

So Long, and Thanks for All the Ponies, part 20

Author's Note; "I love deadlines. I like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by."

Douglas Adams

"Why have you returned?"

Celestia's voice echoed fearsomely in that great and empty hall. She had not deliberately employed the Royal Canterlot Voice in many centuries, and would have enjoyed it had she not been so angry.

"Um."

DAMN. Jeltz mentally scrambled for something to say.

"I can explain everything."

The impression that this simple statement gave was not quite as good as he would have wished, because both princesses were capable of understanding nearly every language ever, and as such they did *not* make use of babelfish. This means that they, unlike our heroines, heard the vagon's actual voice, rather than a psychic facsimile that a babelfish would have produced. This is not a point in the vagon's favour. To say that vagon language sounds ugly is to fundamentally overestimate the power of that word. Vagon language is, to the overwhelming majority of beings capable of hearing, or in any way interpreting vibrations in air, utterly repulsive. This is at least partially because they have changed little since they were sea dwelling creatures, and their cheeks and jowls naturally get in the way of the mouth in a manner which prevents them from ever having their mouths totally empty of drool, which collects in a large pool over their windpipe. Furthermore, the constant production of phlegm in the highly domed nose, which rises well above the rest of the vagon's face, ensures that neither airway can ever normally be breathed through without occasionally taking a moment to noisily clear it. This means that vagons splutter, gargle, snort and choke their way around their own ugly syllables, which are constructed from a language which uses consonants very sparingly. The overall effect is that spoken vagon sounds rather like a drowning cow with a cold in a sewage processing facility, or a Frenchman with a strong accent.

The effect was that the princesses were not exactly enchanted by the unfortunate vagon's placatory words. Jeltz was informed of this in no uncertain terms.

"Explain? There is nothing to explain. We will see you leave this place immediately or we will see your whole fleet destroyed. We **WILL** protect our subjects."

It really is terribly difficult to collect yourself and confidently speak when one is being spoken to in a voice louder than you could manage even at a full shout. It leads to a rather significant

feeling of inadequacy.

"Actually, um, I..."

"Which doth thou choose?" It was Luna's turn to shout now. She had wanted to be able to get to say a line about protecting the subjects, and she was in some doubt as to whether Celestia was using the royal "we" or not. She felt more than a little left out sometimes, having slept through the recent changeling incursion and hardly being consulted during Discord's short-lived second reign. At least if things ever got too rough, she decided, she could always go Nightmare Moon on them all again; she knew where the elements lived now; it shouldn't prove a problem.

Jeltz, meanwhile, summoned up the best of his courage to try for absolute honesty. "I... I did come originally to blow you all up again... but I wanted to say sorry actually."

"Sorry?"

"I'm sorry that I blew up your planet and all of your subjects. I'm sorry I attempted to wipe out a species and I can see now that genocide is not justified by construction orders."

There was a pause as the princesses exchanged glances. Actual recalcitrance had not been something they had conceived of the vagon even *pretending* to show. A vagon saying that sort of thing wasn't just unbelievable, it was unthinkable.

Celestia felt a magical force trying to establish itself within the throne room, a teleportation or something similar. She blocked it effortlessly and without thought: No interference until this was sorted out.

"You expect us to believe that you brought your fleet back, after destroying our planet once, and your only intention is to say "sorry"? It is a bad lie."

Jeltz could see three available futures now very clearly. In the first of them, he managed to persuade the princesses that he had meant no harm. In the second of them, he immediately escaped with his fleet and returned to vogsphere to explain to a tribunal why he didn't blow up the planet. In the third of them, he neither left or explained himself to the angry goddesses looking at him as though he were a particularly execrable worm. He very quickly decided that neither of the latter two would be conducive to his own survival. With this very much in mind, and unable to take his piggy little eyes off the points on the princesses horns, he spoke his last best attempt.

"I have some of your ponies in my ship!"

All things considered, he could have phrased it a lot better. Vogons are known for neither their tact nor their intelligence. Princess Celestia's already furious eyes flashed, and Princess Luna grew pale with rage.

"What did you say?" She wasn't shouting anymore, but the very ground vibrated with the power of her voice.

"Um" *damn!* "Just..."

"You dare to threaten my subjects? Who do you have?"

"I think one of them was called Pinkie Pie or something. Her and her friends..."

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Several miles away, a pony named Twister Snaps was making a card castle to while away a fairly uneventful evening. It was not a good day to be building a card castle. Come to think of it, it was not a good day to live within sight of Canterlot and possess windows.

He got shakily to his hooves and through the ringing in his ears he heard the tinkle of breaking glass.

"To the moon?" he repeated.

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A tingling feeling of great power and delicacy stole over Twilight, and she found herself surrounded by a corona of golden light. It felt warm, familiar, and she almost sobbed as she realised she was going home finally. It didn't matter that she couldn't teleport herself down, somehow that Vagon had got it across to the princesses that there were ponies here in need of rescue. She watched as the golden light spread to cover each of her friends in turn, including Zaphod. She felt momentarily weightless, and then suddenly they stood in that throne room she knew so well. The dank metal of a vagon ship was replaced by smooth stone and light.

There's nothing quite like a room which contains a large mural of oneself defeating a villainous superbeing to boost one's spirits; especially when one has just learned that said villain is in sore need of a second serving of defeat. This was the great Canterlot throne room, its high stained-glass windows casting lances of light across the room from the setting sun. Celestia's magic deposited the ponies safely on the floor with seemingly infinite care, so that not even the slightest nausea or discomfort was felt by anypony involved.

Princess Celestia stood alone at the top of the steps leading up to her throne, and as she came down the steps she spoke. She was using her "loving mother of all" voice rather than her "all powerful force of wrath" voice. "My little ponies!" and then, in the voice she reserved just for her favourite student, "Twilight, what has happened? Are you and your friends alright?"

Overcome with emotion, Twilight almost whimpered, "Princess!"

Celestia bowed her head and the two shared a hug. It wasn't what any self respecting biped

would call a hug, but as they rested their heads together the meaning was the same.

"Princess, it's been so awful..."

"I'm sure it was, Twilight, but everything is ok now. What happened? How did he kidnap you?"

"Excuse me?"

"The vagon who kidnapped you, how did it happen? Are you alright?"

It was at this point that the ponies noticed the singular lack of vogons in the throne room. There was also a surprising dearth of princesses of the night, come to think of it.

"But... he didn't kidnap us at all!"

"Well darling, that isn't quite true..." Rarity began.

"Well, he didn't kidnap us today!"

"Well..."

"He never kidnapped us from Equestria itself!"

Princess Celestia looked with confusion between the two unicorns. "Today? He kidnapped you before today... from somewhere other than here?"

"Princess, we've been lost for days!" she paused. "Only days? It seems like so much longer..."

Pinkie nodded, "It feels like it's taken more than a year," she said, glaring upwards at some unseen figure who was apparently responsible.

Celestia frowned. "But I got one of your friendship reports just yesterday! Rainbow Dash, it was from you, and you didn't say anything about a kidnapping! It was about you learning about the magic of reading. In Spike's handwriting, I might add."

"Reading? Do I look like an egghead?" Rainbow was indignant. "That sort of thing is for nerds like Twilight. No offense."

Twilight shook her head "Oh my, of course, we've been living out our lives this whole time!" She smacked her forehead with her forehoof, which forehurt rather a lot. "Princess, you have to understand something, we've been lost in interstellar space for the past few days! Ever since the vogons first arrived!"

Celestia eyes widened. "You... you escaped the end of Equestria?"

"Yes!"

"Then you... Twilight Sparkle, I had no idea..." she paused, looking troubled. "I believed you all to be dead. How did you manage it?"

Pinkie stepped forward. "Uhh... there's something you don't know about me..."

"You're an alien. The same species as that president currently trying to hide behind all of you. I know. Hello again by the way Zaphod, it's been a while."

Zaphod grinned nervously, trying to work out whether or not he had ever slept with this being.

"Hey there..." he fumbled, "...you!"

But Celestia had higher priorities. "Twilight Sparkle, all of you, I don't know how to explain this to you, but there now exist perfect copies of you. They are as much you as this is Equestria, and as any pony you may ever meet from now on is themselves."

Twilight scuffed the ground with one forehoof. "Pinkie told us. That's when we realised we couldn't come back."

Rainbow Dash interjected, "I hate to break this little discussion up, but do I have to ask what happened to the guy who let us go?"

Celestia blinked. "Let you go?"

"Yeah, the vagon or whatever."

"The first nice vagon!" Pinkie added. "I started calling him Vogey-wogey, but he called himself Jeltz!"

"A *nice* vagon?"

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Prostetnic Vagon Jeltz was getting, in a way, a taste of his own medicine.

"**RESISTANCE IS USELESS!**" Luna bellowed as she dragged him along the carved grey walls of moonstone. Although Jeltz was held captive by a blue aura of magical energy rather than a green aura of vagonic arm-blubber, he couldn't help but feel that he could be said to have walked a mile in his prisoner's shoes. Or at least, been dragged a mile in them.

"I'm sorry but, there's been a..."

Luna, by contrast, was thoroughly enjoying herself. "**RESISTANCE IS USELESS!**" Who would have thought she would get a chance to use her moon dungeons so soon? It was pleasing that her dear sister had allowed the practice of locking a being in a dungeon in the place they had been banished to, for now she would have someone to try out the really exquisitely modelled dungeons she had constructed for her moon castle. She strode rapidly, not sparing the vagon a glance. Jeltz was kept level with her by a strong force about his neck and wide middle, which kept him in a pleasing state of half-throttled-ness that allowed breathing and shallow complaining, but nothing of a volume to bother her.

"**RESISTANCE IS USELESS!**" She called again, because really, how often did one really get the opportunity to use the phrase? Hardly ever, she thought. She might as well make the most of it.

Jeltz decided not to try speaking again, as it would doubtless bring no response other than another eardrum-shattering bellow from the princess with the lungs of adamantium. He felt that, karmically speaking, he rather deserved this. Were he to lodge a complaint to karma's head office (incidentally located on the fifth planet of a star system some appalling distance from our galaxy, with a "Closed" sign out the front), it would have only been about the timing of the event; surely punishing him immediately after his first conceptualisation of pleasantness wasn't going to encourage him to be a good person, was it? Counter-productive, that's what it was. If he had been experimenting with it, it would be an abject failure so far. But at least these ponies did not seem the sort to invest in capital punishment, and it was possible that those he had set free would speak on his behalf. He tried the thought for size, and found it comforting. He would be out before long. Maybe.

He suddenly found his shins banging on something, and looking ahead and down, he saw that he was currently being dragged up some fairly steep stone steps. He tried desperately to prevent excessive shin-damage with about the success of a drunkard in an unlit coffee table

factory. It was therefore to his immense relief when he was pulled up, then shoved through an open doorway into what was very clearly a cell, or even a dungeon.

He decided to give explaining everything one more try.

"I promise you I didn't come here to destroy anything!" he gurgled desperately. "I promise I was letting them go!"

Luna's face was as cold as that of the permanently disgruntled queen of the ice planet Reallyamazinglyhotaria (In the local language it means simply "Frostbite"). She regarded him with disdain.

"We shall get to the bottom of this before long. In the meantime we recommend you get your story straight."

The cell door slammed, and Jeltz looked around at the carved stone walls. It was essentially a cube carved straight from the rock of this planet's moon, and was totally lacking in anything that could be called a mod-con. Well, there was a part of the wall that had been left sticking out rather like a bench or a low shelf. He sat down heavily and leaned against the wall. He reached absently into his rubber uniform, looking for a very small bottle containing a thick brown liquid. His hand encountered something else. A gun. Oh dear. The situation flashed across his mind. He could easily get out of the cell now; that door would open quickly enough after it had been filled with Kill-o-zapp branded laser (analysis of the waveform includes the trademark of the Kill-o-zapp corporation). But... then what? He had a feeling he was rather out of his depth. Admittedly his fleet had enough firepower to at least make a lower-calibre god pay attention, but he had no real way, or desire to bring it to bear. It occurred to him that had he not undergone... whatever that change had been, he would have taken the choice to blow the planet, its deities and himself up without a second thought. Simple spite would have demanded it. He carefully put the gun back, and reached again for the bottle. For the moment, it seemed the best solution.

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Twilight's story made Celestia's eyes go wide. She whipped around, and stared around at the ceiling, her eyes seeming to lose focus. She scanned, looking around until she stopped, staring at a point just to the right of the setting sun.

"Yes," she breathed, "of course."

"Princess?" Twilight's nervous voice broke her reverie.

"The being we know as Discord is not isolated to Equestria. What is trapped in that statue in the gardens..."

She was interrupted by Rainbow Dash. "That's still in the gardens?"

"Of course. I wasn't going to throw it away, was I?"

"Well, I just thought after what happened last time you left it out in the open..."

"You mean the lack of signage?"

"And the fact that a simple fillies' argument could release him at any moment!"

"Well, of course we realised how vulnerable it was where it was before, we had it moved!"

"Well... good!"

"It's now right outside the window of the board game room, where there's no need to worry about any arguments. Anyway, that statue only imprisons a part of Discord, a part of the chaos of reality given sentient form. Out there in the galaxy... he is much more powerful. Too powerful even for the Elements of Harmony." She closed her eyes wearily. "We did try once. To make the rest of the galaxy as harmonious as Equestria. But... well, we couldn't make a dent. We satisfied ourselves with keeping this place free from his influence."

"Are we safe here?" Fluttershy's question was quite a good one on balance.

Celestia gave her a warm smile. "Of course. He cannot touch us here; being to being he is no more powerful than I and my sister; we can always hold him off even if we may never defeat him." She faced the whole group. "I remain far more concerned about the Vagon fleet hovering above us all. You say the captain is good now, but he brought his fleet here and is still potentially an agent of Discord. I do not know how long it will take for some Vagon on board one of those ships to find a protocol that enables them to fire without the captain, but if they do we will be forced to destroy them all. I could not bear to lose my subjects a second time..." Her voice trailed off. She was staring at Twilight.

She had taught the almost uniquely talented unicorn from a filly, and she recognised the look on Twilight's small earnest face. She had seen it before, when Twilight had first learned to play chess and had begged to be allowed to play the national grand master when he had come to tea. The middle aged stallion had soundly thrashed her for most of a game, until it came down to Twilight's last two pawns, an errant rook and a beleaguered king. The final result of that game was known to only three ponies in the world, and Celestia had explained that this was an exercise in mercy. It was a look, in short, that meant that something interesting was going to happen.

It was a look of intense concentration; a frown that meant that enough pieces of some intricate puzzle had fallen into place, and that Twilight had just realised that somewhere in the facts at her disposal there was something big, if only she could find the right way to look at the problem. Celestia studied it, picking up on every curve of that small frown. She waited patiently, perfectly still, determined not to break the smaller unicorn's concentration. The other ponies picked up on it, all except Zaphod who had become distracted by his own reflection in the polished marble floor.

Twilight's eyes snapped wide open, and a small spark of light gleamed for an instant. The light of inspiration. She smiled, then looked at Celestia.

"We need that vagon back, I have a plan!"

"For what, my faithful student?"

Twilight's smile was confident, as befitted any being about to utter the following statement:

"We're going to save the galaxy!"

It's a statement which needs a fair bit of backing up.