The Audience
by RHJunior

Summary

Originally something of a short writing exercise. This Human In Equestria story skipped over a lot of the common events and went straight for the meat of the story--- the bronys first audience with Celestia. However, it gained a life of its own and developed--- gasp!--- a plot!
The courtroom was cleared. Courtiers, servants, staff, all had been ushered out. Even the ever present guards had been reduced to a bare quartet around the throne; the rest were stationed discreetly OUTSIDE the tightly closed doors. It was just our tidy little gathering: Celestia, Luna, the Elements of Harmony... and me. Celestia, alicorn, ruler of the sun, coregent of the world of Equestria, regarded me with cool eyes. "And so," she asked, "now that we have, at your request, dismissed any careless ears.... how is it that you, a creature from another world entire, know so much of us?"

I rubbed my eyes as I tried to compose my thoughts. Where to begin? "Okay," I said. "Let me take this from the beginning. But... please be patient; it's.... long and complicated, and it will take some time to get to the point." She nodded, briefly. I puffed out my cheeks with a breath I hadn't known I was holding, and began. "About twenty or thirty years ago in my world, in the mid 1980s, a toy company by the name of hasbro decided to create a new line of toys, especially catered to young girls. A series of small plastic toys, about yea big--" I gestured--" shaped like tiny horses. Tiny ponies, actually, in bright pastel colors and decorative marks on their flanks, and-- important selling point here," I held up a finger-- "combable manes and tails." I smiled slightly in spite of myself. "To promote these dolls and increase sales, Hasbro commissioned artists to create a cartoon... you recall what I told you about television?"

"The moving picture device, yes," Celestia nodded. Twilight nodded in agreement as well; she had been the one to interrogate me about it-- and several other human inventions as well. "We do have motion pictures-- movies-- so we understand some of the concept..."

"Well they made a...a series of moving picture stories, I guess you'd call it, telling about the adventures of these Little Ponies in their magical world. The usual lowest-common-denominator stuff; cute pets, trite songs, stories about tea parties and makeup and dress-up and scads of PINK flung everywhere." I winced. "It was dreadful." A few of the listeners chuckled; I suspected then that, if not exactly alike, the rules-- and shortsighted gender biases-- of the marketplace were predictably similar here. "oh, it was moderately popular enough, at least with children under the age of five, and they sold a lot of toys... but eventually it petered out. Quite rapidly, in fact. Over the next few decades, The toy company tried to revive interest by reinventing the cartoon that promoted it; nothing quite seemed to stick. In fact the remakes and redesigns went from merely mediocre to outright nightmarish.

Then", after several decades of this, they hired a very talented lady named Lauren Faust. She was an animator and director with considerable experience in making successful children's shows. They gave her and her team of artists and writers free rein, more or less, and sat back to see what she would create.

"And this time, it worked."

"She crafted a whole new show: one that didn't cheat on quality, in art or music or writing. One that didn't talk down to its audience, either. She stated herself that for too long "girl's entertainment" had
been an excuse for BAD entertainment... her goal was to make a show little girls could watch, *along with their families.* And that meant their older siblings and parents too. The results were-- well, they were insane. The show became wildly popular. Not just with little girls, but with teenagers and young adults-- male AND female alike."

"The show was titled "My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic." Celestia visibly started. A stir went through the others gathered there. I grinned silently to myself; I could tell that THEY could tell where this was going, and the storyteller in me was enjoying the buildup immensely. "It followed the adventures of a certain unicorn one Twilight Sparkle--" one of the ponies, I think it was Rarity, gave a little gasp "-- the student of Princess Celestia, and her adventures as she and her friends, the Elements of Harmony saved Equestria from Nightmare Moon, and learned the magic of friendship..." the mane six had quit whispering and were making exclamations of disbelief and alarm.

I fished around in the pockets of my tattered coat. One by one I pulled out the tiny plastic figurines and set them on the dais in front of the princess, naming each one as I did. "Rainbow Dash, element of Loyalty, Fluttershy, element of Kindness, Applejack, element of Honesty, Pinky Pie, element of Laughter, Rarity, element of Generosity, and of course, Twilight...element of Friendship-- or MAGIC."

At this visible proof of my foreknowledge, everyone in the room began babbling in confusion. Celestia nosed the tiny plastic ponies at her feet. It was interesting; her veneer of regal serenity was visibly cracked. I'd never seen her look quite so stunned in the show. Her sister Luna was more overt, gaping at me, slack jawed.

It was a full minute before the noise died down enough for anyone to be heard. Rainbow Dash managed to stammer out, "Are you-- are you trying to tell us that we're....that we're NOT REAL? That we're all just like, characters in a book or something??"

Celestia ceased her inspection of the tiny pony statues and raised her head. She looked at me, her expression enigmatic, as she waited for my answer. The others looked at me as well, with expressions ranging from confusion (Pinky Pie) to outright stunned horror (Rainbow Dash and Twilight.)

I'd pondered how I would answer this sort of thing. It's what hopeless fan nerds do, after all. I did my best to express myself... "No, absolutely not," I said. "I'm a little too materialist for THAT nonsense." I pointed at myself. "Look, I'm here, right? And I have to accept that I'M real. Cognito ergo sum. " And if I accept that, and I accept that I'm really... here, in Equestria, then I have to accept the ponies, Equestria, et al-- is just as real as I am. As just as-- as complex and detailed and structured as I am. That it didn't blink into existence just because I or anyone else imagined it, and that it's not going to go away in a puff of logic when I close my eyes or look away." I snorted and rolled my eyes. "Anyway, I'm really not willing to assign power over reality itself to something as MUSHY as a human mind. We have trouble visualizing the way a single atom works, much less an entire universe of them. The mind does not create reality, it is how we discover reality."

"'A is A,' so to speak?" Celestia said. I thought I caught a twinkle of amusement in her eye.Ah, an objectivist alicorn. There was a joke in there somewhere.... I shrugged. "So to speak," I agreed. The tension in the room seemed to lessen slightly. having your own objective existence reassured will do that, I guess. Whether you stand on your own two feet or on four little hooves.

"Then how do *you* explain this.... convergence?" Princess Luna said, delicately tapping one of the pony dolls with a hoof.
I blew out my cheeks and ran one hand through my hair. "I don't know," I said, shrugging hopelessly. "You have to understand. I'm no scientist or theoretical physicist or philosophy major or whoever it is you'd talk to in order to figure this sort of thing out. I'm just a really well-read fat guy who spends way too much time on the internet arguing about weird stuff with even weirder people.

"Your world exist, my world exists... Maybe it's just that there are so many worlds out there that sooner or later one will pop up where someone JUST HAPPENS to write a story about what's happening on another. Infinite monkeys on typewriters, sort of thing. Maybe great minds think alike- or at least think enough to imagine other worlds accurately. Or maybe, I dunno... my favorite theory is that maybe.... the universe leaks."

Celestia creased her brow at that one. "Explain."

Immediately I was spinning off on one of my self-imposed fad theories. "Scientists in my world believe that while our universe is self-contained, closing back in on itself..." I sketched out a bubble-like shape with my hands in the air "...they think that it might also be, well, porous. Perforated with with countless trillions of wormholes--- tiny pinhole tunnels, too small for even a single atom, linking it to other universes around it. This is just metaphysical babble on my part, but maybe...

"Maybe things seep over. Maybe ideas, thoughts, memories, concepts can seep through from one world to another. And certain receptive people pick them up. " I shrugged expansively. "Maybe that's all 'creativity' really is; just someone getting a brief wavelength of another world through the walls of the universe and running with it. Of course, it could all be a pile of horseradish, too..." I looked around me at the castle full of ponies. Tool using, clothes-wearing, ENGLISH SPEAKING ponies, who wore saddles without riders, used cups with handles despite having no fingers, and whose culture, what I'd seen of it, looked like it had been scavenged, higgledy piggledy, from Smithsonian archives and Hollywood backlots. "Then again...." I muttered to myself.

"So this 'Lauren Faust," Twilight butted in, "has been, er, watching our world? Is this why you have been playing your information so close to the vest, because you didn't want to look like a spy?"

"Or 'acause he IS a spy," Applejack said suspiciously. "Using his telly-vision to watch us...."

"Um, yes, I've been watching. But you have to understand, the information about Equestria is... really sparse. The show we watch is made up of weekly episodes, each about twenty minutes long. Plus it's a kid's show, after all; so they weren't going to put up anything too, umm, personal or intimate...." I trailed off awkwardly. A few of us present cleared our throats. "But I knew it would be really, well, disturbing-- so I figured I'd better keep all the details to myself, at least at first."

"The other thing is.... well, again, it WAS just a show, after all. and when I arrived...."

".... And when you arrived, you feared that your Faust might have shown you our world through rose-colored glasses, am I correct?"

Princess Celestia said gently. Dang perceptive pony.

I nodded."That DID cross my mind when I figured out where I was, yes," I admitted. "The show had been made for small children, I had no idea how much she had watered down what she had, er, 'seen.' Or what she hadn't shown at all. Heck, the fans of the show spend hours every day arguing over the details that the camera DIDN'T show.... For all I knew, your culture could have had severed heads on sticks just offscreen." I turned red when I realized she might have been insulted. "N-not that I thought that--- just an example by exaggeration--"
"I trust you've found no severed heads, all the same," Celestia said with dry amusement, an eyebrow raised. A couple of the fillies giggled.

"I could make a list as long as my arm of things I wasn't sure about," I confessed. I reflected; the truth was even stranger than the fiction. What most of Earth's fanfic writers-- especially the Human In Equestria fanfic writers--- didn't seem to take into account was that, were Equestria to be real, then the bronies were essentially learning about an entire world by looking through a very narrow keyhole..most of the fans who'd written stories about visiting equestria had tended to forget that the show was a cartoon, and that cartoons, and cartoon physics, weren't generally literalisms, but were visual shorthand for more complicated concepts. I'd gotten to know Pinkie Pie; she had emphatically NOT exhibited any of the reality-bending abilities attributed to her on the show, and especially in fanfic. She was just a ditz. A bubbly, lovable ditz, with a bizarre Pinkie-Pie logic that could make your brain hurt, but a ditz all the same.

As to physics, save for the situationally altering effects of the magic that permeated everything, they were generally stuck with at least the basic Newtonian laws. While Twilight DID have a truckload of junk fall on her head some time ago, she most certainly didn't have an anvil braining her. ... hammerspace and Bugs Bunny pockets were in notable absence as well; one of the things NOT shown on screen, ponies wore saddlebags and other pocketed accoutrements almost continually.Twilight, for instance, had a clever sleeve on her front left leg that held a pencil, chalk and other writing implements, and Spike never went anywhere without his fanny-pack. Mundane utility was far more prevalent than the show indicated. The physics of Equestria, it seemed, had more in common with Earth than with Warner Brothers Or Disney. And I did have to note a considerable lack of pastel pink and hearts in the local decor.

But still, for the little material details, the big ones--- the culture, the atmosphere, Rarity's generosity, Fluttershy's kindness, and certainly Princess Celestia's benevolence--- were right on the money.

"If anything, I've been surprised and relieved about how accurate the show is to depicting your world," I said. "small details are different, or were left out, but the general gist was right. Equestria is a kind and gentle place, and its people-- ponies-- are generally decent folk."

"And what others of your kind?" Celestia asked. "Were there other reasons you have been so reluctant to tell us of where you are from?"

Ah me, down to the nitty gritty. I looked down and thought it over soberly; this could get VERY touchy. I am not of the "humans are monsters" school, or at least did not want to be. I didn't want to leave her fearful of humanity... but I didn't want her to be incautious or misled, either. I was going to have to pick my next words carefully.

"You have to understand, your Highness," I said,"humanity is... complicated. Our species is essentially alone. We are the only intelligent creatures in our world, we are omnivores, and predators, and we are the dominant species on our world with a vengeance.

"And we are one hell of a mixed bag. We have dozens of nations in the human world,ranging from peaceful democracies to tyrannies to blood crazed banana republics. There are hundreds of religions and thousands of languages and cultures, some of them peaceful, some of them crazy violent. War is a common occurrence; always, somewhere in the world, there is someone or other who can't stand to know that his neighbor lives while he does. For every group of people who would greet you with joy and wonder and praising heaven for such wonders, there is another who would kill you on sight out of fear, or ignorance, or in the name of their god. For every group that said "we come in peace, live long and prosper", there is another that will be cold and ruthless and treat you like lab experiments, perfectly willing to dissect you for some idle scientific curiosity." Some of the ponies looked shocked
at this.

Celestia, tellingly, did not. I pondered why, and made a mental note to inquire more closely about Equestria's history at some later time...

"Let me restate... many humans are good and kind, and many can be decent, given a chance. But collectively? We are unpredictable, and dangerously so. My best advice for dealing with humans would be "Warning: Volatile. Handle with care." I pursed my lips. "If for some reason humans come into Equestria, be ready to greet them in peace... but make sure you do it from a very obvious position of strength."
"So tell us, my human friend; what dost thou think of Equestria's mettle?"

Princess Luna and I were strolling together through the castle at night. Over the course of days and nights, I had become something of a minor fixture in the castle; neither Princess had been so foolish as to put a potentially valuable-- and dangerous-- strategic utility such as myself far away from themselves. No boast there, just fact: I was, after all, the first example of my entire species to fall into their hooves. Tell me, after first contact, how far away would the President of the USA keep the first alien from outer space from his immediate reach? As such, I was quartered with the royal family itself (yes, Prince Blueblood is a bit of a prance, but on the other hand Princess Cadence is quite charming...) and spent much of my time in the Princess' company. It was making me feel rather like an exotic pet, but I managed to cope with it.

My erratic sleep schedule in Earth had come to some utility here in Equestria: it meant that I could freely socialize with both the day and night courts, and their respective Princesses.... while they begged me to regale them with stories of my homeworld or, less subtly, pried for useful tactical information about my people. Some people would think me traitor for willingly giving up my race's "secrets," but I felt no compunction to hold back. These ponies, while not as light and fluffy and harmless as our entertainment would have them, were still innocent souls who at least deserved to know what they were in for, should my inadvertent arrival in their world be a herald of inevitable contact with my race.

That evening Luna was taking her nightly constitutional, strolling through the castle and its grounds, and had asked me to accompany her. I had accepted. We were now walking along the parapets high above the castle grounds, out in the warm night air. The topic had drifted about to this. "Mettle?" I repeated. "I'm not certain how you mean."

"Be that as may..."

"Seriously, Highness, I would hardly pick someone like myself-- " I gestured down at myself-- "to be a spy or scout. I have no training, no appropriate skills, I'm in ill shape... as your own doctors can attest... " I frowned unhappily, remembering. I'm no athlete or terrible risk taker, but I've had some misadventures that have left their marks on me. The unicorn's shock at finding burn scars on my
heart had been something to see. "I'm still so overweight that I couldn't even run a respectable
distance. I'm the least likely secret agent you can imagine."

"One might point out that the best secret agent is the one thou wouldst least suspect," Luna teased.
"Twould be a clever double bluff on thy part..."

I snorted. "Too many clever tricks and you eventually outsmart yourself," I said. "Still I won't blame
you if your people suspect me. It's simply smart to keep that possibility in mind."

"I do not... truly suspect you," Luna said. "Nevertheless... if thou WERE assaying us for our
mettle..."

"Evaluating you for conquest, you mean?" I said.

Luna nodded. "What wouldst thou say of us, and our ability to... hold our own, I believe is the
phrase-- against an invader?"

I looked down at my feet and bit my lip. I had been thinking about that and I didn't like the
conclusions. "I'd say that you were all but dead meat."

Luna stopped on a dime, head rearing back in surprise. "Thou art quite blunt with us, friend," she
said, perturbed.

"It's blunt facts, Princess," I said, shrugging. "I'm no strategist or tactician, but I know enough to
know that, in a throw down fight with one of the nations of my world, Equestria would be hosed."

Luna frowned. She bit her lip, obviously holding back a prideful retort--- probably one in Royal
Canterlot Voice-- about her people's martial valor. ".... Elaborate," she said. "Please."

I shrugged again. Where to begin? "I've told you about my world's technology," I said. "Because of,
well, because of who we are, we have fought a lot of wars. And every bit of our technology has
gone into our militaries. We have vehicles that fly faster than any pegasus. Armored vehicles that
could smash through this palace's walls. Bombs that could level it, and poison the very stones
beneath for thousands of years. Guns that can kill from so far away that you never hear the gunshot
before you feel the bullet hit you. Poisons, diseases, gases..." I shook my head. "Even the cheapest
third-world pothole could send troops and machines and weapons through that would devastate your
kingdom."

Luna looked horrified, but rallied. "But what of magic? What of the dragons, of the ursa minor and
major, the---"

I shook my head again. "still no good," I said. "Even if your magic and magical beasts put you on
parity with a modern human army, and believe me, I'm sure your magic would give them absolute
raving conniption fits.... you're still so tactically backward it wouldn't matter."

"Tactically backward?..."

I paused for a moment, thinking it over. "Let me take it from the top," I said. "Magic gives you an
incredible advantage on a modern battlefield-- or it would, except for one thing: range. How far
away can the typical unicorn cast a spell? Not much farther than a typical pegasus can launch a spear
while in flight, or trigger a lightning bolt or rainstorm. A distance of what, a mile, at most? The
average sniper can shoot someone from two. And they have cannon that can fire twenty miles or
more, and missiles that can fly a hundred miles or more, faster than the speed of sound.

"I've looked over your history books and looked at your soldiers training. You're still using
battlefield tactics that were outdated on Earth in the era of Napoleon. Your long-range communication consists entirely of LETTERS, except for a bare handful delivered by dragon fire. Humans have cell phones that let them talk to people instantly, on the far side of the globe. You have high-flying pegasi for intel. Humans have spy satellites--- tiny artificial moons--- that can photograph entire battlefields, flying drones that can send real time photographs back to base instantaneously, and high flying planes that literally race faster than a bullet and cross entire continents in an hour. An invading human army would conquer half your planet before you or Celestia got the letter notifying you that the invasion had started."

"To top it all off you have one superweapon that I know of. One. And it's composed of six separate parts, each requiring a separate, VERY SPECIAL pony to operate, and that only works when all six components and operators are in close proximity and absolutely everything is working exactly right. And if you managed to fire it off once, you'd never get a chance to use it twice, because the enemy would know exactly how it worked just from watching and would send a single man with a gun to eliminate it entirely from play with one bullet to one pony head."

Luna looked at me in horror. The expression on her face was indescribable; I can only imagine it as the look on the face of an ant who has just been given a full description of a hiker's boot. "what then.... are we to do?" she finally said in a half whisper. "You counseled us before to meet your people from a position of strength. How are we to do this, if e'en a fraction of what thou hast told us is true?"

I finally had to be honest with myself. "Simple," I said. "Don't. Don't make contact with humanity, if you can at all avoid it. Don't let them come here. Don't let your people go to them. Stay away from us, as long as you possibly can." I turned and started walking again, trying to keep the princess, this poor thousand-year-old child, from seeing the moisture welling in my eyes.

She easily caught up and matched her stride to mine again (curse my fat slug of a body!) For a moment neither of us spoke. "That is not an option," she said. "Thou knowest. Once a thing has been found---"

"-- it is only a matter of time before it is found again," I finished. "Yes, I know. I stumbled into the portal, sooner or later someone else with more ept will stumble on another. But it's the only thing that comes to mind right now. Delaying the inevitable." I shrugged. "Delay it long enough, maybe by then your world will have advanced enough to stand its ground against the despots and monsters of my world, who knows?"

We resumed a more sedate pace. "Thou art rather hard on thine own species," Luna noted. Not without sympathy.

I didn't disagree. "True enough," I said. "...Early on, I told you of my beliefs..."

Luna nodded and nuzzled at the pendant hanging around my neck. It was a crude bit of metal on a thong: two nails welded together in the shape of a cross--- the one thing I'd had with me, other than the clothes on my back, when I fell through the hole in the air that brought me here. "It hath... familiarities and similarities, here and there... to our own understandings," she noted.

I made an acquiescing noise. Comparative theology was one of the many topics mulled over since my arrival: I'd long ago come to peace with the personal notion that whatever covenant these creatures had with God, it was unique to them and not the same as the one humanity had with Him. "Well, princess, one of the articles of my faith, probably the first, is that we have to accept the truth about who and what we are," I said. "And as one of our greatest theologians put it: "We are all fallen creatures, and very hard to live with." All of us, Fallen from grace. Even those who have sought and accepted redemption, Fallen. Even the very best of us. I know what my people are..."
what I am. And what harm we can do, even with good intentions, if we are given free rein."

"And I especially know what the worst of us could, and would do, if they were given free rein here."

"So that is thy only advice to us?" Luna said gently. "To delay the inevitable? Sometimes the inevitable comes tomorrow. What then?"

I scowled. "I thought I made it clear already. There IS no solution. If humanity arrived here with villainous intentions, they would hold an insurmountable technological advantage. You're asking me to devise some--- some magical way to... remove... that... advantage...."

I stumbled to a halt. Luna looked back at me in puzzlement; I can only imagine how outlandish my expression was.

"No," I said. "It couldn't possibly be that simple..."
I didn't get much sleep that night. Once I explained my brainstorm to Luna, she had seized on it with an enthusiasm that startled me to no end. After a lifetime as a middle-class American taxpayer from flyover country, having someone in power actually listening to me for a change was a shocking experience.

Not that I'm bitter about that or anything. But I digress.

We spend the night noodling over my concept, considering all the possibilities and variations we could think of, till the wee hours of the dawn. Luna had pulled aside one or two of her advisers to consult, but most of the work was hers and mine alone. Even now it seems her Court of the Moon is still rather small, and somewhat subordinate to the Court of the Sun. And even the smaller details of what I was suggesting were so monumental that even with the full backing of the elected government--- which we did not yet have--- they would require the approval and support of both ruling Princesses...

Let's be frank: we were preparing to try and get Celestia's approval.

I yawned over my breakfast and tried to blink the sleepiness out of my eyes. Luna, Celestia and I were, at Luna's request, sharing a private repast together (private, that is, not counting the servants whisking the serving plates back and forth, and the sour-faced royal guards at the doors and windows. Yes, windows. when one third of your population can fly, it's advisable to take alternative entryways into consideration.) Luna had reasoned that it would be best first to consult with Celestia in a more private setting early in the day, rather than trying to spring this idea on her in the middle of open court or the course of her daily duties. I personally suspected that the presence of coffee and breakfast pastries---and the absence of obnoxious courtiers--- would ameliorate things as well.

We dined in comparative silence for a few moments. After we had taken the edge off our appetites, Celestia set her coffee cup down and regarded us. "Well, it seems that you two are up to something," she said, eyes crinkling in amusement. "My sister tells me you have something important that you wish to present to me-- important enough to ask for a private audience at breakfast, no less. So, Arthur, what is it you wish to tell me?"

I rubbed wearily at my eyes. "Your Highness, you'll recall our discussions in the past about--- the consequences of your world and mine encountering one another."

Celestia nodded, her face turning sober. "Yes. And I am afraid to say that I must agree with your assessment... as do my advisors, especially my generals. If even a fraction of what you describe about your world is true... it would not go well for my little ponies should our worlds meet."

"And you'll also recall what I said about the inevitability of it," I said. "The truth always comes out, no matter how deep you bury it... and once something has been discovered by one person, it's only a matter of time before it is discovered again by a second." I grimaced. "I suspect that the nature of my disappearance has probably already gotten people nosing about, looking for whatever rabbit hole I fell down."
"Pony hole, you mean," Celestia said, eyes twinkling as she sipped at her coffee.

I gave a huff of laughter. "Either way it raises eyebrows when a full grown man disappears into thin air from a busy shopping center in broad daylight," I said. "I'm literally noone back in my home world, but the authorities do investigate missing persons cases. To say nothing of paranormal researchers and alien encounter enthusiasts, the whole box of mixed nuts... even as nutty as they are, get enough of them nosing around--- and I'm getting off track here, sorry. Point made, from the moment the portal opened the clock started ticking. The technological and military disparity between my world and yours-- to say nothing of sheer human ruthlessness--- will make that inevitable encounter a bad deal for Equestria. Unless you have a way to reach parity with them."

"And I'm guessing that you have a suggestion as to how?" the princess of the Sun said, raising one eyebrow.

I nodded. "As Luna can attest, I had a sort of epiphany last night. I suppose I've been working under a bit of a mental block; I've been trying to figure out how Equestria could get up to speed with Earth on technology, industry, military power, all that... when that wasn't really the problem. The problem was finding a way to remove Earth's unfair advantage."

I paused. Sleep deprivation was getting away with me, but I had a full head of steam so I plowed on. "let me give you an illustration....

"an old master had an apprentice whom he was training in the art of kung fu. One day he set his pupil down at a table and set out a cup of tea before him, and right beside it, a bamboo cane. The master said 'This is today's lesson, my son: if you drink this tea, I will strike you with this cane. If you do not drink this tea, I will strike you with this cane.'"

Luna blinked, then huffed. "A cruel sport indeed! Are all such human lessons so cruel?"

"Wait, let me finish, "I said.

"A moment passed. When the boy finally left, he had drunk the tea, but the master had not struck him. In fact, he was so pleased with the boy that he gave him the day at his leisure."

"Why?"

The two alicorns looked at me, puzzled. Then Celestia's eyes twinkled. "I see. The apprentice took away the cane."

"Exactly!" I said, slapping my hand on the table for emphasis. A bit hard, I suspect; two of the guards jumped, and the poor serving maid spilled the coffee. "You take away the cane. Humans are tool-using animals. You are magic-using animals. The tools are what give humanity its edge in this situation; take away the tools, take away the edge."

"And how? Strip them naked as they come through the portal?" Celestia asked wryly. She was enjoying my antics far too much.

I shook my head, waving my hand in negation. "No, I have something better in mind," I said. "It's something of a dead horse trope...." I almost slapped my forehead when the words left my mouth. I could see puzzlement on both Celestia's and Luna's face.

"Prithee...?" Luna started to ask.

"Old human vernacular," I started to explain, redfaced. "It refers to beating a dead, uh...horse..." the puzzlement turned to a moue of distaste. I sputtered a bit in embarassment.
Celestia held up a hoof, stopping me. "I believe you explained that one when you first arrived," she said. "Do continue."

"Moving on," I said. "a, ah, trope is another term for a plot device, in this case a badly overused and worn out one.... ahem. Any rate, it's a common plot device in fantasy stories from my world that technology and magic do not mix."

"A silly notion," Luna noted. "One only needest look about and see the mechanical gimcrackery of this age to know it a false "trope." Asides which, machinery doth operate upon the principles and laws of the cosmos. To have a world whence machines didst not work would be to have a world where life itself couldst not function!"

"Be that as it may," I averred.... honestly, we had thrashed this point about for hours.... "If you have anything in abundance in Equestria, you have an abundance of magic. I mean it practically seeps out of the ground when you step on it. Creating a self-sustaining magical effect to cover all of Equestria should be feasible."

"An effect such as....?"

"Such as a spell that thwarts the functioning of Human machinery, sister!" Luna said, clapping her hooves with glee. "What availeth all their tanks and flying machines if, once upon Equestrian soil, they no longer work?"

"A clever notion," Celestia agreed, but shook her head. "But I can think of several problems with it already. The first one you've already described, Luna: machines run on the laws of physics, but so do ponies. How can we cast a spell that prevents human war-machines from working that will not harm Equestrian tools and machines as well-- if not harm Equestrians themselves?"

"That may not be as hard as you think," I said. "Most human technology, especially anything built in, oh, the last fifty to a hundred years, especially the important stuff, has a common fatal flaw. I've seen it myself; Equestrian inventions run off steam, or clockwork, or musclepower--- or magic. Human inventions run off electricity. Or at least have components and peripherals that do. Even internal combustion engines have electrical components necessary for their function. And electrical power is very, very easy to make wonky."

"Best of all, the more advanced the electrical device is, the easier it is to throw off-kilter. A good powerful magnetic pulse can even fry most electronics permanently, and that's just off the shelf stuff. Have your wizards devise an area effect that disrupts electronics, and you could plunge most Earth armies clear back to the age of Napoleon. No computers, no electronics, no cameras, no spy drones, no missiles-- guided or otherwise, no radio, no telephone, no internal combustion engines either which means no jeeps, trucks, tanks, planes, ships...."

"And none of their medical marvels, either," Celestia said somberly.

I flinched. That was an angle I had considered, and had been avoiding mentioning--- it seemed a little ruthless for the palates of the ponies. "True," I admitted. "Many of their medical devices and diagnostic tools wouldn't work either. Which, considering we're trying to find a way to avoid warfare and keep them from needing them...."

Celestia nodded. "Fair enough. But what of their guns?"

That was an even better question. Save for fancy peripherals such as night scopes and laser sights, even the most advanced and rapid-fire gun operated on strictly mechanical processes.... spring drives hammer which strikes firing cap which detonates gunpowder, etc. No electric ignition to foul, there.
"There are other options for dealing with those that I'd like to get into later," I said. "But keep in mind guns still require a delivery system to get them to the battlefield. And most of the more powerful guns are mounted on vehicles. They can have big guns but it avails them nothing if they can't be loaded, aimed, or driven into firing range. Soldiers will still have firearms but soldiers can march only so far... and with an anti-electronics edict they won't have transportation or a supply line. Or even a chow wagon."

Celestia nodded again. "So in essence, you are suggesting that we-- that is, Luna and I, and whatever unicorns we must-- basically cast a spell on all of Equestria, making it inhospitable to your people... or at least to their more destructive toys...."

I shrugged. "That's one possible implementation," I said. "There are other possible ways to do it."

"Indeed?" Celestia regarded me over the brim of her cup. "I must say, Arthur, for somepony who talks down his own value so much, you certainly have a lot of advice and ideas."

"Meh," I said. "I'd get somebody better to do this, but right now I'm all that I've got.... but like I was saying. One big blanket enchantment over Equestria is one way to do it. I don't know enough about your magic but it seems to me that it could have some possible drawbacks.... constant maintenance, probably. Or unintended side-effects on the environment." I shrugged. "Plus it puts all your eggs in one basket. There are other possible approaches that came to mind--- just noodling this stuff, by the way--- such as making it something that could be activated at need, like a, an invasion panic button. Maybe break it up so that each town has its own smaller anti-tech field, so it's decentralized. Or make a smaller, point and shoot weapon, mount it on a flying carriage or zeppelin... or perhaps a mix and match combination of the above...."

I shuffled through the papers I had. "Come to think of it you might have an anti-tech weapon already."

"We do?" Celestia and Luna said together.

"Well MAYBE. Possibly. Rainbow Dash. That weird rainbow effect when she pulls off a sonic rainboom.... it sort of reminds me of a really powerful EMP--- er, electro magnetic pulse. It'd have to be tested, but if that boom-wave effects electronics, she could probably flash-fry an entire army's surveillance, communications and more... It'd have to be tested, though, and I'm not quite sure how."

"--oh, and there were other ideas I had.

A rusting spell of some sort, depending on how fast and how strong it was. Or weaponizing Poison Joak."

"Weaponizing--?"

"Poison Joak, yes. Really it's a perfect non-lethal weapon. Armies run on uniformity and structure. Dust an enemy base with powdered Poison Joak and the whole chain of command would be higgledy piggledy. And they'd be so panicked that they'd surrender readily in exchange for the antidote.

"Most of my other ideas revolve around Guerrilla warfare tactics, which would be your best fallback position if worse came to worst. Weather as a weapon, or area denial.... a line of thunderstorms could cause some serious difficulty, maybe even generate an EMP pulse if the Pegasi timed their kicks just right.

"I had a note here somewhere about possibly using cockatrices as weapons as well, but there again
you have the whole range-disadvantage thing ...." I flipped through my notes absently, my train of thought rattling loose on the rails.

I was still flipping through them when a rainbow mane obscured my sight. I felt a hoof resting gently on my arm. I stopped in my weary note-flipping and looked up into Princess Celestia's face. She smiled at me, all but radiating compassion, and bent down to nuzzle my cheek. "You've been suffering over this a long time, haven't you?" she said.

I didn't say anything. I was speechless. "Ever since you came here, you've been living in mortal terror," she continued. "Terrified that you'd destroyed everything just by coming here. And trying desperately to find some way out before everything broke. Isn't that right?"

It says much about my tired state that I didn't even try to contradict her. "Tis true, friend Arthur," Luna said. "All could see the cloud of guilt hanging over thine head. E'en the Elements of Harmony didst speak of it. Thou wearest thy guilt and fear like a shroud." She rose from her own seat and came around to nuzzle me from the other side. "Thou needest not bear that millstone, Arthur. Tis not thy fault that the worlds are as they are."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. What could I say to that? I'd imperiled their entire world just by existing, and they freely forgave me for it. My vision blurred and I hastily wiped my eyes on my sleeve. Not for the first time these ponies' capacity for acceptance had left me bowled over.

I sighed and wordlessly indicated my thanks. "--- all the same...." I finally managed to say.

"Yes, all the same, your words of advice have wisdom in them, Arthur. and I think I would be remiss not to take them." Celestia stepped back and rang the bell by her chair with her magic. Servants appeared and quickly whisked away the remains of our meal. She took a moment to meet Luna's eye. "I think I am satisfied," she said. "And you, sister?"

"Yes," Luna agreed. "I didst think mine self satisfied far sooner, but this doth--- clinch it, I think is the phrase?"

I looked at them both, a bit mystified. "Pardon me?"

Celestia turned and began to walk out of the room; Luna fell in step beside her. "Please walk with us, Arthur," she said. "I think it is time we showed you something." I picked up my notes, stuffing them under my arm absentmindedly, and fell in step between them obediently.
I looked around. "Well," I sighed, I feel like an idiot."

The Princesses had led me down through Canterlot Castle, well down into the bedrock of the mountain. This was an old, rarely visited section of the palace's structure, once the lecture halls and laboratories of the original University for Gifted Unicorns, apparently now reserved for far more focused and pragmatic research. Specifically, military-related. Which thanks to current events tended to revolve around the equine enigma known as little ol' me.

The room we were in was a large circular chamber, cluttered with what I cannot help but describe as a charmingly eclectic mix of 50's sci fi movie "government laboratory" and fairy-tale wizard's shop. Bubbling beakers and tubes elbowed for room with magic mirrors and stacks of dusty tomes; glowing staves and crystals vied for attention against slate-grey cabinets covered in random blinking lights and spitting scrolls of paper with wiggly lines on them. Ponies in robes and/or lab coats moved about amongst the tables, holding clipboards aloft in their telekinesis and muttering to each other. I took note that the work did not halt in a wave of bowing upon our arrival; few if any of the ponies working, unicorn, earth pony or pegasus, even acknowledged the Princess' presence. This told me just how common their presence was down here, and how seriously their work was taken. (Keep in mind I'd seen ponies dangling from scaffolding pause in mid-task to genuflect to these two. It was almost scary.)

And scattered all over the place were unmistakeably pieces of human technology.

In my brief glance around I saw a miscellany--- tools, toys, a TV set, some computer peripherals, what looked like an automobile engine, several firearms, what looked to be a partially dismantled desktop computer.... those few items that weren't anachronisms to Equestria by function had handgrips, logos, or other clear indications of origin. The pony scientists (or wizards? In a world with a "magic field," was there any real difference?) were treating each item with exaggerated care one would expect to see around scientists investigating the innards of a flying saucer.

I nearly laughed to see two labcoated earth ponies minutely examining a battered See N' Say through mounted magnifying glasses, scowling in concentration as if they were trying to decide either how to decode it or how to disarm it. I couldn't resist. I reached over from behind them and pushed down the lever.

"ThE COW sAyS.... "MoOoOOooo!"

The two jumped back several steps as the machine warbled its classic pronunciation. I think one of them even gave a tiny shriek. I could hear the princesses behind me; Celestia restrained herself to a chuckle, but Luna exploded into smothered giggles. The two discomfited researchers shot glares over their shoulders at the person responsible (me.) "This must be a newer one," I said conversationally. "The ones when I was a kid had pull-strings. The lever's a nice safety upgrade.... doesn't get tangled around little fingers." I wiggled my own by way of explanation.

I pointed back at the See N' Say. "The arrow's stopped turning. If you want to hear what the chicken says, just pull the lever again."
The older of the two (or so I assume, he was the one with the grey receding mane) shot me another dirty look and addressed the princesses. "Your highnesses! I must object to your bringing the alien here. We have no way of telling what he might attempt...." ah, one of *those*, I thought. Almost a cosmic trope; we must encounter at least one high-domed person in the background who mistrusts the strange alien visitor. I'd met several over the course of my stay. I can't say I blame him, considering the circumstances; still it did get annoying.

"The alien," Celestia said, stressing the word noticeably, "has earned our trust. We have deemed him worthy of full disclosure here."

She lowered her head to meet the researcher's eye. "He has also behaved in an exemplary fashion since his arrival-- even when his circumstances were less than ideal," she chided. "It would behoove us all to do likewise. Wouldn't you agree, Professor?" The grey maned pony flushed and nodded. Celestia rose to her full height again. "Very good. We have things we must show Mr. Arcturus. Is the Window ready?"

"As always, your Highness," the second pony said. "We keep it spun up to speed and under observation 24-7 now." Celestia nodded. "This way, Arthur," she said, and began picking her way through the research tables to the center of the chamber. Luna stepped in behind her, and I trailed along after.

"*The chicken says: cluck cluck cluck PukAWK!*"

Luna and I smothered our snickers and hurried after Celestia, who maintained her aloof dignity. But I swear I saw her hiccup.

The centre of the chamber, an area a hundred or so feet across, was cut off from the rest of the room by a ring of poles and curtains. Without pause Celestia and Luna stepped inside; I hastened to follow. Inside the curtains was a surprisingly bare and quiet space, occupied only by two or three ponies operating film cameras or carefully writing notes. Their attention was focused on some sort of device on a platform in the middle of the room.... an enormous, ornate metal ring, like a gigantic mirror frame, studded with glowing gems and crackling with power. In the center of the ring, where the glass would have been, ghostly images took form and moved about, flickered, vanished, were replaced by others.

Images I recognized. Images of cities, cars, buildings...humans. Images of home.

I waited only long enough to confirm that noone else was nearby to eavesdrop. "So.... how long have you had the portal open?" I asked. "all this time, since I arrived? Or has it been open--- say, the past twenty years or so?"

Celestia blinked. "That is... a very quick conclusion. And a rather specific window of time," she added. "How do you know we did not have it open for far less... or for far longer?"

"Longer is easy," I said. "I didn't see a single thing out there that was older than twenty or thirty years. That See N' Say was probably the oldest thing in the room--- and it's an old toy, but the lever wasn't added to that model till the mid eighties, when I was a teenager.

Shorter? That's a bit harder, but those boys out there don't look like they just started working here last month. They've got some pretty impressive grooves worn in the floor already..... But then again, they haven't had much time to play with the junk out there. Seeing as how they acted like that toy was a ticking bomb.

"Let me hazard a guess that you've had this portal active for years... and only just recently things
started coming through. Including me. Maybe even starting with me.... It's feasible; most of this junk is a couple of decades old, but humans hold on to old stuff for ages. Thirty year old TV sets and car parts could have easily been swept up last week in some neighborhoods. Either way, you got a portal, then you got a lot of things coming through the portal, then you got... me."

"And as a matter of national security you didn't tell me-- after I regained consciousness-- how I got here, or that the doorway back home was still open."

Luna looked at me with sad eyes. "We are truly sorry, Arthur...." But I waved a hand, cutting her off. "So, how much did I get right?" I muttered.

"Much of it," Celestia admitted. "But for certain details. Let me start at the beginning."

"The Window, the device you see here, was originally invented almost two thousand years ago as a means for Luna and I to survey the world--- a tool that would enable the user to see any place in Equestria as they pleased. The highest mountain, the farthest valley, even the depths of the ocean or the heart of a living volcano, all without leaving the comfort of our home...."

"A magic mirror," I said.

"Exactly. But as you can see it did not work as intended. Instead it enabled us to look in upon your world, the world of humans. Moreover, it... wobbled. The 'eye' of the window wanders, both through space and time--- hovering frequently about the period of time you come from, give or take a century.

Despite every effort, the Window refused to operate as intended, and further refused to function in any other way than it did. The inventor regarded it as a failure, a novelty with little use. We... I....purchased it from him rather than see him destroy it, and kept it to myself... I could foresee that it might prove useful in some unpredictable fashion. And, over the course of years, it did."

"How so?"

"Come now, Arthur," Celestia teased, smiling in spite of the seriousness of the moment. "Did you not wonder about the strange anachronisms in Equestria's culture? The oddly human tools and furniture, the gramophones next to the 'electronic' turntables, quills and scrolls next to printing machines and typewriters, pony drawn wagons and flying machines? Truth be told, they are attributable to you. Over the centuries I took to watching the images of your world, and found the machines and inventions and concepts seen in them to be inspiring. I employed a staff of pony scholars and inventors to try and recreate as many of the ingenious things we saw in your world for ourselves, then "seed" them discreetly throughout Equestria, to be adapted and adopted by the ponies.

"Of course, this has never been a perfect process..."

Luna smirked. "Tis only recently that dear Celestia realized 'twas the ENGINE that was meant to pull the train," she giggled.

Celestia blushed. I couldn't help smirking a bit myself; decades of ponies pulling entire trains, engine and all, by musclepower--- that hernia-inducing mistake had to be a terrible embarrassment. "It wasn't always easy to tell what was form, and what was function," the Sun Princess pointed out. "For lack of better knowledge I had my ponies recreate to detail... even if the detail, in retrospect, was less useful for ponies than for the creatures we saw."

"Like cups with handles," I said. "or hammers. or doorknobs...."
"Try to imagine that prior to this, we were not as avid tool users as humans are," Celestia said. "If it
needed built, it had to be built by unicorns--- by magic. If it was to be plowed, it was plowed by
brute strength and by hoof. The idea of a hammer and nail, even one we had to hold in our mouths
and strain our necks to use, was a vast improvement over gluing things together with magic or
moulding them out of clouds or pummeling them with our hooves till they stuck together." She
sighed. "And, at the time, our own nature as alicorns worked against us. What began as a gift from
the Celestial Sisters became a holy ritual that must not be changed!... and then a sacred tradition, and
eventually 'just the way it's always been.' "

"That must seem irrational and strange to you," Luna said.

I grunted. "Less than you would think. Ask me about Qwerty keyboards some time. But how does
this tie into my being brought here?"

"On the night of your arrival, we had noted some peculiar behavior from the World Window,"
Celestia said. "Before our mages and scholars could pin it down, there was an eruption of magic.
The Window... it... well, it burped."

"Verily," Luna said. "With this most obnoxious noise, it didst gush a stream of-- of enormous
bubbles, as if it were a giant bubble wand blown upon by a titan's child--- that didst traverse the
room--" she made a sweeping gesture with her hoof, pointing-- "and pass through yonder wall."

"We followed as fast as we could. Wherever the bubbles landed they popped and something from
your world came forth. One floated all the way to Ponyville, and when it popped--- out you came."

"At which point," I concluded, "You had the Elements of Harmony bring me to you, and had me...
secured." I stuck my hands in my pocket and turned my back. "And covered up how, exactly, a great
big fat alien from another dimension landed in Ponyville."

Celestia nodded. "With more than one good reason.....

"We have discovered that since your, ah, eruptive arrival... the World Window can now work as a
portal. After all, we'd seen it happen; from there it was a short step to learning how it was done.
Within hours of the eruption, the scientists used it to pull some few random items from your world...
and to also send them back." She paused, hesitant of my reaction. "We can send you home. We
always could."

The room went still. This entire time? From the very moment they found me?

"So. Why tell me now?"

"Because thou won our trust," Luna said simply. "Your intentions, we could not know. Your
motives, we could not know. Your threat we could not assess.... save what we hadst seen through
the Window of Worlds, which was not kind to thee. Yet thou didst act gently and nobly to the best of
thine ability, e'en in thy distress. And out of compassion for those who were strangers to thee, thou
didst labor manfully to give us thy best counsel---thou held nothing back. Thou even labored a night
and a day to devise a way to defend us from thine own people."

"You gave us the whole truth," Celestia said. "Even when it might have hurt you. You deserved
nothing less in return." She looked away. "Luna and I understand if you are angry with us for not
telling you sooner..."

I seethed, but my damned heart wasn't in it. They were rulers; they had the welfare of their entire
race to think of. Deceiving the fat man from dimension X was hardly a sin under those
circumstances. Would you tell an alien from another world, with unknowable intentions, that he could escape at any time... and maybe lead an army of his buddies right to your back door?

"I'm not mad at you for withholding the truth from me," I finally said. "You had to do what you had to do." I scowled as the forgotten papers under my arm shifted. "I am a bit annoyed that a certain somepony--" here I shot a gimlet eye at Luna--- "kept me up all night letting me make a fool of myself."

"Me?" Luna exclaimed innocently. A little too innocently.

I turned and looked at them both. "All that brainstorming last night," I said. "All my so-called brilliant ideas for SAVING EQUESTRIA FROM THE HUMAN INVASION!... you two probably had plans like this plotted out for yourselves over a hundred years ago, didn't you?" Neither one met my eye-- but neither one could quite hide a little smirk. "Gah. I feel like a complete idiot. A complete idiot squared. Both of you are older than some mountain ranges, you probably noodled all THIS out-" I gestured with my fistful of notes--- "before ponies invented fire. I'm such a knob..."

Celestia finally burst out laughing. Luna joined in. "Did you HAVE to lead me on like that?" I complained to the midnight filly.

"But thou wert so sincere about it," Luna said with an affectionate smile. "Twas so darling I could not bring myself to...."

So you aren't angry that we manipulated you?" Celestia asked.

I gave her my best deadpan. "Oh, woe is me, you tricked me into living in a luxurious castle, waited on hand and foot for weeks on end, oh, the ignominity of it all," I said dryly. "how shall I ever recuperate?" Luna let out a most unprincesslike snort.

I let out a puff of air. "Of course I'm upset you manipulated me. But I'll get over it. I know why you did it and no matter how much it honks me off, you were still right to do it." I shrugged. "You've ruled a country for over a thousand years. Any plan that isn't completely Machiavellian probably feels spur-of-the-moment by that age." Celestia gave me a raised eyebrow , but said nothing.

"Do understand, Arthur," Luna said, "Thy advice was seemly and timely-- and truly insightful. Our familiarity with thy world's ways and tools have been scattered, piecemeal at best, till only fairly recently..."

"Most of what you see here came through shortly before and after your arrival," Celestia said. "The Mirror seems to be narrowing its sweeps to the modern era, in which you live. And what little we have seen of that time has left us... intimidated.

"Your advice," she stated firmly, "was more informative than you know."

"So, wilt thou return home now?" Luna asked. "We can send thee to thy world e'en this very instant, if thou wishest. Or would thee prefer to tarry a day or so to make your goodbyes?"

There it was. THE question. As luck would have it, the one question I was ready to answer ages ago. "Absolutely not. With your Highness' permission, I'm staying right here in Equestria."

My answer startled them profoundly. "What?" Celestia asked, wings flared in surprise.

"May I stay?"

She stumbled a moment. "Why- I-- yes, of course," she finally said. "But-- your friends, your life---"
Hah. I flabbergasted CELESTIA. "My life is where I take it," I said. "You know, Princess, a lot of Bronies back on earth, when they write stories about traveling to Equestria, when they get to this point the protagonists always hem and haw and have a massive internal conflict about whether they should stay or they should go. Well horseapples to that.

"I thought this through, long before I came here or before I even became a Brony. What would I do if I traveled to another world and was given the opportunity to stay? You know what my conclusion was?

"It was *I'm on another world, what kind of question is that?*

"And it's not just about being selfish or wanting to escape reality to some utopia or any of that--though if I got dropped on a Utopia let me know because I'd be stupid to pass it up. Even if this world were a blasted, barren wasteland filled with evil road-warrior biker dudes, I could never go back.

"Do you know how many people in my entire species have made it off our world? Fewer than you have sitting around your dinner table. They barely made it out of our atmosphere, left a few footprints on our moon, and came back. But just doing that was worth everything they sacrificed... and some sacrificed everything. I have ancestors who crossed oceans on rickety boats on the blind chance of running into new lands. Some never came back. But they knew that might happen and they went anyway.

"Me, I don't even have the excuse of the risk of the journey. I'm already here.

"What kind of option is going home after this? To just turn away from an entire new world, walk through a magic door and go back to my old life and spend the rest of my life either being thought insane or pretending that none of this ever happened? To hear opportunity knock, open the door, and then slam it again in her face? To spend the rest of my life wondering "what if?" Even if I never see my family or friends again, I would never forgive myself for passing up something astronauts and explorers died dreaming of. There will be things I'll miss, but there's always things you miss when you move on. It's a part of living. And if I go home, I'll have things-- and people-- I'll miss here.

"Princess, I have literally gone boldly where no one has gone before! And once you've gone there, you can never go back."

Celestia regarded me with astonishment. "You are an unusual creature, Arthur," she said.

"I'd like to think so," I replied.

Celestia smiled and mantled a wing over my shoulders. "Then, Arthur... let me welcome you to Equestria."

Luna spread her own wing over my shoulder. "I am glad that thou art staying, Arthur Arcturus," she said. Her smile faded a bit. "but I should let thee know one more detail of thy arrival that thou misseth. And I know not what it heralds, but I suspect... something perilous."

"Really?" I asked. "What?"

Luna looked at me worriedly. "Thou misunderstood us," she said. "Thou wert not pulled into Equestria."

"Thou wert pushed."
Chapter 5

There was a knock at the door to my quarters just as I was finishing getting dressed. "Mr. Arcturus, the Princesses request your presence in the lesser audience chamber," a voice said. I recognized it as Cloud Wing, one of my guards. "There are some dignitaries here to see you."

"Thank you Cloud Wing, I'll be right out," I said. There was no further word from the other side of the door; Cloud Wing was now presumably waiting at attention next to my door, along with the two guardponies already there. He would not leave; it was under royal orders that, although I was now at liberty, I was to go nowhere without my own fourlegged Secret Service division.

My citizenship in Equestria was, I'm sure, accompanied by a bit more fanfare than was typical; Celestia and Luna both decided to make public announcements before the entire city of Canterlot that I was now a full fledged citizen of the Diarchy, and had given me some long-winded arbitrary noble title--- with my awkward and self-conscious self standing on the balcony right next to them, trying very consciously to not look like a strange carnivorous alien from beyond the stars. I'd never seen a pony stampede and I really hadn't wanted to change that. It was a heart-touching gesture on their parts, I admit. But doing it twice-- once at midday, once at midnight-- seemed a bit much. Especially as each announcement was followed by a soiree where they did their level best to get me to mingle with various nobility and celebrities. It was a bit trying. I think they were trying to compete with each other....

How did it go, you ask? Remember the first half of the Grand Galloping Gala? Pretty much like that. The nobility were scandalized at the 'jumped up ape,' the press were obnoxious and the celebrities were, at best, a mixed bag. No FlutterSplosions or rampaging wilderness creatures, thank heavens, but it was bad enough. And it happened twice.

I was still something of a ward of the state. I was placed on a modest stipend, on the grounds that I still had value both as a research subject and as a tactical and strategic adviser. Despite my misgivings it seemed that my tactical meanderings had given some of their military minds some new perspective on dealing with a human war machine. Plus the historians and anthropologists (pony-pologists?) were still eagerly pumping me for information about human society, religion, politics, language, culture.... I was always at pains to point out to whichever researcher was quizzing me at the moment that I was, in fact, of no particular rank or importance back on Earth, and in fact had a very limited experience with the world at large.... and, quite frankly, of a VERY biased perspective.... and they would probably be putting their time to better use by scooping up a few books from my world and learning about us from that. They generally reassured me that they wanted the perspective of a typical human on the street, opinions and all, which was something they couldn't get from a book, and that wouldn't any books or publications from my world have their own biases as well? (I certainly agreed to that, albeit for my own reasons.) Plus there were more than a few who were fascinated by the whole My Little Pony thing, and the Brony phenomenon.... those particular conversations got quite recursive sometimes.

Either way it meant that I was rarely idle; I seemed always to be on call. I finished throwing on my casual wear and made for the door. I assumed it was another researcher wanting to quiz me over some esoteric bit of human bricabrac, but there was no telling. I recalled one general who wished to
test my idea for weaponizing Poison Joak on an actual human. Surprise, dear readers; apparently the
effect of Poison Joak can be different every single time you catch it. I spent a good portion of that
week in a variety of embarrassing shapes, colors, forms and sizes before Celestia put her hoof down.

Consequently, I dressed casual. No telling what the pony practitioners would want to do today. No
sense in risking my good clothes.

I picked up my cane, checked to make sure my suspenders were fastened, threw the strap of my
saddlebag over my shoulder and made for the door. (Yes, saddlebag. Their currency is all in metal
coin; "folding money" is a misnomer in Equestria.) Cloud Wing was waiting at the door. He took to
the air as soon as I stepped through, hovering just above and ahead of me. Bright Dawn, a
powerfully built yellow-on-yellow Earth pony, took up his position at my right hand side while Hat
Trick, a powder blue unicorn with a white and blue mane, took her place on my left, patiently
slowing their pace to match mine. All three were armored and tightly professional; my own personal
guard.

This was the usual breakdown for protecting Equestrian royalty and guests of honor; an even
division of unicorns, earth pony and pegasi, capable of handling a diversity of threats. Originally
there had been double this number, but I had complained that six ponies-at-arms was a bit excessive,
not to mention more cumbersome and even more attention-gathering. Not that I was assigned
anything unusually excessive; all the members of the royal family, for instance, had an entourage of
at least four of each. Celestia and Luna rarely went anywhere with less than eight. Note, you never
saw most of them. The human concepts of Secret Service and Plain Clothes Officers had trickled
over from Earth to Equestria. I often suspected my own rather informal looking entourage was far
larger than it seemed; one of the serving fillies handing out hors d'oeuvres at my "unveiling" party
had taken out an overly aggressive heckler with far more ruthless efficiency than one reasonably
expects out of the waitstaff.

"Can I ask what's going on?" I asked Cloud Wing.

The grey pegasus drifted back alongside me."Sorry, Mr. Arcturus," he said. "I was asked not to say
anything in advance." I felt my suspicions rise. I didn't expect any skullduggery, mind-- but I'd been
in Equestria long enough to confirm that Celestia, at least, did like her little pranks. She'd never done
anything particularly outrageous; she was more into the sort of drink-with-your-pinky-out fastidious
sort of joke, tea party wittiness. It could be a trifle annoying when you were the target. Personally I
actually found it kind of sad; the most she seemed to get out of it was a polite little titter, something
that deeply offended the dormant humorist in my soul. I'd used to essentially make a living writing
comedy, and some tiny rebellious part of me had become ever more determined to someday see her
falling down laughing her plot off.

CloudWing led us to a door off a side hall; one of the small "round table" meeting rooms scattered
throughout the castle. He opened it, looked in, and nodded the rest of us through. When I stepped
inside--

"GET IM!"

Without foresight or warning I was suddenly pummeled by three hurtling balls of mane, tail and
hooves. They struck me amidships and sent me to the floor with a crash. I panicked for a moment
before my stunned senses focused and I realized I had been tackled to the marble floor by three
fillies: an orange pegasus, a white unicorn with a pastel mane and a yellow earth pony with a bow in
her mane large enough to go sailplaning... Yes; the Cutie Mark Crusaders had come for a visit. They
squealed with laughter and proceeded to try and tickle me with their hooves. "Great bodyguarding
there, Lightning Wits," I snarked at Cloudwing.
He just smirked. "You've got us mixed up again, sir. I'm Cloudwing. Lightning Wits takes the night shift."

Pony weisenheimer. I ignored him and proceeded to get in a tickle-fight with the gruesome threesome.

In my short stay in Ponyville I had somehow managed to make a lasting impression on the CMC. I couldn't begin to say why. Somehow within a week I'd ended up in the role of a favorite goofy uncle. Or maybe a really cool pet, I don't know. I soon found them tagging along behind me, inquiring after me, or failing that staring at me wide-eyed from just around a corner. Considering some of the things that went down while I suffered through the worst case of culture shock in human history, it was probably morbid curiosity. But they'd decided that they liked me-- and I have to say the sentiment was returned. They're rambunctious, but they're still sweet kids. Just thirty seconds with them now had redoubled my good cheer.

****

I made my way down the Ponyville boulevard apprehensively. Despite Twilight's reassurances that the ponies in town were more cosmopolitan about strange visitors, I was less than eager to put the assertion to the test. Various fan-fic related scenarios ranging from a panicked stampede to a torch wielding mob were playing out in my head. Despite none of these taking place I wasn't particularly reassured; The streets seemed almost abandoned at midday, save for one or two ponies who made a point of keeping their distance. I stumped on down the road to Rarity's for my scheduled fitting, trying to ignore the stares, or the way that the few ponies on the street fell silent as I approached. In retrospect most of that had probably been attributable to what was following me.

I stopped at a store window, trying to play casual (and to catch my wind-- I am rather overweight and not built for long walks) when I noticed a scuffling noise behind me. I turned about and looked back; noone was there. Just an empty street, a few odds and ends out on the sidewalk in front of the dry goods shop, a couple of barrels, an overturned box...

I resumed walking down the street. The scuffling noise resumed. after a half a block I spun about-- still nothing.

The overturned box, however, had apparently traveled down the block with me.

I turned my back, and listened carefully. There was further scuffling, followed by the "thunk" of an upturned box settling to the road, and three voices muffled by said box whispering amongst themselves in argument. I recognized Applebloom's country twang almost immediately.

The previous day I had been introduced to the rest of the mane six by my "captors" (Twilight and a very pugnacious Spike wielding a fireplace poker) and coincidentally to Scootaloo, SweetieBelle, and AppleBloom. At the time they'd gone wide-eyed and silent and kept their distance, much as you'd expect any child to when confronted with something alien and frightening. Apparently they'd gotten over their fright and had decided in true Cutie Mark Crusader fashion to take it upon themselves to keep an eye on the strange visitor from another planet,... and were now making like Solid Snake in an attempt to spy on me.

I turned my back so they couldn't see me, my gut heaving as I tried not to laugh. I got the most wicked idea. I was at the corner of Sugarcube Corner. I took my cane under my arm, put on a malevolent leer, and, going "muhahahahah," skulked my way around the corner and down the back alley with all the subtlety of Snidely Whiplash. Once out of sight I ducked down behind some shipping crates and waited.
The CMC took the bait. There was a drumming sound of three sets of frantic little hooves, and lo and behold, the Perfectly Innocent Overturned Box came thundering around the corner on twelve little legs. Oh, Lord, but for a camera. They stopped, baffled, on seeing that the alley came to a dead end.

And then I pounced.

I leapt out behind them, and in my best vaudeville villain voice announced "Aha, NOW I HAVE YOU!" I grabbed the box and with one epic push, pull and heave, flipped it---and its three inhabitants--upside down. They were now lying side by side on their backs in an upright box, expressions of utter shock on their faces, their legs sticking comically up in the air. "Thought you could spy on me and thwart my plans did you?" I bellowed. "Now you pay the PENALTY!" I lunged forward, they screamed...

And I began tickling the LIFE out of them.

They'd obviously never been tickled by someone with fingers before. Their screams of panic almost instantly became shrieks of laughter; their legs flailing in the air as they desperately tried to get away---but it was no good, they were jammed in too tight to get any leverage. I didn't let up.

There was a bang as the back door of Sugarcube Corner popped open. Pinkie Pie stuck her frizzy head out in the alley. "What's going on out here??"

Scootaloo managed to peek up over the rim of the box. "PINKIE! HE'S GOT US! HELLP!!" She managed to get out between gasping shrieks.

"Okay!" Pinkie promptly hopped over to the box...and stuck her hooves in and began tickling for all she was worth.

"ARRGH! HELP US, NOT HIM!...."

I finally let up and decanted them. They sat there in a row, disheveled, exhausted, tears of laughter streaking their faces, gasping for air and hiccuping in syncopation. Pinkie and I nearly busted a gut laughing at them. It was nearly an hour before the hiccups finally stopped...

The trio got over their fears of me, obviously. But they never stopped trying to get even with me....

****

I finally stood up with a Cutie Mark Crusader hanging on one ankle, another one tucked under my arm like a football, and a third one sitting on my shoulders and clinging to the back of my head, and looked around the room. I was up to my knees in an ocean of cute. A clamor of tiny voices, huge eyes and bright pastel faces surged up around me. I was being enthusiastically greeted by--well, it looked like the entirety of Cheerilee's class. Of course right behind them trying to keep order was Cheerilee, along with...

"Guys!" I blurted out. "Hey, you're all here!"

Not my most clever opening line. But indeed they were. The Mane Six, plus Spike, were all there. A melee of greetings, hoofshakes and hugs went around the room. Yes, I know it's cliche; the Brony goes to Equestria, lands in Ponyville and befriends the Mane 6. Really, though, it was more or less inevitable. When Princess Celestia accidentally pelted half the Ponyville countryside with a hail of human artifacts, including one human, it only stood to reason that the six most important young mares in town would be in the middle of things....and all said and done, they are the Elements of Harmony; the power of Friendship is what they're all about. Friends or not, my time in Ponyville had
been cut short by the necessity of bringing me into royal custody, and circumstances had prevented them from coming to Canterlot to visit. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed them all until that very moment.

I looked the colorful mob over. "What in the world are you all doing here?" I asked.

Cheerilee spoke up. "Well, it just so happens that it was time for our yearly field trip." she explained. "And I decided that this would be a perfect opportunity to bring the children to see the new Humanity wing of the Canterlot Museum of Natural History."

"Yeah," Spike chuckled. "And to see a genuine Human while they were at it...."

I blinked. "Wait, what. A 'Humanity' wing in the Museum?"

"Ayup," Applejack said, grinning.

"A whole wing?" So that's what they'd been doing with all the junk coming through the portal. The laboratory chamber was starting to look like a trailer park after a tornado. But a whole new wing? I really needed to get out of the castle more.

"The girls were kind enough to volunteer as chaperones for our little trip," Cheerilee said.

"Aaaand we sort of asked the Princesses if you could play tour guide for us," Twilight added. "After all, who better to show the class around a gallery of human artifacts than an actual human?"

"Plus it gave us an excuse to all come up and see ya," Rainbow Dash, said, hovering overhead to give me a noogie with one hoof.

"Easy on the bald spot," I groused. Oh clever clever Celestia. Found a way to get me out and about and hobnobbing. As if I was going to say "no" to a literal mob of dewy-eyed foals. Heck, they could have just sent Fluttershy and I would have been doomed. "Well, seeing as my calendar is free for the day..."

The chorus of "yays" that went up was really far in excess. These foals had to be hard up for entertainment for me to be the highlight of their day.

"By the by, I think I see some new faces from last time, Cheerilee; would you care to introduce me?"

"Of course," the schoolteacher smiled. "I think you already know the Cutie Mark Crusaders," she said with some amusement, pointing with her hoof at the small ponies still clustering around my ankles. The schoolfillies giggled.

"Never woulda guessed," I quipped.

"You've met Snips and Snails..."

"Hiya!" "Heyyyy." I grinned and brohoofed them. Those two were definitely under-represented on the show. Sakes, if Faust and her staff had gotten an inkling of all these two got up to, they'd have had to create a spinoff series. In the short time I was in Ponyville those two got up to enough antics to give the CMC a run for the title.

"These are Archer, Featherweight, and Truffle", A blue unicorn filly with a bow and arrow cutie mark... had to be an interesting story behind that. How would a pony hold a bow?... An impossibly skinny pegasus colt with enormous ears, and a pudgy little fellow with a knife and fork cutie mark. Twist was standing shoulder to shoulder with him. Heh. They were simply too adorable for words. I
wondered how embarrassed they'd be if they knew just how many people had seen them passing hearts and hooves cards?

"Sunny Day, Tootsie Flute" --- two earth pony fillies, one a buttercup yellow, the other a pale eggshell blue. "Oh, and our two newest students... come on, introduce yourselves..."

Out from behind their teacher stepped a piebald little colt and a grey unicorn filly with a golden yellow mane... yes. It was exactly who you're thinking. I didn't dare to guess. So many things had turned out differently than I had expected; I just had to know. I knelt down, to try and look less intimidating to the tiny thing. "And may I ask your name?"

The little filly rubbed her forehooves together and looked up at me with big bashful eyes. "I'm Dinky...."

I looked at her for a moment. "Yes, yes you most certainly are," I couldn't help saying. A round of titters went up. I had to ask, I just had to. "I think I've seen your mother someplace...?" I trailed off, leaving the question hanging.

The little fluffy head nodded. "Oh yes. She's the mailmare in Ponyville."

"With the bubble cutie mark?"

"And the funny eyes," she finished. "It's okay, you can say it." *Oh bless her heart,* I thought. "Her name is Derpy Hooves. I'm Dinky Hooves."

"Very pleased to meet you, Miss Dinky Hooves," I said. Meanwhile my inner Brony was chortling with glee. *Yes! She's a mailmare, she has a daughter named Dinky, and her name is DERPY! Fanon, three for three! HAHH! Take THAT, forces of banal insipid political correctness!*

The colt looked nervous for a moment, then made a show of stepping up stoutly next to Dinky and throwing his chest out. "Pipsqueak, sir," he announced, his accent thick as anyone could hope. "Formerly of Trottingham. I'm very pleased to meet you." Every inch the proper gentlepony.

I couldn't help but notice how Dinky seemed to huddle to his side for security. *Oh ye shippers of the world, rejoice.* "Pleased to meet you too." My inner brony worked his mischief on my willpower once again. I leaned forward and said, *sotto voce,* "Keeping an eye on the young lady, are we?"

He blushed a bit, then straightened up like a soldier at review and gave a single no-nonsense nod. "Her Mum asked me to take good care of her little muffin, sir," he said.

*That was it. Ignore all further reports; I died of adorable, right then and there. "Good show, lad," I said, patting him on the shoulder. I stood up and stepped back. The strain of holding in the "d'awww's" nearly popped every tendon in my body, but I managed it. The other adults in the room weren't so inclined; I heard muted coos and squee's from several corners. Including, I testify, from at least one of my bodyguards. (He denies it to this day.)*

"This is it?" a voice in the back piped up. "This is the big surprise? We're going to be shown around by a talking monkey?" Oh, it could ONLY be...

I looked around, yes, there she stood in the back of the group, trying to look aloof and distainful; a pink pony with a white and purple mane and an ostentatious little diadem sparkling on her brow. "Ah, you must be Diamond Tiara," I said. I couldn't resist taking a little jab. "From the, ah, *Filthy* family, was it?" A chorus of giggles went up at this.

The little prima donna stuck her nose in the air. "That's the RICH family," she enunciated. "You've
obviously heard of us..."

"Oh, your fame goes abroad before you, I assure you," I said. My voice was so thick with sarcasm it could have doubled as spackle. Even the adults present snickered at this. Tiara wasn't completely slow; she flushed a bit-- then tried a different tack. *Oh, little bratling, if you only knew how many 'little princess' tactics I'd seen over the course of my four decades, you wouldn't even try....*

"See, I told you, Silver Spoon," she said to her ever-present sidekick. "This is just going to be *lame*. What could we possibly learn from a big fat monkey anyway?"

"Diamond Tiara!" Cheerilee scolded. "Mind your manners, young filly!"

I let it roll off me. I wasn't so much annoyed as amused at being called a "monkey." I've been called far worse.

Some of the foals actually rallied to my defense. "Hey, back off, Diamond Tiara. Mr. Arthur's a great guy!" Snips said.

"Yeah, Tiara, Mr. Arthur's really smart," SweetieBelle said. "He knows all sorts of neat stuff even Twilight doesn't know about."

Scootaloo put in her two cents worth. "Yeah-- he taught me how to fly-- and he doesn't even have any *wings*!"

Several ponies blinked in surprise at that. "Ah, that's a bit of a story," I said, deferring any questions. And a bit of a sore point with Rainbow Dash as well, I reflected....

Snips couldn't resist chipping in further. "And besides...monkeys are cool!"

"...I brought a banana," Snails chimed in.

There was a pause as several adults facehoofed.

*Hrk.* I furiously pretended to be stifling a sneeze.

Cheerilee cleared her throat. "Mr. Arcturus is a very important and very well educated man, Diamond Tiara," Cheerilee said sternly. "He advises both Princess Celestia and Princess Luna. We are *very lucky* to have him take time for us today. Now apologize young lady."

Diamond Tiara muttered the usual insincere apologies of a chastised child. I decided a change of topic was in order. "Um, how are we going to proceed? Bit of a crowd, here..." I wasn't exaggerating either. Back on earth it would have taken a full-sized schoolbus. Did Equestria have school buses?

"The Princesses reserved a passenger wagon for your use," Bright Dawn chimed in. "more than large enough for this group. Won't take to the air though, more's the pity...."

"Good enough for a short trip," I said. "we might as well be going. Bright Dawn, if you'd lead us to our carriage...?"

Everyone shuffled into a rough approximation of organization and filed their way out the door, Bright Dawn in the lead. I was among the last out of the room. On the way out, CloudWing stepped to my side. "Taught her to fly?" he asked.

"Ah, therein lies a tale," I said. "If you don't mind waiting till we get to the wagon..."
"Okay.... gun it!"

Scootaloo, her eyes closed tight, began to flap, her wings buzzing for all they were worth. I stood braced like a linebacker, holding her back with both hands by the shoulders as she tried to plow head on into my chest. The backdraft from her wings began to kick up a plume of dust from the road. "C'mon, give it all you got," I urged. I had to shout to be heard over the bumblebee roar of her wings.

That's what it all came down to, really. Bumblebees.

I'd watched Scootaloo struggle so hard to fly; I'd even caught her once, crying in frustration while she watched other pegasus fillies her age soar overhead. It was heartbreaking... and baffling. Was it wing size? Nonsense. Her wings were no smaller than any other filly her age. And look at that... that creature, Bulging Bicep!

And it certainly wasn't about power. Good grief, I'd seen her running around with that scooter and wagon of hers, towing easily five times her weight by wingpower alone. So what was keeping her grounded?

It wasn't until I saw her watching Rainbow Dash and trying to imitate her that it clicked. It wasn't that she couldn't fly... it was that she was trying to fly the wrong way. Rainbow Dash was like most Pegasai-- she "flew" like an airplane, all gliding and loops and wings. But Scootaloo, I didn't know if it was her wings or her magic, but she couldn't move the air around in the same way. Rainbow Dash was a Harrier jet; Scootaloo was a helicopter. Or more aptly, they were a falcon-- and a bumblebee.

And a bumblebee couldn't fly like a falcon. But it could fly.

I'd approached her and her friends and offered to help. But I hadn't told Scootaloo exactly what I was going to do. She was so desperate to be like Rainbow Dash it had subconsciously affected how she tried to fly. It was going to take a clever trick to shake her loose from that.

So here I stood with a pegasus foal butting her head against my chest, trying to push me off my feet by wingpower alone. I'd been right about her wingpower; I could barely see the road behind her for the dust plume. Sweetie Belle, Applebloom, and a cynical Rainbow Dash (I was taking precautions) were standing to the side, manes blowing back in the breeze. Despite my bulk and being braced, my feet were actually starting to slide! "Okay, whatever you do, don't open your eyes and don't stop flapping! Ready, on three! One..."

And I pushed up with my hand on her chin, pushed down with my other hand on her rump, and pirouetted out of the way.

Scootaloo, now re-oriented from horizontal to vertical and her wings still going full blast, shot into
the air like a bottle rocket.

I landed on my ponderous butt in the dust and looked up. Scootaloo was already a rapidly shrinking orange and purple dot in the sky. Rainbow Dash and the other two thirds of the CMC stood next to me, gawping into the sky. "Hokey smokes, it worked," AppleBloom said. She and SweetieBelle started hopping about and squealing with glee.

"I don't believe it," Rainbow Dash said, her jaw hanging.

"Well don't just stand there," I yelped, "catch her before she hits the stratosphere!"

I needn't have worried. By the time Scootaloo reached cloud cover she'd opened her eyes and realized what had happened. As I'd hoped, by the time Rainbow Dash had caught up with her it had all "clicked". A few minutes later all of us down on the ground were celebrating as Scootaloo buzzed around us like a manic hummingbird, shouting "I'm flying! I'm flying! I'm FLYING!"

***

"And that was the story of how I taught a pegasus how to fly," I finished. I looked up from my seat to where Scootaloo was hovering overhead next to CloudWing. I couldn't help grinning at that little victory. "In all fairness though, I didn't 'teach' her anything. I just... had an idea, and tried it, and it worked. Scootaloo just taught herself from there on out."

We were in the wagon, already well on our way across Canterlot. It was a capacious thing, a long four-team cart with comfortable benches all the way down the sides. The canvas roof was currently pulled back so we could enjoy the breeze and the sunshine as we cantered along. Some of the pegasi foals, notably Scootaloo and Rumble, had taken to flying up to hover around CloudWing where he held position, much to the consternation of Cheerilee. I had to reassure her that CloudWing wouldn't let any of them wander off or fall behind before she could relax.

"Still, pretty clever," Hat Trick said. "I wonder if that's a thing with Pegasi? it could be that all those 'weak fliers' that drop out of flight school are just learning to fly in the way that's wrong for them." I blinked in surprise. The thought hadn't crossed my mind, but once said it made an awful lot of sense.

"It could be," Twilight said, warming to the topic. "I wonder if anyone's done any in-depth research into flying styles? There could be lots more 'hummingbird' fliers like Scootaloo, or maybe even long-range, gliding 'seagull' fliers, or--- Spike, take a note---"

"--- to stop by the Canterlot library later and pick up some books on pegasus flight, already on it, Twi," Spike said, rolling his eyes as he flicked a quill across a notepad he'd already drawn from his backpack. The little fellow was obviously used to Twilight's energetic rabbit trails.

Rainbow Dash was listening in. She grumbled a little and crossed her forelimbs. "I dunno, it sounds like a lot of hogwash to me," she said. "I mean if it were that simple, wouldn't us Pegasi have figured it out for ourselves ages and ages ago?"

"Nothing so permanent as an old mistake," Bright Dawn grunted. He was in the foremost seat, idly scanning the crowds around us. "Some hotshot flier a thousand years ago, everyone and their uncle wants their foal to be just like him..." he shrugged. "Next thing you know, everyone's learning to fly 'just so' because that's how it's always been done."

"Well yeah, but-- c'mon..." Rainbow Dash complained. "Really? A mistake lasting that long?"

I reflected on a few human mistakes--- relatively benign ones, but mistakes all the same --- that had lingered for millenia. "Oh yes," I said. "That long indeed. All it takes is for something to be broken,
but not broken enough. So long as it works for most people it doesn't matter." I held up my hand. "For instance, you've probably never noticed that I'm left-handed." My hooved conversationalists looked at me oddly. "It means I write better with my left hand than with my right," I explained. "In fact I do most everything left-handed because I have better control." I wiggled my fingers. "Sounds like an arbitrary difference doesn't it? Shouldn't make too many problems... And it wouldn't, except for the fact that most humans are right handed. In fact, about ninety percent right handed."

"Ohhh. Ouch," Twilight said, obviously racing ahead mentally.

"What does she mean 'ouch?'" Applejack asked, puzzled.

"She means that a leftie like me, back on Earth, lives in a world where most everything is made for right handed people," I said. "And we humans do everything with our hands. Keyboards, control panels, musical instruments, scissors, vehicles, power tools... even writing pads and writing are right-hand biased." I mimed writing to illustrate. "Tableware is set up for right handed people as well, so I'm constantly bumping elbows with the person next to me--- unless I sit at the far left corner... you get the idea. It's subtle, but it's everywhere. And it adds up."

"Adds up?" Rainbow Dash said, cocking an eyebrow.

"Spills. Trips. Fumbles. Accidents," I said. "A left handed person in a right-handed world is seventy percent more likely to have accidents--- in a workplace, dangerous or even lethal ones."

"Plus, it affects how people look at us. We look clumsy. And because we look clumsy people think we're stupid. It's untrue and it's unfair, but at nine-to-one odds, that's the way the social bias leans. Left to our own devices, and not forced to use right-handed tools, we're just as good as right-handed folks at anything. But again, we don't usually GET left-handed tools, or left handed everything else."

I shrugged. "It used to be far worse. There was actual anti-left-handed prejudice. Doing anything left handed, like writing, was "wrong." Left handed children were forced, on pain of punishment, to write right-handed... and then punished for their "sloppy handwriting." Some even claimed it was a sign of mental retardation or of rebelliousness and willfulness. Only God knows how many millions of children suffered through that nonsense, or how much it cost all of us in the long term."

"Now that's right unfair!" Applejack said. "Didn't anybody put up a fuss?"

"Eventually, yes. I was lucky; I was born well after such cruelty fell into disfavor." I shrugged. "But even now, when we know better, everything is still made to favor right handedness. So left handed people go through their lives having a few more accidents, being thought of as a little more clumsy, a little less smart, and having a little more trouble--- or a lot, depending on the circumstances--- doing things than a right-handed person doing the same things. We're biased against without anyone even realizing they're being biased.

And it's so subtle that nobody really notices it until something disastrous happens," I said. "Like poor Gerald Ford. Former President... He got a reputation as a terrible klutz because he tripped and fell and fumbled with things--- turns out it was all because he was left-handed, and kept turning left when most anyone else would have turned right. But how many people's opinion of his intelligence or confidence in him as a leader went down because he was forced to work everything in his life backwards?"

"Okay, that kinda sucks, but what's your point here?" Rainbow Dash demanded. "What does that have to do with Scootaloo?"

I pointed up at Scootaloo, who was buzzing around CloudWing like a small orange satellite. "Behold
the left-handed pegasus," I said.

I cannot express the satisfaction I felt when I saw the light go on in several pairs of eyes.

"Okay, okay, I get it," Rainbow Dash said, grudgingly. "That just might be the case. Maybe. MAY-be. But what if you're wrong? What if we fliers are right and there is only one right way to fly? What happens if turns out that Scoots really is flying all wrong like I've said, and it messes her up? Like, she gets a growth spurt or something and she has to learn to fly all over again? That could set her back, like, forever."

I could appreciate that. It was in fact the very same riot act she'd read me back when Scootaloo had gone airborne thanks to my meddling. I was glad to know that Rainbow Dash was sincerely concerned about Scootaloo, rather than just sore that the Monkey from Space had taught Scootaloo to fly before she could. And there was that fact: I could very well have "messed her up" quite badly. I knew enough about athletics to know that mis-training and training before someone was ready could do long lasting harm.

"Then she'll cope," Applejack cut in. "Won't be the first time a filly's had to re-learn something she's done not-quite-right all her life. 'Sides, her parents are watchin' out for her-- they made a point of takin' her to a proper pegasus doctor to make sure she wasn't hurtin' her wings none."

"Yes, quite," Rarity said. "Everypony has to start SOMEwhere. And honestly, darling, can you look at how happy Scootaloo is now and sincerely say that flying poorly is worse than not being able to fly at all?"

Rainbow Dash ran a hoof through her mane. "Yeah..." she admitted reluctantly. "There is that. Better ploddin' through the clouds than pounding ground--- uh, no offense," she added for the benefit of the nonfliers.

"Rainbow, if you're worried about Scootaloo hurting herself or doing herself a bad turn, you could always spend a little more time with her," Twilight said. "Keep an eye on her, make sure she doesn't do herself any harm."

"Yeah," Spike said drolly. "Nopony better for that job than the pony who flies headfirst through buildings." There was a round of laughter at that. I looked to the end of the wagon to where a certain pale yellow pegasus sat, keeping the peace amongst the foals. Such large graceful wings, and yet such a weak flier. It did make one ponder.

A "butterfly" style flier, perhaps?

I suddenly noticed there was someone missing. I turned around in my seat, looking for a telltale frizz of pink. "Say, I can't believe I didn't notice," I said. "Where's Pinkie? Couldn't come along today?" I confess to mixed feelings about that; I was fond of the silly thing, and she could be a bundle of fun-- but then again she could be exhausting, in the way only someone who was an unending font of bubbly energy could be to anyone who wasn't.

Rarity waved a dismissive hoof. "Oh, she did come along," she said. "But when she heard that we were bringing you to the grand opening of the new museum wing, she simply bolted off on her own..."

A tiny warning bell in my mind went 'ding.' "Oh dear. Let me guess, someone told her it was a celebration..."

"Well it is, actually; it's the museum's 450th anniversary and... oh dear." Twilight's voice went flat as
the coin dropped. "And to Pinky Pie, 'celebration' is just another word for 'party,' isn't it."

"An' there ain't no way Pinkie Pie is gonna let a party go down without having a hoof in it..."

"Surely the museum staff will keep her from doing anything... outrageous?" Cheerilee hazarded.

"I'd certainly hope so," Twilight said with a huff. "I know the museum director-- he's as tough as nails and completely no-nonsense. No way even Pinkie Pie will get away with anything with him there."

Our conveyance clattered to a stop in front of an enormous and rather ostentatious looking building. Really, on Earth or Equestria, if you've seen one museum you've seen them all. Greek columns, lots of steps... it could be any museum back home, except for the name carved in granite over the entryway--- "Equestrian Museum of Natural History."

Well that and the pastel ponies in fancy getup trotting up and down the stairway...

We all piled out and quickly sorted out into groups, a few foals to each mare, and every mare following me. My entourage took up their usual positions. I hesitated, quickly giving the front of the museum a once-over, looking for signs of Pinkius Pieus at work. There was a large banner over the doorway, stating in ornate lettering "GRAND OPENING: Wing of the Humanities." There were quite a few balloons as well; wouldn't that be more or less normal for a museum event....?

"Something wrong?" Hat Trick asked.

"Oh, um, not really," I fibbed. "It just dawned on me that this is my first visit here, much less to the new wing--- oh well, I'll just have to ask directions of someone when we go in. Onward and upward!" I pointed with my cane, and our little mob began its ascent.

We poured in through the glass doors into the front lobby, an enormous circular room dressed out in fine stonework and capped with a high, illuminated dome. A marble kiosk with the words "Visitor's Service" in etched gold lettering sat on a raised dais in the center of the room, with the skeleton of an enormous dragon standing guard over it, jaws out, bony wings spread. I could see three or four broad hallways leading out of the room, with ponies of all walks of life streaming in and out.

The first sign that anything was wrong was the fact that there were WAY too many balloons. They were tacked to every corner of the information kiosk, scattered at benches and planters about the room, tied together in a giant rainbow arching over the dragon's back.... I think I spotted one bunch tied to a disgruntled museum guard's horn. The second sign was the enormous three-tiered sheet cake the approximate size of a river barge parked in front of the information kiosk. Third, the remains of the terrible and majestic dragon that had obviously once lorded it over these noble chambers had been desecrated. It was covered in streamers and had a jaunty little party hat perched on its once-noble brow, and an enormous banner stretched between its outstretched claws which read:

**HAPPY 'YOU BELONG IN A MUSEUM' DAY, ARTHUR!**

All this I absorbed in the brief few seconds of shock. I was so poleaxed by surprise, alarm, and mortification that I completely failed to brace myself for the grinning pink projectile hurtling my way.

"SURPRIIIIIEEESE!!!"
For the second time that day I was borne to the floor by force of pony. She hit in an explosion of
confetti and party horns. I landed with an awesome thud; thank God for my excessive padding.
When I regained my senses I was flat on my back with a not immoderately heavy pink pony standing
on my chest rattling away at me in a patented Pinkie Pie monologue---

"Hi you're finally here are you surprised I hope you were surprised the museum guards wouldn't let
me shut off the lights so that we could surprise you properly I hope that didn't matter but it looks like
you're really surprised at least your face went all--" she pulled a face that looked like Wile E. Coyote
discovering a lit bomb in his pants--- "so I guess it's okay then...."

I looked up in irritation at Bright Dawn and Hat Trick. "This will not look good on your resume," I
wheezed as the party pony prattled on. I suppose I shouldn't really blame them for being caught
flatfooted. I'd once seen an entire armored division of the Royal Guard stunned to a halt in mid-
charge by one of Pinkie Pie's party eruptions. Long story.

They got me back to my feet and helped me brush off the worst of the confetti. We were all looking
shocked, stunned, amazed or confused as our natures took us.

Twilight in particular looked like someone had farted in church. And then lobbed a grenade in her
lap. She gazed around her at the decorative mayhem polluting a precious institute of science in utter
horror. "Pinkie.... what.... HOW...."

"It wasn't easy," Pinkie admitted. "I had to call in a lot of favors---"

"Are you out of your pink frosted mind?" the purple unicorn half-shrieked. "When Dusty Tomes
sees this he's going to KILL you--- and then ME! He is the most influential museum director in
 Canterlot! One word from him could wreck my career! He would have thrown you out in a
Manhattan minute if he'd seen this! He's STRICT, he's NO-NONSENSE, he's PROFESSIONAL--"

"He's over at the table having some cake," Pinkie supplied, pointing.

We couldn't help it. We all turned and looked. Standing by the cake was a white on grey earth pony
in a formal jacket and tie with a cutie mark of two greek pillars and what had to be the most epic
mustache in Equestria. I exaggerate not; he had a huge, swooping handlebar mustache of snowy
white, waxed and groomed to perfection, that covered almost his entire face. It surely entered rooms
before him to announce his presence. His snowy eyebrows were only barely second-place in their
epicness, a pair of eaglet's wings, vying for dominance on his somber brow. A gleaming monocle
was wedged in place over his nearly invisible eye. He was carefully coiffed and groomed from mane
to hooves, and stood with stiff formality, as unwavering as Gibraltar.

His perfect formality was somewhat undermined by the pink frosting decorating the lower fringe of
his mustache. He clapped eyes (or at least monocle) on us and walked over, paper plate balanced
effortlessly on one hoof. Two points for him; I'd rarely seen a pony who hadn't had to resort to
putting the plate on their backs to keep their balance. "Ah, greetings and salutations---" A napkin
appeared from nowhere and dabbed at his mustache. "Pardon. Greetings and salutations, Sir
Arcturus. I am most pleased that you have deigned to come visit the latest addition to our museum.
I'm sure your presence will add greatly to the prestige of this little soiree."

"....Indeed," I managed.

"I will confess I was a bit perturbed when the royal festivities planner---" he pointed to Pinkie.

"Royal festivities planner--- yyyes, we'll go with that," I mumbled. Twilight made a strangling
sound. Thankfully he missed that.

".... arrived and insisted on making these... changes," he said the word as if it carried ominous implications in his own personal dictionary, "to the festivities. I had to put my hoof down and limit her alterations to the main lobby." He scowled a bit.

Pinkie pouted; clearly she had planned on redecorating the entire museum if she could have gotten away with it. "Nevertheless I can't say it's gone... too bad." He eyed the manic decor about him. "After all, she assures me that this sort of gaudiness--- no offense--- is quite traditional with human festivities, so I suppose it adds a lot of authenticity, wot?" He raised his eyebrows in sincere query.

I seized on that line like a drowning man. "Oh yes, this sort of thing IS quite common back home, very traditional," I stammered. At a six year old's birthday party maybe, I thought. Or a New Year's party, if Guy Lombardo exploded.

"Quite good then," Dusty Tomes nodded in approval. "So, then, where would you and your, ah, guests..." he addressed the mob behind me. "Care to begin the tour?"

"Oh, ah, we'll be taking our own pace, if that's all right," I said. "No need for a tour guide." It probably wouldn't have done for us to tie up one of their staff that way--- especially if I was standing there, more than likely correcting everything they said. I didn't feel like giving some poor minimum wage museum worker a nervous breakdown. And that one researcher had never quite forgiven me for telling him in front of his colleagues that his "electric salad bowl" was, in fact, a ceiling lamp...

"but for now..." I looked around at my little mob for moral support. My guards looked stoic, Cheerilee looked strained, the kids all looked antsy, and the mane six alternatively looked shocked, befuddled, bemused, nervous, or (in Twilight's case) like the sword of Damocles was dangling overhead. "...how about we have some cake?" I finished weakly.

This was met with loud cheers from the foals. There was a brief knee-high stampede as the colts and fillies broke ranks and clattered for the cake table. Cheerilee, Rarity and Fluttershy trailed after, in a rudimentary effort to maintain order. Though I think Rarity was more involved with keeping Rainbow Dash from dive-bombing the cake. "So, Miss Sparkle," Tomes said, turning to the petrified purple scholar. "I hear tell that you have made quite something of yourself these days. Independent scholar, librarian in Ponyville..."

Twilight looked at him and gave him a watery smile. "Yes. Eheheheheheheheheheheheh heheheh heheheh. Heh....."

Dusty Tomes raised one epic eyebrow and said nothing. "Well. Always nice to have you visit. If you'll pardon me... oh, and Miss Pinkamena? lovely job on the decor."

"Thanks!" Pinkie beamed.

"Deuced good cake, too...." he muttered to himself, trotting off to see to other matters about the museum.

Several of us let out breaths we didn't know we were holding. In the next instant Twilight whipped about and got nose-to-nose with Pinkie Pie. "Royal Festivities Planner? You told him you were the Royal Festivities Planner?? What possessed you to tell him THAT?" the expression on her face was right up in "lesson Zero" territory.

"Because I am," Pinkie said. She pulled a scroll out of her saddlebag and showed it to us. "I had to go to see the Princesses first to get it signed, then I came over here to set things up."
I scanned down the scroll; Hear Ye hear ye etc. Official Royal Festivities Arranger, etc. appointed to arrange an authentic human-style celebratory etc etc etc signed by Princesses Luna and Celestia.

We'd been punk'd by the Princesses.

Spike began tugging Twilight over to the table. "C'mon, Twilight, you'll feel a little better with some punch and cake in you..." he said. Twilight whimpered and let herself be towed. Pinkie hopped after her, humming to herself cheerfully.

"Well," I said. "At least we got through that okay."

"Don't git ahead o' yerself," Applejack said drily. "The night's still young."
After it was deemed we had done sufficient structural damage to the cake, and consequently
detoured for a considerable period through the bathrooms thanks to the punch (little pitchers have big
ears but small bladders), Twilight and I carefully confiscated the still-loaded Party Cannon from a
pouting Pinky Pie, and we followed the signs through the museum to the new "Wing of the
Humanities." I would have mentioned something about the name to someone, but I supposed it rolled
off the tongue better than "the human wing" or "the wing of the humans."

Entry to the wing, however, was naturally accompanied by personal mortification. The archway
leading into the wing was flanked on either side by a larger-than-life-size drawing of a human being;
male on the left, female on the right, and both naked as jaybirds.

Now I am perfectly aware that this was not Earth. I know that Equestria is the very definition of a
clothing-optional culture. I know perfectly well that my group was not human and that it might as
well have been two house cats posed there in their full frontal glory. None of that made a bit of
difference to the fact that I personally was leading a group of children and young women between
two giant paintings of buck naked people. I stood there flabbergasted, babbling for a moment before
finally blurting out, in tones loud enough to make echoes ring off the marble halls;

"Oh nobody needs to see THAT!"

The children just looked confused. The girls however were far more merciless. When we had first
met, I had been at pains to explain to them that my species had a very strict nudity taboo, and also to
explain to them precisely why. I had, in retrospect, probably gone to too much length and too much
detail. Back then they had been polite, if amused. By now, of course, it was apparently the funniest
joke in Equestria. Rarity had her hoof over her heart and her head thrown back as she let loose gales
of laughter; Applejack was pounding on the floor with one forehoof; Rainbow Dash was in danger
of plummeting from the air--- Even Fluttershy, the heartless traitor, was giggling behind her hooves,
face as pink as a carnation. Spike was, of course, rolling. My stalwart guards were having one hell of
a time keeping their faces straight as well.

A curator heard the ruckus and clip clopped hurriedly over to us, obviously expecting to have to deal
with some disruptive visitors and radiating huffiness as a consequence. His demeanour however
changed radically when he got close enough to see through his pince-nez that the tumult seemed
centered on a very large biped with a rather red face. "Oh, Sir Arcturus! What seems to be the... ah...
trouble?"

For lack of anything better I pointed my cane behind me at the pictures. "I know you want to be
educational," I, quite frankly, whined, "but is this necessary?"

He looked as puzzled as the foals for a moment. "Ohhh, your people have a, ah, clothing... thing," he
said. (Honestly, in a world where everyone went unclothed, would 'nudity' even be a concept?) "I do
understand and I am certain that nobody wanted to cause any offense to your people... but Is it
really this much of a problem?"

Pinkie's voice came from behind me. "hey, fella, watch where you're poking that thing!" she said in
an incredibly bad imitation of a stallion. I looked back and realized that the end of my cane was
jabbing the male portrait in a rather awkward-to-explain location. I whipped my cane away, narrowly missing putting out the custodian's eye. The girls howled.

I glared flaming death at all of them and started to say something I would regret, but I felt someone tugging at my pants leg. "Is that how humans really look?" SweetieBelle asked, eyes full of innocence.

I glanced back at the pictures. "More or less," I said drily.

Scootaloo pulled a face. "No wonder you wear clothes all the time," she said. "Gross..." Several of the colts voiced their agreement. This time Rainbow Dash did fall out of the air.

"Not all of us," I grated out, "have the privilege of having everything tidily tucked away and out of -- oh enough already!" I turned to the flummoxed curator, who was regarding our group with a sort of vague horror. "I don't know, how much of a problem do you think it is?" I asked him.

He regarded the disruptive little mob having a hoot at my expense. "I shall have a word with Dusty Tomes," he said with a sigh. "We'll... redo them. or put them away from the main thoroughfare. Or something."

I wasn't paying attention. I was glaring at Rarity. "You're laughing awfully hard for somepony who had to have it explained to her why buttless chaps were unsuitable for public wear---"

Once everyone had recovered, we marched on in. I have to confess to a tremendous curiosity had seized me once I'd heard about the wing. I had no notion of what the Princesses or the Museum staff might have done with the bits and bobs of my world's questionable culture.

I wasn't quite expecting a wing the size of the O'Hare International Airport.

We stepped round the corner and gasps of wonder went up from the foals. I can't say as but I let loose one myself. Ahead of us and off into the distance stretched an enormous hall, wide as a freeway, with an arched glass ceiling high overhead. Ahead of us were hundreds of displays on pillars, pedestals, platforms and plinths, and what wasn't up on a pedestal was dangling by wires from the ceiling. Most of the displays were inert and behind velvet ropes, but there were some where the devices were actually functioning and were obviously meant to be fiddle-faddled with by curious hooves. I saw what had to be an enormous model of the Earth's solar system, and---

"Good Lord," I gawped, "is that a BIPLANE dangling from the ceiling?"

I looked at the mind boggling number of displays crowding the mind-bogglingly enormous hall before us. I looked at Cheerilee. "We may be here a while," I said.

Cheerilee chuckled behind her hoof "A good thing we had cake first, then," she said.

"Yeah, cause we would've been out if we waited till AFTER the tour," A bouncing Pinkie Pie said. "And that would've been sad."

I cleared my throat. "Well, let's see what the curators thought was the first thing we ought to see," I
said. There were no ropes or cordons leading people along. I realized they would have been pointless when I glanced up and saw pegasi flitting in and out among the hanging displays. It must make things interesting to have to plot out a museum exhibit in three dimensions.

The first display, at what the arrowed signs indicated was the start of the exhibit, was the enormous orrery I had spotted earlier. As I got closer I realized that the sun, planets and moons, and even the asteroids, were floating in thin air. (Magics. How do they work?) the detail was magnificent. Directly below it in a display case was the educational poster from God-knows-where upon which the model had been based. It might have been from China, to judge by the lettering. I spent several minutes giving a quick lecture on Earth's heliocentric solar system, and how it differed from Equestria's three-bodied Geocentric one.

The colts and fillies were all impressed--- but what really floored them was the five-foot globe of Earth on the stand next to it. Or rather, hovering above the stand, slowly rotating. It was a geologic model, with relief-indent ed mountain ranges and deserts--- and actual watery oceans complete with currents, moving clouds, and north and south poles that were cold and icy to the touch. They had positioned it so that the light and heat of the Orerry's sun fell on it, and even shaded half of it with an intangible starry shadow--- a holographic "night."

Good heavens, where WERE they getting the details?

The children were amazed and baffled when I explained to them, to the best of my education, how the Earth's weather systems worked. They didn't have any trouble grasping the idea of uncontrolled weather--- The Everfree Forest was known to all of them--- but they were astounded at the notion of a race that did not control the weather at all, and more astounded still when I told them we actively avoided meddling with it. "You mean you just let storms and blizzards and tornadoes and stuff happen?" Snips said in disbelief, poking at some of the drifting cloud fronts.

"We don't have morphic resonance field control --- what you call magic--- like you," I explained to him. "Managing even a small portion of our weather would take incredible amounts of power. What's more, we learned some very important things about what might happen if we even tried." I brushed my hand over the globe, my fingers stirring the clouds and causing new weather and strange storm fronts all around the miniature continents. "It's called the Chaos Effect."

"Chaos? You mean like Discord?" Snails asked.

"Well... no, not exactly. Discord wasn't about what we humans call 'Chaos,' he was about disruption, disharmony, breaking things and making a big mess. There's more to Chaos than that. Chaos, real Chaos, is neither good nor evil. It's change. Randomness. New possibilities opening up. It's as important a part of the Universe as Order." I could see everyone was mulling that one over. so I threw them some more to chew on. "Let me put it this way. How boring would a board game be if the dice always came up the same number?"

"Heh, pretty boring," Snails said.

"Well, chaos is the thing that makes it possible for the dice to come up a different number every time you throw it. Or clouds to have different shapes. Or---" I poked at the globe, changing another weather pattern--- "lets a tiny little change, like a change in air pressure less than the flap of a butterfly's wing, change whether it's going to rain or be sunny halfway round the globe."

"So it means that, uh, tiny little changes at the beginning become BIG changes at the other end, and change the whole pattern?" Snails said.

"Very good, Snails, that's a pretty good summation." Snails grinned goofily. " That's why humans
don't mess around with controlling the weather. Our weather is so complicated, we literally can't tell what might happen further on because we fiddle-faddled."

"Then aren't you scared to do anything at all?" Rainbow Dash asked from overhead.

I shook my head. "No... because Earth's weather is a complex, dynamic system. The cycles can wobble one way or the other, but they eventually swing the other way, back toward the center. It's marvelously self-correcting. Though we do try to be responsible about how we treat the ground, the water, and the air," I added. "Sometimes the best thing to do to something is leave it well enough alone. We watch out for bad weather and warn people ahead of time, but other than that we leave it be."

The next portion of the gallery contained a plethora of globes and maps, some showing the basic geography and climates of Earth, others showing the divisions into different countries. What caused the most awkward moments was the map-over-time display; Some clever pony had apparently noticed that many of the maps of the earth, especially those of the nations, were quite different depending on what date the map had been drawn, and had basically made a giant flip-book of maps of the globe... a few dozen simple maps showing national borders on semi-transparent sheets, laid over top of one another. The foals were quick to note that there were quite a few fickle changes between 1700 and 2000, which led to a rather painful recitation of the wars of the past century. I kept it as brief as I could, and kept many of the details as I could to myself--- but everyone was still stunned at how many wars had been fought in the bare space of 400 years, how many lives were lost. "Why so many?" Rumble asked, somber.

I sighed and gave the answer I had come to use most often: "Because there are lots of evil people in the world who won't take 'no' for an answer. Even if it means killing everyone that tells them no. That's what all those lines are about... they measure just how far those bad people managed to get before they were stopped." There was a long, sad moment of silence at this.

Understand, reader, Equestria was not a complete stranger to war and violence; there were many who coveted Celestia and Luna's power and Equestria's wealth. they didn't have an army just for the parades, and most of the armor on display in that museum could have been labeled "one owner, well used, may need cleaning to remove stains." But they were in a position that even a hyperpower like the United States would have envied; ruled for close to two thousand years by a benevolent diarchy that literally controlled the Sun and Moon. There hadn't been a major conflict in Equestria since Nightmare Moon's attempt at a coup, and no major conflicts with any outside enemies since Discord had first been sealed in stone. For all their enemies craved to conquer Equestria, none had dared to wage war on her or press her too far, beyond petty banditries and the like. (Save for three villains who are well known to any brony, as are their fates.)

Still, for a race that had not known total war in thousands of years to suddenly brush up against a race that had known nothing BUT war for just as long.... it made one heartsick.

Then Pipsqueak climbed up on a stool and looked at the map, one forehoof resting thoughtfully on one of those little red lines that had cost so many lives. "At least there were good ponies that fought back-- that made the bad ones stop," he said. "Or there wouldn't be any lines at all."

Oh bless your little buccaneer heart. "Yes....there is that," I agreed.
Chapter 8

In retrospect the method the ponies used for sorting the human artifacts for display was simple; they simply went through all the rubbish that came through the gate. If it didn't look like anything they had ever seen in Equestria they earmarked it for exhibit. Thanks to Celestia and Luna's centuries of "cribbing" notes from human society, there was a great deal of overlap between Earth (at least the Western Civilization portion) and Equestria, especially in the areas of culture and pop culture. Of course there were still enough differences striking enough to fill this entire wing. The X factor in all this was that the ponies in charge of arranging the exhibit had... peculiar notions as to what correlated with what.

Which is why, immediately after the map exhibit, I found myself standing in front of a partially disassembled automobile. Granted, they were clever enough to use a selection of road maps (from the looks of it, they had come from the selfsame vehicle's glove compartment) as a transitional piece. Still, it seemed an odd conceptual rabbit trail-- till I reflected on the noted absence of internal combustion engines in Equestria's development.

Now when I say "partially disassembled," I mean that the vehicle in question had all its exterior bodywork removed and set aside, so that one could observe the internal workings in situ. I spent a considerable amount of time explaining (approximately) how an internal combustion engine works, vs. an external combustion engine such as a steam engine; then from there to explaining why the internal combustion engine had supplanted the steam engine (size, cleanliness, safety, etc.), how the internal combustion engine had revolutionized travel (Applejack had looked keenly interested when I mentioned farm tractors, and Rainbow Dash had nearly fallen out of the air when I informed her the biplane dangling from the ceiling actually flew), from there to explaining petroleum distillates, what petroleum was, a rough explanation of the politics revolving around oil...

I paused in the middle of explaining the conflict over biodiesels and "gasohol." "You know, I never realized just how many different facets of human life and history have been affected by this one invention," I said, coughing to clear my throat. "God help my vocal chords when we get to the home computer." The others laughed while Truffles fetched me a glass of water from a nearby cooler.

"Seems lahk you do durn near everythin' with 'em," Applejack said. "Them machines is the thing most lahk magic y'all got."

"Like I said, wait until the computers," I said. "But... I think it's more generally inventions. We're Earth-ponyish that way... but we got past using people power a long time ago. I think that's what's holding you back from making this sort of stuff yourselves. Most everything you have is pony powered."

"Well not everything, Dearie," Rarity said. "I mean, my sewing machines don't run on, ah, pony power."

"Yeah, and none of the nifty cool blinky gidgets and gadgets in Twilight's basement," Pinkie Pie added. "Or the ovens in Sugarcube Corner or the streetlights or---" she was obviously warming up to rattle off an unending list of every tool and household appliance in Equestria, but Applejack corked
her mouth with a hoof. I winced inwardly; it seemed a bit unsanitary. "He gets th' point, sugarcube," she said.

"Well that's still not quite true," I pointed out. "most of the things you listed-- in Earth they run on electricity. But here they run on magic. And magic, with VERY few exceptions, comes from..." I tapped the tip of Twilight's horn with my finger meaningfully. (No, you lecherous cretins, unicorn horns are not an erogenous zone. Nor are pegasus wings. They wouldn't be able to function in day to day life if they were! Honestly, you pathetically prurient people...) "In the end, it all comes back to pony power. Which is kind of limiting, because someone somewhere is getting tuckered out keeping the wheels turning and the lights lit. Humans found ways to make wood, and coal, and oil, and even wind and water and sunshine do the work for us, instead of just finding ways to bottle up our muscle power." I shrugged. "A labor saving device isn't really much of a "saver" if the "labor" is your own."

"I was always tempted to ask about the Cider Squeezy 6000. I'd always wondered why you didn't buy it, Applejack. Of course you would have had to hire a unicorn to keep it powered, so it wouldn't have been as much use---"

"You knew about?.... oh, uh, raht," Applejack looked suspicious for a moment, then remembered the little tete'-a-tete' with the princesses about my past. The TV show, for obvious reasons, was a pretty tightly kept state secret. Still it had to be disconcerting to have a complete stranger so well versed in episodes out of your life. She gave a dismissive snort. "And what of it? It was a hunk o' junk. It couldn't beat the Apple Family at cider makin'..."

So long as you cheated and included your friends-- with their magic-- as 'honorary family,' I thought. I didn't say it. But I get the feeling my arched eyebrow said volumes. She saw my expression and pulled the same face she'd worn when Discord had inverted her. "That wasn't the point," I said. "It worked fine enough when they didn't get desperate and overclock it... and it could have made your cider making easier. Well, with a reliable power source, anyway."

"We kin make our own cider," Applejack said stubbornly.

"Yeah, and never enough," Rainbow Dash snorted from overhead. Applejack glared at her.

"Thank you, Rainbow Dash," I said. "took the words out of my mouth."

Applejack's glare turned to me. "So Mister Snooty Toots Hoity Toity Space Monkey thinks he knows how t' run an apple farm better'n me---"

I held up my hands in a make-peace gesture. "I'm not trying to pick a fight," I said placatingly. "Your family grows the best apples and makes the best apple cider.... or apple anything, for that matter.... that I've ever tasted. My point is that a machine like that, in capable Apple hands, could up your production and make your lives a lot easier."

She seemed a little mollified. "We do more'n just make cider, you know," Applejack pointed out. "Seems right foolish to spend all them bits on a machine we'd use only once a year..."

"Not if the scale is large enough," I said. "And who said anything about just cider? Far as I could see, that Cider Squeezy 6000 was three machines in one." I counted them off on my fingers. "A picker, a sorter AND a squeezer. No check that, FOUR, since it was self propelled it was also a HAULER. That apple picker alone was worth its weight in gold. Even on Earth we have harvesting machines that can clear a hundred acres of corn in a day, but we still have to pick apples by hand. That thing picked entire trees clean in one go." I shook my head. "Those Flim Flam boys were fools. They could have made their fortunes by splitting the thing into four machines, and marketing them to farmers all over Equestria. Instead they use it to con old ladies into cider-making races."
The look on Applejack's face was one of dawning comprehension. She looked off into space, pondering. "....Sakes. Too bad we couldn't trust 'em..."

"Why not?" I asked. "Devil's advocate here: They were jerks, but they were honest jerks. They stuck to the bargain, they didn't lie, steal, or cheat, or try to sabotage you--- they even let you bend the rules and get extra help. And even when they won the race, and by all legal rights could have stuck out the bad press and held onto your farm for good, they bowed out and left, instead. So if you did work with them, you could probably count on them sticking to an agreement... especially if you got it down in black and white."

I added a somber note. "And by the way, you were dead lucky. If they had served the FIRST barrels of cider they'd made instead of the LAST barrels...."

Applebloom, who'd been listening in (along with everyone else) gulped loud enough for me to hear it. "...they woulda walked away with th' farm, the cider makin' contract, everything," she said.

Applejack looked grim. "Don't remind me," she shuddered. "That was a closer shave than I ever wanna git again."

I went on. "If you could find them--- and bargain them down to a reasonable profit split, and make an ironclad contract--- you could clean up every Cider season. Heck, year round... you could probably cut applebucking season to applebucking DAY. You'd probably have to keep an eye on them around Granny Smith's silverware, and you'd have to put up with their annoying behavior....But it'd be worth it. Especially if you could eventually buy the machine off them." I paused. "But of course, this is just a suggestion, just an idea from the Hoity Toity Space Monkey...."

Somepony giggled. "Mister Snooty Toots." The entire class broke into squeals of laughter. I gave Applejack my hardest steely eye. "If that nickname sticks--- I'm blaming you," I said.

"Okay, I think we'll take a little break," Cheerilee said. "The little pony's room is just down the hall..."

The children made a somewhat hasty break for the loo. I was vexed at myself; I would manage to drone on and on. First lesson my father had taught me about dealing with children--- something new every five minutes. That's the length of their attention span. Why hadn't I remembered it? I hoped I hadn't bored them all....

I looked over at Applejack, who had stayed back. She was giving me an odd look. "I'm going to have this hanging over my head, aren't I."

"Depends," Applejack said with a half smirk. "Space Monkey got any more clever ideas on how to run mah farm?"

I sighed. She was obviously still pretty miffed at being told her own business. "Applejack, I know I'm no farmer, not by a long shot. I'm not trying to tell you how to be a farmer, I wouldn't know where to begin. But I have learned a few things, even if they're only book-learning.... I'm just offering suggestions here. Just some ideas, take 'em or leave 'em."

"Okay, like what?"

"You sure?" I asked. "It involves some 'fancy mathematicals'..." I stuck my thumbs under my suspenders and grinned at her. She glowered at me. "Okay, okay," I said. "Seriously, though."

"Shoot."
I resisted the urge to point my fingers and say *bang*. "Well, let's start with Cider Season. You've got a pretty straightforward supply and demand problem. Too many ponies, not enough cider-- and you can't exactly count on getting stuck in a cider-making race every year." Applejack dolefully nodded. "Upping your supply is going to be difficult, unless you hire more hands--- or rent a Cider Squeezy machine--- so the first possible solution is to raise your price---"

"Whoa, there, hold on," Applejack said."I ain't gonna go gounin' folks..."

"You're not "gouging" them, you're moving your price to match the demand," I said. "Do you or do you not make the best cider in Equestria?"

"Durn tootin' we do--"

"And your customers agree with you. But you're pricing it too low. That's why you run out! The first customers buy up all the stock... dirt cheap.... and leave nothing for the ponies in the back of the line. Raise the price, everypony will buy fewer each, but more ponies will get some."

Applejack looked distressed. "But won't ah lose customers when the price goes up?"

"You're losing MORE customers by running out so fast!" Serendipity; I saw Rainbow Dash come flying back into the room, drying her forehooves on a tuft of cloud (*how in the deuce does that work? aren't clouds water vapor??*) "Hey Rainbow Dash!" I called out. "Pop quiz: which is worse? Apple Cider that costs twice as much---"

"That's TERRIBLE!" Rainbow Dash shouted back without hesitation.

"---Or, NO Apple Cider AT ALL?"

"Augh, worse, worse, definitely worse!" I looked at Applejack and shrugged.

"Okay, I git it," Applejack said. "Still---"

"You don't like raising prices," I said. "Commendable, but is it fair to your family to make them work so hard, only to have angry customers with no cider and LESS money in the till? And how is that circumstance any different than raising your prices because the price of, say, fertilizer or seed went up?"

Applejack sighed and nodded. "Don't mean I have to like it," she muttered.

"That's the reason they call it 'the dismal science,' " I said. "Supply and demand and prices and profits--- and ponies--- do what they do, the way they will, no matter how much *nicer* you think it'd be if they did otherwise. The laws of economics are the very embodiment of honesty." I paused to let that sink in.

"Of course, there's more than one thing you can do to balance out supply and demand--- for example, limit your customers to purchasing no more than one mug of cider at a time....instead of letting Pinkie Pie buy up half the stock." I added meaningfully.

Applejack chuckled and nodded. "Shoulda thought o' that one m'self," she admitted.

"...or you could let people buy it in advance. Figure out how many barrels you'll make on average, sell them in advance, by the gallon, and deliver. It won't solve the supply problem but it would keep ponies from having to stand in line all day." I ticked off more things on my fingers. "Other general
things? Invest in some advertising. billboards, skywriting, lean HARD on the 'down home quality' thing. Hire some unicorns to do the picking--- I saw Twilight clear a dozen trees in one go. Not every unicorn is her but even young colts and fillies could pick a lot, do it faster, and cost very little to hire.... unless you've got some rule about not using magic....?"

Applejack snorted. "Ah got a grove of zap apple trees," she said. "If'n we din't allow magic on the farm we wouldn't have a farm!"

"Ah, well okay then. Where was I? Oh yes..... Everyone needs to do a little market research. Before you open up in a new market, find out ahead of time what the usual prices in the area are, how well they're selling, what people normally eat in a town or community---whether the Gala is going to have free food already....?"I gave her another Meaningful Pause(tm).

Applejack gave me a deadpan stare. "ah, ha ha ha.... funnypony."

"Sorry, that was mean of me. Heh..... Here's one I've seen back home: Start a "pick your own bushel" grove. City ponies will travel for miles to pick their own apples and pay you for the privilege. Seriously! It's a.... farming.... countryside.... experience... thing. Give them a little discount, to make them feel they're getting a bargain, and they'll do all the work for you.

"When you go to the city, raise your prices, at least double or even triple. They expect it. In fact if they see 'inexpensive' in the cities, they'll think "cheap" and not buy it. But pricey equals quality---and quality equals price. You don't see Rarity selling diamond spangled gowns for copper bits.

I grinned and paused. "Ahem, you know, I'm sure you know MOST of this stuff already, I'm not being condescending, I'm just trying to cover all the bases...."

Applejack stared at me in disbelief as I rambled on. "Sakes alive. Do you spend all day doin' nothing but thinkin' up stuff lahk this?"

I paused. I held out my hand. "Hello, my name is Arthur Arcturus, perhaps we haven't met....?"

Applejack busted out laughing.

"... E equals MC squared." I wrote the equation out on the chalkboard Twilight had helpfully conjured up. The bust of Einstein next to me seemed to approve.

"It doesn't seem like much... but that little equation unlocked some of the biggest secrets of the universe. It revealed that matter is made of energy, and that a tiny amount of matter---" I held my thumb and forefinger apart-- "no bigger than this is made of enough energy to... well... " I didn't want to use the illustration of "blow up Canterlot".... "uh, remember the picture of the atom bomb?" I asked. a dozen little heads nodded. ".....speck of matter smaller than this."

"Whoa," Snips and Snails said, eyes round. I had the disturbing premonition that the immediate future involved a lot of juvenile nuclear experimentation. I was rather glad to know that they were highly unlikely to stumble across nuclear fission mucking about in their parents' garden shed. Then I
contemplated the horns on their heads and reconsidered... I was going to have a long and very urgent discussion with Twilight and the Princesses about that. "Einstein's theories also revealed some other unusual things about the universe," I went on, seriously hoping to distract the little fourlegged Oppenheimers. "Like the fact that space is curved. And that nothing in the universe can travel faster than the speed of light. That time slows down the faster you go, or the stronger that gravity gets.... and many other amazing things as well." I tapped the bust with my chalk. "For this reason he's regarded as one of the greatest minds that ever lived."

"See? Told ya.... smart," I overheard Scootaloo say.

Diamond Tiara tipped her nose up and smirked. "Too bad he wasn't smart enough to help you Blank Flanks get a Cutie mark," she said. She and Silver Spoon waggled their rumps, flashing their marks at a scowling CMC.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. Diamond Tiara, even by standards for bullies, you are tiresome. Don't you know anything other than that one-note song?

When I had first arrived in Ponyville, My encounter with the Crusaders had been short and, I suppose mildly controversial would be the right term. Upon hearing that Twilight was playing host to a strange visitor from another dimension, they had immediately succumbed to "Expert Syndrome" and raced over to the Library to gain words of wisdom from the far traveling, and presumably profoundly knowledgeable alien being about how to obtain a Cutie Mark.

I had been implored by Twilight and a couple of the others to, contrary to my Brony instincts, PLEASE not give them any advice. But when those three pairs of puppy-dog eyes had met mine I had folded like wet toast... I had promptly blurted out what I thought their Cutie Marks would be (carpentry for Applebloom, singing for SweetieBelle, and sports for Scootaloo.)

Imagine my surprise when the three of them did NOT experience an instantaneous epiphany about their calling in life... in fact the consequences had been a little catastrophic. I came to find out the next day that all three had broken down in tears, demanding to know why their Cutie Marks still hadn't appeared yet, was there something wrong, they weren't sure that they wanted to do those things anyway.... what if they weren't MEANT to... oh, havoc, calamity and woe.

I had received a rather lengthy and somewhat loud lecture from Twilight, Applejack, Rarity, and several others--- even Granny Smith and the Cakes contributed their sharp tongues when they heard-- about a little thing called reverse psychology, and how pony psychologists knew that TELLING a foal what their special talent was, even when it was as obvious as the nose on their faces, almost always backfired like that.... apparently it was common folk wisdom that telling a blank flank what their talents were would make them take even longer to have that "know thyself" moment.

I won't bother describing the "wacky hijinks" involved in unraveling that mess. But per their friends and family's wishes, I helped convince them that my kneejerk conclusion was all a "weird alien" misunderstanding. Teaching Scootaloo how to fly had completely redeemed me in the CMC's eyes, but I was still disgruntled about the whole cutie mark fiasco. I fear I was growing too comfortable in my "armchair expert" role, and getting something wrong like that rankled.

But today, it was my stage, my lecture, my audience, my rules. And maybe a chance to patch some of the damage I had caused? I looked over at Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon. "Tiara, Spoon--- did you have something you wanted to contribute? And quit wiggling your butts at people, it looks unwholesome." Applebloom, Sweetiebelle and Scootaloo sniggered.

Tiara and Spoon looked chagrined for about a tenth of a second. "Well it's TRUE," Diamond Tiara said. "Everyone says you're so smart but you don't know a thing about Cutie Marks." She pointed an
accusing hoof. "You even told us yourself, humans don't get cutie marks. So how would you know anything about them?"

"A good question," I said with deliberate cheerfulness. "Tell me, everyone--- you too, ladies--- and Spike; how does anyone learn anything about something they don't know?"

"By study and research," Twilight said confidently.

"By...asking questions?" Spike said.

"By reading loth of bookth," this from Twist.

"By trying different things out." A surprising answer from Rarity.

"By practicing," Rainbow Dash said.

"Ooh! Ooh! I know! By taking lessons from somepony who already knows!" Pinkie said, bouncing into the air.

Snails held up a hoof. "By Observation, Hypothesis, Prediction, Experimentation, and Analysis," he said in his slow, lethargic drawl. Everyone, myself included, stared. "Whaaaat?"

Twilight hung her head and muttered. "I knew that one...."

"Those are all very good, and--" I looked briefly at Snails "--somewhat surprising answers... but I was getting at something more basic. People learn by watching, and listening, and by thinking. That's how a person who can never actually climb a mountain or walk on the surface of the Moon can learn about them. They may not always get their theories completely right, but if they make a mistake they learn from it and watch, and listen, and think some more. It's amazing how much doing just that accomplishes."

"So what's the point?" Diamond Tiara said.

"The point, young filly, is that I'm not a complete idiot just because I don't have a cutie mark." The foals laughed.

"Well, then," Cheerilee said. "What have you learned by 'watching, listening and thinking' about Cutie Marks, Mr. Arcturus?"

"I've learned that I have a lot of questions I'd like to ask," I said. The foals laughed again; I pulled up a chair and sat down to ease my aching knees, resting my chin on the head of my cane. "Let me ask you this; if you could choose to NOT have a Cutie Mark... would you?"

"Humans?" I suggested. "We've done without 'em entirely." I shifted in my seat. "Of course, there was one time I thought I would've liked to have one. Humans spend their whole lives asking themselves who they are, what they're supposed to do with their lives, who they're meant to be. You ponies, you've got it stamped right there on your flank for all the world to see....."

"But then again, I've noticed it can cause you a great deal of problems."

Sweetie Belle looked disgusted. "Tell us about it," she said.

I laughed. "No, I mean it causes problems for the ones who have it." There was a round of puzzled
looks at this. I addressed the mane 6. "Back when I was on Earth, when I was a Brony.... one of the people who watches this world.... "(The given, official line about my origins. Don't tell anyone different, please) "the other Bronies and I noticed that you seem to have... ah, problems when you thought you failed to live up to your Cutie Mark. Pretty severe ones. We even had a name for it... Cutie Mark Failure Insanity Syndrome. You seemed to have a drastic emotional breakdown...to the point your personalities inverted."

"Oh come on, when have I ever had a breakdown?" Rainbow Dash snorted. She settled to the ground with the others, her glare challenging.

"Best Young Flyer competition," I shot back. I didn't add any details.

Rainbow Dash blustered. "That was just nerves," she said.

"Yes, it was. To the point you went from the most confident pegasus in Cloudsdale to the least. It took your friend being in peril to snap you out of it." Rainbow Dash scowled, but she didn't deny it. She was too busy ignoring the affectionate teasing from the other girls. "The rest of you: Rarity, her fashion show with your dresses--- it bombed, she went from the most flamboyant mare in Ponyville to a recluse who was pondering becoming a hermit. Applejack, that first Applebucking season after Twilight moved to town. You became so obsessed with doing the work of your whole family by yourself that you became the most UNreliable pony in town. And then there was the rodeo... you went so far as to run off on your family to hide the truth. And remember Pinkie Pie's birthday? I tell you, you just shattered when you thought noone liked your parties anymore.... but, point made, I think."

The mares were exchanging awkward looks, so I let off. Children, however, are merciless. "What about Twilight and Fluttershy?" Applebloom asked. I looked to the two mares in question.

"He, um, might be referring to my, ah, teeny little breakdown when I thought I was tardy," Twilight muttered. "Oh-- the Smarty Pants thing, darn it!" she said to answer the puzzled looks.

Fluttershy looked like she was going to implode in a ball of pink and yellow fluff. "Just go ahead and say it," she whimpered from under her wings.

"The Grand Galloping Gala," everyone else said together. The "Meep" from behind those wings could have shattered insulin injectors around the globe. There was awkward laughter and some consoling nuzzling all around.

"Point made," I said. "From a human's perspective-- mine--- it seems like having a cutie mark puts you under a lot of pressure. Unfair pressure, really.

"And it also makes it easier for other ponies to falsely judge you.... Miss Cheerilee, I suspect at least a few ponies have asked you how your gardening is going, due to your three daisies there?" I pointed my cane at her mark.

Cheerilee chuckled. "It's true," she admitted.

"You know, come to think about it, in some cultures your cutie mark is much clearer than others," I said, suddenly.

"Oh?" Cheerilee asked.

"Oh yes. in Japan they would figure out you were a teacher right away. You see in Japanese primary school, the teachers give out these little merit stickers to their students. Which just so happen to look like..." I pointed at her cutie mark grin. "Flowers with smiley faces on them."
Cheerilee regarded her own cutie mark with a surprised smile. "Well. How about that."

"It's rather interesting that a cutie mark that is so vague in its home region becomes completely transparent in another. I suppose someone could do an entire in depth study on cutie marks and cultural relevance," I said. "Or probably already has... point being, for symbols indicating one's most prominent feature or personality trait, they can be curiously vague."

"But back to the topic.... okay, let me ask first; has there EVER been a pony who grew up without a cutie mark? Just so I know."

"No, I've never heard of such a thing," Cheerilee said. "Neither have I," said Twilight. There was a general consensus; none present had ever heard of any pony who'd grown to adulthood without getting a Cutie Mark.

"Okay, that's good news, girls," I said to the CMC. "Cheer up, you WILL get your marks, eventually." They seemed perked up by that information.

"So... what happens if, when they're way up in their years, a pony gets a new passion? Does their Cutie Mark change? What if in her fifties, Rainbow Dash decides she's sick of competitive flying, she wants to take up, I don't know, deep sea diving?"

"As if!"

"It's just an example, Dash. Or... what happens if something happens and she can never fly again? What happens when you just can't pursue your Special Talent anymore?" I let that sink in for a moment. "I don't know how it is with ponies, but with humans, nobody is just one thing. And nobody's the same person they were yesterday, or who they will be tomorrow. thank you no, I'll keep my blank flank. If for no better reason than to spare everyone seeing me drop trou whenever I'm asked for my credentials." I got a laugh for that.

I addressed the Cutie Mark Crusaders."Don't get me wrong, Cutie Marks are a wonderful gift, they let you know something important about who you are. But they're not ALL that you are, or all that you will be. YOU'LL decide what they mean, they don't decide what YOU mean. Don't let a picture on your behind decide all that you are."

"If it's all the same, I'd still like to have one," Applebloom said.

I chuckled at that. How very Tin Man of Oz. "You know, I think that's why you're having so much trouble getting one," I said.

"Arthur--" Twilight said warningly.

I shushed her. "Bear with me here, Twilight. Look, you've heard all the stories about how ponies got their cutie marks," I said. "What were they all doing when they got them?"

Scootaloo shrugged. "Idunno," she said. "They were all just doin' stuff and it happened."

"They were 'doing stuff' that they enjoyed," I clarified. "Stuff that made them happy, made them feel good. They were chasing their dreams. But all you've been chasing is your Cutie Mark. This--" I poked Twilight in the nearest available Cutie Mark, making her eep-- "this isn't the prize, this is just the ribbon you get for being in the race."

They looked like they were almost getting the concept. "Ah... sorta git it..." Applebloom said.

I sighed and tousled their manes. "Like I said, don't worry about it too much. A Cutie Mark just tells
ponies what's already there, anyway." They smiled at that.

"Can I drop a leeeetle suggestion though? If you're going to keep doing this Crusadering thing?" They nodded eagerly. Ahhh, still victims of the Expert Syndrome, alas. "Instead of all of you doing the same thing, and trying to get the same Cutie Mark... why not take turns? You all work on trying to get one of you a Cutie Mark. The first day you work on Applebloom. The next, Scootaloo. The third, SweetieBelle. And so on. It's lots more likely to work than all three of you getting the same Cutie Mark at once..."

I realized with some embarrassment that I'd drifted off topic again into a private chat. Till I noticed that the rest of the foals, particularly the other blank flanks in class, were crowding in to listen. Apparently the subject of Cutie Marks was an enthralling mystery to more than just the CMC. I saw how eagerly they were listening and......Ye gods, I am not only an insufferable know-it-all, I'm an instinctual meddler. "Oh, and you might consider taking in some new members," I said casually.

"Huh?"

"More ponies means more ideas, after all," I noted. "And it'd be rather sad if the Cutie Mark Crusaders just ended after you three got your marks. Just think of all the other unmarked little foals out there wishing someone would help THEM find THEIR Cutie Marks...." I paused meaningfully.

"Hey, that's kind of a cool idea," Scootaloo said. "That way the Cutie Mark Crusaders could go on forever." I thought I heard a horrified strangling noise somewhere in the back, but I chose to ignore it.

I noticed Twist peeking through the crowd. Poor thing... she'd been all but kicked to the curb after getting her mark, hadn't she?

"And may I suggest," said, lowering my head conspiratorially, "you might ask a few of your friends who already have Cutie Marks to join?"

"But why?" Applebloom looked puzzled.

"Well, because they already have their Cutie Marks," I pointed out. "I'm sure, say, Twist would love to hang out with you and your friends, Applebloom--- and help you and the others hunt for your Cutie Marks...."

"Hey, yeah!" I can't describe how pleased I was to see her enthused by the idea of including her friend in the group. Children, I suppose, are heartless sometimes out of simplicity; they just don't know enough to know they're being cruel.

The foals began to chatter amongst themselves. The popularity of the Space Monkey's idea seemed to be growing. As Scootaloo moved to recruit Rumble, Applebloom awkwardly tapped a gleeful Twist and SweetieBelle got both Pipsqueak and Dinky on the list, I glanced over the group and saw Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon gawping at me in horror as their worst nightmare came true before their very eyes. Silver Spoon looked dismayed, but most likely because she was standing so near a nearly incandescent Diamond Tiara. The spoiled little pink princess pony was glaring at me with an expression that all but screamed I WILL DESTROY YOU.

My giddy enjoyment of the moment was barely even tainted by the fact that Rarity was wearing an almost identical expression. Her pupils were pinpricks as she spoke, presumably to the dismayed looking Applejack next to her. "He franchised them..." she whimpered.

The strain of holding back my laugh nearly ruptured me.
"I apologize for derailing your educational outing," I said to Cheerilee while the colts and fillies chattered with each other about the new, expanded CMC.

The cherry-colored pony smiled wryly. "Oh, I wouldn't say that," she said. "It's proving quite educational... though not in the ways I expected."

Twilight sidled up to me. "And I apologize for poking you in the keester," I muttered to her. "Sorry."

"Apology accepted," she muttered back. "Clever manipulation there, buster. Got them to reconsider the whole Cutie Mark thing from another angle....I liked the analogy about the participation ribbon. And I've been worrying what would happen when one of them finally got their mark...."

"So have most bronies," I confessed. "Just thought I'd take a chance at heading off a problem in advance..."

"---and got them to start reaching out to their friends outside their inner circle," she added. "Very nice. Though I don't think Rarity or Applejack will be thanking you any time soon..."

"Can't please everyone I'm afraid," I said fatalistically. I wasn't particularly surprised at her observations. Contrary to what impressions the first couple of seasons might have made, Twilight does have a keen eye for this sort of thing. She is, after all, doing in-depth studies in Friendship, so this sort of social shuffling is actually an open book for her. At least when she's observing impartially---- no guarantees how things will go when she's right in the thick of it.

I rapped my cane for attention. The foals quieted down. "Not to interrupt anyone, but I think we ought to get back on track," I said. "Before we continue I would like to ask a couple of cutie mark related questions, myself. First off, while we're talking about Cutie Marks, I'd like to get to know you all just a LITTLE better. Because that's an excuse for me to sit here and rest another minute or two." A few of them laughed. "So I'd like to ask each of you what your cutie mark means. Truffles? Would you go first."

The pudgy grey pony shuffled his hooves. "I got it helping my dad cook at his restaurant," he said shyly. "I'm a real good taste-tester."

"I bet he is," Silver Spoon snarked. Several ponies giggled.

"he ith," Twist rallied to his defense. "He helpth me when I make candy. He can even tell how much peppermint I uthe in my peppermint thickth."

Truffles smiled and blushed. "One day I guessed all the ingredients my dad used in his spinach casserole, even the spices. He was real surprised, and proud of me! and---" he pointed to the fork and knife on his flank. "There it was."

"Interesting," I said. "A very useful talent for a chef or a food critic... Okay, how about you, Featherweight?"

The skinny little fellow shrugged. "Nothing much," he said. "I can just hover real well." He
demonstrated by lifting off and hanging suspended in the air, his wings barely moving.

"I bet you could stay airborne longer than any other pegasus in Ponyville," I said. "Useful for long range flights, or for aerial recon--- that's taking photographs from the air," I explained. "Now how about you, Archer?"

Archer didn't say a word. She just grinned and pulled three pebbles out of her saddlebag. The first she spit into the air. The second she dropped and kicked with her forehoof. The third she flipped straight up, spun around, and kicked with her back hoof, sighting over her shoulder. All three sailed through the air towards a trashcan a fair distance away--- and landed in a discarded paper cup next to it, one, two, three.

She got a round of applause from everyone, myself included. "Now that's some fancy shootin'," Applejack exclaimed.

"I figured it was something like that," I said. "Now for one that bronies have all wondered about--- Snips?"

"Oh, that's easy. Uh, got a piece of paper or sumpin'?" Snips asked. I pulled a sheet of paper out of my shoulder bag and held it up by the corners. "Will this do?" I asked.

"Perfect," Snips said. Before I could move he stepped forward and ran the tip of his horn down the middle of the paper. There was a sound like a razor sliding through silk, and the paper held between my fingertips split apart, cut as neatly as if it had been sliced by a scalpel.

"yyyeeeK!" I said. Not my most eloquent commentary, but heartfelt.

"Pretty neat, huh?" Snips said proudly as I carefully set the sliced paper aside. "I can do it with cloth, paper, wood, glass--- anything, so long as it isn't too thick. And look---" He twisted his head back and ran his horn through his fur. Cut hair sifted down, and instantly he had a baby-smooth bald patch on his right rear flank the size of my hand.

....He paused for a moment and regarded his own half-shaved behind. "I probably shouldn't have done that, should I?" he said dolefully.

"No, probably not," I said. "It's okay, Snips. Just.. slide your saddlebag back to cover the bald patch." The others laughed as he shuffled back in the crowd, trying to cover his pink rump. "Okay, how about you, Snails? What does your cutie mark mean?"

The lanky colt looked embarrassed and hung his head, his ears drooping. Diamond Tiara clearly could not resist. "As if it weren't obvious....." she drawled. Sad to say, more than one foal laughed. Snails' head drooped a little lower.

I heartily wished I had learned "The Stare" from Fluttershy, but I had not. I had to resort to the old standby: sitting perfectly still and not saying a word. It worked though... the ones laughing fell silent. I let the quiet stretch on for an awkward second, doing my best to radiate I am displeased with you from my very pores. I admit I am uncertain whether the message got across, or whether the colts and fillies were confused into silence because the Space Alien looked like he had gas.

I had Truffles fetch me another glass of water and took a sip. I finally spoke. "Go on, Snails, what is your special talent."

The colt shrugged. "Ah dunno...." he said.

"You don't know?" I asked. He shook his head. I saw the adults looking at each other, some
surprised, some knowingly. "Okay, then," I persisted, "What were you doing when you got your cutie mark?"

Snails shrugged again. "Out in the yard," he drawled. "Lookin' at snails and thinkin'."

"Thinking about what?" Snails mumbled something. "Come again?"

Snails took a deep breath, and with the air of someone who'd told this story FAR too many times, said "Numbers."

I blinked. "Okayyyyy. What numbers?" I'd meant to say "what about numbers?" and started to correct myself.... but then he began to recite.

"one, one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen..."

Snips nudged his pal. "Geez, Snails, you're counting wrong again!" The other colts laughed.

Me, I did a rather marvelous spit take.

"Twilight... board please?" She resummoned the aetherial chalkboard. I noticed from the corner of my eye that she looked as shocked as I felt...."Can you put a grid on it this time.... thank you." I traced the grid and drew a square with the number 1 inside. And began reciting aloud as I drew another above it, with a number 1 inside. then one to the right of the first two, four times as large....

"One, One, Two, Three, Five, Eight, Thirteen, Next number, Snails?"

"Twenty one," Snails said without hesitation. "then thirty four, then Fifty Five...

"Okay, that's enough," I said. "Colts and fillies, this is a very specific sequence of numbers. Can anyone here, other than Twilight or Snails, tell me what the pattern is?"

There was a pause, then Rainbow Dash spoke up. "Oh, I get it! Each of the numbers is equal to the sum of the two before it! Hah." The others stared. She stared back. "What? I'm good at solving puzzles..."

"Known as the Fibonacci sequence on Earth." I ran a curve through the boxes, connecting the corners in a rapidly widening spiral. "Which, as you see, when laid out as squares, forms one of the most fundamental patterns found in nature.... The Fibonacci spiral." I tossed the chalk in the air and caught it in one hand. " The sequence and the spiral are both found everywhere--- in growth patterns, sunflowers, rose petals, the branching sequence of plants, seashells--- or the shell of the common garden snail."

Everyone was now staring at Snails, who looked remarkably cheerier. "Fibonacci? Is that what they're called? I always called them the Snail numbers."

I decided to yank everyone's crank another turn. "Another property of the fibonacci sequence," I said, turning back to the board and drawing a line segment, "is that the further along it goes, the closer it gets to another number..... a particular ratio." I wrote $A/B=A+B/A$ on the board under the divided line. "that number is called the Golden Ratio, or phi." I drew the symbol on the board. "A ratio is a comparison of two things. Like, say, if Pinkie wanted to bake a cake, and the recipe called for one cup of sugar to five cups of flour, and she wanted to make the cake WAAAAAAAY bigger---"

"Which I would," Pinkie said confidently.
"No matter how big she made it, it would have to be one cup of sugar for every five cups of flour... or 1/5. That's the ratio of sugar to flour. Now the golden ratio, if your first line segment, B, is 1, is...." I paused and grinned. "Snails? Think you can solve this one?"

"Uhhhh, one point six one eight......." he stopped. "Uhh, Mister Arthur, it sorta goes on and on... I'm not sure how long..I've gotten to fifteen places, but....."

"That's okay, Snails, it does go on forever." Dear God, the colt had figured out phi to fifteen decimal places in his head.

"Just like PI!" he said. "..... I like Pi."

"Just like Pi, yes." I nearly giggled like a schoolgirl when he said that. "Phi is another number that crops up nearly everywhere. It was also regarded by the ancients on Earth as the most artistically perfect ratio. They built their temples based on Golden rectangles---" I drew one on the board---" and the proportions of their pictures and statues were based on it... which, coincidentally, is pretty close to many of the proportions of the human body." I showed them my hand and measured off the distance between the knuckles.

Snips stared at his best friend like he'd sprouted a pair of alicorn wings. "Dude," he said. "Why didn't you tell me you knew all this cool stuff?" He paused. "And why do you keep getting such bad grades at math?"

"Yes, indeed!" Cheerilee blurted out. She blushed (an interesting effect on a pony the color of dark cherries.) "Oh sweetie," she said to Snails, "I didn't mean to sound like that, but---" she looked at me. "This is very confusing...."

I felt an itching suspicion in the back of my head. "You wouldn't happen to have some of Snails' homework with you, would you?" I asked her.

"As a matter of fact, I do," she said. "I finished grading it and I was going to give it back to them at the end of the day.... I'm afraid he got an F," she stage whispered to me as I took the paper from her mouth. "he does good enough, on average, but then he'll turn in a paper like this and---"

I looked at it. It took me a minute-- I'm a trivialist, not a mathematician--- but I figured it out. "You'll have to regrade this," I said. "It looks all wrong because he was doing it in base four."

"Base... four?" more than one curious pony queried.

"the numbers we count in," I said. I held up my hands to illustrate. "humans and ponies--- because you copied it from us--- count in Base ten." I counted off with my fingers. "That wasn't always the way, mind. Some tribes of humans just counted in base five.... for one hand. Others counted in base four.." I counted again, using my thumb as a pointer. "Others counted in base twelve---" I used my thumb again, this time counting the joints of my fingers. "The reason we have 24 hours, with 60 minutes made of 60 seconds, is that long ago a tribe of people that counted in base 12 started trading with a tribe that counted in base 5.... and everyone there ended up counting in base 60. Nowadays we use base 10, or base 2-- binary. For everything except clocks... ahem."

"I saw how Mr. Arthur had ten fingers, and I wondered 'gee, why are us ponies counting like we got ten fingers? We just have four hooves... and..." Snails shrugged.

"So that's what he meant by 'he used different numbers," Cheerilee said, stunned.

I knelt down and looked Snails in the eye. "I think things are going to be a little different for you from now on, Snails," I said. "At least I hope so...."
"Really?" Snails beamed.

"Wait. You mean Snails is smart?" Snips said.

I looked up at the bust of Albert Einstein. I stood up and walked over and rested my hand on that venerable head. "You know, Albert Einstein flunked math in his school years?" I said. "Yet he went on to do all that he did. He just thought so differently from everyone else that people had trouble understanding him.

"There is a quote by him that I personally like: "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid."

I noticed some other museum patrons crowding up behind us, looking impatient. "Well, I think we've worn out our welcome with Mr. Einstein. Perhaps we should move on?" The girls ran herd on the class, slowly moving them on down the hall. "Miss Cheerilee, um, perhaps you should talk to Snails' parents," I said. See about getting him a tutor in advanced math." I looked at the paper again before handing it back. "Really advanced math.

Cheerilee nodded. "Oh, definitely," she said, still a little shellshocked. She took the paper back and stowed it away.

I suddenly found myself on the receiving end of an incredibly rare Fluttershy hug. (suffer your jealousy in vain, Bronies!) "That was wonderful, Arthur," she said. "What you did for Snails--"

"What I did?" I said, disbelieving. "I didn't do anything! I was just a hapless bystander!"

"Arthur, you just discovered a math prodigy, right under everyone's noses," Twilight said.

"By blind luck, Twilight. I'm no mathematician myself... I barely passed high school algebra. My familiarity with Fibonacci and phi are the consequence of way too many hours learning random bits and bobs of trivia on the internet back home. It was dumb luck, sheer unbelievable dumb luck, that I recognized it... I'm no scholar, no polymath, I'm just a bozo with a brain full of Trivial Pursuit clues. And I couldn't even win a game of Trivial Pursuit!"

Twilight rolled her eyes. "Why is it that you are so unwilling to give yourself any credit?"

"Twilight, does it seem at all unusual to you that ever since I've gotten here I've stumbled from one ridiculous success to another? I'm an opinionated blowhard; my standard default is to be on the losing side of an argument. Yet nearly everyone I've met so far has come around to my way of thinking. Every situation I've encountered I've been just lucky enough to have the bits and bobs of know-how to succeed. It's like an egotist's bad fantasy version of heaven; someplace where everybody ever so sensibly agrees with me. Just by the sheer laws of probability I should be making some colossal mistakes."

"Oh my," Fluttershy said. "You are such an awful pessimist, aren't you?"

I grunted. "Probably. Maybe it's just that things have been going too well for me, and I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop--- YEEEK!" That last exclamation exploded from me involuntarily, as I had turned around and come face to horn with Rarity. She was wearing a grin the likes of which I hadn't seen since my last viewing of Lesson Zero. Fellow bronies? You have NO idea how utterly scary that smile is in real life. "In the course of ten minutes, you have managed to singlehandedly TRIPLE the membership of the Cutie Mark Crusaders," she said sweetly. "And they are even now recruiting more. Assuming I manage to survive whatever apocalypse my sweet little sister and her friends unleash upon us next, no matter how long it takes, somehow, some way, I am going to make...."
you... PAY." She turned on her heel and trotted off after the rest.

"Feel better now?" Spike asked sarcastically as he trotted by.

I looked at him, "Strangely enough, yes...."

I pondered what the future had in store for Snails. Pony's perceptions of him might change quite a bit. Would he be able to deal with it? Would he lose his place in his community and his social circle? Would he be estranged, or burn out like other prodigies? Would he himself change?

As I pondered, Snips came galloping back to where we stood. "Mr. Arcturus, come quick. Snails got his head stuck in one of the exhibits!"

....Or maybe Snails would still be Snails, prodigy or no. I sighed and smiled ruefully. "Best go fetch some butter from the food court," I said to nopony in particular. "We may have some trouble getting those ears out...."
Chapter 10

Note: this chapter skips a little bit ahead. we'll get back to the museum shortly.

The continued integration of my good self into Equestrian and particularly Canterlot society proceeded with some alacrity. By coincidence I found myself the recipient of an invitation by Fancy Pants to attend one of the local stage performances. The box seats were excellent, the play was divine, the company, consisting of Fancy Pants and his lady associate ( alas, fellow bronies, I have not yet confirmed whether she is his spouse, paramour, or even daughter-- it seemed impolitic to ask, and the information was never offered) Fleur De Lys, was pleasant, charming, genteel and refined. (She has a most lovely accent, I will note in passing.)

Never had I felt more utterly out of my proper place in my life.

After the play there was a small festive gathering on an upper floor, and apparently some politically necessary social hob-nobbing. It was altogether stereotypical; Light music, bubbly drinks in glasses, empty chatter and emptier gossip, the usual sort of thing people within high society do in order to persecute themselves into dissipation and scourge happiness from the lower ranks. I was dressed in literally the first tuxedo I had ever owned in my life. God bless Rarity and her artisan skills, the thing managed to hang on my sloped and rounded frame and look fashionable, while actually remaining comfortable. You know the address, gents; Carousel Boutique, Ponyville, Equestria, and be sure to tell the proprietress that Sir Arthur Arcturus sent you. For all that, the best intentions of Celestia, Luna, and Fancy Pants were falling amiss, as you can dress a monkey in a tuxedo and those around him will still think the circus has come to town. I was intended to be, with Fancy Pants' aid, mingling with Canterlot high society, but was instead on display before it.

I truly wish I knew whether it was a subtle difference between humans and ponies, or whether it was a realistic reflection of "high society" in any place or time, but the snobs and effetes who clustered around Fancy Pants were so unsubtle and clownish in their fawning behavior to him that a six year old could have seen through their phony flattery.... and equally as unsubtle in their whispered jabs and barbs and none-too-veiled insults. I have never slapped a woman nor whipped a horse in my life, but I came incredibly close to doing both that night.

I also cannot help but wonder if ponies are naturally deaf as posts, because several of the nouveau riche gathered around us thought nothing of making rude comments about myself, my species or even my patrons and hosts while standing less than five feet away. The tearing point was when I heard one ghastly overmade bell dame remark to another, while standing right behind me no less: "Poor creature.... they say his race is an incredibly violent, warmongering species. Kill people in the name of their gods, or their countries, or just about anything. Absolute animals....."a tongue clicked in pity as counterfeit as a three dollar bill.

"Oh that's nothing dear; they say he has to be chaperoned even to keep him from regressing to such behavior himself. They say the Princess put those guards on him as much because she feared he would have an outburst and--- and well do who knows what. " This in a ridiculous stage whisper.

I am no practitioner of the Canterlot Royal Voice, but I do know how to project and can manage a
quite impressive stentorian speaking volume when I wish. "They also say the old bugger is stone deaf," I said without turning around, in a voice that made the champagne flutes ring. There were two strangled "eeps" behind me followed by the muffled hoofclops of pony retreat.

Fancy Pants and his inner circle crumbled into laughter at the twosome's expense. Or at least Fancy Pants did, and most certainly Mademoiselle De Lys; more than a few of the barbed remarks spat that evening by the wretched pony had been at Fleur's expense as well.. she tittered behind her hooves and shot me what I suspect was a glance of gratitude for routing the old dragon and her sycophant... the rest, well, enjoyed the privilege of laughing along with Fancy Pants at someone other than themselves.

I was completely and utterly disgusted with the situation, with the evening, and with myself. I set my glass down on a tray as it floated past in a unicorn servant's magical grip, thanked my hosts for a charming evening, and marched out the door before I truly did lose my self control. Apologies of a more formal nature would have to come later...

I was outside and five steps down the street before my entourage of bodyguards joined me. Perhaps it was the dowager's comment about me being "chaperoned," perhaps it was the first time I'd ever tasted champagne, maybe it was just my foul temper, but I was in no mood for it. "Oh, enough! Leave off! " I said angrily, waving at them. "I'm capable of walking myself about!"

The lead earth pony pulled his head back but persisted. "I'm sorry sir, but our standing orders---"

"Rubbish!" I snapped. "What, are you afraid I'll pounce on somepony and eat them? Maybe stand in the middle of the street and fling poo?" The three of them gave me sympathetic looks, but stayed. "Oh for--- On my own head be the consequences, but leave me ALONE for just one evening!" I stumped my way off down the sidewalk. When I looked back, they were gone. Or, at least, nowhere that I could see them... fair enough. I knew there was going to be hell to pay later, but at the moment I was too headlong into my foul mood to care.

It was evening and the streetlamps were already lit. I didn't make it far; though I had lost some weight over the preceding months, I still tired quickly after even a short walk. After an interminable time I found myself at the entrance to a somewhat rundown theater, one that seemed to cater to a broader variety of audience than the usual Canterlot stage. I saw a minotaur, a gryphon couple with their chick (cub?), even a cow or two.... I suspected I was close to the zeppelin yards, where there would be a bit more diversity in the passing populace. I felt a rush of nostalgia for the movie theaters back home. They had movies here in Equestria, but I hadn't attended any, unless one counted Celestia and Luna's own private one back at the palace (Celestia had a weakness for the old Daring Do serials at the time.) I couldn't attend; circumstances always led to me sticking out like a 350 pound thumb, and the seats were depressingly small. This on the other hand looked like just the place for a non-pony type to disappear for a moment; somewhere I could sit in the dark and not be stared at for a bit.

I procured a ticket--- the ticketpony didn't even glance at me-- and walked on inside. It was a middling theatre, dim and a bit shabby. The red velvet curtains were long past their prime, and most of the seats (glory of glories, extra large seats for extra large behinds!) were patched in multiple places. For once my garb attracted more curiosity than I did myself. How many different races wandered about Equestria's world, I wondered? I found a seat off to one side and made myself comfortable.

The lights went down and the stagelights went up, the 'band' (a quartet of musicians that barely deserved the name--- I swear one of them was playing a kazoo) struck up an intro. I was delighted; it seemed this was to be an old variety stage show, something that hadn't been around back home in
over a generation. The first stage performance was a juggling quartet of earth ponies. They were quite skilled, especially for having no hands. Next up was a comedy and softshoe/hoof routine right out of yesteryear. Their resemblance to a certain pair of cider-peddling brothers had me wondering if Flim and Flam had found a new career....

After them came a gryphon doing, so help me, a ventriloquist act. It was rather mediocre, though, and pretty much ended on a bad note when the Gryphon lost his temper at his manikin and—literally—bit its head off. Shades of Ozzy Osbourne.

Despite the semi-seedy atmosphere and the seedier behavior of the uncouth audience, I found I was rather enjoying myself. I'd never had the opportunity to see this old-school vaudeville style of entertainment back home, and it was quite refreshing to watch.

The lights dimmed even further. There was a drumroll, and someone offstage shouted,

"and now.... the Great and Powerful TRIXIE!!"

Ye flipping saints.

Yes, it was her. The curtains parted and a blue unicorn mare with a pale blue mane and a wand cutie mark stepped onstage. Her cloak and hat were different from the show---plain dark blue cloth, no stars or moons, a few cheap spangles sewed on here and there. She made a showy flourish of her cape. "Welcome, one and all, to Tenpenny Theatre! Prepare to be astounded by the mystical magical feats of the GREAT and POWERFUL TRIXIE!!" With another flourish she began her act. She cast a few illusions, hitting the audience up with patter about her adventures and travels and alleged wondrous feats. She did a few stage illusions as she went. flowers from her wand---real flowers, mind you, I caught one and noted the scent...showers of coins from a bucket, vanishing cups and balls, locking rings.... She really wasn't half bad. No, I rescind that; she was, by any human standards, quite excellent, and could have easily held the stage anywhere back on Earth. Of course, she had her unicorn powers to make the job easier, but it was no less visually impressive.

As far as her current audience was concerned, might as well have been reciting pages of a phonebook. The audience members who weren't bored were listlessly heckling her. Jeers, catcalls, and at least one magically deflected tomato were hurled at the stage. I found myself rather offended on her behalf.

"Oh, some Neeeeeigh sayers in the audience?" (to my defense, I was not the only one that groaned at that pun.) "Well The Great and Powerful issues her challenge, to ANYONE in the audience." There was a sharp flash and crack of magic. Her cape floated out behind her and a pale blue aura lit her up. "If you think you are a match for the Great and Powerful Trixie... step up on the stage and try your luck."

"Anything you can do, I can do better."

The heckling faded out. One has to understand, magic users were far more elite than they might seem from merely watching the show. Unicorns represented one third of the pony race---genetically, that is; by actual census, they were the least numerous of the three. And Ponies were only one race among close to a dozen talking species that I knew of (donkeys, goats, sheep, cows, minotaurs, dragons, sea serpents, gryphons...) For most of the Equestrian populace, magic---what I had come to think of as morphic resonance manipulation--was a great cryptic unknown. Even a simple stage magician using real hocus-pocus was a force to be reckoned with.

"Nopony?" Trixie said, arrogance seeping out of every pore. "Then we shall choose an audience member at random! Spotlight, please!" A second beam of light pierced down from the rafters and
illuminated the unicorn. "How about--- YOU, sir!" She pointed into the room. The second spotlight swept out, searching... and illuminated me where I sat.

...... Of course, of course. How else could it have possibly gone? I sat there, lit up like God's own day, in my full 350+ pound tuxedoed glory, waving feebly at the now invisible audience all around me. The audience groaned, which baffled me. Till I realized I was still dressed in the confounded tuxedo. Thanks to sheer coincident I looked like a bloody 'plant,' and a ludicrously obvious one at that.

Of course I wasn't. But The Great and Powerful Trixie, showpony extraordinaire, did not miss a beat. "Aha, a confrontation of the ages! The Great and Powerful TRIXIE is to be challenged by none less than the Unseen Watcher, the Man from Beyond Time and Space: Arthur Arcturus, the Human! Clear a path for him, mares and gentlecolts!" Now there was some enthusiasm in the audience. Applause, and none too few catcalls, rose around me as I got to my feet and helplessly walked down the aisle to the stage. What else could I do? The theatre was not packed, but it was full enough, and by quite a number of beings who were rapidly looking far more rowdy and dangerous to me than they had a moment before. Having minotaurs and diamond dogs in the audience will do that.

I pondered an exit strategy as I made my way up on the stage and stood next to Trixie. Yes, I decided, I definitely needed one.

Trixie stood there, smiling smugly. Comprehension bloomed. Random choice? Not a chance. She had obviously read up on me. More than likely she had told heaps of balderdash stories about her magical triumphs over me or humans like me. She deuced well knew that I was, contrary to all appearance or cultural apprehension, about as physically threatening as a burlap bag full of oatmeal, athletically inclined as a sofa, and that my species expressly had no magical ability whatsoever. I was a Horrifying Monster of the Week who could be beaten into submission with a weapon made of Nerf. She had seen me in the audience and must have thought God had answered her prayers.

Even in my annoyance I couldn't help thinking bravo, you magnificent conniver. "Well, Mister Arcturus, name your challenge," Trixie said. "Show us all something you can do that Trixie cannot do better." Her voice, magically amplified by the stage, echoed out over the audience.

I didn't bother correcting her that she had issued the challenge, not I. It was past a point of making any difference, anyway. Trying to buy time to think, I cleared my throat and cracked my knuckles.

The sound, apparently magically amplified, echoed through the theatre. A slow chuckle started, that quickly rose to a roar of laughter. Baffled, I looked down at Trixie to see what she'd done. She was standing with one hoof raised, staring at my interlaced fingers with a poleaxed look on her face. It took me a moment to realize what the joke was. Ponies had no knuckles to crack. And unless poor little four-hoofed Trixie could grow a pair of hands, she was flummoxed. I had beaten her challenge without even trying.

I couldn't help myself. I just couldn't. I held my hands out for her to see. "Here's the church, here's the steeple, open up the doors and---"

"ENOUGH!" Trixie barked, slapping my hands aside with her hoof.

The audience howled.

I looked down in Trixie's face. My dear readers, I tell you; She didn't crack. She didn't break. She shattered, right before my very eyes. Her face went from angry to blistering red with rage to something indescribable. "That's it!" she shrieked. "That's it! I've had it! I've had enough! I'm not
putting up with this anymore! The SUN will freeze over before I put up with another minute, another second of this--" She wheeled about and, in an impressive flare of her cape, bolted from the stage.

Panic galvanized me. I leapt forward and managed to seize one of her back hooves as she vanished offstage."Let go of me you furless orangutan!" she yelled.

"Oh no you don't!" I hissed. "There is no way in Chinese Hell you're abandoning me up on this stage--" both our voices were still, unfortunately, magically amplified. The audience obviously thought this was hysterical. I dragged her out from backstage, forcibly picked her up and carried her onstage tucked under my arm, to howls of laughter and, so help me, some scattered applause.

Unfortunately, she was facing the wrong direction. She cursed and kicked, trying to get me to drop her. "Cut that out or I swear I will start taking bits for people to come up here and spank you on the bottom," I said over my shoulder.

"Woohoo!!" a stallion in the audience whooped.

I pointed an accusing finger at him. "you in the back row; put your money away and SIDDOWN!" I shouted in flustered annoyance. Hoots and howls went up.

The pony under my arm went limp, hooves dangling. I was sweating bullets. The crowd was going from boisterous to rowdy. I ad libbed as fast as I could think. "Okay folks, we had a little fun and thank you all for going along with it. I'm sure Trixie appreciates you all playing along.... Trixie, say something to your audience---" I turned around so everyone could see Trixie's face. Trixie glared at them and made a sound something like "NYeeeeeehhh...."

The howls of laughter had turned to hoots of derision. "...but now she'll be getting back to her regular set and... awp!" Apparently the amusement factor had dried up for the roughnecks in the crowd; what looked like a beer bottle bounced off the invisible field covering the stage not an inch from my head.

"Forget her," some heckler in the back shouted. "She's the worst thing to ever show in this theater!" The laughter turned to jeers and demands for Trixie to get off the stage. Other objects started flying towards us. Not all of them were stopped by the forcefield.

I spotted a minotaur sitting in the front row. He was good and burly looking, with a thick scar over one eye. Thinking quickly I waved my coin pouch at him. "fifty bits to clear me a path to the door!"

He grinned and stood up, cracking his knuckles. "The Boulder likes you, funny human," he said. "The Boulder calls it a deal!" He turned and started pushing up the aisle, arms spread wide. I dropped off the stage and followed close behind him, Trixie still under my arm.

The projectiles were coming thick and fast now. Whoever was running the damned spotlight was following us with it, making us a nice clear target. The Boulder caught most of them with his sheer bulk, but quite a few were still pelting us hip and thigh... alas for my cleaning bill... And the downside of having the Boulder force a path for us became clear; as well as having large numbers ahead of us we had large numbers of knocked-down, pushed aside, angry individuals in our wake. If we didn't make the door soon we would be surrounded.

Fortunately as we passed under the balcony, help arrived. A shimmering blue field dropped in place behind us, blocking off the rain of debris. A familiar Earth pony guard dropped in front of the Boulder, dispersing the few blocking our path with his authority and, where that failed, brute muscle, while a pegasus hovered overhead, blocking the more irate airborne attendees. Bright Dawn, Hat Trick and Cloudwing were on the job, protecting my stupid behind from its well-deserved
consequences. Between the three of them and the Boulder's intimidating form, we reached the lobby and safety unmolested. Not unpelted, but unmolested.

We piled out into the street. Already the music for the next act was starting up, and the folks in Tenpenny theatre were forgetting all about us as another hapless clutch of performers made obeisance to the gods of instant gratification. Ah, such is fame.

I handed the Boulder fifty bits. "Thank you, Mr. Boulder," I said. "You helped keep that from getting far uglier than it did."

The Boulder counted his money and grinned. "The Boulder is pleased to have contributed to interplanetary relations," he said, flexing, "and the preservation of the performing arts. But now---" he turned, flexing into another pose-- "the Boulder must go." He turned and marched off, ham-thick arms akimbo. Minotaurs. Nice people, generally, but very intense about everything.

I set Trixie down and turned to my bodyguards, shamefaced. "I'm sorry," I said. "I owe all three of you an apology. I was a fool to tell you to leave, even for a moment. If Celestia makes any issue---no," I sighed, facepalming "WHEN Celestia makes an issue of it, I will take full responsibility."

"Irrelevant, sir," Bright Dawn said. "We did try to stay close but concealed. But we still shouldn't have broken orders."

"As far as I'm concerned you didn't," I said. "Trixie, I---"

But by the time I had turned around, the performing unicorn had already galloped off down the street and was gone.

Celestia was in full plumage as stern royal matriarch. "We are, to say the least, not amused by this situation, Sir Arcturus," she said. "Your bodyguards have been reprimanded for their role in the situation--"

I waved a hand. "Please, your highness, the situation was entirely my fault..."

"Do not interrupt," Celestia said, stone faced. "Yes, you made their jobs difficult with your demands. But the guard regularly deals with troublesome wards; this is why they take their first orders from me, not from their charges. They have grown too lax in executing their duties---out of friendship rather than sloth or animosity, for which I am glad, but lax all the same. It is our royal decision that they be reprimanded. Not harshly," she said, her face softening slightly, "but reprimanded nonetheless."

"As for you," she said, growing stern again, "it is time you recognized that you are a po--ahem. a personage of importance and authority, whether you think you deserve it or not, and as such your actions have repercussions for yourself and those under you." I cringed a bit inwardly. She wasn't going to do something like draft me into the guard, or some such alleged character building exercise like that, was she? I wondered---then felt guilty for my shirking nature in the next moment.

She was about to speak when Luna stepped closer to her side. "Sister, it seems to us that this is a lesson he hath already learned," she said. "His first concern wast the welfare of his guards. And he hath commended this "Boulder" personage for his aid, as well. Perhaps no more is needed. For this instance at least," she said, shooting me a fierce scowl.
"Agreed, sister," Celestia said. To me she said, "Don't look so worried. I'm not about to draft you into the army or anything so daft as that." She rolled her eyes. "Would to the Maker that ponies would find some OTHER means of building character in their sons and daughters than sending them to enlist in my armies...... anyway. Consider the matter settled. I may have to make a decision on... certain matters... in the future. But for now let this matter be closed between us."

"Thank you, your Highnesses," I said.

"For now though, we decree that your personal guard shall be once again increased to proper numbers, and that they are NOT to leave your side for any circumstance. We shall also rotate out your current roster and bring in new guards." I felt a pang of regret; Cloudwing, Hat Trick and Bright Dawn had become close friends in their time as my bodyguards. "It's foolish anyway to expect an imbalanced trio to handle any real threats, Sir Arcturus," she continued, more kindly. "In a serious attack they would have been overtaxed to protect you on all three fronts. Consider it a way of making the job easier on your friends, when the rotation brings them back into your service."

"How did you hear of the incident so quickly?" I asked.

The stern, formal manner fell off the both of them instantly like the mask it was. The two princesses let out a most unprincessly snicker. "Sir Arthur, nothing travels faster in this kingdom than gossip," Celestia teased. Her horn flashed; a folded tabloid fell out of thin air. I managed to catch it and opened it up. It took me a moment to find it, but there it was....

"Royal Alien Escapes Riot with.... Exotic Dancer???

I yelped. I read with far more focused attention. Below the byline was a horrendously garbled account of my misadventure at the Tenpenny Theater. All told, I believe the jumped-up gossipmonger who wrote the column got approximately five words out of the whole event correct. They even got Trixie's name wrong.

The way it was written, I had slipped my keepers, run off to a sleazy theater of ill repute, and gotten up onstage with a pole dancer named "Pow-Wow Trixie," starting a riot among the clientele. I had then escaped with the "Pow-Wow Trixie" in tow with the aid of several royal guards and "a hired mercenary named Boulders" and was now under house arrest in the Canterlot palace.

I facepalmed again and looked at the Princesses. "I swear to you this is NOT---" I held my tongue when I saw that the two of them were shaking with mirth, biting their lips to keep from laughing. They lost the fight at seeing my face. The two of them exploded with laughter, clutching their wings to their sides.

Celestia finally gasped for air and wiped her eyes with a wing. "We know, we know, Arthur" she assured me. "We have far better sources than the press. What sort of rulers would we be if we depended on the newspapers for our information?"

I recalled with some irony a certain President who had presided over my home country in wartime. The press had tried to make an outrageous scandal of it when he had mentioned that he didn't bother reading the newspapers or watching news shows. It never occurred to the dullards who accused him of being horribly uninformed that he was the President of the United States, and was not only MAKING the news, but probably had more information on events as they happened than the entire media industry had by the time they rolled the morning paper.

"Methinks this is half the reason thou goest so lightly with him, sister," Luna said, amused. "Because his antics give the foolscape writers something to bide their attention other than thyself."

"True enough," Celestia sighed. "So, as your first official lesson in high statesmanship--- tell me, how do you intend to deal with this?"
I shrugged and pocketed the paper. "By ignoring it, generally," I said with disgust. "There's always
going to be some semi-literate fool working for a newspaper who takes shortcuts with the truth.
Paying them any more attention than that only gives them more credibility than they deserve."


"Though I won't rule out shooting them in the rump with a slingshot from the castle tower..."

Tacky story or no tacky story, I decided to maintain my usual routine. I had taken to perambulating
about the roads and shops close by the palace, and I reasoned that altering my habits would only lend
to the gossipmongers' sillier speculations. So I kept up my constitutionals... though I now had a sextet
of stern-faced, unfamiliar guards around me at all times.

There was a small cafe nearby that I frequented. It was quiet, unprepossessing, and had good
sandwiches and drinks at reasonable prices. Personal experience from Earth had taught me the dismal
lesson early that if something of high quality was within my reach and budget, it was probably going
out of business, so I did my best to frequent this little place as often as I could before the inevitable
tragic loss.

I stepped inside a few days after the incident, my plainclothes bodyguards taking "discreet" positions
at the door and around the room, and who should I see at one of the tables but the Great and
Powerful Trixie. Her back was turned to me, her substandard cape and hat draped over the back of
her chair. She was slumped forward, her chin resting on her hooves, nursing a large cherry
phosphate through a bendy straw.

Fresh guilt panged me. Here was yet another pony's life I had disrupted. I walked over quietly and
stepped around to where she could see me before pulling up a chair. "This spot taken?" I asked
rhetorically, taking a seat across from her. I could get a clear look at her now. She looked--- worn.
Not quite haggard, but there were lines under her eyes. She gave me a glower. "Ah, the great and
mighty Human again," she muttered. "back to finish the job?"

"Finish the job?" I repeated. Without moving from her spot, Trixie used her magic to slap a fresh
copy of the day's paper in front of me. "Alien Ambassador Falls Afoul of Traveling Huxter," the
headline blared. I picked it open and read it, wincing. Certain words and phrases were highlighted
with Trixie's trademark glow. I read them, muttering them aloud: "traveling bunko artist",
"responsible for ursa major attack 3 years ago" (ahh, classic media reliability and accuracy),
"overrepresented herself..." "described as high maintenance and troublesome by theatre manager"....

"That last one was because I demanded the bit-pinching crook actually pay me on time," she
growled. "I went two days without eating once because his 'paperwork was delayed.' "She took a
slurp of her cherry phosphate. "And this soda is the last of my 'excessive and grandiose salary,' as he
put it."

"He fired you...?" I said.

"Of course he fired me, you bald baboon's behind!" She shouted, slamming both her forehooves
down on the table and leaning across it. My bodyguards twitched, but stayed put, glaring. She either
didn't notice or didn't care. She glared at me from an inch away, teeth clenched. "He threw my last
pay in my face and then threw me out into the street! And by now he's put out the word to every
scumbag and skinflint theatre manager from here to Hoofington that I'm an invitation to calamity! I won't be able to get a gig anywhere in Equestria, thanks to you!!"

My egotistical temper, far too short those days, instantly flared. I was winding up and getting ready to blast her with both barrels when she suddenly stopped glaring at me, screwed her eyes shut and started crying. High pitched sobs shook her frame as she sagged down onto the table, tears leaking everywhere.

There's an old Indian saying that "tears are a woman's warpaint." Wasn't that the truth. No matter how right you are and how wrong she is, the minute a woman you're fighting with starts crying you might as well give up, lie down, and DIE. My anger deflated like an untied balloon. I just sat there dumbly while the Great and Powerful Trixie bawled, my anger turned to humiliating guilt in an instant. "It's been-- two-- YEARS-- and-- just when-- I think-- ponies--- finally forget-- Just when-- I start-- getting-- my hooves-- under me again---" she hiccuped.

Wordlessly I handed her my handkerchief. She wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and proffered it back to me. I waved for her to keep it (all the while my inner brony was estimating how much I could have auctioned that handkerchief for on Ebay.) "I am sorry, Trixie," I said wearily. "But I doubt there was much I could have done to make anything turn out differently."

Trixie sighed and sniffed. "Oh, who am I kidding," she said quietly, her cheek resting on the table. "That gig was bound to turn out the way it did. They always do, anymore. I've been on the skids since long before Ponyville..." She sat up and wiped her eyes.

"Tell me about Ponyville," I said.

Trixie scowled at me. "I thought you were 'the watcher from beyond,' " she pointed out. " Don't you already know? Besides, what do you care?"

I took a moment to order my usual; a tall soda water with a touch of lemon. I scratched my beard as I thought. "Let's just say I want to hear it straight from the horse's mouth," I said. " I saw what happened, yes. A twenty two minute summary of it, at least. I want to know more. I want to know: why all the bragging? Why all the lying? Why the mean pranks on your own audience? Even back on Earth, it seemed to me that approach was... counterproductive. I want to know the full story." My drink arrived. I took a sip. "Indulge me."

Trixie sighed "fine," she said. " I'll tell you all about Ponyville. But there are some things you have to understand first, human. Things about being a showpony, and a unicorn. "

"such as?"

She pointed to her hip with one hoof. "Tell me, what does my cutie mark look like?"

"A wand...?" I said. "And this is relevant because....?"

"My talent is magic. Or it should be. I know dozens of tricks, maybe even hundreds, but they're all just tricks." she glowered at me. "Do you have any idea what it's like to be a grown unicorn mare whose talent is showboating parlor tricks?"

"It was easy at first, after I got my cutie mark. I learned trick after trick after trick, and performed them whenever I could. Ponies, even my parents, thought I was a child prodigy. And everyone's enchanted by a little filly who can do all sorts of flashy stunts, so it was easy to thrill an audience. I fell in love with the stage, with the dazzle and the applause...." she sighed.

"But as I grew up I found out ponies got a lot harder to please. Praise for being a wunderkind dried
When I failed the entrance exam for the School for Talented Unicorns, my relationship with my parents... went sour. When I finally struck out on my own as a traveling entertainer, the first thing I found out that was, no matter what kind of routine I did, there was always, ALWAYS somepony in the audience who was better at whatever I was doing at the moment, or at least thought they were. And the next thing I learned was that if you can't squash a heckler, you're doomed in showbiz.

"And everywhere I went with my show, there were hecklers."

"All the time ponies were challenging me, trying to upstage me in my own show... and soon my whole routine revolved around bashing hecklers. It didn't matter that they were a one-trick pony and I was skilled at a hundred, if I couldn't beat them at that one trick of theirs I was a fraud. I couldn't do a birthday party or cuteceneara without some colt or filly challenging me.

She pointed a hoof at my hands. "Do you realize those idiots at Tenpenny Theatre actually expected me to somehow do that... joint-poppy... thing you did with your fingers?"

"Every show, every performance was a contest. Every audience was an enemy." her face fell. "I got to the point where I HATED my audience." A tear trickled down her face, she stubbornly wiped it away with the back of her hoof.

"I have to point out that you seemed to be asking for it," I said gently. "What with the whole 'Great and Powerful' shtick, and the... fabrications about your feats..."

Trixie snorted and leaned across the table to poke me in the chest. "Are you joking? Get one thing straight, human; maybe you haven't noticed but nopony respects a unicorn for her magical versatility or style, only for her sheer power. How MUCH she can do, not how well she can do it." She waved her hoof over her head and rolled her eyes. "I mean, we're ruled by a Princess whose sole qualification for taking the throne was her ability to raise the sun single-hoofed!"

I reluctantly nodded; this meshed painfully well with what I'd seen already. I recalled Twilight Sparkle's entrance exam for the School for Gifted Unicorns; they didn't test her knowledge or her skillsets, they just made her try to hatch a magically resistant egg. Seen from that perspective it was like making someone apply for Harvard based on how much they could bench press.

"Besides which, you said it yourself-- it was a shtick. Everypony in entertainment needs one. They have to get up on a stand and shout out a bunch of humbug about how fabulous, how amazing, how magnificent their show is---"

"The greatest show on earth," I said. "I get your point."

Her ears drooped. "I'm... not very proud of lying about the Ursa Major," she said. "But great flipping Celestia, I never thought anyone would be such a corn pone as to sincerely believe it! That's why I picked a story so ridiculous for my humbug, why I picked a creature so exotic and rare..." she shook her head.

I grunted. I'd have to give her slack on that one. Ask some soul about P.T. Barnum sometime; at one time people understood that entertainers were entertainers, and that tall tales and bunkum were all part of the show and not to be taken seriously. By my generation, though, we were all such a bunch of hyper-emotional ninnies that we threw away our Milli Vanilli records when we found out that the "great music" inside wasn't actually sung by the two black men on the cover....

"But I'm getting off track, aren't I?" she said dryly, sipping at her drink. "You wanted to hear about Ponyville."
"Not really much to tell, though. I rolled my wagon into this little town about midday and set up for my show. Fireworks, fanfare, the usual. I'm pumping the crowd up for the show, and I'm not even through my opening patter when some rainbow-maned buffoon starts BOOING me." She scowled. "How charming of the townsfolk. Most ponies at least waited till I started the actual show to tell me I sucked." I chuckled.

"Anyway, there's this bunch right in the front row. A couple of unicorns, an earth pony, the pegasus, and a baby dragon. And they're all commenting at the top of their lungs about how egotistical and stuck up I was and how I was "tooting my own horn..." I swear, you'd think none of them had ever seen a traveling show before. I was already in a bad mood and that set me off. I went straight to the heckler challenge."

She snorted again. "All that talk about how I was a vain show-off, but my oh my weren't they eager to get up on the stage themselves--!"

"The baby dragon is egging them all on. The first one up is a farm girl with a twang in her voice like a banjo. She starts doing a pretty impressive rope-trick routine... would've held most audiences for at least a minute or two. While she's jumping around I use a rope-tying spell to truss her up in her own lasso. The audience laughs, I figure that's the end of it-- noone's going to try to upstage me after THAT!

But no, here comes the rainbow colored one. Typical pegasus jock; she tries to show me up with flying stunts. I wonder what she does in her spare time, challenge legless ponies to hoof races?

"I turned her own weather manipulating stunt against her, wrapped her up in a miniature tornado... when she finally comes out she's green as grass and, thank Celestia, not giving me any more trouble. I give her a lightning bolt to the rump and chase her off.

"Then here comes a THIRD one! Three of them, right in a row! I can't believe it! I'm just trying to make a living and these ponies are trying to run roughshod over me! It's the unicorn this time." Trixie seemed to seethe a bit. "Some vain, over-made-up town princess.....She gets up onstage, waving her lily-white derriere at everyone, and starts giving me a lecture about class and style... all the while she's turning one of my curtains into a fancy dress and glamming it up on my stage.

"Dreadful fake accent, too. I could hear the Maneasota accent under her fake Canterlot one, clear as day," she said drolly. I nearly choked on my soda.

"I was fed up by that point. I just did the meanest thing I could think of..."

"turned her hair green," I said.

"Pond scum green," Trixie corrected. "With twigs sticking out of it. She ran off in hysterics... and blast it if that little purple lizard wasn't goading ANOTHER pony into trying to show me up!" Trixie banged her head on the table at the memory. "Purple unicorn filly. Thank Celestia, she at least had the decency to refuse to be goaded." Trixie sighed and rubbed her forehead. "Why can't anypony have some blasted manners like that anymore?"

"the rest of the show went off without a hitch... except for two foals who kept hanging around."

"Snips and Snails... you were rather, well-- inconsiderate to them, especially as they were fans."

Trixie rolled her eyes. "I know, I was doing it on purpose. I was trying to get them to go away! They were so obsessed with me it was creepy.

"And star-struck foals are so much trouble," she went on. "I almost got lynched once because
some filly with dreams of running off and being a showmare sneaked aboard my wagon, and I didn't find her till I was five miles out of town!

"Nothing I did seemed to get them to go away, either, so I finally just ignored them." Her face crumpled in disgust. "I might have kept a closer eye on them if I had known they were going to sic a giant freaking bear on me. I get woken up in the middle of the night, and the next thing I know I'm running screaming for my life because my brain-damaged "fans" have lured an Ursa into town! The mind boggles, Arcturus. How can anyone be that suicidally stupid?"

"When I was five, my cousin and I went bear hunting armed with a switch,"(1) I said idly. "It's easy to forget just how irrational kids can be."

Trixie sighed and rubbed her forehead again. "I know, they were only foals... I think they might have even been, well, mentally challenged." I grinned but said nothing. "But still... what they did... ugh.

"The thing smashed my caravan---" she stopped and choked up a bit, obviously thinking of all her lost possessions. "stepped on it and crushed it flat. Then it cornered us. I tried to use magic to scare the beast off... I might as well have been flicking spitwads at it. I thought for sure I was going to be eaten, and those two poor retarded colts with me."

"Thank the Maker that purple unicorn was there. She saved our lives, and the whole town. She cast a musical spell that calmed the Ursa, fed it milk, and levitated it out of town and into the Everfree. Yes, milk. Would you believe the thing was a baby?" she said with a flourish. She'd apparently forgotten the whole "watcher from beyond" issue in the thrill of telling the story.

"You don't hold any resentment towards her for upstaging you?"

"Resent her? Why would I resent her?" Trixie chuffed. "She saved my life! I was just grateful she hadn't humiliated me in my own show." She cocked an eyebrow. "I actually felt sorry for her when I thought about it. I couldn't understand what she was doing in that podunk little town with all that power and talent... I would have thought that the School for Gifted Unicorns would have snapped her up, or the royal mages' fellowship even...."

"Anyway, a mob started gathering. I knew which way this wind was going to blow-- I was going to be blamed for the whole thing, probably thrown in jail and forced to pay for the damages, maybe even tarred and feathered..... Don't look so skeptical, human-- it happens all the time to itinerants like me. I had a friend who was shaved bald and rode out on a rail because he had the misfortune to arrive in town the same day a parasprite outbreak did." She pantomimed a raging villager. " 'A disaster has happened! Who's to blame? There's a stranger in town! we'll pool our three communal braincells and blame him! Let's get him, Arrrrrrrr..."

"I yelled something--- I forget what, I was so addled--- threw a smokebomb, and ran for my life." her chin crumpled a little. "I didn't have anything. Not my caravan, not my props or my books, not my groucho bag(2), not even my hat and robe..."

"And things just kept going downhill. By the time I got to the next town, news of the story was already there. I find out that the hecklers I'd embarrassed, and their friend the purple unicorn, were Bearers of the Elements of Harmony!" she made quote marks in the air. " 'Fraud magician causes Ursa attack,' 'Twilight and Bearers of Elements save town from fake magician's blunder.' It was all over Equestria that I was a blowhard and a fraud. No town would let me in to perform, no stage manager would hire me.

"The rest, you obviously know. The work at Tenpenny Theatre was crap, all I was there for was target practice for the people throwing tomatoes. I was trying to save up enough to buy a wagon, get
back on the circuit...." her face fell. "Not that it matters now. It's all but cast in concrete that The
Great and Powerful Trixie is a liar, a buffoon and a fraud."

She cast her eyes down. "I'm... sorry I blamed you," she said. "I earned my foalish reputation one
bad gig at a time. And now it looks like I'm washed up for good." A tear splashed on the tabletop. "I
used to love making ponies smile and applaud. What ever happened to that?"

I sat back and regarded the pony in front of me. I would have some pointed questions to ask my
friends in Ponyville, but I had the feeling the general gist of the story was true. I was looking at a
pony who was, all but literally, born in the wrong time and place. She hadn't been able to live up to
her own cutie mark since she was a filly, because her "special gift" was utterly unappreciated. She
was a stage magician in a world where real magic was as common as dirt, and she had spent her
whole life being a mendacious blowhard, punching above her weight, to compensate for it.

Could I help her? Should I?

I looked at the pale blue pony crying into her cherry soda and sighed. As if I could do anything else...

"Trixie," I said. "If I could offer you my help, would you take it?"

I saw surprise on her face, followed by hope. But she hesitated, Pride warring with need behind her
eyes. "I suppose I would," she finally said, shamefaced. "The not so Great and Powerful Trixie
doesn't have too many options. But... what sort of help can you offer?"

"Wait a minute, you want us to help HER?" Rainbow Dash was incredulous. "She doesn't deserve
anybody's help!"

"Then it's a good thing indeed, Rainbow Dash, that we do not reserve help only for those that
deserve it," I said with some acidity, "Else both our worlds would be in far sorrier shape than they
already are."

The mane 6 and I were gathered together at the Ponyville library. I had need of co-conspirators in my
plans, and it seemed somehow appropriate to include the representations of Equestrian harmony in
venture. Plus I do confess some baser desire to bring things full circle... after hearing Trixie's side of
the tale I felt I had a... call it a Brony's obligation to bring everyone in for a full accounting.

To that end I had, with the Princess's permission, taken a little weekend trip to Ponyville and talked
the others into a little pow-wow at the library over cookies and tea, where I revealed my intentions...
to a less than receptive audience.

"Still, Arthur," Twilight Sparkle said. "Trixie's... just a random showpony. Why do you feel so
motivated to help her?"

"Because I felt sorry for her," I said, my eyebrows raised. "What is so complicated about that?"

"You ask me, she got what she deserved," Rainbow Dash snarked from the rafters. "Anything that
happened is on her own head."

" I hate to sound spiteful, but I agree with Rainbow Dash about that," Rarity sniffed, nibbling at a
cookie. "One reaps what one sows..."
"Yep. She came swaggering into town, braggin' and boastin' and lyin', and got what she deserved," Applejack said.

I felt my temper leap up like a gaslight. "And what would that be, Applejack?" I said. "To have her reputation smeared? To have her home destroyed?" Applejack looked taken aback. "Yes, Applejack, that wagon was her home, and also her livelihood. That's a mighty steep penalty to pay for telling tall tales, wouldn't you say?"

Applejack bridled, but it was Rainbow Dash who retorted. "Hey, she was more than that." She crossed her forelimbs. "She was a big bragging... bragger!"

"Never seen one of THOSE in Ponyville," I shot back coolly. A couple of ponies snickered. Rainbow Dash turned red. "Hey, she was a LIAR! and a JERK!"

I managed to rein in my combative nature. These ponies weren't the enemy, I reminded myself. There was no enemy here. I took a deep breath and composed myself. "Rainbow Dash, did you or did you NOT heckle and boo her at her own show?" I demanded.

Dash muttered a bit. "Well yeah, but--"

"But nothing. the lot of you--- I'M INCLUDING YOU TOO, SPIKE," I said over my shoulder. There was a clatter of dishes being fumbled, but no verbal response. "The lot of you," I continued looking at the others, "stood around while her show was going on, chatting up about how arrogant and egotistical she was, even outright booing her for it." I leaned forward and looked at them accusingly. "But I'll note that when she offered her challenge the three of you just about raced each other to get in the spotlight and show her up." Rarity in particular blushed at that one. I sat back. "Trixie has her own problems, but I swear you lot seem to have a terminal case of Tall Poppy Syndrome."

A couple of them looked confused, but a few, Twilight in particular, understood. "Now really, that's just a little too far, Arthur--"

"Oh really? Miss Mare Do Well?" Twilight flinched a little. Apparently she'd had a few second thoughts over the years about that particular brilliant little plan. "you got mad at Rainbow Dash for getting an ego and showboating her heroics, so you dressed up in garish costumes--"

"Garish??" Rarity said, offended.

"BRIGHT PURPLE is GARISH, Rarity. You dressed up in garish costumes and hogged the spotlight for yourselves to 'put her in her place.' " A few of them made faces that suggested they hadn't seen it from that angle before. And to judge by the painful expression on Rainbow Dash's face, reconciliation afterward hadn't been as easy or as smooth as the cartoon show had suggested.

"Or how about the Young Flier's Competition? You get a pair of wings and ten seconds later you're trying to upstage Rainbow Dash in her own performance." Rarity bit her lip and looked askance. "Then there's Winter Wrap Up--- you were more concerned with making sure that fancy new unicorn didn't use any of her fancy magic than you were with getting the job done on time."

Applejack glowered. "Now that there is tradition, and tradition is--"

"--A guide for the wise, and a rule for fools," I snapped. "The prosecution rests." I sighed and sat back, scooting to get in a more comfortable position. "Tall Poppy Syndrome: that petty impulse to cut down anyone that sticks up too far... whether they deserve it or not. It's bad anywhere, but it seems to really crop up in small towns. It's just selfish pride, turned inside out. You can have it and
not know it. And you lot had it bad. When Trixie rolled into town, the weed whackers came out. You harassed her, got humiliated for it, and then stood around gloating when she "got what was coming to her."

"Oh this is baloney," Rainbow Dash said. "C'mon, Twi, AJ, Rarity, YOU saw what she was like... Fluttershy, Pinkie, if YOU saw somepony acting like that you'd think they got what they deserved too."

Fluttershy rubbed her forehooves together. "Um... actually...." Everyone got quiet to hear what she had to say. Even the noises from the kitchen got quiet. "Trixie didn't sound like a very nice pony...." Dash looked smug. There, you see? "But what you did to her doesn't seem very nice, either.. I mean, when I was a model... I didn't enjoy it, but I can't imagine how much more awful it would be with ponies yelling mean things at me..."

"Darling, she turned my hair green," Rarity glowered.

"Well yeah, it was kinda mean. I mean it was mean what she did to you all, but didn't you all start it?" Pinkie Pie pointed out. Ouch, and the nail is struck square on the head.

"Well... maybe..." Applejack said reluctantly. "Ah guess ah kin see how somepony could... see it from that angle...yeah. You got us there, Pinkie."

I saw the opening and decided to dig the knife in. "Coincidentally, Twilight, did you do anything with her belongings? What was left of them, that is.... did you try and ship them to her or...?"

Ohhh, the guilt. "Nnno, we didn't," she said. "I had Snips and Snails clean up the wreckage, and whatever wasn't completely smashed, we... um, chucked in a closet at City Hall."

"Well, I obviously know where she is now... so giving her back her worldly possessions might be a start."

Twilight nodded. "And it's the right thing to do, regardless, " she admitted. "But really, Arthur. Why are you so adamant about helping her?"

"What, no clinical interest on your part?" I teased. "One would think you could get a research paper at least out of it. I mean, she's probably the longest running case of Cutie Mark Failure Syndrome in Equestria.."

"What?" several ponies exclaimed.

"She gave it away herself," I said. "Twilight, her cutie mark is a wand. A stage prop. Unicorns don't use wands. Her talent isn't magic, it's stage magic. Magic tricks done for entertaining an audience.... in a world where nearly every audience is made up of magicians."

"So?" Dash demanded.

"Let me put it this way, Rainbow Dash. What would you say is your greatest achievement ever?"

"Oh that's easy-- my Sonic Rainboom," Dash said smugly.

"Tell me, then; how well do you think you'd do in a world where everybody, even the turtles, can do a Sonic Rainboom?"

"Oooerrrr," Rainbow Dash said, grimacing. For the first time I saw some sympathy on her face.
"Trixie has no real marketable magic talent—not by Equestrian standards," I said. "She's got a huge library of tricks and one-off stunts she's always adding to, but her magical power plateaued years ago. She hasn't been able to hold an audience just with her talent since she was a filly. And dealing constantly with hecklers, scoffers and boobs-- the sort who only seem to attend performances to get rid of their old tomatoes, or to try and draw attention to themselves-- has made her have to play a role--- "the great and powerful Trixie"—just to get from town to town. She's been punching above her weight class for years, and she knows it. If she hasn't got CMFS, she's a thread away from getting it."

"She's a performer who fell out of love with her audience. What she needs more than anything is to fall back IN love with it; to hear ponies genuinely applaud her again, to love her and her love them back. Once she has that, she can break free of that CMFS and be happy again. I don't know what sort of personality is under that vain, prideful little shell, but I'm just dying to find out."

Spike came toddling in with a fresh plate of cookies. "well, that's great," he said, "But how are you gonna help her?"

I picked up a large cookie--- ah, chocolate chip!--- and noshed. "I've already started," I said between bites. "I'm her new manager."

"What??" I was growing to love that little chorus.

"Well, manager slash handler," I said. "I've used my ridiculous influence to get her a few gigs around Canterlot. Nothing really big, but far better than that Tenpenny dive. I've also helped her update her routine a bit. The Humanities library had a few books on stage tricks and parlor magic, biographies about famous human stage illusionists, that sort of thing... and you'll remember that letter I sent you a while ago, Twilight--- the one asking you for a list of things impossible or incredibly difficult to do with magic?"

"Yes," Twilight said. "Was this what you needed it for?... But how does that help Trixie?"

"Like I told you, Trixie's talent isn't magic; her talent is showmanship. The old Razzle Dazzle. She's incredibly versatile, but so are most human 'magicians.' I made a flourish with one hand and produced a ping pong ball. Then I turned it from one into two, then three, then four, then vanished them all. The gasps of surprise made the weeks of practice worth it. "A considerable number of her effects were already gimmicks or sleight-of-hand, like what I just did." I reproduced the ball and gave it to Twilight to examine. "er, Sleight of hoof, I suppose... that she had worked out for herself. She was ashamed when I discovered that. She thought it was 'cheating.' " I chuckled. "Cheating!"

"That's why she wore the hat, by the way. It hid when she was, and when she wasn't, using her magic to do something."

"Heh, slick," Dash said.

I chuckled. "Anyway, between your list and some creative mixes of real and 'human' magic, we've worked up some stage illusions that have your old professors scratching their heads."

"Well that's cool. But what'd you do for her personality?" Spike snarked.

I grinned all the more. "Did I ever tell you ponies about William Shatner?" I asked, putting my hands behind my head. "Human actor, quite famous. Got his big break on a television show called "Star Trek." It was fairly popular while it was on the air.... He played the lead character, Captain Kirk, of
the star ship Enterprise." I gave a fake little salute."Anyway, his career sort of hit a snag after the show ended. Some of his former co-stars gave interviews and wrote books about their time on the cast, and some were quite bitter. Described Shatner as a hack actor— he kind of was, really—and as a raging egocentric jerk and blowhard. It pretty well looked like Shatner's reputation, maybe even his career, was shot.

"Then he did an absolutely mind boggling thing." I chuckled. "He made it work for him."

"He, well, he basically began playing a parody of himself. Egotist, bad actor, bad singer, blowhard... whether it was an interview or a TV show or a movie or a live appearance, he was onstage all the time, playing William Shatner the Ham Actor, and he did it all with a smile and a sly wink. His enemies wanted to make him a laughingstock? Fine, he'd be a laughingstock— and let the whole world know he was in on the joke.

"Trixie was in the same boat. She'd gotten a reputation she couldn't shake; the vain, arrogant, incompetent liar, the Great and Powerful Trixie. I simply told her to stop trying to shake it, and double down instead."

"Are you tellin' us you told her t' be even worse than she was??" Applejack asked in disbelief. By way of an answer, I pulled a sheaf of papers out of my pocket and tossed them on the coffee table. They were newspaper clippings, neatly stacked and labeled. a couple had pictures; The Great and Powerful Trixie, in an extra large hat and billowing cape, looking more outrageously flamboyant than ever. "critic reviews," I said. They picked them up and read them.

"New stage performer wows theater goers...."

"The main performance that night was Adagio, but the true highlight of the evening was the warmup performance by The Great and Powerful Trixie...."

"Dazzled the audience with baffling illusions even as she had them rolling in the aisles with her over-the-top "Great and Powerful Trixie" persona...."

"her hysterical stories included her epic saga of her battle with a Grassy Knoll and her slaying of the deadly Flying Buttress...."

"...At one point claimed to have beaten Nightmare Moon in a watermelon seed spitting contest...."

"'You have angered the Gazebo;' quirky and entertaining show by up-and-comer Trixie the Magician...."

"Well, ah'll be dipped," Applejack said.

"I'd say it seems to be working," Twilight said, amused. "But where do we fit into this?"

"Yes, it seems that she's well on her way already," Rarity said. "How would we help?"

I chose my words carefully. "Yes, she is on her way," I said. "But before she goes anywhere, there are a few things she still has to put behind her...."
dares to try to upstage the Great and Powerful Trixie with her tacky music?" She stuck her face into the bell of the player. "Reveal yourself, tiny songstress!" She pulled her head back out. "Confound her, she flees again! I shall not be so easily thwarted! HAha!" She whipped a fire extinguisher literally out of nowhere and emptied it into the bell of the gramophone--- only to be "snowed" as white foam shot out of the mouth of the one behind her.

The foals seated round the floor laughed fit to burst. For a while I was afraid that the nurses stationed round the room would have to spend the day re-mending burst sutures. Trixie's "Gramophone portal" routine was obviously a hit. As the victrolas played an aria from a popular opera, Trixie would run from one to the other, attempting to evict her "competition", the "tiny singing opera woman" from the gramophones by cramming, pouring or even shooting various things down one audio horn, only to have it come out the other--- generally to her own detriment. The gag was repeated with watering cans, a rope (she ended up in a tug of war with herself), a ribbon tied on the end of a stick, a jet of bubbles, and finally a shower of colored firework sparks. The foals "oohed" and "aaahed" and laughed themselves sick.

The children's ward was still echoing with applause when Trixie finally came 'backstage.' There was a spring in her gait that I hadn't seen before, and she was grinning ear to ear. She all but skidded to a stop when she saw all of us-- myself, Spike, and the mane six-- standing there waiting for her. She quickly regained her composure, smoothed out her cape and hat, and walked over to join us, her face carefully neutral.

This is it, I thought. The acid test.

She stopped in front of the girls and sighed. "I see Mr. Arcturus brought you all here like I asked," she said. Her pose was stiff and formal, with her chin held up. "I knew I'd most likely run into you all coming here, and I didn't want it to happen in some random corner of town. And yes, the mayor knows I'm here, so there's no need to run off and sound the alarm," she added, giving Rainbow Dash the eye.

Trixie hesitated. "Truthfully... I wasn't certain until now what exactly I wanted to say.

"I won't apologize to you for how I did my show back then. I'm a showmare," she said pointedly. "It's my job to brag and boast and show off. And yes, to tell ponies a bunch of balderdash, if that's what it takes to entertain them. And I'm certainly not sorry for taking the mickey out of a bunch of hecklers." The mane six said nothing, though some of them looked chagrined.

Trixie looked aside. "What I am sorry for is taking it too far. After all this time of bad audiences and people taking cheap shots, I'd gotten to a point where I was taking cheap shots first--- get them before they could get me. I was being mean and arrogant and spiteful, even to people who were my fans... and I'll be apologizing to them later too. I hurt you, and I hope you will accept my apology."

Rarity, Applejack and Rainbow Dash looked at one another. "Ah think we kin do that," Applejack said sheepishly. I think she was remembering how I needled them for being so eager to one-up a stranger. "we may've crossed a line 'r two ourselves."

"Yeah..." Rainbow Dash said. "okay.. but only 'cause you apologized first." she crossed her forelegs defiantly.

"And here I thought you wanted to be first in everything," I quipped.

"Oh, Ha, ha," Dash said.

Rarity took a step forward. The atmosphere got a tad chillier. Two prima donnas within twenty feet
of each other can have that effect. The two of them regarded each other, chins tipped up, frost and icicles practically hanging in the air between them.

"I... suppose it would be ungracious to not accept your apology," she said, tossing her forelock. "Even if I did have to spend three days trying every dye I owned to get my mane back to its proper color...."

Trixie cocked an eyebrow. "What? Oh dearie," she all but purred, "didn't you try to dispel it? It was just an illusion, after all. It would have worn off within the hour."

"WhaaaAAT?" Rarity squawked. "You mean... all that... and those dyes and rinses... and root damage and..." the contortions the fashionista's face went through were indescribable. Oh dear. I suppose there are just some personalities that are going to clash, no matter how contrite.

The others, especially Applejack, were getting far too much amusement out of Rarity's discomfiture. Trixie relented, just a little. "Stay calm, dear, your mane looks just fine now either way," she said, patting Rarity on the shoulder. Rarity petted her indigo locks and looked sulky.

Twilight stepped up. "I'm glad you wanted to reconcile...personal abrasions aside," she said, giving Rarity an amused glance. "And we do have some good news for you." Trixie looked curious. Twilight opened her saddlebag and withdrew a bundle of cloth, floating it over to the showmare. Trixie took it. It unfolded in her magical grasp to reveal a familiar star-spangled hat and cloak. "My hat and cloak!" Trixie squealed, grabbing them up and cuddling them to her chest like a long-lost dolly. Tears squeezed out of the corners of her eyes. The smile on her face was sheer bliss.

"We managed to save some of your belongings from your old wagon," Twilight continued. "They're boxed up and waiting for you to pick them up."

Trixie didn't seem to be paying attention. The cloak and hat were faded and obviously re-stitched. They weren't a touch on the flamboyant and glitter-spangled ones she now wore. but she handled them as if they were woven of silk and coated with diamonds. "This... these were the last thing my mother made for me, before I left home," she sniffled."I thought they were lost forever. Thank you so much..."

"We also had a word with the mayor," I said. "She agreed--- albeit reluctantly-- that you weren't legally responsible for the Ursa attack, and that you should be compensated for the loss of your caravan."

"What? You mean--- Oh no," Trixie suddenly scowled. "The Great and Powerful Trixie is not going to stoop to... to suing the families of those two mentally challenged colts---" she stopped in confusion at the outburst of laughter around her. "What?"

"Sugarcube, those colts got issues, but 'challenged' they ain't," Applejack said. "One of ’em is just too clever for his own good, and the other's a candidate for the Gifted School for Unicorns-- on an academic scholarship!"

"Those two?" Trixie's skepticism was as thick as cold porridge.

"They're like most foals," Fluttershy said. "They just tend to not think ahead of themselves."

"Knowledge is the propulsion, Wisdom is the steering," I said. "Snips and Snails? ...well...

"Picture a lawn chair duct taped to the nose of a skyrocket..." Rainbow Dash said.
"Still..." Trixie said. "They're just foals--"

Twilight shook her head. "Ponyville has a fund set aside for Calamities and Disasters," she said. "To cover the cost of rebuilding after something major happens."

"Why would a sleepy little town need---" Trixie began.

Applejack cut her off. "Parasprite attack," she said.

"Cerberus," Twilight said.

"Rampaging dragon," Fluttershy said. Spike gulped and ducked out of sight. "Two, if you count the one on the mountain... but really, that one was more of a Smog problem...um..."

"Baked Bads outbreak," Pinkie Pie added. "oh yeah, and two stampedes. One with cows, the other with rabbits."

"You... DO live dangerously, don't you," Trixie said, bemused.

"You have no idea," Twilight deadpanned.

"Anyway, we had a discussion with the Mayor. And your... wagon...." Rarity waved a hoof, "was covered under the policy. The mayor cut you a check..."

Trixie's squeal of glee drowned out anything else that was said.

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1) True story.

2) A groucho bag was a money bag, worn on a thong under the clothes. It was how vaudeville performers kept from being robbed by other showpeople. It's also how Groucho Marx got his name-- he wore the groucho bag and carried all the money for his brothers.
We now return you to your regularly scheduled trip through the Wing of the Humanities.

It was closing in on the middle of the day, and the children especially were starting to get a bit hungry. (When pony foals start chewing on their pencils it's not because they're feeling thoughtful.) By fortune we had worked our way down the hall and were in sight of our salvation. We were standing at the threshold of the highlight of the new wing, the pinnacle of any public vestibule layout, the hub about which the wheel of the museum truly turned:

The food court.

"All right children, do you all have your lunch money with you?" Cheerilee asked.

"Yes, Miss Cheerilee" came the sing-song reply.

"All right then, go and get your lunch, whatever you like--- but stay in the food court," she called after the rapidly scattering foals. The chaperones scattered as well, trying to run herd on their allotment of colts and fillies.

It was like most food courts anywhere, a sizeable acreage of open floor filled with scattered tables and seats, all four walls lined with walk-up restaurants of various pedigree. There was even a surprisingly familiar looking children's play center in the middle... slides, ladders, explora-tubes, ball pit, the usual.

The franchise names (did Equestria have franchises? ) were unfamiliar to me, but I could see, and smell, what each miniature restaurateur was offering. I sighed and prepared for a bit of counter-hopping; the differences in Equestrian and human diet made getting a properly balanced meal--- as opposed to getting either a carb and starch loaded, or even indigestible one--- a bit of a challenge. You'd think it would be simple as not eating the hay fries; you forget that chefs everywhere use a variety of ingredients in all their food. It took some serious analysis and careful questions to avoid purchasing, for instance, salads with clover and hay in them, or roasted tubers that had been made from toxic flower bulbs. How different is it? Hint: the flower shops sell packets of salad dressing to go with their bouquets.

My protein needs also made for a considerable challenge. Thank God for eggs, nuts and beans. Thank God also that Equestria had trade with several carnivorous and/or omnivorous races, and thus had to accommodate them from time to time. As it was my royal dietician (yes, they gave me one of those, too) had been forced to stoop, on occasion, to rifling through the pet food section of the Canterlot market....

I looked around at the various offerings available, debating on what would be my best option, and nearly had a heart attack. At one end of the food court was a restaurant done in red with gold trim, and a familiar pair of golden arches.... "Oh God no," I whimpered. "She didn't. She wouldn't..."
She had. Princess Celestia... or to be fair, Celestia and Luna.... had built a McDonald's.

Hat Trick, Cloudwing and Bright Dawn regarded me in confusion. "What's wrong, Arthur?" Hat Trick said. "I heard about this. It's a recreation of the most popular restaurant in your world. I would have thought you'd be happy to see...."

I sat down and rubbed my face with my hands. "It is," I said glumly. "--- for a given amount of 'popular.' But that's not the real problem. You do recall being debriefed on the dietary habits of the human world?" The three of them made various faces, but they nodded. "Yes, we do know you eat meat," Bright Dawn said. "It's just--- one of those things. I mean, gryphons eat meat... we all own pets that eat meat...."

"Yes, but do you remember the hangup you had about the kind of meat?" I said. "How incredibly difficult it was for me to explain....and how long it took for everyone to understand...."

"Oh, you mean about 'beef' and 'pork' and...." Cloudwing started to say, then cut himself off. You could almost hear the coin drop for all three of them. "You mean this restaurant..." He pointed at the glowing arches.

I sighed. "Yes. That franchise, back on earth, sells chicken, pig, and cow."

For those unfamiliar with Equestria, allow me to summarize: chickens? Pigs? Family pets. Cows? the hot topic of the moment was whether cows should get to vote. Describing a typical McDonald's menu to an Equestrian is akin to telling a typical American that the new restaurant down the street serves peopleburgers and dog mcnuggets. It had taken great effort to convince the ponies in my immediate acquaintance that the cows of Earth and the cows of Equestria were distinctly different animals.

To the average Pony, this McDonald's was the equivalent of a gift shoppe in Auschwitz that specialized in lampshades.

I got to my feet, leaning on my cane, and made my way forward. My bodyguards, unusually somber, clustered around me. I felt, somehow, like it was I who was doomed to be made into meat patties and served to a ravenous populace. It was a McDonald's, all right. From the lit menu overhead to the registers to the meticulously mopped tile floor to the clamshell grills visible in the back. They even had a plastic Ronald McDonald statue sitting on a bench inside, grinning vapidly and frozen in mid wave. The only visible difference was that the bored looking adolescents in paper hats all had hooves. Curiosity got the best of me. I stepped up to the counter and peered in the back and oh my God they had a cow running the grill Celestia you sick sick SICK---

I leaned against the counter, gobsmacked. The gawky colt behind the register regarded me curiously. "Can I help you today, sir?"

I stared at him with haunted eyes. "Um...."

He tried another tack. Brave boy. "Would you care to try our Big Mac deluxe combo?" He asked hopefully.

I glared at him in fascinated horror. "You did NOT just ask me that with your friend the cow standing right there..."

"Sir?"

Cloudwing tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to a brass plaque mounted on the wall nearby.
This restaurant is a point-for-point recreation of the most popular restaurant franchise on human-dominated planet Earth. Its originators boast of reliable quality, cleanliness, and affordability, and is found on all the major continents and in most every country.

Below, in smaller print:

_The original franchise specializes primarily in meat products made from Gallus gallus domesticus, Sus domesticus and Bos Primigenius, earth species with cosmetic similarities to species in Equestria._

_The menu has been consequently modified._

Well I KNEW that. I hardly suspected they were grinding up potential customers and making patties out of them. It was just the sheer cognitive dissonance of the whole concept..... the plaque, at least, should help with preventing fainting spells amongst the museum patronage. Nothing quite like a bit of intellectual obfuscation in Latin to cover one's tail, either. I let my eyes rove over the menu. A surprising number of items remained unchanged; hot cakes, hash browns, all the beverages, french fries---

"Those," I said, pointing at the menu. "Hay or Potato?"

"Um, potato," the cashier pony said. "All the recipes are as close to the human originals as possible. Authentic human cuisine," he said with a bit of boast in his voice.

"Hmm," I said, giving him the gimlet eye. He grinned apologetically, apparently realizing who he was talking to. "Big Mac combo, please, side of mcnuggets, and a strawberry shake," I said. I put my money on the counter. Watching him ring up proved futile; still I had not unravelled the mystery of how these ponies managed to use keyboards! "What are the, um, patties in the burgers?" I asked casually.

"They're something called 'Boca,' " The cashier said, shrugging. "Recipe they got through the gateway somehow. The chicken and fish are real, though. You have to specify if you want a McChicken, or a Chicken McChicken." He turned to the ice cream machine. "You said strawberry, right? Hey Elsie," he yelled back into the kitchen, "the ice cream machine's low!"

The cow flipping burgers (dain bramage!) in the back set down her spatula. "Oh, okay, Grilly," she called back cheerily. "Just let me go put on the milking machine---"(1)

I held up my hand. "Hold the milkshake," I said firmly.

By the time I received my tray of food, I wasn't sure whether I was experiencing nostalgia or surrealism. I picked up my tray and turned around-- only to nearly drop it in surprise, as Cheerilee, the mane 6, and Cheerilee's entire class were standing right behind me. "AAAH! Oh, hello everyone," I said.

Everyone peered past me. "Does this place sell HUMAN food?" Snips asked.
I looked down at my tray. "Ah, well technically yes," I said.

The response was unanimous. "COOL!"

I found myself assisting the herd in ordering their food. After the fourth go-round I broke down and told the cashier "happy meals for everyone!" The group was satisfied with this, and we all took our seats to dine. My guards all ordered salads, as did Rarity. Most of the others went with "What he got"--- reference, moi--- except Rainbow Dash. She just had to one-up everyone and ordered a Chicken McChicken sandwich... to poor Fluttershy's horror. She sat there chewing her chicken sandwich defiantly while everyone stared at her.

"It's not liable to hurt her," I reassured Twilight Sparkle. "Back on Earth, horses were known to eat meat on occasion."

"Really?" Twilight said in fascinated horror.

I nodded. "Tribes on the tundra sometimes fed their horses meat to get them through terrain where no grass grew," I said. "Some horses have gone carnivore-- it's rare, but it happens. Even attacking humans, killing and partially eating them. Alexander the Great's steed, Bucephalus, was allegedly a man-eater, just for one.... ahhh, perhaps not the best topic for dinner," I apologized to the circle of slightly green faces around me. "So how's the sandwich, Dash?"

"Meh," she said with her mouth full. "Not as good as a daisyburger."

"Whut're you doing there?" Applejack asked, watching me peel the top bun off my sandwich.

"Just... confirming the composition of my meal," I said. Ketchup, mustard, pickle, special sauce, diced onion, cheese--- the patty looked to be soy. "Ah yes, Boca Burger," I said, reassembling my "Big Mac." "Popular brand of soy meat substitute back on earth." I took a bite and chewed thoughtfully.

"Well, does it taste as good as back home?" Pinkie Pie asked.

"Better, actually," I said with an ironic grimace, taking another bite of my sandwich, "The patties are larger and well grilled, and seasoned well. The lettuce is fresh, as is the cheese, and if I don't miss my guess the buns are locally baked. The fries are crispy and flavorful, and the, ah, nuggets are plump and juicy."

"which shoots authenticity all to hell, really......Something you have to understand; Mcdonald's was one of the first fast food franchises. It became a major success based on its cleanliness, its quick service, and on the reliability of its product--- a cheeseburger at any McDonald's was the same no matter which one you went in. They're also cheap and affordable, which makes them even more popular. But being the most popular restaurant in the world isn't the same as being the best. Or even, to make a point, good."

I put down my "burger" and started in on my fries. "McDonald's food, back on Earth, is kind of known for being sub-par. Oh, edible enough--- but the sort of thing you chose because nothing else was available. Their quality has been slipping for years. They survive these days largely by appealing to kids, the younger crowd.... bland, predictable, non-shocking food that comes with a smiling clown and a toy? Perfect for children. For everyone else?" I shrugged. "It's basically people-fuel. Eat and go. At any rate, by now they're such an institution that they could coast for generations. They're sort of a study in prosperous mediocrity."

"I'm having a little trouble understanding how everyone can hate this place and it can still be the most
popular restaurant in the world," Cheerilee admitted.

"Well, it's not that everyone hates McDonald's. It's not even most people....Most people like it well enough, or are indifferent to it." I pondered. "Now, mind, there are some people--- well, for them, hating McDonald's is an ideology."

Puzzled glances were exchanged. "Iiii don't think we quite follow," Twilight said.

"Well it's like this. Most people who don't like McDonald's say 'I don't like McDonald's, I'll eat somewhere else.' Then there are people who say 'I hate McDonald's, I want the government to come in and tear down the building so I can set fire to the rubble.'"

"And what has them so hostile?" Rarity said.

"It's a bit complicated...they don't hate the food so much as they hate what they think the restaurant stands for...among other things, McDonald's so big they've become a de facto symbol for "American Imperialism," as it were."

"American Imperialism? So America is conquering other countries and forcing them to eat their food?" Fluttershy said. "That sounds mean."

"Weird, but mean," Twilight added.

I had a brief vision of Ronald Reagan, made up as Ronald McDonald, holding some third-world peasant in a hammerlock and punching a Big Mac into their open mouth with his fist. "Eat the burger! Eat it for FREEDOM!"

...I shook my head to clear it."No, you misunderstand." I searched for the words to explain the modern concept of Imperialism. "It's not that America is conquering anyone or forcing them to buy stuff. It's.... it's just that American things... like McDonald's... are very popular with the common people wherever they go. And this upsets people who see our culture as dominating everything, and who want a different culture to be on top."

"So they're calling you all an Evil Empire," Applejack said slowly, "'cause you bring stuff that people like more'n their stuff?"

"Um...." I chewed for a minute. "I suppose that's a relatively accurate summary."

"Sounds like a bunch o' sour apples," Applejack said.

"That too." I nodded. "There are people...elitists... who simply seethe with envy and spite and arrogance. Nothing makes them angrier than seeing ordinary people choose a McDonald's burger over whatever the spiteful people think they  ought to eat or ought to like. Elitists don't think the lowly peasants--- that's you and me-- should think for ourselves. They don't think we can. And it drives them to bilious fury when we insist on doing so." I took a long slurp of soda. "Almost as much as when the choices we make prove them wrong. They think everyone should be 'equal'.... and when one group does better than another, that's proof to them that the winner cheated."

"That's.... tragic," Twilight Sparkle said. "You're telling me that these 'elitists' dedicate their lives to tearing down a restaurant?"

"No. Just to tearing down anything that doesn't match their vision of utopia."

"What's Utopia?" Pinkie Pie asked.
I dipped the last of my fries in ketchup. "One possible translation," I said dryly, "would be Nowheresville."

I found myself distracted by the chatter coming from the colts and fillies. They seemed to be rooting out the prizes in their happy meals; the cry "look what I got" seemed to feature in the conversation a lot. Curious, I turned in my seat. "What's going on?"

"Our meals came with a toy!" Pipsqueak exclaimed in delight.

"Oh really?" I said with a grin. "Mind if I see?" Pip nodded and handed over a small cellophane bag. I held it up; the writing on the bag read "My Little Human." Inside was a pudgy, cartoonish, yet easily recognizable figurine of... me.

Trollestia strikes again.

---

And that's why cows don't need day jobs.
"I must say, every conversation with you does seem to drift around to something controversial," Rarity said, finishing the last of her McSalad. "I was taught that a civilized pony doesn't discuss controversial topics like religion or politics over dinner."

I laughed at that. "Fair enough, Rarity. But there is only one problem with that sentiment.... every topic boils down to religion or politics eventually."

"Oh, I doubt that," Rarity said. "You mean to say that there's no such thing as a non-controversial topic of conversation?"

"I mean to say that you can pick any banal topic you like, and I-- or anyone else--- can turn it into a political or theological debate in less than a sentence. Without drifting off topic, either." I leaned forward. "Go ahead, take your best shot."

Rarity got a challenging gleam in her eye. "Very well.... ahem. 'My, what lovely weather we're having today.'"

"---Darn that weather patrol office; What are Celestia's bureaucrats thinking?"

Rarity opened and closed her mouth for a moment, then crinkled her nose in disgust, defeated. The others had a good laugh at her. "Of course back on earth the retort would have been "Darn that Global Warming." I rolled my eyes. "Same end result; people discovering that the weather changes, sometimes it's not to their liking, and trying to pass a law against it. But I digress. It all springs from the human nature to---"

"Make a mountain out of a molehill?" Applejack said, amused.

"Fair enough. But to stretch that analogy, if someone on the other side of the molehill is set on making a mountain, you'd better start wielding a shovel yourself if you don't want to get buried." I dabbed my beard with a napkin. "Too many people set on taking revenge on something that was never their enemy in the first place."

"Like a restaurant?" Twilight said.

"Like a restaurant."

"Well, let's be fair here," Rainbow Dash said. "You were talking about how big and powerful this Earth company has become, and how so many people are angry at it. And hey, where there's thunder, there's lightning... You can't tell me this big rich fat-cat company hasn't done ponies--- er, people--- dirty."

I relented. "Yes, that's true enough. I could name two or three outright scandalous shenanigans by that corporation. But you have to remember, 'when elephants fight, it's the grass that suffers.' (1)"

"Huh?" Dash gave me a blank look around a mouthful of McChicken. Fluttershy (who was desperately trying to avoid looking at her tablemate's meal) was equally puzzled.

"Suppose you were an elephant instead of a pony," I said. "'My Little Pachyderms.' Heh..... ahem. Even if you were a kind, gentle and considerate elephant like Fluttershy, you'd still accidentally..."
trample the occasional flower or bug, or break the occasional teacup. Just no way around it. You're big and powerful, so big and powerful that sometimes one end doesn't know what the other end is doing until it's too late. Corporations--- big companies--- are like that. Most of the time they're conscientious, if for no better reason than it's just bad business to hurt or upset your customers. But corporations are just groups of thousands and thousands of people, and people aren't perfect. 'We are all fallen creatures, and very hard to live with.'(2)" I ruminated for a minute. "And that's half of the problem right there... many of these people who are attacking corporations are doing it because of a Parental Imperfection and Father-Deity complex."

"You think these people view McDonald's as an--- imperfect parent?" Twilight said, incredulous.

"Now that there's a sad family reunion," Applejack cracked wise.

I shrugged. "I'm saying that we tend to subconsciously view powerful entities and institutions in the same way we once viewed the most powerful entities in our lives-- our parents," I clarified. "We once viewed our mothers and fathers as all-powerful, all-wise, capable of accomplishing anything... and one of the hardships of growing up is having that faith betrayed when we find out that they're only mortal like us. We either get past that hurdle, forgive them for being flawed, and go on with our lives, or we stumble at it and misspend the rest of our lives resenting them and feeling like we've suffered an incurable injustice.

"Corporations, governments, bureaucracies, unions... big, powerful, seemingly omnipotent institutions... we are inclined to initially view them the same way. Moreso in these latter days, when the institution of family has been shaken so badly. People are inclined to turn to a government or politician or bureaucracy or a corporation as a substitute parent, or at the very least subconsciously expect them to be the 'perfect flawless parent' that disappeared with their childhood. And, when inevitably they find out that these invisible giants are not flawless, they feel betrayed--- and go to the opposite extreme; blaming these proxies for everything wrong in their lives, right down to the pimple they got on their nose that morning. And just like with the Imperfect Parent complex, most people eventually grow up and get past it..... but a vocal minority, for whatever personal reasons of immaturity, never do. They spend the rest of their lives railing against institutions for being 'bad parents'---- institutions that were never meant to be parents, had no idea they were expected to, and couldn't possibly fill the job if they tried."

"Human nature," I sighed. "We put people and things up on a pedestal without asking their permission, demand perfection of them, and then when they can't deliver, we chuck rocks and cans at them till we finally knock them back off."

"So do you think ponies do the same thing----irrationally idolize government powers or authority figures?" Twilight asked, taking a bite of her 'cheeseburger.' She noticed that everypony there was looking at her, then studiously looking away. "....Whaaaat?" She demanded.

"I know at least one...." I said coyly.

The coin dropped. "Oh, I do not over-idolize Celestia," Twilight huffed.

"Twilight," Rainbow Dash said. "Every time Celestia comes to Ponyville, you freak."

"Considering that every time she's come to visit something horrible has happened to Ponyville just five minutes prior, I think I'm justified," Twilight said drolly. "Remember Nightmare Moon? The Parasprites?"

"Even so, Y'all made less of a fuss when your Ma and Pa came to visit," Applejack pointed out.
"Yyyyyeah, you kinda do put her up on a pedestal, Twily," Pinkie Pie said. "I mean, even for a Princess."

"It's understandable, really," I said. "She's not just the leader of your country, she's your personal tutor... she practically raised you. I'd be puzzled if you didn't idolize her a little. I certainly wouldn't begrudge your affection for her." Twilight blushed but said nothing. I thought about it some more and added, "come to think of it.... She sort of sets all sorts of standards, doesn't she?"

"She's been the sole ruler of Equestria for a thousand years, and the Coregent for longer. So long that you ponies--" I pointed around the circle-- actually forgot how old she was and how long she'd been ruling. She's basically set the standards for noble behavior, royal tradition, even standards of physical beauty. Everypony and everything is measured against her as a standard. Hah, the 'ruler' of Equestria in both senses of the word."

Rarity looked amused. "You're right--- I never thought of it that way."

I shook my head. "It's a good thing I never was put in that sort of place," I said.

"Okay, I'll bite, why not?" Twilight said.

"Because within a hundred years-- oh who am I kidding, more like ten, if that-- I would be messing with the royalty's heads. Before they knew it, propeller beanies and bunny slippers would be de riguer in the royal court."

Pinkie Pie spluttered with laughter, spraying milkshake. "That would be great! And all the judges would have to wear goofy glasses---"

I warmed to the topic. "And of course, every one of the royal guards would have to have a rubber ducky mounted on his helmet." I imitated one of the stern faced guards. "Squeak that ducky when a superior officer approaches you, soldier!...." Bright Dawn was seated behind me; I distinctly heard him snort soda out his nose.

"Oh, but darling, not the Captain of the Guard," Rarity chided me with a little frown. "He of course would have to wear something appropriate to his rank."

"An entire live peacock..." Rarity pantomimed smoothing out a fan of plumage around her head, expression of serenity on her face.

Pinkie Pie hit the floor, squealing with laughter. The others giggled, laughed or howled and pounded the tabletops with their hooves, as was their wont. Even Twilight was struggling not to explode with laughter at the vision of her brother, Shining Armor, with a fan-tailed poultry strapped to his noggin. She rested her head on the table. "Darn you, now I'm going to SEE that the very next time I visit him..."

"The truly outrageous thing is," I said when everyone calmed down a bit, "Within a century nobody would think a thing of it. Running around the castle or even hobnobbing in high society with bunnies on your feet and a duck on your head would seem perfectly normal. To everyone except you." I shook my head. "It's a wonder that Celestia hasn't succumbed to that temptation..."

"What makes you think I haven't?"

Everyone started and turned-- and immediately everyone was getting to their feet and bowing, as best as the crowded quarters allowed. Princess Celestia was standing right there, flanked by six of her royal guards.
Immediately the colts and fillies were swarming around her, faces alight. She took a moment to greet and nuzzle each of them. It was heartwarming to see her regal smile turn into something more warm and real. What a pity it couldn't happen more often.

"Please, everypony, do take your seats," she said with a smile. "I didn't mean to disturb your meal. I just teleported in with to see how the opening day is going." Her guards dispersed and spread around the room.

"Quite well, your majesty," I said as the colts and fillies were re-seated. "Though not without a few surprises." I cocked an eyebrow and waved the 'My Little Human' figurine at her.

She tittered. "One of Luna's ideas, actually," she said.

"I can't wait to see what she's got planned for the rest of the collector's edition," I said. "Wait a moment. You said 'what makes you think I haven't?' ....Haven't what?"

Princess Celestia looked over to where her guards stood, as if to make sure they were out of earshot. She lowered her head to us. "Now you're sworn to secrecy on this..." she said to our group. We all nodded..... even as I was seriously debating the effectiveness of such an oath on six mares, three guards, one human and a dozen or so foals. "Ahem. The guard's helmets."

"The helmets?"

"The helmets....." she cleared her throat delicately. "After Luna's... well, her banishment... I tried to console myself by planting little--- pranks for the future. Little, ah, jokes she and she alone would get, when and if she was finally freed." She looked a little embarrassed. "Plus I was... not on the best of terms with the noble families at the time, and--"

"Decided to take the mickey out of them," I concluded for her.

"....Exactly. The Captain of the Guard some 1000 or so years ago was a son of noble lineage and, well, a complete ass. And no, I don't mean donkey. He made frequent disparaging remarks about my circle of friends, my trusted associates and servants, even about Luna herself when he thought I was out of earshot.

" I got my revenge on him by altering the official uniform of the Captain of the Guard so that it had a street-sweeper's broom stuck on the helmet..... at the time it was a reference to an old insult--- about somepony being so stupid that 'you could use his mane for a street broom and his skull for a dustpan.' " She rolled her eyes. "Of course the dolt never got the reference, and went around proud as a peacock with a street-sweeper's tool stuck on his head. Everypony else got it, though. And nopony ever told him.

"But of course his son insisted on wearing his father's uniform when he rose to the same rank, and within a few generations...." she sighed. "Please don't tell them. I'm trying to change the design now, but now it has the force of 'tradition'...."

"Oh, my, word." Rarity covered her mouth with a hoof, her face alight with glee. The expressions of shock, chagrin and hilarity around the group were epic. Twilight looked torn between mirth and dismay. I wondered if it was due to her brother's inevitable discomfiture, or dismay that her adored Celestia would pull such a prank?

Clever old girl. Twilight was sure to spill the beans to Shining Armor... and I'm sure it was no accident that while Celestia's bodyguards were out of earshot my own "plain clothes" ponies were sitting right there. I suspect that the fuller-brush look was going to fall out of disfavor with the higher
ranks after a few cycles of gossip down the grapevine. And I knew from past discussions that exposure to modern Human culture had encouraged Celestia and Luna to look into updating their soldier's body armor to something a bit more modern and effective....

"And Luna?" I managed to ask.

"Laughed her flank off the first time she clapped eyes on it," Celestia said. "It almost made it all worth it." I was going to have to keep an eye on the Night Princess, just to see what things in her own society made her explode into giggles. I had the feeling the fuller brush helmet wasn't the last of Celestia's long range jokes. Gadzooks, a ruler who plotted out pranks and jokes a millenium in advance.....

Scootaloo raised a hoof. "Did you do any other pranks like that?" She stage whispered.

Celestia winked. "Not tellin'."

"Awwwww...."

I grinned evilly. "I dare you to do it to Prince Blueblood," I said. "Stick a plunger on a helmet and tell him he's a Knight of the Bath."

"Arthur....!"

---

1) African saying.

2) C.S. Lewis
"Are you a god?"

"Excuse me?" Celestia blinked at me in surprise.

I had no idea she would be so easily nonplussed. Granted, it was an unusual way to start a conversation. But really there was no truly indirect way to breach the topic.

I had been in Canterlot for only a day or so at this point, and I was a brony fit to burst with questions. Thankfully, after my first rather revelatory meeting with the Princesses of Day and Night, they had urged me quite emphatically to be as open and forthright as possible with them, for the sake of communication. The excuse given was that the translation spell they had used on me would work best if I spoke clearly and without obfuscation. The real reason, I suspected, was that Celestia hated beating around the bush.

"Um, perhaps I should rephrase that. Do you regard yourself as a god? Or do your people?"

Celestia blinked at me again. "Where do you get the impression I am a goddess? Or my ponies think of me as a goddess?"

"A keyhole problem," I said....this was already verbal shorthand between us. It stood for the problems inherent in understanding an entire alternate dimension by way of twenty-minute animated segments. As shockingly accurate as the show was, bronies were still looking at Equestria through a very, very narrow keyhole. "You're thousands of years old, you are phenomenally powerful, you raise and set the sun in your world...." I ticked off the reasons on my fingers. "Plus all your subjects bow and reverence you, ponies have been heard making oaths by your name---"

"And humans do not bow to their rulers?" Celestia pointed out. "Nor make oaths by the names of kings and queens?"

"Point," I admitted. "Though oaths by the names of rulers has become sort of antiquated these days. But what of the rest of it?"

"The unicorns, as a nation, once raised and lowered the sun and moon on their own," Celestia pointed out. "Thousands of years old sounds impressive... it's not so impressive if you're a tree. And phenomenally powerful? My sister and I are both far less powerful than, for example, Discord. Or the Elements of Harmony. Or even Queen Chrysalis, when she was fully empowered." She chuckled lightly. "Humans have rather low standards for deities, if that's all it takes to be one among them."

"Granted, raising the sun and moon would be far more impressive on Earth--- the Moon there is almost the size of the planet, in astronomical terms. And the sun is literally a million times bigger. But yes, Humans do tend to be easily impressed." I shuffled my feet a bit as we walked along. "Oh, I've been meaning to ask, actually..."

"Yes?" Celestia said.
"I know that Luna controls the moon," I said. "Does she control the stars, as well?"

Celestia actually stopped and laughed. "Merciful heavens, no," she said. "It takes all my power to raise and lower the sun. Do you think I would have managed to imprison her, elements or no, if she had control of millions of suns to my one?" She smiled. "The stars in our universe are unfathomably distant, so distant that light takes millenia to reach Equestria from them. And many are even more impossibly huge than your own human Sun.

"Mind, she does tinker with the shooting stars," Celestia noted. "And the Auroras, too.... but manipulate the stars themselves? I think not. (1) Don't take this wrong, Arthur, but--- where did you come up with such a notion?" she shook her head. "What is it like where you come from?"

"Pretty much the same." I told her. "But the thing with your own moon and sun is so radically different that we couldn't help speculate about the stars, too." . plus...." I hesitated to mention this. "Fandom speculative fiction. In addition to watching the show, a lot of fans make a hobby of writing stories that speculate about Equestria.... its past, its future, the ponies and other creatures in it, so on and so forth. Or simply sitting around and debating--- see 'arguing'--- about various attributes of your world."

Celestia hmm'ed. "And what 'interesting speculations' did you have about Equestria before coming here?" She asked. "What strange origins did you hypothesize for us?"

"Theme Park," I said simply.

She stopped again and stared at me. "Theme Park?"

"You do have those here?" I asked. She shook her head. "Well, I suppose you've caught glimpses of, oh, Disneyland, through that mirror of yours? Big castle, lots of people running around eating cotton candy and hotdogs, people dressed as giant mice?"(2)

She nodded. "Yes, I do recall something like that. That last bit rather confused me...."

"That's a theme park," I said. "Basically an amusement park built around a single concept or franchise. Disneyland... let's sum up and say it's built around the stories of a man named Disney."

"Who wrote stories about giant mice," Celestia said, cocking an eyebrow.

"Don't be too surprised. There are stranger ones. I suspect someday they might even build one built entirely around pastel-colored ponies with pictures on their bottoms." I gave her an irreverent smirk. She gave me a chiding look. "Seriously!" I said. "You have no idea how popular your show has become...."

Celestia sighed and shook her head. "You were saying..."

"Oh yes. Theme Park. Well, that was my working theory, really, when the show first started. A peaceful, magical kingdom, administered by friendly and let's say it, cute and cuddly pastel ponies, awash with virtually tame animals, home to mythical monsters, perfectly controlled weather, meticulously scheduled seasons, where even the day and night are controlled and set to a schedule? Only a theme park... a really high end one, like Disneyland... has such a deliberately pleasant and carefully controlled, even micro-managed, environment.

"My working hypothesis was that humans, or creatures much like humans... Elves, perhaps?... had constructed the realm or world of Equestria as a sort of vacation spot, a save haven where one could go with the wife and kids, and staffed it with Earth ponies, pegasi and unicorns... and that for whatever reason they abandoned it millenia ago, so long that the 'park staff' forgot all about them and
claimed the 'park' as their own." I shrugged. "Wild supposition and fancy-spinning on my part, of course. Not that I've seen anything yet that's really contradicted it." I looked over at the Princess. "So what is the real story?"

"No one knows for sure," Celestia said. "Our origins were so far back and so long ago that any records we may have had were forgotten." She held up a hoof and waggled it. "Primordial ponies weren't big on writing, I suspect. Who knows? Your theory might be true."

"It might be," I admitted. "I've seen certain things that had no basis in the actual canon... but were commonly held in the fanon-- the, er, communal fandom's theories," I explained. "The names of certain ponies only seen in the background. Certain aspects of your culture. This and that.... " I thought of a certain derpy-eyed mailmare. At that time I hadn't had the opportunity to investigate to determine the truth, but even then I had a suspicion....

"Do you have any other cosmological questions?" Celestia said.(3)

"Well yes," I said. "Winter Wrap Up. the Weather patrol. Back on Earth I saw things here that seemed... monstrously inefficient and wasteful. If not outright ridiculous."

"Such as?"

"Well, first: do you really have ponies individually hoof-craft the snowflakes? I mean, one cubic foot of snow holds over a billion flakes! It would take.... I can't even estimate how many labor hours just to craft a single snowfall..."

Celestia laughed again. "Mrs. Faust, I fear, succumbs far too often to whimsy. Of course not! We do have to magically "seed" loads of snow clouds with a few crystallized flakes to make it produce more, otherwise the entire snowfall is just tiny shapeless chips of ice."

"Hmm, yes. Like artificial snowmakers produce back home," I said. "Is there some practical reason, though?"

"There probably is, but I've never heard it," Celestia said. "But it does have a certain... artistic value. I like to think every now and then a foal catches a snowflake on a scarf or an eyelash and sees that tiny bit of beauty before it melts away...."

"...And, um, winter wrap up. Do ponies REALLY have to plow the snow off the fields? And carve up the ice on the lakes and rivers?"

Celestia looked at me in bafflement. "Why in the world would they need to do that? I warm up the sun to springtime settings that day-- it would all be melted within an hour! Plowing the roads and clearing the sidewalks one last time, yes, but the fields??" She frowned and muttered to herself. "I think I'm going to be investigating the weather bureaus for work padding again...and snow-plowing the fields would scrape all the topsoil off, to boot...." she muttered a bit more, largely imprecations against self-important featherbedding bureaucrats....

I cleared my throat. "Ah, it may just be that 'whimsy' thing again," I pointed out. "Just saying."

"Yes, but I think I shall be giving the bureau the once-over all the same," Celestia said firmly. "My little ponies are not so rich that they can afford to have their bits or their hours wasted on busy-work foolishness." My respect for her went up several notches. "Forgive me, do continue."

"The birds being guided North each spring by pegasi?"

"Guided, no; flocks surveyed, yes," Celestia answered.
"The other kingdoms outside Equestria... do they object to you having control over the moon and sun? Or.. do they have their own, that they use for their own kingdoms?"

Celestia laughed. "No, we only have the one moon and one sun for the whole planet. Though I do hear the gryphons keep a spare one in storage just in case." She dimpled. I wasn't sure whether to take her seriously or not. "And thus far, noone has made a fuss. I suppose as long as it rises and sets, noone cares who does the raising. It would be quite the squabble if they did... what is so funny?"

I was chuckling so hard my belly was shaking. "I just had the most outrageous mental image....." I picked a cattail out of a nearby floral arrangement and used it as a microphone. "**this is it sports fans, the event we've all been waiting for-- Daytime! The referee just blew the whistle and here comes the sun! It's Apollo, straight outta Greece--- he's got the sun and he's powering down the field, oh, nearly blitzed by Raven and Coyote, and it's a long bomb pass to Ra, Ra to Isis, Isis to Horus--- interception by Rama, he's making a break for the horizon, handing off to Raven, Raven to Coyote, it's all over folks-- no, it's Celestia, Celestia has the sun and she's got nuthin but daylight (ha HA!) between her and the goal line, yes, it's Celestia all the way to the center of the sky and it's HIIIGH NOOOOON!!"

"Now there's a sunrise noone would forget..." I said, wiping my eyes.

Celestia laughed so hard she nearly choked.

__________________________

1) I now wait with bated breath for the script writers to completely bugger that all to merry hell in the next season, the rotters.

2) At the time I had the notion that Celestia possessed a magic mirror. I had no idea of the nature of it, or that it was not a mirror but a door....

3) At the time I was unaware she was deliberately changing the subject.
The memory of Celestia laughing echoed in my mind as I watched her interact with her subjects. It had to be so hard sometimes; unfathomable years of time, countless thousands, even millions of lives passing through her own, a brief breeze through her mane, on the way to a hereafter still millennia distant for her. Always the standard bearer for her nation and people-- "ruler" in every sense of the word, with none but her sister to help her bear the burden; always having to smile serenely but rarely getting to laugh...

I shook off those melancholy thoughts when she addressed me. "So where were you guiding this little group next, Sir Arcturus?"

"I don't correctly know, your Highness," I admitted, stroking my beard. "When I was told there was a new wing of the Museum, I wasn't expecting quite so many sections to it."

"You can blame overwhelming enthusiasm for that," she said. "It's not often we stumble onto an entire new species from another world..." I nodded. I could certainly see that; I suspect that the Smithsonian back on Earth would receive quite an expansion if beings from another planet made a surprise visit. "If I might make a recommendation, there is one room we haven't opened up to the public yet. The museum staff have just gotten everything working, so if you'd like to get a private first look..." she winked broadly. Of course, the foals were practically bouncing in place at the idea of getting a super-special sneak preview, so we all said yes.

She led us through the wing to a door that led off the main corridor. Somehow, despite being the highly visible ruler of the land and leading a human and a troop of excitable preadolescents right through the middle of the museum, none of the crowds blocked or approached her or, for that matter, even paid her and our entourage any attention. I was about to ask her about this when I noticed a faint sparkle around her horn; she saw me take note and gave me a sly wink. Clever old girl. I guess you don't get to be a thousand plus years old without learning how to get around your own kingdom discreetly.

The door was locked, and blocked with a sign that read "not open to the public." Celestia whisked the sign aside and unlocked the door with a flicker of magic. The room beyond was pitch dark. Out of pure old homeland habit, I gropped along the inside of the wall for the light switch... and found it. The lights fluttered to life in a low-ceilinged room the size of a high school gymnasium. There were signs of current construction; a few ladders and tools here, some drop cloths there....

And all over the room, screens flickered to life.

A communal "Oooooo" went up. I admit it, I let out a whistle myself. The room was bedecked in computer technology. I had lived through most of the home computer evolution, and I could see examples from every decade up in running. How in all Creation had they gotten such a complete collection? Were they opening up the portal underneath a Circuit City now?

I had the ominous feeling I needed to start asking some very discreet and pointed questions about the portal project, and soon.
"Good heavens," Cheerilee said. "Where... where do we begin?"

I was just asking myself the same question. My grab-bag of wikipedia-style information and random facts was like most Westerners when it came to the actual function of the machines and electronics we depended on. Desperately spotty. Between basic electrical circuits with little wireframe lines and symbols denoting batteries and switches and the microchip there was a rather large gap in my knowledge labeled with mental signs such as "here there be dragons" and "at this point a miracle occurs."

I decided to slog through it.

"Well, to begin with.. let's start with the basics. You remember the display on electricity, yes?" I started to ask Twilight for her magical markerboard again, but she stopped me. "I have something better," she said. She levitated something out of her bag and into my hand. I noted with some interest that several nearby screens flickered wildly. "Oh, Twilight!" Celestia said suddenly. "I forgot to mention--- no magic beyond this point, please, everyone." She nodded to the displays. "Certain kinds tend to make these devices... act oddly.--- No, it's quite all right, Twilight; it was my mistake."

I looked at what she'd placed in my hand. It looked like nothing more than a wide-tipped marker, one with some odd features added. There was a button right near the gripping point, and a small turnable knob on the butt end. I twisted it experimentally; the nib cycled through the colors of the rainbow; red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, back to red...

"It's a rainbow pen!" Pinkie pie exclaimed. "Twi and me invented it!"

"It was her idea," Twilight Sparkle admitted. "It's filled with a special mix made of rainbow juice. It'll write on anything--- even thin air."

I raised my eyebrows. "Just push on the button with your thumb to draw on the air!" Pinkie said, hopping up and down. I complied; sure enough, the rainbow pen left a thick, wavering line of vivid rainbow red in the air. I waved my hand, entranced; my fingers passed right through it. "If you wanna erase, just pull the knob out." I complied again, the tip turned gray. I ran it over the line and the pen seemed to.... there is no other word for it... slurp up the red rainbow line. "that way it saves ink!" Pinkie said, grinning.

"I looked all over for something like this," Twilight said. "Well, I noticed how you always seem to be talking with your hands, trying to sketch things out, and I thought... well...." she shrugged. "It was Pinkie Pie's idea to use rainbow juice for ink, I modified the pen so it would work like a miniature rainbow protruder and so you could choose the color...."

While she chattered I experimentally began drawing a few simple pictures and writing some random words in the air. I drew on the nearby wall, I even drew on my own clothes and hands. It worked perfectly on every surface... and soaked up the rainbow-glow with equal ease. I turned the pen over in my fingers, speechless. Celestia nudged me. "Now what do we say when someone gives us something like this...two words...?" she teased. I looked her in the eye. "Of course," I said.

I turned to Pinkie and Twilight, bent down to look them in the eye and held the pen up. "patent this."

"Not the two words I was looking for---" Celestia murmured, half amused, half miffed.

"Thank you's are in order," I said. "And thank you. But please, for the love of all things good, get yourselves a patent for this! Today! You two just became millionaires." I stood up and looked to
Celestia. "Your Highness, you serve as a witness to this field test as proof of their claim?"

Celestia blinked. Glory be, I'd actually gotten a step or two ahead of her. "Yes, but why.. a patent?..."

"I'll give you a hint," I muttered, tipping my head back to the schoolteacher and her students. The foals were all cooing with awe and nosing at the intangible light-drawings hovering in the air. Cheerilee, however, had her eyes riveted on the pen in my hands as if she was a career chain-smoker and I was holding the last legal cigarette in the county. "Twilight," she asked in a slightly too casual voice, "Could I possibly persuade you to make, oh---" she glanced over her class and seemed to do a mental headcount-- "a couple dozen of those for me? I'll gladly pay whatever price you ask...."

Rarity heard this and the coin dropped for her... with the sound of a ringing cash register. "Twilight, Pinkie dear," she said sweetly, "Speaking as a businesswoman, if you don't patent that charming little device of yours I shall be morally obligated to kick both your plots."

Twilight and Pinkie looked at her, a bit shocked. Rarity spelled it out for them. "Girls, you've just invented a writing implement-- no, an educational arts and crafts tool--- that paints in any gorgeous color, writes on any surface-- even thin air-- and that can be used by anyone of any age. Artists, schoolteachers, parents, fillies and colts from all over Equestria will be throwing bits at you by the saddlebag-full." She grabbed the party pony and the librarian by the necks and pulled them in close, glaring at them both eyeball-to-eyeball. "GET. THAT. PATENT."

"......Okay," Twilight squeaked. Pinkie Pie just nodded frantically, too intimidated by the fashionista to speak.

"I think I'll be taking my pupil and her party friend to the patent office," Celestia said, amused. "If you don't mind me offering a lift to a couple of future millionaires, Twilight..." Twilight murmured assent, her eyes glazed over. I believe it was starting to dawn on her that she stood a good chance of becoming very, very rich, and she was very busy calculating just how many new books "saddlebags full" of bits could buy.

"How rich is a million?" Pinkie Pie asked, frowning thoughtfully.


Pinkie's eyes went wide. "OoOOOooo," she said.

"Umm, before you go, we do need to do something about this," Cheerilee said. She waved her hoof at the glowing rainbow lines everywhere.

"Oh that's easy," Pinkie Pie said. She pulled a spritzer bottle out of her bubblegum-pink saddlebag. "just use rainwater." She spritzed a fine mist into the air. Wherever it touched the glowing lines, they dissolved into dripping sparkles and disappeared. She tossed me the bottle; I made myself useful spritzing my careless scribblings away. Cheerilee was beside herself. "And it cleans up with water," she said, clapping her hooves to her cheeks and all but weeping for joy.

"i do believe all the more haste is needed in getting that patent, Faithful Student," Celestia chuckled. "If you'll excuse us, I'll be taking Twilight and Pinkie Pie to the patent clerks. Carry on without us, we'll be back in a moment!" With that, there was a flash of alicorn magic and the three of them disappeared.

There was a moment of silence. Then a certain bespectacled little peppermint pony spoke up.

"Wow. What a twitl!"
I nearly choked.

After a moment of nearly strangling to death I managed to wheeze, "Let's see now, where was I...."

"Was sumfin funny, suh?" Pipsqueak asked, all innocence.

"Ahem. Why do you ask?" I managed to say.

His little grey and yellow fillyfriend pointed at my stomach with one dinky hoof. "Cause your TUMMY is going jiggly up and DOWN again," she said, utterly solemn.

I swear by the archives of Equestria Daily, those foals are going to be the death of me.

After I finally composed myself, I started my lecture. "To get right down to basics, a computer is a machine built to do math," I said. "It's purpose is to process lots of numbers, tons of numbers, huge numbers, and do them faster and better than any person-- or pony--- ever could. The first 'computer' was actually an abacus." I looked around to see if there was one on display, then went ahead and drew one in midair. "Has anypony here used an abacus?" Son of a gun if half the ponies around me didn't actually have one on their persons. I shouldn't have been surprised though; considering that their technological level, while averaging around the 19th century, is incredibly scattershot. "Ah, well then, we'll skip over that part..."

"As time went by, humans invented more and more complex and fast 'computing engines'. Ones that ran on gears and levers, tiny mechanical parts.... then, people made ones that ran on electricity." I grinned. "Then they really started going places...." I drew a lightning bolt. "Lightning fast."

"Computers today all run on electricity. And they all work in pretty much the same way.... they crunch lots and lots of really big numbers, really fast."

"How fast?" Rumble wanted to know.

I thought of an example that would make an impression on a group of schoolfoals. "More math problems than all problems in all the math homework for all the foals Miss Cheerilee ever has in school in her whole life. In one second." A round of "OOo0000"s greeted this. Miss Cheerilee gave me a wry look. I think she suspected me of calling her old. Or accusing her of being draconic with homework, perhaps.

Snips sidled over to one of the machines on display and gave it a look. "So, uh, d'you think one of these things could do my homework?"

"Ahem. No," Miss Cheerilee said, giving the ambitious young unicorn the stinkeye. Snips went "aww" and slumped in defeat.

I laughed. "It wouldn't do you any good anyway, Snips," I said. "You'd have to know how to tell it what to do, and it would take you longer to learn to do that than to do the homework. Remember what I said a while back about how we all use numbers in base 10? Well, computers do everything in Base 2.... Binary. In fact, it's all they do... ones and zeros."
I drew out the numbers 0 through 10 in a column. "While we count this way...."

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10

"Computers count this way....."

1 1
2 10
3 11
4 100
5 101
6 110
7 111
8 1000
9 1001
10 1010

I wrote out 000000 and pointed to each of the zeros. "We use the ones column, tens column, hundreds column, thousands column, and so on..... but computers see it as the one column, two column, four column, eight column, sixteen column, thirty two column... and so on. So while we do this...."

1
+ 1
----
2
"A computer does this...."

1

+1

---

10

"It means the same thing.... but you have to know how to tell a computer to take this, turn it into this-- " I drew an arrow from the binary numbers to the arabic numerals--- "Get the answer, and then turn it back---" I drew another arrow back--- "into this. And that involves all sorts of very special codes... what people call 'computer language.'

"Over time people developed very complicated computer languages to tell the computers how to do very complicated math, then they found a way to do it the other way around--- using the very complicated math to get it to do very complicated things. Like storing words and sentences instead of just numbers. Or drawing pictures. Or giving instructions to other machines. Then they made other languages that let all the heavy math stuff go on in the background without you ever really seeing it...."

"Till eventually they had computers and computer languages so complex and fast and powerful that they could do things like... this." I walked over to a familiar gaily colored cabinet and hit the 'start' button. The familiar opening riffs of the Donkey Kong theme began to play, and the titular ape made his appearance onscreen. The game began to play.

The children looked singularly unimpressed. With chagrin I recalled that they already had arcade games in Equestria. In internal function they were literally little more than the mechanical midway games of yesteryear back home, coin operated things of wood and glass and tin... but thanks to the addition of magic to the equation, they did a passing fair resemblance to actual computer games... circa mid 1980s or so, granted, but you'd be hard pressed to spot the difference. In fact they were superior in some regards; the magical animations weren't blocky and didn't move stiffly, for one.

"....Or this," I said without missing a beat, moving to the next display, clicking it on without looking. It beeped and booped and did nothing. I looked back; it was a bleep de blanked IBM computer, green monitor and all, blocky and chunky and at least a decade older than the arcade game and doing jack squat to look impressive.

".... Or this," I said, mentally grinding my teeth and trying my luck at the third one. this one was a pizza parlor game table. Remember those? Clear glass top, you could play the game while staring down through the grease-smeared glass. And was no more impressive than the Donkey Kong cabinet. Frustrated I tapped on the start button.... the machine switched through several low-quality games---

Rumble blinked and hovered closer. "Whoa, it can play different games?"

Hah. Gotcha! "Yes," I said with some relief. "And it has no moving parts. Well, except for the buttons..." Curious, the foals pressed closer and pushed the button themselves, cycling through the games. I cast around for another display; this wasn't really illustrating the versatility or power of the computing age.

The foals weren't the only ones who were hard to impress. "Not to be rude or nuthin," Spike said, "But I'm really not seeing what's so special about these gizmos." He leaned back on the display
behind him, eyes half-lidded in boredom. "I mean Twilight has done eeeYAAAH!" The diminutive dragon leaped forward, yelling, as the display he was leaning against came to life... and began walking toward him, arms outstretched. Spike ran across the room, panicking, the automaton in hot pursuit. "What is it? Get it away!!" Spike yelped, trying to hide behind the others. Everypony else formed a wide circle around it, backing away nervously.

"It" was a 4 foot tall biped, resembling nothing so much as a miniature astronaut. It was built of smooth white plastic and had a visible LED "face" behind its black visor, and it walked with a smooth, fluid bent-knee gait. It stopped when it could no longer see Spike, and turned its head back and forth, looking around. I saw the word ASIMO written across its chest. It looked at me and said something in Japanese.

Oh. Dear. They stole an ASIMO?

"It's alive!" someone yelped.

"No, it is not alive," I said hastily. "It's a computer." in addendum, I looked at Spike and said "That's what is so special about these gizmos. They can be made into-- this." I pointed my thumb at the little lost Honda robot. It saw the hand gesture and waved at me. "There's a computer inside that little guy telling it what to do, how to move, where to go...a computer just like the computer in that game over there, or the one on that table over there." Asimo took a step toward one of the fillies; everypony started backward. "Don't worry, he's harmless. In fact, please be careful... he's very expensive and probably breaks pretty easy." Very very very expensive, and I think it just might qualify as an international incident, kidnapping a robot from Japan....

Asimo glide-stepped over to Silver Spoon. She started to bolt. "Stay still," I ordered again-- visions of a billion-dollar robot being bucked to pieces by panicky little hooves dancing through my head. The little filly whimpered but obeyed. Asimo reached her... and to my astonishment, began unbraiding her mane. The robot then reached into a pocket in its side, produced a comb and began to comb out her tresses, saying something soothing in Japanese over and over. "My word, this must be a very new model," I said. "The latest I'd seen they were just learning to walk around and carry things...." The other foals exclaimed in surprise as the little mechanical man proceeded to groom their classmate. A few even waved at it, to try and get its attention; it would look up and wave back, then return to the task at hand.

"These robots are actually proof-of-concept," I explained. "They were designed by the Honda corporation, which is working on building robots--- computer controlled machines--- that can provide assisted living to the infirm and elderly. They're a long way from perfecting a robot nursemaid... but not as far as they were when I left, obviously." Apparently satisfied with its work, the Asimo put away the comb, gave a confused Silver Spoon a pat on the head, and walked back to where it had been originally standing.

"That's the advantage of computers; with a little work they can be made to control other machines. Nowadays there are computers.... microchips actually... in most every machine, helping them run smoothly, monitoring them for problems, making them more efficient...or even acting as their brain." I searched the Asimo over--- thank God, an off switch. "For safety's sake I think this fellow should stay off the display floor. He goes toddling out in the middle of a roomful of museum patrons and starts brushing some dowager Duchess's hair he's liable to start a stampede. Say bye bye, Asimo." The robot looked up at me. Apparently this phrase was one of the few in its databanks. It looked at the foals, said "Sayonara," and waved. The foals giggled and waved back. I quickly shut him off and set him up on top of an inactive cabinet.

I did a careful look around the room. To my relief I saw none of the current crop of military robots...
out. The curators had either not laid hooves on them yet or had enough sense not to put them up on display. Had Asimo instead been even one of the military's relatively primitive gun-toting robots or bomb-defusing models the disruption would have been a lot more unpleasant. I did however see my hoped for target: a late model home PC, computer desk and all. I turned it on and watched as it warmed up. (1)

"Computers are used for a wide variety of purposes," I said. My eyes roamed over the program icons on the desktop. Thank God again, it was a Windows computer, not some damnable Mac or doubly damnable I'm-too-hip-to-even-use-the-same-computer-terminology Linux piece of garbage. (2) "Design, engineering, business finances, record keeping, word processing--- a fancy word for typing and printing--- art, music, games--- playing them, and even creating them..." I flicked on various icons, popping up windows all over the extra-large screen.

Now, this was more like it. My audience of fillies and foals, and one dragon, gaped in amazement as a flicked through a business spreadsheet, opened a word processor, fiddled with a 3d model in a rendering program, played a copy of "You're a Firework," popped up two or three opening game screens (hmm, Halo, and minecraft...), and printed a picture of one colt caught derping into the computer's camera. "With the right connections, I can even use a computer to talk to someone else on another computer. In fact that's what most computers on Earth are used for today... they're all connected together in a system called "the internet" that lets people communicate, work, and play together, even if they're on opposite sides of the world." I tried to leave it at that, but conscience dictated. "Mind, not all of the people on the internet are nice. Some are mean, some are stupid, some are disgusting, some are downright destructive and dangerous. You have to be careful who you talk to and what you share when you're online."

Applebloom looked puzzled. "How kin you share somethin' with somepony when they're on the other side of the world?" For a practical pony like an Apple, 'sharing' would be something of a more concrete concept.

"A good question, Applebloom. Well, you can share programs and files... programs like these games, or files, like this song or this picture." I kleeeked accordingly. "You can also share other things... like your address, or your password to your computer, or the fact that you're home alone...." I gave them a warning look. Several of the foals gulped. Equestria was an innocent world... but not that innocent, tragically. There were thieves, and violent ponies, and Stranger Danger was no stranger here. There were also more exotic dangers no child on Earth would even have to consider. "One of the rules of the internet is that you never ever share your personal information--- like your address, or your passwords, or your personal schedule--- with anyone. And little foals shouldn't go online without a parent or grownup supervising."

"Another thing you have to watch out for is people trying to share things with you that you don't want.... like computer viruses. You see there are some really rotten, terrible people out there. Cretins who like to break other people's stuff, because they think it's funny and that doing it makes them cool. We call these people JERKS. Along with other really nasty words that would get your mouths washed out with soap." There was some awkward laughter at that. "They make these little programs that, if they get into your computer, they can really mess it up. Sometimes so bad you have to erase everything in your computer and start all over from scratch. And what's worse, the programs will copy themselves from your computer, onto someone else's, all without you knowing it. They spread like the pony pox or the feather flu... that's why they're called viruses. You have to be very careful not to open any strange files strangers send you-- and you have to have an antivirus program to protect your computer from ones you never even see." I opened the Norton antivirus and showed it to them. "The people that write these viruses are criminals, and when we catch them they go to jail for all the destruction they cause.... but it's like trying to find the first person in a city who had the pony pox. It's almost impossible, unless they really screw up. And there are so many of them out
there that they'll never all be caught."

"That's.... absolutely dreadful," Rarity said. "I can't believe such petty ruffians actually exist!"

"Yeah, that sounds.... like too much," Spike said. "I mean, someone being that big of a jerk, just to be a jerk?"

"You mean like those teenage dragons on the dragon migration?" I pointed out. "Tell me, suppose you gave, oh, Garble, the power to smash someone else's stuff from anywhere in the world just by pushing a button?"

Spike's brows met in a line you could lay a level across. "Yeah, point made."

"Point in brief: the internet is an incredible thing, and has been used for good.. but it can be hazardous. It's not to be taken lightly."

The major portion of the room seemed to be filled with various electrical novelties and digital devices; cell phones, cameras, smart phones, iPads, handheld games, mp3 players, laptops, console game systems.... even some relics and offshoots, like 8-track players and that ill-fated 3d gameboy visor thing from a couple of decades back. I found that demonstrating many of the devices was a bit vexing: most of the ruddy things had buttons and switches far too small for hooves to manipulate, and the children found them boring and frustrating. We all had slightly better luck with devices with touch pads.... but it was still finicky work for them to use them.

They were a bit more interested by the cellphone display, especially once I showed them some of the features and explained how the wretched things, originally meant for simple mobile communication, had eventually accumulated every conceivable gadget that the desktop computer had, and more... and how even more gadgets could now be downloaded as "apps." "You mean you can... accessorize them?" Rarity exclaimed with delight. I could think of no better definition than that.

"Well, I certainly hope that the Princesses do manage to adapt these to Equestria," she said. It seemed so apropos; once suggested I simply could not picture Rarity without a stylish slim-phone next to her ear. But how would she dial? I wondered.

The displays seemed finished and well-secured enough, so at my suggestion Cheerilee let the children loose to wander the room and poke at the various hands-on items for a bit. Unsurprisingly they mostly clustered around the arcade cabinets; they were among the few things there with buttons large enough for them to manipulate without magic, and even at 8 bit resolution a game is a game. But a few did go nosing among the more interesting items. I wandered among them, answering questions here and there and pointing out the more interesting bits.

I came around one corner and was treated to the sight of Rainbow Dash rubbing her nose back and forth in random patterns across the screen of a mounted iPad. She was staring at the screen with cross-eyed concentration.

"Dash," I said, "What on earth---"

"Go 'way. Playing Fruit Ninja." There was a 'hi-ya' and the unmistakable sound of a melon being sliced in half by a katana. I snarked and left her be. "Just be sure and wipe your nose prints off the panel before we leave," I said.

"Yeah, kay, whatever."

Several of the fillies were clustered around Diamond Tiara, who was admiring herself in the
viewscreen of a mounted smart-phone. She was busy snapping photos of herself. I stepped in for a closer look and confirmed that yes, it is a pan-dimensional constant:

the little prima donna was making duck lips.

I made quacking noises as I walked past. She glared at me... then went right back to pooching her lips at the camera.

I found Spike standing in front of another thin panel like the one Dash was rubbing pony boogers on. This one was sitting tethered on a pedestal. He was tapping the touchscreen with a claw and looking dissatisfied. "Having trouble, Spike?"

"Yeah," he said. "This iPad here looks like the one Rainbow Dash is messing with--- but it doesn't have any games or anything on it."

I picked up the gadget in question. "Oh, that's because it's not an iPad, Spike," I said. "It's a Kindle."

"And what's a Kindle?" Spike said.

"Basically, it's an electronic book. Or I should say 'reader.' You turn the pages, like this..." I showed him how to operate it.

"Neat. But kinda pointless. Couldn't you just get a regular paper book and save your money?"

"Well this holds more than one book, Spike," I said. I took it back to the main menu and found the listing. "Hmm. This one's got quite a few volumes in it. Two or three hundred."

Spike's eyes went round. "Two or three hundred?? How many books can that thing hold?"

I looked it over. "Well, this model can hold up to six thousand volumes in it...."

Spike actually went pale; an impressive feat for a fellow that shade of green. "S-six thousand? That's more than all the books in the Ponyville library!"

I looked again. "Actually, no. This one can hold up to eight thousand books..."

"Eight thousand books??" I suddenly found myself trying to pry a small purple unicorn off both the Kindle and my arm. Celestia, Pinkie, and Twilight had apparently returned.

"GAH! Twilight! Good Grief!" I exclaimed. I managed to pry my arm, but alas, not the Kindle, free. Twilight sat on the floor clutching the kindle in her forelegs.

"You're not joking, please tell me you're NOT joking about this thing holding eight thousand books...."

I flexed the circulation back into my arm. "Yes, it's true," I said irritably. "But---"

"Ohmigosh ohmigosh ohmigosh..." Twilight babbled in manic glee. "I can carry my whole library anywhere I go with this thing!" She looked around at us, eyes wild and beseeching. "....I gotta have it. I want it. I need it."

"Dude," Spike muttered to me. "I haven't seen her like this since the Encyclopedia Equestria salesman came through town...."

"Oh dear. Let me handle this, Arcturus," Celestia said. She stepped forward delicately and lowered her head to Twilight's ear. "Twilight dear..." she said in her softest, most patient voice.
Twilight's head whipped around. "What?"

"Now I promise you, my most faithful student, when those are ready you'll be the very first one to get one...." Twilight whined and pulled the Kindle closer. ".... but it needs to be magic-proofed first."

"And it doesn't have any of your books in it yet," I added. "They need time to copy all the books you want and convert them into files.. but right now there aren't any at all you can put in there."

"And I'm sure they'll figure out a way to do all that very soon," Celestia continued. "But for now you need to take a deep breath, put the tablet back on the pedestal, and let go. Can you do that for me?"

Twilight froze for a moment, whined, groaned... then nodded. She took a deep breath, set the Kindle back on the little podium, and slowly backed away. Celestia wrapped one wing around her pupil and gave her a nuzzle while I hastily turned the Kindle off. "There," she said. "Feel better?"

Twilight hung her head. "Sorry, Princess," she said feebly. "I don't know what got in me--" she covered her face with her hooves, cheeks flaming.

"Okay, that... was kind of scary," Applejack muttered to me. I just rubbed my upper lip fiercely and said nothing. These ponies could combine comedy and pathos like nothing I'd ever seen. "At least we know what to get her for hearthwarming day," I muttered back. The farmpony snickered.

"Heavens, Twilight," Rarity giggled. "For a moment I thought we might have to arrange a wedding for you and it."

Twilight shot her a dirty look. "Don't stand too close, Rarity," she said. "You wouldn't want to make Tom jealous." Rarity's smile vanished off her face like a light switch had been thrown. "We agreed never to speak of that again, Twilight...." The rest of the mane six giggled and snickered.

"WELL!" I said, doing my duty as a man desperate to sidetrack a fight developing between two women, "how did the patent application go?"

"Quite smoothly," Celestia replied. "I'm informed that the application is quite likely to go through without a problem, and soon. It's surprising how quickly such things can be expedited when a royal ruler is standing right there watching." She winked.

"I'm sure," I said wryly.

Twilight pepped up. "Yes, and we took the time to also make applications for a patent on the nib design, the ink formula, the resorber spell...." for once, Twilight's obsessive compulsive behavior had worked in her favor. More than one inventor had made some great new invention, only to have some slicker come in behind him, make a separate patent for some small but vital component, and steal the inventor's work right out from under them.

Sometimes I felt I was far too cynical for Equestria.

Then again, Applejack had nearly lost her farm to the Flim Flam brothers....

Pinkie Pie bounced in. "Yeah! And best of all there was a rich businesspony there named Hazbro who said he was really really interested in the Rainbow Markers and said for us to contact him ASAP 'cause we could all make oodles of money and he must've really liked 'em because when we left he was still drawing funny faces all over his carriage and his chauffer with the spare one we brought and...."

I found myself wishing I had something in hand to drink, simply so I could have done a proper spit take. An Equestrian pony named Hazbro...
"You mean THE Hazbro?" Applejack exclaimed. "The biggest toymaker in Equestria?"

Son of a gun.

Twilight actually grinned. "He even signed my Smarty Pants doll!" she pulled the ragdoll out of her saddlebag. Sure enough, there was a signature scrawled across its bottom.

While the girls started to chatter, I stepped over to Celestia. "Could I speak to you in private, please?" She nodded and followed me over to a secluded corner. "What is it, Arcturus?" she asked.

I hesitated, started to speak, hesitated again. Where to begin? "I think this will take more time than a mere moment's whispering," I confessed.

"Understood." Celestia looked over to the rest of the group. "My little ponies, I am terribly sorry but affairs of state require me to take your tour guide away from you." There was a chorus of "awws" from the younger ones. "Do feel free to enjoy the rest of the museum, and I hope we all get a chance to be together soon." There was a round of farewell hugs, and the rolling mob of pony made its way out of the electronics room.

Once they were gone, Celestia motioned to the guards. They took positions outside the doors, closing them, and the ones inside cast quick discreet privacy spells around the room. Celestia nodded her approval and turned back to me. "What is it that troubles you, then, Sir Arcturus?" she asked.

I took a deep breath...

---

1) In retrospect I was luckier than I deserved. I had not reflected on the fact that this was most likely a pre-owned model... and if it had belonged to a young male, more than likely had some fantastically nasty porn files floating around in it. This outing wasn't supposed to be THAT educational.

2) Shut up. Macs are nothing but PCs with a Nike swoosh on them. And Linux is pretentious crap; It takes some profoundly godawful design to make something so unusable that you can give it away for free and it STILL can't outsell it's massively overpriced competitors.
Celestia and I stood alone in the middle of the Electronics room of the humanities wing. The room was protected by guards and surrounded by privacy spells; no one would disturb us. "So, what troubles you, Sir Arcturus?"

"Several things," I confessed. "Firstly, and really the most obvious... I could buy a few accidental items crossing over due to the gate. But this?" I swept my arm around, indicating the room. "This stuff—most of it's in pristine condition. A lot of it is rare to find. That little ASIMO robot there? There's only like a half-dozen of them in existence, they're cutting edge technology right off the lab floor and worth millions of bits. This room alone is worth a sultan's ransom. You've filled a museum with things your gate has plucked from Earth, myself included. This goes a little bit beyond accidental. Please convince me that you're not methodically plundering my world!"

Celestia sighed and moved closer, lowering her head to mine. "I understand your suspicions—"

"Don't understand them; fix them!"

"--but it is not us picking the placement of the mirror gate anymore," she hissed.

That froze me. "Then who?" I whispered back.

Celestia shook her head. "We still do not know. The gate is no longer under our control. It's having these...unpredictable spurts now. Some force outside ether of our universe is sending out bursts of some sort that shake the very fabric of the gate. Like ocean surges, or gusts of wind blowing through the mirror like a, a giant bubble wand. And every surge there's a new burst of things being flung through. Nothing living, yet...."

"Then close it down! Yank the plug on it!"

"If we do, there's no way to track down the source--- and no guarantee that the portal will even close. There's a good possibility that instead it will... pinch off and wander away. It only stays pinned to the mirror so long as we keep the mirror activated."

I had visions of a portal of indeterminate size wandering over the Equestrian landscape, randomly burping out objects from my world. The chaos that would cause....

Chaos....

I looked at her, but before I could speak she seemed to read my mind. "No, not him. Not Discord. We checked very thoroughly; he is still sound asleep in his stone prison. I went so far as to treble the bindings; I had every unicorn in my service throw every spell they could think of on him. Then Luna and I added a few more ourselves besides. Then we put guards and monitoring spells on top of that; he hasn't so much as twitched a brain cell since we re-fossilized him." Celestia managed a wry grin. "It is most definitely not him."

"And what of the other draconequi?" I muttered.
Celestia's smile dimmed. "Other draconequi? We... only ever encountered him." Her eyes filled with alarm. "What cause do you have to believe that there are more?"

"No proof yet, just logical questions," I said. "Was he really the only one? If so, then why give his species a name? And it's my observation that there is very rarely just one of any living thing."

"It doesn't seem quite Discord's style, though..."

"Not Discord's, maybe. But there's more than one way to spread chaos. We have legends back on Earth of unbelievable chaos being caused with a single horseshoe nail, a misplaced drop of honey, a single golden apple." I regarded the electronics around us. "And events in real life. Billions in lost profits and damage caused by a single malicious computer program. People killed by a two-line glitch in a program controlling a medical machine. Entire cities plunged into darkness by a single burned out switch. Harmony begets order begets complexity begets a thousand places where chaos can throw the balance the other direction."

I turned and faced her. One idea begat another; whole sections of my little-used brain were finally lighting up. "The balance... the balance, that's it isn't it? Discord didn't feed off of chaos, he fed off of order. That's why he didn't flee when he had a chance, isn't it--- Equestria is his feeding grounds. It's like the balance between plants and animals; they each depend on each other for survival, each feeding off what the other creates.... oxygen and carbon dioxide, fruit and fertilizer...."

"That's why you have to seed the clouds to make true snowflakes instead of just flakes of ice. That's why you have to fabricate clouds, and manually shift the seasons, and guide the migratory birds--- blow me no smoke about merely observing, those pegasi are there to make sure they move on schedule--- and all the other little cyclical changes in the climate and the weather and nature. Chaos is change, and ever since you imprisoned Discord there's been a shortage of chaos, hasn't there? Just not enough to reach the tipping point that triggers cloud formation or snowflake crystals or migratory or hibernation instincts."

Celestia scowled thunderously. "So you suggest we release that monster to restore the balance between good and evil---"

I shook my head furiously and waved my hands in negation. "No no no! Ugh. First off, Chaos and Order are neither good nor evil. Order is stability and structure, Chaos is change. Discord may have been in charge of a necessary cosmic force, but evil is a choice made by thinking beings.... and it was his decision as a thinking being to take his power as an agent of chaos and be a jerk. And if it comes down to a choice between letting a sadistic monster run loose and having to cope with a little chaos deficit, we can all survive a little chaos shortage."

I thought for a moment. "It would explain a few other things, too. Like my own ridiculous run of luck."

"Luck?" Celestia said.

"Yes. Your Highness, I don't know how things are here, but back home success takes hard work, often a lifetime of it, and even then it rarely pays off. Some few people do "fall upstairs," but it generally turns around to bite them in the plot if they don't know how to handle it."

"But since coming here, I've gone from a broke, nearly unemployed, trailer-dwelling nobody long past his prime to living in a palace, wearing fine suits, eating fine food, gold jingling in my pocket--- fame, fortune, political influence and a circle of ever growing fans and friends.... on little to no virtue on my part. Every suggestion I've made has been eagerly adopted, every idea I've had has been golden--- not an hour ago a simple windfall of an idea has panned out and may turn two of my
friends into millionaires... it's verging on the ridiculous." I looked down at my ponderous stomach.
"I'm amazed ponies haven't started calling me 'Buddha' and rubbing my belly for good luck."

"And your point being---?" Celestia chuckled.

"That unless it normally rains luck around here, something is really altering the tables of probability
in Equestria," I said. "Maybe it's a side effect of poking at the walls of time and space, maybe it's just
a consequence of moving from one bubble of probability to another with a higher natural quotient....
but I think it's somehow tied to whatever's happening to the mirror gate."

We both pondered that ominous thought. "I will have my scholars look into it," Celestia said finally.
"Thank you for speaking so candidly, Sir Arthur." She paused. "Arthur," she said, "It may be that
someone or something has messed about with chance and luck in my realm. But please don't entirely
discredit your own hand in your success. Being blessed with luck is one thing. Making good use of it
is another. And you have done your best to be both wise and generous with your own."

"I'll... try to keep that in mind," I hedged. "Thank you, your Highness."

"Oh, and one more thing," she said. She stepped over to me--

And rubbed my tummy with her hoof. "Wish me luck," she singsonged, crinkling her nose in my
face. "Wubba wubba wubba the lucky tum tum..."

I made an exasperated noise at her. She laughed and vanished in a splash of light, leaving half a
dozen computer screens warbling and staticking in her wake....And me alone in the room with a
handful of her bodyguards, all of whom were struggling hard not to laugh.

I just glared at them. "Don't you have royalty to catch up with?"

It was, of course, common knowledge within twenty four hours.....
Chapter 16

It was one of my more interesting conversations with the Princess.

The Court of the Day had closed early, my inquisitors from the Equestrian scientific community had run dry of questions to ask and tests to perform, and Celestia and I found ourselves enjoying the luxury of a rare empty hour. We were sitting in one of her gardens, admiring her golden apple tree while I related the mythical legend of Eris, Paris, and Troy. (She found our mythological goddess of discord to be far more subtle than her own Chaotic nemesis.) As the topic wandered, I chanced upon a thought, a question I had not had opportunity to ask prior. "Tell me, your Highness," I said, "From the other side of the screen, it seemed very odd indeed that after your sister's liberation from Nightmare Moon she failed to appear anywhere for well over a year. Tell me, was there some difficulty in acclimating her to the new era....?"

Celestia, to my surprise, looked distressed at the question. She shifted uncomfortably on her reclining bench, her eyes darting away from me. "There was.... a little," she said. "But that was not our chiefest concern. You may have not noted it but there has been relatively little change in Equestria over the last thousand years--- at least when compared to your own world or country."

"From the ox and cart to the space shuttle, yes," I muttered. "Considering the mayhem we went through along the way I think humans could have happily coped with far fewer 'interesting times.' " Celestia laughed a bit nervously. "But I digress. you were saying?"

"As I was saying... her adjustment to the changes over the millenium were the least of anyone's concerns," she continued. She lowered her voice. "Please do not bandy this about--- it would cause.... distress among the ponies outside the castle. But the reason for her isolation for so long was... medical in reason."

"Luna was sick?"

Celestia bit her lip. "Perhaps it would be easier to show you," she said. Morphic light spilled from her horn, forming a silvery disc in the air before us. It solidified into a glowing mirror.... no, a window. The sun in the reflection was in a different place in the sky, and the garden was in bloom with flowers from a different season. The flowerbeds were full of late summer blossoms.

And Luna was lying on her back in one of them, smashed completely off her plot.

It was the "little" Luna, with the pale, short mane; it must have been shortly after she had been freed. She was lying on her back in the middle of a half destroyed flowerbed, bicycling her hooves in the air and giggling like she'd lost her mind. "Luna!" Celestia's voice came from the mirror. The view drew closer to the potted princess, looking down on her; I realized we were seeing this memory from Celestia's perspective. "Luna, are you all right? What in heaven's name are you doing?"

"Hiiiiii, Tiiia," Luna drawled up at her sister. "'M just smellin' th' flowers." She gathered a bunch in her hooves and crammed her nose into them, inhaling deeply. "Mmmmm, so good....."

Celestia's memory-voice was a mix of annoyance and concern. "Luna? Are you drunk?"
"Naaaaaah. Hey, Tia.... I was just thinkin'.... about these flowers? They, they, they......" Luna paused and frowned. "Oh yeah.... I was thinkin' how they're flowers, Right? And they don't know they're flowers..... but they're still all happy with that...."

Yes. She was smashed, snockered, blasted, fried, bombed right out of her gourd.

The mirror faded and vanished in a cloud of mist. "that was only the first time," Celestia said. "Time and time again, I or some member of the palace staff would find her in this state. Euphoric, barely able to stand, insensate, even...."

"...She.... took to the bottle?" I hazarded. "Or to something more, ah, herbal?"

Celestia seemed to understand what I was driving at. She shook her head. "That's the first thing the physicians and I thought," she said. "We watched her carefully for days, weeks. She never took more than a glass or two of wine at meals, she had no secret stashes or binges, never imbibed in any exotic plants... her physicians confirmed there was nothing in her bloodstream...She of course insisted that she was not indulging in anything...."

"We obviously kept it quiet; it would hardly do to have it known that Equestria's long lost Princess spent most of her time blitzed." Celestia rolled her eyes. "After a while she seemed to get better. But even now she has these fits. They seem to strike without warning, generally whenever she's doing something idle.... She'll be eating a bite of dessert, or be walking among the flowers, or step out into a patch of sunshine, or admiring a painting. And she'll keel over like a felled tree.

"I'm so worried, Arthur. What if there's something seriously wrong with her? The doctors have found nothing-- no sicknesses, no injuries to her brain, but--- it keeps happening. Last week the maids found her rolling around in the linen, rhapsodizing about how soft the sheets were and how nice the smell was.... what, what's so funny?"

Despite myself I was grinning behind my hand. "I, ah, think I might know what it is," I said, starting to chuckle. "Tell me, do your researchers know anything about sensory deprivation?"

She said nothing, but I guessed 'no' from her nonplussed look. Grinning, I proceeded to explain. "Back on Earth, scientists would do lots of things to study-- well, the mind, the brain, how they work and all. How people responded to stimulus, that sort of thing. One of the things they developed was sensory deprivation studies. Basically the subject would be placed in a darkened tank half full of warm, saline water. Earplugs and eye coverings provided as well-- isolating them from all sensory input, or as much as possible: no sight, no sound, no smell, no sense of touch.... then they'd study what their reactions were. The results were.... interesting to say the least.

"One of the reported side effects of sensory deprivation was that, after a couple of hours, when the subject came out of the tank, their senses were temporarily enhanced. Colors, textures, smells, everything was incredibly intense, to the point of being intoxicating."

"Now you're both immortal beings, so I can guess you respond to certain things differently. That probably protected her from the detrimental effects. But all the same, she just spent a thousand years trapped in the moon, with little or no sensory stimuli. And I'm guessing the Friendship Beam from the elements of harmony probably purged her of any negative effects of her isolation. Afterwards, though...." I shrugged.

"Are you saying that my little Luna is getting--?"

"Drunk on life, yes," I chuckled. "The smell of a rose, an involving bit of music, an attractive painting.... my word, the taste of chocolate must have been like a bomb going off in her pleasure
centers."

"Good heavens." Celestia stared off into space. "that makes perfect sense, really. It explains everything." relief washed across her face. "That takes such a load off my mind. I've been having visions of bizarre curses or some horrible sort of brain tumor---" she laughed in relief. "I hope it eventually wears off though..."

"Eventually," I agreed. "No telling how long though. She was isolated for ten centuries, it's bound to be a few years before it stops completely...."

Celestia suddenly pricked up her ears. "Do you hear that?" she asked.

"What?" I shrugged.

The royal ears swiveled. "...Singing," she said, bemused.

Intrigued, Celestia got to her feet and followed her pricked ears; I lumbered to my feet and followed. We wandered our way to the other end of the garden. As we came to a secluded nook the singing became quite clear. I spotted dark blue hooves waving above the daffodils.

"Lu-na in the sky-y-y with di-a-mondssss....."

It was Luna. She was lying on her back in a shaded little grotto. Her cheeks were flushed, her crown was askew and she had an enormous milkshake glass, complete with swirly straw, balanced on her chest. "OH HELLO, TIA AND ARTY!" She said, blowing our hair back slightly. "May I call you Arty? 'Course I can, I'm the princess...! Anyway, HELLO!"

"Luna, are you--" Celestia began. Luna waved her off. "Ohhh, fine, fine fine fine. I'm fine. Say, dost thou know what this is?" She pointed to the ice cream and whipped topping confection balanced on her chest. "It's a strawberry malted! One of the kitchen staff made it for me. We decree he shall be knighted immediately!" Luna giggled, snorting a bit. "You should try thish, Tia, issa best thing inna yuuuuniverse mmmmmmmmm..." she took a long drink from the loopy straw before starting to sing again.

"....You know, I think I actually envy her at the moment," Celestia said with a sigh.
Chapter 17

Becoming a citizen of Equestria was an experience and a half itself. Not due to the aforementioned pomp and circumstance, really..... but due to the paperwork.

"Really, your Highnesses," I protested, "This---" I waved my hand at the vast room filled with filing cabinets, card catalogs, and pony clerks-- "Why in heaven's name do you afflict yourselves with this? It's one of the worst tragedies to befall Man, why emulate it?"

Celestia shook her head. A privacy bubble appeared around us "Because it's an unpleasant necessity," she sighed.

"Surely you don't really need all this bureaucracy to run your country---"

"Who said I actually used it?" Celestia said to me. "You misunderstand; this is more of a ..... pressure valve, as it were." At my raised eyebrow she said "surely you have noticed in your own species that there are always a certain percentage of...."

"Useless people?" I said.

".... Ponies who only feel fulfilled when they are in the middle of things... er, overseeing processes and keeping things recorded and..."

"Obstructing progress," Luna said flatly.

"....Yes. That," Celestia said, defeated. "I have come to blame it on the 'surplus of Order' you have noted, Sir Arcturus. Certain ponies become overwhelmed with a necessity for checklists, files, forms, office memos...."

"They don't care what you do, so long as you've filled out the proper forms in triplicate," Luna said. "And done it through them, so they can make sure it's done properly."

"Nothing here holds weight of law," Celestia said. "in fact I make sure that they have no idea who does and who does not have their 'paperwork in order.' " She glanced around. "I invented this branch of government service to give the poor dears something to do," Celestia continued. "Nearly everything done here is pointless busy work... I have them fill out forms and check lists and lists checks and index everything..... I never even use the files, I just have them archived--- and then put them to work sorting and resorting the archives."

"And give other ponies the job of UN- sorting the files from time to time too, I imagine," I said, amused. I was appalled to see her eyes light up at the idea. "Ohh, that is a good one!" she said. "I'll have to implement it some time in the future..."

"It soundeth a terrible waste, I know, good Arthur," Luna said sympathetically. "But imagine were these pedantic ponies to gain access to the actual workings of governance. They would bog things to a halt with their incessant demands for forms, files, checks and lists."
"Or worse, they'd get actual power," Celestia shuddered. "Imagine an officious obsessive pedant, an entire bureaucracy of them, a dozen bureaucracies of them, unelected, unifiable, unaccountable to anyone, simply making up rules with the same force as the word of law."

I didn't have to. I was an American. "So what do you do with the ponies who want to start such a bureaucracy?"

"Simple, I smile, nod, then give them an office here in Royal Records with the name of their proposed bureaucracy on the door... and tell other ponies in Royal Records to send their paperwork to that office. And for the new office to send its paperwork to them...."

I realized what she was saying. "You mean these poor bastards spend most of their working lives filling out each other's forms? Dear Lord, you've invented tax collector's Hell."

The corner of Celestia's mouth quirked. "Do keep in mind, most of them are quite happy here. So long as they are unaware of the actual triviality of their work," she added pointedly. When an alicorn says something pointedly, she often does so literally. I winced and rubbed the spot on my chest where the tip of her horn had jabbed me. "Ah. Understood...."

"So, um, why am I going through this again?" I asked uncertainly.

"You are a bit high profile for Royal Records to overlook, no matter how high their in box is filled," Celestia said drolly. "It's only a matter of time before somepony notices we don't have any paperwork with "human" in the subtitle circling in this--- I believe the human term is Chinese fire drill."

I grimaced. The beast, it seemed, must needs be fed. "Oh, don't look like that," Celestia teased. "It will only take an hour or two at most, and then you will be done with this place for good. Well, unless you actually wish to file something or heaven forfend, go trawling through the files for some bit of errata." She dismissed the privacy bubble. "Now if you'll just go up to the window and ask for the citizenship forms...I'm afraid I must return to court, but Luna will be right here if you hit any snags or have any questions." I could see the indigo alicorn settling down on one of the nearby sofas, and nodded. With a wink and a smile, Celestia vanished.

I turned with fatalistic dread to the service counter before me. I was subsequently directed to a desk off in one corner where A green unicorn with an ice-blue mane and a dress tie in a windsor knot sat at the desk. He smiled at me soullessly. I sighed, and sat down before him. "I require a Paper of Citizenship," I informed him. Without saying a word he reached under his desk and pulled out a single form. A positive sign! I pulled the paper to me, extracted a quill from the available inkwell....

....And ran into a difficulty on the first page. Under "name" there were approximately fifteen slots. I got up and went to where Luna reclined. "What the deuce is this?" I said, pointing.

"The spaces for your names, of course. Birth name, pre cutie mark name, post cutie mark name, current name, and names past and potential future, if any," Luna clarified.

"...So you're saying a pony's name can change over the course of their life?"

"At least once, after their cutie mark comes in," Luna said. "After all, twould not make much sense to go through life with a name like "Cherry Blossom" and a picture of a socket wrench on your flank."

I nodded. "So potential future names...?"

"Every pony receives at least four or five spare names from their parents at birth," she said. "They
pick the one that suits them best at their Cuteacenara or Cute Mitzvah." I pondered this and shrugging, went back to the desk. I filled out all the slots with my own name and moved on.

And hit another snag. Under "race" there was Earth Pony, Pegasus, Unicorn, Sea Pony (hah! I knew it!) Flutterpony (oho!) Crystal Pony (?) minotaur, gryphon, sea serpent, dragon, donkey, cow, sheep.... there was even a checkbox for "draconequeus" but, naturally, no checkbox for "Human."

"Ahhhh...." I pointed out the absence to Dotted Line (for that was what his name plaque said) who had returned to shuffling papers in his booth. "Addition of any further categories of race or species requires form J-545- ERS," he said in a monotone, slapping another paper down on top of the stack. Grumbling, I started on that paper instead.

"File Reclassification: Name new species, Define/describe new species, categorize new species by Kingdom, Phylum, class, order..."

I went back to Luna.

Things began rapidly deteriorating as we went. The Equestrian bureaucracy had centuries ago fallen into the fatal fallacy of paperwork: ONE: if a category was not listed on the paper, it did not exist; therefore whatever item did not fit into the categories listed, it must either not exist or be fitted into a preexisting category. TWO: if something was placed into a particular category, it must fulfill that category to the nth degree or face the penalty. If you classified, for lack of option, fish as fowl, then that fish damn well better sprout feathers or there'd be hell to pay.

I, of course, was so far off the list of categories that I was clear off the page.

My prior address, as it was in another damned universe, did not appear on any map or any portion of a map, and therefore did not exist. My current address was a room in Canterlot Castle.... which, as I was neither Luna nor Celestia, was automatically listed as patently false. I had no permanent address. My main source of revenue was as a lab rat for a government agency so new that they didn't even have a moniker yet, and was, of course, not listed with the bureaucracy, and was a stipend for services rendered to the Throne... which were not quite top secret, but not to be discussed and therefore did not qualify for either public or secret service documentation. My previous jobs did not exist, either.... and every hitch resulted in the almost magical (perhaps I should say infernal) appearance of yet another form to be filled with yet another list of instructions....

Even with Luna standing (then sitting, then lying fast asleep) RIGHT THERE, nothing could smooth out the rumples and wrinkles the damnable Dotted Line threw in my path to filling out this one, lone, benighted form. It was at about the four hour mark, as Dotted Line was sending an intern to fetch yet another phonebook-thick manual on how to precisely calculate.... who knew what.... that I finally snapped. "Give me a fresh form," I said.

Dotted Line scowled suspiciously. "It's a little early for that," he said. "You should finish the other paperwork, and use this as the rough draft, then we can get all new copies and make a nice clean--- Gaaak!"

The truncation of his suggestion was a bit rude sounding; of course it was to be expected as I now had his nice striped tie in my grip and was pulling the Windsor knot as tight as it would go. "Give me a fresh copy of the Paper of Citizenship form," I said, my voice eerily calm even in my own ears,
"Or by Celestia, Luna, and Discord I shall pull this tie until your head snaps off." Eyes bulging, he complied, sliding the paper over to me with a free hoof. I released his white-collar worker's noose from my trembling grip. While he gasped with relief and struggled to loosen his tie, I calmly commenced with filling out the form.

I was done in five minutes. I slid the form over to him. He took it from me warily; apparently my doughy build had led him into misjudging the speed of my reflexes, and he was loath to accidentally provoke them again. He scanned over the paper. Frowned. Scanned it again.

He gave me the most deadpan look I have ever seen, even on something as lifeless as a government bureaucrat. "Name, Arthur Arcturus. Age, 41. Species...Draconequus." He looked at me.

"Humans are a sub-breed," I said.

"Seriously??"

"Feel free to prove otherwise."

"Former address.. Everfree Forest."

"EEyup. Feel free to send someone to check the address." That earned me a glare.

"Permanent address... Foggy Bottom Bog??" His face scrunched up. "a hydra-infested bog...."

"Yup. Got my hydra farm there."

"Hydra farm."

"Yup. I sell hydra milk. Says so right there on line 14: primary source of income."

"Hydras don't make milk!"

"Never said it was a good income..."

In case it isn't obvious how this was going, In my frustration I had succumbed to the unethical decision to use the unspoken, two-edged sword of bureaucracy against them: while the law of bureaucracy insists that anything they don't have a check-box for doesn't exist, the flipside is that, if they have a check box or any combination of check boxes for it, it must therefore be true, no matter how much it is obvious utter balderdash. An islamic fanaticist hasn't got a touch, my friends, on a government bureaucrat for believing in whatever is written on their personal collection of sacred papers.

You think I lie? One couple living in the middle of the Arizona desert had the EPA classify their property as wetlands. Another man lost control of his own land in Washington State due to an environmentalist filing a form that classified it as a preserve for, among other things on the checklist, Bigfoot. Someone wrote it, someone else filed it, someone else went out and enforced it. If you gave a bureaucrat a sawhorse and a federal document calling it Secretariat, they would dutifully enter it in the Kentucky Derby.

In my case, they had a checkbox for "farmer", for every imaginable species including hydra under "livestock," and under produce they had, of course, "milk." It wouldn't have mattered if I'd claimed to grow donut trees on the moon--- confound it, I should have gone with that, Luna might have actually helped me plant 'em--- because it was on the paper, Dotted Line must believe it, whether
sanity or common sense said otherwise. (1)

The rest of the paper was, of course, filled with similar tripe, each line more outlandish than the last, but all of it dutifully picked out from the bureaucracies' own meticulous list of options and guaranteed to be too time consuming, difficult, or (in the case of Foggy Bottom Bog) too hazardous to check. He read down through it, face puckering more and more with every line, but unable— or perhaps afraid— to raise any more objections. "Well, I.... suppose it's...." he choked a little, "...all in order...." He dutifully made a copy of my form 'for my own records,' then pulled out the coveted Paper of Citizenship, copied it, signed it, and hovered over it with a royal seal, biting his lip painfully. I reached across the desk, grabbed his hoof and banged the rubber stamp down on the form. "Thank you," I said, snatching the paper away from him and tossing the fee in bits on his desk.

I snapped up my cane and, disregarding the pain in my knees, marched briskly across the enormous office space to where Luna lay snoozing, her head resting on a stack of documents that had somehow made its way to her couch. She awoke as I approached, stretched and yawned. "Ah, Sir Arcturus," she said, "Art thou finished already?"

I leaned over to her and muttered. "Yes, but we'd best depart quickly before my victim figures out he can object." She looked puzzled, but obliged; we disappeared in a flash of light.

And that, my children, is how I became the first Draconequis citizen of Equestria.

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1)the added advantage was that it was all so ridiculous that I would never have to try and remember it all. A subtle lie you have to remember. A complex but believable lie, you will have to keep all the details straight. An outrageous lie, people will come up to you and tell you the details for you: "Did you REALLY say....?" or "Is it REALLY TRUE that one time you actually....?"
"Well, really, what I'm saying is that what he did, didn't make sense--- even for him," I said over my cards. "Just mountains and mountains of power, and he completely let it go to waste. It makes no sense. Raise you two." I tossed a couple more jelly beans on the pot.

"He seemed to do a fair enough job by me," General Airstrike said, edging some beans in with his hoof.

It was Friday night; poker night for me and the boys.... "the boys" being the leaders of the Equestrian military. General Airstrike, pegasus leader of the Equestrian Airforce; General Long Strides of the Equestrian ground forces, AKA the Army by any other name; Shining Armor, the Captain of the Royal Guard, who I had come to think of as the somewhere between the Army Reserve and the National Guard; And Admiral Cresting Wave, the sea pony who led the Equestrian Navy.

Our little get-together had come about due to my own continued suspicions about my change in luck. I had been roaming about the castle after discussing probability curves with some of the pony researchers, and had been pondering how to test some of my more.... exotic theories, when I happened to spot a steel grey, white maned, military looking pegasus in the Princess' waiting room, grumbling to himself and playing a hand of solitaire. I had asked if he would mind playing a few quick rounds of five-card draw for a change of pace, and to my surprise he complied. Within 2 or 3 hands we had a casual audience of others waiting on Her Majesty's pleasure, then a full group of five playing the devil's pasteboards and shooting the breeze. We had agreed to reconvene that week in more amenable surroundings, and it had quickly become a routine for all of us.

It was obvious from the start that they had their nation's and their Princesses' safety in mind, and had leapt at the chance to brain-pick the Monkey from Space and scrutinize me at their convenience. I didn't mind, and in fact tipped my hat to their conscientiousness. Despite this we became, if not fast friends, then at least amiable associates.

Of course while they were evaluating me, I was doing some testing of my own--- namely of my strange streak of luck. I was trying to determine if there was any objective evidence that my "luckiness" had changed since arriving in Equestria. Random hands of cards seemed to be one possible avenue of investigation. Results were ambiguous though.... I insisted that we did not play for money, and provided the tokens: generally jelly beans or other sweets from my own personal stash. You see, I had been gifted with a lifetime supply of sweets by a generous local candy maker. (a long story involving a recipe for non-melting chocolate.) My covert objective was to try and dispense with as much of my ill-gotten goodies as possible without actually eating them myself. However, I seemed to be winning the pot far more often than losing it.... so was my luck good, or bad?

"I have to agree with the General," Cresting Wave said, leaning forward in her barrel and nudging her ante into the pot with a hoof. her mermaid-like tail appeared briefly then submerged with a splash. "He basically turned all of Equestria inside out in a matter of hours."

"Well that's just the thing... hours," I said. "Thousands of years of waiting and planning, and his
"reign of terror didn't even last as long as an all-day sucker."

"He didn't exactly strike me as particularly sane," Shining Armor chuckled, looking up from his cards with a cocked eyebrow. "Was he really up to serious planning?"

I shook my head. "Crazy and stupid aren't the same thing," I said.

To my surprise Long Strides nodded, agreeing with me. His shaggy mane drooped over one eye, but his gaze was sharp. "Don't mistake the floor show for what's going on behind the stage," he said to Shining. "Discord may have acted like he spent all his time adding two and two and getting banana, but from what my intel tells me he came dang close to winning the whole game without even trying."

"Exactly," I said. "He had information, deep personal information, on all six of the Bearers. He didn't even have to directly use force on them; he just head-gamed them into defeating themselves. He had the intel, he had the high ground, he had the firepower...."

Air Strike chuckled dryly. "Weren't you arguing that he was a hack just a minute ago?" The others at the table chuckled.

I had to pause; he was right. I'd ended up arguing against myself without realizing it. "Meh," I grumbled.

"Well, which is it, then, dear?" Cresting Wave teased, picking up her cards. "Was Discord competent, or incompetent?"

I found my mental traction again. "Neither. He was obviously sharp, very intelligent, very informed, and despite all the wacky antics, he was capable of cunning. Just putting Rainbow Dash in a double bind like he did... putting her in conflict with her own Element.... shows he was a competent gamester. But the whole of it, He wasn't even trying."

"It's like he wasn't even interested in winning this round."

"...This round?" Shining Armor queried.

I shot him a stone cold sober look. "He's immortal, he's still as powerful as ever, he's sitting outside right this very minute, and he's already escaped once after several thousands years imprisonment, and he's perfectly capable of living another several thousand as a statue-- or until someone slips up and he escapes again. Yeah, 'this round.' Sooner or later he'll get back out, and it'll be 'round two.'" I shook my head. "I get the feeling that he and Celestia have a lot more in common than we think. They play games laid out over eons."

I laid down my cards. "Three of a kind." There were groans round the table, and I scooped my winnings into a bowl. Darn, I was never gonna get rid of these things. Long Strides gathered up the cards and started shuffling.

Shining suddenly gave a half-laugh. "Okay, before we go on, I want to know...." he looked at me. " His 'A' game. Okay, Mister Ape from Dimension X.... you don't think he was bringing his 'A' game. I wanna know what YOU think a real 'A' game would have been?"

I didn't even look up from the cards gliding across the table to me. "Turning your sister to stone," I said in a deliberate monotone. I glanced up; the smile had slid off Shining Armor's face like it was greased. "Or, granted that he seemed to take pride in the fact that he never turned anypony to stone--- teleported her to the far side of the globe. Or done the same to all six Bearers; scatter them around the world in places so far flung they'd spend years just getting back to Equestria. Or he could have erased their memories. Turned them into infants. Or into rabbits. Or potted plants. Or fish lost in the
"Or assuming that he didn't WANT to mess with the Bearers, he do the same with the Elements. Scatter them across the globe. Send them to the Moon. Leave them floating in orbit. Drop them in an active volcano. Heck, even I could have taken the Elements out of the equation, no magic involved.... a boat to the middle of the nearest ocean and toss the Elements over the rail.... problem solved, forever, or as close to it for us mortals as it doesn't matter.

"Keep in mind, this is all just off the cuff," I said, gathering up my cards. "Face the facts, Discord could have won easily, with just a snap of his fingers." I snapped my own for emphasis.

"Fortunately for us he does have one fatal weakness," Airstrike said in his gravelly voice. "He's obsessed with games. Pathologically obsessed, even. My own intel division has been digging back through the books ever since he made his appearance; same story in all the legends. No matter the stakes, he has a compulsion to make everything a game or a gamble. Gimme one." Another card coasted across the table to him.

"I wouldn't count on that," I said. . " I mean, let's consider the 'game' he played, this time. The rules he set up...."

"No flying, no magic," Shining Armor said. "Twily told me about it."

"And don't forget the rules he set for himself," I added. Shining Armor looked puzzled. I counted them off. "Other than taking their wings and horns, he didn't use any magic on them directly. He didn't interfere with them when they got ahold of the elements. He only mesmerized them once he'd head-gamed them first..."

"Didn't he just up and brain-zap the little yaller one?" Long Strides said.

I shrugged. "I never said he didn't give in and cheat a little," I said. "the important part is that he actually set rules for himself, and more or less stuck to them. Even when it put him at a dangerous disadvantage. And he set a goal for himself, as well. Twilight's goal in the game was to get the Elements of Harmony. Discord's goal was to render the Elements useless, without doing it the easy way. And even despite his lackadaisical approach, he almost did it."

"That's the thing, though. (I'm in for ten.) Even given the limits he put on himself, he wasn't really trying all that hard. It was almost like all the ruckus he raised and trouble he caused was an idle pastime. Like it didn't matter if this round was lost..."

Cresting Wave looked up from her cards. " I saw the statue," she said. "He didn't look all too happy about losing."

"Well yeah, but he didn't look too UNhappy before he was released, either," I said. "Makes me wonder just how good his poker face really is."

Cresting Wave "hmphed." "Point made," she admitted. "And let me guess," she added dryly, "this is all a lead up to you telling us what you think his 'A' game would have been...."

"Ah, dear lady," I said, tipping my hat, "You wound me, and you know me so well. Even within the limitations he set on himself, a clean victory should have been easy. Not that the headgames he played on the Bearers weren't good, but again, they obviously weren't his A-game. Getting Applejack to lie? Appealing to Rarity's greed? Making Fluttershy cruel?" I went "pfft." "Play school tactics. Not the stuff he would have done if he really wanted to mess them up."

"And if he did--?" Shining Armor queried.
I set my cards down and looked at them all. "Turned the weaknesses of the Elements against them. What I don't think you or most ponies realize about the Elements is that the virtues they represent---Honesty, Loyalty, Generosity, Kindness, Laughter, Friendship---all can be turned into vices. Honesty can become tactlessness, indiscreetly blurting out information that can get others hurt or killed. Loyalty can become blind, marching you off a cliff-- or divided, leaving you with no choice but to betray one side or the other. Generosity can be perverted into demanding you bleed yourself dry, giving and giving even when it's killing you. Kindness can smother. And laughter can leave you incapable of taking anything seriously..... or make you heartless about other people's suffering.

"And Friendship? That can become the turned back into which all those knives are driven."

"It's so much easier to pull than to push. I wouldn't have made Applejack lie; I would have made her incapable of keeping her mouth shut, constantly blabbing everything that popped into her head. I would have filled Rarity with self-flogging guilt over her own desires, till she was headed right to the poorhouse from giving so much to try and compensate. Making Fluttershy cruel? No, I would have cranked her compassion up to eleven, till she was completely unable to say so much as an unkind word to even her worst enemy, and she drove all her friends away with her smothering, treacly affection. Cruelty I would have saved for Pinkie Pie, leaving her laughing merrily at everyone else's suffering. Rainbow Dash's Loyalty I would have inflamed to mindless fanaticism--- and then let her pick her own banner to follow to destruction. And Friendship, assuming it lasted through all that, I would have amplified till its bearer was a shivering codependent wreck, torn to pieces between her self-destructing friends and unable to even think or breathe without their support."

"Then, once the bearers had rejected their elements in emotional burnout, I would have taken possession of the Elements and put them someplace secure. Game, Set, Match."

The expressions on their faces was heartbreaking. It was like watching children learn about death for the first time. "For such ruthlessness to come so easily....You truly do come from a dark and terrible world, don't you," Cresting Wave said. She sounded almost sympathetic.

"And don't ever forget it," I said solemnly.

"So you think he was just... toying with us," Shining Armor said. "That he wasn't really even trying to win. Okay, you've convinced me of that." He shuddered; he was most likely picturing his baby sister frozen in stone..... " Well then, why? What does he get out of being so sloppy?"

I picked through the cards in my hand. "That's the question for the ages," I said. "What does Discord actually want? What are his goals? What is he really after?"

"All of us here have people noodlin' on that one," Long Strides said. "Scholars at the School for Gifted Unicorns, historians, philosophers, researchers. Best anyone can figure is 'Chaos.' "

"Though as for that--- " I anted another fistful of jelly beans-- "he wasn't very good at it, was he. Which sort of brings me back to my first point; he was kind of a hack. Whether incompetent or lazy, still a hack."

"Hit me," Air Strike said. He swept up his card. "Granted, he threw around a lot of power to very little long-term effect."

"I'm speaking more, well, artistically," I said. Air Strike cocked an eyebrow at me. "I saw pictures and footage," I hedged. "He obviously fancies himself some sort of artiste, the ultimate performance artist. But his work, all his little tricks and set pieces, they were so...." I waved a hand vaguely.
"Derivative. And not derivative of great art, either; it was all cheap back-lot stuff, random visual gags ripped off of cheap album covers and low-budget Saturday morning cartoons," I shook my head. "It was a nightmare to deal with, I'm sure.... but for an avatar of Chaos, the guy was really unoriginal. No style at all. Draconequi must be absolutely pathetic when it comes to creativity."

Shining Armor chuckled. "Hey Long Strides... what would you have done with Discord's powers?"

The earth pony General gave a slow grin. I had learned to my surprise that the slow-talking, laconic pony had earned a reputation for being a startlingly clever practical joker... all the more effective because you never expected it out of the laid-back fellow. His pranks were rare, but epic. "Oh, the possibilities," he said. "'Smore like what I wouldn't do.... I really don't know. Probably something with sovereign glue and the Rear Echelon desk jockeys..... how about you, Ma'am?"

Cresting Wave put a hoof to her chin and smiled. "I suppose I'd do the cliche', and make all the fish in the ocean fly," she said. "tropical fish swimming down main street in Canterlot, dolphins leaping through Cloudsdale airspace..."

"That's actually rather picturesque," I said. "Any particular reason?"

Cresting Wave smiled. "Sometimes it's a little tiresome having to be wheeled about in a rain barrel," she said, flapping her tailfin.

Air Strike started to chuckle into his cards. This was going to be interesting; when it came to humor Air Strike had a mean streak that went all the way up. "I know one thing I'd have done," he said.

"What?" Cresting Wave asked.

"That chocolate rain thing? I woulda given 'em a couple of hours of that. Then... after everyone was used to running round guzzling out of puddles...." he paused.

"....well?" Cresting Wave pressed.

His grin was all shark. "Switched it out for a couple hours of fertilizer."

I joined in the vocalizations of disgust around the table. The crusty old airpony just shortlived at our discomfiture. "'Always with the potty humor," I said, giving the chuckling pegasus the gimlet eye. "I'm starting to develop my suspicions about what really caused the conflict before the first hearthwarming day.... and it hinges on how your Cloudsdale plumbers dealt with their blackwater."

That shut him up. The general scowled at me. "Hey, now, we're no bunch of dirty birds..."

A puzzled look crossed Cresting Wave's face. "How do they deal with it, anyway?" she said. A momentary lull struck as everyone present got a thoughtful look on their face, then turned to the lone pegasus at the table.

Shining Armor gazed off in the distance in horror. "I'm never going walking in a spring shower ever again," he said dismally.

"I said HEY now---!"

"Well, defend yerself, already," Long Strides said. "How DO they deal with it in Cloudsdale?"

"You know darn well how we deal with it, Ground Pounder," Air Strike snapped, clearly irritated that the joke had turned on him. "We dessicate it."
"You mean dry it out?"

Air Strike nodded curtly. "Dry it out, sterilize it--- you'd be amazed how sanitary something is after you run it through a few lightning bolts--- break it down, box it up and sell it as fertilizer." He shrugged his wings. "By the time they're done processing it, it's this white, granulated powder, so nobody gets squicked out by it."

"So that's what that 'Pegasus Quality' plant food is mah sister raves about," Long Strides said, bemused. "Seriously... you take it and sell it as..."

"Fertilizer." Air Strike said. He shrugged again. "Or chemicals for fireworks." He looked up as I facepalmed. "What?"

I looked at him between my fingers. "I just had this horrible mental image of a pegasus tearing across the sky with multicolored flames coming out of his---"

"HEY now!" Air Strike barked. "There's a lady present at the table---!" Of course the lady in question was now laughing so hard she was in danger of sloshing all the water out of her barrel. She wiped her eyes (Sea ponies had tear ducts, who knew). "Now I'm never going to be able to watch a Wonderbolts show again without that image in my mind..." she giggled.

It only took a moment for each of us to remember the last airshow we'd seen... with the titular Pegasi tearing through the sky.... trailing pyrotechnic clouds behind them.... and the rest of us were doubled over as well, racked between laughing our plots off and being horrified that we found it so funny. Shining Armor had it the worst. "I'm too young and innocent to be associating with you horrible ponies," he whined, covering his eyes with his pastern. "I need a grownup!"

"We ARE grownups!" I said in my deepest voice.

"Argh!"

When we finally simmered down, Air Strike was still scowling at the rest of us. Pegasi really did have issues with cultural pride. Sometimes it was like being surrounded by Angry Young Black Men in pony suits. "So this is pick on the Pegasi day?" he groused.

"Hey, friend, you went there, we just followed the trail you blazed," Long Strides drawled.

"Well how do you all deal with it?" Air Strike said. He pointed an accusing hoof at Cresting Wave. "I especially want to hear from you, Miss Admiral of the Waves."

Long Strides shrugged. "Modern Plumbing, o' course.... failin' that, dig a hole an' bury it."

"More or less the same here," Cresting Wave said.

I was puzzled. "How does that possibly work underwater?" I asked.

Cresting Wave looked up and blushed a bit. "Oh, well, there are differences, obviously," she said. "For one thing, we, um, don't--- " her blush deepened.

"You don't urinate?" I hazarded a guess. She gestured to me in the affirmative, regaining her composure. "You have no idea how perplexing that was," she said. "I have a granddaughter who's a land pony.... Son married an earth pony girl, quite the stir, that was..... I was foalsitting her one day and couldn't for the life of me figure out what she meant about 'needing to go Number One or
"Number Two...." She shook her head and chuckled. "Any way, our, ah, waste is solid, and far heavier than water. Comes out like little hard pebbles." Everyone else at the table, myself included, flinched. "We more or less bury it in deep holes."

"How did we get on this topic?" Shining Armor said, rolling his eyes.

"What, afraid we'll start querying about unicorn biological functions next?" Air Strike snarked. Shining Armor glared at him.

"I could crack a joke about unicorns and rainbows, but you don't have the cultural references to get it," I said. This earned me a glare of my own. Pegasi weren't the only ones sensitive about their pony ethnicity; Unicorns, regardless of how powerful or weak their manipulation of the morphic resonance field was, were physically the least strong of the pony races. The absolute difference was fairly small, but it was enough that they got typecast as, well, pansies. (The behavior of certain pony aristocracy didn't help matters much.) They were very very touchy about it, which of course only made matters worse.

"Oh you gotta figure they have some fancy magical whup de do to take care of things when nature calls..." Long Strides grinned.

"Assuming they 'go' at all," Air Strike said.

"And how do you suppose they would manage that?" Cresting Wave said dryly.

I didn't even pause. "Teleport spell."

I was instantly assaulted on four fronts by a volley of cards, jelly beans, and vocal remonstrations and demands for brain bleach. What can I say? I had a reputation to uphold. I shielded myself as best I could with my hat and weathered the onslaught.

"I have an idea!" I said once the barrage let up. "Let's change the subject! Now where were we before we got to this point?"

"Talking about what each of us would do if we were Discord," Shining Armor sighed, while I gathered up the scattered cards and sloppily shuffled them together. "We never got your answer, by the way..."

I shrugged as I began dealing cards. "I'm a fiddler, I guess," I said. "I wouldn't go making random wacky changes all over the place, like he did. I like to push ONE button and see what it does before I go mashing all of them.

"Besides which, I learned long ago that real Chaos doesn't come about from running around making everything go smash. It's always...." I held my thumb and forefinger an inch apart... "Always that one, tiny, teeny little mistake, that one loose screw, that one horseshoe nail, that one flap of a butterfly's wing at just the wrong time, that unleashes a big ol' storm of Chaos. If my goal was to create the most chaos with the least effort? I'd change just one thing. One, singular, tiny thing.... then sit back and watch everything spiral out of control." I realized I was leaning a bit and shifted in my seat.

Come to think of it, everyone else seemed to be leaning askance a bit too; very odd for career military types. "One thing, huh?" Air Strike said. "Like what?" His 'chips' had slid over; he took one hoof and patiently scooted them back into a pile.

"Like a single constant. Like..." there was a click. A single jellybean fell out of the bowl in the middle of the table and rolled its merry way to Air Strike's side of the table and off into his lap.
Slowly, as if that were a signal, all the loose candies piled on the table began to roll across the circular tabletop to where the Pegasus general sat. "...like gravity," I finished, befuddled. We all watched, mesmerized, as a cascade of jellybeans poured off the table. The cards began to slide across the slick surface as well. At this point we were all leaning at roughly fifteen degree angles off plumb. Salt water sloshed out of Cresting Wave's wheeled barrel; the chairs and table began to slide---

"What the blazes--? Hang on everyone!" Air Strike shouted. All around us everything was suddenly askew. Pictures on the walls swung loose. The chandelier overhead, chiming and creaking ominously, swung towards the South wall and pointed there as fixed in its gravity defying angle as a compass needle. As for us, well, every loose object, including our furniture, our jellybeans, our cards, and ourselves went sliding on the suddenly sloped floor to the far end of the room.

Air Strike managed to get aloft and dragged Long Strides aloft by the forehooves as well, getting both of them out of the way of the tumbling furniture and bric a brac before it squashed them against the wall. Cresting Wave tumbled from her barrel, water and all; Shining Armor, clever boy, caught her and most of her water supply in a force field bubble moments before the barrel smashed against the wall.

He and I were not so fortunate; I landed on, and in, most of the shattered furniture and fixtures, and subsequently he landed on top of me. We both were knocked windless by the impact. Still, even after being smashed into a pile of broken furniture the Captain of the Guard's control over the Sea Pony's life-saving bubble never wavered. Shining Armor's tenacity was something to admire.

Of course we weren't exactly in any mood to be patting each other on the back. By divine providence we'd avoided major injury, but we were both hurting quite severely. Shining Armor and I groaned and dug our way out of the mess to stand, wobbly-legged, one foot on the floor, the other on the wall. "What the heck happened?" Shining Armor groaned.

"The castle fell over!" Long Strides said as he and Air Strike set down.

Cresting Wave rapped against the wall of her bubble and pointed. "No it didn't," she said. We all looked; the French doors on the East wall had been left open to let a bit of breeze in. Through them we could see the balcony that overlooked the scenic vista of Equestria. The balcony, like the room, was tilted at a twenty or thirty degree angle from horizontal. But so was the horizon beyond it. "The Castle didn't tilt," Shining Armor gulped. Gravity did."

Now that we were settled against a stable wall ourselves, I could hear sounds of mayhem throughout the palace. Sounds of things breaking, furniture sliding and smashing.... ponies screaming in panic. Basically the entire castle, every single floor, was a meticulously polished Southward-facing slope some twenty or so degrees steep. Anything that wasn't nailed down was now illustrating that fact empirically.

I retrieved my cane and edged over to the door in the Western side of the room, the one that opened onto the hallway. I stuck my head out into the hallway. I was just in time to see a hapless earth pony chambermaid 'up slope' lose her precarious perch in a doorframe and come sliding down.... with a dislodged grand piano and a tumbling china cabinet in close pursuit. The poor girl was sure to be crushed!

With a burst of pure adrenaline-induced reflexes, I reached out and snagged her by the hoof with my cane as she slid past. I yanked her in through the doorway, and out of the path of the plummeting piano by mere inches. She clung to me with all four hooves as the runaway grand piano smashed and bonged its way down the hall past us. The smashup when it reached the end far below sounded spectacular.
I looked down at the periwinkle mare clinging to me, her eyes squeezed shut. "Are you all right?" I asked.

She looked up at me with wide indigo eyes. "Vous avez sauvé ma vie, M'sieu...Merci, merci beaucoup--- ah??" she blinked in surprise... and what seemed obvious disappointment... to see her rescuer wasn't, after all, a pony. Ah me. That cut to the quick, it did. And French, no less; right down to the little french maid outfit---

"Ah, le singe parle d'un autre monde! Merci Beaucoup, M'sieu Singe..." and she gave me a peck on the cheek.

I'm sure it was a moment or two before my brain finished derailing. I just stared at the filly in my lap, my eyebrows climbing off the top of my head. Fortunately my mental vapor-lock was broken when Air Strike began bellowing. "Cannonball! Shooting Star! Where the---" several exceedingly non-children's-show-friendly perjoratives followed-- "are you two??"

Two pegasi came flying into the room, hovering in midair. They saluted sharply. "Sorry, sir, we had to come to the aid of a couple of civilians who, er, fell past us," one said. The general grunted, seeming to accept the excuse. "All right soldier. Get to the barracks, get everypony aloft who isn't already. I mean everyone, I don't care if they're riding a desk or in the brig! I want them airborne and airlifting civilians to safety. Get the Princess's zeppelin aloft while you're at it, and commandeer anything that's airworthy too. There's probably hundreds of ponies hanging from rafters and windowsills out there. Get them down. No broken eggs on my watch, you hear?" Cannonball saluted and shot out of the window. "Shooting Star, convey any orders General Long Strides here has to his staff. What you got for 'em, Strides?"

Long Strider looked up at the hovering pegasus. "Get down to Ground Pounder HQ, get Sergeant Hillbilly and tell him I said he's in charge of evacuation. He is to start with the South side of town, below the castle. He is to drag his sorry mountain-bred plot and all his cliff-climbing friends out, secure whatever climbing gear he deems necessary for the job and start getting the population evacuated to the East or West as fast as he can."

"The east or west, sir?"

"This castle wasn't designed to hang sideways, flypony," Long Strides said. "I want the civilians to safety before this overgrown chunk of architecture decides to pull up roots and move south." Perhaps I imagined it, but at that moment the stone and marble walls around us seemed to give off a deep, almost subsonic groan. Shooting star saluted and was gone like his namesake.

Shining Armor was using his own means of communication; he'd produced a small pocket mirror and was shouting instructions into it. "---Send Alpha and Beta teams to locate the Princesses," he said. "Anypony else with wings I want in the air, helping the Air Force rescue the stranded. Put all our unicorns to work reinforcing the castle. ---- With cohesion spells, guardsman! Cohesion spells, magic webbing, chewing gum, anything they can think of! And send some pegasi here--- northwest tower, fourth floor. We need to evacuate Counselor Arcturus. ----To somewhere outside the range of this, this gravity warp, whatever it is! And get me word on how far that range IS." Almost as an afterthought he added "And while you're at it, send someone to haul OUR plots out of here." He tucked the mirror back in his uniform.

"Handy," I noted, referring to the mirror.

"Junk," Shining Armor said irritably. "Magic Mirrors only work in pairs. I'd have to carry one for every person I wanted to talk to. I only had two--- and the one to Celestia is broken."
"Haven't they gotten those Earth-style radios to you yet?" I said, trying to distract myself from.... well, take a list: the tilting gravity, the faint sounds of distress and panic echoing through the halls, the rather bemusing issue of the French maid sitting in my lap.... I had pushed consistently for Celestia and Luna to upgrade their forces' communication technology to at least mid twentieth century, and it was frustrating that they hadn't adopted them yet.

Shining Armor shook his head. "They're still fiddling about," he said. "Deciding who in the chain of command needs one first, how the protocols for their use will go, which political friend-of-a-friend gets the contract to make them..." his eyes rolled. "Right now it's spinning in a circle in committee while everypony tries to figure out how to get all of the credit if it goes right and none of the blame if it goes wrong."

Cresting Wave chuckled cynically. "And while a few dozen gravy-train ponies try and figure out how to stick their hoof in the pie..... I hear there's at least one pony insisting that it has to have a working translation spell in every language, including Fancy, Gryphon, and Native Bison, as well as be able to work underwater!" At my look, she noted, "I lead ponies who work on board boats, Arcturus. If those radios are working underwater, I've done something wrong. Besides which, I know enough to know that water and electricity don't play nice." she splashed a bit for emphasis. "and noone can get it through the wonks' heads that radio waves don't propagate well underwater, no matter what you do."

"So rather than give us something now, that does what we need, we're sitting on our hooves waiting for them to give us something that costs ten times as much that they couldn't make work with a genie and three wishes," Air Strike snorted. "I can only imagine what all this REMFO incompetence looks like to a war-ready race like your own," he said.

I sighed. "It looks incredibly familiar. Remind me to tell you a little story about the Sergeant York anti-aircraft weapon sometime. or the Bradley fighting vehicle. or the M-16......" I casually wondered whether a copy of "The Pentagon Wars" or the book it was based on had been pulled through the gate yet. "Wait, what about your dragonflame lighter?" I knew for a fact that higher ranking officers carried a small cigarette-lighter-like bottle filled with dragonflame for emergency messages to Celestia.

They all shook their heads. "Got broken in the Changeling invasion," Shining Armor said. "Still waiting for a replacement."

"Mine's empty," Long Strides said. "Used it up ages ago. They only carry about three or four squirts."

"I don't carry one," Cresting Wave said. "For obvious reasons."

"Sat on mine," Air Strike grumbled. "Burns right up my--- anyway, waste of time. Messages only go one-way. They're more for last resort situations."

I sighed. Thousands of years, and they still hadn't managed to organize a reliable communications system faster or more advanced than hoof-delivered, written messages.

"Qu'est-ce qui ne va pas?" the pony in my lap asked. I looked at her. "I sincerely wish I understood a word you were saying, Ma'am," I said. There you go. Communications failures all around.

There was an almost inaudible groaning. The world's center of gravity shifted another few degrees.

There was a thunder of wings outside the balcony window. One of Celestia's enormous flying carriages pulled up alongside the balcony--- on an even keel with gravity, unlike the castle itself. A
pair of guard ponies flew in. "We arrived as soon as we could, Sirs, Ladies," one said. "Who all do we have to evacuate here?"

"Just the six of us here," Shining Armor said. "The generals, the Admiral and I, Counselor Arcturus, and Miss, ah...."

"Violette," the mare in my arms said.

The guards cocked their eyebrows at the sight of me holding the damsel in distress but said nothing; I'm positive one of them winked and gave me the pony equivalent of a thumbs up, though. "Yes sir. The Princesses have set up a base of operations on a cloud over the city-- er, next to the city---" he gave up. "Nearby. We have instructions to bring you to them, Mr. Arcturus included." He paused. "Shall the lady be accompanying you, Mr. Arcturus, or should we drop her off..."

She seemed to get the gist. She threw her forehooves around my neck and widened her dewy eyes at the soldiers. "Messieurs, s'il vous plaît, laissez-moi rester avec le Singe, je me sentirais beaucoup plus sûr!"

This time the guards DID grin and wink. I couldn't even manage to roll my eyes, having to settle for a "oh dear lord help' bewildered basset-hound look. "Come with us, sirs and ladies. We'll get you to Princess Celestia and Princess Luna right away."

After a few minutes' precarious clambering over the canted balcony, we were all ensconced in the royal chariot and speeding on our way. My card-playing partners' subordinates were out in force; though I could hear noises of panic everywhere, at the same time everywhere I looked I saw ponies in uniform swinging into action--- pegasi were busy plucking ponies from precarious perches, while unicorns methodically cast what had to be cloud-walking spells on the rescuees so they could be transferred to countless clouds now floating around the tilted city. Earth ponies were down amongst the tilted streets, hanging on grappling hooks or dangling from ropes as they freed other civilians trapped by debris. Still more unicorns were down there as well, casting reinforcement spells on the dangerously tilted buildings or anchoring loose property (carts, wagons, loose furniture) with sovereign glue.

Celestia and Luna had set up base on a large cumulus cloud floating just beyond the city limits. There was a full triage hospital already set up there, ponies with medical cutie marks tending to the injured. It seemed to be mostly minor injuries, thank goodness; ponies are a sturdy lot. Celestia was in the center of a cluster of armored pegasi, issuing orders, messengers coming and going like darting arrows; Luna was flying back and forth over the city, pulling ponies to safety a dozen at a time with her magic. Her bat-winged Night Guard were in attendance as well, diving to the rescue again and again. In spite of the circumstances, it brought a smile to my face to hear the cheers greeting the heroics of the Court of the Night and their Princess; Luna would be walking on cloud nine for days.

We landed (docked?) on Celestia's cloud-base; unicorns hastily cast the cloudwalking spell on each of us as we disembarked, whether we needed it or not. I kept a tight grip on my cane all the same. After my last visit to Cloudsdale I'd made the mistake of dropping my cane..... it fell right through the cloud cover and plummeted to the Earth, never to be seen again. I'd gained a new cane, this time taking the precaution of having a few extra spells on it--- including a permanent cloud-walking enchantment. It had become my security blanket whenever I visited Cloudsdale. Especially after an incident where I fell through a thin patch of cloud and found myself dangling over the Everfree by the handle.

We made our way hastily to Celestia's side. The Bearers of the Elements were there, of course, doing their best to help. Rarity and Fluttershy were tending to the injured; Pinkie Pie seemed to be cheering up some colts and fillies who were discomfited by the turn of events. Rainbow Dash and Twilight
seemed to be overseeing the forming and placement of more emergency-platform clouds. "Nice work," I noted. "How do you get 'em to stay level?"

The unicorn looked up from the cloud she was enchanting. "Oh, hi, Arthur," she said. "Thanks. The hard part was unfixing their balance centers so they would move like a universal-joint pendulum--"

"Yeah yeah yeah," Rainbow Dash said, swooping in to push the cloud away to a new quadrant. "Less nerd words, more cloud platforms, Twi!"

Twilight just shot a glare after the departing pegasus and turned back to us. "It's been a nuthouse up here," she said. "We were on our way here for a little shopping trip when we suddenly noticed the train was going up a lot steeper grade than it used to." She noticed the wide-eyed chambermaid pressed to my side. "Oh, and who's this?"

I gestured at the awkwardly close-pressing castle maid. "A filly I hooked up with after our card game--literally. She was taking an unscheduled downhill skiing break in the castle; I snagged her with my cane before she ended up flattened in a hallway sconce. Twilight, Violette. Violette, Twilight Sparkle."

At the mention of Twilight's name, Violette's eyes lit up. She beamed at Twilight and shook her hoof demurely. "Mademoiselle Sparkle? vous devez être les porteurs des éléments d'harmonie! Bonjour, c'est une bonne chose d'avoir enfin l'occasion de vous rencontrer." She gestured to me. "Êtes-vous amis avec M'sieu le Singe? Il a sauvé ma vie plus tôt." She blushed a bit and glanced up at me. "Il a été très courageux...."

Twilight gave her the classic Sparkle awkward grin. "Aaaand I don't understand a word you're saying," she said. "Sorry..."

"I can!" from behind the cloudmaker came a familiar little yellow filly with an enormous bow. She hopped over to us and gave a pony curtsey to Violette. "Bonjour, Mademoiselle Violette, mon nom est L'Fleur d'Pomme. Comment allez-vous?"


Twilight stared at Applebloom. "You can speak Fancy?"

"R'member when I got the Cutie Pox?" Applebloom grinned and rapped on her own noggin with one hoof. "Guess some of it stuck."

I looked at Violette. "Ah, tell you what. Why don't you--" I pointed at her "go with Applebloom here?" I waved in a general Bloom-ish direction.

"Venez avec moi, s'il vous plaît." Applebloom said

Violette bit her lip. "...Certainement." She followed after the Apple filly, casting one last look over her shoulder at me.

I kept my poker face till she was out of earshot. Soon she was chattering happily in "Fancy" with Applebloom. I sighed in relief and turned back to the others.

Who were, of course, all watching and grinning. "Who's yer new friend, Artie?" Pinkie Pie said with a very uncharacteristic smirk. Applejack and Twilight were grinning as well.

"Just a young lady who I got out of a pinch earlier," I said smoothly, carefully setting my hat back upon my head. Applejack made an appraising sound and grinned even wider. "Made an impression,
looks like," she said.

Pinkie Pie giggled. "Yeah. It looks like Miss Fancy has taken a fancy to you!"

I scowled at them. "Not funny, Pinkie."

"Who's jokin'? Anyone can see you got yore hoof in the door," Applejack said. "At least take a chance and tip yore hat to 'er."

"Go on," Air Strike urged as well, chuckling. "Why not try to make a little time...?"

I found myself growing irritated. "It's not nice to tease someone about..... a ridiculous impossibility like that," I said dourly. Honestly. The very notion--

Before anyone else could say anything else silly, Celestia made her way over to us. "Greetings, Generals, Admiral, Counselor," she said. "I am relieved to see you all unharmed."

Air Strike was the first to speak up. "Can you tell us what's happening here, Princess?"

"Not much more than you already obviously know," she said. "About half an hour ago, the direction of gravity began to shift, all over the city." she shook her head. "The entire city, and everything a mile outside it, is acting as if it were on a forty five degree slope. The Unicorn University has been going mad trying to figure out why..."

I had a flashback to our conversation over the card table and felt a finger of frost slide down my spine.

"If my goal was to create the most chaos with the least effort? I'd change just one thing. One, singular, tiny thing.... then sit back and watch everything spiral out of control."

"One thing, huh?" Air Strike said. "Like what?" His 'chips' had slid over; he took one hoof and patiently scooted them back into a pile.

"Like a single constant. Like... Gravity...."

"It has to be a coincidence," I muttered.

Long Strides overheard me. "Has to be," he agreed.

Celestia frowned at us in puzzlement. "Our card game," Cresting Wave volunteered. "We were all discussing what sort of things Discord could have done."

"And this came up?" Celestia asked.

Cresting Wave nodded. "Just as the whole world started to tip sideways." She gave Celestia a sidelong glance. "Just be thankful it wasn't Air Strike's version of Chocolate Rain instead...."

"What--" Celestia started.

I held up a hand. "You don't wanna know," I said. "Trust me on this one, Princess. I wanted to know. He told me, and now I'm telling you, you don't wanna know."

Celestia held up a hoof. "...I don't want to know."

"Good to know."
There was a sudden rumble of noise from the city below. We all looked down. Ponies were suddenly rushing about in a panic; I couldn't see what it was at first, but then I saw the still loose wagons and trash bins and junk in the streets, and no too few ponies, start to slowly slide. At the same moment I noticed that the cloud we were standing on--- in fact all the clouds--- were changing their orientation to the horizon. Below us the loose objects in the street began sliding Northward. The climbing ponies were now dangling from their climbing ropes in whole new directions; the hovering airships had to reorient to avoid the tilting buildings suddenly swaying back towards them. "Blast, the center must be shifting again!" Air Strike shouted.

Soon, every loose object in the city had tumbled to the Northern wall. There were shouts and groans and quite a bit of pungent language from the ponies still below. Luna flew in for a landing next to us. "Discord, it has to be, Sister."

Celestia shook her head again. "That was the first thing we checked, Luna. Discord is still trapped within his statue."

"Hey Everypony!" Everyone looked up. It was Applebloom. She was dangerously near the edge of the cloud, pointing down. "It's changing directions again," she said. We all looked; the cascade of loose debris to the North slowed, stopped....reversed..... then slowed to a halt again; battered ponies still trapped on the ground shakily got to their feet. I looked up; the horizon was level once again.

"Is it over?" Somepony asked.

I didn't venture an opinion.

Slowly, gravity began shifting to the West. Then, after a brief eternity, it shifted just as slowly to the East.... slowly, the horizon began to roll continuously, like the rim of a bowl spinning and wobbling on a tabletop. It was like watching a bored child shake an ant farm, I reflected.

This was not a happy thought.

Just then a pair of pegasi ponies came gliding in, bearing a rather battered looking pony in a lab coat between them. I recognized him as one of the researchers from the Gate laboratory. Celestia quickly cast the cloudwalking spell on him; the soldiers set him down at her feet. "Majesty!" he gulped. "We have an incident at the lab!"

Celestia looked at him. "Does it have any bearing on... this?" She pointed to the rolling horizon.

The scientist swallowed hard. "Indubitably," he said. "We had another gate eruption, just before all this started. It--- it looked like a small one---" He gulped again. "I was only able to escape just a short while ago---"

"Did something come through?" Celestia demanded.

The scientist shook his head. "Some... SomeONE." He swallowed nervously. "He came through in a gate-bubble.... He's still there in the room, last I saw, just-- floating there."

Celestia's face was a thundercloud. "WHO?"

The researcher's voice was nearly a whisper. "A Draconequus," he said. "A new one."

There was a split second of utter silence. "Guards! Elements! To our side!" Celestia barked. The Bearers and every soldier on the cloud clustered in close to Celestia and Luna. "Together now, Luna-- follow my lead--" Luna nodded grimly. Their horns met, flared with light. There was a blinding flash of light---
---and the world disappeared.

When I finally shook off my disorientation, I found myself standing in the chamber of the World Window. I stumbled slightly, a bit shellshocked. Why had the Princesses brought me along...? I must have been standing too close, I realized; I was certainly singed in a few spots--- the sort of thing one saw with an accidental teleport.

The room was a mess. All the equipment in the enormous stone cavern was swept to the north wall in a heap. There were a few guards and researchers still there, scattered among the wreckage, imprisoned in forcefield bubbles, rolling about like hamster balls. The Window was still in the center of the room, but that was not what drew the eye. I had just enough time to make out a silvery bubble hovering above the Window, and strange, distorted figure within.

I had apparently missed the traditional "By the Power of the Elements" Heroic Speech... assuming there had been one. The girls were already in formation and powering up the Elements. Luna and Celestia had teleported to opposite sides of the room, triangulating on the target still hovering in the center, their horns blazing up. The guards were scattered around the room as well; everything with a bow, spear, or horn was leveling on the figure hovering in the center of the room. The full power of the sun, the moon, and the elements of Harmony struck at the same time, with a twenty-unicorn spell volley and a few hundred arrows and spears for seasoning.

All Hell broke loose.

I can't even describe the experience coherently. It was an... eruption of light and sound, light so intense I could feel it pressing against my skin, sound so primal my bones rattled. It was a sensation so powerful it blotted itself out; It struck me blind, mute, insensate, incapable of feeling or thought.

The first sensation that gelled for me was the sensation of my own feeble skull bouncing against the floor. My first thought, compressed into a tiny seed, was how peculiar, *I can actually feel my head bouncing on something. I never would have thought it would bounce so many times, either....* From there consciousness bloomed outward in disorientation, confusion, and yes, pain.

I opened my eyes. Yes, this was the floor. It was cold and flat and made of stone, just like I remembered it. I lifted my head, groaning. Oversized men such as myself do not respond well to going splat on the floor.

The Princesses, the mane six, all the guards--- they were all imprisoned, each in their own glowing bubble. They rolled on the floor, sprawled helplessly inside them, apparently unable to keep their footing on the slippery insides of their spherical prisons.

Peculiar. Why wasn't I inside one, myself?

I groaned and slowly levered myself to a sitting position with my cane, clutching my battered head and reflecting that I could use a few extra hands to clutch here and there, and got my first good look at our adversary. he was right where we left him, hovering inside a silvery, rippling gate-bubble just above the World Window, somehow sitting crosslegged inside its spherical chamber. He was holding what looked like an overlarge snow globe in one hand; a closer glimpse would reveal it to be a perfect model of the city of Canterlot. Gravity dipped and swayed as he rolled the glass globe in his talons.

Yes. He was a draconequus. Just not the one we expected.

Oh the jigsaw-piece body was there, as was the long snakelike form, and certainly the smug smirk was familiar enough. But it took a second glance to see that this mix-and-match monster was made
from pieces out of a different box. the head was less like a pony's and more like a dragon, and the grin was full of sharp fangs. Two tusks jutted upward from the lower lip. One horn was a bull's horn, the other curled like a ram's horn over his ear. Instead of a mane he had a long, ribbed dorsal fin, like a sea serpent. his wings were larger than Discord's, probably because one belonged to a dragon and the other to a vulture. One forelimb was an eagle's claw, like Discord's, but the other was the claw of a reptile. His back legs were from a rhino and a duck, and his tail was long and segmented and tipped with a scorpion's barb. And his eyes were blood red and slit like a serpent's. Altogether he looked bigger, and far, far more dangerous than Discord did.

Celestia was sitting up and attempting to assert herself. Her voice was muffled slightly by her bubble prison. "Who are you, creature? Name yourself!"

The draconequus didn't speak. His poisonous grin merely spread wider. He took the snow globe in his claws and rolled it suddenly to the left. All the ponies suddenly went tumbling across the room like hamsters in runaway play-balls, yelling in alarm, and piled up in a heap against the wall. I fell to my knees as my friends went tumbling past.

The villain chuckled in amusement; The bone-chilling sound seemed to echo from everywhere. His bubble slowly floated down to the floor and across the room so he could admire his catch.

I blame it on instinct. I don't know whether it was the leer on his face or the sight of dozens of cute, helpless pastel colored ponies moaning in pain, and I definitely attribute my own croggled state to my inability to rethink my choices. But I succumbed to my first knee-jerk reaction, which was when one is struck, lash out. I stumbled to my feet and, aided by the slope of the floor, flung my immense frame at him.

He must have heard me coming. To be fair, four hundred pounds of wheezing couch-whale thundering towards you is rather hard to miss. He turned and looked back at me with an expression of absolutely epic surprise, just as I brought my cane down in a two-handed, stabbing blow.

To both our astonishment my cane pierced his bubble like it was made of water, and with the full force of the blow and all my weight behind it, I rammed the foot of my walking stick right into his eye. He had just enough time to distort his face in a shriek of pain---

Then his ruptured container exploded. It burst with a flash of light and a report that knocked me once again flat on my back, and sprayed liquidy bubble glimmer all over the room that splattered and then shimmered to nothingness. The gate-bubble and its villainous passenger were gone.

As I lay there stunned, something roundish and weighty struck me in the breadbasket, winding me and making me kick my feet up in the air. By instinct I grasped at it; it was the Canterlot snow-globe. By God's grace it had landed right side up on my ponderous belly and now sloshed gently in my grip.

I panicked momentarily; I literally had the fate of the city in my clumsy hands. But then I had an epiphany. Carefully, so as not to send the city careening again, I lifted up the globe till I could see the underside. There it was, a tiny rubber stopper holding the water... or what I suspected was anything but water.... inside. I carefully pulled the stopper out with my thumbnail and let the globe drain out.

As I suspected, the "Water" drained out, fading into glimmery ripples and then into nothingness right in midair.... just like the Draconequus' bubble. Liquified time-space of some sort? Everyone present could feel it as much-harried Gravity settled with a cosmic sigh of relief back to its normal, unidirectional nature. I let my head fall back and let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding.

The bubble-prisons all flickered and vanished. The ponies crowded around my prostrate form. "Well
DONE, Sir Artur!" the Night Princess laughed, clapping her forehooves.

"Yeah though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for the dumb sucker is downhill of me," I muttered.

"Stand ready, everyone, we're not clear yet." Celestia warned. She cast her gaze around the room, wary. The guardsmen and soldiers stood at the alert.

"Hold, Sister," Luna said. "I have devised a spell for detecting the presence of Discord. 'Twill work on this knave as well, methinks." Her horn began to glow.

We all waited for a brief eternity. "Luna?" Celestia finally inquired. Luna's horn faded and she shook her head. "Naught but traces of chaos magic," she said. "Our foe is gone from this realm--- and methinks even from this reality."

The soldiers were busy being chivalrous and helping the Bearer and the battered lab workers to their hooves. "Y'mean.... we beat 'im?" Applejack said in disbelief.

"With a walking cane?" Twilight asked her sarcastically.

"Yeah, that's a bit too good to be true, innit," Applejack muttered.

"You mean he just.... left?" one of the guards said, baffled, as he and a friend offered a hoof to me and pulled me to my feet. I retrieved my cane, noting that the rubber ferrule on the end was missing. I hoped he had fun fishing that chunk of rubber out of his eye.

"Thus it would seem," Luna said. "They said he came through the World Window. We have long suspected that Discord came from a realm outside time and space, someplace between the true universes. He must have returned there, whence he came. Mayhap the wretched creature saw the portal and was drawn here by idle curiosity... ?"

"Heh, well, getting a poke in the eye probably cured him of that," Rainbow Dash snickered.

There was a rumbling sound from the Window. Everyone tensed, magic flared. The surface of the mirror rippled like an agitated bowl of gelatin. It gave a sound like a bronx cheer and spat a small gatebubble into the room, then went still, a seemingly solid mirror yet again. The gate bubble burst with a wet pop, and four small cards fluttered to the floor---landing right at my feet. Warily, I picked them up and examined them.

"What is it, Arthur?" Twilight asked, curious. She stepped closer, peering at the cards.

"It's a warning," I said. "Or a threat. Or a challenge, depending on how you look at it." I could almost feel the facts tumbling into place in my head. "Our visitor wasn't here by accident. He already knows about Equestria, and has been doing the cosmic equivalent of listening at doors and peeping through keyholes." I turned the cards over in my hands. "He was apparently listening in at our card game today, and probably took offense when I disparaged Discord as an unoriginal hack. So he decided to take one of my off-the-cuff thoughts about what a clever Draconequus could do, and run with it... and mucked about with Canterlot's gravity."

"This is a little parting message from him to me. One he knew only a human-- one who played cards-- would get. It's a reference to an old bit of human folklore." I fanned the cards out so that everyone could see them. "Ace of Spades and Clubs, Eight of Spades and Clubs. Aces and Eights.

"....the Dead Man's Hand."
Celestia's face was stony. "Gather the mages and the researchers, all of them who are still on their hooves," she said. "I want them working round the clock to shut the World Window down. I want that Gate closed!"

1) I had taken some time ago to wearing a panama hat wherever I went. It was sharp, stylish, and protected my bald spot from Equestrian sunburn.
The Princesses were on the horns of a dilemma.

It goes almost without saying that from the moment the unnamed draconequus disappeared, Celestia and Luna’s first impulses had been to put Canterlot, and all of Equestria, on high alert. But to what end? On three different occasions in the recent past, Equestria had been put in imminent peril; first by Nightmare Moon, second by Discord, third by Chrysalis. And in all three cases, mobilizing the traditional armed forces had been worse than ineffective. To put troops out in the streets--- troops that had been shown to be ineffective against the threat--- would merely inflame the panic.

Yet to do nothing....

I watched in grim dismay as the ponies, soldier, scientist, and sage alike, scrambled around the chamber, setting equipment aright, dashing back and forth for more orders, or tending the injuries (thankfully minor) of those present. I was in pretty bad need of some liniment myself; I felt like someone had used me for a hacky sack. Oh, I was going to feel like a plank of knotted pine by morning.

Celestia looked distressed. More distressed than I’d ever seen her; even the faint worry she showed was stunning in absence of her seemingly unbreakable serenity. And Luna... I don't know what Discord did to her, personally, in his last two invasions, but Discord was a bully, and bullies love nothing more than preying on the weakest in a group. She looked terribly frightened and vulnerable next to her sister.

Worse, I could see something else in their faces. They... WE... were facing an enemy who could be anywhere and nowhere, one that had shrugged off the power of both princesses and the Elements of Harmony. Anything could go now, and they were trapped by their indecision.

"Well, you’re a Royal Counselor, fool. Counsel, already." I stepped forward, biting my lip. At the least I might jar them out of their shock, get them moving in some direction.... "Majesties," I said. They both whipped their heads around to look at me. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't know, Sir Arcturus," Celestia said. "Is there anything you can do?" She shook her head. "Forgive me; I did not mean for it to sound like that. Your friendship and counsel have been of great value to us. But this..." she shook her head again. "We are facing a Draconequus, Sir Arcturus; a creature of Chaos. One seemingly more powerful than Discord. He can take a thousand forms, strike from anywhere or nowhere. Even if he does not strike he will soon hold all of Equestria in the grip of terror. I doubt there is anything in your Human experience to even compare to it."

"An enemy who takes a thousand forms, who can strike from anywhere or nowhere... who will hold the nation in terror. I felt pinpricks of familiarity go jiggidy jig down my spine. Not terror. Terror. I hesitated, for a second--- "Not quite true," I said.

"A little over a decade ago, my country was attacked by terrorists. They lived among us for years. Then, one day, as planned, they hijacked passenger jets full of innocent people, took the controls, and flew them headlong into buildings. Three thousand people died that day. " I had their attention
now; their full, wide eyed attention. "We were plunged into a war.... one that will probably be still going on for generations."

"We'd been attacked out of the blue. Our enemy was everywhere and nowhere. It would be months before we could even face him on the battlefield, and for all we knew he could attack again at any moment.

"What's important to us, is what my country did immediately afterward. We mobilized. As a nation. You're...." I corrected myself. "We're facing a similar situation that the President of my country did when the 9-11 attack occurred. We're dealing with an enemy that has struck, and vanished. We can't face him on the battlefield. Not yet. We need to mobilize the people...."

"To what end? Putting troops in the street---"

"I didn't say soldiers, I said people. The common ponies. You have to unite them, get them prepared....we have to rally Equestria. Get them up, and moving, and united. Prepare them for what comes next."

Celestia seemed to draw herself up at this. Her unshakable composure returned. "Of couse. Make a public announcement: we have been attacked, we are mobilizing. Keep calm and carry on. Scribe!" a unicorn magically wielding a quill and pen made his presence known. Celestia recited the pertinent points of the situation, adding some more prosaic turns of speech along the way. The scribe nodded, studiously scribbling it all down. "...good. Does that sound good to you, Luna?"

Luna nodded distractedly from where she was consulting with the Night Guard. "What? Oh yes, um, good...."

"...Signed, their royal highnesses, etcetera etcetera," Celestia concluded. "Send copies to every city, town, village and one-stop post office in Equestria," she instructed. The scribe nodded and started to trot off.

"Yes-- no wait!" I shouted. The scribe stopped. "Highness, add a second note to that. A list of things that ponies can do to prepare, in case the Draconequis returns."

Celestia looked at me with a cocked eyebrow. "How does somepony realistically prepare for Chaos?"

"Duct tape and plastic wrap," I muttered. Before she could ask I added, "Even if they can't do much or it isn't very effective, it at least gives them something to do. Better that they be busy stockpiling bottled water or something...at least give them something to keep occupied, to make themselves feel prepared, feel like they're being proactive rather than just sitting on their hooves and waiting for Chaos to fall out of the sky."

Celestia nodded. "Any suggestions?"

I plucked at my beard, thinking. "Bottled water is actually a good idea. Pony cannot live on chocolate milk alone."

"Stockpile... say, a week's worth of packaged food and water?" Celestia suggested.

"A week at least," I agreed. "Same for things like medicine, soap... anything perishable." I brooded a bit, and had a brainstorm. "Twilight!" I shouted. The purple pony was digging through some research rubble. She "eeped" and gave a little jump, then trotted over to us. "Twilight, what's the name of that spell you used to, er, un- Discord your friends?"
"Um, you mean the Memory Identity Discombobulation Spell?"

"That's the one. Princess, I'd pass a decree or an order or a Really Good Suggestion, whatever--- that every unicorn, and I mean EVERY unicorn, has to learn that spell and teach it to everypony they know. Make it clear that this spell will restore friends or loved ones who have been brain-addrled by Discord...."

"Indeed, good thinking. Once ponies learn of it there will be unicorns lined up three abreast to learn it." The scribe scribbled furiously. Too true; after the Changeling invasion, Changeling-revealing, trapping, and repelling spells had spread through the unicorn community like wildfire, and likewise anti-changeling gadgets and trinkets through the earth pony and pegasus ones. (1)

"Um, let's see... recommend traveling in groups, preferably unicorn, pegasus and earth pony. If things start getting tossed topsy turvy, What a unicorn can't deal with a pegasus or earth pony might...."

Between us we managed to hash out a quick list of things the common pony could do to prepare for another Discordian(2) attack. I had no idea how many of them were even useful or practical.... but, I reflected grimly, better that they have something to do besides wait and panic.

"We thank thee for thy counsel, Sir Arcturus," Luna said. Her gratefulness was sincere.

Their faith in me was utterly terrifying. How could simply appearing exotic, coming from a far off place, and speaking with assertion and confidence have so much influence on beings that measured their lives in millennia? Sometimes it was far more comforting to believe that Celestia and Luna were simply humoring me than to think that they were so... innocent.

Then again, this truly was the first time they had been attacked by an enemy who had not been summarily defeated. Even Chrysalis' army had eventually received a proper curb-stomping. When was the last time they had fought an enemy that lasted more than a few days? Dealing with a prolonged conflict was quite possibly long out of their personal experience.

"It will be some time before receive word back from the rest of Equestria," Celestia said. "And repairs in Canterlot are already in good hooves. For now, I think we need to spend some efforts on... gathering intelligence." She raised her voice to be heard by the ponies still scurrying about the chamber. "Gentleponies, I leave you to your task. Send word to us immediately, once the Mirror has been closed." There was a general murmur of acquiescence, and the ponies continued about their work.

"Oh, hey," I said, flagging one of the researchers down. I tossed him my cane. "Examine that. It actually struck the Draconequus, right through his defenses. Might be important."

The lab worker nodded hesitantly, then grimaced at the cane balanced on his hoof. (how DO they do that?) "there's something wet and sticky on the end," he complained.

"Vitreous humor, probably," I said.

"You mean--"

"Yeah, I dotted his eye." I heard Rainbow Dash snort and Pinkie Pie giggle at my impromptu pun. The pony gave an "eww" and gingerly carried my walking stick elsewhere.

"And I think our next step should be a little word with our resident Draconequus," Celestia said grimly. "Guards, Bearers of the Elements, if you will--" but before she could finish, two guards came galloping into the room. They knelt hurriedly before the Princesses. "Yes, what is it?" Celestia asked.
"Your majesties," one said. "We are two of the guards stationed to watch over the hedge maze."

"And what brings you here, then?" Princess Luna demanded, a trifle sternly.

"It's Discord, Princess...." the other interjected.

"...We think he's dying."

It was a strangely somber gathering in the center of the hedge maze. The princesses and their personal guards, the Bearers of the Elements, a smattering of unicorn scholars and of course my own august personage and my own entourage of bodyguards (who had wasted no time in racing to my side after the dust had settled) were gathered in a silent semicircle around Discord's petrified form. Save for the hum of analytical spells and quiet mutterings between the sages and the Princesses, it was as quiet and grim as a deathside vigil.

The old boy looked like hell. The smooth, impermeable stone of which he was made had aged, growing porous and weathered, crumbling at the corners and mouldering like poorly made masonry. Cracks and fissures had appeared, running through him. As I watched, the tip of one of his mismatched horns broke off and fell away, crumbling to dust even before it hit the ground.

"Is he... in there?" Applejack said, wincing as the horn snapped away with a sharp crack. Celestia nodded. "He is," she said. "I can sense him. As I have always been able. Since you six re-imprisoned him, he has been... quiescent. I thought him merely lying dormant; now I see he lacked the strength even to stir in his chains." The Princess sounded distressed. Enemy or not, I supposed it was a sobering thing to see a fellow "immortal" facing his final moments. I suspected she did not deal well with death.

Who am I kidding? I don't deal well with death.

It was Pinkie Pie who asked the question that was lingering like a pall over us. "Is it us?" she burst out. "Did we do it? When we zapped him with the Elements again, did we... did we k---" Her mane and tail hung limp and straight, and her eyes were flooded with tears. I could see her distress mirrored in the faces of the others. Celestia moved immediately to comfort them. She nuzzled Pinkie Pie, then drew the others in. "No, no, my little ponies," she said. "The Elements of Harmony did not do this, and neither did you. They are not killing tools."

"Then what did do this?" Twilight said.

"We do not know, Twilight Sparkle," Luna said.

"It--- it could be a trick, right?" Rainbow Dash said. She was trying to play tough, but it was obvious she was shaken by the idea that she and her friends might have played part in another being's death.

Celestia shook her head. "No, this is no trick, Rainbow Dash. He is still trapped within the statue, and his power is swiftly fading. It is even now threatening to gutter out,"

"Could we... could we try to save him...?" Fluttershy said.

"Should we?" Rarity said apprehensively. She grimaced. "Please, don't look at me like that," she said to the others. "I know we should, but--- if we do, instead of dealing with one Discord we'll end up
facing two."

"But if we don't, we lose the best source of information on this other draconequus," Twilight pointed out. "Even then we have to at least try."

"She is right, Sister," Luna said. "Even were he useless to us... for the sake of our own souls.... we should at least try."

"Try what, Luna?" Celestia said, sounding a trifle exasperated. "We know no more of draconequi than when we overthrew Discord thousands of years ago. It would be like... like asking tree surgeons to perform surgery on a pony!"

They all debated. I was only half paying attention; I was more interested in getting a closer look at the statue.

I had known since my arrival of Discord's presence in the royal gardens. I had, however, made a point to avoid approaching the statue. Whatever you may say about my species, I think we'd agree that humans are incredibly chaotic, and I did not wish to risk the off-chance that my proximity might somehow empower him or put a chink in the forces holding him prisoner.

Now, finally being within tossing distance of the creature, I found the petrified form to be eerily compelling. Without noticing, I found myself moving away from the group and stepping closer to get a better look. Mind you, I kept enough of my shiny bright cynicism polished up so that, if I so much as heard a faint chuckle on the breeze or saw an eldritch light flicker in the cracks of his stony prison, I would break land speed records running in the opposite direction.

Nevertheless, I couldn't tear my gaze away even as I stepped closer---

"Sir, look out!"

There was a cracking noise. I looked up to see that Discord's crack-riven form was slowly toppling from his pedestal straight toward me. Something shockingly strong grabbed me by my shirt collar and yanked--- Cloud Wing had darted forward and seized my shirt in his teeth, trying to drag me out of the path of the falling statue.

I all but flew backwards, landing on my rump in the grass. the statue tumbled to the ground in shattered chunks.

With a bounce and a roll, Discord's detached head landed right in my lap.

The room was bare, the walls blank and covered in plaster, the floor bald planks. Everything was dimly lit in sepia-toned light, and flickered as if illuminated by firelight... or by the stuttering of an antiquated movie projector. I lifted my hand to rub my face and saw that it was as colorless and antiqued-looking as the room around me.

"Well well well," a familiar voice said behind me. "Celestia's new pet. So we finally meet..."

I lurched to my feet and turned around to find myself facing none other than Discord. A quite non-petrified and very alive Discord.
Unlike his statue, he was only a few feet taller than myself. He seemed, in fact, shrunken, as if he had endured a long sickness. He was seated in an overstuffed chair, fingers steepled as he regarded me. Somehow he lacked solidity. It took me a moment to realize that he didn't LOOK solid. He looked, in fact, like a pen and ink drawing, devoid of color save for the sepia-toned, flickering light that infused everything. I looked around again; the room was now a vast open plain, the wooden floor stretching off into the distance---though at the same time the walls and corners of the room were clearly visible, the lone window hanging in empty air. A few cartoon-sketch clouds drifted by on the horizon.

He regarded me with mismatched eyes. "I suppose your first question is 'where am I,' " he said drolly.

I sighed. "We're not actually anywhere. This is a shared mental landscape couched in dream-metaphor and symbolism that you've established between us in order for you to convey your parting words, last wishes, final annoying mysterious revelations, 'the secret to defeating a draconequus is argh choke gurgle....' that sort of thing." I reached behind me and hooked a chair with my cane and pulled it to me. "Stop me when I get off track."

Discord's expression soured. "And you are aware of all this because---?"

"tvtripes dot com," I said drily. I snorted. "The room that is both intimate and infinite, representing the psyche; the diminished, fading look of everything; the 'antique' coloration suggesting tremendous age, the flickering lighting reminiscent of an old-time movie projector winding down.... you're not exactly subtle with your metaphors."

Discord scowled. "I can be far more creative, if you like," he said in a tone that hinted menace. A coffee table appeared between us, with a setting for tea for two. I took one cup and cheerfully knocked it back. Chocolate milk, unsurprisingly.

"I doubt it. I'm the Watcher from Beyond, remember? I watched your last little spree. It was mostly a ripoff of a Warner Brothers cartoon and that music video by Marcy Playground," I said. "You don't have to be a great artist to spot a bad one, and you're in the habit of treading old ground."

You might be asking where the hell my sense of self-preservation had gone. I was speaking to a being of terrifying and unpredictable power, who could do any number of horrible things to me with a snap of his fingers. And I was quite clearly and rudely tweaking him.

To this I say: have you ever had a particularly vivid dream? If you ever have, you'll know what I mean; you become immersed in this feeling of, I can't quite say, indestructibility; the dreamlike feeling that you could do anything you damn well pleased and get away with it. I was in that zone right then, lulled into a reckless trance by the Dreamscape's very atmosphere---conscious, but still at a point where all my inhibitions and restraints, even my sense of self-preservation had disappeared. They were about to reappear quite suddenly.

Discord gave me a humorless leer. He didn't snap his fingers; he didn't even unsteeple them. But I went rigid in my chair and cried out as a crawling pain swept over my body. A cold, crackling sensation swept over me, like the blood had turned frost-burn cold in my veins. I lifted up my arm in time to see it slowly discolor in a wave from elbow to fingertip, turning slowly grey---not the grey of someone mentally Discorded, but the veiny, cold grey of stone. I was turning to stone, an inch at a time.

And it hurt. Like. Hell.
I hadn't felt pain like that since I'd had my little cardiac event some years ago... only this time instead of the pain shooting in jabbing bolts through my neck and arm, it was all throughout my body, spreading outward from my heart in an agonizing wave. Soon I was solid stone, frozen half-risen from my seat... every inch of me frozen in a rictus of pain. I could see, I could hear... and God help me I could feel.

Discord chuckled and rose from his seat. He circled me once, admiring his handiwork. "I guess you can see why I never turned ponies to stone," he said. "I'm not like Celestia or her precious Elements.... I'm much... cruder about it." He flicked a claw against my side for emphasis; tiny jolts of frozen pain briefly radiated from the point. He walked around in front of me and looked me in my frozen eyes. "Oh yes, I know all about you, my little Human. And far more about that Fallen realm you come from than anyone would care to." He snorted in disdain. "Oh, quite a lot. More than I can stomach, really."

"?" I tried to say. But, you know, statue.

He started to pace, idly, waving his lion paw with the air of a professor giving a lecture. "Oh don't get me wrong, I've never visited your dimension," he said. "but as you've surmised, the cosmic realms tend to.... leak." He held up a sieve with water leaking from it. "All the important stuff stays inside, but ideas, concepts, even whole chunks of pop culture... hmm, perhaps that is the important stuff.... leaks out. In dreams and passing thoughts. Being a creature of the Between, I get free viewing of it all. Full cable access, all the channels." The sieve became an enormous remote control; a gigantic flatscreen covered one semi-tangible wall. He began flipping through the channels idly. "HBO is still extra, darn it...." With a flick of the wrist the remote went sailing. With a smash and a spurt of sparks it embedded itself in the screen, which filled with static and noise before going dark.

"Can't say I was a big fan of Channel Earth, though," he said. He stepped in close, till his nose was an inch from my own. "I like to play with my lesser beings in person. Or Pony, as the case usually is. Oh yes, this whole dimension is my toybox." he tweaked my nose, then took the pinky of my upraised hand in between his thumb and forefinger. "Of course, from time to time my toys break---" he gave a quick twist, with a snap my pinky finger came off in his hand. I blacked out from the pain.

I almost immediately regained consciousness. He was still standing there, tossing my detached finger up and down in one hand, smirking. "And here I make this little Dreamscape, just to have a chat--- and you cop an attitude with me."

"I know your kind," he said contemptuously. "You're pretty much all the same. Some burger-flipper or Megamart mop-pusher living in a trailer, or some teenage still wet behind the ears who thought he had the world by the tail, or an unemployed middle aged mama's boy living in his parent's basement..... no money, no real job, no girl, no career, no skills or abilities worth speaking of, dangling an inch from going on the dole-- if you weren't there already.... nothing at all to distinguish you from the other umpty million no-accounts wasting their lives on Facebook. And suddenly this great miracle occurs---" he spread his hands over his head, producing a monochrome rainbow--- "and you're in the Magical Land of Equestria!...." he snorted. "Or Narnia, or Brigadoon, or Barsoom, or Pandora...." he rolled his eyes and shrugged.

"And the minute you arrive, you think that makes you the hero of the story."

I said nothing. Again, statue.

He sneered. "That's right. You think you're the Chosen One, don't you. You fall butt-first into the magical wardrobe, or slip and fall through the mirror, or get sucked through some glowing portal..."
and so naturally you think that the Great Aslan--- or Gandalf, or the Elf Princess, or Yoda, or Zordon--- has chosen you to be the great world-changing hero. You humans glut your bookshelves with such stories.... pandering to your pathetic fantasy." He spit in disdain. "That somehow just bumbling your way into another world overcomes all the shortcomings and failures of character that made you such a useless lump back home." His scowl turned to a smirk. "I bet you even imagined that you'd come here in the dreamscape and teach me a thing or two....the hubris of humanity never ceases to amuse me."

"You know why there are so many stories like that? About worthless failures tumbling into other realms and becoming the airport novel version of the Great White Hunter? Because most people ARE worthless failures--- though looking at you, you're apparently pushing the envelope....and they sincerely believe that if they just changed their circumstances... if they were taller, or skinnier, or a different gender, or their family were richer, or their skin were a different color, or they lived in a different town--- everything would be better. That they would be better. It's a cheap sell to the lowest common denominator.

"And you know what the gag is? The really big cosmic joke? It really happens all the time. Thousands, millions every day, all over the multiverse, some portal opens up in some unwashed cretin's filthy apartment and he falls through it and his personal circumstances are REALLY changed. Voila, welcome to Wonderland. Hey, maybe we'll throw in a new body to boot!

"You know what happens ninety nine percent of the time?" I refrained from shaking my head. He continued anyway. "Dead. Usually within hours, most within days. A statistic of interdimensional travel. Oh, not from falling into an unsurvivable atmosphere or anything droll like that.(6) They just go out and win a Darwin Award at the speed of light. Running up to pet the local wildlife--- or the locals. Eating poison berries. Getting an infection. Suffering a minor injury and not knowing how to treat it. Crossing the royalty. Burned as witches. Dissected as alien monsters. Falling on their own brand new magical sword. Caged and put in a zoo. Standing there gawping like an idiot when they should be running like hell the other way.

"But the best ones, the most hilarious ones, the ones that happen way more times than anyone cares to admit, are the ones who cross over into another dimension, manage to survive, get their feet under them, and proceed to fall into the same old useless lump of a life they had in their old world. They always forget that they can leave their old life behind, but they still bring themselves along. Once a basement dwelling couch potato, always a basement dwelling couch potato."

He grinned in my face. "Like you."

"OOHhhh yes, I know YOU," he jeered, prancing around me. "I know all the things about your life that you never told your little pony friends. I am in your head after all. How you lived in a filthy, broken down trailer. How you couldn't hold down a job. How you alienated everyone you met, your entire life. How you couldn't be relied on by anyone, for anything..." He stopped and stuck his face into mine, bugging his eyes at me. "And trust me, Celestia sees it too."

"You think you have standing? Stature? Position? You honestly think Celestia, a ruler thousands of years old, turns to you for advice? She and her sister are patronizing you. Playing along just to see what the funny monkey does next."

He sighed and went on in his disinterested tone. "At least until that gets old. Sooner or later they'll get bored with you. Or annoyed with your sub-standard personality. Or you'll mis-step or screw up in front of company one time too many. They'll get sick of you. That is how it worked when you were back home, wasn't it, Mr. Arthur Arcturus? In every social circle you ever found?"

"One way or another, ponies will clue in to the fact that you're all empty talk and hot air, that you
really can't do anything worthwhile and that you're not really all that pleasant to be around. They'll demand you stand on your own two aching feet and when you can't..." he tsked and shook his head. "They'll politely shove you out of the way.

"You're not going to change, you're not going to become the great and mighty Champion of Equestria. You'll end up just what you were back on your homeworld..... A lonely, unwanted, friendless, useless charity case."

...

I lost it.

I forgot that I was supposed to be turned to stone, reared back and swung my fist at his head as hard as I could. He caught it in that damned lion paw, laughing in my face, clenching the claws into my knuckles, drawing blood.

Then I brought the other hand around with a running chainsaw in it.

He stopped laughing.

I don't know why it was that my fit of rage broke his control over the dreamscape, but it did. I became vividly aware that this dreamscape was in my mind; could feel it, right down to my marrow. One instant I was trapped in a waking dream.... the next, I was trapped in a lucid one. But unlike any lucid dream I'd ever had, I didn't start to wake up. I was still in deep, immersed in dreamstuff..... which meant that now I was in control, not Discord.

Though perhaps "lucid" isn't a good description for the hysterical rage-fit into which I went.

I'm not a good man. I'm not particularly strong, or smart, or wise, and I have a lot of issues, some far more deeply suppressed than others. Old shames, and old guilt, and traumas dating all the way back to when I was a scrawny little stick of a kid who had to run home after school to try and escape the bullies who tormented him. God only knows but for His grace what kind of psychotic break I might have had by now. And here I was, four decades down that wretched road, in the clutches of the ultimate petty sadist as he took my deepest fears and insecurities and shames and ground them under his bony heel.

Bad mistake. Bad, BAD mistake.

For the next five subjective minutes, I went freaking berserk. In here I wasn't a sad, lumpen old man; I was in the body that my own subconscious saw when my eyes were closed formed of my memories and self-image and my natural proprioception. I was young, strong, and inexhaustible. I could pull anything out of my subconscious that I desired. And I had nightmarish reserves of suppressed childhood rage---cold, dark, and deep--- to draw on for violent inspiration.

Do you know why human babies scream when they're born? They're screaming in rage. The only thing that saves the world is the fact that we are born so weak and helpless. Discord, the fool, had bored down cruelly into my soul and right into that pressurized pocket of primal animal fury that is every human's tragic birthright, and released it in an environment where I was no longer restrained by anything-- not by morals, or ethics, or the fear of doing collateral damage-- not even the limits of my mortal body.

I lit into him like the Tasmanian Devil.

I lay into him with chainsaws, flaming swords, ninja claws, spiked war maces, mace spray cans, tasers, fireplace pokers, fire axes, live polecats, pole axes, axe deodorant, icepicks, climbing picks,
machetes, gunfire, flamethrowers, motorcycle chains, bat'leths, grenade launchers, jars of Vegemite, I swung building girders at him, I threw entire main battle tanks at him, I sprouted claws and ripped at him.... I even bit him a couple of times. The entire time I was screaming a torrent of abusive profanity at him that would have made a Tourettes patient gape in awe. We tore and rolled and thrashed back and forth across the dreamscape, tearing up the ground, pulling down the sky, smashing into everything and smashing each other.

Him, he was clearly not expecting this, or anything like it. For all his blah-blah about "knowing humanity," he "knew humanity" in about the same way a typical otaku knows japanese culture... poorly, removed at a distance, and from the opposite side of a TV screen. He had no idea just how deranged a human being could get. He was reduced to throwing everything he could think of in between us to try and block my flailing attack; pillows, giant bananas, small trees, checkerboard walls, decoys, live ducks...

I knew it was all a dream, so I didn't care. I smashed, burned down or ripped apart anything that got in my way.(7)(8) Soon the surrounding dreamscape was torn up like a battlefield from World War II.

It finally ended when I got through all his random rubbish and got my hands around his neck. My mitts were swollen to gorilla-sized paws, and were squeezing his windpipe like the neck of a balloon. He was clawing at me futilely with all four feet, while I continued to scream invective at him in a state bordering on the speaking of tongues.

"Gaack," he said. "ENOUGH!"(9) There was a blinding flash of white---

---And we were back in that not-a-room, sitting in overstuffed chairs across from each other around a tea setting for two.

Chains out of nowhere suddenly lashed around me, binding and manacleing me to my chair. I struggled a moment, but I was too tired from my frenzy to fight anymore. My metaphorical claws shredded the chair arms; I could feel fangs gnashing in my mouth.

Both of us were gasping for air. Discord clutched the armrests of his chair and stared at me with bulging eyes. "What in the name of Entropy's left tit was THAT?" he wheezed.

"What happens when a human gets in touch with themselves," I snarled between gasps, glaring at him. "Lesson one, you pretentious jigsaw puzzle; you want to go around pushing other people's buttons, you'd better remember that some of those buttons go BOOM."

He managed to recover some of his veneer. He narrowed his eyes and growled at me. Literally, actually growled. Then a smirk crossed his face. "Well, you just might survive what is coming after all," he said.

We spent a few minutes letting the adrenaline dwindle. Suddenly the dreamscape dimmed, darkening like a brownout. Discord looked up at the darkening "sky." "Blast," he muttered. "I wasted too much energy with our little meet-and-greet session. I'm going to have to rush things..."

"What things?" I said.

"What I have to tell you before... well... the end," he said. He got to his feet, began pacing. "I presume you know that I'm not long for this world..."

"Judging by how you look out there," I said, "I wouldn't plan any long trips. Or long sentences."

"How bad?"
"Your head fell off and landed in my lap."

"Bad enough." He looked over his shoulder. "Let's cut to the chase. You're about to be visited by more Draconequi."

"Late news," I said. "We already met one and ran him off."

His head whipped around and he gaped at me. "You're joking."

"Put out his left eye myself," I said.

Discord winced and blinked. I was apparently full of surprises. "Oh? What did he look like?" I gave a quick description, and of the events surrounding the 'visit.' "That sounds like Ataxia," he muttered, stroking his chin. "If he's here then the other big guns won't be far behind... and I doubt a poke in the eye is going to keep him out of the running." He muttered to himself for a moment.

I waited, warily. "A little clarification?" I pressed.

"Fine, fine," Discord said. "First off, I'm not dying. Not as you understand it. I'm dissipating."

"Ah..."

"...Fading away. Disappearing back into the cosmic background, soon to be nothing more than a mere wisp of myself, floating in between the universes, barely able to push around a single quantum flux. In a few subjective eons I might gather enough substance to take a concrete form, who knows? It's a part of the natural lifecycle of Draconequi."

"Caused by?"

He gave me a sour look over his shoulder. "A thousand years in a state of petrification, and a faceful of the Elements of Harmony at either end," he said. "I was already up in millennia, but that pretty much pushed me over the threshold. Draconequi survive by creating chaos---We take old order, create chaos... new forms, new concepts and ideas.... other creatures turn that chaos into new order."

"Like a tree creates oxygen, and animals create carbon dioxide." I murmured.

Discord looked impressed in spite of himself. "A good analogy. But, well, going a thousand years without making more chaos.... not very healthy for a Draconequus. At this point my degradation is irreversible."

"Not very healthy for the rest of this dimension, either," he added. "For the past couple of millennia, this world has been running with a surplus of Order. You may have noted a few... defects in the system?"

"The weather control," I said. "The need to turn the seasons over by hand."

"Exactly. Chaos is change. Without enough of it in a system, the system won't cross over its threshold. Rain won't condense and fall. Evaporated water won't form clouds. Snowflakes won't crystallize. The biology of plants and animals won't respond to the turning seasons." He shrugged. "I'd barely gotten enough Chaos into the system to kick-start the Everfree when they imprisoned me." He growled, his shoulders bunching. "If Celestia and Luna hadn't butted in with their blasted Elements. What skin was it off their noses if I had a little fun doing my job?"

"Better they have to struggle with a little excess Order than turn this poor world over to a despotic bully," I said, glowering. I massaged my hands. My whole, unbroken hands.
He spun around and snarled. "Well thanks to them, they're going to get worse than that," he snapped. "Oh yes, they're going to be wishing for the good old days under Discord's reign after the others get here..."

"Others?"

"Haven't you been listening? Or does that beard grow straight out of your ears? Other draconequi. It's one tiger to a hill, get it? Now the tiger on YOUR hill is dying, and all the others are circling and licking their chops. This dimension has been overflowing with Order for generations, and the only thing keeping them away was the fact that one of their own--- me--- was squatting on this turf already. Now with me out of the way, the games are about to begin."

"Your last escape," I said, in a sudden epiphany. "You weren't trying to escape, or take over Equestria again. You were marking your territory."

"Oh, we are the clever monkey, aren't we," Discord smirked. "You're right. It was my last shot. Blew the works, even. I might have survived even that, but then---" he shrugged again. "The Elements of Harmony were pretty much the last nail in the coffin."

"So what happens next?" I asked.

The lights dimmed further. "Hm, best cut this short," Discord said. Perhaps I imagined it but there was a tinge of fear in his voice. "I'll break it down quickly, Human. Once I dissipate, my relatives, for lack of a better word, are going to compete for ownership of this dimension."

"Oh, not in a war, nothing so gauche. A game. A contest. And there are four things you will need to know." A chalkboard appeared; he carefully wrote down each sentence as he spoke.

ONE: There will be exactly twelve competitors. No more, no less. But no one will tell you anything else about them.

TWO: There are rules, and they remain the same for all the participants. But no one will tell you what they are.

THREE: They'll each take a turn. But you won't know when, or for how long.

FOUR: You, and all the little ponies, play an important part in the game. But they'll never tell you what it is.

He circled the last part. "All the other rules, you will have to figure out for yourself."

"And we're supposed to use this to save ourselves?" I growled.

Discord giggled. "Of course not. You don't have a hope in hell. You're going to be stuck with a new Discord. One younger than me, stronger than me, and more than likely a whole lot less fun than me. For you, anyway. I'm going to find it freaking hysterical."

"So why tell me this?" I said. "What do you care?"

"I don't," he said. "Well, I do care about this; I want Celestia and Luna and their precious little Bearers to know. I want them to remember this, even as my greedy brothers and sisters tear their little sugarbowl world apart. If they hadn't rebelled against me, hadn't imprisoned me, Equestria might have survived. They think I was a cruel tyrant? Let Ataxia or Bedlam or Maelstrom win the prize, then they'll know what a real monster is. The apocalypse has come, and It's all their fault." He leered in triumph.
"So, just being a sadistic jerk," I said.

Discord spread his hands in false modesty. "I am what I was made. An Avatar of Chaos..."

"Horseapples."

His leer faded. "What?"

I glared into his mismatch eyes, unblinking. "I said horseapples. You heard me. Horse. Apples."

"Chaos isn't evil, anymore than Order is automatically good. Chaos can be destruction and decay or creation and inspiration and freedom, just as Order can be efficiency and harmony, or the slow tramp of jackboots in the street. Chaos and Order are both parts of a higher Order, a Harmony on a higher plane of existence...if they are used for Good."

I stood up; the chains binding me, now little more than ghostly pencil outlines, faded away. "Any mindless amalgamation of parts could be in charge of distributing undifferentiated Chaos. But you were given a mind and a consciousness, a soul-- and the power to make choices. That means that your choices matter. And you, not anyone else, not your "nature", made all the bad choices. Now the bill has finally come due, and it's cost you everything. That's noone's fault but your own, Discord."

"You were made an Avatar of Chaos. You chose to be a dick."

I guess I can push a few buttons of my own. Discord's face was suffused with rage. He lunged toward me-- but even as he did so, he was fading away. A monochrome painting, a colorless drawing, a silhouette outline, then nothing... the scenery around us likewise faded away as everything darkened to black.

"Arthur! Can you hear me??"

I awoke with a start to a small purple unicorn shining her horn in my face and yelling in my ear. I groaned and pushed Twilight Sparkle back. "Easy, Twilight," I said. "No need to shout."

I was seated on the (rather wet) grass, with Luna, Celestia, and the main six gathered around me, along with a few other ponies. They all had rather alarmed expressions on their faces. Perhaps I should say they had expressions that ranged from sincere worry to appalled shock... oh dear. "What happened?" Twilight demanded of me.

I looked at her. "Maybe I should ask that first," I said.

Applejack looked fretful. "Well, sugarcube, y' darn near got squarshed by that statue--- the head landed right in your lap--- an' then you sorta froze up," she said. "We couldn't get you to wake up f'r nuthin'."

"And then..." Twilight bit her lip. "And then you started turning gray."

"And then you changed back, and started shouting the most atrocious and profane things!" Rarity chipped in, looking mortified. She tossed her mane. "I have no idea where you learned such
"I took notes," Pinkie Pie said. She waved a notebook in front of Rarity. "Hey Rarity, what does this one mean again?" Rarity looked where Pinkie was pointing, shrieked and passed out. Applejack leaned over the prone pony and looked at the notebook, curious. "I think that one's in Fancy," she said.

I grunted. "Sounds about right," I muttered. I looked over at Celestia. "Discord and I just had a little heart-to-heart. It seems that now that he's fallen from power, his relatives are squabbling over the inheritance." I told them, briefly, all that Discord had told me--- his dissipation, the other draconequi, the mysterious "game" now being played for the fate of their... our... world.

The garden was disturbingly quiet after I finished, as every pony present pondered what this would mean. "How do we know this isn't a trick? That Discord really is 'disparating,' or whatever?" Rainbow Dash said. "I mean-- this is Discord..."

Even as she spoke, the stone head in my lap crumbled to dust. The rest of the broken statue followed suit, crumbling to dust, then to less than dust. Soon there was nothing left that was distinguishable from the soil. "Okay," Rainbow Dash said. "that's.... kinda convincing...."

"But it's not a problem, right?" Fluttershy said. "I mean-- we have the Elements of Harmony, we can zap any Draconequus the same as we did Discord---?"

Twilight shook her head mournfully. "It's not that simple anymore, Fluttershy. Like Arthur said: these Draconequi are going to be younger, and stronger, and more powerful than Discord was. You saw what happened with the first one...."

"It was like water off a duck's back," Applejack said dismally.

"You mean the Elements are no use to defending the Kingdom?" Rarity exclaimed in horror.

Unhappy murmuring rose from all the ponies gathered.

Twilight shook her head. "No! I- it's just that...that we aren't using them to their full potential." She hung her head unhappily. "We need more time... I need to study the Elements more, learn to understand how they work better...I'm sure we can find a solution. Make them more effective--"

"And you shall," Princess Celestia said. "It is my decree that from henceforth the Bearers and the Elements are not to be separated. And..." she looked unhappy at what she had to say next "...and I must also demand that the Bearers must be kept together as well. For the foreseeable future the Bearers must live in Canterlot castle, under our protection."

"Agreed," Luna said, "We would further recommend their immediate family be moved to the castle as well."

Celestia nodded. "We are sorry, my little ponies," Celestia said. "We know that this will disrupt your lives...."

"Oh yeah, living in the castle with the Princesses, staying in fancy suites--- soooo terrible," Rainbow Dash said drolly.

I felt a nudge against my shoulder. Celestia had bumped my shoulder with her nose. "Well, my counselor?" She said. "Do you have any advice to give?"
I sat there, looking at the dust in my hands that was all that was left of a cosmic demigod.

You think you have standing? Stature? Position?

You honestly think Celestia, a ruler thousands of years old, turns to you for advice?

She and her sister are patronizing you....

Do you really think you're the hero of the story?

I slowly got to my feet, brushing the crumbled dust out of my lap.

I looked away from her. "Nothing.... for now," I said.

---

1) There had been a great upheaval as friends, loved ones, family members had been unmasked as Changelings... followed by an invasion right into the Changeling badlands to rescue the ponies they'd kidnapped. Perhaps "rout" would be a better term, as for all their stealth and cunning, Changelings were poorly equipped for face-to-face warfare. In fact, most Changelings lived in small groups of two or three, close to ponies or other creatures they could parasitise. The whole "Changeling Queen" thing had been an artifice of Chrysalis, who had taken the moniker after conquering and uniting a few thousand Changelings with the promise of conquest, plunder and plentiful food. Emotion-vampires like Changelings depend on their victim's compliance and ignorance, and any predator relies on huge swathes of territory to feed just one or two-- one tiger to a hill, as it were. Had she succeeded, her "kingdom" would have been unable to sustain its numbers, even on the vast numbers of ponies in Canterlot.

More discomfitting had been the few ponies who, it was revealed, had ALWAYS been Changelings... they had simply wandered into communities in disguise, settled down and lived perfectly normal lives (relatively speaking). The day AND the Night courts had been busy for some time with requests for amnesty, not to mention marital conflicts, contract disputes, and more arising from Equestria's unexpected minority...

2) I do not know who came up with the name first. It was something of an unexpected consensus. It certainly rolled off the tongue better than "Draconequussian Attack."

3) Her scholars had reassured her that there was no way that a few squabbling fillies had liberated Discord from his prison. If anything, it was more likely that his burgeoning escape had caused the squabble. Nevertheless, Celestia had him moved to the center of the maze after he was re-petrified, just in case.

4) It was a dreamscape. I thought it would be there, so it was.

5) Likewise.

6) Side note: Portals tend to open from like environment to like environment. Odd little law of the cosmos.

7) Don't ask about the ballerina buffalo. It was particularly ghastly.

8) He screams like a filly, by the way.
Actually it came out more like "ENARRRGGHK" but the thought was there.
"But why twelve?" Hat Trick said as she levitated another suitcase off the carts. "Why not seven? Or a hundred? Why so specific?" The suitcase--a steamer trunk---hit the floor of the suite with a thump. "There has to be some significance."

I had learned over the past year that my unicorn bodyguard had a driving fascination for puzzles, riddles, and logic games. I suppose one had to have some sort of mental activity to pass the long hours standing guard. It certainly made for interesting conversations ever since she joined my personal detachment of plainclothes pony protectors.

Speaking of which, they were all present at the time. Since the attack Equestria had been on high alert, and my humble guards were now stationed with me more or less 'round the clock, even moving their sleeping quarters into a spare couple of rooms in my suite. Personally I was all for it; I found it rather galling that my bodyguards, when they were off shift, went and slept in barracks and ate in the canteen while I slept on plush pillows and sheets and ate from silver plates.

I should take a moment and note that the usual portrayal of three tribes, even though it was used commonly by the ponies themselves, wasn't entirely correct. There were in fact at least five or six pony tribes. There were also the Sea ponies... though for obvious reasons they almost never visited Canterlot. There were the Crystal Ponies, of course. And, as I had suspected ever since my citizenship application, there were Flutterponies, and their even daintier cousins the Breezies. And then there were the Negasi or Thestrals, the bat-winged ponies you have all surely seen pulling Luna's carriage on Nightmare Night.

As it stood, I now had representatives of five of the six tribes in my entourage: Pegasus, Unicorn, Earthpony, Flutterpony and Negasus. If I ever had the temerity to go swimming in anything larger than a kiddy pool, I probably would have found myself introduced to my very own seapony bodyguard.

The Negasus was a bat-winged, fanged, yellow-eyed pony with indigo coat and jet black mane by the name of Moth. His Cutie Mark, appropriately, was a single dark-blue moth. As I understood it, his "special talent" was an almost preternatural gift for stealth. Even when he wasn't lurking in the shadows he moved with amazing quiet, and when he spoke it was barely two or three words, scarcely above a whisper. He could almost disappear while standing quietly in front of you. It was a bit unnerving at times. His other abilities, including bat-like sonar and the ability to see in the dark---were scarcely less so.

The Flutterpony was a tiny filly named Jonquil. Imagine a full grown filly with butterfly wings and antennae, no bigger than a kitten, with a cutie mark of the flower for which she was named. She was apparently part of some sort of cultural exchange program. She could often be found hiding, nearly invisible, in Bright Dawn's mane. I had misapprehensions as to what such a tiny thing could contribute to a security detail, but I was repeatedly assured that she had skills (not to be disclosed) of value to the group.

My inner Brony found her culture to be endlessly fascinating.(1) They flew (obviously), though not as high or fast as the pegasi. They had magic as well, though only a fraction as powerful as the unicorns. They had cutie marks as well, though the rules thereof were quite different; like the larger
ponies, their cutie marks appeared with the discovery of their special talent... but the cutie mark was never indicative of what it was. It was always of the plant, flower, or fruit for which they were named.(2) Among the Flutterponies, a pony's special talent was a very secret and private thing, rarely shared with another outside of one's family. It had made for some scandalous moments when she'd first joined us.

Of more than passing interest was the fact that the Flutterponies knew and used the language of flowers for nearly everything-- decor, signposts, naming conventions, etc.... I only knew a smattering of this Victorian era form of secret communication, but it was a second tongue to Jonquil, if not a first. She was taking some efforts to try and teach me, at my request; after all, it seemed like it might have some utility.

Am I meandering? I'm quite certain I'm meandering. Where was I?....

Oh yes. As I was trying to say, I and my entourage were in the process of helping the Mane 6 and their entourages move into their new quarters. Yes, they had their own... and not just their own guards.(3) Firstly of course they had their own families. Twilight's parents, the Apples (Applebloom, Big Macintosh and Granny Smith, that is. They'd done a nose count of the Apple clan at large and decided, quite firmly, to limit security to the immediate family), Rarity's parents and sister SweetieBelle.... Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy didn't have any immediate family, but it was summer and Rainbow Dash had promised to spend the summer giving Scootaloo flying lessons(4), and had insisted on bringing the little orange filly to the castle (much to the little buzz-bomb's glee). And of course Fluttershy had her animals to consider... most, thankfully, were fine on their own living in the woods, and those few that weren't, were easily merged into the royal gardens with the other animals already there.(5)

The Apples weren't quite so sanguine about leaving Sweet Apple Acres untended for such an indefinite period. The Princesses, arguing the interest of national security, came up with a solution that shocked nearly everyone involved to the core:(6)

They bought Sweet Apple Acres. The barn, the orchards, the fields, the zap apple trees, the whole shooting match.

They didn't just buy it, they used their own royal funds(7) to make an offer that, at my best estimate, was four times its net value. Even then, the Apple family dragged its hooves at the offer.... hard times or not, this was their family home, after all, with over a century of love, blood, sweat, and tears in the ground. It was then that Celestia clarified: Sweet Apple Acres would be royal property, but the Apples would still live there in their ancestral home, on retainer as caretakers and royal administrators for as long as they wished.(8) From now on the crown would handle the costs of running the farm, maintenance and repairs, staffing--- no more breaking their backs; the crown would hire more than enough farmhands to keep the place in tip-top shape, enough that none of the Apples would have to lift a hoof of their own unless they wished--- And the bulk of the Apple's crop would go straight to the royal tables.

That was all for after the crisis was past, of course; For now, though, Celestia and Luna would send staff to take care of the farm in the Apple's absence.

Even then Applejack was conflicted.... till someone finally pointed out to her that, with the buyout price the Princesses were offering, if they decided they didn't like being gentlepony farmers they could probably buy Sweet Apple Acres back--- or go out and buy four more farms just like it and start from scratch.(9)

It took hours for Applejack to wipe the shell-shocked grin off her face.
It may have sounded like flamboyant charity. I knew better. Celestia had discussed with me the possibility of the Apples (sensibly) balking at leaving Sweet Apple Acres untended. She'd also confessed that for years, decades even, she had wanted to secure the world's only known source of domestic zap apples for the throne.(10) Even for earth ponies, domesticating a powerfully magical fruit like the zap apples was an astonishing achievement; she intended to put the Apples to work trying to domesticate other exotic magical fruits and plants as well, if they were game.... she had one golden apple tree, for example; she was ambitious however for an entire golden orchard....

At the moment, we were helping Rarity move. We were helping her move her whole benighted boutique. When she had learned she was expected to move into the palace for an unforeseeable period, she had all but stripped Carousel Boutique to the wall joists, boxed it all up, and had it delivered. Thank God that Canterlot Castle had rooms and rooms to spare. She had secured a suite that was literally large enough for them to have rebuilt the entire building inside and was rapidly setting up shop, fussing and rearranging even as the rest of us were still hauling in rolls of cloth, dress forms, racks of already-made dresses, her furniture...

Very well. everyone else was hauling in all that. I was more or less standing around supervising.

For lack of anything to put my hand to, I decided to put my mind to the question. "Hard to say," I ruminated. "There's a lot of cultural significance to the number 12, at least on Earth. Twelve months in a year, the twelve Apostles, twelve tribes of Israel, high noon and midnight are twelve o'clock, twelve in a dozen, twelve twelves is a gross, twelve Olympians in the Greek Pantheon, uhm, twelve feats of Hercules...." I shrugged. "But none of that should have any meaning to a Draconequus, I shouldn't think."

"It sounds like a math thing to me," a familiar raspy-yet-squeaky voice said at my elbow. I started and looked down; to my surprise Snips was standing there. He was fitted out in a shirt, tie and vest, and looked as if someone had ruthlessly gelled and combed his mane sleek to his skull. "Whoa, hey there, Slick," I said. "What are you doing here?"

The colt shrugged and rolled his eyes. "Summer job," he said, pointing a hoof at Rarity. "I'm gonna be helping Miss Rarity."

"You don't say? Seriously, Rarity?"

The fashionista looked over at me. "Oh absolutely, darling," she said. "He may not be a tailor, but that scissors spell of his--- he can cut an entire dress pattern out with a single wave of his horn! Now I could hardly turn down his request for a job when that talent of his would save me absolutely hours of work, now could I?" She flashed a cheerful smile at me before diving back into her boxes. "Besides, it makes me feel better knowing that SweetieBelle will have a little friend around to keep her company when our parents and I are running about..."

The filly in question was sitting nearby, perched on top of a steamer trunk. She waited until Rarity and Snips were looking the other way and gave me a silent grimace of horror. It took all my willpower not to choke to death with laughter. "Indeed," I managed, with some effort. "You were saying, Snips?"

Snips looked up at me. "Oh. Yeah. I was saying it sounded like a math thing," he said. "Snails would know..."

"Know what?" said a voice from the doorway. I looked over. Two of Rarity's fashion-model bodyguards were at the entryway, barring someone from entrance. One looked over her shoulder and asked, "Is it alright for him to enter, Miss Rarity?"
Rarity looked up and saw who it was. "Oh yes, he's harmless," she said with a dismissive wave of a hoof. "He's a friend of Snips. Let him on in." The two elegant mares stepped aside, letting a familiar gawky unicorn colt with a green mane step inside. "Snails?" I said. "What is this, old home week? What brings you to the castle, fella?"

"Hey, Snails." Snips said. The two brohoofed. "So wassup?"

"Ahhh, nuttin' much, eh?" Snails grinned awkwardly. "Math camp at the School for Gifted Unicorns," he said. "We have the afternoon off today so I came by to see everyone."

Snips' expression spoke volumes. "Math camp?" he said. "Aww, dude. Bummer! A summer vacation doing homework? What're your parents gonna do for your birthday-- get you a broccoli cake?"

"Eyy," Snails protested. "It's not so bad... in fact lots of it is kind of cool."

"Yyyeah, right. Try not to catch a case of boring before you go back home." Snips rolled his eyes.

"What?" Snails mulled that over a minute. "Heyyy..." He snorted. Then grinned and jabbed Snips with a hoof. "Well at least I'm not gonna spend all summer making dresses..."

At that moment three or four of Rarity's female guards came walking in. Or perhaps I should say slinking; they were dressed to kill in some of Rarity's finest "semi-casual" designs and were moving like panthers on the prowl. They glided by the two colts, who had stopped needling each other to stare slack jawed as the mares passed. The last one in line, a soft peach earth pony mare with a honey colored mane, wearing a gauzy thing of translucent silks and knee-high laced sandals on all four hooves stumbled a bit as she walked past Snips. She stopped and fussed with her hoofwear. "Oh shoot, I can never get these darn little buckles and straps to catch right. Snips?" She looked over her shoulder and stuck out a graceful hind leg. "Would you be a dear and help me fix the straps right on these? I can't quite reach the ones in the back..."

Snips' and Snails' eyes went round for a moment. The fashion ninja saw Snips' expression and laughed. "Oh don't be silly, sweetie, we're going to be working around each other all summer. There's no point in being bashful..."

Snips said nothing. He just whipped his head around to look at Snails and smirked. They regarded each other for a moment. "You win this round," Snails said dolefully.

Several of us had a good chuckle. While Snips went to help the lady with her legwear (using his magic rather than his hooves, thankfully), Bright Dawn got Snails’ attention and motioned the disgruntled math prodigy over.

"Hey, smart guy, think you can solve a math problem for Mister Arcturus?"

"Uh, sure, I can try," Snails said, rubbing his head with a hoof. "What's the problem?" Bright Dawn told him about the Rules of the Game. Particularly the first. "Twelve, huh?" Snails said. "Yyyikes." He scratched his head with his hoof. "Umm, lemme think," he drawled. There was a moment of silence while he ruminated, his nose to the floor. Even the staff unloading the boxes and luggage paused in mid stride to listen. "Gee, umm... okay, it's a natural number.... has six divisors..... a dodecahedron has twelve sides...." He mumbled a bit. "Maybe it has somethin' to do with the kiss number?"

"The kiss number?" One of the fashion models standing next to him, a pale yellow mare with a silky ebon mane, said.
"Ahyeah, the--" Snails raised his head, and promptly developed the red-faced stammer of an adolescent boy who finds himself suddenly speaking to a very attractive lady at close quarters. "Oh, ah, hee, uh, yeah, the ah, k-kiss number--" He kicked a toe in the floor and looked away hastily, face blossoming red. "Its talking about how many balls can be stacked together." He stepped over to a box of yarn and started magically stacking the balls in midair. "If you take a ball, and stack other balls the same size around it, the most you can make touch the first one is twelve... see?" he levitated the cluster of yarn over to us.

We all counted furtively. Twelve. "O' course, that's only in three dimensions," Snails said. "In four dimensions it's 24, in five it's 40 to 44, and in six it's 72 to 78---"

I waved him down. "we get the idea," I said. "Good work." I picked up a ball of yarn and considered. "It would make sense though. Say that this--" I waved the ball of yarn I held. "Is the universe. And we have twelve other universes bumping up against it. It would stand to reason that we could have only so many in direct contact with our own universe. We're the disputed territory, the other twelve... launching platforms for the other Draconequi? Territories already claimed?.... packed around us, isolating us from the rest of the multiverse."

"So what you're saying is that basically they've got us surrounded," Bright Dawn said.

"Thank you, Bright Dawn," Hat Trick said, deadpan. "You should do motivational speeches."

Twilight Sparkle trotted over from where she'd been shuffling some furniture about and checking one of her infamous checklists off. "Seems like a lot of speculation on little evidence," she said doubtfully.

"True enough," I shrugged. "It's all wild-eyed guessing. But I'd rather spend my time guessing than just waiting."

Twilight nudged a cushion over and sat down. "Well, we're doing our best to eliminate the guesswork," she said. "the Professors at the Unicorn Academy are throwing everything they have into digging up anything we have on Discord." She gave a puff of exasperation, blowing the mane out of her face. "The only thing is we have next to nothing. Even the Princesses don't know much about Discord's past. They say one day he was just there, messing things up..." she shook her head. "They say Equestria suffered a full year of his pranks before anypony even saw him face to face."

Moth suddenly spoke up. He instantly had everyone's attention; when the taciturn negasi said something, it was an event. "Do they know it was just him?"

"How?"

Twilight blinked. "Well yes, I assume---"

"For a year... or twelve months," Hat Trick pointed out. "Or one draconequis a month?"

Twilight blinked, thinking this over. "You mean... oh gosh, you think this happened before? It would make sense....." She got to her feet and trotted out the door, a thoughtful expression on her face that we all recognized; wheels and gears were turning like mad behind those purple eyes. A couple of unicorns in plainclothes pulled themselves away from the walls to escort her. "I have to go speak to the princesses again, see how much they can remember..."
Once Rarity was more or less settled in, I decided to take a quick tour and see how the other Bearers were doing. I started with Rainbow Dash. The pegasus speedster had been the quickest to move in, by virtue of simply having her cloud home pushed to Canterlot. It had taken some fussing and quibbling to find a place for it that didn’t block the sun for the gardens, or the view from any of the windows, but they’d finally anchored it in place to one of the lower towers. A few extra “walkable cloud” spells, a fluffy white staircase and they were in business. "Didn't even have to clean the place up," she'd said with satisfaction.

I made my way to the tower with my guard and a few other ponies tailing behind. By the time we arrived, I think she was glad for company. Scootaloo was rooming with her, and the little orange filly was bouncing off the walls—literally; apparently the new spells on her cloud-house were still setting and the walls, floor and ceiling were still at the consistency of a carnival bouncy castle. Dash paused in her efforts to catch the ricocheting filly and greeted us. "Hey guys, hey Arcturus," she said. She sounded a trifle exasperated. "Man am I glad to see you! Think you could take the Pony Pinball here off my hooves for a little while?"

"Actually, we were hoping to foist somepony off on you," I said with a chuckle. I pointed to where SweetieBelle had joined her fellow crusader in bouncing across the cloud-house's elastic floor. The two fillies were squealing with glee. Rainbow Dash groaned at me. "Don't do this to meeeeee....!" she pleaded, holding her hooves together and begging.

I laughed out loud at this. "Calm down, calm down," I said. "Rarity asked me to take SweetieBelle off her hooves for a bit. I'm going to see how everyone else is settling in and figured I'd round up the Trio of Terror and find something to keep 'em occupied."

SweetieBelle chimed in as she bounced on the cloud sofa. "Yeah, anything's gotta be better than watching Snips and Snails goobering around all day getting cooties all over everything," she said.

"Those two are here?" Scootaloo asked in disbelief, bouncing along.

"Yeah, they were both there, drooling all over Rarity's models," SweetieBelle said. Both fillies went "ewwwww" and started making 'gag-me' motions.

"You're serious?" Rainbow Dash said, eyeing me. I nodded. "Thank you thank you thank you thank you," she said, just low enough for Scootaloo not to hear.

"We're going with you? Cool!" Scootaloo said.

"Where are we gonna go?" SweetieBelle said.

"I dunno, We'll find someplace. I figure someone in Canterlot needs a building demolished," I said with a smirk. Both girls blew raspberries at me.

The next stopoff was the suite where the Apples were residing. They had taken up residence at the bottom of the same tower, just off the entryway. The first thing I noticed as I approached the door
was that there was a certain disparity in the guards on either side. One on the right was the typical stalwart armor-clad stallion; the one on the left, on the other hand, appeared to be scarcely more than a helmet and four hooves.

As we approached the helmet stepped forward and issued challenge. "Halt!" it said in a high squeaky voice. "Who goes thar?" Scootaloo and SweetieBelle giggled; I heard one or two of my bodyguard stifle a snicker as well.

I leaned over and addressed the belligerent headgear. "Sir Arthur Arcturus, council to the Princesses, and company-- here to see the Bearer of the Element of Honesty and her family."

The helmet wasn't having it. "Uh uh! The Princess says nobody gits in to see the Bearers, no body, no way, no how!" The voice echoing inside the helmet turned suspicious. "Y'all might be a sab-oh-two-er."

"Oh well then," I said. "I was planning on taking Scootaloo and SweetieBelle here out for ice cream and wanted to invite Applebloom to come along, but since I can't get in to ask..." I turned and pretended to walk off.

"WAIT! Uh, I mean maybe ah can reconsider--" the ambulatory helmet tried to scurry after me, tripped and not so much stumbled as turned turtle, rolling completely over its own dome before falling flat with a clang. I stopped and picked the helmet up, revealing a yellow filly with an apple-red mane and an enormous bow sprawled on the floor. "Now what if I had been an actual saboteur," I chided her, teasing, "and all it took was a bowl of ice cream to get you to leave your post?"

Applebloom looked disgruntled. "Nuts," she said. "No Royal Guardpony cutie mark for me, ah guess..." Out of the corner of my eye I saw the guardsman’s eyes twinkling and his sides heaving as he struggled to hold back a laugh.

I chuckled and tousled Applebloom's mane. "At least there's still ice cream," I said.

I looked up and saw a second Guard, sans helmet, come striding up, and handed him his headgear. He looked apologetic. "Sorry, sir," he said, donning the helmet. "Trip to the little colt's room."

I gave a half-bow. "With your permission, gentlemen?" They pushed the door open and I strode inside.

Oh dear.

The room was posh. Posh, posh, posh. The walls were hung with ornate paintings in gilded frames; the furniture, even to my untrained eye, was obviously antique and richly appointed; the rooms were lit with subtle crystal chandeliers--- what passed for subtle in a marble-and-gold layered royal palace, that is. Expensive and fragile knicknacks were everywhere. Applejack, Granny Smith and Big Macintosh were all in, seated around the posh welcoming area around a tea set that looked as frail as eggshells and probably cost more than their barn back home.

Applejack looked tense. Granny Smith looked irritable. And poor Macintosh looked positively miserable.

I looked around the rooms. "....Well," I said. "All settled in?"

"Ummm, more or less," Applejack said, with an awkward grin.

".... Didn't you bring anything from home?" I asked.
"Ahwell, some clothes, Applebloom's toys, Granny's knittin' things... not much else," Applejack admitted. "Nuthin' we had would really fit in such a fancy place like Applebloomwipeyourhooves!!"

"Ah did, ah did!"

"Well do it again! Um, sorry, Mister Arcturus...."

Mister Arcturus, I noted. Not Arthur. "I'm... sensing you're not very comfortable at the moment."

"Like a settin hen layin' square eggs," Granny said sourly. "Cain't git comftible in this fancy-schmancy chair..." she shifted around, scuffing the legs on the carpeted floor.

"Granny, don't scuff up the chair like Applebloomdon'tTOUCHthat!!"

"Touch what?"

"Anything!!" the sheer panic in Applejack's voice was almost comical in its pathos.

Big Macintosh let out a faint groan. "What's wrong?" I asked.

Applebloom grimaced. "He ain't been feelin' well," she said. "Tummy troubles."

I gave the burly stallion a look."Well, they have doctors on staff here, um, I'm sure they can get you something," I reassured him. "maybe some seltzer?"

"Eenope," he muttered . "Tain't that." He got to his feet and gingerly picked his way through the ornate furniture, motioning for me to follow with the air of a man showing something only another man could understand. Curious, I trailed behind him. He led me past the bedrooms to an unobtrusive door and opened it for me.

I looked inside.  It was the bathroom. "Ye gods," I murmured. The bathroom itself? Large, spacious, with an oversize tub, sink, toilet, and cabinets for towels.... quite nice. The decor?

It was horrific. It was appalling. It was.... frilly. I cannot emphasize how frilly it was without perhaps dipping into exotic foreign languages. What wasn't frilly, was fluffy, what wasn't fluffy was crocheted in pink. The window curtains, the shower curtains, the bathmats, the toilet seat cover. There were potpourri.... things..... everywhere, done up in ribbons. There were folk craft pieces, or what I suspected a blind gay San Francisco interior decorator would mistake for folk craft pieces, decorating the walls. The sink, medicine cabinet, bathtub, soap racks, were overwhelmed with fancy frou frou bottles of pink bath oils, seashell soaps, and countless miniscule bottles of prissy toiletries-- many with their own cutey cozies.

It looked like Martha Stewart had exploded.

The jokes about men and the bathroom are legendary.... the male of the house retreating to "sit on the throne" is an iconic image in modern culture. Women find it alternately annoying or funny. What most women don't realize about men is that this is a biological necessity. A man, especially one surrounded daily by women, needs a sanctuary. That sanctuary is usually the lavatory.... primarily because it is the only room in the house that a man can lock the door behind him and noone can bother him under any circumstances. What is more, it's a place where he has to feel at his ease. Radically changing a man's sanctuary can have very real and unpleasant effects on his health.

Back home, Big Macintosh had a bathroom of his own. I'd seen it; it could best be described with words like "spartan" and "rustic." Now, he'd been moved into the castle and been subjected to this: a bathroom from which every last drop of manly solitude had been expunged and replaced with a foot-
thick layer of estrogen. And it was a safe bet that the other bathroom in the suite was as bad, or worse. It was a violation of personal manly space on a grand and tragic scale.

I looked at him. "Constipated, huh."

He looked at me, the strain visible in his eyes. "Like a Diamond Dog's garbage disposal," he said miserably.

There was no choice. It was a mission of mercy. Big Macintosh was hesitant to do anything---- I was not.

Before Mac could stop me I stepped into the bathroom and began tearing things down. I tore down the floral-print shower curtain and laid it in the floor. I whipped off the coverlets and cozies, swept the shelves clean of bottles and tubes, stripped everything out till I was down to the tile and the bare walls. I piled every bit of it in the shower curtain, rolled it up in a bundle and threw it out the door, to the startlement of those outside.

I looked around the room. Bare tile and chrome, the way God intended. I looked at Big Macintosh. "Better?" I asked.

He hesitated, apprehensive at the audacity of this random act of redecoration. Then he looked at me with a hint of relief. ".....Eeyup."

There was still a lot of pink, and the aroma of potpourri still hung in the air. I reached in my saddlebag and pulled out a book I'd picked up a while back. "Here you go, big guy, this might help," I said, handing it to him.(11) He held it in his hoof (how DO they do that???) and read the title frowning in puzzlement.

"Uncle John's Bathroom Reader..."

"You might be in here a while," I said. I gave him a pat on the withers and sidled past.

I left Big Macintosh to take care of business and went back into the welcoming room. "Applejack, do you trust me?"

She looked up, puzzled at the question. "Well yeah, ah s'pose so...?"

"Then will you let me make a few changes here? I promise you'll be a lot more comfortable when we're done." Applejack nodded. There were a couple of maids flitting about the corners of the room, dusting at things and looking apprehensive. I cornered one and spoke to her. "Get the majordomo, tell him I said to send the staff and have them basically do for this suite what they did for mine, all right?"

She blinked at me. "Sir?"

Back when I had first moved into the castle, I had found my suite had been decorated in the same fashion--- packed to the walls with priceless art and antiques and casually breakable items that were worth more than my annual income back home. Naturally, I'd freaked. I'd promptly demanded that the staff take all the costly accoutrements out of my living quarters, move them someplace safe, and re-fit my room with furniture that wasn't worth the GDP of Bolivia. The head of staff had finally relented and had refit my suite with furniture taken from the servant's quarters--- sturdy, comfortable and affordable. I had to wonder what had possessed the majordomo to move a farming family into a living space so full of expensive bric a brac that they'd be afraid to even move.
"He'll know what I mean," I reassured her."Oh, and have them find a rocking chair for Granny Smith...." She trotted off obediently.

"Well, I was planning on taking the girls out for ice cream," I indicated the CMC, who were, for a miracle, standing very still in the middle of the room, "but I think we could make room for a few more. Care to join us while they're redecorating in here? Trust me, you'll be a lot more comfortable once they're done." And poor Macintosh will have some place to put his hooves without crushing something, I added mentally.

"Sounds like a plan," Applejack said.

There was a sound of a door locking, and of running water. A terrible groan emanated from the distant bathroom, an ascending and descending scale that dragged on for over a minute, like the refrain from a distressed whale. The room fell awkwardly quiet as the sound of flushing echoed.
"We may need to wait a bit for Big Macintosh, though," I added unnecessarily.

knock, knock. "Hey Pinky. We're going to get ice cream--"

_Gallop gallop gallop Slam! "ICE CREEEEEAAAAM!!!!"
CRASH!
"Artie? Artie, you okay?"

Gathering the rest of the crew was more or less uneventful. Fluttershy was in the royal gardens, cautiously making acquaintance with the animals there with the help of the groundskeeper. True to her shy nature, she opted not to go. I promised to bring back a pint of violet-petal and vanilla for her.

Twilight had taken up her old quarters again, but at the moment was encamped in the royal library with Princess Luna, and what had to be half the scholars in Canterlot... We couldn't have pried Twilight away with a crowbar, but Spike was more than willing to be pulled loose. Twilight brushed him along after us, barely looking up from her scrolls to secure a promise of a pint of butter brickle.

In short order we were all down at the local ice cream shoppe, much to the consternation of the staff, and enjoying our ice cream. Pinkie Pie amused me to no end by forcing ice cream cones on all the security staff that had accompanied us. I dare anyone, even a guardpony of the strictest military discipline, to refuse those puppy-dog eyes. The rest of us had gone for various sundaes and other treats; the Cutie Mark Crusaders were sharing a banana split large enough that the three of them could have gone canoeing in the dish afterward and pummeling Jonquil (who was working her way through a honeysuckle cone nearly as big as she was-- Tres adorable) with nonstop questions about all things Flutterpony.

The small talk inevitably drifted around to the crisis of the hour--- the Draconequi-- and whatever it was that Twilight was up to. "So yeah, Twilight's been running everyone ragged all day," Spike told us over his sapphire sprinkle sundaes. "Something you said to her clicked, I guess. She's been
picking the Princess' brains for every little detail about when Discord first showed up." He gulped down another scoop of ice cream. "Whatever it is, I think it must be mega huge."

"Did she tell y'all whut it was?" Applejack said. "Or give y'all a hint?"

Spike shook his head. "Nah, she didn't tell me anything. Nothing that made sense, anyway," he said. "But whatever it is, she says they'll probably be making an announcement in a couple of days."

"An announcement? To whom?" I asked.

Spike licked his spoon. "To everypony," he said.

About a week later, the throne room of Canterlot castle was packed. All three alicorn princesses, Celestia, Luna, and Cadence, were holding court, and every pony of note or influence was in attendance--- nobles, dignitaries, scholars, the staff of the Unicorn Academy, the leaders of the military, the press, the mayors of every city, ambassadors from several neighboring nations, the Bearers of the Elements.... and Celestia and Luna's advisory staff, including my good self. We were all present for the first major briefing concerning the Draconequus threat.... a presentation given by several of Celestia, Luna and Cadence's top researchers, to be led by Twilight Sparkle, acolyte of Celestia, bearer of the element of Magic. All of Equestria was glued to its radios and television sets, waiting for whatever crumbs of knowledge the assembled ponies had to give.

Twilight Sparkle climbed up to the podium and addressed the audience. To her credit there was no quaver in her voice. You'd have to know her to see how nervous she was. "Mares and Gentleponies," she said. "Not long ago, our nation was put through a tremendous challenge, with the escape and return of the chaos entity, the tyrant Discord. He was, thankfully, quickly defeated and re-imprisoned, and Equestria was restored to order and sanity by the power of the Elements of Harmony." There was a smattering of applause. "Unfortunately, recent events have confirmed that this was not the end of the issue. Unbeknown to anyone, even the Princesses, Discord's... life cycle was nearing its end. The strain of his escape, and of his subsequent re-imprisonment, hastened his end." There were actual murmurs of dismay at this. At times even I must confess that these ponies are better at heart than most men.

"We learned, after the fact, that his demise held consequences for all of Equestria" she continued. "Consequences nopony could have foreseen. With his dissolution, the territory he once controlled has now come into dispute with others of his kind." The murmuring amongst the audience grew. Twilight raised her voice to be heard. "Our kingdom, and possibly our entire world, are now the prize in a conflict between the Draconequi."

The murmur rose into a full roar at this. Celestia got to her hooves, wings flared, and called for "Silence, please!" the roar hastily dropped to a murmur and faded out. "Who are they?" Somepony shouted. "What do they want?" before being shushed by those around them.

Twilight looked in the direction of the pony who spoke. "The draconequi are, self-evidently, Discord's species," she said. "They are extradimensional beings who live outside of time and space, between the Universes. They are entities based and rooted in Chaos magic, and they feed on Order. As to what they want... they are competing for the role of Avatar of Chaos in our dimension.

"There are certain things we have already confirmed. We know that there are twelve of them." This
caused some rather vocal alarm. "We know that they are all younger, and at least as powerful as Discord was. We also know," she said loudly, over the raised voices, "that they are bound by certain rules in their contest for this world. And we know that we can influence the outcome of this contest, and will strive to do so in our favor."

*Though we don't know how to influence it, I thought to myself. Or if there is any outcome that works in our favor at all. We may be stuck with a choice of the lesser of two evils.*

A pegasus reporter pony stepped forward, waving a hoof for attention. "Byline, from the *Cloudsdale Clarion*. And how do we know all this?"

"Because this is not the first time this has happened," Twilight said. A ghostly magical screen appeared in midair behind her. Several woodcut-style images of a Draconequus, presumably Discord, rolled by. "Several thousand years ago, when Discord first appeared in Equestria, he was first heralded by twelve months of strange, unnatural phenomena." The woodcuts were now interspersed with various sketches, carvings, bas-relief images, images from tapestries... each showing the Chaos entity engaged in some particular mischief or other. "Rains of fish and frogs, lakes that disappeared and reappeared, upside-down mountains, forests that uprooted themselves and started walking... in retrospect they were all attributed to Discord, but the evidence we've gleaned suggests that each of these events was actually caused by a different Draconequus, each one a contestant for the role of Avatar of Chaos. We consulted with the Princesses, who confirmed that each of these events was separate. Each one taking place by itself, no more than one each month, for twelve months."

She lowered her eyes. "The winner was obviously Discord." The image changed to show a crude drawing of Discord, tapping a pony on the head with his claw. The pony in the image was half greyed-out. "We believe that his... trial run... was the fifth. The ponies at the time called it the Gray Plague. Any pony afflicted by it lost all their coloration, and had their personality completely changed, even inverted--- Effects that were more or less Discord's signature. The mayhem it caused in that short month was immeasurable. We have since developed defenses against mental attacks like this and made them available to the public. But it was most likely what 'won' the contest for Discord back then." The screen disappeared.

The inevitable question came up. "Why twelve?" somepony in the press pool asked.

"For that, I'll have to turn you over to my associate, Professor Cosmic Constant," Twilight said. She stepped down, gesturing to a pony standing nearby. It was a light yellow-green Earth pony in a white lab coat, with a grayish mustache and a white mane that hung about his head like a cloud. Another of Equestria's chronic little amusements. I was willing to wager he had an atomic symbol on his flank under that coat. Or maybe E=mc^2?

The science pony stepped up to the podium and spoke. "Tank you, Docterr Tvilight," he said (oh glee, german accent and all!) "Vell, you are asking vy there should be only tvelve of ze Draconekevus. It so happens dot a recent discovery in ze matematics and theoretical physics may shed light on dis. Inspired by an insight from my young pupil and assistant, Shnails--" he gestured magnanimously to the colt, who flushed and shuffled his hooves bashfully-- "into ze nature of ze mathematical structure of ze universe. Schnails, iff you vould please...?"

Snails took his cue and pushed a small bucket forward. A brief flicker of his horn and a ping pong ball floated up out of the pail. "Now, ze kvestion is related to ze Kepler Conjecture, or ze 'kiss problem,' as it is sometimes known. I dunt know about dot. Vere I come from ze 'kiss problem' has to do mit a pretty girl und standing on ze porch after a date." Here he grinned and wagged his eyebrows at the audience, his eyes twinkling. There was scattered laughter. "But no. ze 'kiss
problem’ is the question of how many spheres of equal size can be placed so that they are all touching a central sphere of the same size.” As he spoke, more ping pong balls came floating up out of Snails’ bucket. They clustered around the first one in a tidy packet. "As you can see, the answer in three dimensions is twelve. Coincidentally, the number of sides in the dodecahedron, and corners in the isocahedron... which are both related in structure to the golden ratio. In higher dimensions, the kissing number is much higher, of course. However, internally we are a three dimensional universe with certain given mathematical constants."

He made another hoof-motion to Snails. The clustered ping pong balls spread out, forming an isocahedron around the central ball. "Now, let us pretend this central ball is our universe. Even in higher dimensions, there are constants determined, by the golden ratio. Which means that when you extrapolate these mathematical constants outwards, only a certain number of universes touching ours, at external points determined by the golden ratio, will share in our constants and are therefore capable of bridging with our own."

"You mean our universe is linked to twelve others...?"

"Nein, nein..."

"Nine of them--"

"Ach," Cosmic Constant said, facehoofing. "I mean NO! Dumkoppen... it is more...." he fumbled a bit. "Ah, do you remember this toy, der ball mit der shapes---" he sketched a shape with his hooves in midair.

Twilight's face lit up. "Ah, I know what you mean, Professor..." Her horn glowed and the screen reappeared. On it was a rather familiar spherical toy with shapes cut in the sides. "Ah, yes," Cosmic Constant said. "Dats der jasper."

Twilight blushed. "I had one as a filly," she said.

"Hey, I had one of those too," Dash said next to me. "Too bad it broke."

"What happened to it?" Spike asked her.

She turned red. "I got the shapes stuck in the wrong holes..."

"Ehh, a good whack with a rubber mallet 'd get them out," Spike said knowingly.

"Anyway... imagine dot ball is our universe, and ze shapes are stars or planets---or ponies. And ze holes, zey represent our universal constants. Zey can only get out through ze holes, and only get in another universe mit der same holes. Another universe mit different holes? No good." He shook his head. "Ze Drakonekvi, they may live in the Outer Dimensions, but zey vant universes like ours. Mit our laws of time, und space, und nature. And such universes will have ze twelve points. Vich, as cosmic coincidence would have it, are also ze point vere other universes like ours will be close to us, in ze hyperspace.

"So each vun has taken up one of ze access points..." he pointed to the hovering ping-pong balls. "Till ze contest is decided. Not so much to keep us in---but to keep other drakonekvi out. Ve haff twelve Discords because ve have twelve points of access."

"So let me see if I have this straight," a blue green unicorn reporter said. "We've basically got twelve Discords because our universe has twelve seats?"

I had a brief vision of twelve Draconequi sitting in the contestant's row on 'The Price is Right.'
"Discord Dra conequus, come on down!!..." I shook it off. Cosmic Constant mulled that over. "Er, yah," he said reluctantly. "I suppose dot could be a... vorkable summary.... Mister...?"

"Teal Deer, Daily Tweet."

("You would be," I muttered to myself, facepalming. Applejack shushed me.)

"And my next question; what good does all this information do us? What's the point of this?"

The Professor stood there a moment, flummoxed. I didn't have to read his mind to know why. Cosmic Constant wasn't tongue tied because he didn't think the information was useful. He was tongue tied because he was a pure researcher. To him the question was irrelevant. For him, the data was the whole point of the exercise.

Of course, to the average pony it looked like he'd been 'caught out' by a clever question, that a clever reporter fishing for a bumper-sticker caption had unmasked the proceedings as pointless smoke blowing. The crowd stirred restlessly. Even as Teal Deer stood there smirking I could hear the morale of the citizens back home fizzling away like a punctured balloon.

Thank God, Twilight Sparkle stepped up to microphone. "The point, Mister Teal Deer, is that we have hope," she said, glaring at him. "The point is that they may be playing a game, but we're playing to win. And we've already done more than even Discord expected of us--- we're figuring out the rules. And every new rule we figure out means we're another step closer to winning.

"This is not the first time a Dra conequus has underestimated us. There's an empty pedestal out in the royal hedge maze that stands proof to that. We are not helpless pawns in this contest, we are not toys to be played with, and when this is over and we've beaten them at their own game, every last one of those fricking lawn ornaments will know it!"

The applause was thunderous. Twilight went on. "We know now that we will face twelve of these creatures, each in their turn; that these attacks will be spaced a month apart; that each Dra conequus will be limited to one change to reality. That gives us leverage, it gives us breathing space-- and most importantly it gives us time. Time to prepare for each attack, time to find a way to further turn the tables on the Dra conequii. I would urge every pony listening now to follow the advice that the Princesses have released to prepare for a Discordian event, and that they work together through this challenging time. That we all keep calm, stay strong, and carry on." More applause greeted this.

Another reporter stood. "Do we have any idea what each of these attacks will be like?"

"For that I have to turn you over to Parchment Pages, our head archival researcher," Twilight said. "Pages?"

A dark blue unicorn with a parchment scroll cutie mark stepped up to the microphone. The floating screen reappeared; some of the images seen before flickered past. "One is tempted to say that a Chaos Avatar's behavior is, by definition, impossible to predict," he said drily. "Fortunately for all of us, dra conequii are still thinking beings, and therefore creatures of habit--- and not particularly original ones at that." There was a brief chuckle from the audience. "During his reign, for example, Discord demonstrated a tendency to the same sort of tricks and stunts, over and over again. Chocolate rain, cotton candy clouds, checkerboard grass, floating upside down houses.... the stunts of someone who got their concept of 'chaos' by browsing the first wing of a modern art museum." More laughter greeted this. "This of course was his own individual quirk. It's safe to suspect that other Dra conequii would have different 'styles' or motifs."

More images slid past. "However the events that took place in what we now call the Chaos
Ascension--- the period which Discord and the other unknown Draconequi competed for the throne of Equestria--- shows a radically different motif... and yet a predictable theme." More images, in rapid succession. "Inverted mountains. Flying rivers. Disappearing lakes. Rains of frogs. In short.... a theme of Nature. Even the 'winning' entry... the 'discoring' of ponies... was arguably a tampering with a fundamental feature of Nature, namely the Pony species itself."

The screen vanished again. "Apparently, the competition is based off a preselected theme. Best entry... presumably the one that causes the most chaos with the least effort, without breaking from the theme."

"Do we know what theme they've selected this time?"

Cosmic Constant stepped back to the microphone, edging Parchment aside. "As a matter of fact, ya, ve do haff a good guess," he said. "It seems dat zis time zey are meddling with things more.... fundamental. Ze laws of physics zemselfs."

The audience rumbled. "And how do we know this?" the reporter persisted.

"Because we have suffered one attack already," Parchment Pages chimed in. "The anomaly that hit Canterlot a few weeks ago."

"Dot vun," Cosmic Constant said, "Vas a tampering mit ze laws of gravity."

"--By a chaos entity we now know to be named 'Ataxia,' Parchment Pages said.

There was a loud clatter. Every pony on the dais jumped. It seemed that all this time Snails had been obediently levitating the ping-pong ball display and, finally, had lost his telekinetic grip. Ping pong balls bounced and skittered about underhoof. "Sorry, sorry..." he said, scurrying about, trying to catch the bouncing globes.

"Ach, vy did you not put dose avay?" Cosmic Constant said. "Quickly, now, get zem up-- ach, schnell, Shnails, schnell!"

There was good natured, if nervous laughter as Snails gathered up the wayward balls. Eventually everyone decided to ignore the "pock pock pock" of bouncing ping pongs and focused on the task at hand. "How soon will the next attack? Do we know?" somepony finally ventured.

"Soon," Twilight Sparkle said. "We don't know exactly how long, but it has been very close to a month since the last event, so it could be any day or moment now. Again, we urge everypony listening to be prepared, to the best of your abilities...." the pock pock pock noise in the background continued. "Snails, would you please just scoop those things up??" Twilight said over her shoulder.

"Uhh..."

"Mein Himmel, boy, be about it..."

"Uhh, Professor..."

"Ach, can you not handle a simple task like--"

"Professor!"

Everyone stopped. The scientists and scholars all turned to look at Snails. He was standing foursquare in the middle of the stage, eyes riveted on a single bouncing ping pong ball. Which was not slowing down. It was, in fact, increasing its height with every bounce. "....I think we have a little
problem..." Snails said.

Everyone present watched as the ball *ticked* off another, setting it to bouncing as well and traveling across the stage. Then another, and then those two ricocheted off others.... "Actually, it's a BIG one," Snails corrected himself, slowly backing away.

The bizarre display continued. Soon every loose ping pong ball was bouncing of its own accord. And it took a moment, but anyone could see they weren't bouncing *right*. Some seemed to be bouncing almost in slow motion; others were careening back and forth, altering their trajectory for no apparent reason. Some were striking the floor and stopping cold, as if they'd stuck to flypaper... only to spontaneously start bouncing again, popping into the air like a popcorn kernel. As I watched, a single ball struck a briefcase... which promptly sailed across the room, careening off a wall. Another struck a stage light sending it tumbling end over end like it had been swatted with a baseball bat.

Cosmic Constant spun and looked at the Princesses. "Sound ze alarm, your Highnesses," he said, his face grim. They hesitated. "Sound ze alarm!" Cosmic Constant repeated, shouting. "It is ze second attack!"

Celestia stood, horn flaring. All over the city klaxons began sounding; the sound made known all over Equestria as the Discord Alarm. Twilight held on to the microphone even as the room began filling with loose objects moving at impossible angles and irrational vectors. "Attention to all Equestria! This is it, this is the second Chaos Event. Please follow your local Civil Defense plans and stay in your homes!"

The bodyguards went to work, doing their best to lead important figureheads to safety even as the panic around us grew. "What in tarnation's going on?" Applejack shouted.

"Draconequi, DUH," Rainbow Dash shouted back, dodging a camera that went hurtling past.

"Ah know that! But what are they *doin'?*" Applejack waved at the chaos around us. Even as we watched, a pair of guards running to the rescue bumped into each other and went shooting off in opposite directions like a pair of superballs.

"Action and Reaction," I said over the tumult. "Conservation of momentum. Don't look now, but it looks like Newtons' three laws of motion just went out the window!"

---

1) okay, my inner Brony was also going "squee" a lot.....

2) How their parents knew ahead of time what to name their child was something of a mystery to the other pony races, who in their own case resorted to either outright name changes, or heaping scads of "middle" names to cover any possibilities. "We just know" was the only answer any Flutterpony mother could give.

3) Celestia and Luna were getting remarkably subtle and clever about the bodyguards chosen for each of the Bearers. Twilight, for example, had an escort entirely of unicorns, the better to coordinate their magical defenses with her own considerable abilities. Rarity's protectors on the other hand were a team of graceful and lovely mares. Their cover was as models working for her, and served in that capacity--- but I was assured that under the coiffed hairdos and frou-frou dresses each of them was a ruthless and efficient fighting machine, and that even the daintiest of them could have folded up Big Macintosh like a cardboard box.
4) Modified lessons, admittedly. It was something of a co-op between Rainbow Dash, Scootaloo and Twilight, who wanted to analyze Scootaloo's unusual flying style.

5) save, of course, for the redoubtable Angel, who never left his mistress' side.

6) I think U C wat I did ther.

7) To get an idea of how the Princesses got their pocket money, watch THIS.

8) That wasn't extravagance so much as common sense; who else would the Princesses hire to take care of Zap Apple trees?

9) Granny Smith's reaction to the offer could be best paraphrased as "And up from the ground come a bubblin' crude!"

10) Getting her little hoofies on a royal supply of Sweet Apple Acres Cider didn't hurt either.

11) Law of nature: including reading material in a bathroom increases its manliness quotient 15%.

12) The Princesses were all long convinced of the value and utility of television and radio communications. after the gravity attack incident, they were no longer willing to tolerate any hoof-dragging by the government and implemented the technology nationwide. Within mere days the military and civil services had a full, if crude, network of radio communications, and every town and hamlet in Equestria had at least one functioning radio station. Cheap TV sets were jumping off the shelves shortly thereafter. The setup and broadcast regulations would have the FCC tearing its hair out and any electronics engineer who looked inside one of the sets would be left curled up in a corner sucking his thumb and sobbing, but it worked.
"... actually, to be spezzific, it would seem dat der Drakonekvus---"

BOUNCE

"... haff altered both ze ratio uff action to reaction, as vell as ze Coefficient uff Restitution...."

CAROM

"...to randomly alternate to any fraction between vun--"

POING

"...und zero...."

SPLAT

"The what??" Rainbow Dash said, dodging a careening desk. She, like the rest of the pegasi, thestral and flutter ponies, had gone airborne once everything had started bouncing off everything else. Those few unicorns capable of it were levitating as well, trying not to touch anything. Everyone else was more or less at the mercy of unhinged physics. I had managed to grab a pillar and hold on. Twilight was hovering overhead in a purple bubble.

"He means the bounciness of things," Twilight told her pegasus friend. "Like, a One will bounce like a rubber ball on a kitchen floor. And a Zero will go splat, like a, well, like a pancake." She drifted to the right as several loose objects caromed her way. "The Draconequis is changing that randomly from one, to zero, and everything in between."

"There's nothing between one and zero," Rainbow Dash complained.

"Yes there is! Fractions or decimal places---"

"Y'know ah don't mean to interrupt all your fancy mathematicals," Applejack said from her hiding place under an overturned desk, "but d'you think y'all could concentrate on how to FIX THIS??"

"Call it a hunch," I said from my hypothetically safe position as a fixture on a pillar, "But we need to get everything to stop bouncing..."

At this point the bouncing effect had spread out to the entire castle, and was already affecting the nearby streets of Canterlot. Ponies and their possessions and property were bouncing hither, thither and yon. Least ways we could hear the mayhem through the open windows. There was a great deal of panic in the uproar, not to mention the sounds of quite a lot of breakage.

As I was frantically rifling through my addled mind for ideas on how to stop an entire city of ricocheting objects, I heard a feminine screech and was struck amidships. I folded around my hurtling attacker with a 'WHOUF!', bringing them to an effective, if inelegant, halt. Purple hooves clutched at me and dark purple eyes looked up into mine. "Bonjour," Violette said weakly.

"We must stop meeting like this," was all I could think to say. I wrapped one arm around her barrel.
and held on.

Well I couldn't exactly just set her down-- the poor mare would have gone careening off again.

"Hey, Hot to Trot, no time for love! We need a solution to this, quick!" Rainbow Dash was being her usual charming self.

I swear, that mare has a natural gift for pushing the worst possible buttons at the worst possible moment. I flushed and snapped back, "What are you all looking at me for? I'm just a de-facto diplomat! I don't have any magic powers, or wings or--" here I ducked a flock of chalkboard erasers- - "anything like that! Why do you expect me to solve this? Get out your darned elements and zap things back to normal yourselves!"

I was in a bit of a mood.

"Gee, somebody is a grumpy pants," Pinkie Pie said to me.

"Well I--" I did a double take. The party pony, contrary to all possible logic, or perhaps in accordance with her own, was the only thing in the room currently not bouncing. She was standing there, all four hooves firmly planted on the floor, grinning.

I thought for a moment. "Pinky... you glued your hooves to the floor, didn't you."

"Um, yuppers." Her smile faded a bit.

"....And now you can't move, can you," I concluded.

The pink pony hung her head. "....Yeah," she confessed dolefully. "I knew I shoulda used my suction cup shoes..."

"That's it!" Twilight exclaimed suddenly. "Pinkie! Do you have any of those shoes with you??"

Several minutes of physics-bending morphic resonance field manipulating moments (1) later, the lot of us had donned pairs of magically-replicated suction cup shoes and were 'ka-plock'ing our way down the castle halls. Even Dash had opted to wear the things, as going airborne was proving little protection from being pinballed about by flying objects, as even something as light as a ping pong ball could unexpectedly send you off on a new kinetic vector in a most non-Newtonian fashion.

The girls were wearing odd bits of armor procured from the various display cases lining the halls (and one or two chivalrous young guards) to protect them from random ricocheting debris; I myself had replaced my hat with a steel cooking pot and managed to acquire a minotaur war shield from a wall display, and was more or less successfully blocking any incoming projectiles. Why wasn't I still being battered about by the force of objects striking my shield? Who knew? The rules of physics and even common sense were quite out the window at this point.

Why was I going along? Damned if I know. I certainly didn't know what I expected to contribute, but the thought of leaving six girls and an aging professor to face a Draconequis alone made me want to crawl under a rock. We had a few hangers-on in our little group; Snails was tagging along with the professor, and Violette refused to leave my side. Celestia and Luna were not with us this time; they had both taken to the air, overflying the city and magically gluing down anything and
anypony they could; once again anything with a pair of wings or a horn had been called away to help with a crisis in a similar fashion, so our security detail was thinned.

Jonquil, being too small to lend much muscle to the larger effort, was with us... she was clinging to my shoulder and was busy using her magic to help fend off various hurtling objects. Twilight had erected a screen of her own, but the randomness of the kinetic forces involved was making it hard for her to shield effectively--- half the objects that hurtled at us were punching right through.

There were a few guards on hoof with us, but they were looking like they were well out of their element and knew it.

Coincidentally, I have to stop and mention that the sight of the ponies ka-plocking along in their suction cup shoes was dorkishly adorable. Ever seen a dog or cat trying to walk in booties? Exact same high-stepping, leg flailing walk. If the situation hadn't been so serious I probably would have collapsed in a giggling fit.(2)

"So where are we heading?" I asked. Rules of engagement, don't you know. Someone has to ask the obvious question.

The professor held up what appeared to be a pair of punch bowls, mouths taped together to form a hollow ball, with a glowing ping pong ball clattering about inside. A carpenter's level was taped across the top, and a regular grid of numbers was written down the sides of the globe. "Mit zis, I am able to determine ze direction und distance uf ze epicenter uv ze dishturrbance."

I cocked an eyebrow. The professor needed no further prodding. "Inside is un ping pong ball mit a perpetual bounce spell, provided by ze gracious Miss Tvilight," he explained. "As it is supposed to only bounce oop und down at a regular pace, ve can use it measure ze strength uff der Discordance. Ze closer ve get to ze eye uff ze shtorm, as it vere, ze vorse ze erratic behavior uv ze ball becomes." He was right. Despite the makeshift globe being held level as possible, the ping pong ball inside was bopping around quite erratically indeed.

"So how close is it?" Applejack said.

Cosmic Constant scrutinized his cobbled-together detector, squinting at the numbers. He then kerplocked his way to a set of wide double doors. "Iff mein calculationz are correct--- und dey alvays is--- it is right on der udder side of dese doors," he said in a low voice.

"Okay girls, get ready." A thrill of tension seemed to pass through our little group. The Mane Six clustered together, Elements donned, and faced the door. The earth ponies took fighting stances. Every unicorn in our little group lowered their horns and prepared themselves. I gripped my cane and the french filly under my arm tightly (she squeaked in protest but made no other sound.)

At a curt signal, the doors were magically flung open. They slammed open with a bang, revealing...

A ballroom.

Well, in all fairness, it could have been a chapel, or a chamber, or a banquet hall; just a wide open room with a gleaming marble floor and a vaulting glass ceiling. But I felt at the time that the best term for this capacious chamber would be "ballroom." Seeing as, at the moment, it was full of balls.

Well, not precisely full of balls. Maybe a half dozen, all bright blue and about the size of a basketball. All seemed to have writing of some sort or the other on the side--letters, numbers, strange greek symbols--- painted in yellow. One got the impression of there being many more due to the fact that
they were bouncing back and forth through the room, off the walls, floor, ceiling, and off the single tenant of the room, who was seated in the middle of the floor, clapping his hands with glee and occasionally catching and tossing one of the bouncing orbs in a random direction.

It was the Draconequus. It had to be. I'd hate to think there was another species out there in the cosmos of such discombobulating attributes.

This one looked nothing like either Discord or Ataxia. Where those two had certain attributes in common (two arms, two legs, two wings, vaguely sinuous), this creature was of a radically different form. Twilight would reflect later that it shouldn't have surprised us that Chaos entities would be radically different in form from one another.

To begin describing it I would have to say he mostly resembled one of those plush caterpillars you see at certain toy stores. Rather than being bilaterally asymmetrical, one might say he was randomized sequentially. His head most resembled a crocodile, save for the bulging, frog-like eyes, and the manic grin. The next segment of his body seemed to be the forelimbs and torso of a raccoon, complete with little black handlike paws. The one after that was of some sort of bear; the one after that was feathered and had the claws of a raptor... and thus down the length of his body, each segment bearing the markings, hide, and limbs (and occasionally wings) of a different animal, tapering down to his bobbled tail— which seemed to be made up of a daisy-chain of parasprites.

Twilight seemed a bit flummoxed by the creature's unexpected appearance, but she rallied quickly enough. She stepped forward, hooves akimbo. "Draconequus Mayhem?"(3)

The Draconequus paused in toying with one of the balls in its paws and looked up at her, grinning.

Twilight continued. "Good evening! As a duly designated representative of the land, principality and kingdom of Equestria, I order you cease any and all supernatural activity and return forthwith to your place of origin or to the nearest convenient parallel dimension!"

We all stared at her. "That oughta do it, thanks very much, Twi," Applejack drawled.

The mismatch creature leaned forward, like a stack of beanbag chairs starting to topple forward. It goggled at us with its bulging, wide set eyes, its crocodile snout spreading in a manic rubbery grin.

Oh please don't say it, I thought.

It giggled; a loud, echoing, high-pitched giggle. "Are you a god?"

I didn't wait for Twilight's reply. I plucked Violette up, made my hasty, sucker-footed way to a corner of the room where three massive pillars provided a sheltered corner and plopped her down on the floor behind them, her suction cupped hooves sticking her firmly to the floor.(4) I stuck my head back around the pillar in time to catch Twilight's response.

"Of course not!"

Here we go...

Mayhem began giggling. "Bouncy Bouncy! Bouncy Bouncy Bouncy!"

Well, at least that was original. It was certainly off script.

All the balls in the room stopped bouncing, freezing in midair. For the first time I got a good look at the symbols and letters on the sides.
The moment I saw the little triangle and V symbol, it clicked. Just as Ataxia's little gravity prank had been tied to the Canterlot snow globe, Mayhem's chaos effect had a totem as well. Those balls symbolized the six variables for --- what was the field called? Blast. Kinematics, that was it!--- a kinematic equation. Position, displacement, velocity, acceleration, two others I couldn't remember--- mass and delta V? Blast, once again my Cliff's Notes brain betrayed me... whatever, it came down to the fact that as the balls bounced and collided with each other, each collision somehow changed the relationship between those variables, altering, among other things, the Coefficient of Restitution in the world around us. Which in turn altered how the balls reacted with each other, in an inception-esque maze of complexity that would probably make smoke roll out of the ears of anyone but a mathematical genius.

TL;DR, if we wanted to stop this Event we had to capture those balls.

It wouldn't be till much later that I thought this out in full. At the time I was running on raw subconscious instinct, out of which only a few sparse words bubbled up as conscious thought:

The balls.

Collision equations.

Oh crap.

Twilight had apparently seen the symbols, and snapped to the conclusion my sluggish brain was just starting to gel into a thought. She went rigid for a split second, then barked, "Girls! GET THOSE BALLS!"

Before anyone could move, with a loud, cartoonish kerboing, his segmented body flew apart at the seams. Each segment of his body hurtled, pell mell, around the room, snatching up one of the Equation Balls in its paws/claws/flippers, before crashing out through the skylight.(5) Even his parasprite-chain tail wrapped around one of them and flew off. The last to go was the crocodilian head, the delta-v ball clutched in its rubbery jaws.(6)

Twilight wasn't so easily deterred. "AFTER HIM!" she shouted. Twilight's horn flared, and she disappeared with a flash... only to reappear a few seconds later in another. "What are you waiting for!" she shouted at the others.

"We'd like to, Twi, but how?" Applejack said. "We cain't all exactly fly OR teleport, here."

Twilight flushed. "Oh, um, right. Hold on--" She tensed up, her horn flaring. She and her friends were surrounded with a whirlwind of blue-white light. There was a flash so bright it almost had a sound, and they reappeared, each sporting a pair of graceful translucent wings.

"Oh boy!" Pinkie Pie squealed, doing a quick loop the loop.

"My word, Twilight, how did you do that?" Rarity gasped. "The last time you did something like this, just giving ONE of us wings nearly knocked you out!" The wings were also a touch different this time as well, I noted. Rather than gossamer butterfly wings, they were more akin to the pinions of a pegasus--- albeit a translucent, ghostly pastel pegasus.

"I've been practicing," Twilight said, a little smugly. She adjusted her tiara(7) and took to the air. "Come on, we've got no time to lose!" The six of them took to the air and flew out the skylight, scattering in pursuit of the discombobulated draconequus.

My own thoughts pinwheeled for a second in frantic energy. What to do? What to do? I suddenly became aware of a weight clinging to the back of my head. Jonquil had clung to her post-- my
shoulders-- throughout the whole event. Even now I was surrounded by a faint glister that I recognized as her protective aura. (8) I plucked her off my back and looked at her. "Jonquil, get word to the princesses, the Captain of the Guard, the head butler, any pony you can find who's in charge, I don't care-- let them know that they need to drop whatever they're doing and go after those balls."

"But what about you--" she asked.

"Do I look like I'm built for speed?" I asked. "This can't wait for me to waddle my way across the castle. It doesn't look like I'm in any danger her anyway, go on, GO!" I all but threw her into the air. She didn't give me any more argument; she zipped out the door in a streak of sparkles.

There was a faint "ach du lieber" from the Professor. I looked over at him; he and the two earth ponies were looking a bit shellshocked from their first meeting with an avatar of Chaos.

"What now, Professor?" I said, as much to prod him out of his shock as anything.

He seemed to shake himself out of his stupor and glanced out the door into the hall. Without warning he leapt forward. "Ach!" he shouted. "Schnell, Shnails, der doors!" Snails and the guards leapt forward and helped him slam the doors shut and bar them. And none too soon; just as the crossbar thunked home(9) something large and weighty banged against the oak doors, making them shudder in their frame. There was a series of thuds and crashes as whatever it was ricocheted its way back up the hallway.

"Now, mein freund Arcturus," Cosmic Constant said, making a cursory effort to smooth his frizzed hair. "Ve shtay in here. Dere ist nuffink for to be bounching about in here, so ve are relatively safe. Der effect seems to be growing at un exponential rate, und our little group is of no use out there." There was a muffled crash and what sounded like a Wilhelm scream. The Professor winced. "All ve can do for now is vait."

I settled to the floor-- carefully; nobody needed nearly four hundred pounds of fat man careening around the room like a demented superball-- and threw my arm over Violette's withers. She rested her head against my shoulder.

"J'ai peur, Monsieur singe," she said. "Mais au moins vous êtes ici."

I murmured something noncommittal and patted her on the shoulder. The rest of this confrontation with the Draconnequi, it seemed, would be played out by others.

Author's Note:

1) And one jar of glue solvent

2) I saved that for later, when reviewing the footage I covertly took with my Smartphone.

Yes, I had a Smartphone.... salvaged from the worldgate detritus and painstakingly fitted with a magic recharger. I was at pains to keep it out of Rainbow Dash's hooves... especially as she had threatened to smash it underhoof if I ever showed the footage of her walking around with those sucker shoes.

3) His name was easy to guess. It was spelled out in bright red letters that ran down the length of his body.
4) Don't ask me how I ended up carrying her, even though she was as shoed as the rest of us. She... got somewhat clingy when a bouncing chair narrowly missed her head.

5) Each segment made a point of smashing through a different pane of the ornate skylight.

6) What I had mistaken for ears were, in fact, bat wings.

7) The Bearers had been wearing their elements nonstop since our little tete-a-tete with the late Discord. Nopony was willing to get caught empty-hooved.

8) She'd never take on an assailant hoof to hoof, but she made a dandy fine personal forcefield generator.

9) Luna had a very old-fashioned outlook on home security.
Chapter 22

Violette, Cosmic Constant and myself were by default forced to sit idle, hunkered down in the empty ballroom while the Bearers of the Elements pursued Mayhem. We made idle chatter to try and distract ourselves from the situation. Or rather Cosmic Constant and I did; Violette's English was too poor to easily take part in the conversation. She was reduced to sitting there and asking Cosmic Constant (who it seems spoke Fancy as well as his native Germane(1)) what we were prattling about. I could only hope I would pick up a few words of it soon.

Despite the situation I felt fairly confident that the Bearers would manage to pull things off. Experience with them had taught me that, appearances to the contrary, they were six of the most capable ponies in Equestria. Mayhem was fast and unpredictable, but the bearers had two magic users, and three fliers. Mind, Fluttershy was still a 'weak' flier, and while Twilight was still having some issues with stability and control, if they were motivated enough they could hold their own in the air...

What? Twilight? Yes, ever since she became an alicorn.

...I didn't mention that? Oh. *Well.*

Bit of a kerfluffle, that was.

I wasn't present for the event that caused it, and the details are a little muddled, but as I understand it Twilight was mucking about with an unfinished spell by Starswirl the Bearded, and in the course of unraveling the resultant mess (something about switched cutie marks-- I didn't even think that was possible!) the Elements activated and triggered her... ascendency, for lack of a better word.

It was about that time that I learned some interesting things about the nature of the Elements. As Luna explained it to me, the Elements' main, or key function is to *reveal or restore the true nature of things.* To "Put things back the way they should be," roughly speaking. For instance, transforming Nightmare Moon back into Princess Luna. Or changing a village ravaged by Chaos magic back to normal. Or restoring cosmic stability by changing a disruptive chaos entity into an inert statue. They had other abilities, of course. And more darkly, could be put to other purposes, or even made to behave against their natures--- Luna's imprisonment in the moon was done by exploiting that, turning her connection to the moon into a full union with it--- but at the cost of its connection to its bearers. Celestia and Luna lost their connection to the elements because they tried to turn them against each other; as a consequence Celestia had been forced to wait a thousand years for new Bearers to be born and the balance of the elements to be restored.

What does this have to do with it? Well, all ponies are born with at least a *little* of the potential to become Alicorns. Some rare few, though, are born essentially nascent...alicorn caterpillars, if you will. They will inevitably become alicorns; it's only a matter of waiting for the right trigger. Twilight was such a case. Even Celestia and Luna are uncertain of the actual mechanics, but it seems the Elements were *designed to do this*-- to seek out those ponies with the potential for alicornhood, gravitate to them and in turn subtly gravitate those ponies to themselves, and then transform them. Ponies with sufficient potential can ascend on their own, or even be born as full alicorns (per Princess Cadence), but it's incredibly rare. The Elements help make it a certain thing by, in a nutshell, revealing the pony's true nature... an alicorn.(2) And well, Twilight was such an obvious
nascent that she might as well have had "Instant Alicorn, just add Element" for a cutie mark.

Twilight handled her transformation and her consequent promotion...about as well as one would expect.

Twilight continued to stare into the mirror, an expression of dumbfounded shock on her face. I think it was at that point, when she finally got a look at herself in her new tiara, that it all sank in. She'd caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror as they were fitting her for her gown, and she'd frozen, eyes wide, pupils turned to pinpricks. It was starting to get disturbing. At least she wasn't hyperventilating.

Then again, I wasn't entirely sure she was actually breathing.

"Twilight?" Celestia said, concerned. She nudged the purple alicorn with a wing. "Twilight dear, are you all right?"

One of the quartet of blonde-maned mares tending to her leaned forward anxiously. "Princess Twilight?" she said. "Are you all right, Princess?"

That seemed to get a response. Twilight raised a single trembling hoof to the crown on her own head, and then started making the most extraordinary wheezing noise.

"Eeeeee..."

I found myself backing up a step, along with Spike. "That's not good," he muttered to me.

The drawn-out "eeeee" quickly turned into wheezing gasps, in and out--"Eeee--ahhhh, Eeee-ahhh, ahh-eee, ahh-eee, ahh-eee... " Her eyes puddled up. She finally let out a heartbreaking wail:

"But I don't WANT to be a Princess!!"

Celestia, bless her heart, rushed forward, wings spread like a mother hen. She enfolded the poor filly as Twilight finally went into her long-overdue breakdown. "I don't want to be a Princess! I hate politics! I don't know how to run a country! I don't want to rule anypony! How will I run a castle, I can't even keep my sock drawer organized!(3) And what about my research? I can't give up my books and my studies and my experiments, I just can't! How can I move away from Ponyville? How can I leave my friends? I can't handle being treated like royalty, I'm not Blueblood--!

Her friends of course clustered around her, while Celestia chuckled and cooed reassurances to her like a mother to a distraught foal. Twilight had already started talking about going on the lam, changing her identity, having her wings removed or getting a horn-ectomy or maybe she could just wear large hats all the time and lets try the breathing trick Cadence showed her, why isn't it working, why isn't the breathing exercise working--!

Being merely an acquaintance and a typically awkward male, I stood to the side and grimaced sympathetically. "Epic level blow out," I muttered to Spike.

"I give it a six out of ten," he said. "Nothing's caught fire or exploded yet, and nobody's turned into a cactus..."
"Eeee, ahhh, eee, ahhh, eee, ahhh....."

It took a while for Celestia and the Bearers to calm her down, but eventually she did.

When she stopped hyperventilating and bawling in panic, Celestia had reminded her, quite pointedly, that they had a mostly parliamentary government-- the only members of the royal family with any political authority or duties were Celestia and Luna themselves, and they weren't going to be vacating the diarch thrones any time soon. Twilight wasn't even first in line for the succession.

Furthermore, her rank as Princess was pretty much ceremonial--- much like Prince Blueblood's-- and wouldn't make any substantial changes to her life, or so Celestia managed to reassure her. There were in fact swarms of Princes, Dukes and Duchesses, Lords and Ladies, Sirs and Madames in Equestria who lived fairly pedestrian lives outside of certain ceremonial or minor political roles, and perhaps having a touch more luxury from their royal allowance. Twilight might be expected to pop into the palace a bit more often, but she could live-- and spend her time-- as she darned well pleased.

It sounded a great deal like how the nobility in England worked. After all, what government role did Sir Elton John or the Prince of Wales really have, anyway?

Celestia's calm reasoning, along with a lot of mothering hugs and reassurances from her friends that she was still "the same old Twilight" eventually pulled the new Princess out of her emotional death-spiral. She'd more or less come to terms with it since then, and was accepting with good grace the one or two things that did change. The Ponyville library, for one, got one hell of a magically-aided expansion. One alicorn-powered growth spell later and it would rival the house-trees in elven high fantasy. It was about five times as wide in the trunk as it had been, and now cradled a rather sizeable mansion in its boughs (and no few extra volumes in its shelves.) Mayor Mare was a little unsettled at first to have a Princess' palace looming over the Ponyville skyline, but eventually conceded that it was nice of the Crown to give the local libraries a few new branches.

Confound it; now I'm going to have to go back through my journals and check to make sure I wrote "alicorn" where it should say "unicorn." aren't I?... Ehh, to heck with it.

My, I have wandered off-topic, haven't I.

At any case, suffice it to say that between the six of them, they had three fliers, two magic users, and the Elements of Harmony, and so I felt the mane six to be more than a match for the modular Mayhem.

It was unfortunate for my peace of mind that it dawned on me: Mayhem had outmaneuvered us. With the six of them scattered in pursuit of his segmented body, they would be unable to bring their particular Magical Maguffin to bear....

Meanwhile, the Bearers of the Elements were having troubles of their own. There were six Bearers,
six Equation Balls, and six Draconequus segments, so one could be forgiven for thinking that it was a fairly even contest.

One would have to reassess the situation, however. Of the six Bearers, only one, Rainbow Dash, was a seriously skilled or even experienced flier. Fluttershy was pitiful on wingpower; Rarity, while deft and agile, had little stamina; Applejack was struggling hard with her natural earth pony agoraphobia; Pinkie Pie was erratic and inattentive; and Twilight, while possibly faster than even Rainbow Dash thanks to her alicorn powers, had a long way to go on control and maneuverability.

The arena for their aerial combat was not in their favor, either. The airspace over the city was getting filled with more and more randomly moving objects, turning the sky over the city streets into a perilous obstacle course. While the mane 6 had to duck and weave to protect their all-too-vulnerable selves from getting pummeled, pierced, or crushed, Mayhem had no such restraints. His autonomous segments pinballed off of buildings, ponies, and objects both mobile and stationary with reckless abandon.

True to her nature as a pony who respected the power of intellect, Twilight was pursuing the head. He was giving her quite the run, despite the ridiculousness of his bat-wing ears and the incredibly unaerodynamic nature of a disembodied head. He was smart, too, if seemingly demented; he kept to below rooftop level, forcing his pursuer to bob and weave through the buildings and towers of Canterlot in a combination dodgeball and slalom run.

This was not Twilight's forte', and it was showing. If she flew above the rooftops, she risked losing him, but when she tried to pursue him down the narrow canyonways between the towers of Canterlot, she found herself smacking into loose objects and taking bruising impacts off stone walls. If it weren't for her magical forcefield she would have already broken something. The worst indignity was when she took a sharp corner and plowed headlong through a dozen lines of wet clothes dangling over the street--- what in Tartarus? weren't there laws about blocking the flying lanes in Canterlot?-- coming out the other side with a half-dozen unmentionables(6) tangled around her horn.

Snarling and spitting, she managed to shake the laundry off her head before she crashed into something. This was no good; she couldn't possibly outfly a creature who considered Isaac Newton's laws of motion an optional feature. She needed to outsmart the thing.

She fired off a quick salvo of magical bursts-- freezing spells, bubble-trap spells, stunning spells-- but Mayhem's flying head dodged them with ease. The spells pinged off the walls and street. She even tried the "appearing door" spell, apparating a door and frame in front of him. He simply opened it and flew right on through, slamming it behind him.

Twilight growled in frustration. She just couldn't get a clear shot! And she didn't know how to make spells that would turn corners on their own. She had been practicing that, but to be safe she'd only learned to do it with--

"Lightbullllb," she sang to herself with a wicked grin. Her horn lit up as she turbocharged a new spell.

Mayhem's head was running a slalom course through the remains of an open-air market, dodging hurtling wagons and flying piles of fruit and launching whatever wasn't already airborne into the air, when a brilliant flash of purple lit up behind him. His eyes rolled back in time to see a blob of purple light streaking his way, effortlessly dodging the obstacles in its way and closing with him fast.

He yelped and began jiggling back and forth across the street, but it was still no good. The bolt of light struck him in a splash of octarine light. For a moment there was no effect; then the mustache began to grow. It sprouted from his lip in a torrential rush, yards and yards of curling fu-manchu
mustache streaming behind him like the tail of a comet, growing ever longer and bushier by the second till the ends finally tangled around a lamp post.

The head came a stop with a painful yank. Mayhem yelped, losing his grip on the ball in his mouth. It sailed off down the road, right into Twilight Sparkle's waiting hooves. "Hah!" she shouted triumphantly. "Brains over Brawn, once again!... Euugh." She shook a bit of Draconequis drool off one hoof. She turned the ball over, examining it hastily; how was she to deactivate it?

There was a tiny valve stopper on one side. Recalling Arcturus' own handling of Ataxia's snowglobe, she quickly tore it out with her teeth. The ball deflated with a loud bronx cheer. She looked around. Had it worked?

Things, unfortunately, were still bouncing around. Though the randomness of it seemed to have diminished, slightly... "Okay, looks like we gotta get 'em all to stop this," Twilight said. "One down, five to go." She turned to the entangled head. "As for you--" the Element of Magic on her crown flared.

Mayhem's head gave a panicked squawk and vanished in a cloud of smoke. Twilight pooched her lip in discontent. "That was rather inconclusive," she said. Had she 'won,' or had the head just teleported back to join the rest of him? No telling. She fired a magic flare into the sky, signaling for the royal guard to come secure the deflated globe. "I hope the rest of the girls are doing okay..."

Author's Note:

1) Don't blame me; Celestia has been planting these stealth puns all over Equestria's world for millennia. It is only going to get worse now that she has access to literal tons of twenty-first century pop culture. She's read the Harry Potter series and, as I learned from Luna, is already laying the groundwork for Gilda's homeland to be renamed Griffindor...

2) I'm tempted to draw parallels with 'being strong with the Force' and becoming a Jedi Knight, but I'm not certain how accurate it would be and it would involve bringing in the old novel 'Splinter of the Mind's Eye' and that would be just getting too fandom-obscure.

3) I've never seen any pony wearing socks in public, is the strange part. I've asked about it, but I get the most shocked and scandalized looks. One would think I'd made conversation about their choice in intimate lingerie....

...I think I just answered my own question.

4) Not like that, you sniggering dolts.

5) She's used that pun in five public speeches since then. Kill me.

6) Like socks.
Chapter 23

It should become apparent to the observant reader that many subsequent passages in these narratives contain details which I could not have personally witnessed. Of course 'observant' has its obvious depressing limitations, so in order to avoid ceaseless inquiries into the matter I must take pains to restate the self-evident: that such passages were pieced together by myself at a later time from the recollections of those who were there. Ah, well; on with the story.

***

Things were not going well.

That was the assessment from Rarity's perspective. The very moment everypony had cleared the skylight, they had scattered to the four winds, pursuing segments of that beastly Mayhem creature. And, of course, leaving her to chase after the brute-- or a large portion of him anyway-- all alone. What were they thinking? She was a dress designer, not a fighter! And she certainly wasn't going to go rolling about in the dirt wrestling with that hairy, mangy looking.... thing.... for a rubber ball.

Especially not after, to her horror, realizing just which section of the reprehensible creature she was chasing. Twilight had taken after the head. Dear Fluttershy, too timid for anything else, had gone in pursuit of the tail. Rainbow Dash was doing her best to run down the first section of the upper torso, Pinkie pie the second, Applejack the third. Which left Rarity with the last chunk of wayward Draconequus. It was covered in mangy grey fur and was running along on what appeared to be the arms of a gorilla... or would it be the legs?.... and it was strangely contoured, almost double lobed, with a distinct cleft---

Let's just outright say it. She was chasing down a giant ambulatory gorilla butt.

When she had realized just what part of the beast she was chasing, it had almost undone her. But there was no help here; no gallant stallions to bat her eyelashes at, no iron-stomached apple farmer to roll her eyes and push her aside, no overeager little sister to sucker into pulling the load. Equestria was counting on her! She and she alone would have to chase down and (oh Maker!) capture a giant, hairy, gorilla's rear end. Right now though she couldn't overcome the visceral certainty that the only thing worse than letting the horrid thing get away would be catching it.

The segment she was chasing seemed to be well aware of her trepidation. It was scarcely making an effort to get away, jouncing and flapping along through the seedier streets of Canterlot, ball gripped firmly in one paw, with Rarity fluttering along a squeamish few yards behind it. It seemed to be picking the filthiest alleyways to hop and flap(1) its way down--

She barely ducked in time. As she pursued the runaway rump round a corner, something brown and oblong came hurtling through the air right at her head. It missed her by scant inches and splattered against the wall of the building behind her, spraying the whitewashed stone with lumpy brown ooze.

"You vile beast!" Rarity shrieked when she saw what the creature was using for ammunition. "That's no way for anypony to behave with a yam!"
The alleyway they were in ran behind several fresh produce stores, and the monkey-limbed posterior had found a discarded crate of slightly-off yams amidst the kinetic wreckage. It hefted one sizable rotted tuber in its paw and, despite having no eyes,(2) glowered at her.

"You wouldn't dare," Rarity said.

Her mother always did say she had a knack for saying just the wrong thing.

The next instant a volley of rancid yams were winging her way.

Rarity shrieked and dodged like a madmare. She almost, almost! managed to evade the incoming barrage, leaping and twisting like somepony from the Matrix, only to take the very last rotten vegetable square in the face.

Mindful of "Sisterhooves Social," I had once enquired as to the accuracy of that episode. It had seemed rather unrealistic to me that Rarity would simply wipe the mud from the pit off and walk away sparkling clean... She informed me to my surprise that yes, that was actually accurate. She happened to know a spell that rendered the mane and fur impervious to mud and stains for hours.

She had not cast that spell today.

Brownish black gunk dripped from her mane and face. She wiped her eyes clean and stared in horror at the mess on her hooves. In the past she had been subjected to terrible things: Swamp muck, farm dirt, diamond dogs. Never, in all her life, had she been so befouled.

Mayhem's Buttocks hopped up and down gleefully, mocking her.

Deep inside her fastidious soul, an absolutely transcendent rage kindled to life. "Oh, you. Are. DEAD," she rasped. She rocketed after the Draconequus. The rebellious rump apparently sensed that things had seriously Gotten Real; it stopped hopping up and down and began fleeing in earnest. It veered further down the twisting alleyway, the fashionista in close pursuit, her muck-covered face incandescent with rage. "I will end you," she howled.

Tragically for Rarity, the butt she was pursuing had more than just yam flinging at its disposal. There was an obnoxious Bronx cheer and the alleyway was filled with clouds of noxious green gas. Plants wilted, paint peeled, and the delinquent posterior vanished in a yellow-green smoke screen. The infuriated unicorn was so livid that she didn't even slow down; she held her breath and rocketed into the center of the cloud of fumes.

And collided headlong with the sewer lid held in the butt's monkey paws. Stunned senseless, she tumbled from the air and plummet straight down the open manhole. There was a resounding splash. The monkey rump dropped the sewer lid back in place and made itself scarce.

There was a long, drawn out, terrible silence.

Followed by an unholy scream that echoed the length and breadth of the Canterlot sewer system.(3)

Mayhem's tail was making tracks. It was well clear of the castle and already passing over the gardens and hedgerows, one of the balls wrapped in its buzzing length. Just as it was about to clear the arboretum, a cheeping, feathered cloud rose up from the trees and engulfed it. Birds of every type
and shape, from hummingbirds to buzzards, plucked and clawed at it. There was no escape; it was in an incredibly painful three-way tug of war between a toucan and two flamingoes when it finally gave up and vanished in a puff of illogic.

The ball it was carrying dropped out of the sky... and into Fluttershy's waiting hooves. "Thank you so much, little birdy friends," she cooed to the birds now fluttering around her. "I'll be sure and ask the princesses to bring you all some extra bird feed today..."

---

Pinkie Pie circled over the city, pondering. "If I was a giant runaway tummy," she pondered, "where would I go?"

The pink pony was at something of an impasse. Most ponies--- or people--- in her situation would be confounded by a lack of lateral thinking. Her problem here was also her more typical handicap; an overwhelming surfeit of lateral thinking. Even on her best day Pinky's logic had more lateral moves than a knight on a chessboard. Straightforward concepts like following something from point A to point B had a tendency to elude her.

"At least I think it was a tummy," Pinkie Pie ruminated out loud as she flew. "there were an awful lot of middle-y sections to him, I might be chasing down his spleen... or even his kidneys... but then again if I was a spleen or kidneys I'd want to find out where my stomach was, too, so I guess I better look for the stomach first. And Granny Pie always said the best way to somepony's heart is through their stomach--- aha! The BAKERY!" Once again the pink pony's brain took two squares forward and one to the right, and she began sniffing the air. As it so happened the scent she was looking for was strong on the breeze over this side of town:

The smell of baking goodies.

Following her sniffer, she beelined for the Canterlot Imperial bakery.

The Imperial bakery was a huge facility that provided baked treats of every imaginable form to all of Equestria (and beyond! as the blurb went). While the majority were shipped out in bulk to stores and restaurants, they also had a showroom where you could walk in, browse through the racks piled high with goodies still warm from the ovens and purchase whatever you liked fresh--- or, if your pocket money was a little short, just stand, drooling, at the huge picture windows lining the walls and watch as the bakers worked. There wasn't a day that went by that ponies ranging from the most hoity toity of upper crust to the most common of street urchins didn't leave their noseprints on the glass while white coated chefs went about making pastries, pies, cakes, and petit fours under equestrians' hungry gaze.

Well, except for today, obviously.

The usual audience had long fled, as had most of the bakery staff, upon the arrival of the Imperial bakery's newest guest. Mayhem--- or at least the erstwhile middle section of him-- had made camp in the center of the Imperial bakery's factory floor and was making itself right at home.

One would be surprised at how much mayhem the Draconequisus was able to cause there. Baked goods aren't generally known for their bounciness, even under ideal circumstances. However, there were plenty of loose utensils associated with the baking arts, and so the airspace over the factory floor had quickly filled with ricocheting pans, mixing bowls, egg beaters, and the like... and the
exotic properties of Mayhem's kinetic-altering field were beginning to affect the elasticity of even the most phlegmatic substances. At this close proximity even the liquid ingredients-- the eggs, the cream, the pie fillings-- were behaving in an unnervingly non-Newtonian fashion.

That was the state of affairs when Pinkie Pie came sailing through one of the broken factory windows. The furry lump that Pinkie had come to think of as Mayhem's Tummy was seated in the middle of the factory happily bouncing his rubber ball with one cloven hoof as kitchen utensils, gobbets of weirdly animate foodstuffs, and the occasional luckless baker's assistant flew through the air around it.

A few of the staff were still present, out of reluctance to give ground before the thing before them. Somepony had to face this monster; at the moment they were the thin red raspberry and creme frosted line between one of the agents of Chaos and the rest of Canterlot, and they knew it. Several of the bakers had rallied and, armed with rolling pins, spatulas and other implements of the culinary arts, were preparing to perform the Charge of the Light Pastry Brigade just as Pinkie Pie arrived.

The lead baker recognized the Element around her neck and had immediately seized upon her as their salvation. "Your Ladyship, thank heavens!"(4) he said, wringing his hat. "What do we do?"

Pinkie opened her mouth to speak, only to be interrupted as a gobbet of pink frosting the size of a grapefruit splutted across her face. A moment later her tongue appeared through the frosting and she lapped it off her face. She smacked her lips thoughtfully. "Switch from 3x powdered sugar to 4x and add more strawberry liqeur," she said. "But that's not important right now. Right now we have to get that ball away from him--" she pointed to the basketball-sized globe Mayhem's Tummy was bouncing in its hooves-- "before he uses it to bounce all of Equestria to the Moon!"

"Great!" one of the pastry chefs said sarcastically. "How do we do that?"

"Like this!" Pinkie grabbed one of the loose industrial-sized cans floating about and ripped off the pull-tab lid. "Caramel sauce! Perfect! This'll sticky up that ball so he can't bounce it any more!" She took aim at the Draconequus and wound up. "We're rubber, you're glue, what bounces off of us sticks to YOU!" She threw the caramel sauce as hard as she could.

It never reached its intended target. A cloven hoof snagged the hurtling caramel in midair, deftly catching the slopped sauce with the can. The front of the ambulatory midriff split into a wide, grinning mouth, and with a single chug, swallowed the caramel, can and all.

"Nuts!" Pinkie pouted. The stomach belched.

The bakery staff followed the pink pony's lead and took up arms. "All right lads, give him a volley!" the head baker shouted. Cakes, pies, balls of unrolled dough, tubs of filling and cans of sauce flew. The effort was fruitless. It didn't matter whether they were aiming for the disembodied stomach or were trying to knock the ball out of its hooves. The belly of the beast simply glommed the projectiles out of the air without even interrupting its dribbling.

It didn't escape Pinkie's notice though that it was moving a good bit slower. It burped again, wetly. Goodness that sounded familiar. Almost like when the twins...

A sly grin spread across Pinkie's face. "Oh so that's how it's gonna go, huh?" Pinkie Pie said. "Let's see how well you like a little pie-eating contest... Pinkie Pie style!" She retreated back into the rows of shelved pastries and began heaving them hoof-over-hoof at the Draconequus as fast as she could.

"What good will that do?" the head baker complained. "You're just feeding him more cake!"
"I'm not FEEDING him cake, I'm ASSAULTING him with cake!" Pinkie said, slinging a decorative ganache overhand. "Keep it up, everypony!"

For lack of better options, every pony present returned to pummeling the malevolent midriff with the bakery's stock. The beast gorged itself heroically, engulfing pies, cakes, and cookies in every state of baked edibility, but soon began running out of steam. Pinkie knew they had it when the now-bulging stomach halted in mid-battle and lurched over to the milk cans. "We've got him now!" Pinkie exulted as the groaning stomach guzzled the giant cans of milk two-fisted. "Go for the treacle tarts!"

The rain of sticky, sinfully rich tarts was the last straw. The gigantic gut sagged to the floor, spattered with crumbs and filling, waving its hooves in defeat even as it tried to choke down the gluey mass threatening to engulf it. "Hold your fire!" Pinkie screeched. The onslaught ceased. Pinkie motioned with her hoof. "Stay back everypony," she said. "This could be ugly." Carefully she closed the distance between herself and the groaning, belching belly.

It was in no condition to fight. It sagged on the floor in an adipose pile, dripping crumbs and frosting and goo, groaning and burping in that wet, burbly way she recognized... from the dark day when the Cake twins had gotten into the custard tarts when nobody was looking. "Awww, ate too much, did you?" Pinkie cooed at the stomach, poaching out her lips. "Poor baby. Couldn't help it, couldja? Cause you're all stomach, and all a stomach can think about is eating and eating and eating." The Gut gurgled in woe. "I know; it took me a long long time to learn to ignore my stomach. It's super hard for me sometime, and I have a brain in my noggin to tell it 'no.' So I figured a tummy all out on its lonesome wouldn't know when to say 'when.'" As if in confirmation the misery ridden stomach lapped up more of the frosting on the floor, even as it groaned in pain.

Pinkie Pie nodded and reached into her saddlebag. "Well I'll tell you what," she said. She pulled out an amber soda bottle and held it out in her hoof. "I have some nice, flat ginger beer here that will settle all those ickies and owies right down. All you have to do is give me the ball, and you can have it." She beckoned enticingly.

The Stomach gurgled reluctantly and seemed to consider.

"Come on..."

It belched, and came to a decision. It slumped forward, holding out the ball in one trembling cow hoof and reaching for the open bottle of ginger beer with the other.

The staff of the Imperial bakery leaned forward, holding their breath...

And at that exact moment, a giant winged monkey butt crashed through the window.

This would have been upsetting enough on its own. It broke the fragile detente' and sent the factory floor into a whole new round of chaos. The monkey butt leaped and flapped about, knocking shelves and equipment flying, growling and farting noxious green smoke that sent the workers running for their lives and their lungs.

What happened next, to steal a pun, took the cake. Leaping through the shattered window came a form that left even Pinkie Pie's erratically flexible mind reeling. It was a mare, but other than that almost unrecognizable. She looked like Hell. Literally. She was coated and smeared with indescribable filth, blackwater silt, and axle grease, mud and offal; her mane and tail matted down with gunge. Errant sparks sizzled from her horn, igniting the muck coating her in places and sending wisps of smoke drifting up. She was screaming wild-eyed, half-incoherent profanities in a fit nigh unto an epileptic seizure, and was heralded by a cloud of foul stench that sent any pony that was too close reeling. Yet somehow, somehow she was recognizable under all the
Pinkie Pie’s pupils shrank to pinpricks. "Rarity...???

Rarity didn't answer. She was in a zone beyond reason. Somewhere she had procured a manhole cover and a pitchfork, and was wielding them as a shield and trident and was loudly threatening to do things with them that would surely have violated the Geneva convention. "WHERE IS HE??" the fashionista howled, brandishing her pitchfork, her voice reverberating in spine-chilling fashion. "I WILL END HIM! HIS SUFFERING WILL BE LEGENDARY EVEN IN TARTARUS!!"

Several of the bakery staff shrieked and fainted-- whether from fear or from the stench, nopony knew.

The butt looked terrified, as much as it was possible for a butt to look afraid.

Pinkie, for her part, was completely croggled. Worse, she was scared sober. She was used to the weird-- she was the weird-- but this went beyond even her threshold for the irrational. In a brief moment of self-awareness, it occurred to her to wonder: Is this how the others feel whenever they deal with me?

"Um, Rarity," she said hesitantly, stepping closer and interrupting her friend in the middle of finding as many synonyms as possible for 'eviscerate.' "Whuoah." Pinkie covered her nose with a hoof. "That ain't no chocolate cake. Rarity, what happened??"

Rarity paused in mid tirade. "Oh, this, dearie?" she said, giving Pinkie a grin that reminded the party pony way too much of Twilight Sparkle during the Smarty Pants Incident. "Nothing that can't be fixed with a little grooming, a little makeup--" she thrust out the pitchfork, pointing at the Butt cowering behind an overturned table--- "a little monkey rump on a skewer..."

"Why indeed I am." The loose cutlery around the room became enveloped in a magical glow, and formed a deadly, jagged cloud next to Rarity, every point and tine and blade gleaming with deadly intent. "And I intend to give until it HURTS!"

The steel blades leaped. The Butt fled its hiding place, jetting off in a cloud of flatulence just as the singing blades perforated the overturned table. Rarity shrieked like a mad thing and leapt after it, pitchfork lunging wildly. The two combatants lunged about the enormous kitchen, flipping furniture, splattering everything with muck and fogging the air with flour, filth-reek and clouds of fart gas.

Pinkie Pie spun in a circle in the middle of the room, frantic to stop her friend from doing something ghastly. The situation was taken out of her hooves, thankfully. She was the only one to notice that the Gut was in an increasing state of distress. The sewer stink and the noxious fart-clouds were upsetting its already upset metabolism; it was groaning and shaking and starting to bulge and swell.

Pinkie knew those signs too. "Everypony run for it, she's gonna blow!" she shrieked to the ceiling. The bakery staff took their cue and galloped for their lives. The last workpony cleared the emergency exit just in time. The groaning, spasming Gut lost control of its contents just as the prodigious methane clouds produced by the Rump, the flour-laden clouds in the air, and no little amount of sewer gas clinging to one deranged pony, drifted in ignition range of the pilot light on the ovens. There was an enormous, wet belching noise, a sound that made the parents of newborns all over Canterlot shudder and look over their shoulders out of pure habit... followed by a tremendous boom.
Ponies were knocked to their knees blocks away. Tiny bits of rubble rained down; the light from the fireball was visible for miles.

When the smoke finally cleared, the Imperial bakery was nothing but a four-sided shell, splattered from the inside out with... something the newspapers days later would refuse to describe too closely. There, sitting in the middle of the shattered shell of Canterlot's finest bakery, was the shattered shell of Equestria's finest fashion pony. She was covered in at least three layers of too-horrible-to-contemplate muck. Clutched in her trembling hooves was a pitchfork, on whose tines were hung, like trophies of war, two deflated rubber balls.

Pinkie Pie, for a miracle untouched by the unspeakable muck, crawled out from beneath a nearby shipping crate and grinned at her. "Well, that takes care of that," Pinkie Pie said.(10)

"Memewmweemmmeeneh," Rarity said.

"Well, two parts of it, anyway," Pinkie amended.

"Memewmweemmmeeneh."

"I wonder how the other girls are doing..."

"Memewmweemmmeeneh...."

Pinkie shrugged. "You're right. Out of our hooves for now," she seized Rarity's tail by the one clean spot on its end and dragged her, insensate, out of the wreckage and over to the large decorative fountain in the square. "Okay, bathtime for Rarity, in you go," she giggled, pushing the unicorn into the fountain with a splash. She jumped in after.

Two guardsmen dropped out of the sky and landed at the edge of the fountain. "Miss, we're in a crisis, you can't bathe in--- your Ladyships?"

Pinkie Pie ignored the implied complaint. She plucked the pitchfork out of Rarity's insensate hooves and handed it, rubber balls and all, to one guard. "You," she commanded. "Keep an eye on these for a second, willya?" She turned to the other guard. "You-- go to the store down the street and get two dozen bottles of Mane and Tail shampoo.(11) On the double!"

The second guard ran off to retrieve the shampoo as ordered. The first guard took the pitchfork dubiously and regarded Rarity, who was sitting immobile while a marble dolphin gushed water on her head. "Will she be... okay?" he asked. The second guard returned with bottles in tow. Pinkie Pie unceremoniously dumped the first bottle over the filth-coated unicorn's head and began to scrub.

"Herbal..." Rarity mumbled.

"Pardon?" the guard asked.

"Make sure it's Mane and Tail herbal," Rarity said. "Only kind that will do..."

"Oh yeah," Pinkie said with a snort and a giggle. "She'll be fine." She began to lather with enthusiasm.

The guard regarded the remains of the Imperial bakery. "Well, your ladyship, I hope the rest of your group are doing a little better than this..."
There was an explosion somewhere in the city. Ponies screamed in alarm.

Pinkie Pie shook her head. "You shoulda known better than to say that," she scolded the guard.

Author's Note:

1)Pigeon wings. Even in Equestria, not the most tidy of birds.

2)Or maybe it did. Rarity didn't care to speculate.

3)Echoing, in fact, clear down to the residential districts and up the household plumbing in one particular bathroom, where it set back the potty training of one poor innocent young colt by simply weeks.

4)He was a bit unclear on the actual social ranking of the Bearers, but like most sensibly assumed they had some sort of title and so, bunted.

5)Floating, falling, bouncing, hurtling...

6)runoff from the lawns and gardens

7)drainage from the train wheelhouse

8)The fish processing plant

9)Sorry kids, it was a sewer-- you darn well know what it was

10)Being very careful not to lick her lips.

11) Yes, it actually exists. Look it up.
Chapter 24

Applejack had ended up chasing the upper torso. One of the upper torsos, anyway. Not that it mattered, the wretched Draconequus had all the sequential symmetry of a bag of cootie bug parts. This portion, at any rate, seemed to be composed of an enormous barrel chest with tiny fly wings and two powerful frog legs. It was all brute strength, spreading chaos by the expedient of thundering along like a bull in a china shop, smashing everything in its path, its ball tucked under its armpit.

It had chosen to elude the Bearers by diving further back into the castle and rampaging through the hundreds of rooms and twisting hallways. But Applejack was not so easily eluded. She’d quickly lassoed the creature around its middle and was now riding it, rodeo style, as it hopped and smashed its way through the castle.

"YeeehAW!" the farmpony hooted. "You ain't throwin' me that easy. I dun been to THIS rodeo before!" For all her boasting, though, she was in a fix. The bruiser wasn't getting away from her, but she wasn't making headway in bringing it down, either. Her plan had been to climb aboard, bear it down to the ground, and tie its legs together like a calf at the rodeo. But the jasper was too darn big and too darn strong to do that. In the back of her mind, her sensible self was starting to worry she’d lose her grip. And further back than that, her inner poor penny-counting farm girl was in danger of going into hysterics with a running tally of everything they were destroying, the longer it took to bring the brute down.

The upper torso thrashed and bucked, trying to scrape her off on first one wall there went another couple of them fancy vases and then another oh lord, a bunch of them gold-framed portraits, they had to be three, four hunnert bits apiece. She nearly lost her seating when it leapt up into the ceiling, smashing her bodily into the chandelier, Oh Maker, how many bits did great aunt Apple Brown Betty pay for that little chandelier in her home? And then crashed down on the enormous table set for twenty oh horseapples, not the china!

Battered, cut, bruised and not a little bloodied, Applejack gritted her teeth and held on. Stubborn as she was, though, if she didn't have a lucky break soon, she'd be thrown for sure. She just hoped that everyone, especially the younguns, was safe out of the way.

It was just her luck, and you can debate whether her luck was good or bad, that her family and friends didn't want to hide. They wanted to help.

"Cutie Mark Crusader Monster Wranglers, YAY!"

As she and the creature passed through yet another archway (trampling yet another collection of cupola bric a brac underfoot), an enormous rope net weighted down at the corners by three familiar fillies fell from the roof, covering them both. The beast bucked and thrashed; Applebloom, Scootaloo and Sweetiebelle hung on for dear life.

"Applebloom, whut're you and yore friends doin'?!" Applejack yelled.

"Helpin'!" Applebloom replied.

Any further argument between the two was interrupted by a sudden volley of apple fritters. Scalding hot apple fritters. They spattered against the partitioned draconequus, making its froggy skin sizzle. It
jumped and shook, in obvious pain. Applejack caught a glimpse of Granny Smith on the far side of
the room. She was manning a serving cart with a hot oil cooker on it, and was wearing an apron,
oven mitts and a saucepot for a helmet. She was flinging apple fritters as fast as she could fish them
out of the oil with a slotted spoon. "Hah, take that, ye durned vermint!" She shouted. "You mess
with the Apples, you get the whole tree!"

"YEAH!" Scootaloo shouted. The monster hopped around the room in a scalded rage.

"Bu-u-t we-e-e're no-ot Ap-ples," Sweetiebelle said as she was jounced around.

"But Applebloom is, and you mess with one Cutie Mark Crusader, you get the, uh, the whole-- oh, I
got nuthin. Whoa!" the Draconequus spun in a circle, trying to shake the CMC loose.

It was then that Big Macintosh got in on the act. The Apple family did, indeed, have a plan;
Macintosh's part was to tie the brute's limbs together and bring him down. He galloped around and in
between the monster's hopping legs, barely missing getting stepped on, dragging a stout braided gold
rope he'd liberated from the royal draperies. After two or three passes he took off down the hall,
closing the loop.

The Draconequus's frog legs came together. The huge torso teetered precariously, then fell, the red ball
squirting out of its grip. Granny Smith pinned it to the floor with a pitchfork(1) on the second
bounce; It collapsed with a bronx cheer. "We did it!" shouted Applebloom. The three fillies set up a
cheer.

"Flank check!" shouted Scootaloo. There was a brief pause. "....Nuts."

Applejack hopped down from the prone monster's shoulders. She'd give Applebloom a talking-to
about going in harm's way later-- when she wasn't feeling so button-busting proud of her. "Give me
a hoof here, y'all," she said, picking up the slack of the rope. "I want this half-a-draconequus tied up
good and proper so they kin haul him... eh?"

There would be no need for rope. Even as she watched, the creature deflated like a depressed beach
ball, shrieved up into a wad, and disappeared with a pop.

Rainbow Dash was enjoying this.

The funky chunk of chaos monster she'd gone after was covered in feathers, had bird claws, and the
wings of a peregrine falcon. The moment it had laid claws on one of the red ball thingies everyone
was after, it had torn off into the sky and was hurtling for the stratosphere as fast as it could go. Even
as it had flown it had gone from a roundish blob to a football-shaped form, sleek and streamlined,
farther than any bird in Equestria.

It never stood a chance.

After nearly a minute of climbing almost straight up, Rainbow Dash blew past it, forcing it to jink
madly to avoid her. She pulled an immelman and rocketed past it going the other direction, this time
close enough for her contrail to catch it and send it tumbling. It righted itself after plummeting a few
hundred feet and took to evasive maneuvers, weaving in and out and through the clouds as the
impossibly agile and fast pegasus pursued it.
It wasn't a given, though. The disembodied body segment was half again the mass of a pony, which meant it wasn't just going to be bumped out of the sky easily. And it had one huge, pony-ripping talon free, to slash at anything that got too close to it. Rainbow Dash learned that when she tried for a third pass; the fleeing segment had flipped over on its back and lashed out at her, barely missing her leg by an inch.

"Fine. I don't need to lay a hoof on ya to kick your flank!" Dash began circling her adversary, performing a barrel roll along its flight vector, orbiting it just out of its reach. Then she started going faster.

A more experienced flier would have dived out of the vortex. A more clever Draconequus would have exploited the environment, turning the clouds to cotton candy or unleashing a storm of chocolate rain to clot her wings. Mayhem was neither of these things; in fact he was fairly simpleminded, and besides which his brain was quite literally elsewhere. He was a creature far too used to having everything his own way. Resistance was unthinkable, and so was getting tossed around like a sock in a clothes dryer by a pony-driven tornado.

Rainbow Dash simply twisted the funnel till the addled segment was spiraling straight down. The partial creature, panicking and completely disoriented, augured straight into the ground, smashing into the earth in the royal orchard. Rainbow Dash landed just as the dust cleared, revealing a neatly bored hole in the ground, a single, twitching eagle claw sticking up out of the hole. "Ouch," Dash muttered, wincing. "Total wipeout."

There was a sound like a cork coming out of a bottle, and the ball that the segment had been clutching popped out of the hole. Dash caught it before it hit the ground. "Ayep, yep yep yep," she said smugly, rolling the ball in her forehooves. "Mess with the best, fry like the rest." She lifted off and flew for the castle, not even looking back to see the turfed segment disappear in a puff of smoke.

"Zo, der universal laws in your universe are identical?"

I shrugged. "So far as I can tell," I replied. "I'm no scientist, but I know enough science from my school years to guess. Speed of light, gravitational constant-- those are the same. About ten meters per second per second, and just under 300 thousand kilometers a second... water freezes and boils at the same temperatures; a mole of carbon has the same mass, so on and so forth." I shrugged again. "Of course there are obviously other more exotic forces at play in your universe, ones we either don't have or haven't discovered yet--" I waved my hand around indicating our current circumstances, hiding in a ballroom from a rampaging Draconequus-- "but apparently all the vital constants are the same."

"Or else, your physiognomy vould not vork in our world," Cosmic Constant said, nodding. "Your body vould have... ceased to function der moment you arrived."

"The ultimate smoke test," I chuckled. At Cosmic's puzzled look I explained. "Old earth engineering joke. The 'smoke test' is where you take a device, plug it in, turn it on, and wait for the smoke to come out."

It took him a minute to get the joke, but he chortled merrily when he did. I noticed poor Violette was looking left out of the conversation, so I decided to shift topics a bit. "So tell me, what brought you here from your old homeland?"
"Oh, all der vunderbar discoveries vot happens here," Cosmic Constant said. "Equestria is much more open and villing to ponder ze imponderables, to try new tings, new ideas..." He cocked one shaggy eyebrow at me. "As your own presence here vould demonstrate, ya?"

"Ya," I chuckled. "And what of you, Violette?"

She started a bit. "Oui?"

"What brings you here to Canterlot, all the way from Prance?" the good professor translated for me.

She blushed a bit and ducked her head. Then to my surprise she hiked the hem of her maid's outfit to reveal her hip... I started to stammer in confusion and alarm when I realized she was just trying to show me her Cutie Mark.

Cosmic Constant got a good chuckle out of that. After some moment's embarrassment I decided to be clinical about it and took a look. It was an unusual one; a goldfish, leaping from a small bowl to a large one.

"Ma marque de cutie. C'est le symbole dans mon pays pour quitter votre zone de confort," she said. "Toute ma vie j'ai prospéré plus quand je me pousse d'où je suis confortable. Ainsi, j'ai quitté ma maison pour venir ici, à Canterlot. Pour voir de nouvelles choses, nouveaux endroits, nouvelles personnes, pour prospérer, pour se développer." She looked up at me. "Je ne sais pas ce qui se produira après, mais c'est une aventure grande que je ne pourrais pas passer. Pouvez-vous comprendre?"

"She says dot it is der symbol for, ah, leafink one's comfort zone," Cosmic Constant said. "Dot she has alvays done best ven she is leafink where she is comfortable. So she came to Canterlot, to see new tings, new places, new peoples. Dot she does not know vot comes next but her life is... a grand adventure, dot she could not pass up."

I leaned back against the wall. "A grand adventure she could not pass up. Interesting."

"Ah? How so?"

I looked at nothing in particular. "That's the reason I stayed."

Before the conversation could get any more philosophical, we heard the drumming of wings. Five of the six bearers came flying into the room through the shattered skylight, each triumphantly bearing a deflated rubber ball. "We did it!" Twilight crowed.

"And in ten minutes flat!" Rainbow Dash added. The ponies threw their deflated prizes in a pile in the middle of the floor.

I did a quick nose count. "Where's Rarity?"

"She's still downtown." Pinkie Pie said, throwing two rubber bladders on the pile. "She had a bad oopsie and needs to get cleaned up..."
scrubbers, sprayers and driers, getting out, walking around to the front, and going through again and again.

"We can't let her keep doing this!" the manager complained. His assistant shrugged.

"Hey, she paid," he said, pointing to the stack of bits she was feeding into the coin slot. "Nothin' says she's gotta actually have a carriage. Besides, she's a lot more entertaining to watch going through than some hoofball mom's four-seater."

"Can't... get.... cleeceeeaaaaan....!"

"Well, at least she'll have a few days to recuperate," Twilight said. "Now that Mayhem is taken care of, we have a month to prepare for the next--"

The next what, went unsaid. The room was suddenly filled with an explosion of light and noise, a storm of static and flares that flung the unsuspecting Bearers to the wall. Half blinded, I blinked away dozens of afterimages to see Mayhem hovering in the middle of the room. He was translucent, and his body segments were all disconnected, jagged blobs made of explosions and lightning. He looked like an animated cloud of angry.

His disembodied head spun around to look at me. "CHEATER!!" He screamed. "CHEATER CHEATER CHEATER!! You MADE them win! I'll fix you! I'll show you what I do to cheating cheaters who cheat!" He dove down on the pile of deflated balls and began to swirl around them like a raging storm, shrinking in on them as he spun faster and faster. They were sucked up into his vortex. There was an explosion of light, and he disappeared.

A single red ball dropped to the floor with an alarmingly metallic thud. Everyone was frozen in place with fear. In the silence, we could hear it ticking.

"Oh horseapples, it's a BOMB!" Applejack said. We all scrambled across the floor to where the ticking ball lay. There was a rather large, garish digital counter on the side, counting down from sixty. "Defuse it! Somepony defuse it!" Fluttershy was whimpering. I spun it around, looking for an access panel or something (Ha! More the fool I, for expecting a Draconequus to leave such a thing).

What I saw on the other side nearly threw me into heart failure. I must have looked like I actually was having a heart attack, because Twilight asked, "Arthur, what's wrong?"

"Interesting question with a BOMB in the room!" Rainbow Dash snarked.

I turned it around so they could see the symbol. Three triangles around a circle. The international symbol for radiation. "We got us a real sore loser," I croaked. "it's an atom bomb."

"Oh sweet Maker, one of those city killing bombs you told us about?" Twilight seemed to wilt. Pinkie Pie's mane and tail deflated like a balloon.

"Hang on, we just gotta get it out of here!" Rainbow Dash said.

"To where?" I said. "In fifty seconds? It'll destroy everything for MILES when it goes off. There's nothing in the world fast enough--"
I knew it the moment the words left my mouth. She was born for speed. She was the element of Loyalty. There was no way she could, or would, pass up a challenge like that. There was a rainbow-maned blur and the ball disappeared from between my hands. "Rainbow, NO!" I shouted.

She actually paused at the skylight. "How far this thing gotta be from everything?"

I ballparked frantically. "I dunno, five, maybe ten miles? You'll never get it clear and get away in time---"

"Watch me," she said. She tore off into the sky.

We all stared in horror at the blank patch of sky where she'd vanished. Five second later a sonic rainboom split the sky.

Could she make it?

I realized what was coming and tore my gaze away. "Everyone, get out from under the skylight! Get under those stone archways, behind those marble pillars, they should provide some protection. We have--- call it forty seconds. And stop looking at the sky!"

Applejack looked angry. "She's my friend--"

"And when that bomb goes off anyone looking at it is going to have the eyes seared out of their heads! Do not. Look. At. the SKY! Understand?"

Twilight suddenly gasped. "The rainboom. Everyone in the city will be looking at the sky now!" She ran to the center of the room and began casting a spell. There was a flash of purple and a shockwave of almost-invisible purple light washed out from her and passed out through the walls.

"What was that?" I asked.

"A 'Look Down Now' spell," she said. "Anypony it touches will be absolutely fascinated with the ground between their hooves for the next two minutes." She ran back to her hiding place behind one of the pillars and threw her hooves over her head.

I went and half-dragged, half carried Violette and Cosmic Constant behind a pillar of my own, Cosmic Constant translating what was going on as fast as he could. It was a tight fit, but none of us was willing to complain. I looked at my watch. "Thirty Seconds!" I shouted to the others. "Everyone cover your ears and close your eyes!"

I covered Violette's eyes with my hand and started counting down the last seconds. The fate of a whole city now rested on one question:

How fast could Rainbow Dash really fly?

Rainbow Dash may not have been an egghead, but she was smart enough to figure this equation out: There was no safe place in Equestria to take that bomb. Outside the city there were countless small towns and villages and lone farmsteads studding the hills. Even if she got the thing ten miles away, she would just be bringing other innocent ponies into the blast range.

So Rainbow Dash took that bomb in the only direction that would give her ten miles of empty space:
She rocketed into the sky at a steep climb, pouring on speed harder than she'd ever done before. Soon the castle was a mere white dot on a tiny hillock, far far below. And still she poured on the speed. She blew through the sonic rainboom and kept accelerating. The sky faded from blue to indigo; the stars appeared. Her last breath of air burned in her lungs, and frost began coating her wings. She kept going.

All of Equestria was counting on her. The ponies. The Princesses. Her family. Her friends. Scootaloo. She would go out burning up the sky before she'd let them down. She would die first, before that Draconequus got the last laugh.

Around her neck, the element of Loyalty began to glow a dull cherry red.

She felt her wind come back. New strength flooded through her body and wings. How? She didn't care; she'd take whatever miracles she got. She poured on the speed, faster than ever before. Behind her, a second, then a third rainboom burst, thin and attenuated in the sparse atmosphere. She never even noticed. The cherry red glow crept over her, ever brighter.

The sky turned black. At the very edge of space, where her wings caught almost no air, she pulled an immelman and released the bomb. She didn't look back. Blazing like a crimson star, she dove for the ground.

She almost managed to outrace the blast wave.

"....Three... Two... One..." We all tensed, holding our breath. A few seconds later, the sky bloomed, briefly, with a second sun. I could see the light shining through my closed eyelids. I opened my eyes, blinking. The others started to creep from their hiding places. "Stop!" I said. They froze. "There's still the blast wave. If she didn't get... if she didn't get high enough..." I shook off the thought. "Take cover!"

We hid back behind our pillars. How long? Speed of sound, about a mile in five seconds. If she was less than ten miles away-- I counted backwards from fifty, out loud. "....Two.... One...." Then there was a long pause. I started counting forward. I got to thirty before a deep, boneshaking boom echoed over the city.

Sixteen miles. Holy horseapples. The bomb must have been about the equivalent of Little Boy or Fat Man; fairly small, enough that sixteen miles dispersed the blast wave. "It's okay I think," I said... just as the wind hit. For several seconds manes were tossed and litter was blown high into the air. After it subsided I sat down hard, clutching my chest. "Okay, that's enough excitement for one lifetime," I said weakly.

Pinkie Pie looked up. "Wow, what's that?" Everyone's gaze followed her pointing hoof. High in the stratosphere was an expanding cloud of boiling rainbow colors. It was small, no bigger than the palm of my hand at the end of my outstretched arm. Even as I watched it faded away. Dash really had done it.

"Dash..." Twilight said. Fluttershy started to cry.

I noticed a small flock of birds, high in the sky. I squinted; no, they were pegasus. They slowly drew
closer. And what were they carrying--?

"It may be too early to mourn," I said. "Look!"

They were close enough to see clearly now; the Wonderbolts, or three of them at least. And borne in the air in between them was a familiar blue pegasus---

"Rainbow Dash!" Twilight and Fluttershy flew up to greet them. The others tried to follow, but fell back to earth with a thump as their ephemeral wings finally faded away. "Ah nuts," Applejack groused.

The Wonderbolts floated down through the skylight and lay Rainbow Dash gently on the floor. I staggered on over, awash with relief. She was bruised, she was battered, she was unconscious... but she was alive. The leader of the flying trio was none other than Spitfire. She pushed back her goggles and grinned at us. "Hey, any of you lose a stunt flier?" she said. "We saw this one falling out of the sky and thought we'd catch her for you."

I leaned on my cane and laughed. "Nice work, captain," I said, giving her a sketchy salute. "We owe you one."

"Ah heck, we already owed her a couple, at least," she said.

I'll confess. I had no particular liking for the group. I'm not a big fan of sky shows, really. And I'd long had a distaste for anyone on two legs or four who used the drill sergeant nasty routine on their people as a default training method. But at that moment I could definitely find it in my heart to sincerely like the Wonderbolts and their captain.

I had some things to ponder too. Mayhem was beaten, but the pattern we thought we had figured out was broken. What had made Mayhem think that someone had cheated? Why had he accused me? I'd had less than nothing to do with the events today. What had changed?

I shifted my weight and grunted a little. And where could I find an ankle wrap? Apparently my burst of energetic running about had gotten me a twisted ankle....

I staggered over to get a look at the hero of the hour. She was just coming to. That crazy pegasus was luckier than a roomful of horseshoes; her feathers weren't even singed--

What I noticed next made me stumble to a halt in surprise. She was sitting up, and carefully poking her hoof at the spiral horn now sprouting from her forehead. "What--what the hay is this??" she yelped.

I looked at Twilight, who looked as astonished as I felt. "I'd call it a serious game-changer," I managed to say.

Author's Note:

1) *She refused to leave Sweet Apple Acres without it. Nopony ever questioned that decision again.*
Beep... Beep... beep....

Well, I thought. *This can't be good.*

The most disorienting part of regaining consciousness is the realization that you lost it. I consequently spent several seconds taking inventory of my situation. I was awake. I was lying prone on what felt like a hospital gurney, and from the feel of it I was wearing a hospital gown. I could feel wires or tubes snaking up and down my arms and across my chest. The beeping next to my head had to be a heart monitor then. What on Earth or Equestria had happened?

All my limbs seemed intact; I didn't feel any particular pain... no, I rescinded that; my chest ached a bit, and for some reason the pain felt vaguely familiar... like someone had spent some time stubbing a cigarette out on my sternum.

I suddenly realized I was afraid to open my eyes.

My last recollection had been the battle with Mayhem, and the sight of Rainbow Dash with an alicorn horn. Then everything went blank... and now I was lying in a hospital bed, something I was morbidly familiar with from my life on earth and my poor health. I was scared to open my eyes. There was a good chance I was in an Equestrian hospital after some mishap.

There was also a terribly good chance that I was waking up in a hospital on Earth--- either some magical backwash, that the same mysterious wave that had tossed me on the metaphorical beach of Equestria had rolled back out to the cosmic sea and dragged me home... or worse; I had never left Earth at all, and that all my misadventures had just been a dream while I lay here, unconscious...

Bracing myself, I slowly opened my eyes.

Yes, I was in a hospital room. A depressingly familiar layout, as I said. There was an IV running to my arm... and from the labels I surmised was a bit more than saline in it. My heart sank to the floor. I cast about to see if anyone was nearby.

I cannot begin to describe my elation when I saw my hospital roommate... on the bed right next to me was a little brown colt with a caramel-colored mane, wearing a propeller beanie and a cast on his left foreleg. He was staring at me with wide, worried eyes. Blessed relief, I was in Equestria.

My elation was diminished somewhat when I realized I could hear him whimpering in pain. "Hello there," I said. He jumped a little-- then winced, tears pooling in his eyes. That broken leg must've hurt like hell. Poor little guy. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," I said quietly. "You okay?" The little fellow nodded, but it was obvious he was fighting back tears. Curse the woobiness; the impulse to jump up and cuddle him like a plush toy was unbelievable. I let him recover his control a bit.

"What's your--" I croaked. I had to pause and lick my lips, trying to get my saliva going. That meant I'd been out for at least a few hours. There was a pitcher of water on the nightstand; I availed myself
of it; the water was as cool and fresh as morning dew. "What's your name?" I asked once the dust in my throat had been cut. "No wait-- let me guess," I said, memory suddenly refreshing. I decided to have a bit of fun. "Button Mash, right? Eight years old-- no, scratch that, twelve by now... loves video games, lives with his mom, dad, and big brother. Goes to school at Ponyville elementary."

His eyes went round and his mouth formed an "o". "How'd you know all that?" He asked. The voice clinched it. It was Button Mash alright.

"Haven't you heard? I'm Arthur Arcturus, the man from beyond. Iiii knowow everythiiiing..." I wiggled my fingers at him, making mystic passes in the air. I chuckled, then coughed as pain spiked in my chest. Ow. Note to self: don't do that again.

Were it possible, his eyes would have gone even rounder. "Really?"

I shook my head. "Not even close," I said with a wink. "I just know a lot of surprising things. And we... may have a mutual acquaintance." I ignored his puzzled look while I searched for and found the button that raised the head of my bed. "I seem to have been under the weather," I said once I was slightly more vertical. "You wouldn't happen to know what happened to me, would you?"

Button shook his head. "No sir. You were here when they brought me here. The nurse got mad at me cause I was cr... cause I was making a lot of noise. She said I was disturbing you." He looked uncomfortable. "You did sort of wake up a bit. I'm sorry--" Unconsciously he tried to move his front leg again. He yelped and froze, trembling. "Ahh... ahh... ahhhh..."

I frowned. "Didn't they give you anything for the pain?" I said. I saw no IV for him.

Button nodded jerkily. "They gave me some stuff with a needle when they put my bones back in--" Back in? I grimaced. Eesh, a compound fracture at least-- "But it... it still hurts a lot." I could guess as much; I could see streaks in his fur where he'd been crying, and his breathing was unsteady. "I asked the nurse for something, but she never came back. And she gets mad if I bug her..."

"How long have you been here?" I asked gently.

He bit his lip and looked at the clock on the far wall. "A-about three hours," he said.

Oy. One of THOSE. And yes they do exist, wretched things; nurses with all the nurturing instinct of a cuttlefish. Universal constant, I suppose. But to be fair, it was his side of the story. I scowled at the intercom, thinking. "Do me a favor, Button? Call her again," I said, pointing at the intercom.

The colt looked fretful. "But..."

"Just do it," I said patiently. "I won't let you get in trouble."

Button took the cable in one hoof with all the enthusiasm of a snake handler on his first day. He pressed the call button. The speaker overhead crackled to life. "What is it, Buttons." The voice was terse and impatient. Ahh, the warmth.

Button hesitated. "P-please, Nurse PrunePicker...My leg hurts an awful lot..."

Nurse PrunePicker?? I mouthed to myself.

Nurse PrunePicker sounded just about as pleasant as her name suggested. "Now Button, I've already told you that we can't just be giving out painkillers willy-nilly, just for some crocodile tears..."

Crocodile tears? The boy was in obvious pain! Every inch he moved broadcasted it.
"And those aspirin we gave you an hour ago should be more than enough."

And I was no doctor, but I knew people who'd had compound fractures. They'd been put on portable morphine drips for the pain. Aspirin?? Nothing but bloody aspirin??

"Now you need to be a brave boy, you don't want your family hearing you were a crybaby, do you...?"

"N-no Nurse PrunePicker," Button said. His chin crumpled a little.

"Now be a good boy and lie down and rest." The intercom cut off with a snap. Button seemed to fold in on himself. His face was so bleak... and I knew from experience that despair made the pain all the worse.

Perhaps it was whatever drugs they gave me with that IV, but I was feeling in the mood to misbehave.

"And now for plan B..." I muttered. My cane was dangling off the bed rail; I grabbed it up. Then I reached over to the monitors next to my bed with the hook, snagged a handful of plugs and yanked them out.

BEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE....

There was frenzied galloping in the hallway, and the next moment I was surrounded by a doctor, two orderlies and a nurse. They all froze in surprise at finding their code blue not only awake, but sitting up and sporting (I hoped) a fairly irate expression. Before any of them could make a move toward me I planted the foot of my cane square on the doctor's nose.

"That boy," I said as loudly and clearly as I could, "Has a compound fracture of the front left leg. He should be on a damned morphine drip and yet has been given nothing more potent than a couple of aspirin in the past three hours. I would consider it a personal favor if one of you medically inclined individuals would be SO KIND--" here my voice had reached a bellow. I let it immediately drop back to its original quiet conversational level "--as to do your expletive-deleted job and administer some care to him." I smiled sweetly. "I'm sure that won't be a problem, will it Doctor?"

The doctor blinked at me, then looked over at Button. He levitated Button's clipboard over to himself and flipped through it. "He's right. Nurse PrunePicker, this patient was supposed to have been put on a drip hours ago; why isn't he?" He looked indignant. Bravo, doctor; you win my approval.

Nurse PrunePicker (who else would it be with that cutie mark of three plums?) tried to bluster. "I didn't see any note to that effect--"

"I left it at the nurse's station," the doctor said, his irritation visibly growing. "And even if you missed it, you should have thought to ask me for a break this severe. Didn't the patient tell you he was in pain?"

"Well-- I--" the nurse fumbled.

"Go fetch a morphine drip, already! Do I need to draw a picture in crayon?" he barked. Nurse PrunePicker's face scrunched up like she'd sucked a lemon. She started to march out the door, fuming. I knew where THAT might lead; I'd known a few sourpuss nurses who took their boredom or irritation out on their patients. I jabbed her in the rump with my cane. She "Yeep"ed and spun around. Once I had her attention, I gave her one of these:
She huffed loudly and stormed out. The two orderlies sniggered as they continued hooking my monitors back up. Ah, not quite a Pony of the People, was she.

The doctor looked at me, chagrined. "I'm terribly sorry about that..." he said. "We have been a bit overwhelmed. Tons of ponies coming in with all sorts of injuries due to that-- that draconequus' antics..."

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to poor Button, here," I said. "he's the one who was in pain."

The doctor looked guilty, then trotted around the foot of my bed to reach Button. "He's right. I am sorry, Button. I should have checked in on you sooner," he said. "If you can hold on just a few more seconds we'll fix you up with something that'll make you feel lots better. Okay?"

"Okay," Button said shakily. He actually ventured a smile. On an impulse I reached over and petted the little fellow on the withers. He actually calmed down a bit, his shakes lessening. The doctor noticed. "Hm. You seem to have a gift for that," he noted.

I withdrew my hand. "For what?"

"Calming hurt foals down," he said. "When we first brought Button in here, he was still howling in pain. It actually brought you around for a moment--- you rolled over, saw him, and just...reached over, started stroking his back, mumbling something, like it was the most natural thing in the world. It actually helped; He calmed down long enough for us to re-set the bones. Once he was taken care of you just rolled back over and went out like a light." The doctor shook his head and grinned. "Darnedest thing."

Thoughtfully I put my hand back on button's back and continued petting. True enough he relaxed. "It helps," Button admitted. "Your paws feel really weird though."

"Hands," I said.

Miss PrunePicker returned at that moment with a trolley. She humphed and left. "I think I'll be giving you two a different nurse," the doctor said. "Miss PrunePicker... could use a bit of time off I think. Now, close your eyes, Button, and pretend this is a sharp stick..."

I continued stroking Button's back while the doctor hooked him up with an IV and a pain drip. The drugs worked fast; poor little fellow nodded off the instant the pain was numbed. The stress had
wrung him out like an old sock. "Huh, it's therapeutic for you too," one of the orderlies noted. "Your heart rate went down by about a fifth while you were doing that."

"Well, now that he's been taken care of," I said, "I might as well ask how I ended up here myself, Doctor....?"

"Panacea," he said. At my raised eyebrow he added, "My parents were very optimistic about my future. As to how you ended up here-- what do you last recall?"

"Things are a mite fuzzy," I admitted. "I remember Mayhem, the bomb---" here I stopped to shudder. That was far too close..."the explosion, the Wonderbolts rescuing Rainbow Dash, finding out she was now..." holy carp. "How she was now an alicorn too--" I frowned. "Aaand, then things seem to iris out at that point."

The doctor hummed thoughtfully at that. "If you don't mind, I'm going to have some memory tests administered later," he said. "You did bang your head pretty good when you fell down."

For the first time I noticed the bandages on my scalp. I reached up to feel them tenderly. "Can't believe I missed that," I muttered.

The doctor chuckled. "Not surprising, considering the painkillers," he said. "You had a rough time of it sir." He got sober. "When you came in, you were suffering a massive attack of Tachycardia. Heart rate hitting close to 200, disoriented, pain shooting through the arms, neck and chest... sound familiar?"

I nodded grimly. Some five or six years prior, I had suffered an attack just like that. Irregular, rapid heartbeat. supraventricular tachycardia. In my case, it was caused by a deformity in the nerve bundles regulating the beating of my heart. The doctors had done an ablation-- basically, they ran a probe up the major artery in my leg, clear up to my heart, then used the probe to burn out the misfiring nerves. That explained the "Stubbed out cigarette" sensation behind my ribcage. "I'm guessing you did an ablation," I said.

The doctor nodded. "I've heard the description of the process the humans used on you," he said. "Oh don't look so surprised-- your physiology and medical history are subjects of great interest in our medical community. Anyway, that information was mighty useful for us; it let us figure out what was wrong almost immediately. And Unicorn magic let us do the ablation far less invasively." He shook his head soberly.

"I'm sensing some unpleasant news coming," I said carefully.

"I'm just disturbed by what we found in our scans," he said. "You had all sorts of chronic issues, sir. Scar tissue all over your heart was just the beginning. Apnea, cardiac strain, swollen legs, to say nothing of the diverticula we had to clear out of your digestive tract and..."

"Wait." I blinked. "Are you saying you *fixed* all those things?"

Panacea nodded. "Well of course," he said. "They're all interconnected. The sleep apnea puts a strain on the heart, the heart puts a strain on the arteries and lymph glands, which leads to edema and swelling, and all of the above contribute to digestive problems, obesity due to lack of energy---" he shrugged. "You were already under the knife for the tachycardia, which, all told, only took a few minutes to correct, so it only made sense to go in and take care of all the corollary---"

Poor fellow. He'd probably never been kissed by a half-bald monkey before.
Word of my awakening was of course taken straight to the Princesses. All five of them. Sakes alive; Rainbow Dash as a princess. The nobles must have been fit to be tied.

I'm sorry, I'm rambling again.

Any way, word was sent out. Within a matter of minutes I had guests. The first to arrive were the Cutie Mark Crusaders (founding members.) I received no warning; there was a clatter of little hooves out in the hallway and suddenly three fillies divebombed me. They leapt over the bedrails and landed atop of me, knocking the wind out of me. "You're okay!" was shouted at me multiple times at point blank range.

"Whauogh!" I said. "Great. 'He was friend to all the foals, and it killed him.' That's what my tombstone will say...Easy, easy, easy, Shhh--" I pointed at my roommate. Despite all the ruckus, Button Mash was still sound asleep. Brave little fellow...

There was a squeak of recognition from SweetieBelle when she saw the colt. Before I could capitalize on it, though, the rest of the Ponyvilleans poured into the room. Oh, I'm sure it was far fewer than all of them, but in the confined space of the room it certainly felt like the entire cast of characters was paying me a visit. Twilight, Rarity, Applejack, Pinkie and Fluttershy were there; Spike was there as well, as were a couple of my bodyguards (who thankfully contained themselves to standing at the door.) Exclamations of gratitude and relief filled the room, followed by a great deal of 'shush'-ing on my part. They all caught glimpse of the sleeping colt and got the message; the greetings were muted, if equally as cheerful.

I did take note that SweetieBelle couldn't tear her eyes away from the colt. I restrained a chuckle. "Twilight, hand me my bag, would you?" The princess complied. I dug a few bits out of one of the pockets. "Hey, you three," I said. I gave Applebloom a poke in a ticklish spot on her tummy. She yeeped and scooted to the side of the gurney. "Here's a few bits, why don't you go buy something for yourselves at the gift shoppe."

"They have a gift shop here?" Scootaloo asked.

"They always do. Here." I gave each of them a bit coin. Scootaloo and Applebloom jumped down, eager to run off and spend their loot. SweetieBelle started to hop down but I stopped her. I gave the other two a two second lead then addressed the unicorn filly. "And now this," I said holding up another bit coin, "Is for something from you, to Button over there."

Her little cheeks turned pink. "F-from me?" she squeaked. Hnnng, dang, and I'd just gotten my heart patched up...

"Yes, from you," I said. "Little guy has had a rough time, and I think maybe a visit from a schoolmate might cheer him up." I gave her a wink. "A visit from a cute filly wouldn't hurt, either." her cheeks went from pink to red. She darted a paranoid look around her; yes indeed, the adults present had cottoned to what was going on and were grinning insufferably. Then she looked back at Button. Still blushing, but with an ambitious grin, she jumped down from the gurney and galloped out the door, both bits in her possession. There was muted laughter all around the room.
"Well, that should keep them busy for a moment or three," I said. I hooked the privacy curtain between Button's side and mine and pulled it closed. (1) "Anyone care to give me an update?"

"Well, in case you haven't guessed," Applejack said, "Things are pretty topsy turvy right now. Mayhem purty much made a mess o' Canterlot. It's a tossup whether him or Ataxia did the most damage." She shook her head. "Noone died, thank the Maker, but a lot o' folk were injured by things flying an' bouncin' around. Even Big Macintosh is getting treated for a sprained cannon an' a dislocated shoulder."

"What makes it worse is that Mayhem's bouncing thing got everywhere. Turned the hospital's files into a tossed salad, for starters." Applejack tipped her hat back. "'Swhy we took so long finding your room."

I nodded; that followed. Ataxia's stunt had just tipped the city on it's side; Mayhem had shaken it up like an Etch-a-Sketch. "Probably why Button's family hasn't visited him yet," I muttered. Objectively, Mayhem had created a great deal more chaos than Ataxia had managed. Store shelves, book shelves, filing cabinets, pretty much anything that required being stacked and sorted in order had been upended and rattled around like dried peas in a tin. Beyond injuries and material damage, it would take weeks to sort out the mess.

Which meant we'd be back to normal just in time for the next Draconequus to show up and wreck everything. "In other news," I sighed. "How is Rainbow Dash taking her... ascendance?"

"Umm, ups and downs," Twilight Sparkle said. "She's in good health-- didn't even get her wings singed-- but she's a little freaked out about being a princess, being an alicorn..."

"Having a new bone grow out of her forehead..." Applejack finished dryly.

"Yes. She's sort of recuperating in her cloud house right now. The metamorphosis on top of her stunt with the bomb sort of took it all out of her. There also seem to be some..." Twilight fumbled for words. "Some changes in her connection to the Element of Loyalty."

"Changes?" I asked.

"Um, she can't take it off, for one," Fluttershy said quietly. "Um, that is, she can, but it... sort of follows her if she leaves it anywhere. And reappears around her neck."

My eyebrows went up at that. "That's... different," I said. I looked at Twilight. "I don't recall your element doing that once you became an alicorn."

"Actually it does," Twilight said, vaguely annoyed. She tapped her tiara. I took a closer look; while the tiara itself was more tasteful and understated than the 'big crown thingie,' it had the same gemstone as the Element of Magic. "It changed shape to this-- a little bit more subtle than the original form, thank goodness. But I can't go more than a few dozen feet before it reappears on my head."

"Funny you didn't mention that before," Applejack said.

Twilight shrugged. "It didn't seem that important," she said. "I told Celestia; she told me that the Elements had always been a little quirky, and it wasn't anything to worry about. When Celestia and Luna had been the bearers, the elements were polished gem stones that floated in the air around them all the time."

Rarity tossed her mane. "Thank heavens they don't do that to us," she said. "I could never get any work done with some big jewel floating around me, knocking things over and getting in the way."
"There have been other changes too," Twilight said. "But I won't say anymore--- I think you'll want to see it for yourself." She rested a hoof on my arm. "Right now we're just glad to see you're okay."

"Are you okay?" She added anxiously.

I scratched my head. "Well, as you said, ups and downs," I said. "The good news is, while your doctors were using their magic to poke around my insides, they went ahead and fixed up several other minor medical issues. Among other things, my snoring should be cured..."

"Why would they do that?" Spike said. "I mean, Hurray that they did, but weren't they supposed to be dealing with your heart attack?"

"It's a holistic approach, Spike," Twilight informed him. At his puzzled look she explained; "medicine is a whole body thing, Spike. What affects one part of you will affect other parts of you."

"Among other things, snoring and sleep apnea will put a strain on your heart," I contributed. "That in turn puts a strain on the blood vessels in your lungs, and your circulatory system as a whole. It even contributes to swelling of the legs and edema. They also found that it affects your metabolism, making you gain weight--- which contributes to sleep apnea, and puts another strain on your heart and circulatory system... all of the above can effect digestion, causing acid reflux, which in turn can contribute to snoring---"

"Yikes," Spike said. "It's like a vicious cycle. Or a dozen vicious cycles all in one."

"Got it in one," I said. "But Panacea went in and, well, did a quick tune-up of everything. My health should improve quite noticeably."

"And so what's the down side?" Applejack said.

I sighed. "Unicorn magic makes that sort of thing much safer and easier, with more non-invasive procedures. But there's still a cost to be paid for cutting and patching up the body like that. To say nothing of the damage done by the tachycardia. It's... put a good bit of mileage on me. Maybe even trimmed a few years off my lifespan.

"Plus, there's pretty serious scarring on my heart now. So much on my heart that, if I had another attack..." I shrugged. "Next time, it won't just misfire. It'll stop. The heart has, well, redundancies that are there to keep it going. Fixing my heart up involved burning those redundancies out. That's part of why they worked so hard on patching up everything else; to give my old ticker the best chance they possibly could. My heart's otherwise sound as a bass drum. But next time, well, if it goes... I go."

Their expressions of shock and dismay cut me to the soul. Even Pinkie Pie's mane had gone flat. Fluttershy nuzzled my arm, but it looked more like they needed comforting than I did. "Hey, hey, what's all this?" I said. I reached out and patted Fluttershy's shoulder. "I'm not dying. If anything I'm going to be as healthy as a-- um, really healthy thing," I finished with an embarrassed chuckle. "Ahem. It's just a minor thing. Don't go dumping the grave soil on my casket just yet."

"But..." I looked down; Scootaloo and Applebloom had already returned it seemed. And they had obviously heard enough of what I'd said to guess what was up. They had smudges of chocolate on their cheeks and half eaten candy bars in their hooves (How in the name of all that's rational do they DO that?), and heartbreaking pathos in their eyes. "But if your heart gives out, you said--"

Applebloom went on.

"If it does, then I'll go meet my Maker," I said, patting her gently on the head. "He and I settled
accounts long ago, and He promised He'd have a place prepared for me. I won't be gone,
Applebloom... I'll just have gone on ahead." I mussed her mane and chuckled. "Anyway, I promise
that dying is the absolutely last thing I'll ever do."

Several ponies groaned. Applebloom made a face like she'd bitten into a green apple. "Now that's
just terrible, Arthur," she scolded. I just laughed at her.

"Hah! As if you could get rid of me anyway," I said. "Hm. Where's SweetieBelle? Still at the gift
shop?"

Scootaloo rolled her eyes. "She's still trying to pick out something for Button," she singsonged
sarcastically. "Yeesh, why does she hafta get all doofy over a colt?"

I coughed loudly. "Aherm aherm herm. I'm sorry I didn't quite hear that I
coughCOUGHRUMBLEcough." Scootaloo went from orange to red. She stuck out her
lower lip and glowered at me. I just smirked at her.

Speak of the Devil, here came Sweetie. She had a small novelty teddy bear and get-well card, and
was carrying both by the ribbon around the bear's neck. She was also sidling her way towards the
dividing curtain towards Button's side of the room and desperately trying to look like she
wasn't. "Hold on," I said to her. I pulled the edge of the curtain back and peeked over at Buttons. He
was sitting up and looking around blearily. "He's awake," I told her. "Keep in mind he might be a
little loopy from the medicine they gave him. And don't chat for too long, you don't want to tire him
out." I motioned for her to go in. With a blush and a grin she trotted on through the gap. I left it
hanging open a few inches--- just enough to give them a sense of privacy without actually leaving
them unsupervised.

Instantly I was crowded by five giggling mares and two giggling fillies trying to peek in as well.
They were literally climbing over my gurney just to watch on the budding puppy love next door.
"Ack, leave off," I said, pushing a couple back. "There's not enough room for everyone to spy!"

Rarity huffed. "Well she's my little sister--"

"Fine, fine, you mind the gap, then," I said. "The rest of you? Get. OFF." There were grumbles all
around, but I managed to get them all to settle down. All except for Rarity, who stuck to the gap in
the curtain like she was glued there. I took a look myself. We couldn't hear anything because of the
sound-dampening spell on the curtain, but we both saw SweetieBelle give Button the teddy bear.
Button looked both pleased and mortified at the same time. Rarity's squee of delight nearly pierced
my eardrum.

"Oh golly, I forgot!" Pinkie exclaimed. I left Rarity to her eavesdropping and turned my attention
back to the others. Pinkie had returned to her poufy-maned state and was now bouncing up and
down, clutching a gift box by the ribbon in her teeth. "It fo' yoo"! She said and tossed it into my lap.
I pulled the bow and opened it. Inside was... a hat?

"When I...?"

"Sat on it," Pinkie repeated. "You sorta went ACK!" She stood on her hind legs and clutched at her
chest with one hoof. "Then you said 'oh no not again' and then you went Aaarrrgh--" she fell
backwards, landing with a thump on her bottom. "And landed right on your hat."
"Ayep," Applejack said. "That old Panamare hat ain't gonna play the fiddle no more."

"So I got you a new hat. I saw it and I thought of you, 'cause it's round like you are!"

"Pinkie--" Twilight scolded.

"Try it on," Fluttershy said. "If--"

"If that's alright with me," I said, finishing with her. I flipped the hat over and settled it on my head. It fit perfectly. I regarded my reflection in the mirror. "I have to admit, I always wanted one of these," I said, tipping it to a jaunty angle. "Heh. It goes with my cane, too..."

There was a knock on the doorframe. Standing in the doorway were a stallion, a mare, and a teenaged colt. "Excuse us?" The stallion said. "Is this room 112? We were told our son was here--" then he got a second look at me. "What-- who in Equestria--?"

"Ah," I said, cutting him off. He started to speak again but I quickly shushed him. I leaned back and motioned for him and his family to join Rarity and myself at peeking through the curtain. Faces brimming with curiosity, they obliged.(3) We all peeked through just in time to see SweetieBelle holding up a cup with a straw so Buttons could get a drink.

"Oh my," Button's mother asked, her worried look melting into a smile. His father chuckled. "Who's the little filly?"

Rarity pulled herself away from the gap in the curtain. "Oh, you must be Button's family," she said with a dazzling smile, holding out her hoof. "My name is Rarity. That's my little sister SweetieBelle, I believe she's a classmate of your son... oh this is so adorable," she giggled, sneaking another look and clapping her hooves together in glee. "But do forgive me, you'll be wanting to see your son--"

She walked to the end of the curtain and poked her head around. "Sweetie dear, we do have to be going," she said. "Button has visitors. Come along... Button dear, your parents and brother are here..."

I saw the two foals make their goodbyes. (I also saw Button hastily cram the teddy bear under his pillow the instant he heard the word 'brother.' Heh. Some things are universal.) SweetieBelle came trotting out a moment later, practically floating on air.

"SweetieBelle, this is Button's family," Rarity said. She lowered her head and whispered. "Now it's only proper to introduce yourself to the young stallion's family. Come on..."

SweetieBelle's eyes finally focused on Button's family. "Um, hi," she said, her face pink. "I'm SweetieBelle... your son is really nice--" She giggled giddily, hiccuped, and fled the room.

I laughed so hard I thought the hospital bed would collapse.

"Well I think that's our cue to leave," Twilight said. "Come on, everyone, it looks like it's back to work..." With that, a few farewells and one peck on the cheek, I was on my own. Button's family took their leave and hustled through the privacy curtain to smother their youngest with overdue affection.

I lay back on the bed and tipped my new hat over my eyes. A magical medical tuneup, a chance to play cupid, and a new hat. Overall, not a bad day....

Author's Note:
1) Said curtains, I had learned in my first visit to an Equestrian hospital, are enchanted to muffle sound as well. (My arrival in Equestria had been-- not without injury.)

2) Pinkie Pie sort of snorted. She was being remarkably well behaved; I suppose even she had her limits.

3) They were courteous enough to walk around my hospital bed rather than climb over it.
I was kept overnight for observation... or, possibly, to sate the morbid curiosity of the pony medical professionals. I shan't venture a wager as to which. Button Mash and I got along famously, I must say. At least after he got over his nervousness a la celebrity shock at sharing a room with me. Like most foals who'd met me for the first time he had a thousand questions about my world, and I, being a complete attention hog, delighted in regaling him with tales from earth. He had a surprising number of questions about human video games. I suppose all young boys... er, colts... get fixated on the things at that age. We prattled about video games, comics (I understand the mane six are getting a small royalty check from the Mare Do Well series) sports (there I was at almost a complete loss-- I am functionally illiterate in the language of sports in both worlds) and other such things. He was champing at the bit (pardon the joke) to see that computer and game display in the Museum of the Humanities.

I did tease him a bit about Sweetie Belle. What can I say, I'm only human. It did seem the feelings were reciprocated a bit; his blush was adorable. Ahh, puppy love.

Being an insider in the royal court gave me quite a few Equestrian stories to tell, no less.

"Yes, I was there for the wedding of Shining Armor and Princess Mi Amore Cadenza," I told him. "And for the Battle of Equestria, naturally. I'm afraid I spent most of that one out of commission."

"Really?" he said. I chuckled at his disappointment at my lack of war stories.

I nodded. "For most of the battle I was hiding under a bench in the wedding cathedral. Sorry, kiddo, I didn't exactly cover myself in glory there." I grinned. "Though I did manage to annoy Chrysalis a bit...."

The six Bearers had run from the hall, cutting a path through the enemy on a quest to retrieve the Elements. Great God, why did Celestia ever separate them from those things in the first place?

This looked bad. Celestia was knocked cold; any illusions anypony retained of godhead on her part were pretty well shattered. The changelings quickly overwhelmed the few guards present; everyone else was too intimidated to resist. "Round them up, put everypony against the wall!" the Queen ordered her soldiers. "Pick out the strongest ones; we will drain them first!" She moved toward Celestia; I saw glowing mucus dripping from her lip like saliva. "I will secure their pathetic princess first," she said, leering.

"You really are a prat, aren't you."

That certainly got her attention. Her skull-like head whipped around, her green eyes blazing. "What? Who dares?"
...I suppose I was hoping to distract the cackling villainness, to stall for time or something. I lumbered to my feet from my hiding place under a pew and stepped out into the center aisle. "I said, you are a PRAT," I said, planting my cane on the floor and leaning on it. "Did you conceive this idiotic invasion plan on your own or did you have your minions clip it out of the sunday funnies for you?" I was desperately trying to pull off the cool, deadpan action hero snark; my voice was a bit too high and my words a bit too hastily spoken to pull that off. I prayed, quite literally prayed, she was too ignorant of human mannerisms to pick it up.

The corner of her mouth curled up. "Ah, Celestia's pet space monkey," she said. "Still your tongue, monkey; your gabble may have amused Celestia, with me it will only get your tongue cut out." With her face being mostly hard carapace it was a bit hard to read her facial expressions, but her words conveyed all the meaning she needed.

I told my quivering cowardly guts to shut up and pressed my luck. My panicked hindbrain had seized on the idea that the only way I'd only stay alive was if I kept on talking. It was like a nightmare where I was facing a horrible monster and trying to banish it by mouthing off to it. "Well then take this as free counsel," said, slowly stepping towards her, thumping my cane into the floor, playing up my age and sedentary nature. "Think of it as my last act as an advisor to royalty. I'd take whichever changeling counseled this little venture and execute them for betrayal. Assuming your own followers don't kill you FIRST."

She scoffed.

I went on. "Oh yes, it will happen. There's an old saying amongst us talking space monkeys, Chrysalis. 'You can shear a sheep a thousand times, but you can only skin it once.' " I gave her my best gallows grin.

She actually grimaced at the turn of phrase. Then again, maybe she thought my slasher smile meant I had bad gas. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Let me guess; your grand plan consists of conquering Equestria, sticking us all in pods and sucking all the love out of us till we're nothing but empty husks. Right?" I stumped a little closer.

"Look around you," I said waving my arm around. "How much love are you feeling in this room right now? How much love will you harvest when the Equestrians all go down seething with fear, rage, and hate for your kind? And what happens after you've drained the last pony to a husk? Will you do this all over again? With the minotaurs? The gryphons? The dragons? You'll either run out of realms to conquer or you'll run into a race that isn't such a pushover, and squashes you like the bugs you are.

I raised my voice to make sure every Changeling in the room heard my voice. "You're a parasite. What happens to a parasite that kills its host?"

The silence was brief but thunderous.

I pressed on. "This isn't necessary. Think of the ponies out there who are showered with adoration by thousands, freely. Singers, movie stars, authors, actors--- not to mention rescue workers, philanthropists, caretakers--- you could make a positive contribution---"

I never finished my rant. I had gotten within ten paces of her. Through my entire spiel she had stood there, staring at me impassively, her hollow-cheeked face frozen and unchanging. Then in the middle of my sentence she spat an enormous gob of fluorescent green mucous at my face.
...I spent the rest of the battle hanging upside down in a pod like a fruit bat," I finished. "The next thing I recall was them peeling the wax off like a banana and pulling me out of the slime. So much for talking through your problems, I suppose." I smirked. "I like to think that wherever she is she's still seething over what I said to her. Nice wedding afterward though."

"Wow," was all Button Mash ventured. "...Did you meet Prince Shining Armor? He's cool."

"Yes, and Princess Cadence too, of course," I said. I didn't bother mentioning that Shining Armor and I played poker together all the time.

"I heard Princess Twilight helped save the Crystal Empire from a bad guy," Button said. "Did you go too?"

I laughed. "No, no, I'm afraid not," I said. "I've not even been to the Crystal Empire."

"Why not? I mean, why didn't you go and help the Elements with your cool human super powers?"

I nearly fell out of my hospital bed laughing. "Human super powers?" I hooted. "Where did you get the idea I have super powers?"

"You don't?" He sounded so disappointed that I actually felt bad that I didn't. "But you're an alien from another world. They always have super powers in the movies."

I sighed. "To my immense regret, real life isn't like the movies," I said. "If anything, I have even less super powers than you do."

"Then me?"

"You're an Earth pony," I said. "From what I've seen, when you grow up you'll be stronger than ten full grown human men. At least," I shrugged. "I didn't go along because I would have been no use. Unless they needed someone to tie their shoe laces." I wiggled my fingers at him.

"That's kind of a superpower," Button Mash pointed out, pointing his good hoof at my hands.

I looked at them. I supposed it would be, to a species who had to manipulate everything with blunt hooves. I shrugged. "Still not much good against something like King Sombra," I said. I sighed and lay back. "Besides, Celestia, Luna and I sort of had a falling-out round about that time." I grimaced as I reflected on how I reacted upon hearing the news of Celestia's little 'test'...

"Celestia, this is unconscionable!" I said, banging my cane on the floor for emphasis. To my irritation the rubber grommet on the tip kept it from making the sort of stone-cracking rap I wanted. "Putting that much of a burden on that poor filly--"
"I do not usually have people question my decisions so vociferously," Celestia said in a tone that made clear she didn't like it in the least.

"I'm your ADVISOR, that's how I make the big bucks," I said scathingly. "And now I'm ADVISING you that putting the fate of an entire empire of innocent ponies on your protege's shoulders is absolutely indecent!"

"So you don't think Twilight is capable of handling the crisis?" Celestia said.

"Of course she's capable of handling it!" I said, throwing my arms in the air. "She shouldn't have to, is my point! She's a young mare just barely into her majority, she shouldn't be doing YOUR job or the job of your ARMIES for you!"

"We do not care for thy tone, human," Luna said, scowling. "Do not presume to tell us our duties--"

"Tell me again, Princess," I said, wheeling on her. "Who is more powerful, you, Celestia or Twilight Sparkle? Who was needed to handle Sombra the last time? How long did it take for you two to actually depose him? He had an entire empire in chains by the time you defeated him and I'm pretty sure that's not an overnight task.

"Capable or not, who should handle a threat that size? The thousand year old alicorn princess or the nineteen year old child?" Luna gaped at me, then closed her mouth, fuming.

I felt Celestia's wing over my shoulder. "Arcturus, please," she said gently. "I assure you, I would never set a test on Twilight she could not handle. This is necessary. She needs to be tested for what we have planned for her..."

Tested. For what we have planned for her. My temper went from red hot to icy cold. I shoved her wing aside. "Tested. She defeated Nightmare Moon, when you couldn't. She faced down a Changeling army while you were hanging in a pod from the ceiling like a Christmas ham. She's battled hydias, Ursa Minors, dragons. Tell me, Princess," I spat, "When exactly is she going to finally earn your approval? When are you going to stop sabotaging her?"

"I would never--" she shouted in the Royal Canterlot Voice.

"You already DID!" I roared back, my jaw cracking from the strain. I was long past controlled and rational; I was in full raging jackass mode. "YOU TOLD HER IT WAS A TEST!"

"What dost thou mean that--- oh buck me running," Luna said, cringing. She closed her eyes and grimaced, facehoofing.

"And so the light dawns," I said sarcastically. To Celestia's exasperated and confused expression I said, "You told the most Obsessive Compulsive unicorn in Equestria that her mission was a TEST! Are you that oblivious to what your own student is like? How desperate she is for your approval? How terrified she is of your disappointment? ARE YOU THAT DETERMINED TO MAKE HER FAIL?"

"She was convinced you were going to exile her or throw her in a dungeon because her friend tried to care for your pet Phoenix. She went spastic because Ponyville was being attacked by parasprites just before your arrival. She's the most capable unicorn in Equestria and she comes apart at the seams if she thinks you're involved. Why? because she's convinced you'll destroy her life on a whim---and by the way I would love to know what the HELL you did to her to make her that neurotic!

"Now the fate of thousands of innocent ponies is in the hooves of a unicorn mare--- one who would stick her leg in a running wood chipper if you told her to, one who has already proven herself to you
a thousand times over, one whom any SANE mentor would say had nothing to prove, one who thinks her life is going to be utterly destroyed if she fails you doing something that you should have sent an ARMY to do.

"Worst of all, you've told her to do it in a way that contradicts every Friendship lesson she's had since the day Nightmare Moon fell, and do it all on her own. You told the Element of Harmony to push her friends away. Either she'll disobey you and save the Empire, and then snap from the strain of disobeying her Mother-Goddess figure, or she'll ignore everything she's learned, do exactly what you told her-- and snap when she sees her mission FAIL and the Crystal Empire FALL. Does this AMUSE you, mare? Are you not ENTERTAINED by her SUFFERING?

"Tell me Princess, whatever are you going to do with your time when your little dolly finally BREAKS?"

That was cruel. I knew it was. I said it anyway. I could see the hurt in Celestia's eyes. The hurt and the anger that I would accuse her of treating Twilight like a toy. "You know that I love Twilight dearly, Arthur Arcturus," she said. Her voice was carefully controlled, but I could hear the tearful tremble in it. Celestia, the royal sphinx, the pony Mona Lisa, showing actual emotion? "I would never do anything to hurt her. You know that."

"Then how do you justify doing this to her?" I demanded to know.

Celestia turned away. She seemed to compose herself, and looked around at the guards in the room. "Leave us," she said.

One made the mistake of hesitating. "But your maj--"

"LEAVE US!" Celestia barked, the Royal Voice making the curtains billow. The guards departed so quickly that their hooves skidded on the marble floor. More than one had his tail tucked between his legs. Celestia and Luna used their magic to close and bar the door, and pulled the curtains shut. My hand trembled on my cane; my fear was finally eating through my anger, reminding me that I was alone in a room with two beings who could incinerate me instantly and then teleport the dust to the moon-- I tamped down and stoked my anger, keeping the flame bright and hot. NO. I was not going to be a hypocritical puss. I was not going to let these two intimidate me no matter how powerful they were! My hand steadied.

"What we say here must not leave this room, save between the three of us," Celestia said. Luna continued casting spells about the room; anti-eavesdropping spells I supposed. "You are right, Arcturus. I told her deliberately."

I motioned for her to go on.

"That IS the test. I had to... I must see if she can overcome her fear of failure. She has to. She must." Her tone became earnest. "I have to know if she is ready for what comes next..."

"And then she revealed to me what it was all about. It seems they were going to give her a special book, one with a, a broken spell in it. If she managed to fix it, make it work, she would have unlocked a whole new kind of magic. That would trigger a metamorphosis in Twilight Sparkle. She
would ascend..."

"And she would turn into an alicorn princess!" Button Mash finished for me eagerly. I nodded. "Wow, so that's how it happened. I mean, I knew Princess Twilight made some sort of new magic, but I didn't really know how it worked... So once they told you that, it made everything better, right?"

I chuckled ruefully. "Actually..."

---

\[I\text{ stood for a minute, silently digesting what the two princesses had just told me. Inside I was in turmoil. I think what decided it for me was looking over at Celestia in my confusion and seeing that smile.}\]

\[That \text{ damned serene, confident, smug, self-assured smile.}\]

"Your Highnesses," I said as calmly as I could manage. "I must regretfully inform you that I must resign my post."

---

"You quit?" Button Mash gaped. "But why?"

"I'm getting to that, I'm getting to that," I said.

"What did the princesses do? Where did you go? Why are you working for them now if you quit?"

"Ah, therein lies the heart of the matter..."
"C'mon, tell me, what'd the princesses do?" Button Mash demanded.

"Not much, actually.." I said.

"You're quitting?" Luna said, astonished.

I looked her in the eye. "....EeYup," I said. I turned and started walking from the room. An indigo wing blocked my path.

"And where dost thou intend to go, Arcturus?" Luna said.

"Elsewhere," I said testily. I brushed her wing aside and headed for the door.

"Halt, Arcturus. We have not given thee leave to depart our presence," Luna said. I kept walking. She stamped her hoof. "We gave thee an order!"

I unbarred the door. "Really? You want hay fries with that?" I said over my shoulder. I pulled the door open only to have the handle yanked out of my hand by a golden glow. The door closed. This was getting irritating.

"You can at least show the proper deference to your Princesses," Celestia said sternly.

"I am," I said, grinding my teeth. "I'm leaving before I say what I actually think."

"According to our laws, you are a citizen of Equestria."

"According to your laws I'm also a Draconequus with a Hydra milking farm in Foggy Bottom Bog," I said drolly. "Both errors can be corrected."

With that little bon mot I marched out. Or I tried to. Celestia magically slammed the door again. No, wait, the aura was moonlight blue this time. It was no longer merely GETTING irritating. "You are a technically a strategic resource, Arcturus," Luna said. "We have the authority to have you locked up under armed guard if we so wish!"

I didn't look back. "And will you exercise that authority, Your Highnesses?" I said, keeping my voice level.

Neither one spoke. Finally, the door handle glowed with a golden aura and the door swung open. I stepped through and left.
"Gosh." The little colt was flabbergasted that I would speak to the Perfectly Perfect Princess that way. "Wh... Where did you go?"

I shrugged. "Where else could I go?..."

I was sitting on a small island in the middle of the bog, skipping rocks on the water, when she found me. Celestia floated down and alighted on the grass next to me as gently as a dove. We stood there in awkward silence. Mostly my awkwardness. "So here you are," she said mildly. "I couldn't believe the report when I heard it. You actually moved out to Foggy Bottom Bog?"

"Well, not so much 'moved out' as 'ran away to," I said sarcastically. I chunked another stone across the water.

She watched it skip across the water. She waited till it skipped its last and sank before speaking. "So why did you come out here?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I considered the Everfree," I said. "After all, the weather's more like I'm used to from Earth there, and nature acts more like, well, nature. But between parasprites, Ursa Majors, cockatrices, manticores and God knows what else out there, I wasn't quite sure about my survival chances. Foggy Bottom Bog, it's a bit muckier but it's apparently safe enough that Fluttershy came out here."

"And found it was full of Hydras," Celestia pointed out.

I held up a finger. "Correction: ONE Hydra. The big galoot is territorial, which means he keeps the other Hydras away. Along with most other large and dangerous critters."

"So you intend to keep the hydras away-- by living with a hydra in your back yard," she said with some amusement. "The flaw in your logic seems self evident."

By way of reply I picked up my cane and pointed it at a nearby tree. I thumbed a hidden stud in the handle; a small but brilliant lightning bolt leapt out of the end of the cane and danced up the trunk with a shriek like an angry tesla coil before fizzling out. Sparks and bits of smoldering bark rained down. "My 'monster be good' stick," I said. "I told Twilight about tasers a while back; she came up with a significant improvement on the idea. Old Chuckles didn't care to much for it when I tickled his belly with it. He steers clear of me now. Ain't that right fella?" I yelled in the direction of a large scaly hump in the water that had been meandering in our general direction. At the sound of my voice it halted, turned about, and began moving away at considerable speed.

"Besides," I continued in a more conversational tone. "I own a chunk of land out here. A hundred acres of prime waterfront property. Only a little less 'front' and a little more 'water' than most settlers generally prefer. I bought it half as a joke, half to rationalize those silly citizenship papers." I jerked a thumb towards the ramshackle log and driftwood shack standing in the middle of the island. "even got a roof over my head here."

"That wasn't what I meant when I asked why you came out here," she said gently.
I puffed out my cheeks and sat down on a nearby rock, not looking at her. "Because I was angry," I confessed. "No, because I was getting irrationally angry. At you. I had to get away. Go someplace where I wasn't looking at anything that reminded me of you, or of your throne or your kingdom, so I could sit down and figure out what was setting me off so badly. Before I did anything, well, anything more that I would regret."

She folded her wings and lay down on the grass. "And?" she said simply.

I sighed again and recited the phrase that seemed to sum up.

"I'm smart and you're dumb, I'm big and you're little, I'm right and you're wrong, and there's nothing you can do about it."

At her puzzled look-- I reflected with amusement that I was probably one of the few creatures alive that could elicit that expression from the millennia old alicorn-- I explained. "It's a line from a children's book called 'Matilda,' by Roald Dahl," I said. "It's a story about a smart and clever and good-hearted little girl with terrible parents and a horrible cruel teacher named Ms. Trunchbull. They say that to her, over and over, throughout the whole story. They are bad and terrible people and they love reminding her that she can do nothing about it."

"So how does that change?" Celestia asked.

I smiled. "She gets magic powers and punishes them for being naughty."

"So what does this have to do with you and your-- irrational anger?" Celestia said.

I rested my elbow on my knee and my chin on my fist and looked at her. "It's been a while since you were a foal, hasn't it?"

"Quite a bit," she said, both amused and miffed.

"Well you might not remember what it was like-- but deep down, every child thinks they're Matilda," I said. "Every adult is this bullying, pushy giant who tells you what to do, doesn't let you do what you want and says nothing but 'NO!' They're always right, you're always wrong, and there's nothing you can do about it because they're bigger than you. Good parents make up for that by listening to their kids and loving them and yes, admitting sometimes that they were wrong. And with luck the kid gets past seeing every reprimand as the act of a tyrant, and becomes an adult.

"But if the parents are screwups-- if they spend more time yelling than talking, answer everything with 'because I said so,' treat their kids like dummies or morons or disparage them all the time----or maybe if something just doesn't go right with the kid while they're being raised.... the kid doesn't get past it. And if you don't get past it, you never grow up.

"You spend the rest of your life seeing any authority figure as Ms. Trunchbull. And your pride and your rebelliousness won't let it go.

"It's why I swore to stay away from anything to do with the military," I said. "I knew that the whole Drill Sergeant routine is for the good of the soldiers. That the yelling and the abuse is the guy trying to hammer training into their heads that will save their lives. I knew that here." I tapped my head. "But down here, I patted my gut. "All I could see was a hateful bully and sadist tormenting people who couldn't fight back. I had a fear, a genuine, terrible fear that I would end up like that poor fat slob on "Full Metal Jacket..." flipping out and killing my Drill Sergeant. Or just ending up a mewling, puking failure, completely shamed to the point I killed myself---" I realized I was meandering off subject and stopped myself. "I'm meandering," I said. "I-- My apologies. The point
"And this is how you see me?" The solar diarch said, visibly hurt and appalled. "As a.. Ms. Trunchbull?"

"Not really," I said drolly. "Not unless you've recently flung your student out a classroom window."

She actually reared her head back, arching her neck and staring at me in shock. "Your world has some truly horrible foal's tales," she said.

"Like the one about the princess who flies around on Nightmare Night gobbling up little children?" I couldn't resist the chance to riposte.

Her eyebrows tabled. "Touche,'" she muttered. ( I had chewed her ear a bit about that one. Thank God Luna managed to get a sense of humor about it on her own. Thank God for Pipsqueak.)

"No, I do not think you're like Ms. Trunchbull," I said, getting back on track. "But I do think you're behaving like a bad mother."

"A bad mother?"

"A bad mother. The stereotypical overbearing matriarch. There's a line I once read in a book by another favorite author of mine, Alan Dean Foster," I said. "'The surest way to get someone to act like a child is to treat them like one." I got to my feet. "And you treat everyone like they're children."

I started to pace back and forth. "Me. Your counselors. Your soldiers. Your nobility. Your student... "Your SISTER." I paced back and forth as I rambled. "Why do you think you have so many problems with her? You're both immortal, you've both lived countless centuries, and yet you still treat her like a lesser. Like your 'baby' sister. The castle you live in is not her home, it's YOURS. The kingdom? YOURS, and don't fool yourself; It's not a Diarchy, it's a monarchy with a spare. You're still her guardian, still her keeper. And she knows it. She knows she's the lesser, she knows she's flat out unnecessary. You proved that by raising her moon without her, running the country without her, for a thousand years. Why do you think she acts so stiff and formal and archaic all the time in public? She does it because she's trying to look older and more mature. Thousands of years old, and she'll forever be 'the kid sister!'"

"And your subjects... all of them. 'My Little Ponies,'" I snorted. "Do you realize how condescending that sounds? For all you have a Parliament, they are still largely window dressing. You still wield most of the power in your government, you still run the country-- a country they are perfectly capable of running themselves.

"This is nothing compared to what you do with ponies you take a personal interest in. You go from benevolent vague mother figure to a meddling battleaxe --- the kind of mother who tries to micromanage their children's lives long after they've left the home and struck out on their own. Look at what you do to Twilight! Fiddling with her life from behind the scenes. Plotting out her life for her, and calling it her destiny..."

"I'm trying to prepare her to be a princess," Celestia reminded me.

"The last thing this country needs, the last thing this world needs, is another all-powerful princess!" I said, my irritation rising. I stopped for a moment, consciously willing it away. "Tell me Princess; in all your plotting and planning, in all your preparing Twilight to become an alicorn and become a princess, **did you ever bother to ask if that was what she wanted?**"

She stared at me for a moment then looked away. "No, I didn't," she admitted, with the air of
someone realizing a mistake they'd made. "But... why would she not?"

"Alicorn? Sure. I can see her going for that," I admitted. "Eternal youth, the power of flight, a
tenfold jump in magical power--- not exactly a tough sell. But Princess?

"Think about it, Celestia; what does your most faithful student live for, outside of your momentary
approval that is?"

"To study," Celestia said.

"To learn," I said. "To do research. Conduct experiments. Bury herself in books and read her way
out. Now tell me this, Celestia; How much of any of those things do you think she's going to have
time for if she's sitting on a throne? How many magical breakthroughs do you think she'll be able to
squeeze in between the formal dinners and Royal duties and sitting in the Court of Day and the
Court of Night?

" She lives for her friends too....Being with them, helping them, going on adventures with them.
What's going to happen to her friendships now that she's a ruler and they're her subjects? And think
beyond that... what's going to happen to the Elements of Harmony when her duties and her authority
over them, when the disparity between them finally make them drift apart? Everything wrong with
making her a princess is summed up in this one image:Twilight Sparkle, the alicorn of Friendship,
with all her friends around her, **bowing to her.** It is the very **antithesis** of what makes Friendship
work, and it will eventually destroy hers!"

I was getting fully worked up now. "You decided on this course for her, without her permission,
without her input, without even considering who she is and what she might want, pushing and
manipulating her from offstage-- yes, **like a bad mother.** Like some horrible old string-pulling stage
mother..." I was in full flight now, storming back and forth like a panther in a cage, my knuckles
going white where I clenched my cane in my fist. "How much of her life is going to be destroyed
because Mommy and Daddy Know Best---"

I bit the sentence off. I stood still, my back turned to the ruler of Equestria, standing on the edge of
an abyss only I could see. "And so we come full circle," I said as calmly as I could, taking that
metaphorical step back from the edge. "This is why I had to leave. Because...I cannot see past my
own immaturity anymore.

"You know what set me off? That smile of yours. That damned, ever-serene, patronizing smile." I ran
my hand down my face. "That's when I knew why I was so angry."

"I can't see you as anything but a-- parental figure. An all-powerful, all-controlling, Mother Figure
who even at her best only smothers her children, keeping them from growing. And that angry,
immature little boy under all this hair and fat only knows how to seethe in rage at her."

I turned to face her again. She was regarding me with a quizzical look, her head tilted to one side.
"It wasn't about me, was it," she said. "It was about your parents."

I ran my hands down my face again, wiping the sweat off, trying to clear my head. "No, Celestia.
My parents were good people--"

"I didn't say they weren't good parents," Celestia said. "But you obviously have unresolved issues
with them."

"Obviously?"
"You used the phrase 'Mommy and Daddy Know Best.' Not 'Mommy.' 'Mommy AND Daddy.' You constantly refer to yourself as a 'man-child.' As being an 'immature little boy.' Your complaints were a constant litany of metaphors for childhood and parenthood. I'm not omniscient but I'm certainly not slow." She shifted in place, putting her forehooves back. "I want to know what parts of your past, your little mentioned past, are holding you hostage like this. Tell me about them."

I grinned humorlessly. "Zho, you vant to know all about my Id ven I vas a kid, ya?"

It took her a moment to get the joke. "Oh, that Freud fellow from your world. The one with the obsession with cigars." She rolled her eyes. "Well I'm no psychiatrist, but I doubt they have learned anything that I haven't dealt with in multiple millennia."

"That confident of your counseling abilities, are you?" I challenged.

Celestia actually snorted. "Don't tell them, but what they call 'psychiatry' looks a lot like what we ancient types used to call 'listening.' " She tossed her head. "So... tell me."

I sighed and sat back down on my rock. " Don't leap to the wrong conclusion so quickly, Celestia," I said. "My parents were good people. Honest, God-fearing, faithful. But like anyone else they had problems and they made mistakes. More than some, fewer than most. But overall, they were good parents. Way above average."

"But?" she prompted.

I tried to say "But nothing," but couldn't. "...But somewhere along the way, something went wrong," I said. "I... failed to launch."  

I tried to explain. "In my culture, it's expected that a young man will grow up, go to college, get a degree, and then set out in life. It's pretty much the same here in Equestria so far as I can see. But... when time came for me to do the same, I just wasn't ready.

"My parents were overprotective of me. They were from a very insular Christian tradition, and regarded the entire world outside the Church the way you ponies regard the Everfree Forest... if you filled it with Changelings and broken glass and then set it on fire. They vetted everything I did; the books I read, the music I listened to, the games I played, the way I spent every hour and every minute of every day, for fear of me being 'corrupted.' And disagreement was NOT TO BE TOLERATED.

"By the time I was in my majority, I was an utter man-child. I'd never held a job. Never learned to balance a checkbook. Never dated. Never gone to a school dance. Never socialized with my peers. They tried to protect me from the world but they ended up putting me in a cocoon. Hell, I was eighteen and still couldn't walk down the street to the corner store without Mommy's permission." I snorted. "And I barely knew how to wipe my own bum. What little responsibility they did give me, I didn't know how to handle. My middle name growing up was "Sorry Good-For-Nothin'," to go by what my Dad called me." I snorted again.

Celestia looked up. "He called you that?" she said, shocked.

"Frequently. He was strict. He... had a temper. He yelled a lot. He didn't punish us often... but when he did, it left welts." She looked stunned.

"He mellowed in his later years," I insisted. Who was I trying to convince: me or her? "And here and now, it sounds far worse than it actually was. Such incidences were few and far between..."

"Were you afraid of him?" Celestia said quietly.
"I ground the word out. "Yes."

"Seems it happened often enough, then," she said. Her voice was gentle but her eyes were stony.

"Growing up, he had it far worse than I did," I said. "His father-- my grandfather-- was an alcoholic..."

"And what was his excuse?" She demanded to know. "This holy man who was your father?"

"Celestia..."

"Well?"

I gritted my teeth, then let out my breath in a huff. "I never said he didn't make mistakes, did I?" I said. "And this isn't about him, it's about me. There are people who went through far worse than the rare whipping or hurtful word, and they managed to grow up and become successful, self-sufficient, responsible adults."

"As you said; this isn't about them, it's about you," Celestia said.

I ignored that. "I frustrated him, I suppose. He was one of those self-made men. His own father was uninvolved with him; he had to go out and teach himself how to do everything. He taught himself how to repair an automobile, how to do carpentry, how to repair wiring and plumbing. As a kid he built his own treehouses and go-karts and repaired his own bicycle... when he was twelve he could walk up into the hills with a pocketknife, peel a birch sapling, and whittle out a complete bow and arrow set. Twine and all. Me? I was more a 'can you please start the orange peel for me' kind of kid." I gave a humorless laugh. "I think he was baffled that he had a son who couldn't seem to self-start on anything. And the few things I could do with skill, he had no use for and didn't understand."

I thought it over. "I suppose that if they made any real error with me, it was a sin of omission, rather than commission. They taught me-- strictly--- what to never ever do... but they never really made an effort to teach me what I SHOULD do, or how to do it. And what I could do, they never left me alone to try. Sometimes I think I might have been better off if they'd been completely neglectful. At the least I would have learned how to take a few lumps.

"Then, I was off to college. And I wasn't ready. I didn't know how to be an adult. I ended up kicked off the work scholarship program and sent home. And I failed to pay off that year's bill so I could return...."

"From there on out my life consisted of me sliding from disaster to disaster, making idiotic decisions, failing calamitously, learning lessons about being an adult one day AFTER I needed to know it. I screwed myself up, massively.

"I was in my thirties before I finally managed to get out, get a job, get away, get a place of my own... But even then, I was on a downhill slide. The job gave less and less hours. The economy tanked. The bills piled up. The debts grew. And any opportunity I was given, I shot myself in the foot. I was still an idiot child living in an adult's body, incapable of being an adult.

"And then one day when I'm walking back from lunch... a lunch I bought with pocket change from my sofa... to my job as the lowest form of unskilled expendable labor in the western hemisphere-- a charity telemarketer--where I worked maybe one day a week, while I wait for the tax collector and the bill collector and my filthy trailer and my broken-down vehicle and my broken-down body to decide who gets to devour me first--- a magic portal sucks me into the Land of Equestria.

"And so here I am," I concluded. "Forty-plus years old, and the only reason I can even survive is
because I'm in a fluffy, sparkly magical candyland where the local All Powerful Mother Figure keeps me as a pet." Some noxious aroma from the bog wafted over, making my eyes water. I wiped them on my sleeve. I stood up and walked away, standing on the shore of my little island and looking out over the water. "And then I find myself in a position way above my class and stature. By sheer dumb luck I had fallen upstairs into a... let's call it what it is, a cushy job with an outrageous pay and ridiculous benefits. And then I find myself behaving just as immaturity and foolishly as ever-- yelling like a spoiled arrogant brat at a thousand year old ruler of a kingdom because she did something I disagreed with. That is why I left. Why I HAD to leave."

"Because you were embarrassed," Celestia said.

"Because I was rightfully ASHAMED," I said. "Because I realized was a CHILD and a FAILURE and a FOOL. And a royal leader needs a counselor and advisor, not an over grown man-child." I kept my eyes fixed on the horizon. "No fool can give good counsel to a Princess."

I heard her step closer. She stood next to me, just visible out of the corner of my eye. "You would be surprised at how many rulers treasure the counsel of their Fool," she said. I could hear the capital letter. She gave me that damned smile of hers. "You are a better advisor than you think, Arcturus. You speak honestly, truthfully, and with conviction. You are thoughtful and insightful. Even in your petty rant, you told me truths that I had not considered or were unwilling to. You spoke from the heart... Even if it was at the top of your lungs." Her smile dimpled. It was much nicer that way.

I looked at her. ".Do you-- can you forgive me for speaking to you in such a manner?" I said, my head down. Shame crawled over me.

"Of course," she said. "And this is why I treasure your counsel, Arthur. You don't ask forgiveness out of fear, but out of genuine contrition. You speak to me not as if I were a ruler or some alabaster goddess, but as a pony." She sighed. "You have no idea how rare that is."

"Don't think too much on it," I said, the corner of my mouth quirking up. "Remember my origins. It's not because I'm wise, it's because to me you're still a giant cartoon pony that reads the moral of the story at the end of each episode."

Celestia laughed. "You give yourself too little credit as a man as well, Arcturus. We are all growing up, and we don't get it right all at once. My sister and I have been at it for millennia, and we still have our childish moments." Her smile diminished a bit. "For one thing, I will be looking more closely at my dear sister's situation. I had not, in truth, considered that she might be... smothering under my wing."

"My advice on that? Give her a place of her own," I said. "Her own castle, her own Court, her own place out from under your shadow. Maybe let her rebuilt the old castle in the Everfree. Or pick another location entirely, maybe directly opposite Canterlot, on the other side of Equestria, for symbolism? Wherever, so long as it's hers. One true thing my father told me: 'You don't start growing up and being yourself until you're out on your own.' " My thoughts soured a bit. "Strange how so many of his ideas for 'helping' me involved me moving back in with him and Mother."

"Hm. I will take it under advisement," she said.

I sighed. "So what are your intentions about Twilight?" I asked.

Celestia sighed as well. "The same as before," she said. "Now that she has passed the test-- you saw the aurora, I assume...."

"So that's what that was," I said. "I wondered if Rainbow Dash had perfected some new trick for a
moment. How did it go down?"

"I'll go into detail on that later," Celestia said. "Or let you hear it from her, personally. Either way, I will be sending her Starswirl's unfinished spell... and giving her the chance to ascend."

I regarded her with a gimlet eye. "And will you be telling her that's what it is she's doing?" I asked her.

Celestia looked away. "...No," she finally said. To my surprise her serenity had cracked; she actually sounded upset.

"And why not?" I demanded. "Doesn't she deserve to know the truth? To make the choice for herself?"

"It's not that simple!" Celestia burst out. She got to her feet, looking away from me. "She... she might panic if she knows what the consequences are..."

"You mean she might say no," I said, angry and disappointed.

"You don't understand!" Celestia cried out tearfully, stamping her hoof. That outburst of emotion startled me more than anything I could name.

"Then enlighten me!" I said. "After all this, and you're still going to play at pulling strings--"

"DAMMIT, Arthur!" I fell silent in surprise. She turned away from me, hanging her head-- then turned back around and stepped forward, till her face was inches from mine. The words tumbled out of her, urgently, desperately trying to persuade me. "Twilight is literally a one in a million pony. She is one of the few unicorns I have ever found in my entire lifetime who even have a chance of ascending to alicornhood. Twilight is right on the threshold, literally on the brink; she has been since the day she was BORN. If I do not give her that last little push, she will not ascend and it may be another thousand, another TEN thousand years before I find another like her or even close to it. And her lifespan is so short-- she is at the peak of her youthful vigor RIGHT NOW... if I wait, if I wait for her to decide on her own it could be too late, and she could be gone in an eyeblink--"

"Dammit, Arthur, I'm not going to lose her!" She burst out. Tears, sweet heaven, actual genuine tears started down her cheeks. She composed herself, but the tears still flowed. "My little ponies... they die so young, they're gone so fast... There are only three alicorns in the world right now, my sister, my niece and I... and I... I am so sick of being so lonely. I am so sick of watching my ponies die.

"It's selfish and it's unfair, but I have a chance to save Twilight. And I'm going to take it."

She brushed the tear-streaks from her face with a wing. When she spoke again she was more calm. "Every alicorn manifested is another step towards prolonging the lives of all my little ponies. Towards curing them of this... brutally short lifespan with which they are afflicted. My sister and I... We have mated with mortal ponies in the past. We have born foals. Their lifespans were greatly expanded, as were the lifespans of their offspring...every alicorn ascended is a little bit more longevity added to the bloodlines of the pony race." She sniffed. "All the more justification for pressing Twilight into ascension, don't you think? So if that makes me a meddling old mare... well, I'll take it."

What a bittersweet epiphany on my part. She wasn't just a Mother Figure. She was a mother; a matriarch to who knew how many of these ponies... a mother whose children all were born with a horrible defect that made them wither and die in a few brief years even as she watched. Small
wonder that she smothered them, and pushed and manipulated the ones she was closest to so much. Small wonder indeed. I rested my hand on her shoulder in sympathy.

"I understand, Celestia. But I still say that the last thing Equestria needs--" I began.

She cut me off. "--is yet another immortal, all powerful ruler, I believe you were going to say? You are right in that regard; we should be a nation ruled by Law, not by ponies. Noone, not even an alicorn, has the ‘natural right’ to rule over others. But it's not like I have much choice in that regard; it has been Equestrian law for centuries that all alicorns are, by default, part of the royal ruling family of Equestria." She snorted. "You are right. My little ponies need to learn to rule themselves. The last thing they need is yet another all-powerful alicorn ruler. Why do you think I want Twilight as an alicorn princess so badly?"

I cocked an eyebrow. "I believe the flaw in your logic is rather self-evident," I said.

She stuck her tongue out at me. "It's rather simple, Arthur," she said, sweeping her mane out of her face. "The more alicorns there are, the more common we become. I want to see a day where alicorns are just another pony race. Every new alicorn is a step towards that, as well."

"And familiarity breeds... acceptance, I suppose, in this case." I concluded. "Or at least you hope. But what of Twilight herself? This will wreck her life. She's a scholar, not a ruler."

"She would be a great ruler."

"Whether she could be or not is irrelevant, the point is that she should not be."

Celestia shook her head. "At least you care for her wellbeing, Arcturus."

"Or I'm just projecting myself onto her," I said.

"Projecting?"

"Mmm. Then again---- a neurotic, reclusive, antisocial guilt-obsessed protege' with mountains of confidence issues, a manipulative parental figure and a pathological fear of failure. What could we possibly have in common?"

She smiled. It was so much better when it was genuine. "Do not fear for her happiness, Arthur," she said. "I'm not going to plunk her plot on a throne right after her coronation. At least not for a couple of centuries, if ever." She dimpled. "With any luck, never. I'm rather taken with the regal system in your world's Great Britain, after all; the notion of reigning without ruling is certainly attractive." She sighed. "Maker knows I could use the vacation."

"Then perhaps it is time the title of 'Princess' was changed," I said. She regarded me with a cocked eyebrow. "Make it an honorific," I urged. "Limit its power, make it symbolic for any future ascendants. Proclaim it a title of respect rather than authority. It would at least be a first step towards diminishing the throne, and establishing Rule of Law and Consent of the Governed, rather than rule by crown. That will at least let Twilight continue to live her own life... and keep the weight of the throne from falling on her back."

She regarded me. "Quick with ideas and suggestions as always," she said. She smiled faintly. "For a Hydra farmer." She turned serious. "The suggestion-- is not without merit. But it might be tricky setting the precedent; I could use an experienced advisor to help me dot the i's and cross the t's..."

"Will you come back, Arthur?" she asked.
I felt fleeting shame crawl over me. "Do you truly WANT me back?" I asked.

"Yes," she said simply. "I was not lying when I said I valued your counsel. Or your friendship." She tilted her head. "Besides, Luna misses you."

"Does she now?"

"Yes. You make her laugh. The highlight of her night is you muttering commentary in her ear during the Court of Night."

"Do I now? I wondered."

"Yes, you evil thing. It takes everything she has to keep from laughing out loud, she tells me." Celestia chuckled. "She nearly dislocated a rib when you called the Duchess of Trottington a 'hambeast.'"

"I thought that calling 'soooeee' was what did it," I commented idly. Celestia burst out laughing. "Sakes alive, how does a pony get that fat? They nearly had to roll her into the audience chamber..." I took a deep breath and blew it out. "I suppose... I shall come back after all. Let me fetch my bags."

I went into my shack and retrieved my suitcase and a canvas shoulder bag, then rejoined Celestia. The bag clinked as I walked.

Celestia regarded the bag curiously. "And what is this?" she said.

I opened the bag, revealing it to be full of hundred-bit pieces. The weight-reduction charm on the bag was strained to the limit. "My dividends from various personal projects," I said. "Percentages from sales of my biography, my ten percent from the Great and Powerful Trixie, use of my likeness on merchandise..." I looked at her. "What, do you think I was going to run off in the wilderness and try to live off the land like a wild mountain man? I'm not a twenty year old idiot anymore. No, I'm a much more experienced forty year old idiot."

"I can't help wondering how you intended to shop for supplies," Celestia said dryly.

I pointed over my shoulder at the rusty mailbox mounted on a pole. "Mail order," I said. "Leave a muffin on top of the mailbox and Derpy can spot it clear from Ponyville." Celestia's expression spoke volumes. I shrugged. "That's how Zecora gets postal service in the Everfree."

Celestia blinked, then shook her head. "I... sincerely do not know whether to believe you or not," she said.

"Anyway, shall we be teleporting, or taking a chariot?" I said. "And do you want to fetch down the security detail hiding in the trees, or should I?"

"You saw them did you?" she said in a monotone.

"Two days ago. Either that or Foggy Bottom Bog has some darned big canaries hiding in the trees," I remarked droll.

There was a basso growl, followed by a rather falsetto stallion's shriek. A few islands over, Chuckles the Hydra had surfaced. All four of his heads were taking a keen interest in a rather dense clump of mangroves. The treetops were shaking violently as something inside objected to the hydra's scrutiny. "CHUCKLES!" I yelled. "YOU LEAVE THAT POOR GUARD ALONE!!"

"HELP!!" the unseen guard yelled.
"DON'T MAKE ME GET THE MILKING MACHINE!!"

"...Anyway, Celestia and I rescued the guards, we all came back to Canterlot and bathed in calomine lotion till the poison ivy went away," I finished. I doubted Button Mash heard that last bit; he was laughing too hard. The colt was practically rolling back and forth, slapping the mattress with his good hoof.

I heard a giggle behind me. I turned and saw our nurse standing in the doorway. "Heard the story, did you?"

"Enough of it," she giggled. "I'm here to check on Button's medication."


The colt giggled. "Yeah. Druuuuuuuugs," he said back, wiggling his lip at me. Ever seen a horse do that lip-flapping thing? It's both cute as heck and bloody hysterical when ponies do it.

The nurse's grin turned sarcastic as she stepped into the room. "I'm starting to wonder just how strong that medication we give you two IS," she said.

"Better living through chemistry," I said cheerfully as she looked over Button's morphine drip. She rolled her eyes and ignored me.

"So that's how Princess Twilight became an alicorn, huh?" Button said.

"NNNot exactly," I said, waggling my hand. "That came a bit later. Wasn't THAT an interesting day. Chaos, explosions, chicken stampedes, cats and dogs living together..."

"Cool." Button looked eager. "Tell me about it."

"You might want to save that for later," our nurse said. "Breakfast will be in, in a few minutes. Then visiting hours start. I believe you both have a few ponies who said they'd be by to see you."

"Won't that be nice," I said.

"So wasn't there s'posed to be a moral to that story?" Button asked me. "Grownups are always saying there is."

I lay there and thought it over. "I suppose that if there was, it would be... that growing up doesn't mean always being right. It's about knowing when to insist you're right... and knowing how to admit you're wrong. And maybe, learning how to disagree and still be friends." I scratched my chin thoughtfully. "Wouldn't exactly fit in a fortune cookie, but what do you think?"

Button Mash shrugged and grinned. "Works for me."
Chapter 29

".....aAAAAAand--- Voila! A perfect parcel of posies for a patched up pony!" the Great and Powerful Trixie said, flourishing the bouquet of garishly oversized silk flowers.

"Cool!" Button Mash said.

I chuckled to myself. Trixie could be such a ham. She had come to visit me in the hospital that morning, but not ten seconds after her arrival she was pulling tricks out of her hat to entertain my roommate. She had the colt eating out of her hoof in moments.

At the moment she was pulling the old schlocky "bouquet from a wand" trick... the painfully obvious one where you could see the bouquet of flimsy silk blooms popping out of the hollow wand. Any two bit birthday party magician would have laughed at that trick-- at least till the blooms popped off the stems and turned into swirling flock of butterflies.

She spent a few moments pretending to chase after them with a butterfly net (much to Button's amusement), then let the flock swoop into her hat, donning it with a flourish. Button applauded as best he could with one hoof. Trixie pulled a folded piece of cloth from behind his ear and unfolded it into a felt paper version of her own star-spangled hat. "For being such a good patient," she said, plopping it on his head.

"Wow, thanks!" he said.

I heard a chuckle. The doctor was standing in the door. "Bravo," he said. "I hate to interrupt but I'm here to sign Sir Arcturus out."

"Ah, well then, I shall escort my redoubtable sponsor and agent to the door," Trixie said. "Farewell, young Button!"

They of course gave me a wheelchair ride to the front door. Trixie walked alongside me, chatting about the tour she was doing. "I see you've been following my little tips," I said.

Trixie rolled her eyes. "And they say Trixie fishes for compliments," she said. "Yes, I've been following it. *Play to their expectations, then subvert them.*' Yes, yes, it's working marvelously. Happy now?" She dropped the act for a moment and chuckled. "I have to confess, it has been fun pulling out old wheezes like that silk flower gag and adding new twists. The look on the colts' and fillies' faces when the surprise ending comes out of nowhere is just delicious." Her smile softened a touch. "And you were right about them, too," she said. "Performing for foals-- it's been more rewarding than I can say. Thank you for talking me into doing it."

I said nothing. Trixie had been dead set against doing shows for children; she saw it as degrading, 'stooping' to the level of a birthday party performer. It seems that when she had first been starting out a few unfortunate gigs at birthdays and cutecenearas for spoiled brats had soured her on child audiences.

But she was a soft touch. A few more carefully selected performances with better controlled and
better behaved audiences had softened her up to working a younger audience. Having a roomful of foals watching even her most hackneyed tricks with big awe-filled eyes had been a balm to the jaded mare. Then all it took was a few gigs at charities—hospitals, orphanages, fundraisers for handicapped colts and fillies... after the first little foal had rolled up in her wheelchair and given her a hug for coming and performing for them, her stony heart had melted like butter. I should know, I was there. Just the sight of it had turned me to goo.

"What made you decide to push me in that direction anyway?" the stage pony asked me.

"Personal experience," I admitted. "When I was about half my current age, I belonged to a puppet troupe in our church. Bible stories, songs, lessons... the usual. I never had so much fun in my life, making all those kids laugh. I figured if anything could get you out of the funk you were in over your audience hating you, that would be it."

She gave me a nudge. "Could have easily gone the other way," she pointed out. "There was nothing that said the Great and Powerful Trixie even liked foals."

"It could have. I could have been completely wrong," I admitted. "But aren't you glad I wasn't?"

We reached the lobby. The orderly was rolling my wheelchair past the gift shoppe when a mare came backing out of the sliding door, a get-well mug with a potted flower in it clutched in one forelimb, and bumped into me. It was Violette. "Oh, pardonez moi, Monsieur," she said. "I-- ah! Monsieur Arthur." She pronounced it 'Ar-TOOR.'

"Hello, Violette. Fancy meeting you here," I said politely. It had taken me a moment to recognize her; she was out of her maid's uniform and wearing nothing at the moment... and I cannot believe how odd it is to write that previous sentence, but there you have it.

The pale purple mare hesitated. I think my phrasing confused her. "Ah. I, ahm, how you say, Came to see you." She smiled nervously. She held out the flowerpot-mug to me abruptly. "A gift?"

"Oh, um, thank you, it's lovely." I hope she realized that I wouldn't eat the thing. In Equestria, bringing both candy and flowers to a date was somewhat redundant. Note to self, talk to Pinkie Pie about the possibilities of chocolate covered roses, I thought as I took the mug.

She smiled timidly. "Are you feeling well, yes?" She scuffed a hoof awkwardly.

"Oh, um quite well, yes," I said. "The doctors patched me up. Better than new, even."

Trixie's eyes darted from me to her and then back to me. I caught a rather sly expression spreading across her face. She made an ah, so sound in her throat and waggled her eyebrows at me. "Well, the Great and Powerful Trixie knows when three's a crowd," she said slyly. "I have to be on my way-- I have a performance slated at one of the local schools." She gave me a quick sisterly peck on the cheek and murmured in my ear. "Be a good boy now and get her home by curfew."

"...!" was all I managed to reply. The flamboyant showmare laughed and trotted off down the hallway, cape swirling theatrically behind her. My eyes darted from the departing pony to the one standing beside me-- who was blushing. And smiling? Danger, Will Robinson, alien being is sending mixed signals. She fell in step beside my wheelchair, saying nothing.

And then it spoke up. You know who it is; that little imp, forever sitting on one's shoulder who somehow manages to carry both a harp and a pitchfork with equal aplomb, and you desperately want to believe in the halo over his head even though you can clearly see the wee little red horns poking out of his curly locks. Mine fluttered his feathery little wings, kicked up his darling little cloven
hooves where they dangled off my collarbone, leaned over to my ear and with a cherubic smile on his bright red cheeks, said:

*Go on, take her out for brunch. What harm could it do?*

What *good* could it do? I retorted silently. We were not even of a kind--

*Two sapient beings, male and female?*

Of different species--

*Inside or out? And which really matters?* the malicious little imp argued back. *I'm not asking you to MARRY her, after all, just take her out to brunch!*

But where could it possibly go?

*Not up to me,* the imp replied. *But you better make up your mind soon on just how human you think these beings are. Because, let's face it, that question has been staring you in the face since day one--and if you're really dedicated to staying in this universe forever, you're going to get terribly lonely.* And with that the mental illusion popped like a bubble and I realized I was silently arguing with myself while Violette stared at me.

Fellow humans, fellow bronies, allow me a moment here. Contrary to the blitherings of various fanfic writers, *this wasn't some minor 'hangup' to get over.* While amongst ponykind interspecies dating and romance was common.. well, for a given value of common; you had something of a sliding scale ranging from the various tribes cross-pollinating (perfectly normal) to donkeys and zebras marrying into the family (less common but impolite to remark on) to ponies eloping with gryphons and dragons (eyebrow-raising, but it did happen.) And yes, offspring occurred. (Discord's race was mistakenly named after one of the more exotic hybrids, due to his exotic appearance. Hint: Draco is latin for dragon; Equus is latin for horse. Draconequus. Food for thought, isn't it?)

But I wasn't a pony. I wasn't even a native Equestrian. Genetically speaking, Violette was probably more closely related to the fish swimming in the fountain out in front of the hospital than she was to me. A relationship between a human and an Equestrian-- regardless of race-- would be... what would the term be? miscegeny?... of the Nth degree.

In addition, biology would tell. Clopfic writers are fools; I was no more sensually attracted to females of Violette's species than to a brick wall. Yes, they are cute and cuddly looking, and they have certain feminine mannerisms that males of our species find attractive-- but at the end a baseline healthy human male is not going to be naturally attracted to a sapient hooved quadruped.

And it was more than reasonable to assume that ponies felt the same way about the half-shaved three hundred pound space monkey. Females of my OWN species were not attracted to me; why would a female of a race from an entire other universe find me appealing?

Then again... why was Violette here?

The notion was ridiculous. Nothing could come of it. Culturally, socially, biologically we were utterly incompatible...

And yet...

Did it matter? Why did biology even become a thing? Matters carnal mean much or little, depending on the person, and in the end it could be lived without. People did so all the time. But... *companionship,* on the other hand, was not so easily passed up. Someone to talk to, to care about, to
share life with as time passed you by. Was that so wrong?

I regarded her from the corner of my eye. Indeed, why not? She seemed to find my presence amicable; I found her in turn to be pleasant and charming. Why not? At the very least, we could be sociable. After all, what better way to spend time than in good company?

I cleared my throat. "Miss Violette?"

She looked up. "Oui?"

"Would you care to join me for--"

Before I could finish my invitation to tea, without warning I was dumped arse over teakettle in the street. I landed face-first on the pavement, legs folded under me and my rump in the air. The orderly who'd been pushing me fumbled around awkwardly, stammering apologies. "I-I'm so sorry Mr. Arcturus," the gawky stallion said, trying to figure out how to help me to my feet. "W-we tip the chair forward to help get ponies up on all fours-- I forgot you weren't a quadruped--"

I waved him off crankily. "Leave off, leave off!" I said, heaving myself to my feet. I dusted myself off and snatched my hat and cane from the orderly's mouth, glaring at him. He beat a hasty retreat back into the building, the wheelchair clattering over the pavement. I resisted the urge to wing my floral mug at the back of his head and finished dusting myself off.

Violette made anxious motions as if to try and help me. "Are you hurt?" she said sympathetically.

"No no, I'm fine," I muttered. "Less my bruised dignity, what there is of it." I let out a huff and composed myself. I caught her dimpling into a smile. She hastily covered her mouth with her hoof. It was, yes, adorable.

Oh what the hell.

"Miss Violette, would you care to accompany me to brunch?" I said. I gestured with my slightly mashed mug of flowers to a sidewalk bistro across the way. She blinked at me in surprise, her mouth forming an "o".

Then she smiled. "I... merci, I would like it very much." With a bow, I escorted her across the street to a table.

It wasn't much, just light tea and some cucumber sandwiches and some idle conversation. But it was... good company.
We chatted idly for some time, lingering over the sandwiches. Violette, it seems, had been applying herself to her studies of the Equestrian tongue (English to you and I, but don't tell the Equestrian travel board that.) It was only now she felt confident enough to venture a conversation. Between that, and the "Fancy to Equestrian, Equestrian to Fancy" phrasebook certain someponies had gifted me with a week or so prior (why do I feel the beginnings of a conspiracy closing around me?) we managed to get by.

The topics of conversation were carefully neutral at first. The weather, the events of the day, so on and so forth. They awkwardly edged towards the more personal however. Violette spoke a bit of herself, explained her cutie mark: a goldfish leaping from a smaller bowl to a larger one--- a symbol, in her case, for a taste for simple adventures, a need to continually move outside her comfort zone (it was why she had come to Equestria as a house servant, despite barely knowing the language.) I had learned as much before, but I listened avidly. She told me a bit about family (still back in her homeland, they had been sorry to see her go, but knew she had to follow her cutie mark where it led.) I chatted a bit about business about the castle, though heaven knew as a maid she was probably better acquainted with the goings-on there than I was.

There still was a certain clumsiness about our banter. We would edge towards certain topics and then skitter away nervously, or fall into lapses of silence that seemed to last a second or two longer than they should. I had always been a solitary type, and had no prior experience with dating, in either world. Was this normal? She seemed nervous and often halted in mid-sentence, as if she had questions she wanted to ask or things she wanted to say, but was insecure in contemplating or even thinking them. I myself was beating around the bush about asking a few things myself.

I finally decided to broach the topic preying on my mind. "Violette," I began carefully. "If I may ask..."

"Oui?"

"You... that is, I have the impression that... or so I have been informed, ah..." confound it. "Since we first met, you seem to have-- taken an interest in me." I paused, then phrased it the only way I could. "Why?"

She ventured a small smile. "Why?... Yoo deed... save mai lahf," she pointed out. "Twice, n'est ce pais? Ah wood fahnd any 'colt een-- ow you say--- eentreai-sting? for zat.." she ducked her head between her shoulders. "And... yoo ahr kind, and fonnae, and...intrigante-- eentreeing." She blushed. "Yoo ahr verra deefran' from many stallion."

I cocked an eyebrow at that. "One might say that," I said, looking down at myself. I certainly hoped this wasn't some odd 'loving the alien' sort of fetish that attracted her. That would be-- awkward. "Most mares would be, ah, apprehensive for that reason," I said carefully.

She got an odd, evasive sort of look on her face. "Apprehensif, oui... some." She squirmed, suddenly embarrassed. "I saw you are charmaing, and am eentreai-staid, but--ahh, I, haf heard ze ru-mairs--"

"Rumors?" I got a wry grin. "What, that I'm a violent, war crazy, flesh-eating monkey monster from
the stars, that sort of thing?"

It took her a moment of puzzled contemplation to translate what I said. "Oh, non, non, zat is seely," she said, shaking her head and waving a hoof in negation. "I, ah, was warned by ozairs zat, your people, um, were... " she blushed suddenly.

I had a growing dreadful suspicion. "What?"

She mumbled it in Fancy. "I was told that humans... n'avaient pas de morale sexuelle comme nous le faisons,\" she stammered. "That you---que vous fériez quelque chose de pervers, et même prendre des photos ...\" She held up her hooves as if to ward off a blow. "Eet is gossip-- tale telling I am sure-\""

I only knew a smattering of French but I could pick out the words 'moral,' 'sexual,' 'perverse,' and 'photos' easily enough. I groaned and facepalmed, resisting the urge to slump to the floor and crawl away in embarrassment. "I knew this was going to happen," I muttered.

This was going to be a long, complicated and mortifying explanation.

From the desk of Arthur Arcturus, advisor to their Majesties the Princesses of Equestria, to his fellow bronies still residing in the human world, namely, those less than few authors of fan works known collectively as 'Clopfics':

Dear GOD I hate you all.

No. I will not hold my words in abeyance. You cannot possibly grasp how utterly, totally, and sincerely I loathe you and your works on the face of the earth at this very moment. Thanks to you, and one mislaid terabyte hard drive, I have today suffered terror, dismay, and indignity for which no possible words or combination of words can venture to express in full, save for these: I blame you for ALL of this.

Through all the events I have chronicled thus far, the World Window has continued to function as before--- for a given value of the word "function," that is. Perhaps "Continued to malfunction" would be more accurate. Regardless, the pernicious device, in its role as a misbehaving portal between the world of Equestria and the world of Earth, had continued to randomly and accidentally pilfer miscellaneous loose objects from my former world and pass them to this one. The unicorn technicians had managed to put controllers on it that kept it from vacuuming up anything larger than, say, a breadbox, or to allow through anything toxic, radioactive, or currently living (or, in a rare moment of foresight, anything formerly living.) These precautions however did not prevent it from burping up items that were destined to cause us immense trouble.

As suggested previously, a great deal of computer hardware was making the transition. The ponies in charge had conscripted me into helping them analyze, and eventually, reassemble these odds and ends into functional machinery. After a few weeks they had become dab hands at putting together the jigsaw puzzle of parts the Window dropped into their laps.

Not a few days prior to this posting a rubbish bin had come tumbling through the gate-- an optimal find, as it meant that nobody on the other side would be wanting it back. Someone had apparently been cleaning out an office or apartment, a student, by their estimation, as the waste can had been filled with the detritus one associated with a high school student-- old stationery, miscellaneous
school supplies, and a few computer peripherals... including a one terabyte hard drive, carefully
wrapped in tissue paper and stored in a shoebox. Pleased with their discovery, the budding
technophiles had promptly plugged it in to one of the cobbled together hardware systems in the
laboratory.

To their delight the disk was packed chock-a-block with files. They sent a memo to the Princesses,
and subsequently to me, detailing their find and stating that while they had not yet decrypted most of
it, to judge by the few files publicly accessible the majority of its contents apparently consisted of
amateur artwork and writing. They thought it would provide great insight into human mainstream
culture, and were requesting attendance by Celestia and Luna and, as an afterthought, myself, if I
wished, for when they first opened the passworded and encrypted files the next morning.

At the time I had scanned the note idly and politely declined to attend, not thinking much about it. It
wasn't until the next day, while I was sitting at my desk writing some missive or other, that
something about it began gnawing at my conscience. I pulled out the memo and re-read it, frowning.
Something about it was amiss. What kind of student throws away a one-terabyte hard drive? And
why would they wrap it in tissue paper and box it first-- unless they were planning to retrieve it?

Why would a college or high school student have so many encrypted files? And what sort of files
could anyone fill up an entire one-terabyte hard... drive...

I scanned the letter again.

Allow me to note in passing, to our amusement the 'hard drive' also features a laminated sticker on
the side, a drawing of Princess Twilight Sparkle....

Sickening comprehension dawned. I lurched from my desk and raced for the door. I galumphed
down the castle corridor as fast as I could go, to the consternation of my bodyguards, who fell in
behind me, querying me as to what was wrong. I saved my breath for running, save to wave them all
back... of the lot only Jonquil, the flutterpony, ignored me and kept following.

I surprised myself; I actually managed to keep up something of a running pace for two or three
minutes before staggering back down to a limping walk. I realized too late that running was a wasted
effort; even had I managed to run all the way there, there was no way to prevent what was about to
happen. The best I could hope to do was compose myself, arrive in a calm and timely manner, and
try to contain the damage.

When I got there, I was outwardly calm and collected. Inwardly I was resigned to my doom.

It was as I predicted. The unicorn techs had, oh gods why, they had set up the projector screen so
that the entire wall was taken up with the contents of the computer monitor. And they had apparently
started with the archived "artwork". Everyone-- the workers, the scientists, the guards, the
Princesses, yes all of them, even Cadence--- were there. Ah, and of course, so were the rest of the
Mane Six, of COURSE they would be.

"And the clouds rolled back, and God said, 'I hate you, Arthur Arcturus," I intoned fatalistically.

They were all staring with indescribable expressions of shock, revulsion, bewilderment and horror at
the pictures (yes, pictures plural; they had managed to set it up in slideshow format, and in multiple
windows) glowing on the wall before them.... images of THEM; of Celestia, Luna, Twilight Sparkle,
Cadence, Shining Armor, the Mane Six, their friends, their neighbors, their family, their family pets,
doing absolutely disgusting things with absolutely disgusting things TO absolutely disgusting things
in violation of all known laws of nature and anatomy.
Jonquil said it best for all of us. "Oh MY GAWHDS!" she shrieked, fluttering next to my ear.

Twilight was in a rictus, frozen in a silent scream. Cadence was catatonic; Shining Armor looked like he was poleaxed. Luna's eyes were all but starting out of her head; she looked like she was about to have a relapse to Nightmare Moon at any moment. Dash and Applejack looked like they were going to mule-kick someone. Rarity was making these horrified little cries of violation and betrayal. Fluttershy couldn't make up her mind whether to press her hooves over her mouth or over her eyes. Pinkie Pie, I don't know how to classify her expression save to say she looked like she was finally experiencing the shocked state of surreality she normally induced in others.

Celestia, apparently jarred out of her stunned state by Jonquil's scream, turned her head to look at me. "Arcturus... what..." her eyes flicked to the images, then back to me, beseeching.

You unspeakable bastards. All of you. Why in God's name am I the one forced to explain your My Little Pony Porn to Princess Celestia?

I said nothing, I just walked over to where the incriminating computer stood. There was an earth pony assistant sitting at the keyboard. His pupils were pinpricks and his jaw was locked open. he was frozen in place, staring at the princesses over my shoulder with an expression of soul-withering terror. I could hear a high-pitched 'eeeeeeeee' coming from his throat. Poor bastard. I could read his mind; I'm surrounded by powerful, dangerous ponies, they've just been shown horrible pornographic pictures of themselves, and I'm the one running the projector. "Relax, colt," I muttered as I eased him off the stool. "Nobody blames you." I sat down at the desk and shut the projector off with a snap.

That seemed to snap the rest of them out of it. Groans of shock and revulsion went up as what they had just seen sank in. Shouts of outrage, horror, disgust, humiliation, tears of rage and shame, it covered the gambit. I saw one or two turn and barf into wastebaskets and open boxes. One poor mare stood in a corner with her face buried in her hooves sobbing like a distraught child and squalled "that doesn't go there, that DOESN'T GO THERE" over and over again.

As the lone human in the room, soon much of the tumult began centering on me.

Imagine that you discovered that you had a weird neighbor living next door, some odd little man who liked to peer through the knotholes in his fence at his neighbors. Perhaps you're disturbed at first, then you eventually dismiss him as odd, but mostly harmless.

Then one day you discover he has piles of pictures he's drawn of your baby sister. Naked. Fornicating with your family dog.

The only question after that would be just how many times you would reload the shotgun after you hunted him down.

To you bronies still in the human world, those clopfics and pics were just fantasy fap material. Over here, they're pictures of them, their families, their friends, their children, created in a horrible and frightening violation of their privacy and dignity.

And I, being the only human available, was left with the simply joyous task of trying to offer an explanation. I was now the center of a perfect storm of violated pony rage. Have you ever seen a really ANGRY horse bearing down on you? Imagine a roomful of them. Some of them wielding weapons.

"What the BUCK??" Dash screamed. "What the Buckity Flanking BUCK??"
"What in HAIL?" Applejack said succinctly. Her face was as red as one of her apples, she was huffing like a steam engine on a five mile uphill grade. "What son of a lame skunk and a desperate diamond dog made those pictures? I'm gonna plant a horseshoe up their plot so far they'll taste iron--"

"These are the humans that are watching us?" Fluttershy whimpered through her hooves.

Twilight shook her head. "Oh gods, oh gods, oh Maker--" she said miserably, turning in a circle, her wings flailing. "Why? Why? They had-- of ME-- doing--- and my FRIENDS-- and-- oh Maker was that last one me and SPIKE??--" She lost it at that point; her next act was a galloping run for the nearest trash can and a round of noisy retching.

Rarity was well past any fake swooning. She was positively shaking in fury. "I'll DESTROY them--!" she seethed, grinding her teeth in fury. "What sort of depraved animals live in your world, Arthur? How could your people befoul innocent ponies like this--"

Applejack rounded on me as well. "You all told us these 'brony' folk were halfway decent!" she said, accusing. "What the HAIL is all this, then? You folk ain't nuthin' but a bunch of greasy-hoofed perverts!"

The others quickly joined in. Angry, revolted, tearful accusations from every corner. I just sat there, my face in my hands, and let it roll over me. What else could I do?

"My little ponies, PLEASE!!" Celestia finally shouted, fanning her wings. The chamber fell mercifully silent. "Please, let Arthur be," she said. "He is hardly the author of this. Let him at least speak on his own behalf!"

Silence held for a few precious moments. I sighed, running my hand down my face. "So..." I finally said. "How long have you all been..." I waved a hand. "...Browsing?"

"Oh, no more than a minute or so, for the pictures," Celestia said, sighing. She waved a hoof. "We'd already spent some time reading through the text files." I noticed the piles of printouts. Curse the day I taught them how to use a printer. I leafed through a few; yet again, porn. Clopfics.

"All of them?" I blurted out. "They had a TERABYTE of Pony porn?"

"We couldn't believe it either," one of the scientists said dryly. "But no... We just noticed the first gigabyte or so of files had names like "celestia," or "luna" or "Elements of Harmony" and looked there first. The rest seems to be... varied."

"The first gigabyte?"

"There were a lot of files."

I sat down wearily. Celestia looked at me almost sympathetically. "Is this what you have been trying to hide from us all this time?" she asked.

It was quite true. This was a topic I'd been LONG avoiding. I'd not only been carefully censoring what I told them of human culture, carefully downplaying the more embarrassing parts--- or at least only referencing it in ambivalent terms--- I'd spent some time anxiously scanning the incoming materiel from the Window for stuff from the underbelly of human culture, especially from the nastier underside of the My Little Pony fandom. I had been lucky thus far, but today my luck had run out.

And no, it wasn't just prudery, though one would hardly have to be a prude to object to some of the content that floods the internet from "fans." Do you people realize that in some cultures making
vulgar pictures or stories about the national leader would be an act of war? I was having visions of the stellar sisters climbing through that Window with an army behind them and going on a brony-skewering spree. Luna, at least, looked ready to try it.

I got no sympathy from the pony researchers or guards, either; they shot looks of contempt of me all their own. And why not? To them I was just the representative of a species that had just desecrated their near-divine immortal rulers and their greatest national heroes—A lone monkey from a troupe that had just flung shit at their national emblem.

"Wouldn't you?" I said simply, holding out my hands, palms up, in defeat.

To my surprise she sighed, and nodded. "I cannot blame you for being—embarrassed by the baser behavior of your people," she said. "Do not be afraid, Arthur, I do not blame you. We're no sexless innocents ourselves; I'm not unfamiliar with what supposedly intelligent beings can sink to." She pursed her lips in distaste.

"Then why the shock?" I asked.

"Largely, the fact that this is so... Personal," she admitted. "Still, this is... incredibly extreme." She looked unsettled and embarrassed. "We are no strangers to erotica here in this world, Arcturus. Myself and my sister in times past have appeared in various artists' erotic works—"

"That whole... sun and moon, avatars of fertility thing," I ventured.

"Horny artists and collectors," Celestia corrected dryly, her eyelids at half mast. Luna muttered something about 'that damned cathedral fresco all over again' under her breath. "And despite our best efforts there are probably more than a few illicit magazines floating around in the dregs of Canterlot society with, shall we say, 'artistic renditions'—" she stopped. "But even then... there was some restraint."

"This... is a bit much," she finished weakly.

"You are too kind to them," Luna said, finally breaking her silence. She almost spat the words. "Never have I seen such. Not even in the decadence of Roam or the hedonists of Pegasopolis would stomach such! Such vile... filthy..." she choked. "are humans nothing but rutting, musk-oozing animals, that they tolerate and embrace such?"

"Luna, please!" Celestia said.

"No, I will not still my tongue! Well we should fear his people approaching us, as he himself forewarned, if such bestial appetites are commonplace among them!" Luna snapped, her wings flaring angrily. "And look at how they regard US!" Her wing fanned out, sending a stack of the clopfics fluttering to the floor. "They look on us with vulgar intent and lewdness—"

"She's right, Celestia," Twilight said weakly, hobbling back to the group, wiping her mouth with one wing. She looked at me; the look of violation in her eyes was heartbreaking. "Arthur, I saw portrayals of sodomy, tribadism, bestiality, rape, incest, pedofoalia—don't humans have any sexual morals or taboos? At all?" The other ponies around were muttering amongst themselves to that effect.

"Please, my little ponies," Celestia said, raising a wing for silence. "Don't be so swift to rush to judgment."

"Rush to judgement?" Luna barked. "Tia, there were tentacles—!"
"And household appliances," someone else added soberly. Perhaps with a touch of awe.

"We saw what we saw, your Highness," one of the researchers said, apologetically.

"As did I," Celestia nodded. "But use your common sense. Shouldn't the fact that Arthur is mortified by this, indicate that perhaps this is out of the ordinary?" Here she ventured a small smile. "I will admit some confusion on my part that such prolific salaciousness should come from the same world as someone as, ah, fastidiously modest as our Mr. Arcturus." I heard a few ponies chuff in curt amusement.

What can I say. I suppose it will never cease to amuse them that I wear pants. "Look," I pleaded. "Humans aren't a bunch of bonobo chimps. We do have morals and ethics and standards... even if we don't live up to them perfectly. Please, believe me... most bronies, most humans in general, are not like this."

Dash zipped over and got nose to nose with me. "You're still not off the hook, pal. I don't care how many of you humans are pervs or not, the point is that a bunch of pervy humans are writing nasty stories and drawing nasty pictures-- of US!"

"And what do you want ME to do about it??" I snapped, my exasperation deepening.

"I want some explanations for starters! Why the buck are they drawing me as a lesbian??"

"Dash, they drew us all as lesbians," Fluttershy meekly pointed out.

Dash brushed her off. "I didn't need to do a count to see how many rainbow manes there were," she said sullenly. "And I saw how many of those stories had "rainbow" in the title..."

"We are no fools, Arthur," Celestia said. Behind the serenity of her voice was the barely restrained scandalization of a noblewoman. "We all saw and read enough to notice certain trends. I saw quite a few that featured my sister and myself... with each other..."

"And with Nightmare Moon?" Luna said in disbelief. "And Chrysalis?" At this the two immortal sisters lost all composure; they shuddered violently and let a strangled "yyyyeerrrrrggggghh" escape their lips.

"Celestia and Chrysalis?" Pinkie Pie said, thoughtful. "Is that what they mean by 'buggery'?"

"PINKIE--!!" Twilight yelled.

"And why do they show me an' my brother--" Applejack went from red to green.

"And the way they portray me," Rarity sniffled. A sympathetic lab pony had fetched her a box of tissues, and she was busily dabbing at her nose and her ruined mascara. "I read one of those dreadful stories. They make me out to be this... this..."

"Town bicycle?" Pinkie Pie suggested. I jumped; somehow she had sidled up to me and was now clicking her way through the files on the still-active computer. "But they make us all out like that, Rarity..." she paused on one image, her expression as bewildered as a baby seal on its first encounter with a baseball bat. "Awww... not in my pooper again..."

"Will you stop LOOKING at that stuff?" I slapped her hooves away from the keyboard and smacked the power button on the computer. It spun down with a dismal whine and went dark. I was getting terse; this had been an emotional strain and I really was at the end of my tether. "you want the long and short of it?" I said. Dash stifled a snort. "Oh shut up, Dash... First, they do this because they
CAN. Smut junkies would stick it in a cactus full of fire ants if someone told them it was kinky. And for some people, nothing is more delightful than violating a moral code, or taking something innocent and corrupting it. But as to particulars?

"The lesbian thing? First off because most smut consumers are males, and the only thing males like looking at better than a sexually aroused female is TWO sexually aroused females. As the saying goes, the only thing better than ice cream is ice cream on top of ice cream." I noted drolly that several stallions around the room were nodding subtly in agreement. Not so different after all....

"Secondly... because the show, the My Little Pony show, Friendship is Magic, is all about the six of you. And none of you are shown with boyfriends, or even dating. So the drooling fanboys make do by matching you up with whoever is available."

"And Dash," I said. "I'm sorry, but... they pick on you especially because you're a tomboy."

"Yeah, so?"

"So they're sexist pigs. It's a disgusting retrograde stereotype that all girls who are athletic and rough and tumble and tomboyish are really lesbians."

"What !?" Dash sputtered. "That's---Is that why they showed me with Gilda...?"

"Remember when she visited Ponyville, and how she got in a feud with Pinkie Pie?" I reminded her. "There are some bronies who thought Gilda was acting like... well... a jealous girlfriend..."

"What? Aw, ewwwwww--"

"Is that why---" Twilight waved her hoof. "Me and Trixie?" She stammered.

"Old cliche', the 'rivals in love,' " I said wearily.

"That's just ridiculous. We barely even MET when she came to Ponyville! She--- never mind, it doesn't matter, does it."

I shook my head. "You had to have seen at least a few Lyra and Bon Bon pics in there. All that's required for an excuse is close proximity. Not even that really..." I reflected on the reams of Vinyl Scratch/Octavia art, and to my knowledge those two had never even met. Or appeared on the show on the same episode.

"And the ones of me and mah brother?" Applejack turned green again.

"Another nasty stereotype," I said bluntly. "A lot of conceited city-born bigots in my world like to spread the rumor that country folk are all inbred and commit incest." I thought a moment. "And bestiality," I added.

Applejack shoved her hat at Rarity. "Here, take this," she said.

"Why?" Rarity asked.

"'Cause I'm afraid I might puke in it--!"

Shining Armor spoke up for the first time. "None of that explains the ones of me," he said, humiliation and anger fuming in his voice. "Cadence and I are married! Quite publicly! We got a DVD through the portal: there was an entire two-episode season finale!"

"And the pervs would just say, 'Hey, good cover," I said. Shining seemed to swell with rage at that
one, Cadence frantically tried to calm him down. "They're nasty people, Shining," I went on. "After a certain point they don't need a reason. They're just seeing how many combinations they can come up with-- and competing to see how low and base they can go."

"Is that why... the tentacles...?" Fluttershy asked.

"That's an import from the orient. For some time cultural taboos allowed them to show anything but male-to-female penetration so artists resorted to using tentacles in their drawings because it combined simulated coitus with the fetish of bondage and I cannot believe I'm discussing human pornographic underculture with a roomful of PASTEL COLORED TALKING PONIES!!" I ended on a near shriek, pressing the heels of my palms against my eyes.

I took a moment to get a grip. Luna, surprisingly, filled the silence. "We are sorry, Arthur," she said somberly. "We know you aren't responsible for this... and we can see that it upsets you. We did not mean to put such pressure on you. But..." she gestured with a wing. "We have been--- besmirched. And we just want an explanation as to why."

I decided to go for the blunt trauma. I doubted I could give them any more profane a shock than they already had suffered, and at least this way the message would stick. I gave them a rueful grin. "You want an explanation for this? We have one. Among humans on the internet it's called the Greater Internet F@#%wad Theory," I said.

The ponies gaped in shock at my profanity. More than a few gasped. "I beg your pardon?" Celestia said, flushing and giving me a stern, maternal look of warning.

"Normal Person plus Anonymity plus an Audience equals a Total F@#$%wad," I said. "I've told you about the internet before. A great deal of good, combined with a great deal of bad. Well, one of the bads is that these foul people have access to it. And they think that the 'anonymity' of the internet protects them from any moral judgment.

"Why wouldn't they? They never see the other people they interact with. They're sitting at home, behind closed doors and shuttered windows, at a desk like this, in front of a screen and keyboard like this, posting messages and pictures to other computers hundreds or thousands of miles away. No matter how obvious the consequences are made, they feel safe and untouchable.

"And so these people, at least some of them, behave as if they were alone on a desert island-- with no self restraint whatsoever. Morals and ethics and taboos they would never dream of violating elsewhere get thrown right out the window. In fact some of them feel motivated to see just how far they can transgress, and encourage each other to push the envelope as far as they can as well. It turns into a race to the bottom, where everyone loses. And since excluding a jerk from the internet is about as easy as nailing jelly to the wall, they continue their shenanigans with virtual impunity.

"They no more represent the typical sexual mores of the human race than Snowflake in Ponyville represents the typical male pegasus."

"Then why do you tolerate them?" Twilight demanded, with an angry stamp of her hoof. "Why are THESE ones getting away with it?"

"Because we can't DO anything about them!" I said, letting my exasperation show. "Our culture is swirling down a toilet; what was unthinkable a decade ago occurs right out in the streets today. They draw smut and screech "freedom of speech!" They draw pedophile porn and squawk that it's "not photographic"-- no REAL children were used-- and so it somehow doesn't count--- they publicly violate society's crumbling mores, and claim immunity from consequence---"
I threw up my hands hopelessly. "Unfortunately the law currently agrees with them, so they get away with it." I paused meaningfully. **For now.** We have laws, STRICT laws, against child porn... and right now they're relying on a legal loophole to get away with it.

They're arrogant and stupid as they are vulgar, and they've forgotten that loopholes can close around your neck when you stick your head through them, and that all it takes is the decision of twelve people in a jury box to upset their little smutty apple cart.

"And as for the rest of it--- sad to say, because our society has let morality slide, the few of us who are outspoken enough to resent it are too cowardly to do anything about it. Because people might say mean things about them." I snorted in disgust. "No balls, no guts, and no brains among the lot of them."

"And try to remember, here; to them you're nothing but fictional characters. Fantasies. They feel no more guilty about drawing lewd pictures of you than you would about making disparaging remarks about characters in a filly's storybook. Though I guarantee that the little would-be libertines would shrivel up like a raisin in the sun if they were confronted with your presence in real life. They don't feel they're degrading anyone." I scowled. "Too bad they never seem to notice they're degrading themselves."

"And let me emphasize this: even as horrible as it is, people like this ARE an overall minority. This hard drive," I said, tapping the hard drive in the exposed inner workings of the desktop, "represents the written and drawn work of maybe, ball park figure, maybe a few thousand people, out of a world population of seven billion. Even in the community of bronies, they're still maybe one percent of the total. They're a tiny group of perverts acting out in a forum where they think they are both anonymous and invulnerable, because nobody has the moral spine, the balls or the guts to flog them from the public square." I leaned forward in my seat, resting my chin on my cane. "I make no excuse for this," I said, waving at the table. "But would you judge the health of a nation by the conditions in a leper colony?" That generated some thoughtful expressions.

"I'm sorry you all had to see this side of humanity," I said soberly. "And I'm really sorry that it happened in a way so... personally violating." Twilight winced; Luna ruffled her wings but remained still. "There are just some sides to humanity that even human beings struggle to control, and want to keep hidden and locked away, and we all have to deal with the damnfool ones that want to put it on display for the world instead."

"I still say these humans are a bunch of sex crazed monkeys," I heard someone mutter. "You wouldn't see anything like this in Equestria."

I turned around. It was one of the guards. Discipline must be slipping. "Oh, care to put your bits where your bridle is?" I snapped. "Let's put five bits on a talk with your Mom about what magazines she found under your mattress when you were a colt, fella." It was a shot in the dark, but it was a bullseye. The guard spluttered and turned red.

I snorted. "you still think this is normal? A terabyte of porn? Whoever owned this was a serious freak.

"Let's consider how this little treasure trove was found: password locked, encrypted up the wazoo, buried in a trash can, wrapped in tissue paper and stuffed in a shoe box-- along with the debris from a hastily-cleaned student's apartment." I saw a few lightbulbs go on. A few knowing smirks got passed around.

Chief amongst the illuminated was Twilight herself. "Oh, you mean this came out of some young adult human's room when he--"
"When he was trying to cover his tracks," I said. "Someone gave him an ultimatum or was about to bust him. And it looks like he was planning on rescuing it from the trash once the heat died down." My mouth twisted in a wry smirk. "The lesson to carry away is that, whatever this horndog hoarder may have boasted online about being more sexually liberated and mature than the rest of us, deep down he knows his little collection isn't publicly or morally acceptable. He hides in the dark-- and on the internet-- because he knows what would happen if he dragged it around in public.

"Summary: Anything you want to know about the role of porn in human society is illustrated by where you got this hard drive--- you dug it out of the trash. Q.E.D."

"Nevertheless," Luna said grimly. "Were these deviants to make an appearance in our world, they would find us far less tolerant and 'open-minded' about their chicanery. Should they arrive in our realm and attempt to make or distribute this wretched work, they will find our dungeons most accommodating."

"Agreed," Celestia said, frowning. "More than one visitor to our country has learned that we are not nearly so tolerant of such things. They will behave themselves, or they will answer for it."

"I would expect no less." I sighed. I had visions of some intrepid brony explorer arriving in Equestria with his iPad under his arm and getting one incredibly unpleasant surprise when the authorities browsed his 'art collection.' Very AMUSING visions. "Please, just... burn this crap and let us all be rid of it. And try to be more careful before you go flipping through data storage next time? This time it was porn, the next time it could be a computer virus." Interns hustled to break down the computer and remove the offending hard drive... and hopefully throw it in a blast furnace someplace.

Celestia approached me. "You do realize that rumors are going to get around," she noted sympathetically.

I nodded, my nerves still jangling from the stress of the situation. "Wouldn't be surprised if there weren't some already," I said in disgust. "It would stand to follow. 'They came from beyond the stars, lust-crazed monsters to conquer our world, to devour our corpses, and breed our mares.'" I intoned dramatically. "Horny Monkey Cannibal Men From SPACE!"

Jonquil sputtered with laughter in my ear. Even Celestia chuckled wryly. I looked over at the others with sympathy; they were all standing around, still shell-shocked from the onslaught of the internet's most common offal. "I wish I had something to help them forget this," I said.

"Excuse me sir, but should we dispose of these, too?"

I turned around; a unicorn intern in a lab coat was levitating a half-dozen loose CDs in front of me. I scanned over the handwritten labels; one in particular jumped out at me. B-R-A-I-N-B-L-E-A-C-H.

"Oh thank God," I muttered, grabbing it. "I hope this is what I think it is..." I found a nearby laptop, stuck in the CD and quickly browsed the contents. "Yes, thank you JESUS," I said.

"What is it?" Jonquil asked.

"Therapy for Internet trauma," I said, hooking the laptop up to the wall projector and powering it up. Apparently the owner had been an archivist rather than an aficionado, and needed to cleanse his own brain-palate from time to time. Or maybe needed it on general principles. The slideshow started up to the strains of "What a Wonderful World." Fluttershy was the first to notice.

"Oh look," she said, pointing at the wall. "Bunnies!"
"...And so we spent the next hour or so watching images of cute baby animals and cartoon pictures," I concluded. "And quite a few Brony drawings, too—clean ones this time. Archives of the cutest sugarbowl art the fandom had. The Baby Celestia and Little Woona ones were a big hit... Luna denies she ever looked like that, no matter what Celestia says--"

"Comment adorable," Violette giggled, looking over my shoulder as I flipped through the images on my smartphone. (Yes, I downloaded the whole set. I had more than a feeling that I'd need a mental balm like that more than once in a while.) She looked me in the eye and dimpled, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "Ah, so no rravishing sex beast from ze stars?" she teased. "Quelle déception..."

I glowered at her. "Anyway, it at least helped persuade the royal family and the main six that I wasn't just arguing in self-defense. And let them see that not all bronies were raging horndog perverts--- and even those that were, weren't like that ALL the time. It's hard to believe anybody that draws cute baby ponies is completely evil.

"Too bad it didn't stop the rumors leaking out. Some guard or intern or professor probably blabbed something over their beer, and the gossip grapevine got ahold of it in no time. Now the scurrilous rumors are that my race intends to invade, conquer, enslave, eat and hump the pony races." To my gratification she laughed aloud at the notion.

Someone cleared their throat behind me. I turned and saw two guards standing behind my chair. "Excuse us, Sir," one said. "But the Princesses request your presence. We're here to give you a carriage ride to the Cloudsdale Coliseum."

"Oh? Ah well, all good things must come to an end. Is something up?" I asked, setting aside my teacup and getting to my feet.

"It's the Elements, Sir," the other one said. "The Bearers and the Princesses are at the Coliseum testing the Element of Loyalty and the bearer—er, the Princess—of Loyalty.

"It seems that the Element has begun to manifest power."
A quick application of the cloud walking spell, a hop into a chariot, and we were making all due haste for Cloudsdale. The trip to Cloudsdale itself was fairly short; the cloud-based city was fairly close to Canterlot at this point in its slow perambulatory path around Equestria. At my request Violette was allowed to accompany us. It seemed a bit brusque to snarf sandwiches and tea, have a brief gab about smut, and then flee the scene, and I thought it might be a bit of a treat for her to see the nation's weather capital. It seemed to go over well; she couldn't stop staring at everything in wide eyed wonder.

And you thought YOU picked out a good first date. Hah.

We had little time for sightseeing, unfortunately, we were going straight as the pegasus flies for the Cloudiseum. Violette looked disappointed when we flew past the weather factory; I took the impulsive action of promising her a private tour of the facilities once my business with the Princesses was complete. Now where had that come from? I didn't care, I decided; her smile of delight at the promised outing lifted my spirits too much.

I had seen the Cloudiseum before; as we approached though I noticed something different about it. There seemed to be a new decorative feature; a permanent rainbow ring around the top perimeter. The glowing ring seemed to wobble and flicker in the light breeze.

Then we drew closer still and I saw that it wasn't a ring at all.

"Rainbow Dash?" I exclaimed.

It was. It had to be. I could see the silhouette of a pegasus mare in the glowing ribbon, flickering as she flew around the track too fast to see. She was literally outracing her own contrail. A half dozen more laps in the blink of an eye, and she switched to zigzagging back and forth over the Cloudiseum, doing razor-sharp turns at speeds that should have pulped her bones just from the G forces.

The Cloudiseum workers had rolled out the hoofball floor so the ponies watching her could have someplace to stand. And there were a few there: Celestia, Luna, Twilight, a few scholars from the University, and most definitely several of the Wonderbolts. I recognized Soarin and Spitfire, and braced myself internally. I'm sorry, but I just did not like them. It was a personal thing. All of them were standing together in the middle of the cloud field, staring up with slack jaws as the pegasus--pardon me, the alicorn--shot back and forth through the sky above them.

We landed in the field a short ways away, and gingerly dismounted. (Don't judge; neither Violette nor I had wings, and my last visit to Cloudsdale I'd nearly taken an unscheduled skydive through a weak spot in the vaporous pavement.) I amused myself for a moment by filming everypony with my smartphone as they stood there, their heads turning back and forth through the sky above them.

"Ah, Arthur, good of you to come so quickly," Celestia said, turning briefly away from the spectacle overhead to greet me. "I am sorry we couldn't be there to greet you when you were released from the hospital--"
I waved a hand. "Places to be, kingdoms to run," I said. "You can hardly be there for every employee who falls and bumps his bum." I looked up at the rainbow streak overhead; Dash had switched to doing spirals, corkscrews, barrel rolls, and dozens of other aerial maneuvers I had no name for, all at speeds I would have said were impossible, even with magic. "Besides it looks like you have your plate full at the moment... how fast is she going??"

"We don't know," Twilight said, obviously discomfited by the lack of information. "We tried using the wingpower meter--"

"And?"

"It broke."

I whistled. "Is this because she's an alicorn now, or--?"

"Not e'en at our fullest power, exerting ourselves to our greatest, could we do this," Luna said, not taking her eyes off Dash. "Tis the power of the Element of Loyalty."

"So it amplifies her natural abilities, then?" I asked.

"No," Celestia said. "There is more." She looked over at Twilight. "Twilight, would you--?"

"Of course," Twilight said. Her horn, and curiously enough her Element, flared. "DASH!" She shouted. "Bring it in for a landing! Princess Celestia wants to show Arthur something!"

There should have been no possible way for Dash to hear her, but hear her she obviously did. She pulled a backflip and raced for the stadium floor, pulling to a halt a literal inch above the cloud, then settling gently to her hooves. "Sure thing, Twi," she said. "Hey, Arthur! Good to see you up and around!"

"Good to be up and around," I replied. I looked her over. Like Twilight, she was ever so slightly lankier in limb than she had been before her ascendance, leaner and sharper. Her wings were slightly longer as well. Affixed around her neck was a golden torc, the Element of Loyalty. It had altered in form slightly and now suited her rather well, I thought. Nice to see that whatever controlled the shape of the elements was learning a bit of taste.

"Hey, I'm guessing you wanna show him the other cool stuff I can do now?" Dash said to Twilight. Twilight nodded. "Cool. Check this out, Arthur." The rainbow alicorn trotted off to one end of the field. A row of archery targets stood in the end zone. She turned and took a defensive stance in front of them.

A quartet of guards carrying crossbows marched out and took aim--- right at their new princess. I had an inkling as to what was about to happen, but my pulse quickened considerably all the same. You learn to respect what those archaic weapons can do to a body once you've seen them fired in anger (another story for another time, I think.) As one, they fired.

Rainbow Dash's horn flared, and so did the Element of Harmony. A transparent crimson shield leapt from the stone set in the torc and hung in the air in front of her, blocking the arrows easily. "Force fields," I said, mildly impressed.

"Exactly," Twilight said. "And the interesting thing is, they'll protect her, but they seem to get stronger the more targets she protects. Watch." Twilight's horn glowed briefly as she formed a dozen more targets out of the cloud floor behind Dash. Dash expanded her shield to cover them, and
actually seemed to brighten. Once again the soldiers fired, once again the shield held. "I'm sure there's a bell curve of course," Twilight said, "but it's interesting all the same."

Dash let her shield drop. "And it gets weirder," she called to us with a laugh. "Check this out. Hey fellas, you ready for another go?" She was addressing a group of five pegasi standing nearby. They responded with a cheerful affirmative.

"Some random ponies from the Cloudiseum staff," Twilight explained. "The first time we used guardponies; we got these volunteers for comparison." As we watched, Rainbow Dash flapped and lifted off; the group of pony groundskeepers (cloudkeepers?) followed, hovering around her. Rainbow Dash lit up her horn, activating her element yet again. A crimson glow spread over her... and over each of the ponies in her group. (Party? Team? Wing?)

"Alright boys, let's see if you can keep up with me this time!" Dash said, and tore off across the sky. To my astonishment, the quintet of ponies rocketed after her, matching her speed. The six of them began flying stunts in formation as if they had been born doing it.

I was no judge of pegasus, mind, but even I could tell this group was anything but professional fliers. A couple were scrawny as brooms, and one was fat as could be... but all of them were flying like they were born to be Wonderbolts. "She's...empowering them?" I said.

"Giving them a portion of her skill and power," Celestia said. We all ducked instinctively as the sextet swooped and did a hair-ruffling low pass overhead.

I noticed that Dash and her wingponies were flying at her typical air speeds... far faster than a typical pegasus could handle, admittedly, but also far less than what she had been doing when we arrived. "She seems to be dividing her power among them," I noted.

"Tis an odd mix of empowerments," Luna said. "We do not see the connection."


The others looked at me. I left them hanging for a second, just to tease. "Well?" Twilight finally said.

I chuckled. "So impatient..." Twilight stuck her tongue out at me. "Ah, how charming, your Highness. It's her Element. Loyalty. What is a loyal friend? Someone who's there in a flash when you need them. Someone who protects those they care about. Someone who gives you a little of their strength when you need it." I revealed in the expressions of dawning comprehension. I snapped my fingers. "Ah, and that's why she could hear you," I said, pointing at Twilight.

"Come again?" Twilight said.

"Her element is Loyalty. Yours is Magic, or more specifically the Magic of Friendship. Friendship is about communication; Loyalty is about knowing when someone needs you. I noticed your element ignite when you called her name..."

Twilight crossed her eyes trying to look up at her tiara. "I... hadn't really made the connection," she admitted, tapping the gem tentatively with a hoof.

"I suspect as the others ascend, their Elements will start to manifest thematically related powers," I said. "It's going to be very interesting."

"And it will mean we have more of a fighting chance against the Draconequi," Twilight noted. "...If it does happen. How can you be sure the others are going to ascend too?"
I raised an eyebrow. "Oh please. Like we all can't see where this is going."

Celestia and Luna chuckled. "Truth be told, I expect something of the sort myself, Twilight," Celestia said. Twilight looked shocked. "Oh, don't be so surprised, dear. You aren't the only extraordinary pony in Ponyville--"

"Q.E.D.," I said, pointing up at the cartwheeling Rainbow Dash.

"You were all chosen, and not by chance. As much as it seems like coincidence, the Elements were influencing you all to come together long ago. After the fact I was rather confused by why you all did not ascend simultaneously when you cast Starswirl's spell. You all had the traces of the power of ascension upon you, yet only you had transformed..."

"Like popcorn," I said. The others looked at me strangely. "Even when the skillet's the right temperature, you don't expect all the kernels to pop at the same time," I explained. "I... not the best metaphor, is it."

"No, no, it's... workable," Celestia said. "It would figure that their ascendance would be a bit... erratic."

*Or in other words CHAOTIC,* I thought. Another example of insufficient Chaos; the inability to reach or pass a tipping point. Was it the very presence of the Draconequi that was making their ascendance possible?

"Who dost thou suppose wilt be next to, ah, 'pop?'" Luna said.

"Don't say it that way, it sounds unwholesome," I pleaded mildly. "And I wouldn't care to make a wager on that one."

Luna suddenly smirked. "Which brings us to a tangent," she said. She looked at Celestia. Celestia looked back. She suddenly had a VERY innocent look on her face. "What?"

Luna nudged her with a hip. "*Pay up...*" she said.

The Matriarch of the Sun sighed, rolled her eyes, and magicked a bit coin over to me. "Eh?" I said, plucking it out of the air. "And this is for?-- oh." I realized the significance when I rolled it over in my hand and saw that it was copper, not gold, and there was a hole bored through it.

Some time ago Celestia, Luna and I had been quibbling over-- I forget what, some minor bit of legislation or taxation or something or other. Celestia had been adamant that the proposition would work, I was equally adamant that it would not, and stated what I believed would happen, Luna had just been irritated at our arguing. Celestia had proclaimed she wouldn't bet a plugged copper bit on my scenario coming to pass. In vexation Luna had pulled out a copper bit, magically drilled a hole through it, and slapped it down between us. "There!" she'd said. "Wager made! And I shall spot thee the plugged copper bit as well! Now stop arguing and pass the boysenberry sauce!"

To Luna's endless amusement, a month later I'd won that first plugged bit. From then on, it had become a thing between the three of us; whenever we came to loggerheads over something, grand or small, we'd wager a plugged copper bit on the outcome. Our way of agreeing to disagree, I suppose... or perhaps, more aptly, to accept the verdict when the facts came in. That copper bit got more than one poor law reversed.

For the record, at that point I had won five, Celestia three, Luna two (one from each of us.) What can I say, I had an unfair advantage: they had thousands of years of experience-- but so did I:
Luna contributed her own coin to the winnings, I took it graciously. "So Whinnyton has rebuilt already?" I said, jingling the coins in my palm.

"And its sister village, Nickerville, doth languish," Luna affirmed. The two towns thus named were close enough to Canterlot to have gotten caught up in the edges of the Discordian events. The damage had been considerable. "I am loth to guess how thou didst know the outcome of this wager THIS time, Arcturus."

"Easy," I said. "It's happened before on Earth, in my homeland."

To clarify, both towns had been half-leveled. Both towns had received royal aid-- but word had come back of ponies engaging in 'price gouging,' charging exorbitant prices for goods and services. Outraged, Luna had proposed punitive recrimination; Celestia had managed to talk her down to simply proclaiming price caps on goods and services till the crisis was past.

I had shocked and appalled them both by leaping into the middle of the discussion and pleading for them to do nothing.

Hence had come the wager; price caps would be instituted in Nickerville, but NOT in Whinnyton. If Whinnyton rebuilt, my policy would be standardized for all disasters in the future. If Nickerville, Celestia's proposal would stand for all of Equestria. My only surprise at the outcome was that my win had come so quickly.

Twilight had been informed of the wager and had been awaiting the outcome in curiosity as well. "So... what happened?" she asked.

I looked at Celestia. "Go on," Celestia said, waving a wing for me to proceed.

"Indeed," Luna said drolly. "Any pony that knows thee can see thou'lt burst at the seams if thou dost not."


"No matter how you cut it, Twilight, price caps never solve a crisis, they CAUSE a crisis. On Earth, a hurricane ripped through one of our cities. Prices for everything, naturally, went through the roof. Angry legislators passed regulations putting price caps on everything to stop all the 'gouging.'

"And businesses, workers, and companies with goods stayed away in droves. Why would they come? Think about what the legislators were asking of them; they were asking these workers and businesspeople to travel clear across the country, bringing their equipment and their supplies with them, to a place with no power, water, or infrastructure-- to make no more money than they would if they had stayed at home. Many would have had to operate at a net loss, just to do it. They were asking the businessmen who were already there to STAY there, in a dangerous, ill-supplied place, keeping their business open at their own risk and their own loss, without compensation. In short they were telling people that the only way they could help was by ruining themselves.

"So given the freedom of choice, since they couldn't raise their prices to compensate for their own danger or difficulty-- they stayed away. And instead of overpriced services and goods, the city had NO services or goods... and it took years, not months, to rebuild. Some parts probably aren't even rebuilt to this day.

"And to top it off, when the price cap didn't drive suppliers away, it still caused shortages."
Twilight is a smart little cookie. She caught on immediately. "ohh. Like Applejack's Cider shortages," she said. "Because she keeps the price so low, the first few ponies buy it all up."

"Whereas if she raised the price, the ponies would buy less individually... so there'd still be some left when the rush slacked off and prices could come down again," I concluded. "Just like in a disaster. Plus, as prices go up, folks looking to make a profit will come rushing in with wagonloads of goods to sell. Till eventually the supply outbalances the demand, and prices come down again. And it all happens FASTER when you don't try to block the market or cap the prices.

"You can't cheat supply and demand, regardless of the cause of the rise in demand or drop in supply. People get mad when prices go up in a crisis because they're self-centered. They can't imagine that the storekeep, the delivery company, or the farmer are going through a crisis too, or that they're sticking their neck out to bring their business to a disaster area."

"All said, it was an important question to resolve," Celestia said. "It will establish how we handle the coming Draconequus attacks and their aftermath. We cannot afford to hobble rebuilding efforts with such a fundamental mistake."

"It's always fundamental in hindsight," I admitted. "Unless you're a devoted policy wonk."

"Still, we are fortunate that thy people are wiser in such matters--" Luna said. Her ears twitched when I barked in laughter. "What is so humorous?"

"Wiser?" I chuckled. "Maybe you missed the part about how my government is doing precisely what I just described? At least in major cities with political cachet... other towns not in the public's line of sight have been left to hang, more's the irony... they're the ones that are already rebuilt. Some humans are sadder, but wiser; the noisy mainstream continues on in its blissful ignorance."

"Folly always pleaseth the ear more than words of wisdom," Luna nodded. "Because folly telleth thee what thou wishest to hear, not what thou needest..."

"Either way. We will send out a decree revoking the price caps," Celestia said. "And cautioning against establishing any in the future attacks. Ponies will be upset when prices rise-- but you can't have your cider and drink it too."

Rainbow Dash thumped to the clouds next to us, her ragtag flying wing fluttering down behind her as the eldritch glow around them faded. "Whoo, worked up a little sweat!" She said, licking her lips. "I thought I heard someone say cider?"

"Sorry, Dash, no cider," Twilight laughed. "We were just talking over some of the preparations for the next Draconequus."

"Whups. Looks like you're too late," a female voice behind us said.

Violette screamed. I whirled about, whipping my cane out like a saber. Standing behind us was a creature with a shocking resemblance to Discord. Violette was backing away from it in terror; I grabbed her and pulled her behind me, keeping my cane at the level. "Who are you?" I shouted.

Tumult rose all over the stadium. Guards scrambled for their weapons. I heard Celestia and Luna give cries of surprise-- though as for that Luna's was more of a battle cry. Rainbow Dash whizzed past me in a rainbow-hued blur, her face set in rage, her forehooves out and aimed straight for the Draconequi's face.

....and slowed to a snail-like crawl in midair.
I gaped in surprise. She hung there like a fly trapped in amber, face still glowering in fury, hooves extended for a blow that would never connect. I realized I could still see her contrail, frozen in the air as well; I could pick out individual little colored sparkles, slowly winking in and out of existence. She was still moving; I saw her blink in slow motion as she inched forward through the air, mane and tail streaming behind her.

It wasn't just her, I realized. I could see ponies running across the field in the background, frozen in mid stride. I turned my head to look back at the others— but when I moved my head things got disorienting; things suddenly warped and changed color, shifting wildly in distorted rainbow hues. Dizzily I faced forward again and took a step towards the draconequus. To my shock everything around warped as if looking through a fishbowl lens; the distance between us seemed to expand by a hundred yards. Dizzily I fell to my knees.

I made an effort to stay very very still; so long as I didn't move, things looked fairly normal, despite being temporally frozen. "Time dilation. Lorentz transformation," I croaked. "You did something to the speed of light."

"Oooh, you are a smart one," the draconequus said. I had actually learned it all from a free video game online, but I didn't feel like enlightening her. "Actually," she went on, "I was shooting for that whole 'slow time to a crawl' thing, but time and space and lightspeed and all that are so intertangled that it's tricky to fiddle with one without affecting the other. Relativity and all that. You know how it is."

She walked closer. The odd effects that distorted things all around didn't seem to affect her. I got a good look at her; she had all the same features as Discord had sported; same mismatch limbs, same serpentine body, same horn and antler, right down to the single fang. She did lack the goatee, though, and overall she was slightly smaller. She also had a slenderness and shape of form overall that said 'female.'

She walked up to me and bent down to look me in the eye. "Hi-eee," she said. "The name's Eris. I got a message for you."
"Eris," I said. "The greek goddess of strife and discord. Symbolized by a golden apple, upon which she carved the words 'to the fairest' and threw into a gathering of the gods... ultimately resulting in the Trojan War and the destruction of Troy."

The draconequus (draconeqesse?) curtseyed. "No relation," she said.

I did the best I could. "Have at thee," I said. I fumbled stiffly for my cane where I knelt with one hand and whipped it around, barely missing the end of the draconeqesse's nose. (draconeqesse, we'll go with that.) The tip sparked a bit, but apparently wonking up time and lightspeed did something to electricity as well, as the spark failed to leap the gap.

"Well, see if I try to be polite with you ever again," she smirked.

I dropped the cane to the Cloudiseum floor in impotent frustration. It bounced once then seemed to join the rest of the world in its semi-frozen temporal state, hanging in midair. "It's not been a month," I protested pointlessly.

"Imagine that. Chaos monster doing something unpredictable," she said drolly.

"Fine," I snapped. "What do you want then?"

"My face on the one dollar bill," she said, grinning. I scowled at her. "Oh fine," she pouted. "Jack Nicholson did it better anyway. Relax, cute stuff, this is not an attack. Well, kinda sorta technically it is, but it's actually me forfeiting a turn to drop an update."

"An update," I said.

She nodded and lounged backward on nothing, striking a coy pose. "Yes indeedy."

I waited. She said nothing. "....fine. An update of what?"

"I thought you'd never ask," she said, sitting up and clapping her hands. "No, seriously, you just sat there forever. Of the rules to this little game we Draconequi are playing. You see, sexy," she said, turning about to lie on her stomach, her chin on her folded hands, and batting her lashes at me, "they've changed."

"What?" I said. "You're changing the rules? In the middle of the game? Even Discord didn't do that!" I fumed. Preparations and planning, wasted. "Why?"

"Oh, that's the funny part," she said. "Because it's in the rules."

"....Come again?"

"Oh, let me clarify. There are rules and there are rules. The rules Discord told you about? The four rules?" She ticked them off on her claws.

"ONE:There will be exactly twelve competitors. No more, no less. But noone will tell you anything else about them."

"TWO: You will not attempt to adjust your power in the game. You will simply play."

"THREE: You will not attempt to alter the course of events in the game."

"FOUR: You will not attempt to influence the other players in any way.

"These rules apply to everyone, even you."

"ALL: You will not attempt to cheat in any way."

"END."

"Yes, indeedy."

"So where's your update?"

"You can probably guess."

"Well, let me guess."

"You're going to be the first one."
TWO: There are rules, and they remain the same for all the participants. But no one will tell you what they are.

THREE: They'll each take a turn. But you won't know when, or for how long.

FOUR: You, and all the little ponies, play an important part in the game. But they'll never tell you what it is.”

"Those still stand. But the rest of the stuff--- the rules that rule number two mentions? Those just went out the window."

"So the pattern---"

"The whole 'laws of physics go bonkers' theme? Gonearoo," she said, with a dismissive wave of her lion's paw.

I glowered at her as best I could in the constantly shifting light spectrum. "Again, why?"

"Oh, well, I'm not supposed to tell you this, 'cause it's against the rules, but--" she got nose to nose with me and grinned with manic glee-- "Chaos Monster! To heck with the rules!

"Basically, it's because you guys broke the fourth rule. Or maybe it's the zeroth rule? Or both?" She stroked her chin thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Eh. Basically, it goes like this: 'they're not allowed to know the rules. If they learn the rules, the rules have to change."

"You have a rule... that says you have to break the rules?" I was getting a little croggled from trying to follow this chain of thought.

"I know! Dountcha just love it?" She squealed and gave herself a hug.

"What."

She sat up and took on the air of someone preparing to deliver a lecture. "It's like this, hotbuns. We're chaos entities, riiiiight?" I nodded. "Which means we're not big on doing things in patterns other people can predict. In fact, it's sort of against union rules. Get it?" Again, I nodded. "So the minute you finite mortal guys figured out the pattern-- we HAD to change it. That fourth rule should probably say 'and you're not ALLOWED to know.' " She shrugged. "You spoiled the game, but them's the breaks."

"So that's what Mayhem meant when he screamed 'cheater'," I concluded.

"Yeah, Mayhem ain't wound too tight, even for a chaos critter," Eris said dismissively. "By the way, just so you know-- we had to throw in a new contestant because Mayhem disqualified himself."

"The atom bomb?"

"Bingo." She scowled; her eyes glowed red momentarily. "We don't like it when others try to break our stuff." She shrugged. "Of course, that's another part of the reason for the rule change. Turns out it's really really hard to tweak the laws of physics without making the immediate environment inhospitable to life." I felt a chill run down my spine. "Yeah, poke at the weak force in the wrong way and suddenly oxygen doesn't bind chemically anymore. Stuff like that. So..." she waved her paws. "New rule set. Not much point in fighting over a new world if it gets irreparably broken in the process."
"Your stuff," I repeated.

"Get used to it honey--- this world and everything on it is draconequus property already," Eris said. She floated in a circle around me. "It's all down to who gets to take the ball and go home with it. You're just part of the package."

I risked getting to my feet. The world swayed and changed color, but I managed it. "So why help us?"

"Well," she said, suddenly coy. "Maybe I just like you." She sidled up and fluttered her lashes at me. I gave her a look that would have curdled milk. "Seriously? You're really going to try that routine?"

She put on a pout. "What?"

"'Cute stuff. Sexy. Hot Buns.'" She tittered at me, but stifled it. I went on. "Save your efforts, you're not even the right species to interest me."

She was suddenly coy again. "So? That can be fixed." She snapped her fingers and suddenly there was a white haired human female-- a shapely, young, and quite under-dressed human female-- standing before me. "After all, I'm very comfortable with change." She slunk toward me, emphasizing every hip wiggle and pneumatic curve. "Draconequis appetites are quite.. flexible, you know." She tousled her white hair and smiled, a cute little fang poking out of the corner of her mouth. "We could... partner. Work together... instead of fighting each other...."

With, I admit, some effort, I looked her in the eye. Her smile never reached them; they were about as expressive as orbs of glass. Any arousal I might have felt went dead on the spot. My face was flaming red, but not for the reason you think. "Oh yes, oh yes, my fantasies are fulfilled," I deadpanned. "knock it off, already. I know when I'm being made fun of."

She threw her arms over my shoulders. "Aww, how do you know I'm making fun of you?"

"Because your performance is about as convincing as a longshoreman in drag," I said dully. "Your body language is all off. Your movements are stilted, your voice is flat, and your dialogue sounds like something written by a teenage game designer for a female sidekick in a first person shooter." I glanced down. "That and your tits are on backwards."

"What??" She jumped back and looked down, grabbing her boobs. "Wait, no they're not! They--"

"Made you look."

She shot a glare at me that could have melted lead. She snapped her fingers and returned to abnormal. "Aren't WE a clever monkey," she snipped. "Excuse me for taking a shot with that 'feminine wiles' stuff everyone keeps talking about..."

"Well you suck at it," I said. Really. She was cute in her natural form in a stuffed-toy sort of way, but she was about as sexually arousing as a lawn chair.

"Fine, fine," she said, sulking, waving a claw dismissively. "So maybe hominids and their hormones aren't exactly my 'thing,' " she said. "Can't fault a girl for trying, can you?"

"Yes," I said. " Yes I can. Get to the point. Why are you cluing us in?"

She crossed her arms and legs and sat in midair, huffing. "Because the vamp act was a joke but the offer to collaborate wasn't," she said. "Look, not all Draconequi are jerks like Gramps was-- or like
Ataxia or Mayhem. Some of us are fairly easy to get along with. I may be no prize winner but at least I won't try and conquer your world or spend all my time tormenting you. You could do worse."

"And I'm guessing that not all the Draconequi are as powerful as Ataxia or Mayhem in this little contest," I said. "I bet there are some lowballers. Like you."

"Like me?"

"Otherwise you wouldn't be trying to talk the puny mortal natives into tipping things in your favor."

Her mouth puckered. "You are too good at that whole 'pattern finding' thing for your own health," she said.

"It's a human thing," I replied.

Her shoulders slumped a little. Some genuine emotion. "You got it pegged, big boy," she said. "We're not all at the same power level. Some of the contestants are downright pathetic. Some of them, like Ataxia, are way more powerful than even Grampa Discord was... and before you ask, the only reason you 'banished' him is that you caught him by surprise. He's even grousing around demanding a mulligan. He might get it.

"Worse news for you; the heavy hitters tend to be raging jerks."

"No road manners when you're an eighteen wheeler, I assume?" I said.

She nodded. "We don't have much civilization out there; usually it's strong versus weak. The Game is pretty much most of it, and-- what a surprise-- the rules change." She gave me a stare. "You really shafted yourselves-- and most of us-- when you spoilered the rules."

"How so?"

"Because this time around, under the first set of rules, we all had an equal chance. The theme was altering the laws of physics, which meant even the lowballers had to be loaned enough juice to access them, and the high rollers had to restrain themselves to that 'one physical law only' thing. Now..."

"Now it's no holds barred," I said, with a sinking feeling.

She nodded. "Ding ding, give that man a see-gar," she sighed. I covered my face. I should have known there'd be a catch. I should have guessed, I should have known that the Draconequi would be irate when I spilled their game plans to all of Equestria--!

I started as a lion's paw patted me on the shoulder. "Hey, don't be too hard on yourself, sweet pea," Eris said sympathetically. "Chaos monsters, remember? Someone was liable to upend the chess board eventually." Her voice turned sardonic. "Though I did sort of hope it would take longer than two turns in..."


She pulled out of a lazy loop-de-loop and regarded me. "You said it yourself. Chaos does not automatically mean Evil. I mean, in my home universe the mortals don't like me, they think I'm a jerk-- but that's because I sort of do this whole 'empress of luck' thing. You know, good luck to meet me one day, bad luck the next?" She shrugged. "Depends on my mood. But I don't try to conquer their world, or ruin it."
"And maybe I'm just fond of you guys?" She tickled me under my chin. "You little mortal things are cute, in a sort of squishy-nosed-pug-doggy kind of way. I'm a jerk, but not enough to let someone else torture you while I watch."

It was believable, I suppose. Even if we were insects to her, nobody likes watching a small child pull the wings off of flies.

Her tone turned suddenly serious. "Look, there's some stuff here that'll help you. Not all the Draconequi in this game are evil. Not all of them are all that powerful either-- so that's a leg up. If you think you have a shot, take it. We're all still limited to One Big Thing, so that's in your favor. You're not going to get trampled by rampaging flamingoes while it's raining pies.

"And the big shots, which means most of the worst of us, think they have it in the bag. That means they're overconfident. If you're smart, if you're cunning, if you're brave, you can use that against them."

She backed away. I realized she had been almost nose to nose with me, her burning eyes boring into mine. Her words rang in my skull; I had the feeling I would remember those words, exactly as she said them, till the day I died. "So... what now?" I asked, trying to keep myself from passing out.

She smiled and shrugged. "I leave and things go back to normal," she said. "I blew my one shot delivering this message. Double points off for breaking the schedule, too." She shrugged again. "I never had much of a chance of winning the brass ring anyway, and with the whole game-reset being hit I didn't have a hope in heck....so I figured I might as well use it to give you guys a shot." My estimation of her basic decency went up a notch.

She smiled at me, surprisingly wistful. "Hey. You still got a couple weeks till the next contestant spins the wheel. Try not to think about it too much. Take your girlfriend out, finish that date you were on-- she'll love the weather factory, trust me. Live a little, monkey boy. Make what time you have count. Mortal or immortal, you never know how much time you got." She pulled a ringing brass alarm clock out from behind her back and with an overhand swat smashed it between her paws. Then she winked, blew me a kiss, and disappeared.

In a flash the world snapped back to normal. Rainbow Dash blew past me at mach one, the aftershock knocking me off my feet. Which was fortunate, I suspect, as multiple beams of magic lashed through the air where Eris and I had been standing. Dash pulled a hairpin turn at the end of the field and landed at my side, her hooves skidding on the cloudtop. "Omigosh, Arthur, are you okay??"

A moment later the others were crowding around me. "Arthur, are you all right?" Celestia said.

"Where did the miscreant go?" Luna stormed, casting about with her eyes for the Draconaquesse.

I waved my hand as Bright Dawn and Cloudwing (and an anxious Violette) helped me back to my feet. "She's gone," I said.

"She?" Twilight said, curious.

"Yes." I dusted myself off-- though as for that there was scarcely any dust up in the clouds to account for. "It seems we have at least one sympathizer among the Draconequi." I gave a quick summary of Eris' message.

There was more than enough in it to distress everyone, and quite a bit to make them ponder. "It could be a trick," Celestia ventured. "An attempt to throw us off-balance with disinformation..."
"Occam's Razor," I said. "It would be easier to throw us off balance with a full blown Discordian attack just now, than to expend all that effort on a double- fakeout."

"Still, she might have been attempting to deceive thee in some fashion," Luna insisted.

I snorted. "If she was then she's a better actor than any I've ever seen," I said. "Nobody's that good at being that bad at seduction."

"Excusez-moi? Qu'est-ce que c'était?" Violette said. She had a clouded, jealous look on her face. Jealousy? I thought in surprise? This soon?

She just had another woman jiggle her ta-tas in her date's face on their first day out, moron, my shoulder-imp told me. She could be on a date with a stuffed bear and be offended by that. "...Sorry," I said lamely. "She DID try to play Mata Hari with me at first... Turned herself into a human and tried to vamp me. Badly. " My expression, I hoped, told volumes.

"She didn't have the moves, huh," Dash said, amused.

"Like a man trying to kill a snake with a stick in a phonebooth," I told her dryly. The rainbow alicorn hooted. Violette's clouded expression cleared a little; still, I had the feeling I was going to have to unruffle a few feathers before the date was over.

"This is much to digest," Celestia said. "It means the contest-- and the threat-- is not as uniform as we expected."

"And that we may be more than a match for many of them," Luna said confidently.

"More importantly she gave us another bit of info between the lines," I said. "It seems we mere mortals have a skill that puts them off their game.... our knack for finding patterns. It spoils their fun, forces their hand. I think to some degree they have as much trouble fully understanding Order as we do fully understanding Chaos."

"A possible tactical advantage," Twilight said.

"Maybe."

I turned to Celestia and Luna and took a deep breath. "Highnesses, I feel we all need to step away from this for a while, a few hours at least, ruminate on what we've learned before we try to digest it further. With your permission?"

"Your advice, as usual, is commendable. Let us part ways for a few short hours," Luna said. "There are some few things that we must attend, anyway, ere we reconvene."

"Like sending a memo to Cosmic Constant that the researchers need to scrap their Discordian attack model," Twilight said glumly.

"And what do you intend to do in the meanwhile?" Celestia asked me.

"For now, to follow some good advice, and take a certain charming young filly on a walkabout in Cloudsdale," I said. I looked over at Violette. "Get a bite to eat, perhaps visit the Weather Factory?" She dimpled and nodded. Four legs or two, a blushing girl is adorable, I reflected.

Celestia chuckled. "Have fun you two," she said. She sighed regretfully. "We will all be returning to the task at hand soon enough."
Violette and I headed for our carriage. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Rainbow Dash shouted.

"Now there's a comprehensive list," I called back over my shoulder. "How many items you got on it- - three?"

"Hey!" I heard the others tease her about being zinged.

I ignored them. I had a young lady to attend, and I was going to show her a good time.
What then? What else-- I took my date to the Weather Factory.

The Weather Factory is quite an extraordinary place. Of course, I speak from the perspective of a human; I'm sure to most pegasi or even most ponies in general that it is interesting, but fairly banal. But allow me to assert, it is even more extraordinary than the limited glimpse we bronies were given on the show. That diminutive representation does it no justice.

I am sure most readers are familiar with the images online of the vast supercell storms that sweep across the midwestern plains. They are intimidating to look at, even confined to the size of a computer screen. One can only imagine how overwhelming it must be to stand out in the fields of some small town and see such a storm front rolling in.

Now imagine standing beneath such a storm, standing IN one, a vast brobnidagian boiling THING hanging in space overhead like a flying mountain of mist.... then the clouds part, and you peer up into its interior, seeing not just clouds and wind but a factory, a vast engine of nature, a thing of pipes and tubes and machinery and walkways of solidified cloud and snowflake glass, covered in antlike workers, churning and pumping and lit with a thousand industrial lights, all around the mists boiling with the slow brooding energy of a storm, streaked with sun dogs and brief rainbows, its inner crevices sporadically lit with flickering lightning and crooning with the low, gentle rumble of thunder.

If one could grasp that mental image, that feeling of personal diminutiveness as that vast and unearthly construction hovered on mere vapor over his world, he might grasp what the real Equestrian Weather Factory was like. (*)

It was a vast facility, and looked like a cross between a chemical plant the size of a city and a psychedelic fever dream. Enormous translucent pipes ran every which way carrying water, cloud vapor, and ice; huge complex prisms of magically inert ice like crosses between fresnel lenses and cathedral windows made of diamonds gathered sunlight and moonlight; leyden jars the size of houses crackled with stored lightning; and machines made of fog and air blended and infused these exotic ingredients with pure quintessence(1), transforming them into banks of clouds pregnant with rain, storehouses full of snow and ice, and titanic cloud-vats of liquid rainbow. And through it all serenely drifted cloud platforms, bearing workers and equipment hither and thither through the forest of pipes, vats, and cisterns, between shafts of sunlight and waterfalls of molten rainbow.

Violette and I were dwarfed, ants in an enormous engine of clouds. Even having seen it all before I was awed. Violette, for her part, was in a state of stunned wonder, huddling close to my side as she gazed about us, her mouth hanging open in amazement. We were floating through the factory on a cloud platform, one of the Weather Bureau staff giving us a guided tour of the facilities."...and here we have the main rainbow production facilities," the hard-hatted pegasus said as we drifted along. He was pointing to a pair of enormous rainbow falls. Each one was a torrent of mingled colors, like someone had tie-dyed the Niagara. They cascaded down into a stair-step series of pools, the division between the intermingled colors slowly becoming more distinct and clear with each one, till they became two perfect rainbow ribbons down below.

"Why are there two different streams?" I asked.
"Well, the one on the left is regular rainbows, made with quintessence and sunlight," our guide said. "The one on the right is a new production line-- for moon-bows, rainbows which will only come out at night. Since Princess Luna's return, they've been in really high demand. Took us a while to get the moonlight balance right." He sounded very pleased.

"As you can see there's a distinct difference in color warmth between the two." He was right; the "moon bow fall", while having the same general spectra, was made up of much 'cooler' looking hues. "And there's another difference," he added. "Here, let's pull over closer." He spun the wheel at the helm, bringing the cloud over till we were within arm's reach of the two cascades. The glowing colors showered down around us, illuminating our transport with secondary light.

The look of enchantment on Violette's face was delightful. Almost impulsively she stuck out her hoof towards the cascading colors-- then pulled her leg back, blushing. "Pardon," she said. "Pardon, je ne sais pas ce qui m'est venu."

"Oh no, go ahead," the guide urged. "You too, sir. In fact, taste them-- just a tiny dab, mind." He grinned. "The flavors are a bit... intense."

I damned well knew about what happened to Pinkie Pie when she tried to taste the rainbow. I cocked an eyebrow at him. He just smiled broadly and motioned for us to go ahead.

Now my curiosity was up. I dipped the tip of my pinky into the sun-rainbow fall and tasted carefully. Violette followed my lead, coloring the tip of her hoof.

Although I was prepared, the taste surprised me; it was definitely hot and spicy, reminiscent of sun-ripened peppers; chili, yellow, green, jalapeno, habanero, the exact kind eluded me. Violette wasn't so forewarned; she sputtered and spit it out, saying something in French that was surely impolite, even as her face lit up from within. It looked like someone had stuck a disco ball under her tongue.

The guide chuckled and gave her some suspiciously available bottled milk to rinse her mouth. I chuckled and availed myself of the milk as well; the burning heat of that tiny drop spread quickly and I had no desire to challenge my gastritis with it. Intrigued and emboldened, I took a larger dollop of the Moonbow-fall for a taste.

Now it was Violette's turn to laugh. I was prepared for spicy. I was not prepared for cool.

Not cool, cold.... It was like spearmint dipped in peppermint rolled in wintergreen and then infused with the pure essence of a mint ice cream headache. I gagged; the flavor was going clear up into my sinuses like someone had stuffed a tin of Altoids up each nostril. I stomped my feet and pounded on the rail with my fist while multicolored light shot out of my nose and mouth and Violette's bell-like laughter rang in my ears. Tears streaming, I informed her that her disdain for my suffering and mockery wounded me.

"FNernfh," I said. The heartless creature only laughed harder.

"Here you go, sir," the guide said-- and handed me a peanut butter covered spoon. I regarded him in confusion but was in no position to question. I stuffed the gluey dollop and rolled it around in my mouth. "By jove it works," I said with relief as the overpowering coolth disappeared. Well, after I'd swallowed it and chased it with some more milk. I made a mental note: remember that trick.

"Little trick I learned when I was on the rainbow mixing detail," he said. "Stuff splashes sometimes and you can get a bit in your mouth. Gets you into the habit of carrying milk and peanut butter in your lunch." His eye twinkled. "Funny how often the tourists seem to need it too..."
I made a noncommittal harrumph. "You know, I never asked this the last time I visited," I said. "But why do you make these? I mean, what technical purpose do they serve? I know that even here mundane rainbows occur whenever there's a rainfall."

The guide coughed, somewhere between amusement and embarrassment. "Well, the higher ups and PR ponies like to make a lot of foofaraw about tradition and 'beautification' and 'weather condition signaling' and the like," he said with the air of someone revealing an open secret, "But the truth of it is that this is all byproduct."

"Byproduct?"

"Yep," he nodded. "See, the rainbow juice is sort of a, well a leftover caused by the process of mixing quintessence, sunlight and water to make clouds," he said. "We had to do something with it, and there aren't that many ponies into hot sauce or overly strong breath mints. Fortunately we found that spraying it in a fine mist--"

"Like a really high rainbowfall off a cloud..." I provided.

"...or over an arched thaumatic lattice," he said, nodding. "Will let it evaporate quickly and disperse into the environment as quintessence and colored light."

"Making a virtue out of a necessity," I said. "Nice. Well. Where to next?"

"Wherever you please, Sir Arcturus."

I looked over at Violette. She was still giggling, her eyes twinkling merrily as she tried to stifle her laughter with her gaskin. I couldn't help smiling at the sight; gads, ponies were cute. She was cute.

"Oh," Violette said. "I haf always want to see où ils font la neige... where they make the snow?"

Our tour guide nodded and put the cloud platform back in motion.

We soon pulled into an enormous chamber... or would "hangar" be more appropriate?... a vaulted space large enough to hold all of Earth's zeppelin fleets combined. It was filled with huge billowing clouds, stacked in layers on either side, with walkways running back and forth between them.

"You're in luck," our guide said. "This place has little to do this time of year, but we've got orders for an early-season snowfall up near Vanhoover."

We dismounted and started trotting along the walkways between the zeppelin-sized snow clouds. The air was severely chilly here. Violette shivered and pressed in closer to me. "As you can see, these clouds are already frozen," the tour guide said. "Nothing more than clouds of frozen water droplets." He led us over to one of the tabled work stations spaced out along the walkway. He reached out over the rail and scooped a hoof-full of cloud and held it up under the station's magnifying lens for us to see. We both peered closely; under the crystal lens we could see the cloud was made of billions of tiny shapeless frozen droplets.

"This one hasn't been seeded yet," he said. "Let's see if we can't find one where they-- ah, here we go!" he pointed off in the distance and headed off at a light trot. I followed at a more leisurely pace. Despite her own bright-eyed fascination Violette kept her pace matched with mine and stayed by my side. It made me feel warm, that.

We caught up with him quickly enough. He was standing before another enormous grey cloud being tended and fussed over by a group of weather pegasi. "Ah, there you are. Here we go now... they've just brought a snowflake in from the artisan floor and are just about to drop it in." As we watched, a
cloud cart was pushed down the catwalk. It bore a single upright glass cylinder, capped at top and bottom with silver. It glowed faintly blue, and we could see a tiny blue-white something floating inside. Violette craned her neck trying to see.

"Hold up a sec, fellas." The cart stopped. "Come here, come take a look," our guide urged. Suddenly reverent, Violette crept forward, fascination radiating from every fiber of her being. She smiled and gave a tiny coo of delight. I stepped in behind her and looked over her shoulder. Suspended inside the cylinder, magnified by the curve of the glass, was a single, tiny, perfectly formed snowflake. It glowed with a ghostly blue-white light. "We could never make enough snowflakes by hoof for even a single snowstorm," our guide said quietly, as if afraid the breath of his words would melt and shatter the tiny thing before us. "But this single flake is infused with gallons of quintessance.. and just a drop of chaos magic."

Chaos magic?

One of the workers swooped down and picked up the cylinder in her hooves. She flew back up over the tethered cloud, hovering just above it. "Now comes the really cool part," the tour guide grinned. The mare unscrewed the cap of the cylinder and let the snowflake fall out, and down into the cloud. There was a crackling, like rice krispies in milk... no, a hissing, like rain on wet pavement ... No, I decided yet again as the sound grew and I could hear it more clearly; it was the sound of crystal chimes, millions and millions and millions of tiny crystal windchimes sounding at once. The cloud began to glitter, a sparkling blue-white that spread out from that single snow-droplet and suffused it from end to end. Slowly the cloud went from a dull gray to an almost silvery gray-white. One of the workers scooped a hoof full of cloud and held it under the inspection lens for everyone to see. I leaned in; under the cool light of the glass I could see the tiny frozen droplets had been replaced by millions of perfect, unique snowflakes, dancing together in a minuet.

Violette clapped her hooves together. I regarded the brobnidagian cloud hovering over us. It was still chiming faintly, just out of the range of hearing. "Hast thou entered into the treasure houses of the snow..?" I quoted to myself under my breath, pondering I know not what.

The foreman shouted something, and the workers untethered the cloud and began pushing it to the double doors at the end of the chamber. With a rumble of machinery... or perhaps a rumble of thunder... the vaporous doors opened. Sunlight spilled in, and suddenly a torrent of wind was roaring through the center of the room. Beyond the doors I could see a vortex of air stretching off into the sky. "Jet Stream!" the guide shouted over the whistle of rushing air. "Express route to Vanhoover-- only way to get there on schedule!" The workers pushed their newborn snow-cloud out into the open aisle. It was sucked up into the sideways cyclone like a dollop of whipped cream up a straw. In moments it was whisked up into the sky and over the horizon.

"Au revoir!" Violette cried, waving. She realized she was doing and stopped, blushing and giggling awkwardly.

"Never mind," the guide chuckled. "I feel like doing the same whenever the things leave home." The doors rumbled shut and the weather ponies went back to work. "Shall we head for the stormclouds next?"

The stormcloud department was, figuratively and literally, a hair raising visit. brooding, angry clouds
ruled all around us, and the air was so charged with static electricity that my hair and Violette's mane stood on end. The pegasi seemed immune to the effect somehow. Natural resistance, perhaps? That didn't stop our guide from affixing grounding strips to each of us and himself, nor of keeping us behind barricades of lightning rods as we passed through the work space.

"This is another example of an unwanted byproduct," the tour guide said. "On top of the static buildup from pumping quintessence and air and water all together, we pegasi seem to generate a massive static buildup in clouds with their magic just by mucking about with 'em." I recalled a certain derpy-eyed pegasus who'd kicked out lightning just by bouncing up and down on a powder-puff sized cloud. "It's usually harmless enough when colts and fillies play about on tiny clouds," the tour guide said, echoing my thoughts, "But over time it can be a big nuisance. Cloud houses used to have to have lightning veins-- that's V-E-I-N-S, by the way--- to continually bleed off the static buildup."

"So what changed?" I asked, jumping as a nearby cloud boomed its displeasure at being so overstuffed with lightning.

"We found out lightning was useful," the guide said. "Put it to work cooking food, lighting houses, powering our appliances... here in the factory we pass overcharged clouds through this department to bleed off the juice and pump it right back into weather production." He pointed over to where some workers suited in heavy rubber suits and wielding long metal poles were corralling a cloud over an array of leyden jars. Once positioned, the jars were raised into position and began "milking" lightning out of the cloud. The cloud slowed its churning and its rumbling diminished, like a contented cow.

"The reason you ground-pounders... no offense... see thunder or lightning at all is because sometimes we need a rush job on the rain and we don't get the clouds bled off completely. That, and we sometimes actually get requests for thunderstorms specifically. Something about the ozone clearing out the impurities in the air, the Princesses tell us."

The thunder rumbled again. I heard a feminine squeak and felt something press against my hip. I looked down. Violette was pressing against my side. I could feel her trembling. Gads I was a dunce. Talking pony or not she was still a pony, and ponies and thunder never mixed well... pegasi excepted. "Are you all right?" I said.

She laughed shakily. "Is no-sing, Artoor," she said. "I am just being silly."

"Scared of thunder?" I murmured, resting what I hoped was a comforting hand on her withers.

Distant lightning flashed in the warehouse, and she flinched. "Oui, since I was the filly," she admitted.

"We'll leave then," I said. "No sense in it..."

"Non, non," she said, shaking her head and smiling. "One must move outside ze com-fairt zone, no? À cœur vaillant rien d'impossible."(2)

"Nul n'est tenu à l'impossible."

"Nul n'est tenu à l'impossible."(3) I replied. "Come now, if you're not having a pleasant time, then there is no point in being here, is there?"

The thunder cracked and she jumped. She bit her lip, shaking like she had the ague. Her eyes were wide and staring. "P-Pouvons-nous laisser maintenant? Je n'ai vraiment pas aimé cet endroit---"

One of the rubber-suited workers tending the stormclouds tripped. The long lightning rod he was using to herd a cloud across to the leyden jars fell crossways and jammed between two clouds. This
was apparently a bad thing to do. Both clouds released a massive discharge, setting off a chain lightning bolt that flashed between a half-dozen clouds or more. The flash was blinding; we were submerged in a massive, deafening boom of thunder. Violette let out a scream and--

And well, she leapt. Into my arms.

For a wonder, I didn't drop her. For another wonder I actually managed to remain standing, holding her. Three cheers for a healthy diet and regular activity. She and I held that pose for a moment, her with all four hooves curled up, me holding her like Shaggy holding Scooby Doo and staring at her stupidly. There was an aftershock from the clouds; she let off a tiny shriek, threw her forehooves around my neck and buried her face under my chin.

Aw, heck.

I grunted and shifted her weight a bit. "Go fetch the cloud platform would you?" I said to our tour guide. "I think we've seen enough of the storm department." He blinked for a moment, then chuckled. He gave me a wink, darn him, and trotted off for the platform. I resisted the urge to boot his cutie mark as he went past, and settled for walking after him as best I could with a tonitrophobic girl--- filly--- shivering in my arms.

He made it back to us before I'd gone a dozen steps. Which was good, as the thirteenth would have ended with me falling flat on my fat backside. I sat down on the edge of the platform with Violette on my lap while our guide drove us out of the stormcloud warehouse. Poor Violette was a shaking wreck.

Our guide thought on his hooves and took us to the Weather Factory commissary. A cup of coffee (heavy on mocha and whipped cream-- Equestrians are unparalleled sugar junkies) was just the thing to soothe frayed nerves. She smiled wanly at me as she sipped the sweet caffeinated drink. "I am sorry, Ar-toor. I feel like the silly filly." "No no," I said seriously. "I... I know how it is with phobias. Um, le terreur des tonner." Hey, the tutoring sessions in Fancy with Applebloom were paying off. "When something scares you, it doesn't matter how little sense it makes. The fear is still there."

"Do you... have the...?" she waved a hoof, searching for the word. Her pretty eyes fixed on mine, demanding. "Phobias?" I thought about it. "A... few. Un ou deux." She looked surprised at the admission. I went on. "A fear of failure. A fear of shame. Of... damnation and hell... Rejet par mon Dieu."

She shook her head, scowling. "Je ne comprends pas. But these are... common. Little... Les craintes sensées communs. Not..."

"A phobia is defined as Une extrême peur irrationnelle." I said. "Extreme or irrational. My religion... ma foi... is one of Grace. Teaches that my soul is secure. And yet I fear. Irrational, no?" I smiled wryly. "I have so many flaws that I live in constant terror that I shall blunder and unforgivably shame myself. And even though I have had so many triumphs, I am convinced that I shall fail you all at some desperate moment... I am told those fears are irrational. But there they are."

Her hoof came across the commissary table and rested gently on mine, surprising me. Her smile was kind and her eyes were gentle. "Because you care," she said. "Because you are a good man. à mon avis."

I shook my head, smiling. "Personne n'est bonne autres que Dieu. But you weren't asking about any
soul searching things, were you. You meant more-- immediate fears." I thought about it, sobering immensely. "I do have one crippling phobia," I confessed. "L'asphyxie. Suffocation." I felt a shiver run down my spine when I recalled how I learned I had that phobia.

"Pourquoi?" She leaned forward, curious.

"I have... something of a snoring problem," I admitted with a weak chuckle. "A fairly bad one, I'm told. The doctors of my world tried to help me. They tried to fit me with a CPAP... a, um, mask that would help me breathe at night while I slept." I waved a hand around my face. "They wired me up with sensors and strapped the thing to my head.

"The moment it went on, I went into a panic attack.

"Heart rate through the roof. Struggling to breathe. I thought my heart would burst from the fear. The thing was blowing fresh air into my face, and it felt like I couldn't breathe. I tried twice to put the thing on... they told me my sleep breathing was so bad it could eventually kill me... but I couldn't.

"I can't describe the despair I felt. Such a simple treatment, something that would have immeasurably improved my life, and I couldn't use it. I decided it was better to shorten my life by years with my sleep apnea than to spend every night in terror-- assuming my heart didn't just burst from the stress." I gave her a weak grin. "I can't stand to have anything affixed to my face to this day."

I watched as she digested my confessions. "How long have you been afraid of thunder?" I asked.

She sighed. She seemed to accept my own admissions of weakness as an offer to unburden herself. "Since I was a tiny filly. One summair, I visit wi' my Grand-pere. I stay in his lodge, far from ze city. Hills and fields to run and play in... it was un merveilleux été." She smiled wistfully. "But then one night, when ma Grand-pere was away to town, a rogue storm fell on the little valley. The lightning, the thunder, zey nevair stop flashing and roaring... and the wind, it shakes the whole house like a foal with a rattle. Till the wind tear half ze roof away." Her eyes grew hazy. "All I see is the storm above, rain slashing like knives, the wind howling, and ze storm above boiling and raging like a monster big enough to swallow ze world.

"I hid under my bed, crying for ma Grand-pere, for ma mere, for anyone, till ze storm stop. Grand-pere find me undair ze bed, like a little drowned mouse--" she laughed a little sadly. "For a long time, I was afraid even of the clouds on a sunny day."

Considering what a careless pegasus could do with a kick to one, it struck me as more sensible a phobia than it seemed. I nodded. "I wish you had said something," I said. "I would never have let him take us into the storm warehouse if I'd known. Why didn't you?"

She smiled and nodded to her cutie mark. Ah yes. "It is who I am," she said. "I must face my fears, challenge myself, from time to time, or I am not myself." She smiled into her cup shyly. "And when I am wit you, I am feel... a little bit more brave than before."

My ears felt hot. I realized I was smiling. "At least we have something in common." I said. "Fears aren't so bad when you have someone to share them with." She said nothing, but I think she agreed.

The remainder of the tour was somewhat mellower. We got a quick glimpse of the weather planning boardroom, which was about as exciting as it sounds (as in, not at all), and a brief tour of the wind
manufacture and storage facility, where surplus gusts and torrents of wind were stored in enormous Wind Bags. The supervisor there didn't take it well when I congratulated the staff on finally finding a productive use for upper management.

Our final stop was at the Weather Factory gift shoppe. Yes, they had a gift shoppe. It took every ounce of my willpower to not simply buy one of everything there. It was a veritable wizard's workshop; the most mundane items for sale were things that human physicists would have sold their internal organs to possess. Trinkets made of crystallized rainbow. Bottled lightning. Cans of fog. Vials of sunshine and moonlight suspended in quintessence. Toys made of solidified cloud. Miniature bags of wind (good for three strong gusts or your money back.) Even the humble books and magazines ("So You Want to be a Weather Pony;" "Rainbow Recipes;" "Cloud Architecture and You") would have had earth scientists either in spasms of ecstasy or curled up in a corner, weeping and sobbing.

I splurged a bit on an impulse buy and bought a Junior Weather Pony Home Weather Experiment kit. It had a miniature set of weathermaking tools and "over 50 vials of common weathermaking ingredients-- includes its own quintessence gatherer! Thousands of experiments, hours of fun!" I didn't even know if I could even use the blessed thing, but I certainly intended to have fun trying.

While the clerk was wrapping my purchase up, I saw one other item that I just had to get. I looked over to make sure Violette was still browsing the tee-shirt collection ("Pegasi do it on Cloud Nine." Really, Cloudsdale? Really?) and silently indicated what I wanted to get to the clerk. She nodded and quickly packaged it up for me; I slipped it into my coat pocket.

It was evening when we finally left Cloudsdale. The guards were kind enough to take the chariot on a circuitous path so we could watch the sun set unimpeded. We sat in the chariot, leaning against each other as we watched. It was one of Celestia's better ones, rich with golds and purples, pinks and oranges.

We spiraled down to Canterlot, the palace and the city below us glittering in the night with a thousand streetlamps, and set down on the road in front of Violette's house. I escorted her to the door. Just before she stepped inside I cleared my throat and pulled her present from my pocket and held it out. "I know it's a bit early to be buying jewelry, but I saw this at the shop, and, ah... well." It was a pendant. A tiny diamond phial on a silver chain, etched in silver. The cut was reminiscent of the Light of Earendil, the phial that Galadriel had given Frodo in the Lord of the Rings movie, which is why it had caught my eye. Suspended inside was a single perfect snowflake. It spun slowly and glowed with a faint blue-violet light.

Violette gasped, her pupils growing enormous as she drank in the sight of it. The glow complimented her color perfectly, I noted, pleased. "I saw how enchanted you were with the snow room, and. Ahem. Well. A memento.." I realized my conversational skills were deteriorating to sentence fragments. I could not resist adding a quote..."May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out." I felt foolish the moment I said it, and shut up.

"Oh, it is lovely," she cooed. "Merci, Ar-toor." She bowed her head as I hung it around her neck. "Somesing pour vous." She reached into her saddlebag. Shyly she held out something to me, balanced on her nose.

It was a bracelet, woven of two thin braided rainbows. Literally. One the warm color of a sunbow, the other the cool of a rainbow made with the light of the moon. It was the strangest sensation; I could feel the weight and solidity of them, yet they looked intangible as air. It was like holding a looped streamer of light in my hand. "A little joke, non?" she said. "A memento, as you say." Visions of us both getting suckered into tasting pure rainbow juice danced in her eyes.
Chuckling, I slipped it onto my wrist. It slipped easily under my shirt cuff. "I'll treasure it," I said.

Before I could say any more she reared up on her hind legs, placed her forehooves on my chest and kissed me on the cheek. I stood there, surprised, with surely the stupidest look in history on my face. "Au revoir," she said, retreating inside. The door closed with a click, but not before I saw the blush and the smile on her face.

I stood there for a moment in the dark, savoring the moment, then turned and started walking back toward the waiting carriage, my cane under my arm and my hat at a jaunty angle. I didn't get more than halfway before l'esprit d'escalier jumped out of the bushes and slapped my stupid face. Facepalming, I hurried back to the doorway and knocked. No, not frantically. Just briskly. She opened the door almost instantly. "I'm sorry, I forgot to ask if you would like to go out again next Friday?"

---was what I meant to say. However I instead managed to fumble my own tongue and blurted out "Next Friday?" like a lout.

Of course I was drowned out by her simultaneous shout of "Oui, Oui, j'aimerais bien!"

We Eeped, erked, and mumbled for a few seconds, before finally managing to get out "Next Friday? At seven? A movie?"

And a "Oui, tres bien." This time she merely hopped up and gave me a peck right on the lips. "Bonne nuit, Ar-toor." She disappeared back inside.

The door closed. I retrieved my bowler hat from where it had rocketed off my head into the bushes, gathered my scattered wits, and marched, with a fresh confident smile, back to my waiting carriage. The two guards said nothing as they flew me back to the castle, but I could see them shooting me looks and knowing grins over their shoulders at me.

Pah. Discipline had gone to bloody Tartarus since Shining Armor left the capital.

I arrived, made my way through the castle, made my distracted greetings to the few officials and nobleponies I encountered, returned to my suite and went to bed--where I stared at the ceiling with mixed emotions and ambiguous thoughts. She was charming, shy, sweet, bold and yet vulnerable at the same time in a way that I found irresistibly attractive. And most amazing of all she seemed to actually like me.

And she's the wrong species, the thought returned. She's an alien race from another dimension. Or I was, which was the same difference. Somehow though that thought didn't erase the smile from my face.

This was going to be.... complicated. But complicated, I supposed, could be a good thing?

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*If that fails you try and remember the footage from the first Star Trek movie when the Enterprise does a fly-by of VGeer's ship. Yes. Like that.

1)Quite literally, 'the fifth element': hypothesized by the ancient alchemists and natural philosophers
of Earth-- more vaporous than air, more fluid than water, more substantial than earth and more aetherial than flame. Aka, the essence of what Equestrians called "magic."

2) "To a valiant heart nothing is impossible."

3) "No one is bound to do the impossible."

4) I waited till the next day and mailed an order in. You can do anything with sufficient bits.
I frequently find my own tendency towards sleeping in rather regrettable. I'm no spring chicken, and I'm not exactly capable of forbearing sleep for prolonged periods anymore and merely making it up with a short nap.... skimp on sleep one night, and I pay for it for days afterward. It's always felt like something of a cheat that much of my limited time in this life is wasted lying on my back sawing logs. You never know what it is you're missing.

Like the sun and the moon being in the sky at the same time.

I woke up in what felt like the late afternoon, to my disgruntlement. My alarm clock had failed to wake me. My duties such as they are to advise the Princesses required me to be awake at truly odd hours. And alas, due to my hours, the staff had been instructed to leave sleeping humans lie, so they had not woken me. Grumbling I rose from my bed, noting the odd twilit state of the sky outside my windows, and did my best to drown my oversleep headache in water and aspirin, hastily trying to recollect what meetings or appointments I might have missed. A quick shower, a jump into one of my suits and a hasty breakfast of fruit from my coffee table, and it would be time to face the day.

The irony is that as poorly as I do without sufficient sleep, I do even worse if I get even a little too much; I wake up tired, and spend the day with a headache that literally does not cease until I lie down to sleep again that night. And indeed, I had awoken with a dry throat and a thumping headache; common signs I experience when I have overslept a great deal. It must be God's own joke that I do not imbibe in alcohol, yet am cursed to wake up with my own little miniature hangover. Coffee and aspirin did little to alleviate the discomfort, but I indulged both to excess as I dragged myself about my suite. This was shaping up to be a red-letter day already.

It says something of the state of my mind that it took me nearly all that time to realize that the sun and moon were both shining through my living room windows.

To reiterate, the sun and the moon of Equus are manually controlled. They do not, I repeat do NOT, appear in the sky at the same time. If the sun and moon are in the sky simultaneously in Equestria, this denotes Very Bad Things. Things on the order of Nightmare Moon, or worse.

The severity of the situation was just dawning on me when my guards began hammering on my chamber door. I opened the door to find Bright Dawn and Moth standing outside. "Sir! Your presence is needed at once!"

"What the deuce is going on? Is it another attack?" I asked. "Have the Princesses told you anything?"

Both of them looked... I can't begin to describe the expression on their faces. "Th-that's the thing," Bright Dawn said. "They're missing."

I felt cold slide down my spine and spread down my entire back. "Missing," I said.

"Disappeared. No sign, no warning, nopony knows anything." Bright Dawn gulped.
It occurred to me then to ask my next question. "....Which princesses are missing?" We did, after all, have four of them at that point. Cadence was visiting, so five.

Moth's response was quiet and level and turned the ice water down my spine to frozen mercury. "All of them."

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I marched for the throne room, my guards all flanking me... Hat Trick, Bright Dawn, Cloud Wing, Jonquil, all of them. Apparently they had been absent due to aiding in the search for the missing. It had belatedly dawned on someone in charge that I myself might be at risk, and they had been sent in force to retrieve me. Jonquil was hovering by my head, giving me a quick breakdown of everything that had happened during my prolonged nap. "...The first sign anything wrong was this morning when the moon didn't set," she said. "Then reports came in of something happening to the Everfree. Princess Twilight and Princess Rainbow--" (yes, they had finally gone through with a coronation ceremony) "--flew out to investigate..."

"And let me guess, never returned," I said angrily. Oh, I was going to twist some pony's ear off about them letting two new princesses go out unescorted--!

"Don't get your dander up," Bright Dawn said, catching my expression. "They took a dozen guards with them each. None of them returned." That gave me pause indeed.

"One did," Jonquil corrected. "They sent him back to report. The Everfree was... spreading."

Moth nodded. "The guard who returned said some sort of strange black vines were growing out of the forest, taking over Ponyville. Strange unnatural clouds were spreading too... the Princesses went in to investigate, but never came out."

"Are the vines still spreading?" I asked.

"See for yourself," Moth said, pointing to a nearby window. I stepped over and looked out. Down far below, in the direction that Ponyville normally lay, I saw a mass of dark clouds blotting out the sky. Below was a mass of vegetation; enormous thorny vines that seemed to slowly spread even as I watched. The sight chilled my heart. I tore myself from the view and resumed heading for the throne room. "Who's in charge now?" I asked. "What are they doing?" I winced at the notion of Prince Blueblood at the helm.

"That's the thing," Hat Trick said. "The Princesses left explicit instructions that in the unlikely event of something happening to all of them, the Bearers of the Elements were to take command." I felt my eyebrows rise. It made sense, I supposed. The Bearers were powerful symbols in Equestrian culture; ponies would look to them for guidance in a crisis.

"But the Bearers have gone missing too."

That brought me up short. "What??"

"Whatever force abducted Celestia and Luna made off with Applejack, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie as well," Jonquil said. "They disappeared right from their quarters. The Apples haven't seen hide nor hair of Applejack since this morning. The Pie family says that they turned their backs for a moment and Pinkie was gone-- but they didn't think much of it till she'd been gone for over an hour..."
"Pinkie Pie being Pinkie Pie," Moth interjected. "They only suspected something was wrong when everything got quiet-- and stayed that way."

"And Fluttershy's guards say they heard her cry out, but when they broke into her room to investigate, she was gone," Jonquil finished as we approached the throne room's double doors.

I hit the double doors with my palms out. "Then who the devil is in charge right now?" I asked as the doors swung wide. I strode inside, and stopped dead in my tracks.

All around the throne room were the friends and family of the missing: the Apples, the Pies, the Cutie Mark Crusaders... even Angel Bunny was there. Seated on the throne was an alicorn I'd never seen before. She was a gleaming white, and wore a tiara studded with six very familiar looking gemstones. Spike was standing by her side, looking worried.

She got to her hooves and gave her elegantly coiffed purple mane a toss. "Oh, Arthur darling!" she said. "Thank heavens you're here at last. This is simply dreadful!"

I picked up my jaw and found my voice. "Rarity?"

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1) Though they have, to my aggravation, risen and set from the same horizon on occasion. The summer sun celebration nearly unhinged my sanity. I was a gibbering wreck by the time Celestia broke down and explained it to me.

The explanation didn't help at all.

2) The redoubtable rock farming clan had been moved into the castle fairly recently as well. They were a bit more phlegmatic about leaving their farm unattended than the Apples had been; nothing much could interfere with rocks.
"So," I said, for lack of anything better. "...Wings."

"Yes, lovely aren't they?" Rarity said with wry amusement. She stepped down off the dais, fanning them. She approached me and her reserved demeanor crumbled. "Oh Arthur, this is dreadful! I don't know how we are to cope!" No melodrama, just sincere dismay on her part. She stepped up to me and leaned against me for comfort.

I could understand her distress, obviously, but I needed answers. "How--?" I said, waving my hand to indicate her transformed self.

"Twilight," Spike said, fidgeting uncomfortably where he stood. "I was just explaining. She had some contingency plans, in case any of the girls got-- taken out of commission by the draconequi."

He twiddled his thumbs, not looking at anyone in the room. "She cast a bunch of spells on the Elements. If any of the Bearers got trapped or imprisoned or--" he gulped. "Th-then the Elements would teleport to the next nearest bearer." He pointed to Rarity's tiara. "And, well... not an hour ago the tiara appeared on Rarity's head-- with all the elements on it."

"And... this?" I waved at Rarity's flaring wings.

Spike hunched a little lower. "That was another contingency," he said. "She... she found a way to make the Elements cast Starswirl the Bearded's last spell by themselves. She told me that if any of the bearers who wasn't an alicorn found themselves with all six Elements, they would activate and cast it-- in the hopes it would make the last bearer ascend. It was a last ditch thing, so that there would be... so there would be at least one alicorn to face the Draconequi."

Rarity said nothing. I found myself speechless. After all this time Twilight Sparkle was still highly uncertain about the exact purpose of the spell itself, or whether her ascension had been a deliberate purpose or merely a side effect. It had been a terrible risk... but a calculated one.

Rarity looked like she might weep at the words. "I'm sure they're okay," Spike hastened to add. "Really."

"How?" Shining Armor demanded bleakly. I recalled that his wife was among the ones missing.

"Twilight told me that if the bearer... if the bearer wasn't alive, the Elements wouldn't look like their cutie marks anymore," Spike explained. He pointed to the tiara. "And they still do." He was correct. The gems in the tiara still bore the form of their Bearer's flank mark. Some of the tension left the room.

"Then they're still alive someplace," The captain of the Guard said. He looked to Rarity. "What are your orders, your Highness?"

Rarity nearly jumped out of her skin. "Me?"

"I think we're missing a coronation ceremony, but the fait is rather accompli at this point," Shining
said wryly. "Besides which, our orders were that the Bearers were to take charge if the Princesses were unavailable. Either way, that's you... Your Highness."

Rarity looked stunned. "I... suppose that's true," she murmured faintly. She rallied herself. "Send out the troops, evacuate Ponyville and the other towns immediately around the Everfree. Bring the ponies there to Canterlot.... we're high enough up the mountain that it will take time for those, those vines to get here."

She looked out the window to where the Everfree was slowly spreading its malevolent vines to engulf the countryside. "I swear that wretched forest is part and parcel of every headache and heartache we've had for the past-- I don't know how long," Rarity muttered. "If I had my way it'd be plowed under for farmland." She suddenly brightened as the obvious dawned on her. "Hm. Come to think of it I am acting regent..."


"What about the sun and the moon, Rarity?" Sweetie Belle piped up.

Rarity blinked. "A good point, Sweetie dear," she said, fretting. "Oh I don't know, I'm a seamstress, Twilight would know what to-- of course, what would Twilight do? Ah! I know!" She turned to the Captain of the Guard. "Contact the Professors at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, tell them that we need them to dig up anything they know about how the unicorns back in Princess Platinum's day moved the sun and moon. And have them start rounding up every high-powered unicorn in their school, even the students." She smiled a little shakily. "I get the feeling that I may need a helping hoof or two if I actually have to handle a sunset."

"And the Princesses?" the captain of the Guard said, turning on his radio.

"Continue the search, of course!" Rarity said. "Any clues, have them phoned to me immediately, you have my number on speed dial." She held up her own glittering cell phone. She looked around at the distressed Apples, Pies, and Sparkles. "Keep guards on the families of the Bearers," she added. "Tell them not to let anypony out of their sight. As far as we can tell, Celestia and Luna were abducted right out of the castle and we don't want our unknown enemy to gain any more hostages. In fact, it would be best if they all stayed together here in the throne room. Celestia once told me it was actually the most heavily protected room in the castle..."

"You're speaking as if you won't be here," Shining noted carefully.

"Because I won't," Rarity said flatly. "Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash disappeared into the Everfree. I am going to Ponyville to oversee the search for them."

"Your Highness I must protest," the Captain of the Guard said. "You're placing yourself in danger."

"That doesn't matter!" Rarity said sharply, pacing back and forth on the red carpet. "We need the Bearers, and we need Twilight especially. She's Celestia's student; she's the only one of us who can solve this mystery for us. And I won't sit here in safety while my friends are in danger--"

As she was speaking, something dark, viney and thorned lashed out from the shadows underneath Celestia's throne. It whipped straight for Rarity, wrapping around her back leg and hoisting her into the air. She shrieked in alarm as the room exploded into panic.

The vine had whipped past me, causing me to stumble backwards and fall on my rump. I jabbed ineffectually at the thing with my cane; blast, I'd picked up one of the ordinary ones from the umbrella holder instead of the weaponized ones. Every stallion in the room rushed forward, hacking,
slashing and zapping at the thorny cable. Blades barely scarred the thing; Big Macintosh and the Pie patriarch were in there as well, trampling the vine and trying to crush it, but to little more effect.

I saw Shining armor jab at it, a spell crackling at the tip of his horn. The vine brushed against his leg; the moment he touched the woody stem the spell fizzled and went out. Other unicorns in the room were having similar troubles; any of them who so much as brushed against the coiling vine had their magic short out or go awry.

"Everypony look out!" a squealy voice shouted. A spell crackled from across the room, slashing back and forth across the vine like a ginsu blade. The black vine fell to the floor in a dozen pieces. The severed end loosed its grip on Rarity's hoof; she fluttered awkwardly to the floor, landing in a heap. Snips came galloping up to Rarity, the tip of his horn still sparking. "Are you all right, Miss Rarity?" he said anxiously.

"Yes, I'm quite fine, Snips dear," she said, a bit breathlessly. "Well done."

Snips grinned and blushed at the praise. "Heh, the old snip-spell, works every time," he said.

Across the room, Spike was scorching the severed stump with his fire breath; the smoldering, foot thick vine was beating a hasty retreat, disappearing back under the thrones. The guards shoved the enormous chairs aside, revealing a cavernous hole torn through the stone floor beneath. One more than large enough to drag, say, a full grown alicorn down. Shining Armor swore. "Well that explains how they got the Princesses," he said angrily.

The Captain of the Guard's radio beeped. He answered it. "Flash Sentry here," he said. "Let me guess.. you found tunnels burrowed up through the castle into the Princess' quarters," he said flatly. The radio squawked something. "Yeah, I thought so. Keep me posted." He hung up. "Looks like your guess is confirmed, Sir," he said to Shining Armor.

"Tunnels through the walls and floors."

"And nobody noticed?" I said in surprise.

"The walls and floors in the older parts of the castle are meters thick, and extend down right into the mountain," Shining Armor said. "Part of the reason this throne room was considered so secure, ironically. Can we get back down those tunnels?"

Captain Flash Sentry shook his head. "They said that they're blocked. The vines packed them full of rubble as they retreated."

She turned to the guard. "Move our families up into the towers-- in the newer sections of the castle. That should at least hinder those vines from sneaking up on any more of us. And tell the pegasii to bring the chariot," she added. "I need to fly to Ponyville, now. And send message ahead; tell the guards to be on the lookout for a zebra by the name of Zecora. I'm going to need her help." She took a deep breath. "I'm going into the Everfree."

"I must protest," Flash Sentry said. "The vines are clearly after you, your highness..."

"Well then this makes getting to Ponyville all the more urgent," Rarity said. "It's quite obvious that the Princesses and the others have been taken to where these wretched vines come from, and unless we are reunited we stand no chance of defeating them."

Flash Sentry and Shining Armor looked at one another and stood at attention. "Then we are going as well," Shining Armor said. "Of course you weren't planning on going without proper armed accompaniment, were you, your Highness?"
"Definitely," Flash Sentry said. "Princess Twilight-- er, and the others-- are in danger," he said. "It's my-- our-- duty." he coughed.

Rarity hesitated, but relented. "As you say," she said.

I decided to speak up. "Eh, I knew I should have worn my hiking boots," I said. "...I knew I should have bought some hiking boots. I knew I should have taken up hiking... Jonquil, do be a dear and fetch my sword cane from my chambers? I suspect this little jaunt will involve a great deal of slashing through undergrowth, that sort of thing." The flutterpony nodded and sped off.

"Seriously?" Rarity said.

"As a heart attack," I said. "Don't mistake this for bravery. This mess just screams 'Draconequus' and I don't want to divide up the party."

"Quite," Rarity agreed reluctantly. "As you said, he last two draconequi have taken something of an interest in you personally, haven't they? Being divided up did us no good at all against Discord."

Spike came running over. "And you're certainly not going without me!" he snorted a stream of smoke for emphasis.

"Spike, this is going to be dangerous--" Rarity said.

"And you think saying that is going to make me want to protect you less?" Spike said, cocking an eyebrow. "Hello? Breathes fire, covered in rock-hard scales, can wade in molten lava? I think I can hold my own."

Macintosh stepped forward. "I'm comin'."

Rarity started to protest. "Macintosh, I couldn't allow--"

"Wasn't a request, Yer Highness," Mac said calmly.

Snips gave a grunt and shuffled forward. "Well, since everyone's volunteerin'..." he said.

"No Snips, absolutely not!" Rarity said. "You're a colt!"

"Hey, Miss Rarity," Snips grinned. "I'm old enough to hold a job, I'm old enough to call myself a stallion. Ya din't want me around, ya shouldn'ta hired me. Anyway, sometimes a stallion's gotta do what a stallion's gotta do, right?" Big Mac chuckled and gave the pudgy unicorn colt a brohoof.

"He certainly came in handy a minute ago," Shining Armor admitted.

Rarity stamped her hoof in vexation, but I could tell underneath the bluster she was pleased. "When did Ponyville and Canterlot get filled with would-be White Knight stallions?" she said in exasperation.

"Always was," Big Macintosh said with a slow smile. "You an' the gals just never looked up and noticed." That certainly left the fashionista at a loss for words.

"You ponies..." she said. She smiled and sniffled a bit-- then froze, her eyes glowing white.
She was on a plain, a vast, faintly undulating plain of white, covered with rolling mist. Above the stars rolled past in the night sky... only she looked again, they were not stars. The moon and stars had been replaced with swirling patterns of light, sparkling streamers and clusters that spun off into infinity in almost-patterns of mind boggling complexity.

"Well, that didn't take you long," an echoing voice said behind her. She spun around. Floating in the mists behind her was something she had already grown weary of seeing; an alien creature, cobbled together from a mismatch selection of parts. Though as for that... she... couldn't quite put her hoof on what parts were what. Every time she focused her eyes, its limbs, wings, tail or tails, head or heads, seemed to shift about and change place. The only thing that seemed to be holding still was a tin cup the creature was shaking in one paw/claw/tentacle. She could hear a couple of bits rattling inside.

"Our next contestant, I presume," Rarity said dryly.

"Indeed." It bowed... at least Rarity thought it bowed... and smirked at her. "Anarchy, at your disservice."

"Well?" Rarity said, eyeing him with an arched eyebrow. She kept her expression cool, though her heart was racing like a rabbit's. "You've obviously come to gloat, or brag, or whatever you ruffian creatures call this little preamble. You may as well get on with it."

Anarchy tsked. "So brusque," he said. "One would think you were better versed at catching flies with honey than with vinegar. It is after all how you got everything you have." He chortled.

"I've often reflected that saying only makes a point if one is interested in catching flies," Rarity said scornfully. She sniffed. "Get on with it. I presume the vines and the thorned clouds are your work..."

"Actually no." The creature lounged back on a bed of mist. "It's actually an old leftover project of my predecessor here. Discord always was sloppy with cleaning up after himself. I stuck my nose into your universe, found his little booby trap waiting, and decided to save myself a lot of work and effort." He made an undulation Rarity took for a shrug. "What can I say? Waste not, want not."

"So you intend to win the prize not with your own work, but with somepony else's," Rarity said.

Anarchy rolled several eyes. "You're a fine one to talk, Oh princess of generosity... who is generous with praise and affection to get what she desires."

The remark stung. "I have gained my place with hard work and wit, nothing else."

Anarchy snorted. "Please. Just look at what happened here. You give a brave little speech, throw out some flattery, bat your dewy eyelashes--" a half dozen eyes batted at her--"and stallions fall all over themselves to give you what you want. You're a greedy little manipulator."

Rarity gaped at him. "You cad! Take that back!"

"Oh? Care for a memory refresher?" The draconequus held out two misshapen hands, as if he were framing the scene between his forefingers an thumb, and spread the fingers apart. A glowing portal appeared. Images of the past flickered across it. Rarity showering a newly-arrived Twilight with affection and camaraderie once she found out the unicorn was from Canterlot. Rarity shmoozing for the tickets to the Grand Galloping Gala. Rarity trying to flatter treasure out from under the red dragon. Rarity using Spike as a go-fer, a fan waver, a pincushion. Rarity wheeling two stallions into towing a carriage clear to Canterlot and back. Rarity using big, baby-doe eyes on Spike, getting a Fire Ruby from him. Rarity using flattery to get a gawkish stallion to part with some asparagus
"Seriously. Asparagus?" Anarchy said drily. "There anything so trivial you won't pull that stunt for?"

Rarity's face was burning with shame. "Fine, you've made your point, you interdimensional hooligan," she said. "I fail to see how that is relative to the situation at hoof."

"Oh, Rarity Rarity Rarity," Anarchy said, swirling about her in a tangle of limbs. "You have to ask?"

"Here you are, even now, at your most heroic... using your 'feminine wiles' to drag along others to do all the rough and dirty work while you stand back and look majestic. But it's not going to be that easy, this time.

"Think of all you've just been given lately, for no particular good reason. You're living in a palace. You're among the elite-- you're above the elite, rubbing shoulders with the princesses themselves. You've even been made a princess now. All by a rather distasteful mix of shmoozing, pandering and sheer dumb luck. Power, prestige, wealth, even immortal youth...

"And oh, that's the clincher, that one is. Everything else before you got with your looks, your pretty face, your carefully sculpted mane and your perky little flank. And you knew it wouldn't last. That's why you're barely in your twenties and already spending half your time at the salon, frantically trying to moisturize away imaginary wrinkles and hide illusory grey hairs. Suddenly, a miracle! You're a princess now-- an immortal princess. Perpetually young and beautiful...

"But this time you're off on an adventure you can't toss your hair, mince, and wiggle your rump at. You can't wheedle or whine your way out of this one, Princess Rarity. It's easy to be 'generous' when you're dipping out of a bottomless well. But this time, Generosity is going to cost you.

"I'll even be nice and tell you right where to go." The image rippled, scrolling over a forest running amuck, to a very familiar castle ruin. "Your friends are being held prisoner in the Everfree, in the cavern of the Tree of Harmony. Right underneath the Castle of the Two Sisters, how convenient!

"And yes, you can save your friends... but it's going to cost you, Rarity, you and nopony else. It's going to cost everything you have gained till now. And more." He shook his tin cup, the coins rattling like a snake's tail.

"Everything."

The draconequus turned into a swirling cloud of smoke, surrounding her, mocking, laughing...

...The next moment her eyes cleared. She staggered; those nearest moved to steady her. "I'm alright, I'm alright," she muttered.

"What was that?" I said.

Rarity shook her head, clearing it. "Our enemy just delivered his ultimatum. Our friends are in the Everfree all right... in the cavern of the Tree of Harmony." She looked grim.
"It's obviously a trap," Shining Armor said.

"And it's also the truth," Rarity said. "Are the chariots ready?" she said. She got an answer to the affirmative. "Then let's go. We still need Zecora as a guide to get through the forest itself... it's changed radically, that much I was shown. Arm yourselves, we're headed for Ponyville." She marched for the door, the rest of us falling in behind.

Jonquil arrived and dropped my sword-cane into my hand. I gripped it and regarded Rarity. The draconequus had spoken to her, and only her, and something it had said had obviously rattled her. This was not the time to inquire, though. I had to just trust that she would reveal everything in due time.

1)Yes, the concept did indeed catch on quickly. Though I suspect the internal mechanisms the Equestrians used in the devices would leave an electronics engineer lamenting his life choices in a bar.

2)Only Rarity would bedazzle a cell phone with real diamonds. Well, her and your average hip hop "musician"-- but I doubt she would have appreciated the comparison.
We arrived in Ponyville. Things were already quite grim there; the outlying streets and houses were already a snarl of black thorny vines. Snips immediately made himself useful cutting several entangled ponies free--- being careful not to touch the vine himself. The guards gave him cover while he worked; others were speaking to the fleeing villagers, attempting to locate Zecora.

The zebra was fairly easy to find; she was trudging down the main street of Ponyville, her worldly belongings loaded in a cart behind her. I'd never seen her looking so out of sorts. Rarity all but galloped to her. "Zecora!" she said. "Thank Heaven. We are in desperate need of your help!"

The zebra gawked at her. "What is this new surprise? A new princess before my eyes!"

Rarity fluffed her wings and laughed awkwardly. "Bit of a long story, darling," she said. "But it involves the Princesses. It appears they have been abducted and dragged into the heart of the Everfree. We have a rescue party assembled, but we need a guide..."

"My aid in this task, you need but ask," Zecora said, shaking her head. "Though how much help I shall be, we are yet to see. The forest has become wild and strange, much within has greatly changed. So perilous it was, so great my dread, that in the end I reluctantly fled."

"Never fear," Rarity said, looking over her shoulder at the rest of us. "We have... quite a few gallant gentlestallions to see us to our goal."

I could describe the trek, but what is there to really describe? Merely an interminable period of us hacking our way through the festering forest, following the black fines to their root. Snips was a pudgy little vine-destroying machine; his slicing and cutting talent chewed through grass, vine, briar and bush like a lawnmower. The rest of us were kept busy either slashing away vines that tried to creep back around behind him, or using magic and muscle to fend off the nastier wildlife. For that, the animals there gave us little trouble; they were too busy fending for themselves against the black vines or simply fleeing the forest.

To my distress it became obvious that my own poor physical state was slowing us down. Happily I was in far better shape than I had been when I first arrived in Equestria... frankly it would have been hard for my health not to have improved... but I was still seriously overweight and not all that accustomed to strenuous activity. I tried, halfway in, to urge Rarity to leave me behind, but she was adamant that we all stick together. I was a potential target of the Draconequus, and it would be dire indeed if we allowed circumstances to divide our party. I ended up riding astride Big Macintosh, much to our mutual consternation. At least to my consternation; Big Macintosh was his usual taciturn self. I might have worried about my weight doing him injury... but this was a pony who had once pulled a two-story house off its foundations single-hoofed. He bore me with ease.

Rarity was doing her share. The guards were keeping clustered around her, but she was acting as much to protect them as they were to protect her. Her magic aura had a cloud of scissors, pinking
shears, seam rippers, and sewing pins orbiting her group like a flock of deadly steel hornets. On at least one occasion they owed their lives to her; a particularly nasty tempered manticore had been sent running off with a very sore rump full of sewing needles.

It was obvious we were approaching our goal. The forest grew darker and more threatening as we went. The sun was blotted out; nothing could be seen of the forest around us but the writhing, ever-growing black vines. We reached an impasse; the vines grew too thick for us to slash our way through. We halted, focusing on keeping the area around us clear, holding the vines at bay with blade, magic and torchlight. "Okay... now what?" Snips said.

I had a sudden premonition. "Cue the dramatic entrance in three, two..." I said cynically.

Sure enough, darkness and light began to coalesce in front of us. The draconequus appeared... but never quite fully formed. I found myself blinking and shaking my head, trying to focus on it. It was most frequently sinuous, sometimes cloudlike, a constantly shifting amalgamation of shapes and parts and colors, like an image off the cover of a zoology magazine seen through a toy kaleidoscope. A rattling tin cup was clutched in its grip. "Anarchy," Rarity said without preamble. "Showing your face now? What there is of it, anyway?"

The draconequus gave an approximation of a smirk at the jibe. "Oh, you know how it is," he said. "Starting act three, this is where I do my second reveal, let you know you're on the right track and that it doesn't matter, yada yada, villain speech villain speech, et cetera." He waved a shape-spasming appendage, bored. "Besides, I wanted to do a little chit-chat with the participants prior to the big reveal."

"Well? Say your peace," Rarity said frostily. "We have things to do."

"Oh? Confident that you'll succeed, aren't you," Anarchy said, amused. "So sure that you'll get past what I've laid in your path."

"With all of us working together? Against the likes of you? Not even a challenge, Anarchy," Rarity said. "Hear Hear!" several ponies said. Cheers and shouts of defiance went up.

Anarchy wasn't even discomfited. His smirk only spread. "Oh, but you're not going to come back out together," he said. "Oh yes, I'm sure Princess Rarity will reach her goal, with all of you... helping. She'll get through the obstacles ahead just fine, and save the day again. Of course, she won't necessarily come out the other side with all the rest of you." The hint was obvious; we all glowered at him. "Oh yes, that's right," he chortled. "This last leg of your journey here is about to get quite deadly. Of course, some of you will most certainly be killed-- but that's a sacrifice she's willing to make.... am I right?" He rested his chin on his hoof/claw/paw/hand and smirked in Rarity's face. She said nothing, face red with anger.

"Killed?" Snips squeaked. One of the guards patted him on the back, reassuring him.

"That is the way it works, my little colt," Anarchy said. "The heroine of the story saves the day, takes a moment to mourn all the little red-shirted ponies who stupidly-- oh pardon me heroically-- sacrificed themselves for her sake, then she gallops off into the sunset. Until the next issue, when she gets some more Daring Do sidekicks to die in an appropriately dramatic fashion."

"Nobody's dying on my watch," Shining Armor growled.

"Oh but you don't have a choice," Anarchy said. "You're a soldier. You should know better. Your very JOB is to die. If you want little Princess Rarity to make it through in one piece and save all of Equestria, and believe me, she is the only one who can do it. She's going to have to be willing to
sacrifice each and every one of you to do it." His grin was all jagged teeth. "And you're going to have to let her."

A pony next to me snorted. He stepped forward; it was Flash Sentry. "You think that scares us?" he said. "We're soldiers. You know better. Every stallion here wears used armor, Anarchy. We know from the moment we swear in that we might be called on to lay down our lives at any moment." He looked regretful for a moment. "Maybe I'm not happy about doing it so soon, before I had a chance to do much with my life... but I'm ready to do it all the same. I'll meet my Maker knowing I did my duty."

"So say we all!" Shining Armor shouted. The other guards echoed it.

Anarchy snorted in disdain. "And the rest of you?"

Big Macintosh spoke up. "Ayup. Ah run in the Maker's herd. Ah ain't got nuthin' to fear from dyin'. Lettin' the likes o' you run loose through Equestria scares me a whole lot more."

"Aye, I'll second that," Pinkie's father said, spitting nonchalantly into the grass.

"Foul creature low and rank, I won't turn back-- so kiss my flank." I leave the reader to guess who that was.

"I-- I don't wanna die," Snips said. "But I'm not gonna give up, either." He stood his ground.

Beyond shifting about a bit, Anarchy's expression didn't change. "And what of you, human?" he said to me, mocking. "You ready to go to Heaven too, meet all the little angels?"

"Not in the least," I said truthfully, trying to steel my nerve. "But I don't get much of a say in it.... And neither do you, you cosmic tapeworm." I looked him in the eye. "I'll go home when the good Lord takes me. Not one second sooner."

Anarchy's fractured smirk turned almost serene. "Just look, Princess. Isn't it wonderful? All these other souls, just ready and willing to die for you." Rarity's face had gone from red and swollen with anger to drawn and pinprick-pupiled. The cloud of Draconequus parts swirled upward like a cloud of leaves in a whirlwind. "Oh, I do believe I shall grant them their wish."

For the briefest second his eyes... all six of them, at that moment... glanced behind me. "Distraction!" I yelled, twisting about on Big Macintosh's back to look behind us. While we'd been chatting with Anarchy, several vines, ones topped with enormous black pods, had sneaked up behind us. The pods split open, revealing purple, fanged maws that spewed clouds of pollen at us.

Magic and steel lashed out in every direction. There was a snap, a scream, and a pod reared back, a struggling guard clutched in its jaws. The others surged forward, kicking and slashing at the stem, trying to get it to drop its victim. It was all I could do to hold on to Big Macintosh's back as he lashed out with punishing blows at the nearest pod.

I had traded my usual garb for more appropriate adventuring gear, including a bandolier and a heavy work vest lined with dozens of pouches. I feel a bit silly about it now, but I'm afraid my instincts as an old school tabletop roleplayer had come to the fore and, visions of myself as a bargain basement Gandalf, I'd stuffed my pockets with every flashy trinket imaginable. But amidst the mess there were a few items from one of my puttering hobbies that was custom made for the situation.

I finally found what I was looking for. A flask that sloshed heavily in my grip. I pulled it out and unstoppered it, pointing it at the vines. With a whistle like a steam train a jet of freezing mist shot from the neck. The clearing soon was swirling with thick, freezing clouds of fog and ice. The vines
withered under the arctic chill, drooping as they retreated sluggishly.

Snips and the guards managed to hack down the pod that had taken their comrade. It fell to the ground, all but collapsing in mush like a frost-burned head of lettuce. They dragged the grievously wounded guard free. "Good work," Shining said as the guards made quick work of the half-frozen vines. "The devil was that?"

"Home weather-factory science project," I said. "I tried mixing a snow cloud with a small bottle of wind. Rather interesting result, don't you think?" I realized I was chattering and shut up.

"Clever trick," Anarchy snorted, hovering over us. "But you could have a trick in every pocket and it wouldn't save you all!"

"You don't know how many pockets I have," I said.

"Feh. I can wait. After all... her Highness already knows what it is I'm wanting. And she's just too generous to resist giving it up." He snorted and disappeared in a swirl of fractal shapes. We were alone again, in a frost-rimed clearing.

"Well, that was cryptic enough," someone said.

Rarity rushed immediately to where the fallen soldier was being treated by his comrades. "Is he all right? Will he be okay?"

I joined them. It was... messy. The plant's thorny fangs had bitten deep. Zecora and Clyde, Pinkie's father, were lending a hoof bandaging up the shivering guard's barrel. He looked up and shook his head. "Tain't good," he said soberly.

"My potions have bought a little time," Zecora said. "But toxic I fear was that plant-thing's slime."

"Dunno if'n there was poison, but twernt nuthin' good in that thing's mouth. Colt's slippin' into shock," Clyde said. The bandages were soaking through quickly.

Shining Armor gently pushed Rarity back. "Spike, Snips, tend to the Princess," he said. "This is nothing she needs to see." Neither did two half-grown boys... but that was the idea behind Shining's order. The two youngsters swallowed thickly and obeyed, leading a fretting, distraught Rarity away. I could hear her talking with them, agitated. "What chance does he have?" Shining asked under his breath.

"Not much, less'n we get him to a hospital in the next hour or so," Clyde muttered back. "Somepony's got to take him back..."

"Yes, but back to where?" Shining Armor said, looking back the way we'd come. There was nothing but black vines behind us; nothing but black thorny vine-clouds overhead. "We'll have to have somepony stay here with him while the rest of us go on. We can only hope he holds out till we find a way out of this mess." Shining stood up and spoke over his shoulder. "Princess Rarity, I think we should--" he paused. "Princess Rarity??"

I looked about. Rarity was gone. Spike and Snips were there... bound up and gagged with ever-so-stylishly sewed ribbons and bunting. Beyond them a pathway that hadn't been there before had opened up through the black vines, a tunnel of green that wound off towards the heart of the Everfree. I had a dreadful suspicion about what was up. It was confirmed when I cut Spike free.

"Rarity's going to face him alone!" he said the moment his mouth was free.
"What?" Shining sputtered.

"She said something about how she was what he wanted," Snips clarified.

I muffled an oath and snapped my fingers. "So *that* was what that was all about," I said. "He was goading her. Rubbing her Element in her face. Why that little Comtean sleazeball..."

"Comtean?" Snips said, confused.

"Philosophy later," I said. "We have to stop her. He's trying to trick her into martyring herself!" I heaved myself onto Big Macintosh's back and pointed down the thorny tunnel with my cane. "After her!" Big Mac needed no further prompting; he took off in a gallop down the jungle's thorny throat. I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on. The rest of our party galloped after us.

We hadn't gone far before the tunnel began to narrow... then to constrict. Our host wasn't in the mood for more guests, it seemed. The others lagged behind, tripping over tangling vines or getting cut off from the group by the pinching of the tunnel. I heard shouts of dismay as the rest of the group was left behind, hacking and slashing at the viny obstacles thrown in their path.

Big Macintosh kept powering ahead; he was simply too strong and had too much momentum for the vines to restrain him easily. But eventually even he was snared. he staggered to a halt; I tumbled over his head to the writhing viny floor. I managed to stagger to my feet. I started to turn back to help him. "Go on!" he shouted as the vines wrapped around his torso. "Save Rarity!" I nodded and ran, leaving him slashing with his borrowed sword at the vines and trampling them underhoof.

I didn't have far to run, thankfully. a few dozen yards and I tumbled off a ledge, landing on my gut at the opening of a cave. Vines as thick as my waist crawled their way inside; I could see a faint light in the depths and heard voices. I got to my feet, old hernia scars groaning in protest, and drew my sword cane. "Once more unto the breach," I muttered, and marched inside.

The tunnel ended at the shallow end of a large, egg shaped cavern. I found myself staggered. The walls and the ceiling, except for where we fell through it, were covered in enormous crystals that glowed in pale blues and lavenders. The floor was layered in little steppes, almost like the Giant's Causeway in Ireland. Circular little columns and platforms of stone, scattered amidst small standing pools of water. They were dotted with moss and other plants that grew in the pale light. And at the center of it all, on a raised island, stood a crystal tree.

It was stunning. I'd 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. The air, deep in this cave, smelled of sunshine and spring rain. The whole chamber throbbed with power, and all of it emanating from that tree.

But it was diminished power. The black vines had enroached here, winding about the trunk, dimming the light. The tree was weakening under the onslaught; even I could see it. Around the foot of the tree were-- I counted quickly-- eight cocoons of coiled black vine. I saw a couple of them move, as if whatever was inside them was struggling to get out.

Standing before the tree, facing off, were Rarity and Anarchy. Rarity was standing on a steppe while the madcap kaleidoscope creature circled her. I had evaded notice; I crept in, ears pricked, to wait for an opening.

"Well, what's it going to be?" Anarchy was saying. "Here you are, the alleged Bearer of the Element of Generosity. And here we are, with your homeland, your ruler, your kingdom, and your precious tree of Harmony, all in peril. What are you willing to part with to save them?"
"Name your price, Anarchy," she said. I could see her trembling from where I stood.

"Oh, I could ask for the Elements of Harmony-- they do make such lovely trinkets--" his claw tapped against her tiara briefly.

She jerked back. "They are not mine to give," she said firmly.

Anarchy chuckled. "Oh, don't fool yourself," he said. "One of them is--- and you take one, you take them all. But no, you don't understand the situation. Not quite.

"You see, this--" he waved a hand, indicating the room, and all that lay beyond it-- "Is all of a piece. The vines, the thorn clouds, the disruption of the magic, the peril of the Tree, the fate of your Princesses, your own ascendance-- it's all part of a single magical binding. And not just because the plunder vines are tangled in all of it." He twined a loose tendril around one claw. "You see, the vines are actually the physical symptoms of a curse. And curses are tricky, metaphorical things.... because the Plunder Vines triggered your own ascendance, you are entwined in the associated curse. Through your Element, Generosity." he folded his forelimbs in midair and rested his detached chin on them.

"You see, to unmake the plunder vine curse, you have to perform an act of generosity. True generosity, not these self-serving little gestures you've gotten away with before. It has to be something from which you, personally, will not benefit at all. It has to be... utterly sacrificial." His teeth grew long and sharp as he grinned. "Otherwise, it isn't pure."

"And that act of generosity would be...?"

"Your immortality," he said, holding out his hand. "All of it."

She looked askance. "Y-you mean--"

"Your alicornhood. Not merely what you gained by your ascendance, but all of it. Your eternal youth-- and all the youth you had left, as a mortal. Your unicorn magic, horn and all. Your pegasus wings, and the powers of flight that came with it. Your earth pony strength, down to the last drop."

"But won't I--"

"Die? Oh, of course." He shrugged. "You will wither like a bloom on the vine, and be no more." He plucked a rose out of the air and watched it wither away to dust. "But isn't that worth it, to save your friends?" Muffled cries of protest came from the cocoons. "Is that not the true spirit of Generosity itself-- to give, utterly, altruistically, heedless of the cost? Even to the very end?" He smirked. "After all, how can you call yourself the Element of Generosity if you aren't willing to give up everything and gain nothing in return? Nothing less than a deed of true Generosity can break the curse. Only your self-sacrifice will do."

She opened her mouth to speak.

"Poppycock."

The two started-- Anarchy visibly jumped-- and jerked their heads around to look in my direction. I waddled out of the shadows, sheathing my sword-cane and leaning on it.

"Poppycock? Excuse me?" Anarchy said, swirling over to look at me in disdain.

"You heard me. Poppycock. Balderdash. A complete load of arse trumpetry." I jutted out my chin pugnaciously at him. I heard Rarity titter nervously. I pointedly turned my gaze away from the
draconequus and addressed the Princess of Generosity.

"In my world, there was once a philosopher by the name of Comte," I said, slipping into lecture mode. "An advocate of atheism, humanism and a protean form of socialism, along with a few other oddments. Among his other follies, he advocated a theory of morality which is known today as Comtean altruism.

"His theory, summed up, was that the virtue of a deed was directly in proportion to its selflessness--in short, that the more altruistic a deed was, the more virtuous it was. Thus an utterly selfless deed, from which one gained absolutely nothing, was the most virtuous." I snorted. "Basic math should expose the first layer of flaws in that belief."

"How so?" Rarity asked, curious.

"It essentially states that a deed that benefits two people-- the doer and the recipient-- is less virtuous than a deed that benefits one." I rolled my eyes. "But never mind the abstractions. Common sense shows that altruism is no guarantor of virtue. Every major horror of history was perpetrated in the name of altruism. The Inquisition. Religious wars. Civil wars. The French Revolution. The German Revolution. The Russian Revolution. No tyrant or egotist ever roused masses of fanatical followers by enjoining them to go out to fight for his personal gain. Every leader gathered men through the slogans of a selfless purpose, through the plea for their self-sacrifice to a high altruistic goal: the salvation of others’ souls, the spread of enlightenment, the common good of their state."

"So you know your Ayn Rand," Anarchy quipped.

"I know my common sense," I retorted. "I also know my C.S. Lewis: 'The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience.' The most hideous evils were done 'for the children,' 'for the future,' for Mother Earth--' in the name of some distorted concept of selflessness.'

"Ayn Rand's understanding was far from complete, but she unearthed some truths that many find unpleasant tasting. Chief among them: Altruism is not a virtue. Hells, it's an evil system by it's own creed: for every act of altruism there must a recipient and if, as altruism claims, self-interest is evil, then the recipient of altruism is performing an evil deed by virtue of receiving in his own self-interest."

Anarchy chuckled. "What are you blathering about? Your own religion teaches altruism."

"No, it teaches charity. There's a difference," I said. "Charity...Generosity... is a gift to be given from a place of richness, out of the fullness of one's heart, and received with gratitude--and because a greater reward is in reach. Not a right to be demanded, and given out of guilt. Jesus Christ taught, "love your neighbor as yourself", not instead of yourself. He promised rewards to those who served Him. He appealed to our enlightened self-interest in the salvation of our own souls. Altruism is complete destruction of the self, a hatred of the self, a perversion of Christian charity.

"Hells. altruism was never a Christian philosophy.... Comte was an atheist. He thought his philosophy of altruism, of complete disinterest in one's own being, was the key to a godless, humanist system of morality!

"'Give heedlessly,' my thundering backside. A deed isn't virtuous just because it's sacrificial. Chop down a tree, pluck all its fruit, burn it for firewood, and it will never give fruit again. Think, Rarity," I said to her. "What is really achieved if, in order to save the Elements of Harmony, one of the Elements immolates herself?"
"This shyster said it himself-- you take one, you take them all," I went on, pleading, urgent. "Think Rarity, think! With you gone, not only will the Elements be broken, but Equestria will have one less alicorn to defend it. Destroying yourself won't save us... it's a perversion of what you stand for--" I had a tiny epiphany. I looked over at the glaring, spasming draconequus. "That's it, isn't it. He's not trying to get you to live up to your Element-- he's trying to get you to pervert it."

Rarity glanced up at her tiara, then over to the tree. I saw comprehension in her eyes. "To turn generosity into self-destruction," she breathed. "To corrupt one of the keys of Harmony itself!"

Anarchy seethed. "Swallowed a philosophy textbook today, did you?" he sneered. "Quite clever. Too bad you're between a rock and a hard place anyway. Save your friends, and the Elements are corrupted. Save yourself, and your friends die-- and the Bearers and the Princesses are lost." He spread his arms wide. "Choose and perish!"

Rarity startled us both. She laughed right in his face. "Here's a new vocabulary word for you, darling," she said to Anarchy. "I picked it up from dear Arthur during one of our little chats. 'False Dichotomy.' " Her horn lit up. The tiara, with the six Elements, levitated off her head and exploded into sparks. The six gems began orbiting her. A silvery radiance flowed out of her body, joining the orbiting stones. "I don't have to destroy the elements or my alicornhood to save us," she said, floating off the ground. "I just have to give them back to whom they belong!" She tossed her head. There was a brilliant flash; the Elements shattered, transforming into a cascade of light, like the rays of the Aurora Borealis, that streaked across the room and plunged into eight cocooned bodies.... and into the tree.

"What? NO!" Anarchy said, gape-jawed.

The tree blazed with light. The writhing black cocoons crumbled to ash, and five alicorns and three bearers rose from the ashes like phoenixes ascendant, Rarity joining them a moment later, their eyes shining with starlight. The chamber filled with light, brilliant as the inside of a star, yet somehow not blinding; I could see everything perfectly clear, as if the world had turned to silver glass. Celestia looked at Anarchy with blazing white eyes. "Begone, draconequus," she said. "You are in a place of Harmony, and your power means nothing here. Begone and trouble us no more."

rainbow light emanated from their bodies, merged together, lashed out at the draconequus, engulfing him. Anarchy shrieked in rage, and then... blew away, scattering like a cloud of leaves, which themselves vanished to nothing. His tin cup hovered in the air a moment before falling to the ground, spilling its contents. The coins popped like firecrackers as they touched the cave floor, vanishing in bursts of yellow sparks. The sparks showered down on the vines, sinking into the woody flesh; the vines withered where the sparks fell. With stunning swiftness the withering spread, racing up the vines and shriveling them to nothing.

The light faded, and the eight settled back to the ground. Celestia staggered a bit. "Ooh my," she said. "Sweet Maker, that was... something." The others sprawled on the floor, blinking and dazed.

It took me a moment to realize I'd fallen on my own keister. I shook the daze off and looked over to Rarity. She looked... diminished. She was lying couchant on the floor, head hanging wearily, her wings fanning the air weakly even as they faded away like morning mist. In a moment they were gone; she sat there biting her lip, clearly fighting back tears. The others regained their feet and rushed to her side. "Oh Rarity," Fluttershy said. "Are you all right?"

Rarity said nothing at first. She marched across the room to where a battered tin cup lay on the floor. She rolled the cup in her hooves, making the two coins left inside rattle about. She looked at the others and smiled weakly, her eyes wet. "Oh, I'll live, I suppose," she said. She looked at where her wings had been and sighed. "Well it was nice while it lasted..."
"Whoa, Rares," Rainbow Dash said. "You gave up being an alicorn princess to save us?" She paused and looked at Celestia and Luna quizzically. "Is that even possible?"

Celestia looked as surprised as I felt. "Yesterday I would have said no," she confessed.

"Wow," Pinkie Pie said, astonishingly sober. "For us?"

Rarity smiled tearfully. "For all of us. And gladly," she said. "A hundred times over."

The next few minutes were spent in great haste, rejoining the rest of the expedition and to the critically wounded guard. Celestia herself teleported the guard with her, straight to the hospital. The rest of us were preoccupied with joyful and relieved reunions and the slow trek back to Ponyville. The vines were gone, shrivelled to dust.

The absence of vines weren't the only thing that had changed. "It's certainly... brighter out here," Fluttershy noted. She was right; a great deal more sunlight was streaming down through the canopy. The air seemed fresher as well.

"An' a lot cheerier," Applejack noted, tipping her ears to some birdsong.

"The Tree of Harmony restrains and subdues the wildness of the Everfree," Luna explained. "Your... gift, I suppose is the right word... replenished and strengthened it. Methinks the Everfree wilt be much more hospitable henceforth."

"As anypony can clearly see," Zecora said. "You'll certainly hear no complaints from me!" A chuckle went up from the group.

"But... what'll we do without the Elements?" Dash said. "We lost 'em. How will we fight the other draconequises without 'em?"

Twilight gave her an uncanny smile. "What makes you think they're lost?" she said. At Dash's uncomprehending look, Twilight took a deep breath and extended her wings. For a brief moment the little purple alicorn seemed to glow from within.

"Hokey smokes, they're inside us now?" Applejack looked down at herself and poked herself in the collarbone.

"More like... some part of their essence got transferred to us," Twilight said. "In a way I think we are the Elements now."

"Fascinating," Celestia said, smiling faintly. "Take heed though, my little ponies. Once you have been touched by power, you are never quite the same afterward."

Rarity was walking along, her head down, looking a bit blue. I didn't blame her in the least. Spike was walking alongside her, silently trying to be a comfort to her. Twilight was walking along on the other side, subtly scanning Rarity with her magic and wearing a puzzled look on her face. "Oh must you do that, Twilight?" Rarity said, pouting a bit. "I-- I'm really not up to being poked and prodded right now."

"I'm sorry, Rarity," Twilight said. "I'm just baffled as to what happened. Everything I've ever seen or
read says that becoming an alicorn is a one-way process."

"Strewth," Luna said. "In mine own long life never have I known such. How truly can this be?"

I suddenly felt prickles down my spine. I heard, or thought I heard, the after echoes of a deep chuckle, and caught a whiff of spring rain. A thought whispered in my ear:

Perhaps because it hasn't happened yet

I wasn't the only one who heard it. Twilight blinked and scanned Rarity anew. "Of course!"

"What? What is it?" the others crowded in, curious.

"Because she didn't actually ascend! It's hard to catch but there's a faint residue of pre-transmogrification magic here... like the flutter wing spell, almost."

"What?" Rarity looked surprised, almost offended. "You mean my wings were fake?"

"Kind of," Twilight said. She waved a hoof, more. "It's more like... like a borrowed suit. Or a half-finished dress..."

Rarity seized on the metaphor. "Like I was being measured for a fitting?"

"The Elements loaned the power, just a taste of it, just for a day..." Luna said, understanding. "Until... oh my!" She stepped back, for the unicorn fashionista had suddenly become surrounded by tiny swirling lights. "Until she was ready..."

"By jove," someone said. I think it was me.

"Oh! Oh, my!" Rarity exclaimed as she lifted off the ground. The lights grew brighter, more numerous; she disappeared from view in a cloud of light. There was a tremendous flash and a report...

When our eyes cleared, Rarity stood there-- slightly taller, slightly more slender. She was turning in a circle, looking at herself, fanning her newly fledged wings. The faint moonlight shimmer that had accompanied her old wings was gone; these, it seemed, were permanent.

"Whoa," was Spike's verdict. "Get a load of that."

I think the mane six can be forgiven for shrieking like schoolfillies.
Chapter 37

Rarity spent weeks all but floating on air. Sometimes literally; she took to flying far more naturally than Twilight had, poor thing. She loved the attention and glamour, of course, and as to suddenly being at the pinnacle of high society, she wove among them as deftly as her needle and thread wove through silk. I think the hardest thing she had to adjust to was having someone else fitting her for dresses.

The staff was a little less elated; they were suffering a bit of "Princess Fatigue" at this point. Between Twilight's obliviousness to the royal niceties, Rarity's inevitable commandeering of the design of her own coronation gown and Rainbow Dash's mulish refusal to be frou-froued up at all, the staff were in tears.

The royalty in general were growing agitated as well. As it stood the already-existing princesses were now debating whether to simply coronate the remainder of the Mane Six now and save time; it was after all quite obvious which way the trend was going. I suggested giving them the title "Princess Apparent" as a compromise. Celestia and Luna were still mulling over that one. In addition, for various reasons (Twilight in order to form an efficient network of helpers, Rarity for generosity to those whose deeds she admired, Rainbow Dash because she was lazy and didn't want to muck about with "all that princess crap") the new Princesses had been knighting, duking, and earling ponies left and right. It was somewhat necessary; Princesshood apparently came with certain titular claims over various bits and bobs of land... most of which (by, ahem, Celestial design) were abandoned bits of territory left to lie fallow. The new Princesses now needed help overseeing their new holdings, which meant slapping down various stewards, landlords and barons and whatnot to hold down the fort, knights to patrol it, et cetera.

Most of the titles were honorary or symbolic, but quite a few came with a good bit of clout. Many of the hereditary houses were barking in outrage that having so many princesses, knights, earls, dukes, lords, ladies, and what not was diluting the authority of the "ancient" noble houses as a whole, and that soon they would all be indistinguishable from the common pony. "Soon even the title of Princess will be nothing but ceremony!" One gangly old fart could be heard saying round the palace.

One could almost hear the quiet smile Celestia and Luna shared. The fact that many of the new titles (at their not so subtle-- or even necessary-- urgings) were going to earth ponies, batponies, crystal ponies and other Equestrian minorities (even, shock horror outraged nobility standing aghast, at least one donkey, a couple of gryphons and a zebra) only seemed to add to their amusement. I should have known what a monster I was unleashing when I let that muttered complaint about 'racist arrogant nobles needing a wake-up call' fall past my lips in their hearing.

On that note, I have to say it is an extraordinary learning experience, working for beings who were so incredibly ancient. It certainly gives you an inkling of the universal truths of human... or sapient... nature. After thousands of years of life one would expect Celestia and Luna to be unfathomable wells of inscrutable wisdom; yet, while they were in fact quite wise... um, generally... they were still at the end of the day mere sinners like the rest of us-- mortal finite beings still susceptible to the
errors, foibles, and shortsightedness we all suffer.

If anything their long lives, while immunizing them to certain petty errors, seemed to make them more vulnerable to others--- dreadful habits of thought, or just plain dreadful bad habits period. Imagine trying to cure a smoker or a nail-biter with a few centuries behind the vice. (hence Celestia's irresolute practice of snarfing slabs of cake the size of her head.) Thus I found that my own advice, when adopted, was done so with frightening enthusiasm-- simply because it was so novel to them, and shocked them out of habits of thinking they hadn't even realized they'd fallen into. When I suggested the idea that perhaps it was time that someone besides unicorns be granted royal titles, they informed me with wide-eyed astonishment that the idea had simply never entered their heads!

Make no mistake, this was in no way a one-way street. I think it goes without saying that I myself had quite a few paradigms shifted quite violently since arriving here. Talking ponies will do that to a fellow.

But I digress.... anyway, it was a bit alarming how avid they were about new ideas. Sometimes they seemed like children with their first taste of chocolate. Then again, they could have simply been taking advantage of the chaos... quite literally, in this case... to do a little updating and housecleaning and stir some stumps a thousand years or so left sitting.

With that in mind, while everypony was out setting the thousand-year-old system of Equestrian nobility on its ear, I was recusing myself from giving any further advice by the simple expedient of making myself unavailable. The Princesses were busy plotting, planning, panicking (Rarity, Rainbow Dash and Twilight-- but mostly Twilight) and preparing for the next draconequus attack...

Me, I was mucking about with the weather.

It was some time after the conflict with Anarchy, and I was idling away my spare time with my oversized chemistry set. The Home Weather Lab had arrived some time ago from Cloudsdale. I had quickly set it up, begun dabbling and immediately became addicted. I'm a little ashamed to admit that my personal allowance quickly depleted as I began spending extravagantly on the hobby. I now had an entire room filled with beakers, tubes, bottles, boxes, weather prisms, rainbow juice, things that went zap, other things that went doink, and every other tool and toy of the trade plus a few extra. It looked like a mad scientist's attic. At every opportunity I could manage I would sneak off to that room and fiddle about with liquid moonbeams and canisters of summer breeze.

I can't say how much disciplined science went on in there. I fear my understanding of morphic resonance meteorology and quintessence science only rose to an extremely juvenile level; I was more interested in playing with things and making flashy sparkles than I was in doing rigorous science. Heaven knows poor Twilight would have been tearing her mane out at my undisciplined dabbling. I didn't care though; I was having too much fun.

Violette and Applebloom were accompanying me; the two of them had taken to playing Mad Scientist's Assistant whenever they came over. Violette was just as fascinated with my dabbings as I was, and Applebloom's curiosity was just as irrepressible. I was something of an enabler; felt obligated after my first Cutie Mark Fiasco to at least encourage Applebloom in pursuits that might clue her in to her special talents. I even went so far as to secure an entire set of potions equipment just for her. I had witnessed her working with Zecora, and from what I recalled on the show the little earth filly did seem to have a dab hoof at Equestrian chemistry. I'd even enlisted Twilight and Zecora in expanding her equipment and supplies to include Zebrican potions and unicorn alchemy, and a few books and subtle hints at "neat experiments" to try.

Needless to say, we monitored her closely. As it was I suspect the security staff was getting ulcers from the idea of me in the same room as a Cutie Mark Crusader and a complete collection of volatile
I was fiddling about with clouds again. Thus far I had managed to recreate a genuine miniature Cloudsdale quality cloud. A small poofy one, about five feet long. It hovered over the work table, fluffy and quiescent. I clapped my hands together, pleased. "Excellent! Okay, now this time we try adding a little moonlight infused quintessence...." I climbed up on a stepladder, leaning over the cloud. Violette handed me a tray of tubes and bottles. I picked one with a squeeze bulb attached (quintessence) and gave the cloud a liberal spritzing. "And now for a drop of oop!" I'd made the mistake of leaning over the cloud too far. The bottle of spring breezes in my hand spilled half its contents, and test tubes of sunshine, liquid chaos magic and a tube of distilled surface tension spilled out of the tray and into the cloud. the cloud began to glow, then to shimmy and shake.

"Ooohboy," Applebloom said. She dropped her flower potion project and galloped behind the safety screen in one corner of the room. Violette and I made haste to join her. The cloud continued to wobble and bobble, squashing and stretching faster and faster like a runaway animation test. Just when it seemed to be building up to a calamitous conclusion, it suddenly stopped and resumed floating innocently in place, as if nothing happened.

We peeked out from behind the barricade. The cloud began chiming softly... and emitting bubbles. Shimmering bubbles with a vivid rainbow iridescence, no less. I poked at it carefully with a gloved hand. "Well... it's certainly not a snow cloud."

"Nope." Applebloom cocked her head. "Kinda neat, though."

"It would be fun at parties, I am thinking," Violette said cheerfully. A bubble popped on her nose. She touched her nose with the tip of her tongue. "Hmm, it tastes like spring rain."

Curious, I popped a bubble in my hand and tasted the residue. No soap flavor as one would expect; just rain, with a faint hint of quintessence. Hm. One of the ingredients must have been treated with quintessence to contain the morphic resonance of the surface tension, or constant mean curvature under balanced pressure....

...and that was the point I realized I was hanging around Princess Twilight a bit too much. I actually understood most of that.

There came a hammering on the door. "Enter," I called out. Cloud Wing entered. His expression could have told me everything. "The Princesses have summoned you," he said. "The next attack has begun."

"Oh dear." And thus our little session of quality time ended. "Violette, would you escort Applebloom back to the Apple family suite? I'd best be on my way..."

"But of course." She reached up and gave me a quick one-legged hug, then set to chivvying Applebloom out the door. I went around the room securing all the loose ingredients, putting everything in order (after one or two less-than-humorous magical lab accidents, even I could learn to be tidy) and pocketing a few odds and ends I suspected I might need.

"What is the nature of the attack?" I asked Cloud Wing as we trotted through the castle. My usual retinue, Hat Trick, Bright Dawn, Moth and Jonquil fell in around me. We had more than enough time to talk; Canterlot is not merely an enormous castle but one built on pony scale, which is determined not by size so much as what qualifies as an easy walk for a plainsdwelling quadruped. "A short trot" is a different thing for a pony than it is for a human. For not the first time I contemplated investing in a mobility scooter. Or at least a pair of roller skates. "I haven't notice anything off kilter."
"Neither have we, Sir," Bright Dawn said.

That almost brought me up short. "Have the princesses said anything?" I said, lowering my voice. I knew that if no one had noticed, then keeping word from spreading would help prevent panic. All I got was a shake of the head.

Oh dear. This was urgent.

Rather than the throne room, we ended up further down into the castle, down a winding course of hallways and stairwells into the actual mountain itself. We met Celestia standing in a rarely-navigated hallway, next to an enormous gold-framed painting. The distress on her face was unsettling. The rest of the Princesses and the Mane Six were there as well. Before anyone could speak she raised a hoof. "What I am about to show you must not move beyond this circle of ponies," she said, and flicked the tip of her horn at the painting.

The painting swung outward on oiled hinges, revealing a thick brass door behind it. Ah, another of the castle's many treasure vaults... Celestia and Luna stashed their 'mad money' about like Pinkie Pie stashed rubber balls and eye patches. The heavy door in turn swung open, revealing an impossibly huge room filled with...

"Coal?" Everyone exclaimed.

"Coal, and other assorted rubbish," Luna said grimly. The room behind the door was filled with heaps of black, crumbling rock, mingled with dust and gravel.

"Um, I don't get it?" Rainbow Dash said.

"Yesterday this vault was filled with gems," Celestia said unhappily.

I stepped inside carefully and picked up a lump from a nearby pile, rolling it in my fingers. "Let me guess..." I said. "Twilight, Rarity, either of you got a spell for identifying minerals...?"

There was a snort behind me. "Oh please," Pinkie Pie said. "Never send in a unicorn to do an earth pony's job." She stepped inside, started sniffing around and grinding various pebbles under her foot and tasting the dust off her hoof. After a moment she said "Mostly coal, but quite a bit of aluminum and silicon oxides, some beryllium, and traces of chromium."

The others stared at her, but I nodded. "Coal for the diamonds, aluminum oxide for sapphires, aluminum oxide and chromium for rubies, beryllium and silicon for emerald and amethyst."

"Wait, wait--- aluminum for sapphires?" Rainbow Dash said. "You mean the stuff in pop cans?"

I nodded. "We humans found ways to synthesize rubies and sapphires from aluminum," I said. "And diamonds, well, you just take carbon-- that's coal-- put it under heat and pressure, and it turns into diamonds."

"You can MAKE gems out of DIRT? From SCRATCH?" Rarity boggled.

"Thy species is astounding in its inventiveness," Luna murmured. I was surprised at their amazement, till I reflected that in their world, magic made gemstones grow in the dirt like potatoes. They had an entire branch of agriculture built around growing and harvesting the results. My revelation that humans could manufacture gemstones must have been like announcing I could build apples and oranges with carpentry tools.
"Are you certain this was a draconequus attack, Celestia?" Twilight said, scanning the inside of the vault with a purple beam. "This doesn't seem very... er... Draconequus-y."

"It is rather... subtle," Fluttershy said.

"Yeah. Not enough chocolate rain or carnivorous pies or stuff," Rainbow Dash chipped in. "I mean, it's gotta suck losing a whole vault of gems...wowsers... but it's not like the rock farmers won't be producing more. Shoot, Rarity hauled home more gems than this from the Diamond Dogs that one time."

"It is draconequus magic though," Twilight said, continuing to run purple magic over the former treasure trove. "But it's surprisingly faint..."

"This isn't the only gem vault in the castle that I'm worried about," Celestia said. Were she human she would have been wringing her hands together. "And it's not the content of the vaults that is so terrible as the timing."

"What do you--- ohmigosh, the dragons!" Twilight yelped, her wings standing out.

"What?" I asked.

"Indeed," Celestia said. "The trade emissary from the dragon lands is here. If we have nothing to give him but vaults full of coal..." her tone was ominous.

Twilight gulped. "Girls, we need to check all the gem vaults, fast!" She pulled out several scrolls of parchment and began magically duplicating a map of the castle. "Grab one of the Assistant Treasurers, they have the keys and combinations to all of them. Rarity, you take vaults one through three. I'll take four through seven. Dash, you take eight through fourteen, you're fastest. Luna will take fifteen through twenty five. We've got to secure those gems!"

"You got it, Twi! C'mon, Fluttershy---" Rainbow Dash took off in a burst of red-tinted rainbow light. Fluttershy trailed after her in a flurry of "oh dear oh dear oh dear."

"And I will be going to check on our guests," Celestia said. The next moment, to my startlement, I felt myself lifted off the ground. Celestia set me on her back. "Hang on, Arthur," she said. "We will be going rather fast. I will explain on the way." She took to the air. I grabbed a double handful of her mane and held on as we swooped out a window and hurtled into the sky.

I immediately tried to distract myself from the height and speed we were flying. "So I'm obviously missing something important here," I shouted over the wind, my voice unnaturally high. "Am I to understand that Equestria is paying the dragons some sort of Dane-geld?"

"Dane geld?" Celestia asked. Her voice was, of course, magically modified to reach my ears. She didn't even have to raise her voice as I did.

"Tribute," I said as we circled up over the palace. "Protection money. You pay them, they don't torch Equestria!"

"Hardly anything so craven," Celestia said. She gave a snort and tossed her head. "The dragons know far better than to try and extort from us. No, this is-- a bit more complicated. Haven't you wondered why gemstones are as expensive as they are in Equestria?"

"Now that you mention it..." I admitted. I had been flummoxed at figuring out the exchange rate for gemstones to bits. There seemed to be no pattern to it. A fist-sized gemstone would be fobbed off on a bellboy as a tip, and the next minute a sliver of jewel the size of your fingernail would be used to
rent a carriage for the day. I had chalked it up to some arcane difference my unpracticed eye could not make out and shrugged it off. Even then, though, it made no sense; regardless of color or cut they were literally as common as gravel. "So why is that?"

"Simple," Celestia said. "Dragons can't grow them." She banked and we began to slowly circle the mountain that Canterlot stood on.

That simple phrase made everything click into place. Dragons didn't just hoard gemstones in Equestria, they ATE them. In fact it seemed to make up the bulk of their diet. And a full-grown dragon probably ate countless pounds of them daily... enough to keep scarcity fairly high.

"The dragon lands are mountainous, and very volcanic," Celestia went on. "Which is terrible for growing gemstones. What it is good for is smelting metals right from the rock-- iron, copper--"

"Silver and gold," I finished. "Which they trade to you for gems." It made sense. The dragons could dig up ore and, what with being fireproof enough to wade into molten lava, smelt it with their bare claws... but so far as I'd seen, didn't eat it. Ponies, however, could grow gems like gangbusters, and preferred to mint their currency in gold and silver. It also answered a question I'd harbored since my days as a Brony on earth: why had the red smoking dragon's hoard been full of gold, while the green dragon in the Everfree forest had a hoard of nothing but gems? Simple. The red smoker was from outside Equestria, and had hoarded gold to pay for gems, while the green lived IN Equestria and could probably dig up as many gems as he wanted.

Celestia slowed and banked again, reducing her airspeed. "We could probably use gemstones as currency," Celestia said. "But dragon consumption-- and varying tastes-- keeps their value unstable."

"Not advisable to use a perishable commodity as a money base anyway," I said. I recalled the Confederate South and its cotton standard; China and its money of pressed blocks of tea.

Celestia nodded. "Gold is longer lasting and a more stable commodity, we use it in trade with other, non draconic races. And even though they're always digging up new sources, dragons produce it at a rate about level with our economic growth..."

"Which helps prevent shocks of massive inflation or deflation," I said. We were now flying slow enough that I could talk in a normal tone of voice. I realized we were on the opposite side of the mountain from the city. There was a large cave entrance below, halfway up the mountain; Celestia was dropping altitude, heading for it. I could see pony guards stationed at the cavern mouth, awaiting our arrival.

"And thus we keep a balance," Celestia said. "The dragons get their gems-- and a disincentive to invading us, as the longer-thinking ones are aware that we can grow them better than they can. We get a stable currency in the form of gold. The price of gems stays balanced, which supports the rock farming communities. More or less, everyone benefits." She coasted in for a graceful landing at the mouth of the cave. Guards trotted forth to stand attendant for us.

I made a less than graceful dismount, stumbling and staggering; she was kind enough to lend me a wing. I straightened my jacket and hat and caught my breath. "And let me guess; there's a big handoff of gems for gold due today, am I correct?" I huffed.

Celestia nodded. "There are other complications," she said. "You recall the origins of most of the... pseudo-human technology you have seen in Equestria." I nodded; no need to mention the World Window here. "Well quite bluntly, we had to subtly... well... outsource most of it to other races. Gryphons and minotaurs, for instance. They have hands. We do not." She wagged a hoof. "Luna and I hoofed off the technology to them-- which they adopted quite readily. Now, they do most of
"Which is why everything is still more or less made for hands," I guessed. "Equestria imports merchandise from foreign lands-- and they're not exactly blazing new trails in equine ergonomics out there. It also means you operate at a trade deficit. Gold goes out, goods come in. Which is why you need this gold influx..." 

"We trade most of our gems to the dragons for most of their gold. We trade most of our gold to the minotaurs and gryphons for most of their consumer goods. The gryphons and minotaurs trade most of their gold back to the dragons for most of their other metals and raw commodities--- iron, copper, and so forth... with pretty much every other good or commodity tangled up somewhere in that web." Celestia's mouth set in a grim line. "And if an entire year's harvest of gemstones vanishes..."

"No influx of gold this year," I said. "The price of gold in Equestria jumps due to scarcity, and the price of gems will rise worldwide. But the gryphons and minotaurs will still be flush with gold from the last fiscal cycle, and with unsold consumer products from this one. Price speculation, bank runs, bursts of inflation, deflation...shockwaves that could take years to smooth out.

"And worst, for the dragons this will be a food shortage." I felt a cold shiver run down my spine. Even among squishy humans, that was the sort of thing that started wars. And this would happen with dragons. Hungry, angry dragons. "Wait. Could this much calamity really arise from just one shipment going astray?"

"Didn't you once tell me of how badly awry your own homeland's economy could go with a single day of delayed shipments?" Celestia sighed. "This is an entire YEAR'S worth. Having dragons flying back and forth over Equestria is disruptive as it is, and the dragons refuse to let a train line be laid through their lands. The couriers from the dragon lands use extradimensional bags to carry a whole shipment in one trip." She gestured at the cave entrance before us. "We even have to put the dropoff point out of direct sight of Canterlot, to prevent panic in the streets from overflying dragons."

"So this is the new Draconequus strategy," I murmured. "Economic chaos."

"And he shall have it, if we do not catch him before the other vaults are damaged," Celestia muttered back. "If the repercussions are bad enough the next dragon flight over Equestria might degrade from a migration to a raid."

The way into the cave was blocked by two enormous doors. The guards hastened to work the chains that ran through them, slowly swinging the doors wide. Light and what sounded like someone speaking... no.. singing?... came forth as they cracked open. "So, ah, why did you bring me here, exactly, Your Highness?" I said.

"Hopefully, to help me distract the emissary," she said, her voice low. I was not happy to hear the nervousness in her voice. "He expressed some intense interest in meeting 'the world's only human.' Please. We need to keep him distracted and amiable until the girls can find this new draconequus-- and stop him from spreading this ruin to the entire Equestrian economy!"

Just inside the doors was an enormous, draconic silhouette. "Ah, there you are, Princess," a guttural voice boomed. "We had begun wondering where you'd gotten to."

I swallowed, my throat dry. "I'll do my best," I whispered back. With wings tucked in, heads held high, cane under arm and hat at a hopefully cocksure jaunty angle, we strode inside to have tea with a dragon.
1) To clarify, Cloudsdale construction clouds were infused at the factory with Pegasus-formed Quintessence, which gave them many of their more unusual properties.

2) After a few near misses with dropped volatile potions and misaimed miniature lightning bolts, the guards had learned to knock, no matter HOW urgent the message.
"What, exactly," I ventured, "makes 'Dark' magic dark?"

Celestia and I were sitting on the viewing gazebo of the highest tower, enjoying one another's company and the view of the world stretched out before us and discussing this and that. Eventually the subject had drifted around to the topic of the Equestrian's exotic science, and I had been moved to raise this question. "That's... an interesting question, Arthur," Celestia said, tilting her head. "What brings this up?"

I pooched out my lip, trying to compose my answer. "In... spite of having no magic in our world, humans have a lot of different... theories, I suppose you'd say... about how it would or might work."

"So I have gathered from your works of fiction," Celestia said, amused. "Coincidentally, would it make you feel more comfortable to call it 'Quintessence manipulation' rather than 'magic'? That is the proper scientific term for it after all, and I do know that your people conflate the word 'magic' with witchcraft..."

I waved it off. "Perhaps-- but that's a topic for another time," I said, shaking my head. *Occultic bastards, hijacking the language for their own ends...* "but let's use the common Equestrian word for the sake of the subject at hand."

"Very well."

"As you say, human culture has multiple 'magic systems' in its fantasy writing," I went on. "And most of them incorporate the idea of 'light' and 'dark' magic, though the definition of what makes it light or dark varies from author to author. In some, it is determined by what source you draw the power from--- holy beings and angels or dark powers and demons. In some it is defined by what tools and ingredients are used, say between using herbs and crystals versus using the blood of virgins and other ghastly things. In others it's defined by whether the spells are healing and passive and defensive, or aggressive and injurious. In still others (the most common, I would estimate) the light side is powered by 'being at peace and tranquil', while the dark side is powered by passion and negative emotions..."

"It seems that the exercise tells you less about the actual nature of 'magic' than it does about the moral philosophies of the writers," Celestia noted with mild amusement.

"True," I nodded. "While here in Equestria, the situation is the inverse. I have seen ponies and others use what they term 'Dark' magic... which, depending upon how it works, could be expected to inform your moral philosophy."

"Ah," Celestia said, chuckling. "And you wish to know, thereby giving you a peek into what makes us 'tick', so to speak."

"Partially," I admitted.

"First, though, I'm curious about that 'light side, dark side' fiction you mentioned," Celestia said. "It comes from that 'War Stars' series, as I recall?"
"Close enough," I chuckled. "Is that the closest approximation to--?"

Celestia huffed. "No no, far from it," she said. "It's a bloody ridiculous notion." At my raised eyebrow she continued. "Arthur, there's no such thing as inherently 'good' or 'evil' emotions. That's something I've struggled to hammer into my students' heads over the millennia. Anger, sorrow, and fear are not "negative" emotions. They are not intrinsically "bad" or "evil." They are necessary and vital to our survival. Any creature that does not feel fear doesn't survive past infancy, because they're standing there gormlessly indifferent to oncoming danger when sane, healthy creatures are shying back or running away. And anger... well, there is such a thing as righteous anger, and the world sorely needs more of it.

"Meanwhile the most horrible deeds--- from crimes of passion to the slow pushing of entire civilizations into oppression and slavery-- are done in the name of "love.""

I nodded, and quoted C.S. Lewis. "Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. It would be better to live under robber barons than under omnipotent moral busybodies. The robber baron's cruelty may sometimes sleep, his cupidity may at some point be satiated; but those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience."

Celestia nodded in agreement. "Good and Evil are not feelings. They are actions, choices, and deeds. While unreasoning passions may make committing errors more likely, they do not lend them any special power or grace them with any extra vice. Sufficient to the deed is the evil thereof."

I nodded. I had been unable to quite put my finger on what bothered me so much about George Lucas' dualistic fictional philosophy, but in retrospect it was obvious. "So, to bring it back to the original question, what makes Dark magic Dark?" I asked.

"That's rather simple actually," Celestia said. "It's place on the spectrum."

I furrowed my brow. "Pardon?"

Celestia saw me foundering and moved to explain. "As you know, the ancients believed that the universe was made of four elements-- Earth, Water, Air and Fire," she reminded me. "Of course modern science has abandoned the superstitious nonsense of 'earth, fire, air, and water' and replaced it with 'solid, liquid, gas, and plasma/energy.' Hurray for scientific progress." She rolled her eyes and smirked and I snickered.

"Equestrian 'magic' involves the manipulation of Quintessance, or the Fifth Element, that the ancients believed both transcended and underlay the other four.... or what modern Equestrian physics calls the fifth, transcendant state of matter." she hesitated, waving a hoof. "Well there is some argument on that issue-- some say it is a hyperdimensional state of matter, others argue that it is closer to a form of energy at dimensional right angles to our own material universe. Others have still stranger explanations that even I fumble to grasp."

"Something like the argument over light being waves, particles, and/or both," I said.

"Something like that. Once the researchers start describing the universe with things like 'Multiply the square root of infinity by a carrot' I give up and just smile and nod. Anyway, we use Quintessence to manipulate the material universe around us, via the morphic resonance field.... and I just lost you too, didn't I." She shook her head. "Anyway, we use Quintessence. And Quintessence has a number of exotic properties, including what you might call wavelength."

"Ahh, I think I see where this is going."
"You've surely noted the rather colorful nature of Equestrian magic. Most normal magic is conducted within the fairly broad middle ground—by pulling and manipulating Quintessence in the 'middle' spectrum, which tend to produce effects in the usual rainbow colors.

"But outside that band lies what you might think of as the ultraviolet and infrared of quintessence energy... the 'dark' spectra. They tend to produce effects in the indigo and dark umber..."

"The purple-black of Sombra's magic," I contributed. "Or the extremely dark red of the Alicorn Amulet."(1) It clicked. "So, 'Dark' in the sense of being outside the normal, 'visible' spectrum of Quintessence."

Celestia nodded. "Quintessence in those wavelengths isn't innately 'evil,' any more than infrared and ultraviolet light are. In fact it has certain highly useful and exotic properties that are much harder to get out of the harmonic rainbow band. In many ways it's easier to use, even." She frowned, sipping her lemonade. "But it does have certain negative effects, especially if over-used...

"Ponies are designed to use the rainbow bandwidth. When they start dipping into the Dark spectra, indigo or umber, it is initially physically and psychologically unpleasant. But it gives a massive power boost—plus, over time, feelings of euphoria. A sense of invincibility. Hampered judgment and risk assessment. Increased aggression...."

"Like a performance enhancing drug," I said, immediately grasping the implication. This, I had to admit, was utterly fascinating; A magic system where "light" and "dark" were not innate ethical or moral poles, yet where a definite ethical issue was present.

"And it becomes more and more addictive, the more it is used." Celestia said. She looked, brooding, into her glass. "Alicorns have some resistance to it. But... after what happened to poor Luna... I have had to reevaluate how much resistance we have. It's so dangerous."

"And illegal as hell, I would presume," I said.

Her answer startled me. "And what good would that do?" she said, with a surprisingly ungenteel snort. "Tapping into Dark quintessence is esoteric knowledge, but in the end it is merely a matter of learning to reach up or down the wavelengths. Outlawing it entirely would border on an unenforceable law. It would be like trying to criminalize the color blue."

She stirred her ice with her straw. "There are mountains of restrictions on it, of course. And we quite bluntly use folklore and propaganda to teach ponies to fear its touch and shun its use...not difficult, considering its more unpleasant side effects... and the crown refuses all funding for its research. But, there are times when it is necessary. Or simply too useful. Times when I've had to use it myself." She shuddered. "Extreme wavelengths of Quintessence can achieve certain effects that the safer bandwidths cannot. And sometimes it is necessary to use Dark magic in order to undo its effects."

"Like... using radiation therapy to destroy tumors?" I fished for a metaphor.

"I believe that's one possible parallel," Celestia agreed. She didn't look up from her glass. "But researching it is so dangerous...one must exercise iron self-control, rigid temperance. To study it one must use it after all, and use exposes oneself to potential addiction and corruption.

"After Nightmare Moon, I did outlaw it. For at least a century, I think. Then the Black Blight happened and I had to relent... It took some poor foal nearly dying of the Blight before my very eyes before I realized my folly. I was blaming the substance for the sin of the abuser. The hardest thing I ever did was force myself to open up my magic and use Dark quintessence again to--" she cut herself off.
Again. I had one of my brief, rare moments of inspiration. A younger sister, driven by jealousy to abuse a performance-enhancing substance. A guilt-ridden older sister, blaming herself far too much... Nightmare Moon wasn't just a villain. She had been a drug addict.

"Luna learned to use Dark magic from you," I said. "Didn't she." Celestia said nothing. "When you were much younger, I suspect. She saw you use it for something. Or caught you at it. Whatever."

Celestia set her glass down on the arm of her divan and looked away, a thousand year old hurt on her face. Hurt and anger at herself. "And talked me into showing her how to tap into it. We were very young, barely more than foals. I dabbled. I forswore its use for fear of what might happen.

"And then King Sombra happened." Her jaw clenched. "I can only assume she saw how monstrously powerful this mere unicorn had become with its use, and decided to assuage her jealousy of me by...enhancing herself with it to finally outdo me, to surpass me... remembered my own use of it, found my discarded tomes."

"Going cold turkey?"

"What an odd turn of phrase. Either way, we are both grateful for that... extra obstacle to temptation. Still, it's always going to be there. It is for every pony who gains great power, or who tastes a bit of dark magic. But for her--"

"We are all guilty of our own sins," I said. "She doesn't blame you for what happened. Neither should you."

"I... suppose, I..." She picked up the pitcher before her and topped off our glasses. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," I said. I lifted my glass to her, then paused. "Your majesty, I think you should lift the research ban. In fact, I think you should dedicate some funds to a Dark Magic research lab."

She started to bristle. I had to tread carefully; taken the wrong way this could come across like suggesting government funding of dope farming. "Your majesty, you say it's impossible to completely outlaw, because it is so easy for an amateur to simply stumble across by... by turning the radio dial far enough in one direction, in essence. You say the stuff, for all its side effects, is useful, as well as physically harmful and potentially addictive. You also say that it is not inherently evil--that it's just another form of Quintessence.

"But save for some assuredly contraband books by those who ignored the taboos, we are working in a knowledge void when it comes to the stuff. That's not position from which anyone should be setting policy or making legislation."

"Power is power," she admitted. "Whether it comes from a horn or a light socket."

"In which case, have you tried to make it come from a light socket?" I pressed on at her querying look. "That is to say--- have your researchers tried manipulating the stuff using mechanical means? I know they've been able to research harmonic magic in this manner already, generating it with crystal arrays...and considering all the Quintessence the pegasi pump around the weather factories, it's obviously feasible. They should be able to adapt the technology to Dark magic, shouldn't they?...

"Offer a grant to researchers. If they can demonstrate they can do indirect research, take them on
board. they might make all manner of discoveries without risking themselves. Perhaps even a way to neutralize its negative effects." It made sense to me; we humans made a lot more progress understanding radiation when we learned not to handle radioisotopes with our bare hands.

"An idea, perhaps," she said. "We cannot make use of it, or even effectively combat it, if we do not understand it better. I will take the idea under advisement." She mulled it over.

"Well," I said. I raised my glass to her. "One hopes for the best. Here's to a conversation that has proven most... illuminating." She smiled and tapped the rim of her glass to mine.

1)That had been a particularly nasty episode. Some struggling student at the School for Gifted Unicorns had tracked the wretched thing down in some back alley pawn shop, in hopes of using it to save his failing grades with a power boost... before it was all done he'd wreaked some spectacular havoc on campus. Fortunately Twilight was able to trick him into a "duel" with her, and eventually con him into removing it. The student had been given a pardon due to being under the amulet's influence and allowed to re-sit his exams.... after he agreed to take therapy for Dark Magic contamination, and amulet had been dropped in the Princess' deepest vault--- encased by one of the royal blacksmiths in a solid block of iron.
This had to be the most nerve-wracking, no the most terrifying social event I or any other human being ever attended in the entirety of human history. Every pitiful primitive survival instinct I had was scrabbling at the back of my skull, desperate to send me running for the nearest hole to hide. Instead I had to sit there with what was surely a rigor mortis grin frozen on my face and a cold teacup in my hand while my employer tried to make small talk with a fanged, fire-breathing monster right out of humanity's worst nightmares. Forget the potential political implications of our little tete-a-tete; I was sitting down to tea and biscuits with a predator whose head was larger than my first car.

And oh, let us not forget; we were trying to stall for time, in the hopes of making sure this building-sized engine of destruction didn't find out it had reason to be very angry with us.

The fact that he and his two compatriots did not seem nearly as unnerved by my presence as I was by his did nothing to engender confidence.

The chamber was enormous, big enough to be an airplane hangar (apropos, I suppose.) Celestia and I were sitting in a balcony jutting out from one wall, while our guests were lounged about the floor of the cavern, their heads about on level with our own seating arrangements. There were three of them, a green and a blue, with an enormous red who was the obvious leader. They supped tea from a pot the size of a locomotive engine and did their best to make small talk.

Introductions were made (the lead dragon's name, upon my oath, was Sid. That's all, just Sid. Not an abbreviation for a tonsil strangling fourteen syllable Klingon-sounding nom de guerre, just... Sid. Apparently after fourteen clutches, his mother had run out of ideas for names.) And, after a few niceties, Celestia had deftly handed the opening conversation off to me. "And I understand you said you had some fascination with my new advisor. Perhaps you two could get to know each other better, I thought?"

"Indeed, Indeed I would, your Highness," the ambassador said cheerfully. He raised his bathtub sized cup to her. "Among the things I hoard are the stories and lore of distant races and peoples, and I would be remiss to miss this opportunity." He regarded me. "So, sir Arcturus... tell me a bit about yourself and your people?"

"Ummm," I said, idly stirring my drink with a spoon, "I must confess that I am at a bit of a loss for conversational topics at the moment." I fervently hoped the sound of my spoon clattering on the rim of my cup like the clapper on an alarm bell was too faint for him to notice. "Allow me to turn the tables on you, Ambassador Sid... when you heard of humans, what was it that aroused your curiosity most?"

"Ah." The ambassador sat back. "Well, it's been rather an eclectic mix of odds and ends we have received second-claw. An odd mix of bits of your history, culture, folklore... but, ah, at risk of succumbing to stereotypes about my own race..."

"I understand you have some fascinating perspectives on money and economics." He cocked his head to one side.
For the first time since walking into the chamber I felt a bit of confidence return.

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As to the girls, things were a bit more complicated than expected. It seems that the Treasurers had gotten clever, and had moved the vaults to what they had hoped were more secure locations. They were now laid out in the old crystal mines below the city, a random, sprawling anthill of tunnels and chambers, in no particular pattern anypony could perceive. The tunnels that poor Cadence had been imprisoned during her own wedding were just a tiny branch of the entire complex burrowed through the mountain, and searching them methodically was, well, something of a challenge. Against a typical foe, such mazelike security would be quite effective; against a draconequus, a creature that lived and breathed randomness, not so much. And the defensive measures were working against the defenders, this time...

They ended up racing back and forth in random directions, backtracking several times, dragging the poor Assistant Treasurer after them (poor stallion wasn't really up to all that running around after a lifetime at a desk job). After the third frantic run-around and the third near-mass-collision at a tunnel intersection, Twilight had had enough. She came in for a landing to try and organize. "Everypony, this isn't working," she said. "We need to be systematic about this! Rainbow Dash, take this chalk and scout ahead. Find a vault, then fly back to us leaving chalk marks to lead us back to it."

"Got it!" Dash grabbed the chalk and arrowed off.

"Okay, Princess Luna? You need to fly back to the castle and bring the guards and the treasury ponies. Tell them to bring carts; we're moving the gems out of the vaults and to a new secure location." Luna nodded and darted off, nearly as swift as Dash.

"Everypony else, take your accountant and be ready to follow Dash's chalk trail, one pair of ponies to each one. Got it?" Everypony still present nodded. "All right, we have the tools, we have the talent, we have the plan. Let's do this!" Twilight said.

It was a good plan. Unfortunately it met the same fate as most plans upon encountering the enemy. The jinx laid on the tunnels soon had them all separated from one another, chalk marks appearing and disappearing at random whenever the mares took their eyes off them. In short order, the methodical search was in complete disorder, and the groups of ponies were well and truly lost.

Fluttershy in particular got badly drawn off. Within minutes she wasn't even in earshot anymore, and the clerk that had been buttonholed to accompany her had taken a detour to the washroom and promptly disappeared. Her timid nature got the better of her in those dimly lit hallways, and she was soon quaking in terror of stumbling on their quarry alone. But credit where it's due, she didn't find a corner someplace to curl up and hide. She kept going from room to room, even if she was inching her way down every hall with the air of someone who desperately wanted to be yarding their way up it.(2)

Her entire attitude changed, however, when she heard the whimpering...

In passing, I've noted that fan artists from my world have certain trends and stereotypes when they draw the mane six, particularly when they're portrayed in alternate forms. Gentlemen, I know them in person, I've seen them in alternate morphologies thanks to magical experimentation, and I assure you-- you're getting it terribly wrong.

One thing you have to keep in mind in transmogrification is that lifestyles and levels of activity do translate over from one form to the other. A swimmer's build doesn't turn into a weightlifter's, for example; whatever your species in your new form, your attributes are transformed to match the target
Celestia for instance is anything but Amazonian---it has been a long time indeed since she strode forth on a battlefield, and she has never been particularly physically aggressive. While tall in her human form, she actually comes out as surprisingly slender and graceful... and by the way, the legends of the solar badonkadonk are explicitly untrue. Really, she doesn't eat THAT much cake.

Luna is of course smaller, and she is closer to the warrior-princess build-- strong shoulders and hips, modest bust, powerful stance, every inch an equine Artemis. Rainbow Dash is built along similar lines. While being athletically toned, though, neither of them is flat nor mannish in human form; Dash in fact is actually middling in the hourglass build, though with a cut, muscled look. And, well, a c-cup. She learned the importance of jogging bras that day...

Applejack, when humanized, is pretty close to the typical portrayals as a robust farm girl, I will grant- broad shouldered and buxom. Rarity has a similar build to Rainbow Dash, surprisingly, albeit not "cut" like her. In any form she is the picture of carefully cultivated fashionable looks. Twilight? Perky and petite--- and in better shape than she should be, thanks to Rainbow Dash's incessant nagging to get her out of the library for some physical activity out in the sunshine.

One of the broader mistakes you make is about Pinkie Pie. Having met Pinkie Pie in person, I cannot imagine why anyone would imagine her to be a pudge. (1)She's an earth pony, gentlemen; she spent her formative years doing heavy labor on a rock farm, the equivalent of pure strength training that has stuck with her ever since. She has only become more physically active since leaving home. Seriously, she exercises every morning with the Cake twins, works her fluffy tail off in the bakery, pronks everywhere she goes rather than walk... As a human she's the original brick house--- short, thick in limb, deceptively soft looking and round in face, but not really an ounce of surplus fat on her. Her core body strength is terrifying. I've had opportunity to pick her up and hold her in pony form; under that huggy pink bubbly fluff she is a literal superball of muscle.

If Pinkie Pie were a Porky Pie, she wouldn't be able to run circles around the others like she does. While I was having tea with a dragon, she was tearing back and forth through the sub-chambers of the castle, checking all the vaults for sabotage by our still-invisible invader, dragging a bewildered assistant treasurer behind her. He was run ragged; if she even got winded I would have been surprised.

But the biggest mistake human artists and writers make is with Fluttershy. Firstly.... B cup in human form, gentlemen, so please rein your hormones in. (She was a supermodel, remember? And in Equestria, Celestia is considered the beauty ideal. They don't tend to hire badonkadonks or "jug kittens" in either world.) And secondly yes, she is just as sweet as she looks, but no creature who knew her would ever mistake that gentle soul for weak. She worked as hard as any of the Apples in her veterinary calling; the frogs of her hooves were tough and callused from endless days of work in the care of animals great and small ; it was only Rarity's constant fussing and the tender ministrations of Aloe and Lotus that kept her hooves as pristine as they were. And you can't see it on the show, but under her coat her forelimbs have dozens of thin white scars from scratches and bites and from plucking lost woodland babies out of briar thorns. Under that rosepetal and velvet exterior she has a tenacious strength. I've seen her manhandle grizzly bears, and put on bursts of speed in the air that actually rivaled Rainbow Dash's... when she was angry enough to forget herself.

You see, that's the key to it: I think her only real problem is that she thinks she's weak... or perhaps she's afraid of how strong she might be. Yes, actually; I think the thing she's most afraid of is herself.
It took Twilight about half an hour to remember their cell phones. She stumbled to a halt in the middle of the hallway, facehooved, and tapped the speed-dial for a conference call. The others picked up quickly. "Guys! Any results?"

"Most of the vaults seem okay," Dash said. "Least I haven't found any coal in any of 'em."

"Likewise," Rarity said.

"Clean as a whistle, here," Applejack said. "What about you Fluttershy? You seen anything?... Fluttershy?" There was nothing but an ominous silence. It didn't take long to draw the obvious conclusion.

"Oh dear," Rarity said. "Oh dear oh dear--"

"Fluttershy? Fluttershy speak up!.... Hang on Fluttershy, I'm coming--" Dash started revving up into her typical overdrive.

"WAIT EVERYPONY!" All of them froze at Twilight Sparkle's shout. "Rainbow, hold on. It won't do anypony any good if we all start running around higgledy piggledy. We need to regroup, THEN we can track down Fluttershy together!"

"Yes, we do need to stay calm," Rarity said. "Fluttershy may have just forgotten to switch her phone on, the poor dear."

"Great, now how do we find each other?" Dash said, frustrated.

Twilight looked over at the clerk she'd brought along. He shrugged in confusion. "Don't ask me. I've worked down here for years and nothing looks the way I remember!"

Twilight huffed in annoyance. "Hold on. Girls, switch on the Geeps."

There was a pause. "The whaaaat?" Rainbow Dash said for all of them.

"The Geeps! The little blue button at the top! It's something I added to our phones. Arthur described something similar, it's not quite the same and it still needs a lot of fine tuning but it's a system so that you can always know where you are and find each other... It bounces signals off the highest tower of Canterlot and triangulates with---"

"Oh, oh THAT button," Rarity said. "I wondered what that was."

"Uh, Twi? I think it's pronounced "Gee-- Pee-- Ess," Applejack said.

"Whatever! It's an abbreviation!-- oh just turn it on." Multiple hooves fiddled with slick metal and glass rectangles, and soon tiny screens showed little maps of Canterlot, with seven tiny glowing dots. "The map is just an overlay. But the dots show where each of us are and..."

"Haha! Triumph!"

"Oh! Princess Luna, I forgot you were searching too. Did you find anything? Did you find
Fluttershy?" Twilight said.

"Nay good Twilight. But I have made a monumental achievement. I have finally activated the "game" folder on yon device!"

"Luna, this really isn't the time--"

"Hah! And it hath 'Angry Birds' installed! Excelsior!"

"Wait, these things play games?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"I found I prefer 'Bejeweled,' "Rarity said.

"Y'all would--"

"GIRLS! FOCUS!"

Fluttershy was not, as others would measure it, a brave or bold pony. But perhaps they used the wrong metric. She would not easily go forth on risky endeavors and excitement was the last thing she would ever seek. But she would follow a tug on her heartstrings through the fields of hell, if that was where it led.

At that moment it was leading her to a gem vault that stood open at the end of the hall. Light spilled out from inside, glittering on a loose handful of gems scattered across the floor. Fluttershy could see bits of coal and gravel scattered amongst them. More importantly, she could hear something rooting around inside, the sound of hooves or paws digging through piles of gemstones... and frustrated muttering and weeping. Breathlessly, she crept to the vault door and looked inside.

It was the draconequus. As always, it had to be, because nothing else in the world would look like it. It's alien form and geometry was obvious to anyone. It most resembled a broken slinky shoved inside a tube sock. It had googling, mismatched eyes beneath a tuft of scraggly hair, skinny sticklike limbs with long bony fingers, and a mouthful of crooked teeth at the end of its crumpled sock-snout. The other end didn't so much have a tail as much as it tapered off into a kinked and crooked vapor trail that vanished into nothing. It was nothing like the energetic creatures that had come before it.

In fact it looked... sickly.

It was digging through piles of gems with its stick-like fingers, muttering to itself and sobbing faintly. "Not enough, not enough," it, or maybe he, was saying. As she watched, he plucked up a tourmaline the size of a baseball in his hands and clutched it. With its free claw it pulled out a strange-looking tube, pencil thin and twisted into loops and whorls, and jabbed it into the gem. He began sucking mightily on it. The stone shimmered and glowed, and something seemed to drain out of the stone and swirl up the straw. The gem turned black and crumbled to dust, littering the floor. for a moment the creature seemed calm, but then he shook his fists and pounded them on the floor. "No!" he sobbed in a voice like a disconsolate kazoo. "It's just not enough!"

"Um, Excuse me?"

The creature spun around, silly straw clutched in his fist, to find himself facing a pink maned, yellow pegasus. Or at least he gathered that much from what he could see, peeking around the door at him.
"Who dares?" he hissed. "Who dares interrupt the terrible Clutter at his repasssssst?" He loomed up and clawed at the air, trying to look intimidating.

"Yeeep!" Granted, it didn't take much to intimidate Fluttershy. "Mister Clutter? I- I'm Fluttershy..."

He cocked a pencil-scribble eyebrow. "Come again?"

"I'm Fluttershy..."

The eyebrow rose higher. "Almost got it that time..."

Fluttershy took a deep breath. "I'm FLUTTERSHY!" she yelled, making both of them jump. "Eep! I'm... Fluttershy. I'm one of the Elements of Harmony, and um, I'm going to have to... place you under arrest? I think?"

She hunkered down in a ball. She expected him to cackle maniacally and throw lightning about like Discord. She expected him to turn her to stone, or into a cloud of flying guppies, or turn the universe inside out and send her to the far side of the world. What he actually did she never saw coming... he grimaced in terror and tried to flee. It was a short flight; he thwacked into the wall of the vault and crumpled to the floor in a heap.

"Oh my!" Fluttershy said. She'd gotten up and run over to help him before she'd even thought about it. "Are you okay--"

"AWAY FROM ME, PUNY MORTAL!" he honked. He rose to his full, crooked height and unleashed chaos magic from his fingertips. The room rippled and swayed. He swelled, growing larger and larger, trembled for a moment... then shrank again like a fatally punctured balloon. The room snapped back to normal with the alacrity of a rubber band. He slumped to the floor, groaning, barely bigger than a ferret.

Fluttershy scooped him up in her hooves without a thought. "Oh no, you are hurt! No, wait." She looked him over, took in his shaky hands, his wheezy breathing, and corrected herself. "You're sick. Aren't you."

Clutter obviously felt he should rant and rave and "nyaaah nyaah puny mortal" a bit, but he apparently didn't have the energy to care. "Yes," he admitted in defeat. "Yes, I am."

"What's wrong? How can I help you?" Fluttershy said.

His eyes goggled in disbelief. "Why?" he said bluntly. "What do you think you'll get out of it? Think you'll buy your way into my royal court when I take over this---" he stopped to cough and hack.

Fluttershy smiled and shook her head."No." She pulled out a kerchief and wiped his face. "It's... it's just who I am," she said. "Really. So what's wrong?"

He looked up at her. "Simple," he said. "I'm dying."

"Look, each of the dots is one of us. Just use it like a compass, follow it till the dots come together and we meet each other," Twilight said patiently as she trotted down the hall with the phone floating in front of her.
"I'm trying I'm trying," Pinkie bleated. "But every time I start to, the ghosts eat the one I'm following and I have to start over!"

Twilight stopped and facehoofed. "Pinkie, that's the pac-man game!"

"You're kidding," Rainbow Dash said. "You've been following the little yellow mouth thing?"

"Uh huh."

"Man, I've been trying to follow the little blue ghost..."

"ARgh." Twilight gently but firmly thumped her head against the wall.

"Dying?" Fluttershy exclaimed. "What, but why?" She lay down, cradling the shrunken draconequus in her forelimbs.

"I'm... I guess you roundsiders would call it starving to death," Clutter explained.

"Roundsiders? And, starving?"

"What draconequi call people who live inside the round universes," Clutter said. He sighed. "And... I don't know how much you roundsiders can understand about this but... my kind, we sort of, well, we feed what we call Potential. The energy difference between Chaos and Order. It's an oversimplification, but..."

"I understand," Fluttershy said simply. "Mister Arcturus explained some of it."

Clutter nodded. "Anyway, I'm not one of the big shots in this contest," he said, his voice wheezing like a leaky accordion. "Never been. I've just been a shrimp getting by, scraping up a little to eat in the outerverse, just enough to get by, and keeping my head down. Never even been able to claim a roundsider universe for myself..."

"Anyway, word gets around that another universe just opened up for a Tournament, and they needed a twelfth. And since the rules were for altering one single cosmic constant, the high rollers were even going to spot everyone a few Quatloos of Potential so the table was even. This was my big chance. It cost me every bit of hoarded Potential I had, but I bought myself a seat at the table. This was it! Me, sitting down with some of the Big Boys..."

"But I overestimated myself. I didn't realize just how much it would cost." He stopped to wheeze and spasm, interference patterns like a disrupted TV broadcast dancing across him. "when my turn came up I was already going to be on dregs. But then the rules changed... so now I didn't have enough. The moment I came inside your universe, I started starving."

He went staticky again for a moment. "You see? It's costing me more Potential to keep going than I can get back. I've been running a deficit ever since I hit this three-dimensional burg. I don't even have enough juice left now to climb back out the way I came in.

"I've been leaching the Order out of these gemstones to keep going but it's getting harder and harder..." He raged for a moment, seething. "That Shazbot Ataxia! I can't believe I fell for it! He just needed a patsy to fill in the twelfth slot. I never had a chance. He's been sitting back in his fatcat
"I'm sorry," Fluttershy said, stroking him with her hoof. "I wish I could help you. I really really wish I could."

Clutter scoffed. "Don't mock me, roundsider," he spat. "I'm a chaos spirit. And not a particularly nice one. Why would you care?"

"Because you're a person," Fluttershy said gently. "And you can't help how you have to live."

The draconequus was struck speechless.

"Left... now right... Rarity, take a left... we're just around a corner...!" Twilight shouted out directions as she galloped through the maze, the clerk panting along beside her. They turned one last corner and all of them collided in a tangled heap of hooves and tails. The moment they met, with a groan and a pop the distorted corridors snapped back to normal. They all clambered to their hooves, wincing at their bruises and shaking out ruffled feathers. The way was clear; a single straight corridor with a trail of coal-crumbs scattered down its length. "That way, girls!" Twilight shouted.

"Tallyho!" Luna shouted, and the group was off at a gallop.

"You... you're being kind to me," Clutter said, marveling. "Even after the damage I've done. Even though you know what I'd do if the tables were turned. You'd really try to help me?"

"I really really wish I could," Fluttershy said sadly. "Sometimes, like with my little animal friends, sometimes I can't and... It's the hardest thing in the world, when I can't help." She blinked a tear away. "I wish I could help you. But I'm just me. Fluttershy. I'm not magical like Twilight or brave like Rainbow Dash or Applejack or clever like Pinkie Pie. I'm not anything."

Clutter scowled, squinting at her like he was looking through her. "No, you're not nothing," he said. He seemed to see something, like someone seeing a glimmering in the bottom of a deep well. "In fact you're full of potential. Extraordinary potential. You just don't know it, do you."

"Potential?" Fluttershy blinked, her eyes wide. "Oh. Oh! Potential! if you can use it, if it will help you... then go ahead and take some of it..." She held out her hoof to him. "I... I know it'll hurt, but... if you just take some, just out of my hoof, then---"

Once again he was struck speechless. It was true; the Potential, the Order in a living thing was astronomically higher than that of a mere crystal. And yes, he could extract some, but--- Surely she had seen what had happened to the gems? He saw it in her eyes, saw it in the tiny, faint scars on her leg where tiny animals in terror and pain had drawn blood as she mended them; that didn't matter. She was saving a life, and her own wounds would heal; she would bear the hurt.

What a pity it was the one taboo even a wretch like himself would never break. "No no, not the kind of Potential that I can use," he fibbed, "the other, metaphorical kind that..." he coughed, staticked,
and seemed to shrink in on himself. "Oh never mind." His sly smirk returned. "Though come to think of it..." He jerked and shuddered and shrivelled smaller still.

"Oh no!" Fluttershy said tearfully. "Hold on, Mister Clutter, I-- I'm sure my friend Twilight can help you---!"

"I think it's a little late for that." He patted her cheek with one spindly hand. "Fluttershy, you were kind to me. And now I'm going back to where I came from as a Null. But I think I *can* make use of that potential in you. Well, indirectly."

"How?" Fluttershy asked. "What for?"

Clutter chuckled vindictively, his voice honking. "Why to help upset Ataxia's apple cart." He held up something in his withered hand; a crystal egg, clear as water.

Fluttershy gazed at it, entranced. "What is it?"

Clutter chuckled like a broken music box. "I guess you'd call it my nest egg." He tapped it against her forehead, it shattered in a cloud of snowflakes. The glittering vault blazed with light...

"*Really,*" Sid said, cocking an eyebrow. "*And they buy into this... what did you call it?*

"Fiat currency."

"*...Fiat currency system over and over again?*

"Yep," I knocked my tea back and went for a refill. Celestia graciously poured me another cup.

The conversation was going quite well. I've always been a policy and economics wonk, and the dragons, of course, were always interested in ways to increase their hoards. Understandable; it was their bread and butter, quite literally, as well as their heritage, mating display, and preferred sleeping mattress. We both warmed to the topic quite readily. They had been fascinated by the idea of investments and stocks, and the topic had drifted around to some of the more cautionary tales of moneymaking: fractional reserve, fiat currency, and the abominable so-called "*federal*" reserve. Being creatures with a very concrete idea of wealth-- they slept on it after all-- they were flabbergasted that any species could be so gullible as to fall for such obvious flummery.

"To give you an idea," I went on, "an investment research company once did an analysis of fiat currency systems. They wanted to know how many fiat currencies had been used and how they had turned out. By the time they were done they had examined over six hundred currencies around the world--"

"*Six hundred?*" Sid's scaly eyebrows nearly jumped off his head. "*There have been that many?*

"Far more, actually. They did the search alphabetically. They decided to quit halfway through the B's. You know what they found?"

"*What?*

"All of them defaulted to zero; that is, they became worthless. The average lifespan of a fiat currency
is about **five months**. And nearly all of them ended in a massive crash: hyperinflation, total collapse of the economy..."

"**Great Maker,**" Sid rumbled, sipping his tea. "**Why on earth would anydragon-- er, anyone-- go in for such a system?**"

"Greed and gullibility," I said as I used the tongs to drop three sugar cubes into my cuppa. "The worst combination of vices since wrath and pride. See, it always starts out the same way: they begin with commodity currency. Precious metals such as gold and silver, usually. But the very thing that makes gold standards so stable is the one thing they don't like: unlike other commodities that have been used as money such as cotton or tea, the amount of gold available is very very **stable**. It doesn't corrode, or get consumed, but neither does it increase in volume. That cramps the style of politicians, bankers, and other plutocrats who want to spend more than is actually in the vault.

"It doesn't take long to find a loophole, though. Eventually, to make things easier than lugging around all that gold, they start using banknotes... usually paper receipts for the gold... as if they were money.

"So eventually some bright, ambitious and amoral individual thinks: Everyone is using the bank notes, the receipts, for the gold as currency, just as if they were the actual gold. Wouldn't it be nice if we could just print more bank notes without having to bother actually earning more gold?" And so they start printing more receipts than they actually have deposited as gold and using those empty receipts to buy more stuff. Oh, they keep a little gold in the bank at first-- what they call "fractional reserve." But they're still circulating more paper receipts for gold than actually exists. If anyone raises a fuss, they just blow smoke about how they'll get more real money to back the paper receipts "later..." from interest on their investments, or future taxes on the populace, or other imaginary places.

"And they get away with it. So long as there isn't a run on the bank when the reserves are low. That's when people get mad that their gold has been turned into empty vaults and emptier promises, and the lynchings start."

"If they manage to pull it off long enough, they say "let's just forget the gold altogether. People only spend PAPER, so let's print as much as we need. Free money forever. Wee!" And if the lawmakers agree with it-- and they're usually greedy and gullible enough to do it--- the presses never stop rolling." I snorted. "The presses print and print, and the value of the banknotes falls and falls, till finally they print so many banknotes that one shiny day everybody realizes that the paper is worthless and the ones printing all the money have been robbing them. Then things REALLY get fun."

"People get hung, governments fall, bodies hang in the streets. And everyone goes back to tangible commodities for money. But the loss is already there. People who have worked all their lives, saved thousands or millions of banknotes from the sweat of their brow, wake up and their blood, sweat and tears are gone.... and the bankers and politicians have flown off with all their ill-gotten treasure. The people find they've built their masters palaces and yachts, and in the end been paid in bags of newspaper clippings."

"**I see now,**" Sid rumbled, lip curling. He huffed. "**Deplorable. Such cowardly thievery! And this has happened six hundred times?**"

"Way more than six hundred. Always started by the same five words, "I said. "It won't happen to us.' I was incredibly lucky, actually, to escape to Equestria when I did. My own country was brewing up for a massive collapse of its own... one that will break the back of most of the world."
"How bad was it?" Celestia asked.

"Let me put it this way." I pulled out an old American $20 bill. Don't ask me why I still carried it; nostalgia I suppose. "You see this? This is twenty dollars. From 1792 to 1930, this was about the price of an ounce of gold. About that point, we went on fractional reserve... printing fifty dollars for every twenty dollars in gold we had in reserve. And the price, of course, jumped up almost instantly to 35 dollars, and rose steadily to 38 dollars by the year 1970... after over a century of stability, the value of the dollar essentially dropped by just under half in forty years. Then, we went on fiat currency-- and the price of an ounce of gold jumped to $151 an ounce by 1975.

"it increased fourfold in five years?" Celestia said.

I shrugged. "Of course, the shrinking didn't stop. It even accelerated, as the government printed more and more fake money to spend on real goods and services. By the year 2011, it took 1,531 dollars to buy an ounce of gold."

"A tenfold increase??" Sid said, sparks shooting from his nose in surprise. "In such a short time?"

I nodded. "Or an increase of about 7500 percent from 1792," I said. "It's probably a matter of years or even months now before the inevitable."

"Why couldn't they just keep on going?" one of Sid's companions pointed out. "They could just print larger and larger bills, forever."

"Not if they no longer believe in it," Celestia said soberly. "If the ponies, the people decide something is worthless, then there is no power under heaven that will make them consider it valuable any more."

"It was probably a matter of months before the collapse when I left," I said, sadly. "The last warning signs were all there."

"Warning signs?"

I sat back a little. "You know of tidal waves, correct?" My audience nodded. "Well, when a tidal wave is coming, the last warning sign is that the ocean draws back... the tide goes out. And keeps going out, and out, and out, further than it ever has. Then the wave comes roaring in and sweeps up over the beach, up over the harbor, up over the village, destroying everything in its path.

"Historically, one of the last warning signs before hyperinflation sets in is that the price of gold, which was going UP all that time, suddenly drops dramatically. In 2011, gold was fifteen hundred an ounce. Right when I left, four years later, it had dropped to $1100. The tide was going out.

I nodded. "No, we don't have Draconequis where I come from. But we have chaos aplenty. It wasn't hard to see the coming of the storm."

The conversation was cut short. Celestia's cup suddenly fell to the floor, shattering. She rose to her hooves, her horn glowing and an indescribable expression, mingled euphoria and pain, on her face. "Oh mercy," she breathed. "It's happened again! but... in the joy, such sorrow..." She gathered herself. "Forgive me, Ambassador," she said. "Something... extraordinary has happened that I must attend to--" She vanished in a flash of light.

"Is there something we should be aware of?" Sid asked.
"Oh, nothing bad, I assure you," I said, beaming in spite of myself. Save for the strange bittersweetness, I had seen that expression on Celestia's face once before... when a certain purple protege' had her life radically changed. "But I think I'll leave any announcements to Her Highness." I sipped my tea and wondered which one of them it was this time...

Luna and the Bearers tumbled into the last vault at the exact same time that Celestia teleported there. By a miracle they avoided a seven-way collision, sliding to a halt around the sun princess' legs. All of them had been riding to the rescue, but now they all stood gaping at what they saw.

Lying on the floor, between piles of unimaginable treasure, was Fluttershy. She, there was no other word for it, **glowed**, residual magic gathered around her like a mantle of spring. She was cradling a strange, crumpled something in her forelegs and looking down on it, weeping, her wings mantled around them both as if to shelter them from a storm. The shrunken thing reached up a withered claw to her.

"Beep," it said. "Gotcha nose."

Fluttershy giggled through her tears and gave it a watery smile. "Better," it said. "No tears. Not really dying. Just being... diminished." It coughed and briefly turned into a cloud of static. "We might. Have been friends....Maybe I'll see you again. Someday. In. An eon or two."

Fluttershy sniffled. "You'll probably forget me by then," she said.

"Never," it said. "You were. The first. Creature. Who was ever..." He paused to breathe. "...Kind to me." The word was a benediction.

"Goodbye," Fluttershy whispered, lowering her head till her spiral horn touched his forehead.

"Good. Bye..." Starting at the crumpled tail, the creature slowly faded away, till there was nothing left but a single brightly flickering spark. It rose up out of her hooves into the air, circled once and vanished.

The newborn Alicorn of Kindness got to her hooves and smiled through her tearstreaked face at her friends. "Hello everypony," she said, holding up a silly straw, of all things, in one hoof. "I guess I should tell you what happened.... If you don't mind.

1) Before you mention her confectionary consumption, I really should point out that the "sweets" the ponies consume are startlingly healthy. They use cane sugar as well as honey, brown sugar, molasses, agave nectar, sweet leaf, fruit juices-- nutrient-rich, natural sweeteners. Their flour is whole grain. They use whole milk, eggs from free range grain fed chickens, whole sea salt, olive oils, flavorings made from concentrates... even their candies could probably legally pass for vitamins back on earth. Their diet is still distressingly high in carbs, at least by human standards, but it's offset by a staggeringly high vegetable fiber content, and the simple expedient of using nutritious ingredients rather than using the bleached flour, white sugar, and corn and rapeseed oils(a) we humans guzzle. The differences in flavor and texture were barely noticeable, and my palate quickly
adjusted; they are quite good bakers. And so long as I made sure to supplement my diet with a little meat, well--- while the pounds weren't exactly melting away like snow, I was losing a little bit of my ponderous belly...

A) Yes, vegetable oils (other than olive oil) are bad for you. In retrospect this should be obvious: consider how much corn you'd have to squeeze to get one bottle of vegetable oil. Is there any reasonable way you would get that much corn, and hence that much corn oil, into your diet naturally? Rule of thumb: the harder it is to turn into something digestible, the less likely it is to actually be healthy to digest. Another hint: what do they feed cattle to fatten them up for slaughter? Yup. Corn. What do we feed our kids? Corn oil, corn syrup, corn and wheat based breakfast cereal.... Mooo, y'all.

2) Make no mistake, when I heard about this later and pictured poor Fluttershy creeping her tearful, whimpering way down those tomb-like passageways all alone, my Inner Brony wanted to teleport me through time and space to her side with her blankie, her teddy, and a plate of cookies and milk to make everything better. FlutterCry: a fearsome power in its own right.

3) The girls were natural early adapters. As expensive as they are, Equestrian cellphones have marvelous advantages over Earth cellphones. Being partially quintessence based they rarely if ever needed a recharge, and you could still get four bars even deep underground. Of course unless you were a unicorn dialing them was a bit tricky, so speed-dial was a must. That and really really big buttons.
What a fuss. One would think that the paparazzi had merely been impatiently biding their time as the first three Bearers ascended, for they fell upon poor Fluttershy like an oasis in the Sahara. A former fashion supermodel, officially recognized as one of the top ten most beautiful faces in Equestria-- and we shall not mention her unofficial ratings on other, less dignified scales of anatomical pulchritude---ascended to alicornhood? Pure gravy in an endless buffet of dry, unappetizing news-bites about the ongoing Draconequis invasion. The poor dear had to hide in the royal gardens almost round the clock to avoid the press and other pestiferous gawkers.

Even then she got little peace, as ambitious pegasus photographers and reporters would risk the wrath of the royal guard to overfly the gardens, in hopes of catching sight of her and shouting questions at her.

At least they did until I showed the CMC how to build a water balloon launcher out of old inner tubes. With the three of them overlooking the gardens from the balconies of their fortuitously placed suites, they managed to use their crossfire to turn the air over the gardens into a strict no-fly zone---as many a paparazzi learned to their soggy disgruntlement. After its initial test run we were caught by the Princesses. I thought I had gotten the poor girls in trouble, but Twilight's only comment was to tell Sweetiebelle to correct for windage and Celestia's only comment to Applebloom was "move over, it's my turn."

One or two did manage to get through, though. I was taking a midday walk around the hedge maze (oh fine, I went in and got lost) when I stumbled across the garden at the center. Fluttershy and several of her animal friends were there, of course. To call the scene pastoral would be to understate it. Before she had been a beauty among ponykind; now she was positively radiant; where once animals had flocked to her, now it seemed nature itself breathlessly held attendance on her. She rested couchant in the middle of a riot of flowers, all but glowing with the aura of an equine Mother Nature, the rabbits and chipmunks and birds gathered around in worshipful adoration or cuddled up against her side while butterflies gamboled about the clearing. Two armored guards, fierce looking as lions, stood watch over the entrance, but even they couldn't entirely wipe the expressions of contentment from their faces.

The only thing out of place was the colt. He was a skinny fellow, scrawny as two sticks... Featherweight, that was his name! He was holding a notepad in his hooves and looked as jittery as a chihuahua on double espresso. Or, I reflected, as a pubescent boy in the presence of a stunning supermodel... I crept closer, signaling to the guards to let them know I was there. I stood in the archway just out of sight and listened in. "A-and what would you say is the, uh, the hardest thing about being a new P-Princess?"

"Well, I suppose..." Fluttershy said softly. "Living up to it." She poked at a tuft of grass with her hoof. "I mean, all the ponies before me who have become Princesses, it's a big set of horseshoes to fill! Twilight is so smart, and Dash is so brave... Rarity, she has such style and grace and it's like she always knew how to act like royalty-- and then there's Luna and Celestia! It's very intimidating, trying to live up to that," she concluded.
"Well I think you're doing a great job," the colt said. The sappy look on his face so adorable it nearly brought me to tears of laughter. The two guards standing watch over this little scene were having trouble holding back chuckles as well, I could see. Poor boy. It looked like Spike had competition in the hopeless crush category. "Oh, that's very sweet of you," Fluttershy said with a heartbreaker smile.

"Hnnngkh," said the colt.

"Did you have any more questions?" Fluttershy said, pointing at his notepad with a dainty hoof.

"Oh! Uh..." He glanced down at the pad, then looked up, blushing beautifully. "Um... th-these were all questions other- other ponies wrote..."

"I remember," Fluttershy said.

"Um... one more... um... d-do you have a s-- a special somepony?" The last bit came out as a squeak. Fluttershy giggled. "Oh, no," she said.

"Really?" the boy almost sounded hopeful.

She lowered her lashes shyly."Oh, well... there is a certain stallion I keep hoping that I'll catch his attention... I'd rather not say yet, though."

"Oh." Featherweight dutifully scribbled down the answer, his face glum. He knew as well as I did that if Fluttershy hadn't caught this mystery stallion's attention, he was either blind or dead. "Thank you very much for the interview, Princess Fluttershy," he said, trying to put on a brave face. "We-we'll send you a free copy when the story runs."

"You're very welcome," she said. "You were very polite and kind." Then she startled me and shocked the fool out of him by leaning forward and giving him a peck on the cheek.

The look on his face nearly made me rupture my sides. I held in my mirth as he tottered to his hooves, tucked his notebook under one wing and drunkenly staggered out of the enclosure, a tiny smear of lipstick on his cheek and a goofy grin spread over his face. I gave it a count of twenty and finally let go, laughing till I couldn't stand without leaning against a nearby concrete flowerpot.

"Dabbed a little on my lips when he wasn't looking," she confessed with her trademark adorable giggle. Well. It seemed the shyest pony on the planet had a tiny little spark of mischief. Here's to hoping he was smart enough to get photographic proof. Or at least save the tissue when he wiped off..."
"And really. We go to all the trouble to chase off the press for you, and here you are giving a private interview," I teased, sitting on a nearby stone bench. "Why him and nopony else?"

She pouted, defiant. "Because he was every inch a proper little gentlestallion," she said. "He wrote me a very nice letter and asked very politely if he could have an interview with me for his school paper, like a polite pony should--" she ruffled her feathers, casting her eyes aside as her pout turned into a scowl. "Not... yelling and pointing and chasing a pony and shouting rude questions, flashing cameras in her face..."

I had to nod at that one. Some things didn't change from one world to the next. "Here's to hoping you set a trend, then," I said, tipping my derby to her. She dimpled.

"Was there something...?" She asked.

"Oh, yes," said, remembering what had sent me out to the gardens. "The others... the Princesses and the Elements, that is-- or maybe it would be easier to just say "your friends" --- anyway, they're having a meeting. We're all trying to prepare."

"For the next Draconequis?" she asked.

"And for the next ascension," I added. "Four of you alicorns now, it's not hard to guess where this is going."

Fluttershy nodded. She looked down at her hooves. "I hope you don't mind my saying so, but... I do kind of hope that Applejack is next," she said.

I raised an eyebrow. "Any particular reason?"

She hesitated, waving her hoof as she fumbled for the words. "Well, it just seems... unfair somehow," she said. "Everypony talks about how all three kinds of pony are supposed to be equal. But... that isn't how it is. Not really. Unicorns and Pegasi always seem to have the easiest time doing-- big impressive magical things. Magic and sonic rainbooms and things. And earth ponies seem to come in last."

"And you think they're due for a day in the sun," I said, amused.

She nodded. "Oh, not that there's anything wrong with Pinkie Pie--" she hastened to add. "It's just... she's not quite as..."

"Down to earth?" I said with a smile.

"Um. Yes. And Applejack is the earthiest earth pony I've ever known," she said. She sat up and clapped her forehooves together, smiling. "Oh she would make such a wonderful Earth Pony princess...!"

I had to chuckle at her enthusiasm. "Well, your Highness," I said, tipping my derby and giving her a bow. "Shall we attend and see what your fellow matriarchs have planned...?"

She stood up and fluttered her wings to settle her gown. "Do lets," she said with a graceful pony curtsy. We left the garden, the guards falling in behind.
This chapter of my journal might have ended here, save for what happened next.

Fluttershy and I and our respective bodyguards had barely reached the gate when, inexplicably, Fluttershy's horn flared. "Oh... MY!" she squealed. Before either of us could say anything, a vast rumble, like an oncoming thunderstorm or a distant explosion, shook the air. Ponies all over stopped and cried out in alarm. Every winged guard rose into the air, casting about to see where the sound came from. One of the pegasii pointed to the horizon; Fluttershy and I raced to the nearest patio to see what it was. In the distance, surrounded by a cloud of dust, was something shining... and enormous... and---

"It's in Ponyville!" Fluttershy cried out in fright.

Once again, any action on our part was preempted when Celestia, Luna and four of the Mane Six came thundering up behind us. The solar and lunar diarchs took one look and didn't hesitate.
"Quickly, Sister!" Celestia said. Their horns flared---

And the next instant we were all in Ponyville. I staggered as my senses caught up after being squeezed through a cosmic keyhole. "Warnings, please," I gagged, my innards heaving.

"Apologies, Arthur," Luna said. "But haste was of the essence."

"What has befallen Ponyville THIS time?" Celestia said. There was more than a hint of exasperation in her voice.

I cast about to determine where we had arrived. It took me a moment to recognize it; we were in one of the lower fields in Sweet Apple Acres, an empty patch that I recalled Big Macintosh telling me they were letting lie fallow. Well, it was empty no more. The billowing clouds of fog and glitter---thaumatic smoke---were wafting away. I found myself looking up... and up... and VERY up....

"Great Googa Mooga," Rarity said.

It was the Tree of Harmony. No, it was A Tree of Harmony, a twin of the one lying in the caverns below the Castle of the Two Sisters, grown to gargantuan proportions. A glittering trunk easily a hundred feet around rose into the sky to a canopy of vast boughs and branches, filled with silvery leaves that glowed and chimed like the rims of wineglasses. Cradled in those branches was a castle, no a palace of shining crystal. It had a repeating decorative theme, of six rather familiar cutie marks.


"Oh! Um... hello everyone. Um. Luna. Celestia.." someone above said faintly. She sounded both shell-shocked and mortified.

I stepped closer and squinted against the glimmer. Hanging over the rail of one of the balconies was Twilight Sparkle. her crown was askew and she looked a bit bedraggled. "Twilight?" I said. "What happened? Are you all right?"

Celestia stepped up next to me, staring up at her student in astonishment. "Twilight, what in blazes is all this?" she shouted.

"It sprouted a little faster than we expected..." came back the disoriented answer.

Celestia stepped up next to me, staring up at her student in astonishment. "Twilight, what in blazes is all this?" she shouted.

"See Twilight? Ah tole ya it was a seed!" I cast along the curve of the bough, looking for the source of the voice. There up in the highest branches, draped over one of the forks, was Applejack. She
flapped her new wings awkwardly, trying to pry herself loose. Her hat hung askew at the end of her horn. "Could one of y'all gimme a hoof, here?" she said, clearly embarrassed. "...Hain't never had an agricultural job turn on me quite *that* quick afore...."

"Well if you'd let me examine the box we found in the Harmony cavern *first* instead of marching off and sticking it in the dirt---"

"Doggone it Twi, it was a *seed*. Anypony could see it needed plantin'. You'd have us measuring an apple seed until it was halfway to its first crop of cider, if'n you had your way...."

We all stared as the Princess of Friendship and the new Princess of Honesty quibbled at each other. Fluttershy nudged my side.

"Um," she said under her breath. "Do you get the feeling that the Universe is getting *impatient* with us?"

I refrained from replying.
“Well, Twilight here decided that, after all the hullabaloo, she oughta go an’ check out the Tree of Harmony, make sure it was doin’ all right after all that ruckus, an’ I decided to tag along. We get to the cave, and doggone if the tree hain’t sprouted a bloom, with a great big ol’ seed right in the middle of it—”

“It wasn’t a seed, Applejack, it was a polygonal box,” Twilight said for what was, to judge by her world-weary expression, the thousandth time. "With keyholes in it.” Applejack rolled her eyes.

“It was a crystal poly-whatsis, growing out of a crystal flower, bloomin’ off a crystal TREE. It was a SEED, Twilight.” Twilight ‘humphed.’ Applejack gave me a longsuffering look. “Well, you can guess what we spent the walk back arguing about. I guess we got a bit het up about it,” she admitted a little sheepishly, “’cause by the time we got back to Sweet Apple Acres I was bound and set to prove it to her. We were passin’ one of the back fields I’d left to lie fallow, so I climbed the fence, dug a hole and planted it.”

“And you expected it to sprout then and there, just to settle your argument?” I said, amused.

Applejack gave me a deadpan look. Without a word she pulled an apple out from under her slightly-horn-punctured hat, held it up in her hoof, and gave it a constipated look. The apple trembled for a moment, then a bright green apple seedling shot up out of the core. “Just in case you forgot I was an earth pony,” she said sarcastically, popping the baby apple tree into a nearby crystal vase and dusting her hoof off on her vest.

“Ah,” I said, wisely shutting up.

“I don’t rightly know what got into me,” she confessed. “Part of it was just bein’ riled from the argument, but— well—” she waved a hoof, hesitating. “I didn’t just know it was a seed, I could FEEL it. I could feel just cryin’ out to be planted in the ground and made to grow…

“I stuck ‘er in the ground, covered it over, and started to give it an earth pony nudge. Only, it didn’t just stay a nudge. The more I pushed for that seed—”

“It was a polygonal chambered exadimensional magic artifact!” Twilight groused. “We should have examined it thoroughly in controlled laboratory conditions, not stuck it in the ground like a potato!” She sulked, plopping her rump on the floor and crossing her forelimbs over her chest. Oh boy. It looked like Twilight was deep in her ‘I’m the scientist, I was right anyway’ mode.

“The more I pushed that SEED,” Applejack went on, giving the sulking pony a brief glare, “The bigger the need got. It was like I was caught in a flash flood, with the water roarin’ up high and rollin’ fast… except… except I was the flash flood. Or the riverbed, an’ the flash flood was rollin’ through me…” She waved her hoof, futilely looking for the right words. “Feh, listen to me gettin’ all poetical. But— there was just this rush of, of POWER and LIGHT—”

She looked around us. “And the next thing I know, I’m dangling from a branch of a giant crystal house-tree a couple hundred feet up in the air.” She tapped her forehead and glanced at her sides. “With three more parts than what I started out with this mornin’.”

"Indeed,” I murmured. I confess to being a bit distracted; I was too busy gawking at the interior of the castle around us. Yes, castle. This wasn’t just a gigantic crystal tree, it was also a palace, with an interior that ran from the base of the trunk and up into the boughs, into an enormous gothic edifice
perched in the branches. A canopy of gently chiming leaves sheltered the edifice from above, filtering the sunlight through... squinting, I reached out a window and carefully plucked a nearby leaf, turning it over in my hand. Yes, it seemed to be tinted-- and polarized. And were those glittering threads copper? Were these solar cells of some sort? Interesting.

I wasn't the only one distracted... or distracting. It hadn't taken long after this palatial cross between a sequia and a chandelier had erupted from the ground for everyone to show up. The Royal Guard was of course swarming all over the place, checking for threats to Their Majesties, poking at various things with their halberds and trying to look intimidating. Looking for booby traps, one supposes, or perhaps saboteurs lurking in the planters (which were full of good rich Sweet Apple Acres soil and an assortment of wildflowers; they were artfully arranged and quite stunning.) The rest of the Apples were there as well, along with Twilight's family (absent Prince Shining Armor and Princess Cadence, who were currently in the Crystal Empire preparing for the next Draconequus attack) and Spike, Fluttershy and her parents (a lovely couple, very much like their daughter and nearly as meek), Rarity and her family, Rainbow Dash was somewhere about, zooming about through the mansion with her parents, and... well, everyone, really. They had all arrived almost simultaneously, zooming in on Royal chariots commissioned by Celestia and Luna. Half the population of Ponyville had made their way in as well. Everyone was roaming about the enormous palace, poking into rooms and gawking at everything. Every now and then you could hear an exclamation as someone discovered a new nook or corner or chamber or elegant stairwell.

Celestia and Luna, oddly enough, had not remained to participate in the open-house tour. The moment they had clapped eyes on the new, farm-fresh Princess and the (extremely) shiny new castle, they had teleported straight back to Canterlot to set the necessary preparations in motion-- and to quell the hysterical panic the Canterlot royalty were almost certainly brewing up as radio announcements, TV news flashes, and tweets, twitters, texts and voice mails about "the incident" trickled in. (Instant nationwide communication was indeed proving a mixed blessing.)

It wasn't long before Spike came running down from upstairs. "Twilight, everypony-- I think you ought to come take a look at this," he said. The look on his face was worrying; I'd never seen him quite so serious before.

We trooped after him obediently (damn the stairs, damn the stairs, damn the stairs) till we reached (to judge by my throbbing legs) the highest room in the castle proper. It was a large circular chamber with a vaulted ceiling and enormous windows that looked out on all of Equestria. In the center of the room were six chairs, thrones really, arranged in a circle. The sixth had a small child sized chair next to it. Each of the thrones had a particularly familiar cutie mark on it.

"Are these for us?" Rainbow Dash said, hovering over the one bearing her mark.

"I think so," Twilight said. She poked gingerly at the throne which bore her mark. Spike, less hesitant, hopped into the child-sized one next to it.

With a certain air of caution, all of the girls took the seat that seemed meant for them. A moment passed. Then several more just like it. "Okay," Fluttershy said. "Now what-- Oh my GOODNESS!"

I won't assay to describe the light show that the circular table then put on for us; after the umpteenth magical eruption of sparkles and phosphorescent colors one simply runs out of superlatives. Suffice it to say that the table put on such a display, and when it was done, we found ourselves confronted with...

...well... a table. And on the table was a map.

It was a map of the Kingdom of Equestria and the surrounding lands and seas, rendered in full relief
and exacting detail out of shimmering crystal light. Everyone present breathed out oaths of amazement, myself among them. I could see weather patterns, the carefully regimented clouds floating over the surface of the world, ships cutting the waves of the seas, tiny ant-sized trains chugging their way through the hillsides--

It clicked. "This isn't a palace," I blurted out. The others looked up from the map and stared at me. I gave our regal, crystalline surroundings the once-over. "Well, not JUST a palace," I corrected myself. "It's a command center." At their continued uncomprehending looks I went on. "Look," I pointed at the table, specifically at a very familiar looking train winding its way through the hills. "Tell me, Twilight, when is the Friendship Express due in town?"

"About twelve fifteen," she said. She pulled out her cell phone. "Which is right about..." in the distance a train whistle sounded; through the enormous windows lining the room one could see the tiny, distant puffs of smoke heralding the arrival of the Friendship Express in town.

"Whoa," Spike said.

"Whoa indeed," I said. "Real-time surveillance of all of Equestria and, if I don't miss my guess, most of this side of the planet."

"This is amazing!" Twilight said in delight, her nose almost pressed into the hologram. "With this you could monitor weather patterns, urban development, transportation--"

"Troop movements..." I added grimly.

Twilight caught my tone and faltered. "Well, yes," she said. "But-- think of all the good things it could be used for as well--!"

Further discussion was interrupted when the lights in the room began to flash. No, not the lights in the room, I realized. The pulsing glow (and the rather annoying chiming sound) was coming from the girls' Elements... and more oddly, their cutie marks. Smaller, identical marks appeared over the map and flew in a tiny flock to hover over a spot on the map. "It appears to be tracking our location, perhaps?" Rarity said.

"If we're in Ponyville," Fluttershy said, pointing to Ponyville and then to the tiny flock of floating shapes, "Why is it showing our cutie marks way over there?"

"Of course," Twilight said, smiling brightly. "The Elements must want us to go there!"

"Pardon?" I said.

"Or, well, the Tree of Harmony and the Elements," Twilight corrected herself. "That's what all this--" she indicated the crystal edifice all around her. "--is for. It's so that the Tree of Harmony can find places where the Magic of Friendship is needed, and tell us where to go!" The others began voicing their enthusiastic agreement with this conclusion.

I need to take a moment, give pause and confess. At this alarming bright-eyed announcement from Celestia's protege', I kind of freaked. "Whoa whoa WHOA!" I said, slapping my hand down in the middle of the table, making the image (and several ponies) jump. "You are getting WAY ahead of yourselves here! You are jumping to a LOT of conclusions about this-- several conclusions in a row, in fact-- with little or no evidence!"

Twilight scowled at me. Oh dear, it looked like she had the bit in her teeth and was going to run with it, come hell or high water. "What are you talking about?" she said. "The tree of Harmony, the Elements, our Cutie Marks, our duties as the Bearers and as Princesses--" she took a moment to look
around the table. For the first time I realized, there was rather a majority of equine royalty gathered there-- "It's all connected! It's as plain as the nose on your face what we're supposed to do..." she tapped the map. "Go to this location and solve whatever Friendship and Harmony problem is there!"

"I must say, what she says does make sense, darling," Rarity said.

"Makes sense to me," Rainbow Dash added with a careless shrug.

"Girls," I tried again. "We don't know what it's doing, or how it's doing what it's doing. There's no controls, no training interface-- not even a user's manual--"

"Why are you making such a fuss about it?" Spike interjected. "The Elements didn't come with any instruction manual, and you were fine with the girls using THOSE."

"As a matter of fact, no I wasn't," I snapped. "Why do you think I begged and pleaded with Celestia and Luna to put some researchers to work on the darned things?" I'd nearly passed out when I learned just how little any of the Mane Six or even the Princesses knew about how the Elements of Harmony worked. Their entire approach had been to put the things on, point them in the general direction of the current problem, and hope the resulting blast of rainbow-colored thaumatic energy fixed everything. I had basically thrown a fit till Celestia and Luna appointed some researchers (OTHER than Twilight Sparkle, Princess of Tunnel Vision) in charge of studying the Bearers, the Elements, and everything in between.

"Beyond which, you wisely only brought out the Elements once matters passed the Godzilla Threshold, so I largely kept my peace. And the Tree of Harmony, well so long as it sits there quietly doing... whatever it does... I'm more or less at peace with it." I scowled. "It's when the deuced Deus Ex Machinas start issuing orders that I start getting sensibly reluctant to proceed."

"Godzilla Threshold?" Fluttershy asked.

"It refers to the idea that there's a point in a disaster when things are so bad that dropping a giant, fire breathing monster into the middle of things can't actually make anything worse," I explained, waving it off.

"Oh MY..."

"Wait an inky dinky second," Pinky said, squinting at me as if she suspected me of hiding her jellybean stash behind my back. "You said 'issuing orders'?"

"What do YOU call it when a piece of furniture tells Twilight Sparkle to go someplace right away, and she goes 'Yes sir, right away sir?'" I sniped. "(I really was behaving poorly; I can only blame it on my downturned mood.)

"I am not being 'ordered around' by a 'piece of furniture'--" Twilight said snippily.

I reined in my temper and glared at Twilight. "Twilight, we have a saying back where I come from: 'Don't trust anything that looks like it can think for itself if you can't tell where it keeps its brain.' This table," I gave it a poke with a commanding finger, "is showing way too much initiative for a simple tool, magical or otherwise.

"It's clearly both powerful enough and for lack of a better word intelligent enough to detect some sort of emergent crisis and determine that you six are the ones to fix it. But it's telling you nothing about the problem it wants you to fix! What sort of crisis? Who does it affect? What does it affect? Should we bring bailing buckets or fire extinguishers? It doesn't say! It's smart enough to recognize a problem but can't tell you what it IS?"
"You've got TWO--" I held up two fingers. "Possibilities here. Either this thing is a blind, dumb monitoring station, which we are yet to figure out how to use correctly... or it's intelligent and it's withholding vital information from you."

I rested my fists on my hips and glowered at the table. "More importantly you ought to be suspicious of the motives of whoever designed this thing."

"But-- it's from the tree of HARMONY," Twilight protested.

"So?" I cocked an eyebrow at her and harrumphed through my mustache. "Twilight, maybe you missed how many truly unpleasant individuals throughout your history tried to muck about with either the Elements or the Tree... and from what I've read one or two of them succeeded. Hells, we know nothing about the people who MADE the tree-- it's quite possible that they wouldn't have had our best interests at heart when they made this thing. The fact that it's messing with your Cutie Marks should be setting off alarm bells with you."

"Our ancestors, from tens of thousands of years ago--"

"Might I remind you that as recently as one or two thousand years ago your entire species was in a race war?" I said wryly. "The fact that they're your ancient forebears doesn't exclude them from being raging a-holes. Consider the possibility that the ones who designed the Tree, or this Castle, or this magic table, might have believed that the world would be a more Harmonious place without the other two tribes cluttering it up." The expression on Twilight's face was like she'd just been told that the van with the words 'Free Candy' painted down the side wasn't likely to have any.

"Or, just as possible, it could be responding to things that were a crisis in ages past that simply don't exist anymore," I said, trying to soften the blow a little. "Forests turn to desert, mountains turn to plains, rivers run dry and disappear, cities rise, empires fall-- It could be responding to unearthed dinosaur tracks for all we know." I shook my head. "No, you definitely shouldn't be running off chasing little floating icons across a map. Not till you, no check that, not till Celestia and Luna have looked this thing over and figured this thing out PROPERLY... starting with making sure noone, like say the Draconequi?" (everyone gulped at that little reminder.)" Have tampered with it. And finding an operator's manual at the very least." I squatted a bit, grunting, and looked at the underside of the table. Nothing. "Or a control panel. Or something."

Several of the Mane Six were nodding, some reluctantly. Twilight looked positively mutinous. Spike leaned over in his chair and put his hand on her fetlock. "He's right, Twilight," he said. "We could get in a real mess if we just messed around with this thing. I mean, remember when we got our cell phones? You wouldn't quit reciting the user's instructions over and over until we both had it memorized, because you didn't want us to mess them up 'just fiddling around.' Shouldn't we be at least that careful with this?"

She slumped a little. "I guess..."

I shook my head to myself. Twilight's 'unquestioning obedience' gland was getting seriously hyperactive... and this time it hadn't even been something wearing a crown or stuck in a binder.

"Uh, guys?" Rainbow Dash said. "Hate to bust up Arthur's little lecture..." (I glowered at her) "...but the marker is moving again." Sure enough, the miniature cutie marks were slowly drifting across the map, Eastward and Northward, to come to rest over a much more familiar location.

I could almost hear Twilight starting to hyperventilate. "The Crystal Empire! Cadence and Shining Armor... Now we have to--"
I waved her down. "Calm yourself, Twilight. We still don't know if the map is working right, it could just be--" at that precise moment my cell phone rang.

The dial tone was 'You Are My Sunshine.' Three guesses for who. (Fine, fine, I'll tell you-- the one for Luna was 'Moon River'.)

I pulled it out and answered, foreboding creeping over me. "Hello, your Highness... Um yes, she's here-- you forgot to turn your phone on, Twilight," I said. She eeped and fumbled for the phone in her pannier. "Should I pass this-- oh, I'll just tell her, then? Okay."

"Uh huh."

"Yes."

"In the North, you say."

"Of course, your Highness. Urgent. Immediately." I paused. "We will be passing through the Capitol to pick up some supplies first... uh huh, yes, and a few... right, exactly."

"Thank you your Highness." The connection clicked off. I sighed and put my phone back in its holster and glowered at the still-glowing table. I could see my reflection; I looked like Santa Claus had tried to eat a mouthful of persimmons. "Well, this is from Celestia and Luna direct," I said. "Take three guesses where she wants us to report to ASAP."

Pinky gave me a toothy grin. "I'll take three guesses, but I'm betting no matter what the first two are I'll be packing a parka."

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