasant suspicions started running through my head of what they might have done to get him up to par with me... a magic weapon? Some sort of magic medallion like mine? A new thought crossed my mind and a chill ran down my back. What if they hadn't had to kit him out? What if they'd gone sifting through the universe and found a real badass to do the job? It would be just my luck if they managed to summon Hercules or the Dovakiin or someone like that to kick my black-clad butt around like the high school wimp that I was. This could get really bad really quick.

He was still little more than a speck at this distance but I could see his eyes were focused right on me (or at least the eyeslit of his helmet was pointed at me) even as he risked breaking his own neck leaping down the rubble-strewn slope. I made a quick decision. "Take out the Guardsman, leave the human to me!" I shouted, and started racing down my own hillside to meet him. Some of my minions looked confused, but the Guards were already among them-- they'd figure out who "the human" was fast enough. Hopefully they'd pull the incoming force off of me and him, leaving us plenty of elbow room for scrapping... and hopefully they'd be too busy with their own fights to pay attention if I started getting my butt handed to me. Lucky me, the other side was apparently thinking the same thing; the Guard seemed more than happy to let my fighters steer them away from where we two would meet.

I infused myself with dark indigo energy, strengthening my still-shaking muscles and hardening my bones. Already things were going wild; I passed three or four furballs on my way to the Caldera floor. None of the Guardponies even tried to stop me. I pushed more magic into me, into my armor, accelerating myself across the basin. That bitch Celestia wouldn't just send some scrub out to attack me; even money that she'd found the baddest hardass in the human race to recruit, then packed him out with as many buffs as she could think up. Hell, with all that gilding it was an even bet she'd crafted the armor herself! I was going to hit this guy with all I had and I wanted plenty of elbow room, good and clear of all my men and his.

Celestia's Dudley Do-Right stopped at about the center of the crater floor and struck what he obviously thought was a heroic pose. "DARTH VULCAN!" He bellowed. His voice had to be magically amplified somehow; it was echoing the length of the Caldera. "I am LIONHEART, and
I am here to STOP you, Villain!"

I skidded to a halt a hundred yards or so from him, planting my steel boots hard and letting flame and lightning boil around me. "So, Celestia has a new lapdog to-- to--"

I stared. "Oh what the frug?"

We were both staring. We were standing akimbo, facing off, and if his face under that shiny helmet was anything like mine he was completely slackjawed. He was decked out in gilded plate trimmed in indigo and gleaming chain, a shield on one arm and a golden mace in his free fist that glowed with power.

And he was fat. FAT. He was a metal plated beer barrel! It hadn't been easy to see as he'd come down the hillside; his cape flailing around had hidden it. But he was twice as big around as I was, easy. How the hell had he gotten down that hill without a heart attack? I knew Celestia and her flunky-princesses didn't have much of a grasp of what constituted a war-ready human, but REALLY? I was actually starting to feel insulted--

"Are you KIDDING ME? A DARTH VADER costume??"

I twitched. "Excuse you?"

His voice dripped with contempt. "You've been running around Equestria in a DARTH VADER HALLOWEEN COSTUME?" His faceplate was down, but I could guess what his expression was like.

I glared at him. "Hey, when I got dragged here I didn't exactly have a big wardrobe to select from," I sneered.

His voice was getting angrier and louder; He was really building up a head of steam. "Is that all this is to you? Some-- some COSTUME PARTY?" The scorn in his voice was thick as government surplus peanut butter. He looked me up and down. Somehow I got the feeling he could see just how scrawny I was even with all my armor and padding in the way. I didn't like the feeling. "I don't believe it. The terror of Equestria, the Monster of the Everfree, is some scrawny, pimplefaced teenage twerp cosplayer--"

"Hey--"

"Fresh from his mommy's basement--"
"HEY!"

"Who found the Alicorn Amulet, put on a crappy Star Wars costume--"

"Oh, you had to go there--"

"--And decided to run around Equestria, hurting and terrorizing people and burning shit down, just to show how big a PRICK he could be." The tone in his voice had quickly shifted from arrogant amusement to boiling outrage. This last came out as an echoing growl. "You spoiled little SHIT. I'm gonna ENJOY kicking your privileged, pimply little arse--"

Fifteen seconds and his golden-boy attitude was already flying all over me. Self righteous lardass. "OH you're a fine one to talk, Sir Porksalot," I snarled. "Standing there in MAGIC ARMOR you borrowed off of Mommy SunButt because she decided to play DRESS-UP. So come on, show me what you GOT, Tubbo!"

Snappy comeback time was over. With a roar he crouched down and launched himself at me.

I don't think I'm conveying the real visual image here. He didn't run towards me, or even leap into the air in some graceful arc (which, considering what a hambeast he was, would have been terrifying all by itself.) No, he kicked off the rocks behind himself and shot straight at me like a bullet from a gun.

No, more like a cannonball.

Make that an oncoming asteroid--

I barely got my shields up in time. He hit me like an express train, his pauldron catching me right across the gut. We both went rocketing backward; I felt something give inside me and spit up something-- puke, blood, maybe both-- before we crashed down and plowed through the ashy soil another thirty feet. I managed to pull my feet up between us and fired off a blasting spell from the bottoms of my boots. He flew backwards a really depressingly short distance and landed with a crash like a toppled junkwagon. I staggered to my feet and didn't wait for him to get to his. I thrust out my hand and lashed out at him with magical lightning bolts, red-green-purple, full-on Emperor Palpatine.

To my shock none of it touched him. He hadn't quite gotten to his feet, but his shield was up and ready. He blocked, and the magic swirled into the dark indigo metal in the center of his shield without a scorch or a spark. Was it my imagination or was the head of his mace glowing brighter? "So," he panted. I could hear the savage grin in his voice. He started circling me in a crouch. I turned in place, trying to keep him in front of me. "How does it feel to be in a FAIR FIGHT for once, 'Darth Vulcan'?"
"I dunno," I said, trying (and failing) to hide how bad I was hurting. "Have Celestia throw another couple HamPlanets at me and I'll tell ya."

That wiped the smirk out of his voice a little. "Well, come on, you little zit stick," he taunted. "Come on! Pull out your big bad lightsaber and show me what a big bad Sith Lord you are."

I didn't say anything. I just reached up behind my shoulder blades and unsheathed my broadsword. I'd been working on it for a while; I was rather proud of it. The two-foot-wide, six-foot-long blade slid out of the spatially expanded sheath with a teeth-edging scrape. I held it out to one side and let him see the spectral lightning and screaming ghost-skulls slithering up and down its length. Some of that spectral energy arced out, grounding out on a nearby rock that immediately cracked and shattered.

"Lightsabers," I hissed, "Are for PUSSIES."

I lunged at him, sword whirling. It was on like Donkey Kong.

Elsewhere in the Caldera the fur was flying too. The Guard had fallen on Darth Vulcan's scattered minions like a thunderbolt; for a minute it looked to be a full-on rout. But it didn't take long for things to go cockeyed. Perhaps the mistake was their unspoken assumption that Vulcan's troops were nothing but the dregs of Equestria and would be a cake walk to take down. They were finding out, piecemeal and one or two at a time, that Darth Vulcan's followers were not such easy prey.

The earth ponies had charged, tackling the Diamond Dogs hoof to hoof. The Dogs had a reputation for cowardly retreats, and the Guardponies imagined they would quickly knuckle under. But that was a sorely mistaken impression-- in part because ponies were herbivores, while the Dogs were primarily carnivores. An herbivore will fight to the death because it has nothing to lose; a carnivore will retreat from even a fifty-fifty fight because being badly injured means being unable to hunt and therefore being in danger of starving. Diamond Dogs were given to hastily retreating because it was easier and generally more pragmatic. It was better to simply step back, dive down and tunnel away than engage an angry foe who might leave you unable to hunt, fight, work or dig. But in the Caldera, their usual route of easy retreat was cut off-- the magma was too close to the surface!-- so they were more than willing to wade forward into the enemy and use those powerful digging muscles for driving pickaxes through gilded armor.

Their odds were further upset by Flim, Flam and Heart Root. The Brothers and Heart Root unfortunately didn't do subtle. Flim and Flam had mounted one of their digging machines and were driving it in circles, fishtailing and flailing in every direction with its drills and scoops. The Guardponies unfortunate enough to try and engage them found themselves moving like their heads were on fire and their asses were catching, running in circles trying to evade the flailing shovels and crushing treads. Meanwhile Heart Root was upsetting their equilibrium as well. Unicorns in the
Guard were trained to spell and counter-spell-- to fight and parry with enemy magic users with finesse and deft hornwork. Heart Root's preferred method of magical dueling consisted of picking up the nearest large boulder and slamming it up and down repeatedly on anything that got too close. He was given little trouble; there were few if any Royal Guards who were trained how to parry several tons of volcanic rock.

The Pegasi Guards were having conniptions of their own. There were only one or two unicorns on the ground, but they were sniping at the airborne guard with magic bolts, keeping them scattered. Unable to form up, they took to harrying the minotaurs, harassing them and diving in and out of reach of their swinging battle axes-- only to have that disrupted when something dark, fast, and that hit really really hard flew in among them and began knocking them out of the sky one by one, their armor dented in like crumpled foil.

The wingleader spun in midair, trying to see the thing-- the two or three things-- that were smacking his men out of the sky. They were so fast they were nothing but dark grey blurs! He got his answer soon enough; something shot across his flight path, cracking him so hard across the jaw that his helmet flew off. Stunned, he spit out a bloody tooth and stared at what was hovering in front of him. It was a mare, a thestral mare, barely even half his size. She wasn't even wearing armor or weapons! He gawped, dazed and confused. Weren't thestrals supposed to be less strong... slow fliers? Weren't they supposed to be weakened by the sun, or something...

She smirked at him, red-tinted fangs gleaming in the sunlight. "That one's for the Sun-arsed Bitch," she said smoothly.

"And this one's for the Moon-arsed BETRAYER." Without warning she flipped in midair and delivered a double-buck straight to his gut, folding him. He tumbled from the air, still bewildered and in more pain than made sense.

"Hey, LionFart! Tell me, who's your Lady Fair? Miss Butterworth ?"

"You little--!" The ground cracked under an overhand blow I barely dodged.

"So what, did Celestia summon you off a Renfaire pie-eating contest, or did she just magically animate a can of SPAM--?"

"AARRGH! DIE!"

I sheared the boulder between us in half with a single blow. he kicked both halves into my face.
Miles away, in Ponyville, the countdown struck zero. The order was given. Miles of wards and were dropped, and hundreds of armored troops wielding swords, bows, cannon, poison sprayers, fire-throwers and more grim instruments of destruction crossed the border between Ponyville and the Everfree. Wingleaders and troop commanders barked orders as they dispersed, each squad and platoon heading for their preselected targets. Darth Vulcan and his villainous forces were going to pay.

I smashed backwards through a stone outcropping, pumice flying. This was bad. This was very very bad. I'd once read a novel where a supervillain described what it was like to get in a super-powered fight. He said it was like being in a really violent car crash-- and having it happen over and over again, in the space of a few minutes. He had no idea how right he was. This Lionheart guy, he was hitting me with superhuman strength-- dunno if it was the armor, or some spell on him, or what-- and smashing me with that flaming mace of his. It was like getting rammed over and over again by a Brinks armored truck, only from every direction. Even with my amped up strength and my magicked up armor it was like the entire world was smashing me around.

This guy was GOOD at this! He wasn't just some Renfaire wank, he was one of those full-bore SCA loonies; the ones who spent weekends beating each other with REAL medieval weapons just for laughs. He parried every strike (of COURSE his shield, armor and mace and probably his fricking UNDERPANTS were proof against my sword), and was whaling away at me with that mace like a metronome. And every blow was delivered with an accompanying explosion and ball of flame, smacking me around even further. I had bruises in places I didn't know I had places; I was pretty sure I had a cracked rib. What did cracked ribs feel like---?

I got to my knees but before I could move something lashed out at me. The head of his mace was orbiting me, wrapping me in chain-- oh holy crap, that was so unfair, he could turn that thing into a meteor hammer--? He yanked on the handle and I went flying. The next thing I know I'm orbiting him, spinning in a circle through the air in a fifty-foot circle, the world turning into a blur, here it comes I'm gonna barf--

And then I was arcing overhead, to come smashing down headfirst in a pool of water. A pool of boiling water, one of the dozens of geysers dotting the volcanically active basin. I was immersed over my head in water that could instantly parboil an elephant. The heat-repelling wards in my armor screamed. I released a blast of force outward in every direction; the pool exploded in a cloud of deadly superheated steam, leaving me standing in the bottom of the nearly-empty hole and surrounded by a cloud of steam thick enough to blot out the light.

The sulfuric cloud didn't even phase Lion-Fart. He just raised his shield against the spray, as if it were nothing but an annoyance. Of course he had protection against heat... and probably noxious
fumes too. God knows my own climate and healing spells were working overtime. I could see his silhouette through the steam, peering back and forth.

"Where are you?" he bellowed. "You miserable, dishonerable craven. Come out and fight like a MAN!"

Like it was some sort of honor combat. Like he hadn't just dunked a living human being in a boiling cauldron that would insta-kill a rhino. Like this was some kind of fricking TOURNEY.

He was willing to kill me. Like I was nothing but some character in a video game. Dishonorable? he was a violent murderous idiot! He'd kill me and be too stupid to realize he'd done it!

Something in me went icy. I was really, genuinely, going to have to kill this Renfaire idiot, or he was going to kill me.

Screw fighting like a man. I was going to fight like an Evil Overlord.

I reached down into the ground with my magic and pulled up an old familiar spell. The one I'd used on Big Boss' treasure hoard. "Screw you," I rasped. I reached out and made a grasping motion. Molten lava erupted from the ground all around him, an enormous grasping hand and him standing in the palm. He managed to raise his shield and let out one last roar of terror-- And I closed my fist. The hand closed, engulfing him in an enormous fist of molten stone.

I sagged to the ground, gasping for air, trying to ignite my sputtering healing spells again. No, don't think about it, don't think about it, don't think about what you just did--

A long moment passed. Two. Three. I looked up at the cooling fist of rock. It was already growing dark, hardening into the ultimate rocky tomb. I got to my feet and turned my back on it, and started limping away. I didn't get more than a handful of steps though before something niggled at the back of my mind. I looked back; the rock was already darkening to obsidian black. Wasn't that lava cooling awful fast--?

I hit a running sprint. I made about fifty feet, I think, when the stone fist exploded. Chunks of rock the size of my head whizzed past me. I tumbled to the ground and looked back. There he was, standing in the still-glowing remains of the stone fist like an iron-plated monster erupting from an enormous egg. He reared back and roared, sucked in an enormous breath and roared again. His mace was glowing so bright it was blinding. He'd survived in a molten, airless tomb, sucked the heat out of it with his mace and shield, then burst it from the inside by sheer brute strength.

Good God, what WAS he? Did Equestria do this to him?

He looked at me. Right, question for LATER. Time to get my head in the game again. I sent a cloud of inky black, an impenetrable fog of darkness to blind him. That bought me another minute or two
while I watched him stumble around in complete darkness. Guess the Princesses didn't think to give him fog lamps. Fog Lamps. Wait, this was my chance! With my helmet, I could see through the cloud of darkness, **he couldn't**--

I leveled my sword and charged. I was too slow. He came bursting out of the darkness moments before I reached it and brought his mace swirling around to crash into my ribs. This time I **FELT** the bones break. I folded over sideways, choking. He brought his shield around and bashed me from the other side. It wasn't forceful enough to do much damage but it jarred me, rattling my teeth. I choked, spitting blood on the inside of my helmet. Around comes the mace again, cracking across my helmet. I reeled backwards, bent over. "**Guh-**" I said, a half-choked sob. He hit me with a roundhouse, then another, every blow slapping me a dozen feet in one direction, then another as my feet skipped and skidded across the stones. Plate crumpled and dented, Every rivet in my armor strained and rattled. I couldn't even raise my weapon anymore. I have no idea how I was still standing. I could only crouch there taking it, curled up around myself in a ball of hurt.

"This is for Canterlot!" CRACK.

"And this is for Ponyville!" CRACK.

"And this is for Hilltop-Cirrus!" WHANG.

"And this is for Princess Ember's father!!" CRUMP.

After an eternity of pummeling he let up. He stepped back and flipped up his helmet's visor to look at me. I was a limping, curled up ball, sobbing for air through bloody lips, spraying the inside of my helmet with flecks of blood with every breath as I clutched my guts as the medallion's power frantically tried to stitch me back together. I must have looked pathetic. He couldn't see my bruised and bloody face, but it looked soft, rounded, with a neatly trimmed little comic book collector goatee. He looked about in his twenties or thirties. No wonder he'd called me "a kid." Figures. His face was twisted up in an expression somewhere between pity and contempt. "Look at you," he growled, panting. "Listen to you. Just like every other bully. Big and bad and oh so tough, so long as things are going your way. So long as you think everybody else is weaker than you, and can be pushed around by you. But let you get hurt back for once, and you're lying there crying for your momma like a two year old." He raised his shield and pointed his mace at me. "Surrender, kid. It's over. Maybe Celestia will feel sorry for you and send you back home after she strips all that power off you."

I seethed inside. I never hated someone so much as I hated his fat, stupid face right then. But at the same time something was tweaking me at the back of my mind again. There was something different about him at the moment.

**mage sight**

I flooded my eyes with magic, shifting them over into octarine, and looked at him again. The magic latticing his armor was scarily complex.. Even the solar-powered mace and the all absorbing shield were interlinked with it. Everything was interlaced, interconnected through magical tendrils, overlapping and reinforcing itself so that no external force could pry it apart. I'm sure that Celestia had put some sort of emergency key or back door into it, but for all practical purposes it could only be opened by the one wearing it-- essentially from the inside out.
From the inside out. *And he'd opened the visor.*

I quickly sent out tendrils of magic, probing. Oh yeah, he'd goofed, big time. He hadn't just opened the visor, he'd shut off the magic connected to it, making a nice big hole right over his face. And now I could reach the buckles holding the armor together from the inside. The tendrils shot out, slid inside the armor-- and with a loud click dozens of buckles suddenly came undone.

His eyes went round. "What--"

I shot up off the ground and pounded one iron-plated fist into his stupid, fat, pillsbury doughboy face.

The splat as his nose broke was so fricking satisfying. Almost as satisfying as the sight of the blood squirting out. He staggered backward with a gargled yawp, clutching his face. I followed up with a kick to his gut and another to his crotch. Those didn't go so well; the individual pieces of armor were still indestructible, dammit. But he still bowed over. There were gaps in his armor now, some of it was getting through.

I hit him with a Palpatine Special. He screeched as the lightning got through the gaps in his armor, sizzling him. A ball of balefire to the face-- the visor slipped down and blocked most of it at the last second, but he staggered back further all the same. He parried my sword strike, caught the second one on the shield, but the loose armor sliding around meant the next blow to his unprotected side left bruises on the bone.

He flailed at me with his mace, sending a sheet of sun-yellow flame at me. It splashed over me, singing me through the gaps and damaged seams in my own armor, but it didn't stop me. Another balefire to the face, his helmet flew, a noxious green fog, more lightning, another swordblow to the shield arm, another punch to the face, he dropped the mace, his gauntlet came off, he was staggering, tripping over his sliding armor--

And his bare fist came around in a haymaker that nailed me square in the breastplate. I sailed backwards like a mailbox hit with a baseball bat and landed fifty feet away, sliding another twenty on my back for good measure. Ah, so the insane strength didn't come from the armor after all.

Well, fudgenipples.

He stalked toward me. His weapons and lost bits of armor floated back up to him. I heard the click click click of the internal fasteners locking back in place-- oh no fair, self-reattaching armor, I call HAX...

He had just put his helmet on when the minotaur warhammer caught him in the small of the back.

While he and I had been doing the do-se-do, it seems my "lawless rabble of minions" had been
mopping the floor with Equestria's best. Gold-armored ponies were down, bound and gagged, all
over the place. While some of the survey crew I'd brought with me were finishing up, a good number
of them had broken free and decided it was time to join in on my little dance number with dear old
Lionheart.

Before he could recover from getting kidney shot with a sledgehammer, a couple of the batponies
were on him. They speed-shot past him, clocking him in the helmet before he could fasten it,
staggering him around. Then the final one grabbed the helmet and flew off with it.

"NO!" He shouted. But he was too busy to try and chase after it; after all the minotaurs were still
standing there. They began whaling on him from all sides. He knocked them all back with a
sweeping blow from his mace. I blasted him with balefire, he barely got his shield up over his face in
time. He returned fire at me with sun-flame, only to find himself being peppered with lead shot....The
Diamond Dogs had broken out the guns at last. They plinked away at him from a nice safe range,
quickly making his life WAY more interesting than before. The unicorns chipped in, blasting him
with magic bolts or just flinging things at him with telekinesis. He took cover behind his shield and
tried to fend everything off with his mace. I almost felt sorry for him, he looked so bewildered. "No!
Why are you doing this?" he cried.

I stood up straight, magically pulling my battered armor together and wrapping myself in magical
bands underneath it to hold my battered body together too. I sheathed my sword and slowly walked
over to where he was getting pounded. I poured everything I had left into my gauntlet, hauled back,
and backhanded him across the face, amplifying the blow with a point blank blasting curse. He went
flying, ragdolling through the air like he had no joints, and crashed into a standing pile of boulders.

I was on top of him in a moment, and kicked him in the spine with all my strength. He howled,
rolling away from me. Two Minotaurs were in his way: they brought sledgehammers down on his
knees with a sickening crack, followed by his arms. Diamond Dogs ran in and dragged his shield
and mace away from his twitching fingers, which were stomped in turn by minotaur hooves.

I made the grand finale with a final serving of Emperor Palpatine's Shocky Special.

I pushed everyone back and crouched over him. I pulled off my gauntlets, knelt over his chest, and
punched him in the face barehanded. "Why?" I said. SMACK. "You wanna know WHY?" SMACK.

"Why'd this happen, huh? Why didn't you win. Right?" SMACK.

"You're the GOOD GUY. You're the HERO. Why didn't you WIN, RIGHT?" SMACK.

"You fat, stupid, turkey leg snuffling RenFaire IDIOT. Do you think this is some sort of fairy
tale? Some sort of GAME?" SMACK.
"Did you think you were going to put on your magic armor, and your magic sword, and march into the castle and beat the BIG BAD EVIL *all by YOURSELF*?" SMACK.

"Did you think we were all going to wait in a nice neat row, like good little video game goombas in their little zones, and let you beat us one by one, till you finally got to the Big Boss, had an epic Boss Battle, and went home with the prize??" SMACK.

"You know why you lost? Because you think you're a hero. You think you're a hero and heroes fight with chivalry and magic weapons and armor."

I got down in his face. "I'm a WARLORD. I FIGHT WITH ARMIES!"

"I CHEAT! I DON'T FIGHT FAIR! I WON'T FIGHT YOU ONE ON ONE, I WON'T GIVE YOU AN EVEN BREAK, I'LL DO EVERYTHING I CAN TO OUTNUMBER AND OUTGUN YOU AND ATTACK FROM BEHIND AND I'LL THROW EVERYTHING I HAVE AT YOU UNTIL YOU DIE!"

"So-- Sorry, Mario, your Princess is in another castle." I blasted him in the face with a knockout spell. He slumped, finally unconscious. I got up and walked away from him, limping so bad I was almost dragging one foot behind me.

"What we do with him, Master?" One of the Diamond Dog asked.

"Put him with the other prisoners. We'll leave them someplace where Sun-butt's flunkies can find them." I watched as they dragged him over to where the Guard ponies lay bound. The look on their faces when they saw him, it was tragic. It was like I'd shot Santa Claus. I limped over, transmuted a hard, rocky, unforgiving boulder into a hard, rocky, unforgiving chair, sat down and began, once again, working my healing spells, as one of the minotaurs set about binding my broken ribs and other wounds. They worked slower than ever. This was getting dangerous; what if I used so many healing spells that they stopped working. Or that my body stopped healing itself? I needed to take some time off and recuperate back at the main lair.

Flim and Flam came rumbling up in their DiggerMatic. They had several extremely battered and even more extremely angry Royal Guards tied to the shovels. "Well, your Dark and Venture Capitalistic--"

"--it looks like, despite the heroic efforts--"

"Of these would-be heroes--"

"The project will proceed apace." Flam-- or Flim--- doffed his straw boater with a flourish. "We have found a promising underground magma vein that looks to stretch off for many miles..."
"In a direction more suitable for your dastardly Masterminding needs."

"So while this area is a mite too, ahah, a mite too HOT to hold onto--"

"We will soon have a new lava-powered metal forge in a secure location." Flim smirked. "For all their efforts, the Princesses have once again only delayed us."

"Yes, that's all they managed, isn't it," I grunted. "Just... delaying..."

**Delaying us. For most of a day. Miles away from the Everfree.**

My eyes must have gone as round as saucers. "**BACK! BACK TO THE LAIR! NOW, QUICKLY!**"

We were miles too late.

They'd faked me out. *They pulled off one of my own gambits on me.* That poor dumb shmuck Lionheart had never been meant to beat me. He'd been meant to distract me. To draw me out into a prolonged fight, as far away from the Everfree as possible. While we had been occupied with tearing up the pea patch at the Caldera, all those forces Celestia had been amassing in Ponyville and all along the Everfree border-- all those forces I'd been so smug about infiltrating, and spying on, and keeping under surveillance-- had poured over the border fence and ripped up our territory.

They'd had US under surveillance. They had pinpointed our sub-lairs, located our hidden tunnels and entrances, found our hidden caches of weapons and gold. Then, while I was fooling around playing slap-me-susan with Lion-Fart, they'd airdropped troops right on top of them.

It had been a rout. They'd taken the lairs and storehouses, captured whomever and whatever they could, and then dug in. Troops armed with axes, saws, flamethrowers, weedkillers and pesticides had gone Agent Orange on the Everfree, burning it back to bare black earth a hundred feet around every new encampment.

"**How much have we lost?**" I asked Artful Dodger as I looked out over the canopy. I was standing in one of our lookout platforms, up in the treetops. I could see dozens of pillars of smoke in every direction.

"About half," Dodger said soberly. "They only got a smattering o' the gold an' gem stashes, about a
third of the weapons caches... the hard one is the food caches, that's goanna be a problem an' a half and ain't that the truth. Not too many of us got captured, an' we managed to collapse most o' the inner-connectin' tunnels afore they could get any further, but..." he shrugged.

"But now they have a foothold in the Everfree, and a broad one," I said blankly. My ribs throbbed. My knee throbbed-- it had been nearly shattered at some point in my little duel. The magically grown flesh on my hands and on my dozens of scars throbbed.

"Never thought Their Nibs would go this far..." Dodger said in a stunned voice. His shock wasn't surprising. The Equestrians had spent thousands of years seeing themselves as the protectors and caretakers of Nature. For them to go so far as to use slash and burn... no, to use scorched earth tactics, even in someplace like the Everfree, had to be almost blasphemous to them.

But they'd done it. They'd done it all right, and they'd put me on the back foot in an enormous way for the first time since this had all started.

"So what do we do now?" Dodger asked me.

I stared over the horizon, leaning on the rail. The wood splintered under my grip. I wanted to scream. I wanted to scream and swear and weep, just break down crying in frustration. All that work, all that progress gone...! Most of all right at that moment I wanted to lie down and sleep for about a hundred years, or until all the bits of me stopped hurting and everything stopped sucking, whichever came first.

But I couldn't. I was stuck into it, as far as I could go, and I couldn't stop to rest, or even bleed. "We go back to the ship," I said. "And finish our voyage to the Blue Fire Island. We get those crystals and we bring them home.

"After that-- I don't know."
Diamond Tiara stared out the window of the carriage car, waiting to glimpse the first sight of Canterlot. She didn't know what she was doing. She didn't know WHY she even cared. But she never had been able to give up on something she'd got stuck into, no matter how bad it started going... the rivalry with the Cutie Mark Crusaders, for example. Or her running the school newspaper. Or running for class president... once she was deep into something, something in her wouldn't let her let go.

Well, she was stuck in the middle of all this, and so she had to see it through.

Getting into the castle was incredibly easy. Her father had brought her to Canterlot in the past, even up into the castle, and many of the guards recognized the little pink pony with the tiara and the bobtail cut. Once she was past the guards, everypony ignored her as she trotted about the castle... just another pony about some bit of business or other in the palace, nothing to look at.

This... upset her. It took her the longest time to figure out why. Then she remembered that they were at war with somepony who had Changelings in his retinue. Great Celestia! Were all the grown-up ponies a bunch of dum-dums? Why weren't they screening for disguises, especially magical ones like Changelings had?

She didn't waste time heading for the throne room. She knew Celestia would most likely be there holding court, but she'd be too busy to talk... especially to a little filly, especially in front of a roomful of courtiers. No, she had another goal entirely in mind.

She instead prowled the hallways the servants frequented, keeping her eye open. Eventually she saw what she was looking for near the kitchens: a maidservant loading up a cart with a plate of gourmet cookies and a tall pitcher of milk. Bingo. That was a midnight snack if Diamond Tiara had ever seen one.

The maid put a silver lid over the tray and rolled off down a side corridor. Diamond Tiara doffed her tiara and picked up a random stack of folded towels off a passing laundry cart and trotted off after her. A folded napkin on her head did a passing imitation of a mob cap to a casual glance and merely imitating the serving maid's "meek" demeanour deflected all curiosity; just another servant-in-training, nothing to see here.

Her disguise was effective, all the way into the other Princess' private wing of the castle, with its darker, more twilit decor, its emptier hallways, and its night-clad, bat winged guards... all the way in fact to the gilded doors of her private chambers. It was only at the very threshold that things nearly went awry, when the guards halted the serving maid at the door and inquired after her "assistant."

The maid turned about, startled to find she had picked up a protege' somewhere along the way, and found herself eye to eye with a pink pony carrying a load of towels on her back, a folded napkin on her head, and a look on her face that screamed 'caught!'

But before she could offer any explanation, or the maid or the guards could ask for any, the doors behind them glowed briefly and swung open of their own accord. "Welcome, Diamond Tiara,
daughter of Filthy Rich," a resonant voice inside said. "Guards, stand aside; we bid the child to enter."

The two batpony guards stepped aside, bowing to the voice. Diamond Tiara took a wary step forward. The maid hesitated behind her.

"Oh, do bring the cart in, girl," said another voice, this one more masculine and reedy, and perhaps a bit petulant. "The food isn't going to do anyone good sitting out there in the hallway." Obediently Diamond Tiara took the cart from the maid and pushed it in ahead of herself. She'd barely crossed the threshold when the doors swung shut behind her.

She was standing in a circular chamber, one only to be found at the pinnacle of one of the two royal Towers: Princess Luna's own private quarters. It was opulently appointed, from the dark midnight wallpaper speckled with silver stars to the gold-trimmed furniture to the silken throw pillows scattered everywhere. Seated couchant in one of the sofas lining the sunken center of the room was Princess Luna herself, in all her royal midnight splendor.

Seated across from her was the misshapen, draconic figure of Discord. The draconequus leered at her with a lopsided smirk. "Well, don't stand there, wheel the thing over here so we can have a nosh," he said.

"Again, welcome, little one," Princess Luna said. "We have much to discuss."

"We have been observing thy dreams, Diamond Tiara," Princess Luna said, as Diamond Tiara served the milk and cookies. "Tis how I knew thou wouldst seek us out."

"Yes, your Highness," Diamond Tiara. "Well, you, of course-- I wasn't exactly looking for him." She gave Discord a sidelong look that was full of meaning.

Luna sighed. "Much as I am loth to admit it," she said, "we are in need of Discord's help." She gave the draconequus a dissatisfied look (he was currently spreading his glass of milk on his plate like jam.) "Our war effort requires, among many things, intelligence. Though much can be learned of the waking world by observing its dreams, e'en to one such as I the Dream Realms have always been... cryptic. Even nonsensical."

"Chaotic," Discord said, taking a bite out of his cookie plate.

"And thus we do now attempt to collaborate," the moon Princess said. "While Darth Vulcan has been cunning enow to cut off our access to his dreams and the dreams of his closest lieutenants--" she shuddered for some reason... "that still leaves open the dreams of many ponies who encounter or even, shameful to say, work in allegiance with him."

"She hopes, in other words," Discord said drily, "That by running the nonsense dreams backwards
through the King of Nonsense-- that's me-- she can make them back into sensible information." He stuffed some random sheets of paper with gibberish on them into his mouth and turned his horn like a crank: a bound and embossed book titled "Dreams Interpreted" popped out on his tongue.... followed by another titled "Jabberwocky." "Results may vary. Ahem," Discord coughed into his lion's paw.

"Which is how we knew of thy dreams," Luna went on. "And how thou wert deeply troubled... by the events that have transpired of late."

"I'm guessing Little Miss Sun Tzu here has spotted a problem with the royal strategy?" Discord said. "Care to divulge?"

Diamond Tiara recalled her most recent dreams: Darth Vulcan, dreadful and terrible, playing an elaborate board game with the Princesses-- only one Princess was playing chess, and the other was playing Mare Jongg-- and while the Princesses were quibbling over the rules, Darth Vulcan was moving all his pieces to a new board. In the light of day, the meaning seemed evident to her. She took a deep breath. "The battle... the invasion of the Everfree..." she cringed momentarily, remembering the news. The Princesses had used Lionheart as a distraction while the rest of the Equestrian army had engaged in a lightning invasion. It had worked, but the cost had been extreme; the photograph of Lionheart in a hospital bed had shown that. But it hadn't been enough. "You got in. But it only looks like you won."
"Explain." Luna crossed her forehooves and waited.

"You managed to invade, to take lots of stuff from Darth Vulcan: all his little outposts and secret stashes and extra hideouts and stuff. And you've got soldiers encamped all over the forest.

"But can you hold it? Hold it as long as it takes to dig Darth Vulcan out?" Diamond bit out the words reluctantly. It was bad policy to say anything royalty could take as disparaging.

Luna regarded her. "What proof dost thou have that we cannot?"

Diamond Tiara shook her head. "Princess Luna the Everfree is enormous. It's full of swamps and underground caves and ravines and, and--- you could hunt for a hundred years and never find his REAL base, and you'd lose soldiers every step of the way. Darth Vulcan rules the Everfree. And I don't just mean the ponies and Diamond Dogs and Changelings living there. He can control the plants, the animals, the weather, the ground... I saw him do it! He could toss all those soldiers out like my Mom flicking sesame seeds off a salad."

"Then why has he not?" Luna said coolly. "With us closing in, nay, on his very doorstep--"

"Probably," Discord interrupted, his eyes locking with Diamond Tiara's in a knowing look, "Probably the same reason I never panicked, back when I set my little challenge and your sister's understudy and her five friends were closing in on the center of that hedge maze." He rested his chin on his hand and gave her a slow smile. "Because they're nowhere close to the goal at all, are they, Small, Pink and Strategic?"
Diamond Tiara nodded fervently. "He's not just got the Everfree, he's got bases and hideouts all over Equestria... and ponies who are helping him.

Farmers in the Unicorn Range getting help 'off the books' with pests and wild animals, or with tax collectors. A Pirate ship flying his flag in the Western sea. Ponies seeing Diamond Dogs and Changelings out as far as Appleoosa. Ponies in Las Neighgas that got caught selling Black Market blood and meat to the Thestrals. Gossip about ponies who have extra rooms in their root cellars nopony's supposed to know about...

"And the whole in the Dragon Caldera? What was he there for? The newspaper said they were fighting with work tools. I bet they left behind building materials when they left, too, didn't they." It was a statement, not a question. "He was planning on building a base of some sort in the Caldera... miles away from the Everfree. He may be staying in the Everfree NOW, but..."

"But even as we close the gate, he doth already have two hooves over the fence," Luna sighed. "Yes, it is as you have deduced, child. We have closed our net on nothing."

Immediately Diamond Tiara felt incredibly foolish. Of course Celestia and Luna had figured this all out! She'd wasted her time, and theirs, coming all this way... "I-- I'm sorry I wasted your time, your Highness--" she stammered, hanging her head.

"For following thy conscience to warn us? Tis hardly a thing to regret, child. Though thou may regret leaving on this trek without thy parents' permission," she said wryly. "Be not perturbed; we knew thou wert coming and sent a missive to thy father the moment thou reached our doorstep."

"Thank you," Diamond said meekly.

"As thou sayest. Thy observations are nothing more than we have concluded for ourselves, and that Discord and I have reaffirmed through our... makeshift... sifting of the Dreaming. Though he uses clever devices to shield his followers' dreams from us, countless ponies, gryphons, Minotaurs, Diamond Dogs and others dream of encounters with him and his servants, of coin changing hand or talon or paw or hoof, bargains struck, plans arranged, alliances made. His forces are..." she fished for a word. "Decentralized, in a manner most cunning. I am of a mind that he is not even doing this consiously; that this sort of tactical deceit comes as naturally to him as breathing. Hide, and scatter, then regroup and attack again."

"If only Lionheart had beat him," Diamond Tiara lamented. The defeat and sadness in her voice was palpable. She'd hoped, even though she'd guessed how that fight would go the moment she'd seen that brave and foolhardy hero: Lionheart was brave and strong-- but he was a sledgehammer in the face to Darth Vulcan's dagger in the back. He could spend the rest of his life lunging around like a pony playing whack-a-mole, never to land a finishing blow.

"Oh the lad could whip him in a fair fight," Discord said dryly. "Too bad our man Darth doesn't believe in playing fair. I can relate. That battle's outcome was telegraphed from a thousand miles..."
away. the Draconequus' smirk curled. "I'm actually finding the boy fascinating," Discord confessed, dunking his milk into his cookies. "Everything he does is so orderly and plotted out, yet so chaotic at the same time..."

It took a moment for what she said to sink in. Diamond Tiara blinked, then stared at the Princess in growing shock. "You knew?" she said. "You knew that Lionheart would lose?" The pieces fell in place. "You used him?"

Princess Luna stared into her empty cup. "Yes," she said. "My sister's-- no. OUR attempt to match Darth Vulcan's cunning: A distraction, to pin Darth Vulcan and the Amulet in one place while our armies swept in elsewhere and stripped him of his base of power." She lowered her eyelids, brooding. "And we have confirmed what thy own instincts have plagued thee in thy dreams: that Darth Vulcan is already in the process of slipping away through the cracks, even as we seek to circle him in.

"And Darth Vulcan will not be tricked into facing one such as him on the open field like that again," Luna said bitterly. "We wasted the trust of a hero on a throw of the dice, all for naught." She looked at Diamond Tiara. "Believe us, child, that we regret that sorely..."

"Not me," said Discord cheerfully. "I couldn't care less if the tubby fanboy got his heart broken."

"Discord--!" Luna snapped, her head whipping around.

"Well it's not like I KNEW him... probably a good thing too, he'd probably have a go at me with that maul of his if he ever saw me--" the draconequus muttered.
"Enough. Begone, Discord." The Princess glowered at the draconequus. He rolled his eyes, snapped his fingers and vanished. Luna rose to her hooves. "Attend me, filly. We go to see Leo Hart now."

"Do you really think I ought to see him?" Diamond Tiara protested weakly. She had been rather upset when she'd heard the Princesses had summoned some sort of hero to deal with Darth Vulcan in spite of all she'd said to them. She had, in fact, been a bit... vocal, in disparaging the 'Champion of Equestria' when he visited Ponyville.

"Are you sure you wish not to?" Luna said. "He does not have long with us, now." Diamond's eyes went round. Luna saw the look and deduced what Diamond was thinking. "Nay, child, nay," She hastily corrected herself. "He is hale. Tis just that the spells that bind him to his own world are soon to take him home." Diamond relaxed in relief at that. "Still, I think you ought to see him... at least once, ere he leaves us. Come." She walked out of the room, the doors swinging wide for her. Diamond Tiara obediently followed.

The Princess was kind enough to slow her pace so that Diamond Tiara could keep up. They just so happened to meet Princess Celestia coming the other way, at the entrance to the healer's wing. It was strange; she seemed almost affronted that she was not the only one to visit Lionheart at this moment. Nevertheless the two sisters fell in silently side by side, and made their way down the hallway to the champion's hospital room together. It did make for slow going through the long hallway, though, and a lot of awkward silence.
The corner of the castle was secluded; the only ones there were two guards at the door and a nurse, just stepping out of the room. "I'm sorry, your Highness, he has asked not to see anyone," she said. "The Elements of Harmony were by, he didn't even want to see them--"

"Nevertheless, he will see us," Luna said sternly. The nurse bowed and stepped aside. They stepped inside.

When Diamond Tiara saw Leo, she swallowed. He was a far cry from the laughing, bombastic character she'd seen running about Ponyville with childlike glee. He was lying in bed, bandages swathing him. What wasn't covered in the white of bandages was purpled with bruises. His face had been healed as best as magic would allow, but it was still lumped up and misshapen from the pummeling Darth Vulcan had delivered with his mailed fists. There was nothing resembling a smile there. "Your Highnesses," he said, with no inflection in his voice.

"...Art thou faring well?" Luna asked softly, her voice sympathetic.

He looked at her out of his one un-blackened eye. "I guess," he said, trying to put on a brave face. "Better than I look, probably. The doctors said they put all the broken bits back together, anyway." He moved stiffly, obviously in some pain still. He refused to meet either Princesses' eye. "The men... how are they?" he asked. "How.. How many did--"

"Seventeen of thy own band were wounded," Princess Luna said, direct as ever, though her voice was kind. "They are on the mend elsewhere. Five... five were killed outright, or succumbed to their wounds. They did give an accounting of themselves; Twice as many Diamond Dogs fell, and a half-dozen minotaur--" she stopped when she saw the expression on Lionheart's face.

Celestia attempted to rally. "Your valiant efforts yielded fruitful," she said. "The Dark Lord has been driven from the Caldera--"

"Which he would have been anyway when the dragons returned," Leo said bitterly. He raised his eyes to Celestia's. "So did it work?"

Celestia went very still. Diamond Tiara could almost see the Princess' veins chill. "To what do you refer?" she said cautiously.

Leo smiled; it was a very humbled, very self-disparaging smile. "Whatever the real military goal was. I'm figuring you staged an invasion of the Everfree, to try and uproot as much of Darth Vulcan's lair as you could find, am I right? While I kept him busy and pinned down miles away. Right?"

Celestia hesitated, then nodded. "As you guessed," she said.

He nodded. "At least... at least it wasn't a complete loss then," he said. He muttered something,
maybe a curse, under his breath. "Stupid. It was stupid! He wasn't going to stand his ground at the Caldera. Even if he did kill Lord Torch, there's no way he was willing to face the whole dragon race, for crying out loud--"
The Equestrians were left speechless. Leo had been kind, cheerful, bombastic, even more than a little artless; nothing he had said and done had led anyone present to expect him to analyze his own role in the battle and deduce it so accurately. More than one pony shifted uncomfortably in place as they realized they may have underestimated the childlike man in front of them. He looked up at Celestia, then at Luna.

He thumped his fist against the bedrail, denting it. "I almost had him, though. I almost had him! If I hadn't been so stupid as to open my visor--" he looked up. "I won't fail again. The next time I face him, I'll have a better plan--"

Celestia held up a hoof, silencing him. "That is... part of why we are here, Lionheart," she said. "You won't be facing him in battle again." Leo looked at her, stricken. "It is not your fault!" she hastened to add. Her ears drooped. "It is a limitation of the spell we used to bring you here; it gave you only a fortnight. Once that time has passed, no matter the outcome, it will send you back." She hung her head.

"How long?" Leo asked.

"Tis soon," Luna said. "Thy time remaining with us is measured in days, mayhap even hours..."

"More like minutes, Moon-Moon," a dry sarcastic voice said. A swirling streamer of purple smoke curled into the room, slowly taking the form of Discord. "You two have gotten really bad at budgeting your time, you know." The draconequus gave Leo a cockeyed look. Leo stiffened and only nodded curtly. He had never made any bones about the fact he did not like nor trust the draconequus. "As always you've left way too much to say till the very last minute."

"Truly?" Celestia said, dismayed. "Minutes?"

"I wouldn't plan any long speeches," Discord said. "Or long sentences, even."

"We cannot send him back like this!" Luna said, affronted. She gestured with her horn, indicating his battered and bandaged form.

"Calm yourself, sister," Celestia said. "The spell should return him back to where he belongs....someplace safe, near to help, such as he may need it."

A strange sort of pressure began to build in the air. Those present recognized it, from the time Leo had been summoned. Leo most certainly remembered it. Leo slowly, creakily lowered his legs over the side of the bed and got to his feet, his hospital gown hanging about him. "I... don't even get to say goodbye?" Leo lamented, looking about.
"I'm afraid it looks like not," Celestia said sympathetically.

"So now I go back," Leo said as the glow spread. "Back to the ordinary nothing that I was before."

Luna shook her head. "Hardly so. The road you have traveled down... you cannot return from it unchanged."

"Take this, our Champion," Luna said. Her magic sparked, summoning a piece of the armor that Leo had worn-- a thick bracelet, trimmed in gold and white and midnight blue. The bracelet latched around the weeping man's wrist. "Princess Twilight spent thy convalescence repairing thy armor, e'en improved it in some regards..." Luna chuckled ruefully. "Thou should at least have a memento of thy time here among us.

Leo hung his head. "I... I failed you," he said. "I failed." Luna and Celestia both tried to console him; he only shook his head, tears sliding down his bearded cheeks. It was then that Diamond Tiara understood. As a little filly she had read many fantastic stories about colts and fillies who traveled by magic to strange and wondrous lands, had great adventures and became heroes, and then returned home at the end. Never had she read a story where the little colt or filly had gone home after losing the battle against the evil wizard or wicked queen... But this was what was happening to Leo. It had to be the worst sort of thing anyone could ever feel: to be the Chosen One in the fairy tale, and to fail.

A glowing nimbus was forming around the fat man. "Doesn't somepony have something to tell him before he goes bye-bye?" Discord said impatiently.

Diamond Tiara knew why she was there. "Leo!" Diamond yelped. Startled, he looked down at her. She stepped forward. "I know... I know you'd rather hear this from anypony else," she said. (He had been rather stand-offish around the Riches; Diamond suspected he somehow knew she'd once been a bully.) "But you were a hero. You saved Applebloom from that manticore. You stopped that hydra in Ponyville. And you kicked Darth Vulcan's flank harder than anypony else. You're still a hero, no matter what anypony else ever says." She glared up at him fiercely. He blinked at her in surprise. For a brief moment he smiled through his tears.

Discord rolled his eyes and groaned. "Very nice and sentimental," he said to Diamond, "but that wasn't it." As the nimbus of light grew brighter, he suddenly reached forward with his eagle talon and shoved a shimmering something into Leo's chest. "There, don't say I never did nothing for ya," he said to the surprised human. There was a brilliant flash of octarine, and Leo Hart, Lionheart the Brave, disappeared.

Discord looked over his shoulder at the Princesses. "Well, I never expected Sunshine Butt to stop playing things close to the vest but I at least expected more out of you, Moon Pie.." he said. "I fully expected you to spill your guts to him. Ah well, too late for that."

"Discord, what did thou do?!" Luna demanded. She stepped forward, threatening.
"Made a little readjustment to his return ticket," Discord said, idly buffing his claws on his chest and examining them. "To compensate for your own careless handling of the situation."

"What tomfoolery are you blathering, Discord?" Celestia said angrily. "We promised him we would return him safe to his home-- and he WAS!"

Discord shot her a look of disdain that could have withered plant life. "Are you really so dim that you thought you could just return him home?" he asked. "After everything that had happened, after how much he had already changed? He didn't HAVE a home anymore. Not back there."

"What.. what do you mean?" Diamond Tiara asked the draconequus. Discord sighed and sat down on the edge of the now-empty bed, resting his mismatched elbows on his equally mismatched knees so he could look the filly in the eye.

"Dee Tee," he said with a weary sigh, "he was plucked out of his world and his life... a dreadfully dull, unpleasant, magick-less world, I might add, and from what I've gleaned an equally dull and uneventful life... and sent off to be a hero in a magical land full of impossible beasties and creatures out of his world's most delirious fantasies. Then Sunny and Moony here were going to plunk him back down in that dull, unpleasant, magick-less world and boring, uneventful life with nothing but a pat on the back, a hearty fare-thee-well and a commemorative piece of jewelry to show for it. Either he was going to have to spend the rest of his life pretending none of this ever really happened, or living with every being in his world thinking he was barking mad. Either way he was going to have a REALLY fun entire rest of his life."

He snorted. "Or, and ironically this is the most likely one--- unless he worked very, very hard to keep this all a secret, people would find out and make his life a living hell." He rolled his head backwards and looked at Celestia and Luna, his head upside down. "Or did you conveniently forget to tell him about that little consequence of his stay in the magical land of Equestria?" The Princesses grimaced in concern and confusion and looked at each other.

"Consequences?"

Discord flicked the railing on the hospital bed with a claw where Leo had bent it. "Humans are not naturally magical. The silly boy thought that when he returned home he'd still be normal." Discord smirked. "No such chance.

"...Am I getting it about right, Celestia?" Discord said scathingly.

"It is true," Celestia confessed, after a pause. "He breathed our air, drank our water, was inundated with our world's magic inside and out. It changed him. Permanently. He had no magical aura of his own when he arrived; now he generates his own."

"The aura of an Earth pony," Luna said.
"Of SEVERAL Earth ponies," Discord added. "He's going to be a phenomenon, to say the least."

"That does not explain why you... why you TAMPERED with the magic taking him home!" Luna said, eyes flashing.

"Weren't you listening?" Discord snapped back. "I told you, that world isn't a home for him anymore! As if you didn't half suspect that for yourselves."

"Don't be foolish, Discord," Celestia said, back on solid footing, or so she thought. "The boon we have, well, inadvertently given him--"

"Would in the world he came from make him an outcast, a target, a hunted man," Discord replied. "Perhaps you haven't been listening, but he is different now, and his dull, insipid little world isn't exactly very tolerant of the different-- and The Powers That Be there aren't very good at sharing. The moment they discovered he existed, that he was DIFFERENT, they would have pursued him, chained him, experimented on him... eventually tormented him into an early grave." Celestia and Luna's faces grew long and distraught at the implications.

Discord's face ever so briefly grew somber. Then he smirked. "Fortunate for you I was here to correct your little blunder."

"How?" Celestia said suspiciously.

"When you start gallivanting about summoning things across the Void on a regular basis," Discord said, "like myself... ahem... You'll eventually learn not to fight the Literal Genie Barrier, but to use it to your advantage. There was a loophole in the structure of the summoning you used; I just, ah, enlarged it." His teeth glistened in his grin. "The spell did not say it would return him to where he came from; it said it would return him TO WHERE HE BELONGED."

***

Leo's return had been fairly uneventful, comparatively speaking; he had appeared, unnoticed and unseen despite the flare of otherworldly light, on a quiet city street in the middle of the night. It hadn't taken long for him to be picked up by the local police, though; unduly large men dressed in hospital gowns wandering dazed down the street, looking like they had insulted Mike Tyson's mother, did tend to attract attention. From there it had been a short ambulance ride to the nearest hospital, where he had been placed in a room on the city's dime to rest and let the last of his wounds heal while the authorities sorted him out.

It hadn't taken him long to realize his predicament, even after only a couple of short days. He was not back on Earth. Not on his Earth anyway. He was not in any computer system. His social security number did not exist. Had he still had his driver's license and bank cards, he suspected they would turn up as dead ends as well. He was, legally, a John Doe, with no real legal ID.
There were countless other things, too, that clue him in. Songs that had been in the top 40 the day he'd left no one else remembered and had been replaced with others, by musicians he'd never heard of before. Actors and actresses he'd never seen before; politicians whose names were unfamiliar, people mentioning third-world countries he'd never heard of—even household products whose name brands or logos were off. McDonald's was McArnold's; KFC had been replaced by Jollibee's.

He was in the wrong world. And from what the ponies had told him, even if he, in some impossible fashion, found a way to search the thousands of alternate realities, he could search for a thousand years and never find his own.

Not that he really thought it mattered much: he had no family, no ties, no relationships back in his old "life." He might as well be a nobody here, as there... the social workers said they would arrange for him to get some proper ID and a citizenship card.... still, it was too much to deal with now. He spent most of his hours sleeping as his bruises healed—hiding from the world-not-his-own as long as he could.

As for the staff, they felt only passing curiosity about the husky, battered amnesia victim who spent all his time either sleeping, or staring out the window, toying with the gilded bracelet on his arm. They only spoke of him to note how quiet and gentle-mannered he was— or how his injuries healed with such astonishing speed. Or how sad his eyes were...

Three days later he learned just how different his new world was from his old one. By that fourth day his battered face and body were all but completely healed (to the astonishment of the doctors on staff— even x-rays had shown that the half-healed fractures and contusions he had arrived with had disappeared) and they had cut back on his pain medication enough that he was awake and restless. For the first time since his arrival, he picked up the remote on the bedside table and flipped on the TV. He turned it on in the middle of some superhero action movie; a bunch of colorfully dressed characters running, leaping and flying around, trading fisticuffs with what looked like an army of alien invaders or clone monsters of some sort.

It took him several minutes to realize that it wasn't an action movie.

They switched over to (presumably) more recent footage of the heroes, looking battered but cheerful, holding a press conference as various talking heads chattered over top of them. Jean, Leo's day nurse, came in with fresh sheets and pillowcases and found him standing next to the bed, staring up at the television. "Good morning Mr. Hart, just bringing some fresh bedding..." She looked up and saw the TV. "Oh, watching the report on the Guardians stopping that raid on Wall Street by those... what were they, squid people? It was a sight to see let me tell you. Shame you slept right through the live footage— it was just two days ago that happened."

"Bwaah," said Leo.

Jean was busy changing the sheets on the bed while he stood there (such a considerate patient!) and apparently thought this justified a response. "Well, I know some people aren't thrilled with 'people in masks and capes running around,' to quote that one newspaper guy. But me, well, it gives me a good
feeling to know there are people out there like that. You know, heroes? People who will go out and do good, just because they CAN. You know?"

Crunch. At the odd noise Jean turned around to see Leo standing there, eyes fixed on the TV, the remote crushed to literal crumbs of plastic and metal in his outstretched hand. "Mr. Hart, are you all right??"

He made a most profound THUMP when his body hit the floor.

*****

Much to everyone's relief he had not, in fact, had a heart attack; he'd just fainted. Still it was a little bit before they stopped giving him the once-over and checking all his vitals.

After that, he had spent hours glued to the news channels, begging the staff for the day's newspapers, digging through the magazines on the book cart that came through at lunchtime, finally learning about where he actually was.

A world of superheroes. He had somehow missed his own world, and landed in a world of superheroes. There were no names or teams he recognized from the comics back home. There were a lot of similars and near-misses, mind: the Guardians could be a stand in for either the Justice League or the Avengers, for one. And there seemed to be a lot more solo, street-level heroes out there than he would have expected. Of course, both comics companies back home had gotten really obsessed with epic, cosmic-scale battles which made for great cinematics...Leo supposed it made sense; in any world there was probably always a lot more need for grass roots heroes than cosmic avengers. More space for Goblin Hunters than Dragonslayers, more call for a Spider-man or a Batman than for a Superman.

He stood at the window of his room, looking out on the city below in the night. Why in all the names of madness had the Princesses sent him here...

No...not the Princesses. Discord. That last quirky gobbet of magic before he'd disappeared and been flung back through space and time. What was the draconequus up to? Was this all just a cruel joke--send the loser fanboy to live in a comic-book world? He had been out of place before, in his own world. How much more worthless, more pointless was he here in this world where titans walked the earth?

He stared out into the night, fiddling with the bracelet on his arm.

As he stood there he realized that the streets below seemed more active than they had been. Large numbers of people, most wearing hoodies and bandanas tied over their faces were running up the middle of the street. A handful were carrying signs of some sort-- he couldn't read them at this distance-- but far more of them were wielding baseball bats, or chains with locks clipped to the end in a makeshift flail. They were shouting some sort of slogan or other as they trotted up the street.

Leo seethed. Some sorts of stupidity seemed to cross dimensions. He didn't know what this local variety called themselves, but it hardly mattered; they were just another mob of violent retards,
"freedom fighters" defending the world from "fascists"--- by beating anyone who disagreed with them with bicycle chains.

As he watched things jumped up a notch. Up through the middle of the mob cruised a low-rider convertible; five heavily armed punkers were seated inside, weapons in hand and bandoliers crossing their leather-clad chests. Perched in the back seat flashing everyone some sort of sign was a scrawny, haggard man with a spiked mohawk and wearing some sort of mechanized dieselpunk armor over his leathers.

Leo recognized him from the newspapers: Riot, a self-proclaimed Cyber-Anarchist, and his gang of morons the Riot Squad. He didn't know about the others, but Riot was at least partly cybernetically enhanced, with steel and ceramic replacing half his bones and all of his skull, robotic goggles for eyes, and dozens of other implants of dubious purpose. what wasn't bionic was clad in misshapen dieselpunk looking armor and loaded with weapons, all of it for the sole purpose of smashing things up.

Anarchists for the sake of anarchy, they showed up wherever there was a public disturbance-- it didn't matter for what-- and did their best to make things worse, lending their voice and their firepower to whichever side was causing the most destruction. The common wisdom was that they did it just for the thrill of destruction; Leo rather suspected that there was more to it, that they were using the riots they instigated as cover for their own robberies and other crimes. Certainly enough jewelry stores, check loan businesses, and shops turned up looted of everything once the dust settled to support the theory. Regardless, wherever they showed up the collateral damage of the mob went up a hundredfold.

As he watched, Riot sprayed a nearby storefront with fire from his shoulder-mounted gatling gun, then with actual fire from an arm-mounted napalm thrower. All around him the mob howled their approval. He could see the Riot Squad passing out molotov cocktails to the crowd; the mob dispersed them eagerly and began setting them alight.

If we were still in Equestria, Leo couldn't help thinking, I could take care of those punks easily. If we were in Equestria.

He heard someone enter the room behind him. "Mr. Hart, it's getting dangerous outside," the evening nurse said, her voice distressed. "I-- I don't think it's safe for you to be standing next to the windows--"

"We're up high enough," Leo said brusquely. Five stories should be more than enough, he thought.

"Maybe, but-- oh, thank God, he's here!" she exclaimed suddenly. Outside the window a slender black-clad figure could be seen, ricocheting from building to building. It was Recoil, one of the city's street-level heroes. He was dressed in a black leotard with white eye patches, very similar to Spider-Man's infamous black costume-- save for the line of neon-colored piping running up each arm and over his torso. His power, Leo recalled, was the ability to generate "coiled lines of elastic force"--springs, by any other name-- that enabled him to launch himself and other objects tremendous distances, cushion impacts, yank objects towards himself (or himself towards other objects), and as a side effect gave him a near invisible field around and through his body that made him tougher and
stronger than normal and absorbed the force of incoming projectiles... just to scratch the surface.

His fighting style was similar to Spider-Man's as well; he relied on speed, agility, and a seemingly never-ending bag of spring-themed tricks to take down his foes. As Leo and the nurse watched Recoil bounded back and forth through the mob, taking out chain-wielding thugs with snap-fast punches and kicks, launching some into the air with glowing springs that appeared under their feet, dropping others by anchoring them to walls or the pavement by similar glowing, coiled lines and yanking them forcibly into them, launching "springballs"—tightly wound spheres of glowing force-line that unwound with explosive force on impact—in every direction, snuffing trash fires and sending would-be arsonists flying. Soon the majority of the rioters once crowding the street were either down or fleeing, limping away as fast as they could, leaving the middle of the street to Recoil and the Riot Squad.

Riot didn't take that well. He screamed something at the others, and they lunged out of the vehicle, guns blazing. The would-be heroes of the revolution started retreating in earnest then, while the two parties closed.

The nurse grabbed Leo by the arm and tried to pull him away from the window; she might as well have been trying to move a bronze statue. After a moment's futile tugging she gave up and left, probably to fetch an orderly to move him or more likely to look on her other patients' safety.

Leo barely noticed her leaving. His attention was riveted on the battle below. Recoil was putting on a dazzling display of fighting skill, but the battle was going badly for him. Powers or no he was one man against five, and those five armed with a chilling variety of deadly weapons, from machetes and chains to guns and grenades. The Riot Squad was tearing the street to pieces. Recoil had dropped two of them, but Riot's power armor made him the equal of any three of his teammates in destructive capacity. Soon several storefronts were shattered and torn up with bullet holes, and more than one abandoned vehicle was burning... and Recoil was starting to look pretty battered.

Leo ground his teeth helplessly. The hero was losing! He clutched at the rail next to the window, his knuckles whitening.

With a high pitched squeal, the polished metal crumpled.

Leo gawked down at his hand. Slowly, carefully, he peeled his fingers away. The chrome and steel handicap rail had distorted under his grip like it was made of putty. Facts and numbers, little things said, all started to come together in his head.

"The road you have traveled down.. you cannot return from it unchanged..."

He started to hyperventilate, suppressed it barely. He rubbed at the bracelet over his wrist, his memento, the only proof til this moment that his ridiculous adventure into a fairy-tale world had been real.
"You are a hero, no matter what anybody else says."

"She spent thy convalescence repairing thy armor-- improving it in some regards, e'en..."

She wouldn't have. Couldn't have.

He ran his fingers over the raised patterns he now saw in the metal: the repeating shapes of a sun, a moon, a tree.
"Sol Invictus," he said.

There was a clank; the bracelet was replaced by a bracer from elbow to wrist. Then another on his other arm. Gauntlets slid over his fingers; he felt the weight as pauldrons, breastplate and helm took their place, heard the ringing of chainmail sliding over his body. He felt the weight of his shield and mace fill his hands and he began to laugh--

"Arise, and take up thy weapons in the Cause... Sir Lionheart."

The night nurse was hurrying back to the amnesiac man's room when she heard the smash. Alarmed she broke into a run. When she and the orderlies arrived she found an empty room, the night air wafting in through the shattered remains of the ceiling-to-floor window. It seemed their john doe had departed most precipitously.

Down on the street Recoil tumbled to a halt after a twenty-foot roll on the pavement. He had gotten too close and Riot, clumsy as he was, had managed to catch him across the ribcage with a backhanded swing of one mechanical forearm. Recoil had taken an unscheduled flight down the street as a result. His powers had held his bones and organs together, just barely. Internal cohesive field and bullet-catching aura or no, that had HURT.

"Wow, if you didn't want to get close, Rye-bread, you coulda just said so," Recoil grunted, wrapping his arm around his bruised torso. Quips were getting a little hard to come by.

The power-armored violence-junkie cackled. "Laugh it up, moron," he said. Riot's arm made a ratcheting sound like someone racking a shotgun, and a chainsaw blade extended and locked in place. He revved it a couple of times. "You're about to split a gut."

"That's the best you could come up with?" Recoil criticized. Snappy irreverent rejoinder or not, he felt his blood run cold as the still-standing members of the Riot Squad closed in on him, machetes and nail-studded bats raised.

Everyone was suddenly distracted by the sound of breaking glass, high above. There was a breathless pause, a beat, maybe two beats too long and then a resounding crash. Everyone save Recoil (who was still lying prone) spun about. Standing in the smashed ruins of what once had been the front end of the Riot Squad's low-rider convertible was an enormous figure clad in medieval
armor. He was wielding a round shield with a midnight-colored center and a mace that looked as big as a traffic sign. On his tabard was a stylized sun, moon, and tree, with two winged unicorns encircling it.

The Riot Squad gawked in shock. "MY CAR!!" Riot screamed.

"Your scrapyard salvage," Recoil retorted with dry amusement. "Be sure and get a receipt when the recycling center picks it up."

"RARRRgh!" Riot screamed by way of eloquent response.

"Hail and well met, hero!" the armored figure shouted, waving his mace at Recoil as he stepped out of the smashed engine block. "Could you use a hand?"

Recoil chuckled. "Well praise the sun," he shouted back, "Time for a bit of the jolly old cooperation, what?" He hopped to his feet, priming a springball in each hand-- but something making him wait before springing back into action.

"MY CAR!" Riot screamed again "I'LL KILL YOU FOR THAT!"

"You'll TRY," the armored knight said, his voice loud, deep, and dangerous.

"WHO THE HELL ARE YOU??" Riot said, his synthezoid voice crackling and staticky with agitation.

"Who am I?" the man in armor said. "I am sworn to valour." Two of the Squad opened fire on him. He didn't even seem to notice as the bullets spanged off his armor.

"My heart shall know only virtue." He took another step. Grenades bounced at his feet, exploded, throwing shattered asphalt up; he didn't even flinch from his slow, steady walk.

"My word shall speak only truth." Cursing, Riot opened up with his gatling gun, spending the last few bullets on the advancing figure. Firepower that would have knocked an ordinary man on his can, and the guy didn't even flinch.

"My weapon shall defend the helpless." Finally noticing his Gatling Gun wasn't responding, Riot switched to his flame thrower. Flaming napalm, a special mix Riot had concocted himself that was hot enough to melt lead, engulfed the knight-- then swirled away into the blackness at the center of his shield. The head of the knight's mace began glowing an ominous cherry red.

"My might shall uphold the weak... My wrath shall undo the wicked." The head of the mace burst
into flame. It dropped off, and now dangled from the weapon on the end of a chain. The knight began spinning it around his head, a whirling comet of fire. Riot felt his growing nervousness bloom into genuine fear.

"I AM SIR LIONHEART, AND THIS SO I SWEAR!" The knight broke into a run, charging straight at the would-be super-anarchist, closing the distance at terrifying speed. Out of the corner of his eyes Riot saw the last members of his squad taken out by springballs as Recoil finally made his move. Riot hardly cared, though; he was too busy frantically trying to re-start his arm-chainsaw as Sir Lionheart bore down on him like an enraged freight train.

Riot's last thought for the evening was "well tonight's joyride turned out to suck..." just before a flaming ball of steel slammed into his mechanically-enhanced face.

Be sure and check out My Patreon and My Home Website for more of my original art and other work...

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!