

Through The Eyes Of Another Pony

By CardsLafter

Chapter Fourteen: Gave That Luna Some Chapter. Lunas Love Chapter!

Sonuva whore! Forty-three thousand words! This is where I flop about in pain and anguish! Why did I do this to myself!?

Blargh. Not much to say, guys. Life's getting back on track and I'm actually going to be able to write more consistently.

Now, I hope this chapter goes over well because I've really bled for this one.

*Anyway, rather than waste more time, I'm going to link a few cool things and some pictures or something. *flop**

Ponies.

First up we got DaAfroMan's animation project! He wants to animate the entire fan fic. Yes, you heard me. All of it. He doesn't care if it's going to take more than a year (or two) to make it happen. He's gonna do it. If you're interested in helping on this project, whether it be voice-acting, animation, concept art, music contributions or (Omnipony has already claimed Music Director) anything else you can think of, just go [Here!](#)

Those crazy MSTFan/Fic/ers have decided to riff my fan fic. The nerve. Take the fight to them, bronies! Part [One!](#) and [Two!](#) They're still awesome, though. :3

Next up is the fan-forum. Yes, you remember those nutcases that were blowing up the comments with their zaniness? Well, they decided it would be best to congregate in their own nutshell. I'll miss those squirrely little buggers. Here's the link if you wanna join in the [madness!](#)

And last but certainly not least, an audiobook is currently being casted for. Quite a few of the male voices are already snatched up, but there's still a chance to be a part of something ridiculous! Link is [provided](#) within the word 'provided.'

An amazing piece of music, I daresay one of the best I've heard, has hit the youtubes! I give to you... [The Shadow Archon Battle Theme](#) by our very own [Toastwaffle!](#)

Now, I think that's all the non art stuff. (TELL ME IF I MISSED SOMETHING!)

So, without further ado... ON TO THE ART! Be sure to check out <http://firewall-club.deviantart.com/> for more artsy stuff!



I was prepared for many things. Rule 63 Firewall was not one of them. Also, that is not Storm Wing, but the OC of the fellow who commissioned this fine piece of artwork. Also, Dat Flank. Thanks, [Silver!](#)



People often ask me how they make it to the Art Section of the chapter. Not [SerenaKKS](#), though... Nope. This crazy pony knew the way to my heart was through my two favorite pegasi. <3 Also, I love how Storm is smaller than Dashie. XD



D: It hurts! *sob* [RainyRag](#) did this. And damn it, he did a good job, too! D:



Damn it, [Mick](#), you went all out on this one! O.o Color me (rimshot!) impressed, my good pony! :O



I don't like to double up on artists' work. But I really couldn't choose between the two. [SerenaKKS](#), you get a brohoof... I'm in love with Nightmare Sol.

And now... The moment you've all been waiting for... FANFICTION! (that is such an anticlimactic sentence... XD)

First of all, I want to say I was in a bad mood to start. Why? I had nightmares about Luna getting herself... Well, perish the thought and all but, uh... killed in her attempts to save me. Shit was bothering me in ways I cannot fully describe. Brought back some terrible memories, as well. Suffice it to say, waking up screaming somebody's name in terror is not a good start to my day, okay? A cold sweat was the least of my worries however, since it was all downhill from there.

Oh yeah. Feel the burn of unlawful imprisonment.

It was easy to figure out where I was because I had seen it before. That meant squat when it came down to where it was in comparison to other places, but I knew it wasn't too terribly far from Ponyville. Why? Because it was a dark cold cave with medieval torches and perfectly cut jewels protruding from the walls. I was in the underground lair... of the Diamond Dogs. Specifically one of their jail cells. Silly as this was, it came with a bed, toilet, and a woven carpet. Homey, right?

I frowned and reached for my cigarettes, only to glare when I realized that I did not have them. I sat up and prepared to give the gate a good bucking only to realize that I didn't have four legs.

I did a quick once over of myself to discover that I was exactly the way I was when I had left Earth. Two arms, two legs, and one head (which made me incredibly abnormal here). Not only that, but I was clothed in... clothes that weren't mine. Oh god, I remembered thinking, I hope these were magicked on. Still, they were fairly stylish. A pair of dark grey denim jeans along with a thick white sleeveless tank top and socks. My first thought upon seeing socks was that I had never placed socks upon any of the ponies, and that was an opportunity missed. Damn. I felt my face and discovered that I had skipped shaving for a day when I had been snatched up. My face was no doubt grey judging by the sandpaper feel of it.

Now, obviously, I have to give you my visual description, right? Blargh. Here goes. I do not look heroic, so let's get that right out. I have medium length dark blonde hair that sweeps back, revealing my widow's peak. I have a very angular face and a propensity to scowl when I'm not actively smiling. I know, you're probably struggling with this image that feels more villainous than anything. If you aren't, then you're doing it wrong. I don't look like a nice person, and it's been something I've struggled with ever since high school, which is when my eyes sunk in a tad to help cast shadows under them. Seriously, I look like I moonlight as Jack The Ripper. You want to know the irony of this situation? I'd probably be a much less understanding person if I had not adopted the practice of showing empathy to help reassure people who were forced to regularly spend time with me.

"This does not bode well for anyone." I ran a hand through my hair as I groaned, moving

towards the bars to give them a tug. Sure enough, they were tight. That didn't stop me, though. They were attached to sedimentary rock, therefore it was likely that they could be worn down with enough wigg-... Yeah. No, I seriously started to think that before I remembered HERP A DERP THAT'S A SCIENTIFIC/LOGICAL ASSUMPTION. Magic would probably assure that nothing but a dragon would ever rip those bars out of place.

"Who's there!? Show yourself!" I heard a voice furiously demand of me. A voice that was both very haughty and very familiar. No, it wasn't Trixie; I'm not that lucky. Instead, I got The Nightmare. Hold me back, 'cause I get the best dungeon mate ever! No extra charge for the sarcasm, by the way, 'cause I'm generous.

"Identify yourself!" she said.

"Yer mom!" I snapped angrily as I gave the bars a yank for good measure. Yup, they were stuck in place. I tried a bit of magic, but wasn't surprised when nothing happened. I mean, I felt a surge of warmth in my hands, but I was fairly certain that was just me being hopeful.

"Oh. You." The joy was practically dripping off of her voice. I mean I could have bottled it up and everything.

"Firewall!" Applebloom's voice rang out, causing my rage to kick in. I had forgotten that they had her here with me. I pressed my face at the bars and glanced as far down the hall as I could. It was a long roughly dug out hallway. I couldn't see either Applebloom or Nightmare Firesomething (She actually never got around to naming this version).

"Applebloom!" I cried out, becoming semi relieved when she stuck her hoof out. Her cell was right next to mine and judging by how close her hoof was, the wall wasn't very thick. That somehow made me feel a little better. I reached out and touched her hoof, causing her to shriek in horror.

"No!" She yanked away and I could hear her retreating to the back of her cell, "S-Stuh... Stay away!"

"No, Bloom, it's me!" I waved my hand around the corner disarmingly. "This is what I look like normally. It's just me, Firewall."

It took her a little while but eventually I felt her poke at my hand with a testing hoof.

"F-Firewall?"

I gave her a thumbs up. Why? Not a clue. Maybe I was hoping she was psychic and would understand what that meant.

“Yeah, darlin’, it’s me.”

When she grabbed hold of my hand with both hooves and clenched fearfully, I felt my chest tighten. Her fear alone was breaking my heart. I’m not the typical guy to wear his heart on his sleeve; the quickest way to get around that obstacle is to hurt those I care about. This fell into that category, for sure.

“Firewall! Where are we?!” she cried, her voice trembling.

“You’re underground. Buried under a hundred feet of rock, dirt, and gemstone.” The Nightmare’s voice was cold and a bit snide. It was as if she was taking joy in telling us just how little hope there was of rescue.

“I think we’re in the lair of the Diamond Dogs,” I said, ignoring The Nightmare, “It’s not that far from Ponyville, but it’s pretty far underground.”

Applebloom silently digested that for a moment. After her silence began to drag on, I started to speak again, only to be interrupted by the sound of sniffing. I felt a lump in my throat as her magical grip tightened.

Okay, so I may wear my heart on my sleeves a little.

“Hey... Hey, it’ll be okay.” I promised her, unsure of whom I was trying to convince. Myself? Her? The Nightmare? Trixie?

...Trixie?

“Trixie!” I spotted her approaching from the corner of my eye. I was still angry with her, but a large part of me was still happy to see her. I know she didn’t want this to happen to me, but she didn’t have to drag Applebloom into all of this.

She was nudging along a tray full of covered dishes. I don’t know what was in it, but it smelled good. Like garlic. And tomatoes. And grilled bovine. I told myself to ignore the food and stay mad. Easier said than done, that much was for sure.

“Fireball.” She smiled hesitantly, quickly frowning upon seeing my glare. Rather than speak straight with me, she fell back on her charade of hubris and inability to speak outside of third person, “The Great and Powerful Trixie is surprised. Normally you are so happy to see her.”

I narrowed my eyes and crossed my arms. She frowned a bit further more before grabbing one of the trays with her teeth and setting it at the edge of the cell and moving on. For a while, I considered being all badass and not accepting their food. That lasted for all of about oh... six seconds? I’m glad I didn’t wait longer though, because as soon as I reached past the bars to

open that damn tray, I saw the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in Equestria. Except maybe for Luna's eyes, that is. Luna has some wicked deep... Right, food.

STEAK! SWEET MERCIFUL FATHER THAT ART IN HEAVENZ!

It was a big fat 20 oz. Prime Rib steak! Still hot and dripping with the greasy blood (It's not *actually* blood, but rather a watery, blood colored protein called Myoglobin.) of a good Rare-to-Medium-Rare job. I love my steaks like that. That's right. I hope you're squeamish 'cause this sucker was COVERED IN IT! After staring at it in wonder, I yanked it into my cell and tore into it like a barbarian. It was delicious. Beyond amazing in terms of flavor, texture, juiciness and... yeah, I'm boring you, aren't I? Suffice to say I blocked everything out for the three minutes that it took to wolf that baby down. I must have been entertaining to watch because when I finished, I looked up to see Trixie staring at me in awe. She must have finished serving the others while I was busy enjoying the simple life of a steak lover.

"Was... Was it good?" She blinked as she hoofed me a napkin, unsure of how to digest my ravenous behavior.

I smiled contently before remembering who I was, where I was being held, and why I was here. I wiped off with the napkin before tossing it onto the plate and sighing.

"Yes," I said begrudgingly, "Thanks."

"That was meat, r-right? David said you... what... what was that?" she asked, wonder splayed upon her visage. She was curious to know what kind of animal I had just devoured. This was going to be fun. I couldn't help it. Anger or not, my need to troll surged like nobody's business and demanded that I take advantage of this situation.

"That was grilled pony. Unicorn, specifically. Didn't you know?" I licked my lips with a friendly smile. I am so good at bullshitting anyone for about twenty seconds straight.

She paled visibly, but tried to call my bluff nonetheless, "Y... you're ly-... No, it wasn't!"

"Totally was. Adult unicorn mare." I winked at her with a toothy grin, turning my head enough to show off my incisors and canines. "You can tell the gender by the flavor of the blood and the light musculature told me unicorn, since they don't strain their muscles often. Aftertaste and overall texture can tell you the maturity. She was right around... your age, Trixie. She probably... struggled. Hope it wasn't anypony you knew."

Trixie took two steps back, her horrified expression switching from the plate and back to me several times. Poker faced it. It was so perfect! I could tell she was moments away from throwing up and/or passing out. In all honesty, I could never eat a pony, but the sickening aspect of such an act can be subdued for a good traumatizing act or two.

"Y... oh, I think..." she murmured as she covered her mouth with a hoof, looking exceptionally lightheaded. She actually lost a bit of her color.

I stared at her for all of five more seconds before finally erupting into a long string of laughter. "Hahaha! I'm totally pullin' your hoof, Trixie! Damn, but the look on your face was so worth it! You were about to puke, too!"

She wasn't amused. She quickly regained her composure and snarled angrily. Insert trollface right hur!

"Omigosh!" I heard Applebloom cry out, laughing right along with me. That was uplifting, to be sure. Cheering up Applebloom was a thousand times cooler than trolling Trixie. "I thought y'all were serious, Firewall!"

"Firewall?" Trixie looked confused, happily grasping a change of subject that didn't involve the devouring of her kin.

"Yeah, Firewall." I gave her a nod, smiling coyly. "That's my name."

Her expression faded into further flabbergastation. "You've let me call you Fireball this entire time! It can't be Firewall."

"Yeah, it can! 'Cause it is!" The filly next door protested. I could practically see her glaring at Trixie like she was the most wrong pony ever!

"It... it is?" She looked back at me in shock. Finally! Somepony delivered the news to Trixie and it was about time! I watched as her face warped from confusion to pensiveness, then finally annoyance as she looked back at me.

"You've been letting me get your name wrong this whole time!" She snapped, stamping her hoof at me in embarrassment.

My response? Fall over and laugh at her some more! She continued to yell at me for a few seconds, but when Applebloom shared in the mirth, Trixie gave up and began to clean up the plates. I had not caught on at the time, but she had yet to use any magic whatsoever. In fact, the only reason I had spotted that was because she was careful to touch my steak plate as little as possible with her mouth. I was still busy making fun of her, but as she finally got everything gathered up, I was struck with that realization.

"Hey, why aren't you using magic?" I swung myself back up to my feet and ~~trotted~~ (Damn it, I just got used to using those words, too.) mosied on over to the bars.

She glanced my way but said nothing. Still bitter about being trolled, I guess. Somepony needed to get a sense of humor and some thicker skin, in my opinion! I pouted ridiculously at her but she would have none of it and trotted away as she nudged the rolling food tray. I dunno, maybe Luna had made me numb to the sensation, but I didn't think I had trolled her that badly.

"Slave!" The Nightmare shouted at the retreating Trixie. "Tell your master that he will regret betraying me! I will see him destroyed!"

"I'm not a slave! And you should just tell him yourself," Trixie's not-so-amused voice called back as her voice faded. That's when it happened. Cue undramatic entrance by David!

I kid you not, he and Azure Flora walked right past my cell so casually that I almost forgot he was the current antagonist to my life. He was wearing that same maroon sweater and Harry Potter haircut. Only this time he was carrying something in his hand. I didn't see what it was, just made a general rectangular shape and rather shiny. Ooooo~... Shiny...

"David!" I cried out, grabbing the bars of my cell, "This is the stereotypical demand of LET ME OUT! And give me my body back!"

He ignored me, which was the stereotypical villain response, so I couldn't exactly blame him. Instead, I just listened as he approached The Nightmare. Rather, that was what I surmised had happened as the two of them began talking. Keep in mind I couldn't actually see them, as they were some number of cells down to the right of me. I reached back around the corner to Applebloom and held her hoof again to help comfort the frightened little filly. Fantasy world or not, being kidnapped at such a young age can be horrifying. Especially when everlasting freedom is all you know.

"David. You betrayed me." The Nightmare's words were sharp enough to shave the gray off my face. She was not pleased in the slightest.

I could hear him sigh in response before speaking, "It had to be done. You were out of control and drunk on power. You still are in the ways that matter, you are just no longer a danger to anyone in your current state. Still, I blame myself, naturally, since it is all you know. So now I'm mending my mistakes. This is for your own good."

"I don't need a parent!" she countered angrily. I could hear a hoof striking one of the bars daringly.

"Actually, you do," he replied quite softly, "I gave you knowledge and power. What I didn't and can't give you is discipline and wisdom. I aim to change that. You deserve a better life. If you are willing, I will let you out and show you a better way. Now that you no longer have the power to resist the Codex, I will be willing to place trust within you."

“Don’t speak to me of trust! Your ‘trust’ comes with a slave collar and a dog whistle with which to beckon me!” Her words were so sudden and loud that Applebloom clenched my hand again, unaccustomed to such a spiteful attitude. I ran my thumb over what one might consider her wrist and squeezed back to let her know I was there for her.

“Though, I suppose I should grant that you are both trustworthy and competent.” Her words were dripping with acid and sarcasm, contrasting acutely to David’s soft, passive speech. “Very competent and trustworthy indeed! It’s a shame that when you were competent you weren’t entirely trustworthy and when you were trustworthy you weren’t very competent!

“Don’t make me laugh, David. Your treachery is only outclassed by your complete idiocy! Give me no leeway or I will use it to walk upon you and all your endeavors! Make no mistake, any misconceptions I once had over being your ally are long gone, foal! Consider me your enemy, David - a dangerous one at that!”

“I see.” David let out a long sigh before continuing, “And there is nothing I can do to dissuade you?”

“Read my lips, Creator, and read them well: You will regret the day you created me. I so swear it,” she snarled, her words soaked in venom.

“Then I have no choice,” he replied in a resigned fashion, “You force my hand. Flora, open the cage. I take no pleasure in doing this.”

That was when I figured out why Trixie wasn’t using magic. This room was chock full of Inmanipulon! Joy!

“Do your worst, worm!” I heard The Nightmare scream furiously. There were sounds of a small struggle, followed by her whimpering and eventually a body hitting the ground. It was actually really scary. It was like the really tasteful and well-executed horror movies that know panning away from the scene was more intense. Because for those of us intelligent enough to have a speck of creativity, it is much worse than watching the actual gore. Your imagination will always jump to the worst conclusion, and for a while, all I could picture was... Well, it certainly wasn’t pretty, I’ll say that much!

Luckily, that wasn’t the case, as I discovered shortly after. David walked by again, still ignoring me, followed by Azure Flora and a large flat slab of Inmanipulon carrying The Nightmare. She seemed completely unharmed, I noticed, just unconscious for some unknown reason. Flora paused to give me and Applebloom a glance, noting how I was doing my best to comfort the little filly. She cantered to our cells, avoiding any eye contact with me.

“Don’t worry, child, it will be alright,” she assured Applebloom. Not sure how little Bloom reacted, but it seemed to sadden Azure Flora. Judging by the way she pressed her face into my

hand, I'm assuming she cowered from the ancient pony. Flora was a sweetheart, deep down, I'm still fairly certain. It wasn't too much of a stretch that frightening a child would sincerely bother her.

"Come, Flora," David called, "We've work to do. We'll come back for the boy soon enough."

Boy? Man, it had been a while since anybody called me that. I mean, sure, I may not be a thousand-plus years old like them, but I was old enough to drink and legally obtain STDs! What's this 'boy' nonsense!?

Anyway, Flora gave Applebloom a sad, almost fearful look before glancing at me as she trotted away. Her dainty hooves made little to no sound as she retreated after David. Not exactly a pleasant day all in all.

"What's going to happen to her?" the terrified little filly asked.

"Not a clue," I admitted, "but don't worry. They're not going to hurt you. They don't have a reason to."

That seemed to comfort her a bit. Too bad it didn't work both ways. I was still worried if they had a reason to hurt me!

* * *

"Apple. I can't believe you haven't used that one, yet," I chuckled.

"Eggplant!" Applebloom answered enthusiastically, "And I was savin' it! Now ya gone and used it!"

"Tortilla," I replied with a smirk, softly tapping the back of my head against the wall I was sitting up against, "I know, I'm such an ass."

"Asparagus!" she called out triumphantly, "What's an ass?"

"Don't use that word, Applebloom. It's a bad word," I chided her from behind the stone wall between us, "Spaghetti."

Yes, we were playing the Food Game. Juvenile to be sure, but Applebloom was having more fun with it than was reasonable. But hey, I can get behind unreasonable amounts of fun. Why, it's the best sort of fun there is!

Also, if you don't know what the Food Game is, use your mighty wizard powers (aka Google) to find out.

"Ice cream! Then why did ya say it?" she harrumphed, "You ain't no better than anypony else, y'know!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm sorry," I sighed and shut my eyes, trying to think of an 'M' food. "Mustard."

"That ain't no food!" she said just before trying to clear her throat with a cough.

"Can ya eat it? Also, double negative."

"You ain't supposed to eat it by itself!" she stubbornly insisted before letting out a cough.

Decided to lie a bit. "I've done it."

"Yeah, well, you're kind of a weirdo!"

I just got insulted by a little filly. Damn. I was so awestruck by the fact that I forgot to reply, which must have scared poor Applebloom into thinking she had hurt my feelings.

"Firewall? Firewall, I was just kiddin'!" I heard her scamper up to the bars of her cell, pausing her apology only to cough a couple of times. "I didn't actually mean it. I'm really sorry!"

I began to chuckle at her adorable apology. I had not yet taken note that Mocking Bird Syndrome had set in and I was leaving letters off the end of my words. Had I noticed, I probably would have overcompensated and ended up sounding British or something.

"It's okay, Bloom, it was pretty funny. And don't worry, people have been calling me names since I started going to school. It ain't nothin' new. And... You still gotta 'D' food."

"Ah done told you that mustard ain't a food!" she immediately replied, not having forgotten her position on the matter in the slightest. She tried to continue speaking but her sentences kept getting interrupted by increasingly intense coughing. "You *-cough-* need to pi-*cough-*pick something... *-COUGH-* different!"

"You okay?" I blinked. I had not been actively thinking about it, but Applebloom's cough had been getting progressively worse as the hours passed.

Before she could respond, the door swung open and the sound of foot and hoofsteps came clapping down the stone floor. It had been several hours since anyone had last come to visit us in our luxury prison suites, but sure enough Azure Flora and David had returned with The Nightmare. I couldn't help but feel my blood run a little cold when I spied my former body curled up on the floating slab of Inmanipulon, shuddering and whimpering quietly in its sleep.

I heard Applebloom rush to the other side of her cell, having no desire to be anywhere near our captors. Couldn't blame her. She tried to cough as softly as she could, but Azure Flora must have noticed because she stopped the moment she passed me. She stared into Applebloom's cell for several seconds, her eyes widening with what looked like horror. Not sure what she was seeing, but it made me worry for Applebloom. David paused to look back at her, then followed her gaze methodically.

"Flora," he said after a second, letting his eyes drift a bit to glance at me, "Come."

I watched as she had to force herself to look away. Whatever she was seeing, it seemed to scare her. I didn't like that. It pushed out all worries over The Nightmare and started settling on just what was wrong.

"Applebloom, are you okay?" I called out softly as both David and Flora walked out of sight.

"Yeah, I... *-cough-* I'm just feelin' a little... *-cough-* Throat's a little scratchy," she quickly barked out between coughs, "I think I... *-cough-* need to lay down."

I was suddenly extremely worried. I didn't know what all I could do to help the little filly, but that didn't stop me from *wanting* to help her. I tried to remain calm and told myself that Applebloom might just be a little horse. Then I shot whatever part of my brain furnished such an awful pun to prevent it from happening again.

With a bit of reluctance, I came to the conclusion that there was only one thing I could do, and that was appeal to the sympathetic side of my captors.

Man, sometimes I forget just how quickly my pride, laziness, and just about every other inhibition flies out the window when kids are on the line. I mean, some thirty-something John Doe somewhere... Yeah, it'll bother me, but he's just as able to defend himself as I could. Children? Yeah, I mean that's like hurting Fluttershy. And you're just asking for it, then.

I waited until David and Flora returned from caging The Nightmare. I began to call out to them, but fortunately enough, I didn't have to.

Flora was visibly trying to ignore Bloom's coughs, but her resolve was about as strong as a baby otter. She didn't even make it past the first bar of my cage before she turned and ran back to the cell next to mine.

David glanced back at her, his eyes narrowing askance. "Flora."

She didn't respond. She was too busy gazing into the cell in fear in her eyes. It was one of those fears that made me think something similar had happened to her before.

I had that moment. The one where something that didn't make sense suddenly made perfect sense. Where you almost regret figuring it out because the implications are horrible and you don't want it to be true.

"Flora, do not be so quick to jump to conclusions," David sighed, removing his glasses long enough to run a frustrated hand over his face. "She has not even been here an entire day."

"I know, but... but she's..." Flora was having one of those logic-versus-evidence battles where the facts said that something works one way but what you were presented with was telling you something entirely different. "Just... just look at her."

David walked over long enough to glance inside before looking back down at his Pact Pony.

"I see a young filly that seems to be sick, resting in a bed because she's likely running a fever," he replied quite stiffly, "I've no reason to believe she's experiencing the same effect as you were from prolonged Anti-Magic exposure. I'll send Trixie to bring her some medicine. Create a lock on the cage so that she can enter and exit."

"David, I don't know..."

"And neither do I. Which is why I cannot make any assumptions. It has cost me enough in the past," he cut her off before she could continue. "Don't worry, Flora, if she starts to show more symptoms, then we shall see to it that she is taken care of before it is too late. But I am taking no chances until then. Understand?"

There was a pause in there, but eventually she replied, "Yes."

He nodded before turning to me and smiling. "Now, as for you."

I didn't feel like playing ball. All I wanted was a cigarette and for David to lean a little closer to the bars so I could break his nose.

"Oh, you're acknowledging me now?" I gasped, throwing a dainty hand over my heart. "But you've wounded me so already."

"You are not as funny as you think," he replied with a roll of his eyes.

"Lies and slander, bitch! In case you haven't realized, your opinion means next to nothing to me. Unless you want to write it on down on some toilet paper. I could find some uses for it, then." I gave a helpless shrug before continuing, "Seriously, I heard you used to be quite the joker, but you're dryer than Storm Wing. Do you realize how dry that is? You could parch a jellyfish at fifty paces, man."

His response was as cold as ice and did a damn good job of giving me the chills.

“I am told that I become quite cold when those I care about are put into harm’s way,” he uttered.

That brought my nonsense to a halt. I regarded him with uncertainty and curiosity. After a moment, though, I gave a single nod, frowning contemplatively.

“I can relate.”

He raised his eyebrows, as though he weren’t expecting such a serious, straightforward answer.

Which is kinda unfair if you ask me! I mean, come on! Is it really so damned shocking when I show my serious side?

“Then perhaps we are not so different after all,” he replied in a slightly warmer manner.

Damn it, Winter Sky, why do you ALWAYS have to be so right about everything?!

He turned to leave, Azure Flora right with him. Just before he started walking though, he glanced back at me.

“Do you remember the last thing I said to you at the aftermath of the battle?” he asked. “What the Equestrians have come to refer to as The Battle of Shadows?”

It took me a moment to get it, but it wasn’t difficult. I only heard it half a dozen times that day.

“Sure do,” I answered before turning back for my bed and unceremoniously falling back on it. “Why?”

“I think the answer is obvious enough. Get some rest.” He started walking, leaving me behind. “I’ll be sending Flora or Trixie to come fetch you before long.”

I didn’t respond beyond a short affirmative grunt. My mind was already busy racing, worrying about Applebloom. The way Flora had talked about losing her magic made me fear for the little filly. She didn’t make it sound like a pleasant experience. Sure, she would be immune to magic, and yeah, she might become immortal. But if Azure Flora was right, she was never going to get her cutie-mark. Hell, she’d have to make some enslaving Pact with David just to feed herself (unless, y’know... she wanted to get a puppy bowl or something).

“Flora.” I heard David’s voice in the distance.

I sat up just a bit to see Flora still gazing fearfully into Applebloom’s cell.

“Look a little familiar?” I called out to her.

She snapped her head towards me and almost glared. Yeah, it was somewhat a douchebag move to take that cheap shot. She’ll live. Besides, I was suffering from a lack of cigarettes and somepony needed to take the abuse.

“Don’t let him control you like that.” I laid back down, staring at the ceiling. “We have a saying where I come from. Treat others the way you would want to be treated. Wouldn’t it have been nice if someone had saved you from your fate?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she replied and turned to leave without another word on the subject. “Do as David said and get some rest. You may end up needing it.”

“Right,” I sighed.

And with that, I caught me some Z’s. My body wasn’t tired, but my mind was already exhausted.

* * *

In theory, when I take a nap, it’s to get some rest. That’s all. I’m not asking for the moon or anything (Especially since I’m already dating her), I just want to recharge my proverbial batteries. But really, when one’s naps are consistently interrupted, one must ask oneself a simple question.

Why bother?

“Firewall!” Applebloom’s terrified shriek shook me awake.

“Naps,” I replied without thinking. “They are forbidden in Equestria.”

Seriously, how does Rainbow Dash manage to catch naps? I’d have to wrangle the secret out of her later.

“Firewall, lis-*cough-cough*-... listen!” she cried out.

I’m not sure how it took Applebloom screaming at me to get me awake. It did, though, despite the fact that *somepony* was making quite a racket.

“What is that?” Bloom asked fearfully before falling into a hacking fit.

My head was pounding. It had been at least twelve hours (if not more) since my last cigarette. My mood was not exactly sparkling. Still, I was awake and whatever was making all that noise

was going to keep me from going back to sleep.

So I listened. It sounded like... crying. But there was only one pony here besides both Applebloom and myself.

“Hey, Bloom. Are you absolutely certain that isn’t you?” I asked pointlessly. I mean, the alternative just didn’t compute.

“I think I would *-cough-* know if it were me!” she protested the accusation.

“Then let me lay your fears to rest by informing you that the sound you are hearing is the traumatizing melody of someone crying in their sleep.” I sighed, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

Crying and crying in your sleep do not sound the same. Especially in front of other people. When you cry normally, you’ll scream, cough, cover your face with your hands... Basically muck it up with natural reactions that come along with crying. Crying in your sleep, on the other hand, sounds a lot different. It normally involves a lot of moaning, whimpering, and generally sounds rather consistent. It’s actually quite... Frightening having to listen to a person cry in their sleep.

If you’re wondering how I know these things, it’s actually from when my sister passed away when I was younger. Before I could really understand what it meant to lose family. Mom did a lot of crying. Even in her sleep. I didn’t get much rest when it happened, and listening to it again, even from *The Nightmare*... well, it wasn’t improving my mood, that much was certain. Sometimes, nostalgia is really unpleasant.

“Just try to get to sleep.”

“But why’s *-cough-* she cryin’?”

“Hell if I know,” I muttered under my breath, “Probably because David’s doing something to her.”

“Is she gonna be okay?” she asked haltingly.

Oh, the wonderful innocence of a child. *The Nightmare* was the scariest thing she’d ever heard of and yet she still felt concern for its well being. She must be special. Lord knows I’ve never spared a thought for the Boogieman while I was growing up. Ain’t that something?

“Yeah, she’s just going to need some time. Don’t disturb her, just try to ignore it,” I offered with a long, irritated yawn. Needed that cigarette.

“But she’s...”

“Applebloom,” I interrupted, forcing myself to not take my painful nic-fit out on her. “Let it go.”

She'll stop soon enough. Just get some sleep. Please."

"A-Alright," she stammered with a pair of girly coughs.

No, she didn't stop any time soon after that. No, I didn't get to sleep until at least four hours later. And no, I didn't get a cigarette to improve my mood/headache.

Captivity sucks.

* * *

Have I ever mentioned that I hate waking up abruptly?

"Wake up, FireWALL!" Trixie shook me awake with a yell, placing a lot of irritated emphasis on the third syllable.

Even through all the headache and irritation, through all the sleepy haze and disorientation, I snorted out a surprised laugh. That was funny.

"I missed you, Trixie." I rolled out of bed and onto my feet. The headache was a tad worse at this point, but after a while, the pain just becomes white noise. This wasn't the first time that I had tried quitting cigarettes.

It was the first time I didn't get a choice in the matter though.

"Everypony misses Trixie," she said so simply, as though it were a fact of nature that was taught to every schoolcolt and filly for generations past and for generations to come.

"True enough, I suppose," I mused as I sat down in front of her, nodding at the wall to my right. "Is Applebloom okay?"

Trixie yawned softly with a nod, "Master David gave me plenty of medicine and precise instructions on how to use it. She's sleeping just fine now."

I returned a nod of my own, feeling significantly more relaxed, "Good. That's good. Do you think it's that..."

Trixie interrupted me, anticipating my question.

"I'm not a doctor, Firewall," she shook her head, holding a hoof out to stop me midsentence. "As amazing as I am, there are limits to even the vaunted power and intellect of The Great and Powerful Trixie."

I paused, giving her a pensive glance before continuing.

“I’m just asking if you think it is what I think it is,” I stated with a shrug, walking over to the entrance to my cell and sitting down cross-legged. Bad grammar!

Trixie’s reply wasn’t immediate. In fact, it took quite a few seconds for her to muster up the nerve to reply. As though she didn’t want to tell me. There could be several reasons for that, but few of them were good.

“There’s no telling,” she gave a sigh, “From... from what I heard, it’s... There’s a lot of signs that correlate toward what Flora had and what the filly has. But there is just no telling for certain. If that *is* the case, then it’s happening so much faster and... Well, why and how could that be?”

I grunted my assent to that argument. *I need to get my mind off the headache and worry, lest they start fueling one another*, I told myself. So I tried to think of other things. Luckily, Trixie brought up the best possible thing to get my mind off of Applebloom.

“Humans don’t have a lot of fur,” she commented offhoof, staring at me suspiciously, “Is that why you constantly wear clothing? It must be cold.”

“Oh hell,” I facepalmed, realizing where this was coming from, “You were the pony that dressed me.”

I’m pretty sure I was turning redder than the blood in my veins. Not that I had a mirror or anything. I was just... A pony saw me naked, okay? It’s not something you just shrug off!

“Well, of course. David said you might get sick if I put you here without clothing, so naturally somepony had to do it.” Trixie placed a hoof on her chest, as though proud of herself for the deed. “You are quite welcome. I believe gratitude is in order.”

“Yeah,” I remarked with a snicker, my face still stuffed into my hand, “I’m grateful. And uh... Thanks! Listen, uh... You didn’t... Do an-... Y’know what? No, it’s better if I never find out.”

From my peripheral sight alone I was able to notice Trixie’s face twist with doubt.

“Why? What’s the matter?” She tilted her head, somewhat concerned.

“Nothing,” I answered without hesitation.

“Are you ashamed of your color?” She tilted her head the other way, “Because truly, I’ve never seen a pony with such a unique color. Most ponies would be jealous of a peach colored coat.”

“Oh my God, Trixie, I hope to hell you are talking about my skin color.” I was blushing so hard

that I was starting to sweat from it. I can't even remember the last time I blushed like this. Maybe when I got pantsed in front of my entire school in the fourth grade.

"Naturally," she sniffed, "What did you think I meant?"

"Nothing!" I cried, pulling my hand down far enough to look right at her. "It's a human thing and it's very difficult to talk about, much less explain."

Before she could press the subject further, the door swung open and Flora's sweet voice rang out.

"Trixie, you're not supposed to be talking to the human. No one is." Her mood suggested she was more fearful for Trixie's sake than she was chastising her.

Trixie did a valley girl hair whip and scoffed, "David has placed me in charge of nursing the child."

Not the best choice of words, I suppose... Ack, visuals!

"That doesn't include making small talk with Firewall," Flora replied as she walked into view, her voice almost begging. "I just don't want to see you fall into David's bad favor."

Trixie did pale a tad at the mention of such an event, but quickly laughed it off with her trademark hubris.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie has no reason to fear," she cried with a haughty laugh, "David has always allowed Trixie leniency for being his right-hoof pony! And rightfully so!"

Judging by the way in which Azure Flora subtly gagged, I was willing to gamble that Trixie was likely fooling herself. Big time. She started to look my way, but quickly averted her gaze when she realized I was already staring right at her.

Apparently, there's just something wrong about me to that pony.

"Well, just to be on the safe side, I will avoid mentioning it to David. Please, you know he's been getting less and less patient with us," Flora offered, trying to appeal to Trixie's indulgent side. "I don't want you to end up like Cookie."

"What's happened to Cookie?" I stopped their conversation with a very blunt and commanding tone.

I think Trixie was actually about to answer me, but Flora was quick to nudge her. Trixie cut her a glare, but consented to silence when Flora shook her head just barely.

“Look... whatever, guys. I’m just concerned,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “What’s it going to hurt? I mean, David isn’t hurting Cookie, right?”

They both remained silent, both finding convenient excuses to suddenly look away at different matters of interest.

I blinked in shock before I let the implications settle in, “Okay, girls. It’s storytime. If you don’t tell me, I’m going to assume the worst. And if I assume the worst, I’m not going to be a very cooperative prisoner. Now... is Cookie even alive? You both look like you watched David butcher him or something.”

“David would never!” Trixie snapped instantly, “He’s just been changed so that he could handle different duties!”

Flora looked a bit frustrated, shutting her eyes and sighing loudly, “Trixie. Please, stop talking.”

“But I...”

“Trixie.” Her voice was much louder and tempered with unyielding steel. Very out of the blue, and Trixie seemed to think as much, too.

“Do not concern yourself, Firewall. Cookie is neither hurt, nor in danger. However, his position is not an enviable one.” Flora looked back at me with a sigh. “He’s not very happy, in all likelihood, but there’s nothing anypony can do to help him with that.”

I stared at her. Hard. Gave her my equivalent of the Pinkie Pie Soul Stare. She didn’t buckle, though. She stared right back, her eyes half-lidded and colored unimpressed.

“Now, if you would be so kind,” she continued to speak as plainly as possible, “Hold out your wrists. David would like to see you now.”

I contemplated telling her where David could go shove it, but causing problems now wasn’t going to solve anything and would likely make my situation a great deal less comfortable. So I held out my hands and rolled my eyes once a pair of manacles appeared around them made entirely of Inmanipulon.

“Great,” I murmured irritably. I’m not certain where she got the concept of manacles. I mean, would those even stay attached to ponies? I mean, I just don’t make a habit of thinking of ponies and bondage. Whatever.

“Please, do not try to escape or cause problems,” she said as the bars to my cage slowly turned to dust.

“Well, I was gonna,” I replied with a chuckle, “But then you asked so nicely.”

Trixie snickered despite herself before earning a glare from Flora. She blanched a tad and decided to distract Azure Flora with the first thing she could think of.

“The filly isn’t getting any better, Flora,” she pointed out, “Perhaps you should leave with Fireball or Firewall or whatever his name is and let me get back to work.”

Flora cantered over to look in on the filly before nodding reluctantly. I took the opportunity to check as well and found Applebloom to be in a cell very similar to my own. The only big difference was instead of some wiseass with a nicotine addiction occupying the cell, there was a little yellow pony curled up on the bed, wrapped up in the sheets and covers as though it were thirty below zero. I bit my lip as my heartstrings received a rough tugging. Applebloom didn’t deserve to be caught up in all this.

“She’ll be alright,” Azure Flora said. She was talking to me; of this I had no doubt. But it wasn’t me she was trying to comfort.

“Mmm,” I grunted neutrally before looking down at her, “Sure. Let’s go see your boss.”

And without another wasted word, we left. She guided me out of the brig, prison, jail, whatever you want to call it and into the ever twisting halls. I kept track of the layout as I walked, doing my damndest to memorize every turn and every step. I’m fairly certain I had it all pretty well lined out, but with my memory there was just no telling for sure. I glanced down at Azure Flora and frowned contemplatively at her expression. She was thinking about something. Something that was conflicting with something else, if I had to guess. The way she was glaring and letting her eyes dart from side to side told me she wasn’t looking at anything but that her mind was still racing. I’m fairly certain I knew what it was. Hint: It had something to do with fruit and flowers.

“What’s eatin’ ya?” I asked as I kept my eyes forward, walking alongside her peaceably.

I watched her look up at me out of the corner of my eye. She deemed it unnecessary to willingly share her plight so I took a rather educated guess after she remained silent.

“It’s Applebloom, isn’t it.” I made it obvious that I wasn’t asking for anything but a confirmation.

“Does that, perhaps, bring a few memories back? She’s starting to succumb to the Inmanipulon.”

She stopped, causing me to pause as well after a few more steps. I slowly looked back at her, keeping a passive, nonjudgmental visage as I did.

“It’s far too quick to be that. She’s hasn’t even been here a full two days,” she replied, her voice

full of conviction, "It took me nearly two weeks before I started to become ill from the absence of magic."

"So they are the same symptoms," I confirmed with an apprehensive nod, turning to face her more fully, "You know, back where I come from, there are doctors that specialize in *just* the treatment of children. Do you know why?"

She glanced away for but a moment, as though she didn't want to know the answer. I didn't give her an option, though. I mean, this was Applebloom on the line: I wasn't going to pull punches just to make some ancient earth pony feel better.

"Because kids have bad immune systems. Meaning they get sick a lot more easily than an adult. Their bodies can't take the punishment and abuse that life gives out. Luckily, they have things like parents to tend to them when this sorta stuff happens." I gave a helpless shrug. "But hey, ponies may work differently, right? I mean, let's look on the bright side! If we're wrong, she'll get to live forever, right? Not so bad, eh?"

It was like picking out the nostalgic pain button and, rather than just pressing it, I was kicking the sucker in one side and right out the other. The way her eyes dilated was screaming fear for the little filly. Yeah, it was cheap of me to exploit such a harrowing experience, but uh... try asking me if I gave a damn. (Spoiler Alert: I didn't!)

"At least she's young enough that she doesn't even have her Cutie Mark." I smirked deviously at her. By now, she no doubt knew that I was purposefully terrorizing her, but when it's true, that just makes it even worse. "She won't even have to worry about missing her special talent; She'll just never discover it."

She finally let her eyes meet mine and I held her gaze for but a few moments before letting the smirk fade away. Let me remind you guys, I don't look like a nice guy. I really do have a tendency to look intimidating when I'm not smiling. I mean, yeah, I'm totally the biggest marshmallow and stuff, but I don't look the part.

And sometimes, that comes in really handy.

With my eyes cutting right through her, I drove in the final point, hissing through my teeth. "It'll be like she was never special at all. Won't that just be @#%\$ing great, Flora?"

"Enough!" she cried and turned away from me as she shut her eyes, the memories of a thousand years ago no doubt oozing to the top of her mind's eye, "Enough... I... What do you want from me? There's nothing I can do, Firewall."

We'll chalk that up as a psychological victory for Equestria's most awesome brony. Okay, maybe not THE most awesome, but in the words of Tim Curry, *I'm quite up there!*

“That’s not true and you know it. Applebloom doesn’t need this to happen to her, Flora.” I shook my head, softening my gaze. “I don’t know what David has in store for me up ahead, but that’s not what worries me. I just don’t want to see Applebloom hurt. She’s innocent and doesn’t even know where this place is. At least you were an adult and had some understanding. Just listening to The Nightmare last night terrified her; what do you think this is going to do to her?”

“So?” She slowly dared to look back at me, her curiosity getting the better of her. “You never answered my question.”

“You need to beg David to let her go.” I shrugged. “I mean, I don’t think anyone here is actually evil, but... just try and help me convince him? For her. Would you put that little girl through what you experienced?”

It took her a moment to finally respond, but eventually she lowered her eyes and murmured guiltily, “No.”

“Then help me convince him that she’s harmless,” I begged of her, walking up and kneeling before her. “There’s no reason she should have to suffer so terribly for just a stroke of bad luck. She’s just a kid. She doesn’t need to be kept here.”

She didn’t answer. She simply lifted her eyes to stare up into mine once more before walking along. I didn’t get mad and start pressing for a confirmation, though. That would have been stupid. No, I planted that seed in her mind and I knew that she would not be sleeping soundly that night. All I had to do after that was to let it grow, twist my mustache, and laugh as I stroked my pet cat.

Sometimes, I wonder if I shouldn’t have been a super villain instead. I’d put a self-destruct button on my doomsday machine and everything.

By that point I had completely forgotten everything about the turns and the path I had taken. I mean, I don’t think I would have been able to keep it all straight anyway. It was all rough rock surfaces and such. Seriously, it all looked the same. If you painted it purple, you might have thought the Covenant from Halo designed it or something. Holy repetitive scenery, Batman!

Anywho, after being led through plenty more twisting tunnels, we finally got to where I figured I was meeting David (simply because it was the only room I had been in that looked civilized). It was still carved from the same dark grey rock, but it was polished smoothly in what I could only describe as similar to an old Roman cathedral. Complete with a big philosophic painting on an extremely elevated roof. In the center of this huge octagonal room which was ringed with big impressive statues of historic human figures (none of which I recognized), was David.

He was sitting at a table with an empty plate in front of him, reading a small book. It was no

bigger than one of those tiny New Testament Only Bibles, but it comprised nearly entirely of a white (No, not silver) metal, save for the pages it held.

“David,” Azure Flora spoke up, garnering his attention. When he saw me, he began to smile before frowning as though he were confused.

My reaction? “Is there something on my face?”

“No.” He shook his head before explaining, “You just... look rather rough.”

“This may come as a shock, genius,” I snapped with a roll of my eyes, the nic-fit souring my already foul mood, “but I’ve not had a shower or shave since you brought me here.”

“Indeed,” he replied with a soft nod, “Release him, Flora.”

I snorted aloud as the weight from my hands lessened considerably. As the Inmanipulon bindings dissolved and retreated back to Flora’s saddlebags, I felt the cool air of the underground prison vanish almost instantly. Then I felt *it* all return. Every ounce of magic that I had been missing surged back through me, no longer suppressed.

Every ounce, and more.

I was practically breathing the stuff. Everything The Nightmare had been packing as well as the firepower (no pun intended) I had been gunning with from the start. My confusion was only short-lived, as my common sense merely put two and two together. David had used me as a sort of trap to cripple and distract The Nightmare and take away its power, after all. I guess all that power had to go somewhere. I must have been the only choice at the time.

Too bad for him I had every intention of shoving it down his throat, eh?

Without a moment to reconsider, I yelled out the hottest blaze I had ever managed on my own. My ears popped from how violently the air pressure fluctuated. I was so surprised that I cut it short without thinking, wrought with disbelief.

Without so much as an outward reaction from David, the small metal tome suddenly leaped up and created a small blue whirlwind of energy. There was an echoing ring as the fire breath smashed into the book, but as quickly as the flame had been created, it vanished within the vortex.

... Felt a smidge anticlimactic at the moment.

I began to inhale for a more dedicated attempt, but I was promptly cut off by a hostage situation.

With a quick motion, he pulled out his defense and I immediately paused. No, he didn't use Applebloom. He used something almost as bad.

He had my goddamn cigarettes.

"Ah-ah." David took hold of the superbook-thingy and closed it with a loud snap. "I didn't bring you here to fight. Just thought you might want to know a little more about what's going on. Truce?"

I hesitated. Lafter didn't really feel an incredibly strong desire to hear what he had to say, but Stoic, on the other hand, pounced on the opportunity to gain some valuable insight on this guy.

Also, cigarettes.

"Fine," I growled angrily.

Unintentionally or not, David would be giving me knowledge about him that I could likely end up using against him. That said, Lafter got stuffed into a box and I solidified my acceptance to David by levitating the cigarettes out of his hand and float them my way.

Sweet, sweet nicotine. How I had missed you.

"Well," I growled as I lit up, instantly feeling lots of calm, patience, and general zen settle in, "I think it's time you and I had that chat."

He smirked, catching the reference before silently acknowledging the unspoken last word and obliging, "Flora, thank you for fetching him, but I need to speak with our guest in private."

Flora didn't seem to mind, judging by the noncommittal nod she gave. After turning and trotting out, the entrance shrank until it closed itself as though it were growing rocks to seal up a wound. With that, I pocketed my smokes and walked over to the table, magically pulling back one of the chairs as I flopped down into it.

"So, I imagine you have plenty of questions." David lifted his hand and performed what looked like a Jedi Mind Trick accompanied by an azure flash of light. I almost wanted make a Star Wars reference. But rather than spout nonsense about not needing to see identification, the motion created an empty plate appeared in front of me. "But I shall have the first one. What would you like to eat?"

I played along. May have had partly to do with the insatiable curiosity, may have had something to do with me wanting to get information, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't the growling in my stomach, nosireebob.

“Frosted Flakes. Big bowl. Whole Milk from Turner. They don’t use growth hormones. Also, if I could get a spoon with Rainbow Dash’s cutie mark on the handle, that would be awesome.” To my credit, I was stone faced through that whole thing. I know, I couldn’t believe it either.

He blinked, not expecting that in the least, opening his mouth to comment before promptly shutting it. Score one for myself! Still, he kept his word and one wavey-wave-flashy-flash of the hand later and I got my wish, complete with spoon. Magic rocks!

“Awesome sauce,” I murmured before nudging it to the side, taking another drag off my cigarette, “But it’ll keep until I finish my cigarette. So now I ask you a question: I think this one is obvious. I still have my powers. How and why?”

“You remember I told The Nightmare that your Equestrian body was a trap?” He asked me with a smirk, continuing after I nodded, “Well, that wasn’t a lie. You see, I erred, I think. I don’t know what went wrong during her creation, but something certainly did go wrong. She was going to be my Equestrian Vanguard. My protector of this land. And now she is its greatest threat. Or was, anyway. Before she *finally* merged with you. I was starting to fear that it would never happen. Luckily, the plan worked and you weren’t able to keep her out this time.”

I nodded soberly, acting as though it made sense when it in fact made none at all. “Right. So, next obvious question... Why me?”

“The human was her idea, actually.”

Surprised? Yeah, so was I.

He clarified on that, thankfully: “Well, not entirely her idea. See, you can’t imbue an empty body with that sort of power, that just isn’t how things work. It needed consciousness. It needed life. So when I created the body, she said she wanted a human to take control of the body because humans were aggressive.

“She didn’t completely trust me when I promised her I would be able to separate the host from its body after she inhabited it, so she wanted a host with the potential for violence. Hence, you. I don’t think she counted on snagging a brony, though.”

I scrunched my face in confusion, “She said she purposefully chose me!”

“Hah!” David snorted, facepalming in an amused sort of way. “And you believed her?”

You know, as much as it pissed me off, I kinda had to give him that one. I mean, it was The Nightmare. It was a deceitful floaty cloud thing. Why I bought anything that came out of her... gaseous mouth... thing... was beyond me.

“Well, whatever. So... What, you used me and the pony body as a trap to snag her and do what?”

“Take away her powers, of course.” He began to stare at his plate through his glasses as though deciding what he should put on it, “See, I don’t want to hurt Equestria; I’m just trying to get it back on the path that I started it out on. It desperat-...”

“Woah!” I narrowed my eyes as I cut him off. “The path *you* started it out on?”

“We’ll come back to that; one subject at a time,” he promised me before waving his hand and poofing a plateful of --if you could believe it-- vegetable Lo Mein. “So anyway, the basic plan was to create a tempting body for her to inhabit, and to use it as a trap to steal away her power so that I could help fix her. I’m certain you’ve noticed how unstable she is.”

“Fix her.” I flicked my cigarette, not exactly caring enough about David’s pad to dispose of it properly. “So I take it you weren’t able to destroy her.”

David looked up from his plate as he stuck a fork into it and began to twist it (I know, he didn’t even use chopsticks. Le sigh.). He stared at me for several moments as though analyzing what I had said before giving his reply.

“I take it you’re not a father where you come from.” He looked back down at his food, his brow arching a tad. “Perhaps it is a short-coming on my part, but... no, I could not take the life that I gave her. But even if I had tried, it is quite possible that she would have won. Besides, she deserves a better chance at life. Especially since I did not do right by her the first time. Crazy though she is, I am the one to blame for her state. I will see her stable and able to live a happy life. As her originator, it is the least I can do.”

I started to say something about how there are a lot better ways to go about his plan, but I held it in check. After shrugging, I thought about how The Nightmare had suffered in her sleep and began to wonder if David knew about that. He certainly wasn’t omniscient, that much was certain. As I began to pay attention again, I realized David hadn’t stopped talking.

“... and I’ve already done some work on her and I’m certain all will be well bef-...”

“You know that part when you brought her back and she was unconscious? Well, about... oh, less than an hour after Azure Flora, she began to cry. And she didn’t stop. She spent the next several hours crying in her sleep, David,” I murmured, pulling my bowl of cereal in front of me as I interrupted him. “I can prove witness to it since... Well, I found it pretty hard to sleep.”

He froze somewhat, staring at nothing as he sought out his reply. “That’s... expected. It will be a difficult process, to start.”

“Right, and I’m not meaning to flip the table here, but uhh…” I crunched into a bite of sweetened corn before continuing, “I’m betting things get worse before they get better.”

He set his fork down and glanced up, his ire starting to surface but still held in check. “And what would you have me do, Stephen?”

Sheeeeyiiit. My real name. Yeah, there it is. Enjoy.

“Don’t look at me,” I scoffed, taking another bite before chuckling sadly. “I’m not the one playing God here. I don’t have these crazy stupid ambitions. Hell, I’m the kinda guy that would turn down a ticket to immortality.”

“You seem quick enough to implicate my damnation,” he spoke softly, keeping his irritation in check, “so I can only assume you’ve a suggestion.”

“Well, the first thing I wouldn’t do is drag an innocent little filly into this mess.” I rolled my eyes as I struggled not to furiously scream my words at him. However, with my focus aimed towards staying as civil as possible, my words decided to bathe themselves in sarcasm rather than anger.

I don’t think it helped.

“Then, I wouldn’t have gone behind Celestia and Luna’s back trying to fix my @\$%# ups discreetly. And finally, I wouldn’t have started enslaving ponies to my will in exchange for their fondest wishes.”

“Well, seeing as all of that has been done, what would you do now?” He narrowed his eyes at me. “Would you try to fix it?”

“Fix what? What’s there to fix?” I set my spoon down and facepalmed into my left hand. “David, you want the quickest solution? Release me, Applebloom and the Pact Ponies, take your lovely daughter-slash-psycho, and beat it. You’ve obviously worn out your welcome, so I don’t see why you’re sticking around. One of you obviously has the power to travel between dimensions or realities or whatnot. Why not leave and start fresh somewhere else?”

“Because I’m not done here,” he growled, reaching back into his pocket for the little white metal book.

I shook my head. “Whatever. Play around with more shit, then. Make things worse. I mean, things are almost back to being pleasant and --good heavens-- we obviously can’t have that. We just wouldn’t know how to act.”

“You misunderstand.” He opened up the small metal tome and laid it on the table. From it, blue

light poured out and swirled just a foot above it before coalescing into a three dimensional geography map. It was a flat piece of land with a small blue sun shining over it and a moon floating from underneath it. "I'm not done... Here."

As though his word were the command trigger, the map expanded. It was almost like falling, zooming in so quickly as the map swelled in size to fill the entire room with us inside. The blue lights continued to redefine themselves and take more specific shapes, such as clouds, cities, forests, and mountains. It had been a while since magic had freaked me out, but this had reminded me just how crazy the metaphysical could get. Still, I liked it.

It took me a little while to realize this was Equestria, but the next part was what fragged my mind. The part where I discovered it was a country and not an entire world.

Now, that may not seem that mind blowing on its own. But get this: It was nothing *but* a country.

Nothing but a flat piece of land with a line of water around it. There were no borders. It was just a free-floating nation that had a pair of celestial objects revolving around it. The entire concept was so incomplete, it was like taking the Big Book of Science and throwing it out the window into a tub of acid after setting it on fire. I looked around in awe for several minutes, getting up to closely examine certain details. It took me a bit of deductive work with landmarks to eventually find Ponyville and Canterlot, but when I did, I turned back to David and shook my head in wonder.

"Tell me this doesn't mean what I think it means," I murmured lowly, a bit of sadness seeping inside as my suspicions began to line themselves up.

"If you think it means that Equestria was created by myself, then I regret to confirm your fears." He kept his eyes level with mine, stoic and unmoving. "However, if you are afraid that this has been, in some way, fake or fabricated, then I can assuage your doubts and promise you that Equestria and every living thing inside of it are as real as Earth and all its inhabitants. You haven't been living a lie, Stephen."

I let out a relieved sigh so slowly that I almost stopped breathing. He smiled a bit at my reaction before tapping the small tome, causing the world begin to explode into motion. The sun and moon spun rapidly around us, though it took me a moment to notice that they were going backwards. I watched as tiny cities deconstructed themselves, forests replant after the towns stopped existing and once tamed lands become as wild and rugged as they had been before civilization existed.

"I didn't have much to go on," he admitted with a laugh, "but I tried to do my best to work with what I did have. A little over twelve hours of content wasn't much, but I did some guess work. However, even with those guidelines, I failed to keep everything in line with its origins. It took a

while, a few thousand years outside the natural flow of time to be sure. The hardest part was The Elements of Harmony. Luna and Celestia weren't easy either, but after that, it was mostly downhill. And quite enjoyable."

"You created all of this," I spoke softly, letting it all set in. "You're not even human, are you?"

He pulled the book off the table and closed it, causing the illusion to vanish with an audible rushing sound. He ignored my question, and then proceeded with his explanation, "The next big obstacles were filling in the unanswered questions. The pony physiology, their ability to pick things up with one hoof, placing a sun that revolves around Equestria instead of the other way around. All things I've had to improvise with and while it's come very far, I'm still not done. This world, while beautiful, living, and wonderful, is incomplete. As laughable as it may seem, it will eventually outgrow its given boundaries and could run the risk of destroying itself. However, while that danger may not be realized for many years, it is in peril of an entirely different kind. And since I created this world, I am responsible for it. I admit my methods seem suspect, but they have the best of intentions only.

I snorted mirthfully.

"How ironic," I murmured softly enough that David didn't hear me. He did, however, catch the laugh.

"You doubt me?" He sounded pretty surprised.

I laughed again before throwing my shoulders up in helplessness. "No, mate. I don't doubt your good intentions. But I'm starting to put it together. And it's mildly irritating."

I pushed my chair back and started to pick up my bowl of cereal before frowning at how it sloshed around. That's when I tried the summoning spell and smiled as a large ceramic cup appeared. It didn't drain me nearly as much as it normally would have, and I know who I had to thank for that (Luv ya lots, Nightmare!). I paused long enough to transfer the milk and cereal to the cup and began pacing around with the cup in hand, eating my cereal from the more secure container.

"So paint this with me. Let me know if I get anything wrong," I said between bites, staring at the walls before me as I paced, "Let's not speculate on *how* you are able to create a world, let's not even bother with the *why* just yet. Let's just start from, 'You did this' and move forward. So you made Equestria. This your first attempt?"

"Sadly, it is not." He shook his head with a frown as he finally began to dine. "The first was just Ponyville and its inhabitants. They quickly began to panic upon discovering there was nothing beyond the roads leaving the town and I had to start over, this time expanding their world to Canterlot, Cloudsdale, Appleloosa, and offer some room for expansion."

“And again you were frustrated by failure.” David wasn’t as cool as the Architect of The Matrix, but at least he didn’t look like Colonel Sanders. “Same problem?”

“Not quite,” he admitted with a sigh, “The problem this time was that... I didn’t... create truly living beings. They were practically soulless. The first attempt didn’t show this problem right away, but I imagine that it would have, given enough time.”

I looked back at him, scowling in curiosity as I munched on more dairy, sugar, and corn.

“They didn’t develop.” He scowled back, as though just as puzzled as I was, “At all. They didn’t learn. They didn’t explore. They didn’t grow. They weren’t truly alive. Practically nothing more than mere robots acting out a programming.”

“So you scrapped it again.” I paused before my next bite, glancing sideways at him. “What if you were wrong?”

“I assure you, Stephen. I was not. I gave them a century of false time to make any sort of progress. There was none. For over thirty-five thousand days they repeated the exact same sequence of actions. They would alter their actions as I changed their surroundings, but their lives would quickly fall back into meaningless patterns.” He sounded pretty sure. Actually, he sounded entirely sure. As though he had tried over and over to make it work and it just didn’t happen. Immortals.

“And now?” I turned to face him, still holding a half-full cup of cereal.

He chewed on a bite of noodles for a second before nodding and replying, “And now I’ve done it. I’ve created a living, thriving world with living, thriving creatures that live generally happy lives. Though, it didn’t start that way. When I entered the world to get a more personal view of it, I quickly learned that animated beings and reality have troubles mixing properly.”

“Uh-huh.” My voice may have been calm, but I found my grasp tightening on the glass as he confirmed my suspicions. “You succeeded in creating a living, breathing world, yet flawed world. And hey, since you were pretentious and presumptuous enough to create life, why not tug at the strings from the shadows and see if you can line it up a little more with your vision?”

David’s pause was enough. When he lifted his eyes to mine, I knew I had the right of it. And I was very... very angry. I shut my eyes as I tried to remain serene but when I opened them again to look at David, I realized that there was no quelling the anger that was quickly bubbling in me.

“Let me see if I can’t line it out,” I spat acidly before going back into a pacing motion, “You created the living, breathing world you always wanted. Everything from plants and animals to predators and less-savory races. Then when your ponies started to experience the rigors of a

painful reality, you decided to start screwing around with the way things worked. Sky Archons, that was you. Oh, and Celestia's memory spell? Were you the one to put that bug in her ear as well?"

His expression hardened, but he didn't reply immediately and I didn't feel like waiting for him to justify his actions.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." The hand holding my ceramic cup was quivering with rage as I restrained my desire to enact violence upon David's face. I began to shake my head as I spoke, letting the story tell itself. "Created the Nightmare, but you botched that up. Badly! So you needed to a backup plan. More Sky Archons... SHIT!"

It was coming to me all so quickly and all I could do was sling that stupid glass against the wall, shattering it in anger.

"You were the one that convinced Storm Wing to give up his life for your agenda! You toyed with his mind!" I turned on him, my chest heaving with every infuriated breath. "Just like you did with Winter Sky's at the ruins! I bet he didn't come willingly at all, either! Jesus, you were the voice whispering to everyone! Storm! Sky! Even Pinkie Pie back at the Battle of Shadows!"

David swallowed his food before glancing to the side. He probably wasn't enjoying this conversation anymore. I couldn't give less of a damn at the time and still couldn't to this day.

"You're sick!" I seethed, slowly making my way around the table to him. I felt the blood burning in my veins, aching to get out, but I wasn't done yet. "And just like you couldn't come clean to your own creations and let them know how badly you suck at playing God, you decide to try and fix it all behind the scenes and it *almost* worked, didn't it? Until The Nightmare got loose again and you knew you were just waiting to see it all fall apart spectacularly!"

I was only a few feet from him at this point, still slowly getting nearer. He met my glare with his own now, not backing down from the accusations or showing any outward signs of pain or regret.

"You could have just gone to Celestia and explained everything." I snarled before suddenly grabbing him by his stupid sweater and lifting him out of his chair. I'm guessing he knew he was at least guilty of these charges because he didn't react other than glare and take it. If he's not going to defend himself, I said to myself, I'm going to take the opportunity to continue throwing it all in his face. "You let a WAR happen in Equestria just to cover your mistakes. Because for all that power you have, you're still that weak!"

"It was not as though I left you all to die," He stated quite plainly, still staring hard in my eyes, "I did help you at that battle."

“How, David!?” I screamed in his face, shaking him vigorously, “How?! You gave Twilight and the others powers to help us fight at the Battle of Shadows?! You told Pinkie Pie where to find the Elements and get them to me during that last invasion?! Was that your *help!*? Was that your *blessed grace!*? THERE SHOULD HAVE NEVER BEEN AN INVASION! Don’t even try to make that case! You even used it as a way to push more of the ponies into making a Pact with you!”

I shoved him hard, causing him to fall back onto the ground with little-to-no resistance. I was having to force myself to not start kicking him uncontrollably. Glaring down at him, I could feel my heartbeat pounding so hard that it was almost audible; like an infuriated thrumming in my ears. He slowly sat up and looked at me with absolutely no emotional light in his eyes. No shame, no fear, no arrogance. He was just an empty shell. He was definitely no human. He had no heart. Likely some immortal alien that had found a new way to occupy his time and damning the consequences. Screaming at him would do nothing but tire myself out and give me a yet another headache.

It took me a few moments, but as David brought himself back to his feet, I brought myself back to a state of calm. It was more than a little hard fought, but there it was.

“You ask me what I would have you do, David?” I pulled out a cigarette and stared at him as I lit it with a small tongue of fire in my hand. “I don’t care what you say, this world is better off without you. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from my time here, David, it’s that the road to Hell is paved with good intentions. And you’ve given the devil enough to go on for miles. My advice is quit while you’re ahead.”

I expected a lot of reactions out of him. Anger, depression... I didn’t expect him to smile. Expectations or not, though, smile is what he did. He dusted himself off with that same calm ghost of a smirk that he had when I had first seen him. I didn’t get it at the time, but I think I had given him the answer that he wanted.

“Very well, Stephen,” he said with a few nods, as if confirming something with himself, “You will get your wish. You see, it’s actually been on my mind. Should I stay or should I go, that is.”

He returned to his seat and continued to smirk back at me, resting his chin upon his propped fist.

“I knew after I captured The Nightmare that I would be sending you home,” he said with a dry laugh, “But I kept asking myself, ‘Is it truly best for me to stay?’ See, I’m not sure if the ponies will be safe without me once they start to push at the unseen borders I’ve set for them. However, at the same time, I can’t deny that very few things I have done have actually resulted in a better world for the Equestrians.”

I scowled in confusion. Simple as that? I didn’t think so. Still, I don’t think there was anything

my belief or doubt could have done to truly affect David.

“So, why would you send me back?” I shrugged plainly, “You think I’m hurting this place?”

“Stephen, you’re a human. As golden as your heart may be, you have a dark side. We just saw it.” He took his fork up and began to spin it in the noodles again, that same empty smile creeping onto his face. “Not to mention I’ve no clue what magic could do to you over time. It could drive you insane, it could make you immortal, it could slowly poison you. I’m just not taking the chance.”

I gave him a look like he was smoking crack through his nose. It took him a few seconds to notice it, but he got around to spotting the incredulous answer to his statement.

“I take it you don’t share these concerns,” he said through a mouthful of noodle.

“I’ve been here over two months and have been spewing fire left and right.” I took the cigarette out of my mouth and held it out as proof of my statement before snagging another puff. “Not to mention I’m packing more magic now than ever.”

“Time makes all the difference,” he replied with a shrug. “Besides, you won’t retain that magic long enough for it to affect you.”

“Well, Applebloom’s succumbing to the Inmanipulon already, so I’m sorry if I don’t trust your time tables,” I snapped, taking a drag off the cigarette and glaring at him. Ire was back on the rise!

He arched an eyebrow at me as though confused, “The wh-... Oh, right, the anti-magic. Don’t let it concern you, she will be fine. It merely induces lethargy in ponies and can make sleep a little difficult. Her illness is a natural one, of this I have no doubt. Now, as charming as this conversation has been, I think it’s time you went back to your cell.”

He pulled out the white book again and opened it up, tapping a page within. It was like glancing to the side and seeing something completely different. I didn’t blink or anything, I was simply right back in my cell. No bright lights, no sound effects, just... back in the cage, bars already in their proper place. David was on the other side, still giving me that damned smirk. You’ve no idea how badly I wanted to slug it right off his face. As he turned to leave, I ran to the bars and called out.

“One last question,” I tightly gripped the bars as he paused midstep. I didn’t wait for him to look at me, I just asked, “If you were going to send me back to Earth and leave with The Nightmare... Why not just do it and get it over with? What are you waiting for?”

He chuckled before dropping his face into a hand, letting it push his dark hair back over his ears before stubbornly falling back into place, “Took you a while to get to that one. Suffice it to say,

Stephen, everything takes time and preparation. Don't worry, though. We won't be waiting much longer."

I was finally starting to fear the possibility of going back and sighed as I rested my head onto the bars of my cell. I felt tears wanting to escape as I stared at my feet but I didn't allow them. Not entirely at least.

"I don't want to leave, David." I felt an ache in my chest that told me it was afraid of missing something. I'll give you a few guesses as to what it was and the only hint you get is 'troll'.

I heard his feet shuffle as he likely turned back to look at me, utterly silent. He approached me before snapping his fingers to get my attention, which I gave without really thinking. He was studying me closely, but for whatever reasons, I couldn't fathom at the time. He then took a few steps past my cell to look at Applebloom and I could see him frown at what he saw.

"If I sent you back, would you spend the rest of your days pining over this world? Would you even care about what was going on around you at that point?" Blunt question was blunt. It was so blunt that I didn't even answer it right away, prompting him to ask one more.

"Answer me, my heroic little human. Would it have been better if you had never even come here?" he asked, moving back to stand in front of me again. "Or would you live your life back on Earth without regrets?"

I shook my head because the truth of the matter was that I had no idea. A part of me would ache and suffer every day I spent away from Equestria, I knew. Another part of me would be sensible and be happy for the time I had been allowed. For the rare opportunity that had been given to me that no one else had a chance of experiencing. But the biggest part, I think, would be the heartbreak of losing Luna. I looked down again as I felt dread settle into me. To forever lose Luna would take a piece out of me that I would never get back. Thoughts, fears, and regrets were already assaulting me, telling me that it would only get worse if I was sent to Earth. Thoughts such as what was going to happen to everypony while I was gone. Fears such as never again laughing until it hurt. Regrets such as not telling Luna that I loved her back.

"David, don't send me back," I murmured, my fingers turning white from clenching the bars so tightly, "I'd... As pathetic as this sounds and I can't believe I actually mean this... But... I would rather die. I don't want to leave."

"I'm sorry, in that case." His voice was actually somewhat apologetic. "Maybe if this world were complete. Maybe if I could promise your safety. Maybe if you weren't such an unpredictable wildcard. But it is not, and I cannot, and you are. This is for the best, I promise you."

I lifted my gaze to meet his one last time. His eyes moved back and forth between mine, searching for something that he never found. After a moment, he pulled his small white book

back from his pocket and opened it long enough to tap one of the pages yet again.

“Keep the child warm. Her heart rate is a little slow. I’ll send Trixie with some more medicine.” He nodded at something behind me. When I turned to look, I saw Applebloom lying on my bed, curled up beneath the covers and trembling gently. “I know you don’t have any reason to see me with anything but hate in your eyes. Just keep in mind, I never wanted to hurt anyone. Perhaps one day you will understand. Should that happen, you will have my sympathies.”

What he was saying made no sense, but I was too distracted with Applebloom. I sat down on the bed and with the utmost care, scooped her into my arms. She was no bigger than an adult cat, really. A bit heavier, but many times more adorable. Not to mention she held a much bigger place in my heart than any pet I’d ever had. She was as cold as her shivering made her out to be, though cradling her seemed to alleviate the worst of it. She instinctively nestled closer as the shaking slowly abated, laying her head against my shoulder and sighing in what could have been interpreted as relief. I turned my head to look at David and snap once more at him, but he wasn’t there.

“Damn it,” I whispered. As if on cue, I heard the The Nightmare’s whimpering cries start up again. “Damn it all to hell.”

I sat crosslegged on the bed and leaned against the cold stone wall as I continued to cradle the poor filly in my arms. I fell asleep after an hour or so of fighting off the anxiety. Too bad I woke up feeling like I had never rested.

* * *

Time passed, and while Applebloom didn’t seem to be getting any worse, she wasn’t getting any better either. Still, no new is good news? Maybe not, but I helped console myself with that idiom. Consoling, however, did not help pass the time. The Nightmare wasn’t exactly a chatty Cathy and Applebloom was too fatigued to do much beyond wake up long enough to eat and smile gratefully at me when I continued to care for her. She didn’t speak much, except for telling me that I was really warm and somewhat squishy. That made very little sense, as I didn’t have much fat on me. Still, that was kinda cool, I guess.

Luna must have been looking for me by then, no doubt. Not that she would have a way to magically find me within an Inmanipulon cage. She was worried sick, I’m sure. Meaning she was probably going to beat me next chance she got. Then troll me some. Y’know, to make up for lost time and what have you. She’s a sweetheart like that.

~SLAM!~

That was the sound of the door being bucked open and smacking against the wall as furious

hoofstomps made their way inside. They were followed by more hoofsteps and what was likely David's feet.

"I'm sorry, Flora," David's voice wasn't so serene for once. Instead, it was firm and louder than normal, "but it's too risky."

The hoofing stopped for a moment as Azure Flora responded.

"Too risky for what, David!? She's a child! Drain her memory and let her go!" Flora snapped defiantly. She had quite the anger voice, too. And here I had thought Storm Wing got it from his father. Nope!

Chuck Testa!

"Azure Flora, you know as well as I do that such things can be undone. Luna and Celestia are not fools. With the filly having disappeared after actively seeking out the human who disappeared around the same time... I don't think I have to tell you that they will be able to puzzle it all together," he reasoned, his voice somewhat pleading. I got the impression that while he was willing to forcibly stop Azure Flora, I don't think he wanted it to come to that.

"That's your fault for not letting her go sooner!" Surprisingly, she threw it right back in his face. I could hear her steps coming closer, but she didn't get far before slowing to a stop, "... David, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

There was a heavy silence that preceded his somewhat pained reply, "No, Azure, you're right. It is my fault for not acting sooner. But that doesn't change what needs to be done. Flora, I know this brings back a lot of painful memories. But the Codex needs a little more time before we can deal with the human and the filly. I don't want anything to upset that. Just another day or two. She won't succumb to the more permanent side-effects by then. We can even make amends to her afterwards."

"No, David," her voice was on the edge of begging, "She's succumbing to it faster than I did. She's already cold and weakened from being completely bereft of magic. It may take hold in another day or two. Let her out, or I will. She... She can even stay here with me."

"Yes!" I set Applebloom down on the bed and ran to the bars of my cell, gripping them intently, "Dude, just get her out of here! Anything is better than being in here."

"I know Applebloom's propensity for getting herself into trouble," he countered without a moment's hesitation. Whether or not he was talking to me or Flora, I couldn't tell, "That would likely end up being worse than letting her go."

Had me there. Applebloom was about as timid as a wrecking ball, and half as subtle.

"I'm sorry, Flora, but I need you for other tasks besides childcare. The filly will be fine for the next day or two," David spoke firmly, hardening his tone further yet.

"Remember when you said you weren't going to force me to do anything I didn't want to?" Azure Flora's tone was just as steadfast. "And I promised you I would do everything I could to help you, David?"

"Flora..." David's, on the other hand, had lost a bit of its edge. "Don't make me invoke the Pact."

I heard hoofsteps approaching just as she spoke again, "Well, one of us is going to break a promise today. It's up to you as to who that will be."

I heard a second set of hooves take off and just as Azure Flora came into my view on the left. She didn't get but another two steps before Commander Starlight was standing in her way, dressed in armor not too dissimilar from Winter Sky's when he was... incomplete or whatever. Flora was rather surprised, I could tell, but her expression quickly changed and eventually belied her determination.

"Get out of the way, child." Flora's voice was starting to become less soft and more righteously indignant.

"No," Starlight responded before hopping forward and smacking her metal-clad forehead into Flora's.

Unsurprisingly, Flora got knocked the *eff* out! I blinked in surprise. I did not expect that in the least. Neither did David apparently.

"Starlight...?" David asked, genuinely confused.

"Best case scenario was that she got her way and proved that you have no control over her, allowing for complications in the future," Starlight's voice was impassive, her words only broken by the use of her mouth to pick up and sling Azure Flora over her back, "Worst case scenario was that you made good on your threat, planting seeds of dissent. My personal reason? I didn't want to risk her breaking her Pact and... .. Well, the rest you know."

While I couldn't see David, I could tell from the inflection in his voice that he was wholly accepting of that answer. "I see."

"Starlight," I murmured, frowning at her before sighing, "Are you..."

She didn't even look back at me before leaving, ignoring me completely. My heart sank as they all left. Applebloom may not have been getting worse, but I was worried that Azure Flora was

correct and that a day or two was a day or two too long. Still, what could I do, right? Just had to bide my time and wait for an opportunity, I told myself.

After looking back at the filly, I saw her start to shiver again and immediately moved to scoop her back up.

I just had to hope that my opportunity came while there was still time.

* * *

Day whatever. Nothing on TV. Ate Cheetos.

Okay, maybe I actually ate the grilled chicken Caesar salad with blue cheese dressing that Trixie brought me. I swear, I never ate a salad before that but after having experienced the joys of blue cheese and Parmesan placed upon the wonderful green romaine lettuce leaves mixed with seared chicken muscles... Well, let's just say I anticipate some lost weight in my future due to a healthier diet. At least she was kind enough to bring a fork and such this time. She didn't seem bothered by the fact that I was eating meat this time, which was a little unnerving. I mean, smother it in salad or not, that's still some animal's piecesparts! Therefore, with the question on my mind and all, I decided all I could do was press for an answer.

"Hey!" I jumped up before beckoning her closer. Trivia note: Ponies are actually smaller than pony sized, though not by much. I knelt down as she gave me a skeptical stare. I pointed at the sleeping Applebloom and covered my ears, conveying the idea that I didn't want to scare the filly. Trixie was silly enough to trust me, and while I had every opportunity to grab her and hold her hostage, it just wasn't in me.

"Where did you get all this meat?" I whispered low enough to where Applebloom couldn't hear me. If that steak had come from one of those silly cows that AJ had to stop from crushing Townsville (seriously, is it just me or is Ponyville the Equestrian equivalent to a certain metropolis housing three kindergarten supergirls?), I might have had to go politely purge it. Eating sentient creatures wasn't something I had casually jotted down on my bucket list, after all. Chicken, on the other hand, didn't bother me, though. They were just normal illustrated chickens.

Mmmm. Delicious cartoon chicken.

"Oh, afraid you ate somepony after all?" she murmured back, smiling cruelly before winking, "Don't worry. It was provided for by David. We didn't slaughter some poor creature just for your benefit."

I was relieved, but only at first. See, I let her words sink in, and then my imagination began to run amok formulating roundabout ways to say it did come from an animal and that it wasn't

JUST for me or something. It does that sometimes, my mind does. I can't help it! It was like having a deathly strong phobia and trying to *not* think about it once someone mentions it. (SHIT, SPIDERS!)

"Whaddya mean, '*just* for my benefit!?" I cried, jumping back and staring at her in suspicious horror.

"Oh, I'll just leave that for you to figure out." She smiled her dazzling smile as she walked back to the cart and began nudging it over to The Nightmare's cell so as to bring her food. I tried calling for her again, but she ignored me. Much to my dismay, I had been counter trolled. Not as perfect as the one I dropped on her, but she at least made me walk away with a metaphorical bloody nose. Now I had to sit here and reassure myself with the words 'fabricated it' to avoid succumbing to the sway of nausea.

Luckily, I was distracted from that line of thought. Though I will admit, the distraction wasn't entirely pleasant.

"How does it feel to have no power at all, slave?"

"I am no slave," Trixie replied evenly, unwilling to be moved by The Nightmare's mockery.

"Your collar may not be tangible, but I still see it wrapped around your pretty blue neck," she countered with a laugh, "Drop the food and scamper away, little pet. I think I hear your master snapping his fingers for you!"

I grimaced as I heard a loud clang of metal. Whatever it was The Nightmare was eating, she was going to have to pick it up off the cold floor.

Ponycat fight, incoming.

"Even if that were true, it's a step up from sleeping in a cage waiting only for torture!" Trixie snapped maliciously, kicking the bowl/plate/whatever-The-Nightmare-was-served, "Here, beast! Eat in a way that befits a monster like yourself!"

The Nightmare began to cackle loudly.

"Of course, I'm the beast! But at least I choose to be!" she cried with glee. "I, in contrast to *you*, do not have to wonder if every thought, breath, and step I take are my own! I, in contrast to *you*, am not pathetic!"

"Because crying in your sleep like a newborn foal isn't pathetic at all!" Trixie countered angrily, "You should be kissing the ground David walks upon for the mercy he shows you! But your pride makes you weak! You could be walking free and powerful like the rest of us! Yet you

wither away inside within a cage.”

The Nightmare did not like that in the least.

“You know nothing! NOTHING! The veil has been lifted from your eyes for less than a year! Do you think you have seen more than I in that time?” she screamed from within her cage. “The only gratuity David will ever get from me is a swift end!”

“Oh yes, you will construct the means to his end all from the confines of this prison.” I could easily picture the rolling of Trixie’s eyes accompanying her freezing cold sarcasm. “Truly, we have underestimated your power. Woe betide anypony who gets in the way of your mediocre strength and magicless horn! I’ll try not to cry myself to sleep when I picture you struggling to write with your mouth for the first time. The terror might just be a little too much for a helpless mare like me.”

I snorted mirthfully. Let it never be said that Trixie’s tongue wasn’t sharp. I’m not sure if The Nightmare heard me, but I was okay with it either way.

“And yet, I still call myself more free than you possibly could. It takes bars to keep me in place, slave,” The Nightmare sneered spitefully, “But you? You only need the call of your Master.

“And I’m not the only one who thinks it. Why do you think the Human sits behind bars of his own. He has all the power one could ever want, and all he needs to do is make a Pact with your master to free himself. But there he sits in this prison, with me no less. All because he would prefer to rot in this dungeon over slipping that leash around his neck. Mock me if it pleases you. Throw my food on the floor. Spit on it, even. In the end, you are still his slave. And for all the power he’s granted you, you are still less powerful than me.”

Even Trixie couldn’t fight that logic. And that wasn’t sitting very well with her.

“David never made him that offer!” she finally countered. “He would certainly take it if he had. If for just to get away from you!”

“Why don’t you ask him, then? You’re so confident, after all.”

Ah hell. I was getting dragged into it. But then again, that’s what The Nightmare wanted. And I hated her for it. Even from within the confines of her twelve-by-twelve, she still felt the need to hurt others. Still, Trixie couldn’t have been so stupid as to actually believe that I would side with David. It would have taken one hell of an act of coercion to make that happen.

“Firewall!” she shouted, jerking my attention out of its hazy state.

“Yeah, buddy,” I acknowledged, falsifying the bored tone as a sinking feeling fell right through

my gut.

She stomped as she trotted to my cell, clopping as loudly as she could. I don't think it was a stretch to say that Trixie's temper might have been a little uppity right then.

"Surely she is as foolish as she sounds," she glared at me accusingly, "You wouldn't languish in this cell if you had a choice, would you!"

Apparently, she *was* stupid enough.

Well, I decided since I could see where this was going, why not at least get a little fun out of it. That in mind, I pulled out my cigarettes and tossed her one.

"Light that on the torch behind you and I'll answer your question." I gave her an encouraging smile.

"Ugh!" she stomped and started to refuse, but she fell victim to my devilish charms (or her demanding impatience, we'll never know which) and picked it up with her mouth.

"You annoy me!" she snapped from behind the cigarette, her words a tad muffled because of it. But she complied after seeing my smile grow wider and reached all the way up the wall to the torch that was just barely in reach. Ponies can stretch out when they want to, and it almost *always* looks suggestive. If you think I'm messed up in the head, go find a few pictures of ponies lying on their backs on the interwebs. Or rather, don't and just take my word for it.

That said, all it was for me was just one more opportunity to troll.

"Hey, Trixie, are you ticklish?" First thing I could think of that would distract her.

"What?!" She cried out, looking back at me incredulously before snarling angrily when it caused her to drop the cigarette on the floor, where it just barely rolled into the cell across from me.

"I'm not in the mood for games!" she snapped at me before turning back for the cigarette and scooping it back with her hoof.

I waited right until she went to bend over and pick it up.

If I said that I tried to resist the urge, it would be a lie. So I won't say that. Instead, I will just that I instantly obeyed the urge to whistle provocatively at her.

Ah, the reactions I get from trolling. They're priceless. Especially when they cause Trixie to turn bright red, swing her tail about to hide her backside, and stutter in righteous indignation.

“Not a fan of catcalls?” I said with a wink. Man, Luna would kill me for flirting like this, even if it was just for trolling.

Her answer was to throw the cigarette through the bars and glare at me expectantly. I chuckled as I picked it up and took a long one. I shuddered as the feel-good tinglies went all the way from the tips of my fingers to the back of my spine. When I looked back her way, she was only just beginning to get over her blush.

“Well?!” she demanded of me.

“What?” I gave her an innocent smile. If a halo appeared over my head, I wouldn’t be surprised.

“Answer the question!” she ordered angrily.

“What question?” I countered.

“Firewall!” she shrieked furiously as her entire body seemed to spasm with the effort.

I sighed and glanced back at the bed to see if I was about to sit on Applebloom. Whatever Trixie was giving her to help her sleep was some kind of powerful to keep her out through all this ruckus. Two seconds afterwards, I decided it wasn’t likely a good idea that I smoke right next to her and moved to the opposing corner of my cell, blowing my smoke out into the hall.

“Trixie, the fact of the matter is...” I started to say before shaking my head. This wasn’t something I had any business lying about. I mean, I didn’t want Trixie to think that I would choose The Nightmare over her, but I wasn’t going to sugarcoat my principles for her either.

“The truth is, Trixie, you’re both right,” I said with a nod.

She tilted her head, a tad confused. She opened her mouth to no doubt ask me to elaborate, but I beat her to it.

“David has not offered me a Pact,” I clarified, my eyes losing their focus on anything in particular as I spoke, “But that’s because he would be wasting my time and his breath. If David ever offered me a Pact, I would spit on his hand. Even if it got me killed. I’d rather be free than alive.”

“But...”

“Look, I don’t... want to lie to you, Trixie,” I stared down at my socked feet and took another drag, “I mean, not about something so serious.”

“You don’t think I’m free either. That just because I made a Pact, I’m suddenly a pet!” she

snapped, her eyes slowly glassing over with tears.

“Look, I don’t pretend to know how it works,” I said with a shrug. “But... I’m not going to blow smoke up your skirt, either. You may have free will, but... You’re definitely wearing a shock collar. I mean, you can’t even hint at a lot of details without feeling like you’re about to die. And that? Yeah... I’d rather just sit in here. But that’s just me.”

Trixie’s eyes widened with horror. Not shock, not surprise. Horror. As though I had confirmed her darkest fear. She backpeddled away from me and I stared at her, sadness narrowing my eyes. I was watching the world she had built around her mind come crashing down. Sure, it was a fragile world, but driving her to that point was still upsetting.

It really did bother me to see her like that, but it was definitely something she needed to hear. Making deals with the Devil was frowned upon for a reason. It wasn’t the right thing to do. Ever.

“You see, slave. You may no longer hear the Song itself, but you are still dancing to its deceptive melody,” The Nightmare sneered from her cage. “Don’t you find it ironic, though? A dungeon full of prisoners, yet the only one truly captured isn’t even behind the bars.”

“That’s not true,” she whispered before running up to me, “Firewall, I am not a slave!”

“Never said you were,” I took a drag before glancing down at her, “But I’m not the one you need to convince.”

She understood what I was getting at right away. The pain from that realization was hard to look at. Almost made me cry.

There was no almost for her, though.

“N-No!” she yelled, stepping away from my cage. “Y-You’re lying! Both of you are!”

The Nightmare began to laugh one of those creepy laughs that you’d expect out of a Gotham villain. “Why would I lie when it’s the truth that would hurt you the most!?”

“Stop it!” Trixie cried, falling back on her haunches and taking hold of her head with her hooves, “I’m no slave! I am my own pony!”

“Trixie, calm down,” I said loudly enough for her to hear.

“No, don’t talk to me!” she yelled at me before getting up and shaking her head, “I’m no slave!”

Holy existential crisis, Batman! Trixie was freaking out! Badly!

“Trixie, stop, you’re going to hurt yourself!” I started to beg before she turned for the exit and sprinted out as quickly as she could, tears streaming down her face. “Trixie, stop! Hey! Trixie, come back!”

She never stopped. She kept running, her footsteps haunted by my pleas and The Nightmare’s mocking laughter.

After several more seconds of that cliché villain guffaw, The Nightmare finally wound down.

“Ah, I didn’t think you had the nerve to tell her the truth, Human,” she sneered from down the hall.

A part of me felt guilty about it, but another part of me felt right. I’m not sure which was Lafter and which was Stoic, for once. I guess it was one of those days where all of me agreed on something. And the verdict was... That sucked, but was necessary.

The Nightmare wanted to say something, “You’re more intrig-...”

I had no compulsion to listen.

“Yeah, you can totally... y’know. Shut up,” I growled.

I finished off my cigarette and set it down on the stone floor instead of flicking it. I turned to walk over to the bed and ran a hand through Applebloom’s mane. She stirred a tad, happily nuzzling the bed, but was otherwise resting peacefully.

Medicated sleeping pony cares not for your squabbles, for she is above it all.

“Do you deny that she needed to hear every word?” The Nightmare called out.

I snorted before yawning and walking back over to the still lit butt of the cigarette and used it to light a second one. I frowned upon opening the pack, realizing that there was a cigarette missing from it this time. Inmanipulon now sucked in ways that I had only since before shuddered in fear of.

“No, but you said it to torment her. Because you’re a whore.” I answered quite plainly. “So, being that you’re a whore, I think you should shut your whore-mouth.”

She chuckled a bit before continuing, despite my opinion on her whorishness, “Do you not think that the result is what matters?”

“Some would say the ends justify the means.” I shrugged all for my own benefit. “Others would

claim that it's all about the journey, not the destination."

"Oh?" Philosophy seemed to intrigue The Nightmare. Which, to be real with you, I never saw coming from a mile away. "Both have their reasons no doubt. And which are you?"

I thought about it for a while before settling on answer C. I'm a rebel like that.

"All things in moderation," I answered, puffing off the second cigarette, "Including moderation. Life's too complicated to flawlessly simplify."

She gave an astounded laugh. I guess I really surprised her.

"Oh, I like you," she replied.

"Goody." I think you could have bottled all the sarcasm dripping off my voice.

"I bet living here in Equestria has made your life frustratingly dull," she replied with a chuckle, "You must be bored to tears."

I yawned again, taking another drag off the smoke, "To be honest, the last three months have held more excitement than the previous twenty years of my life. And it's all thanks to you and your aforementioned whorish ways."

"I take it that's an insult where you're from."

Looks like we're never going to be able to cast The Nightmare as the Wizard of Oz's scarecrow after all! "Not much gets past you, Nightmare."

"Well, everything gets past the natives of Equestria," she snarled disdainfully, "They hear the Song of Naivete and prance around playfully. Like idiots. Like cattle."

The acid that came off that last word was almost tangible. Her hatred for the innocence of the ponies was beyond rational. I mean, who hates someone for their innocence?

I guess, maybe, the jealous might? But that's just stupid. Not that The Nightmare was a braintrust of any kind, but she was cunning in an insane sort of way.

Maybe that was it?

"Hey, why did you want to bring about Eternal Night?" I asked without so much as a segue. I'm not afraid to change the subject!

"The Rhyme of Eternal Night?" she clarified before sniffing spitefully, "I was going to use it to

drown out the Song of Naivete. To force all these children to wake up. To regard themselves as more than just the inhabitants of a false leader's realm."

"Right, because Celestia is such a cruel tyrant," I replied with a snort. That was all I needed to reaffirm my opinion of the loony Nightmare.

"You speak as though Celestia is not a victim herself." I heard her walking to her own bed, yawning loudly.

"What?" I knew I had no business taking anything The Nightmare said seriously. But a little voice in the back of my head --instead of a clearly audible one!-- was irritating me into curiosity.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you, Human," she answered, "Suffice it to say, not all is as it seems. Leave me be, I need rest."

I felt the urge to disturb her attempts to sleep, but I was rather beat myself. "Whatever. Just try to keep your crying to a dull roar."

"How considerate of you to remind me."

"That's me." I said with a smirk to no one, glancing over to the sleeping Applebloom.

* * *

Time passed in its usual manner. Slowly. Lazily. Yawningly. Bleh. There was a lot on my mind and trying to put everything together was an exercise in futility. Equestria was created by David? The Ponies were under some spell? The Nightmare's insanity might not be so insane?

I tried to think of what it all meant, but truthfully, my time would have been better spent trying to find out how much wood would a woodchuck cut. If he even did cut ~~would~~ wood, that is.

As I sat there, trying to piece it all together with nothing but a dwindling box of cigarettes to keep me company, I began to wonder if it even mattered. Would figuring all this out even give me the edge I needed to get out of there? Likely not, but it was something to do.

That is, until the whimpers off in the distance started.

My groan of impatience was laced with a considerable amount of frustration. I really did not want to listen to four-to-six hours of whiny Nightmare. Hell, I didn't want to listen to anything that came out of The Nightmare for that amount of time. Or even half that amount of time! The damned Nightmare was best taken in small doses if one was to avoid thoughts of better ways to spend one's time. Such as playing Roshambo or something.

As time passed though, the distant whimpers only marginally increased in volume. In fact, it took me a few minutes to realize that wasn't The Nightmare crying. Wherever it was coming from, it was from outside. And I wasn't the only one to notice it, either.

"Human, are you making that noise?" I heard her ask.

Someone's a light sleeper.

"Shh." I held my breath, trying to get a better idea of what was going on.

The whimpering came closer, and as it did, it became more emphatic. Before long, the feminine whining turned into outright gasps and soft cries of agony. Creepy.

"So, that... isn't you?" She apparently needed some extra special confirmation.

Forget what I said earlier. The Nightmare is a few games short of a Steam account. Or perhaps she was a few Jpegs short of a DeviantArt page. Possibly even a few six-siders short of a fireball. A few fries short of a Happy Meal. A few geese short of a gaggle. Take your pick, I can do this all day.

"Shut up!" I ordered The Nightmare, cupping my hand behind my ear in an attempt to hear more betterish and stuff.

She started to say something again, but the ever nearing sound of whimpering sobs cut her off.

"Is it the slave?" she asked softly as her hooves clacked against the stone floor, probably from her cantering closer to the bars.

"Knock it off, would you? ... I can't tell," I admitted as the cries continued to come nearer. It wasn't tortured cries as much as it was tormented cries. I know, that probably doesn't make much sense but let me put it out this way. If you get shot and fall over crying for the next ten minutes, that's tormented cries. Because you're in a state of physical torment. Uhhh... I think you can figure out what tortured cries are. Point was this was somepony actively moving in pain.

The entrance to our little jail hall was suddenly thrown open, though the only reason I knew that was because the door made a tremendous slam as it opened. At that point, there was no denying that Trixie was the one in pain. I know because I'd heard her make these sounds of agony before. When she was betraying Cookie's identity at the cost of pain inflicted by the Pact that David had bound her to.

"Trixie, what's wrong?" I called out as her whimpering came closer and closer.

“U... Use it! Huh-...H-Here! HE-HERE!” She squeaked in a shrill tone, collapsing as the sound of metal striking stone skipped to my cell. Suddenly, at my feet, just outside of my cell laid the small metal tome that David had kept with him. I reached down and picked it up. Upon brushing it’s perfectly smooth and reflective white surface with my fingers, I could feel an energy humming within it. Warmth immediately surged throughout my body and I suddenly realized that I was no longer under the effect of the Inmanipulon. With the tome in one hand, I opened the other, palm up, and created a small tongue of fire within my hand.

“Trixie pony...” I murmured as the sensation hit the bottom of my feet and raced back up my spine, causing my eyes to flutter in response, “You are best pony.”

Without thinking, I grasped the Inmanipulon bar and attempted to melt it, but I could already tell that it wasn’t going to work. This toy may be able to free my powers from suppression, but it didn’t make Inmanipulon any less immune to it.

“Trixie, I still can’t get out, the bars are still...” I started to inform her before she interrupted me again.

“Just... Just open it...” She panted softly, but decided to add an extra comment at the end, “Idiot.”

I blushed a bit and looked back at the book before grabbing its thrumming cover and pulling it back to reveal the first page. The page was blank, but what I needed to see wasn’t actually something you view with your eyes. In fact, I ended up closing them as my mind began to be assaulted with... Magic? Technology? Something greater? I couldn’t rightly tell you. It wasn’t... overbearing like other powerful sensations of magic had been. It was, however, quite the attention grabber.

**WARM WELCOME: CREATOR_
WARNING: POWER
RESERVES CRITICAL_ OFFER:
ENABLE: EFFICIENCY MODE_**

Not technically loud, since it made no noise (which was further disorienting because I was aware that it was making no actual sound). It was like being shocked with words as you were being forced to read them. I know, that doesn’t make any sense, but uh... Very little concerning this little gizmo is going to fall within the realm of sanity. For instance: I didn’t tell it to tone

down the... volume(?) so much as I desired it to be so, lest I lose another year of my life to jumping out of my skin.

TRANSMISSION REDUCED_ APOLOGIES: CREATOR_ OFFER: FURTHER REDUCTION_?

Communication was not two way, at least not completely. I wasn't able to speak to it. It was pretty much translating my thoughts and desires into questions and requests. Like when I began to wonder what it actually was, it was quick to supply me with an answer.

THIS ONE: THE CODEX OF THE CREATOR_ POSSESSION OF THIS ONE: ENABLED_ PERMISSIONS = ENABLED TRUE FABRICATION; ENABLED TRUE ALTERATION; ENABLED TRUE EXTIRPATION_ OFFER: FURTHER ELABORATION_?

That's a lot of shuns.

My mouth moved to form the word 'No' as my mind truly and honestly desired for it to stop talking like a computer. My current thoughts revolved around the concept of such a powerful toy being limited to such an obtrusive and limiting form of communication.

COMPLIANCE_

And suddenly it was out of my head and my eyes were open again. My sinuses throbbed for several seconds as I adjusted to being released from the state of... whatever that was.

"Is this satisfactory?" The Codex said in a soft, gender neutral voice that I could describe as both young and bored.

"Yes." I let out a sigh as I rubbed along the bridge of my nose. When the pain subsided, I stared back at the metal tome. The pages looked as though they were comprised of an unmarked transparent laminate. I began to think of a few more improvements until Trixie's laboured breathing brought me back to reality. Or whatever I was in! Hell, I wasn't so sure anymore!

"Shit, Book. Codex. Whatever! Get rid of the bars to my cage!" I snapped at it, running up to the Inmanipulon and pointing the face of the book at it.

"Mmm, sure thing." I think it was trying to imply that I was going to put it to sleep by putting it to such demeaning tasks. At least, that's what I got from the inflection, anyway. It didn't sound happy, that much was for certain. I think I'll name it Marvin.

With that, a soft blue energy erupted from the pages and began to swirl about me. It was so damn hard, keeping myself from touching the light. I swear, Luna would have decked me in the

face if she even saw me straining with this. Eventually the energy snaked away from me and began weaving in and out between the bars which seemed to slowly erode away. Oddly enough, this made absolutely no sound. I made a mental note to request sound effects next time. The entire process took a couple of minutes, but before long, I was able to slip out.

“Power reserves are low,” the book said with what I could have sworn was a sigh, “Entering sleep mode. Please limit use until further notified. ETA is unknown.”

“Wait, I need you to help her!” I cried at the tome as the humming sensation that I was feeling faded into nothingness.

That worried me. It snapped shut all of a sudden and I began to pry at its edges, but it wasn't reopening at all. I started to get extremely angry and frustrated but I quickly became too distracted. Namely when I turned to see Trixie to the left of me, laying on the stone floor with her entire body covered in sweat and still gasping painfully. No longer concerned with it, I dropped the superbook and ran to her side. She had not been but a few steps from my cell, surprisingly; a testament to her determination when you take into account the distance between my cell and the door.

“Trixie,” I said softly as I dropped to my knees, my voice quickly filling with dread, “What's... What's wrong?”

“What do you think is wrong?!” I heard The Nightmare call out angrily, “She's betrayed David! She's done something to disable him and stolen the Codex. It's triggered the punishment that comes along with her Pact. No doubt she will be unable to weather its retribution and live, as nothing ever has and ever will, most likely. As brave an act as it was, she's doomed herself to the consequences.”

“This didn't happen last time!” I cried out as I reached for her, the fear quickly taking root.

The Nightmare had no answer for that. I felt a cold perspiration break out all over me as the tips of my fingers made contact with Trixie. She was cold. Colder than Applebloom had been, even. I'm not good enough with words to express just how numb one can quickly become when the only alternatives are to faint or scream. I mean, I'm not some almighty badass that can watch his comrade fall and be filled with righteous fury. I'm just some guy who missed his twenty-fourth birthday while playing with ponies. As terrible as some things had been in the past, this line had never been crossed. It never needed to be crossed. It never should be crossed.

I helped her up a bit, holding an arm under her as my spare hand brushed away the damp mane from her face. She lazily affixed her lovely blue orbs onto my eyes and slowly managed a smile. Her normally sky blue coat was darkened by all the sweat, giving her an ill hue overall.

"I'm no... slave," she murmured softly, the pain in her voice causing a lump to form inside my throat.

I was moments from panicking like a child, but fortunately my defense against such things kicked in. I still began to cry, but I still smiled and coughed out a laugh as I continued to brush her hair back.

"No, uh... This definitely qualifies you as... quite the rebellious pony." It took all the strength in the world, but I kept my hand from quivering and my voice from cracking. "You really are The Great and Powerful Trixie."

She gave a shivering gasp as though she were having troubles drawing breath and I couldn't stop myself from seizing up in shock. Eventually, she calmed a bit before smiling once more.

"Stupid human... Every... Everypony knows that," she croaked in exhaustion, her blue eyes glazing over a tad.

I tried to think of something else to keep her smiling, but I was losing focus. The dread and fear within me was fighting off my willingness to keep her smiling and happy. I didn't know what to do but sit there and stare down at her as tears continued to run down my face. My chest began to ache as I forced my steady hand to continue stroking her hair.

"Stop crying," she uttered breathlessly, "You're... g... going to make me... cry, too."

She really couldn't have said anything worse at the moment. I shut my eyes as tightly as I could, trying to stem the flow. All I did was make it worse. When I realized I wasn't going to be able to do as she asked, I finally let out a sob and began to tremble with each pant.

"G... Go." She coughed, reaching a hoof up to push at my chest. "Get out... Out of here. T-Take the filly. B... Better free than... alive, right?"

I shook my head. Yeah, it was the sensible thing to do, but I was busy having my world violently crash down around me. I had never wanted to curl up and wish everything away before, but watching this happen was already changing me in ways that weren't going to be taken back any time soon.

"Oh, this is pathetic." I heard The Nightmare groan out from her cage. Surprisingly enough, it was easy to ignore her into oblivion.

I don't know how long I was there, kneeling as I eventually lost myself to tears. Precious time to escape was slipping by and I couldn't bring myself to give a damn. I was so focused on being there for Trixie that I hadn't even noticed being snuck up on. Which is sorta the point of sneaking up on someone and all, but I digress.

Trixie eyes moved and focused on that sneaking someone just over my shoulder (or rather somepony). “Azure Flora... Are you... here to sto-stop us?”

I looked back at Flora who seemed to be struggling in her attempts to comprehend the situation. Her royal blue eyes moved from the Codex, to mine, to Trixie’s before moving back to mine. Her visage was one of horror and degenerating to downright terror as she continued to piece it together.

“Trixie...” Her voice was a tad strained, as though she were on the edge of panicking. “What have you done?”

“Azure, what do...” I choked on the words, slowly shaking my head back and forth as my the tears on my face began to chill.

“J-Just g... Just go... Pleh... Please, Firewall,” she said as her breaths became deeper and slower. She pushed at my chest again, but her hoof fell after a few moments. I damn my observing nature for realizing this push wasn’t as strong as the last one. I admit, it was the last thing I could take before falling into a panic.

“No, No...” The air in my throat cut off as I looked back at Trixie. Her breathing was slowing and I remember feeling terror-stricken as my fears became reality. Azure Flora suddenly galloped past me but I was too busy cradling Trixie to care what was going on around me. I continued to shake my head as the sweat and tears on my face mingled. The ache in my chest was pushing into my throat and threatening to make me sick.

“You’re... sssso... stupid,” Trixie’s eyes became glassy with tears of her own.

Upon shutting her eyes, they escaped and slid down her cheek before slipping into the already damp fur. It was when she didn’t reopen them that I finally fell apart. There wasn’t anything pretty or romantic or poetic about watching this sort of thing happen.

It’s just awful.

Horrific.

Agonizing.

And I find that I both envy and pity anyone that has the ability to shrug it off.

The ache that had jumped into my throat spread to my entire body as I began to weep without restraint. I could hear Azure Flora and The Nightmare arguing as I pulled the pony closer, now blubbing loudly enough to likely bother the entire world. I’d never felt such pain before in my

life and it was almost worth wishing that I had never come to this place. No heartbreak, rejection, or betrayal could ever amount to what I had witnessed that day.

Nowadays, when I have nightmares, they're not frightening.

They're just this moment.

I couldn't tell you how much time had passed. Only that I had sat there for what felt like an eternity with my arms around her, constantly moving back and forth between unrelenting sobs and silently crying. The truly torturous part of having this happen was that she had done it because of what I had said. She had been making a point to prove that she was free to herself. If I had not said... What I mean to say is that, it may have been her choice, but I helped push her there.

And as cliché as it sounds, all I could think is, 'What have I done?'

"Firewall?" I heard Applebloom call out fearfully. It wasn't the word, but the gentle hoof tap from Azure Flora that brought me out of my frozen state of despondency. When I saw the two of them, I realized I must have woken the filly up with all my crying. Not a big surprise, really. What was a surprise was the fact that David wasn't already here wondering what happened to his superbook.

"Applebloom?" I lifted my head, wiping my face before looking over to the source of the poke. Just to my side were Azure Flora and Applebloom. Flora gazed at me with sympathetic eyes. Eyes that told me she had seen a lot in her time.

"Firewall, you need to leave. This might be your only chance. Take the girl and run." Azure Flora's voice was firm and urgent. She didn't seem to be having the same kind of trouble that I was having over Trixie's sacrifice. You get to be a thousand years old and death is likely something you get accustomed to, I guess. That didn't make me want to listen to her, though. There was a pony in my arms that was never going to smile, cry, glare, yell, proclaim her greatness or boastfully chuckle ever again. It didn't matter who it was, even. What mattered was that it happened.

Right in front of me and for my sake, even.

I had to watch it happen right in my arms.

I stared at them impassively, a myriad of fluids leaking from my eyes and nose. I glanced at Applebloom who was staring at Trixie like nothing made sense anymore. Then I was reminded how I'm not the only one on the line here. With that, I was finally able to remind myself that life marches on. I looked back at Trixie before laying her back down and wiping my face. I don't think I have to tell anyone that this wasn't my most glorious moment.

“Right,” I nodded before standing up and picking up the frightened filly. She gasped in shock at first, but quickly wrapped her forelegs around my neck after adjusting. Figured it would frighten her a little. Ponies don’t often, if ever, get picked up by anything bipedal.

“Just hang onto me tightly, Bloom,” I whispered to give my already sore throat as little punishment as possible. “Flora. Why are you helping us?”

She looked as though she were going to argue that we didn’t have time for this. I was relieved when she gave up before she started.

“Because this has gone on for too long and much farther than it should have,” she lowered her head in guilt, “The Nightmare may have been a plague on society, but... it wasn’t worth it to solve things our way. And Trixie... .. This is just proof. And I should have seen it a long time ago.”

I looked back at her with a frown before letting my head drop again. “Come with us?”

“I wish I could,” she spoke softly, her smiling grimace threatening to sting my red eyes with more tears.

“Right.” I nodded, not wanting to push her into betraying her own pact. She was probably skirting the edges by letting us go. *How does this shit work anyway*, I caught myself wondering. I quickly shook it off and looked down at the frightened Applebloom in my arms. “You okay? You ready?”

“Y... Yeah,” she stammered, adjusting her position in my arms again.

“Human!” The Nightmare called out for me. “Tell her to free me!”

Sh’yeah right. That was *SO* gonna happen. Right after I win the lottery.

“Good luck, Flora,” I offered the white and blue pony, earning a smile from her in return.

Just as I turned to leave, The Nightmare called out again. The difference between this time and last time was that I was interested in what she had to say.

“Free me and I can tell you how to reopen the book!” she called out, a little desperate, “You could free the ancient one from the Pact! And revive the mare! You owe it to her to at least try!”

Y’know, back in the days of pre-pony-life, I would hate it when the movies would take a powerful death and take out its meaning by reversing said death. Would you like to know how much of an impact that had on my decision?

Abso-f***ing-lutely none.

“Firewall, just go.” Flora urged me to continue walking but really, even if there was a sliver of a chance, I couldn’t pass it up, “She can’t be trusted.”

I stopped, turned around, and set Applebloom down before walking down to the cell that held my former body. The appearance had not changed much beyond some incredibly girly turquoise eyes. I glared at her and she glared right back. I bit my lip before taking in a big breath and letting it out through my nose. I gave a look to Azure Flora who was shaking her head. She didn’t trust The Nightmare. I didn’t either, but there was one thing I could trust.

Self-Preservation.

“Come here,” I uttered softly, lifting a hand and crooking a pair of fingers. I didn’t want to show this side of me around the others but it was a necessary consequence. If I got Trixie back, I would have done it a thousand times.

Warning: If you came for the ponies and the sunshine and the rainbows, it’s about to leave the door. I know, I didn’t want it come to this, either. This contains no Lafter, no Stoic, no emotion. Just a cold logic when I realize that an objective is more important than the path. Very... VERY rarely do I come to the conclusion that the ends justify the means. This is one of those times.

The Nightmare hesitantly approached. Big mistake. Soon as she was within reach, I grabbed her by the mane and yanked her right up to the bars. She cried out in shock as her head smacked into the magic nullifying metal, disorienting her long enough to get both my arms around her neck. I hooked my right palm into the elbow of its opposing arm and braced against the cage with my spare hand. That’s a fancy way of saying sleeper hold, by the way.

“R-Release me!” She squeaked, ineffectively pulling at my arms. Sad thing is that this hold is easily broken but... it sorta relies on fingers. Ironic, I know. She tried to pull away with her hooves but the smooth stone floor provided absolutely no traction.

“I’m done playing games, Nightmare,” I spat angrily, flexing my arms to provide just a little more discomfort, “Tell me how to get the book open, or you go somewhere for a lot longer than a thousand years. I don’t know if you have a name for it here, but back home, we call it Hell.”

She continued to struggle and even began to hurl threats and insults that I never really paid attention to. I simply sighed and tightened my hold on the bar, narrowing her air supply even further. It was a bit surreal, watching my once pony body struggle and strain in my arms. When her struggles began to weaken, the panic began to set in that I was serious and she finally caved.

"I'll do it!" she cried through her now hoarse voice.

I was grateful for that, actually. At least, I am now. In the state I was in, I don't think I would have stopped if she tried to call a bluff that didn't exist. I loosened my grip enough for her to breathe again and she gasped as the life-saving air rushed to her lungs. She glared at me for a few seconds before smiling darkly.

"You were going to do it," she said between panting breaths, "You had me so fooled. I had almost forgotten that under all that smiling and laughter, you're still a human. A monster."

"I'm going to give you enough time to take a one more breath and give me the reply I want." I narrowed my eyes at her, leaning in closely, "How do I open the book?"

"Promise me one thing," she said, her bright serpentine eyes glimmering with enthusiastic madness.

"Given your bargaining posture, I'm surprised you feel safe enough to make demands." I gave a tug on her neck to remind her that while today may not have been a good day to die, it just might end up being hers.

"I want you to destroy David." That excitement in her eyes reminded me just how crazy she was.

An odd request, but not one I would mind making good on.

I became disgusted and let her go, glaring somewhat before stepping away from the Inmanipulon bars that were blocking my magic. I turned and pretty much used the Force (magic) to yank the still closed book to my hand. I gave its cover a testing tug and unsurprisingly did not get it open. I gazed at The Nightmare as she rubbed her neck with a hoof, still panting.

"Flora, can you remove these bars?" I kept my voice flat and emotionless.

"I cannot free The Nightmare," she responded shaking her head before cantering closer, "Firewall, I... I want Trixie back, too. But you cannot trust The Nightmare. It won't help you. It will only help itself."

"I know," I countered with a nod before looking at the cell beside The Nightmare's, "What about those bars? David give you any orders to leave those bars in place?"

"No, b-..." she started to say.

"Then get rid of them. And any Inmanipulon inside." I walked up to the bars, silently waiting for her to comply. I heard her inhale as though she had a rebuttal in mind, but she must have let it

go. The bars in front of me vanished and without missing a beat, I walked into the cell and turned towards the wall between me and The Nightmare. With a snarl, I kicked the wall with one socked foot.

Had I been without magic, that would have hurt like a mother. As things were, though, that wall crumbled under a wave of force and fire. The Nightmare smiled madly at me, even when I walked up, grabbed her by the mane, and drug her out of her cell. Not very gentlemanly of me, but I was just so fed up with the bullshit.

“You’re free. I’ll deal with David. Now tell me how to open the book.” I snapped angrily before throwing it down in front of her. She started to speak, but I cut her off. “Keep in mind, the next words that come out of your mouth better satisfy me or the deal is off and you go back in your cell. Where I hope David fails for the next thousand years trying to ‘fix’ you as you suffer through it.”

The Nightmare seemed to like the aggression. I guess it was all she understood. Who knows. Who cares? All that mattered is that she gave me what I wanted. Thank god, because I was bluffing about putting her back in her cell. I’d have probably just taken matters into m-... Well... Let’s not think about such things. Let’s simply remember that The Nightmare was just as much to blame for Trixie’s sacrifice as I was. Moreso, even.

“It’s main powersource is temporarily depleted. Probably from dissolving the Antimagic metal or maybe David’s been using it too much lately.” She tapped it with a hoof before kicking it back over to me. “I once had the necessary permissions to use the device, but now you have them because David gave every last bit of magic I had to you. It has a reserve power supply, though. You can access it. You just need to command it. The reserve won’t last through much use, especially if you plan to use it to attempt a revival.”

“How do I command it?” I levitated it into my palm and looked it over.

“Same way you cast a spell,” she explained without hesitation, not wanting my ire to lose its distraction.

I tried for a few seconds to no avail. After I realized I was getting nowhere, I glared at The Nightmare who cowered back a step but still kept her insane smile shining away at me.

“Y... You must have changed its command sequence. It used to work the same way!” she protested loyally. I know I shouldn’t have, but I believed her. Mostly because I was busy working it out on my own. I had to work fast, though. Applebloom was counting on me.

I suddenly found myself wondering about Applebloom. When I glanced over her way, I saw she was hiding behind Azure Flora. Hiding from me. That hurt a bit. I wasn’t mad at her, it was just a little saddening that I had scared her with my actions. It couldn’t be helped, I told myself in an

attempt to console. It didn't really work, but at least I made the effort.

"Command sequence," I mused aloud.

I thought about how I altered its method of communication and decided it was worth a shot. It was possible that I had changed more than I knew when I told it to stop assaulting my brain.

"Administer auxiliary power," I commanded clearly.

Sure enough, the book popped open and the thrumming within started back up. I lifted a hand and though it was outside of my affinity, I cast a quick spell to knock out The Nightmare. Nothing cruel, just put her to sleep (okay, so maybe I let her hit the ground like a ton of bricks. Sue me for not being extra concerned). I found it remarkably easy. Either being a human removed my affinity, or I got a lot more of a step-up in power than I had originally assumed.

"Reserves at one-hundred percent, Creator," the book chimed dully, "Please use it wisely as the main power will not be restored for at least thirty hours."

"Whatever, remove the Pact from Azure Flora and revive Trixie. Then go back to sleep," I ordered sternly. I wasn't going to make this special or anything, I just wanted to get shit done and get the hell out of this place. Well... Maybe after having a word with David.

"Pact Contracts can not be broken by conventional means. Their design included defenses specifically built towards the Codex," it stated, "Attempt anyway?"

There was something significant about that. I decided to bank on the safe side.

"Revive Trixie first. Then attempt." Well... safe in a sense, anyway. With that, the book floated out of my hand and over to Trixie. The thrumming began to increase in volume and everything seemed to lose focus for a few seconds. After a few more minutes, it almost became unbearable. Applebloom covered her ears as I began to cringe from the discomfort. Flora, surprisingly, didn't even bat an eyelash. She merely turned and held the grimacing filly close. When it got to the point that I couldn't hear or feel anything but that thrumming vibration, I collapsed to my knees and ineffectively clutched at my ears. It was like standing in front of a concert subwoofer with the dial turned up to '11' and the lowest note being spammed like it was going out of style.

And then it stopped. As soon as my vision cleared and my balance righted itself, I sprinted over to Trixie and knelt down by her. She wasn't moving at all, though. I bit my lip hard with anger and clenched my fist so hard that my untrimmed fingernails were cutting into my palms.

"You tried, Firewall," Flora offered softly, placing a hoof on my shoulder.

I just about cried all over again. It just wasn't fair.

Not for her. Not for me. Not for anyone.

But...

We all know Trixie is dramatic and such, but that doesn't mean it was necessary for her to suddenly gasp and shock the hell out of me. In fact, it was downright rude. If it wasn't for that whole dying thing, I might have gotten all bent out of shape. As things stood, though, I was just ecstatic to the point of nearly crying. Again. She lifted her head and began coughing violently, gasping for air as though she couldn't get any. Probably something to do with me hugging her like a vice grip hugs a brace.

"You die again and I'll make you regret it," I promised her as I stood up, picking her up with me as I began to practically squee with glee. She wheezed something in response and I suddenly came to my senses. I set her back down and grinned at her like an idiot as she knelt down, still coughing. After the fit passed, she glared up at me a bit for having woken up to such rough treatment before looking around at everypony. I just continued to grin like a moron as everything came back to her.

"I... ... I'm alive," her voice was strained, as though she had gone for days without sleep, "I... I shouldn't be, though... What...?"

She stared at one of her hooves as she slumped down further. I guess being brought back from the *WORLD BEYOND* can tire you out. Stupid stuff not making sense! I was just about to explain everything to her when a rather loud crack like a gunshot report from behind startled the rainbows out of us all. I looked over to see Azure Flora, looking perfectly fine except for the shocked expression on her face and a bit of steam coming off of her flank.

"Reserves are depleted. Entering Hibernation," the Codex announced before clapping shut and falling to the floor with a loud clack against the cold stone.

"Peachy," I sighed before looking over to Applebloom, "Alright, you little licorice-headed monstrosity. It's time to earn your keep. Show off your amazing book carryin' skills."

Applebloom blinked before tilting her head and cutting her eyes at me menacingly, "What'd you just -cough- just call me?"

"You heard me!" I stuck my tongue out at her before looking back at Azure Flora, "So, before I get the urge to make a hot flank joke, is there any way for us to check if that actually worked?"

Azure Flora's unsettled air slowly left, replaced by a speculative gaze aimed at nothing in particular as she ran a hoof back over her mane. Finally, she looked up at me before trotting

over and STAMPING ON MY TOE!

I don't need to tell anyone how much it hurts to get your toes abused. Just think about the time you stubbed your toe. Yeah, that time. Now imagine a dog-sized pony stomping on it as hard as she can. Horrifying, is it not? It's like, 'that bitch!' amirite?

"Mother Ffff... Gah!" I squalled in abrupt fury, snatching my foot out from under her, "Flora, you b-... Mmmmf! What the hell!"

"I was under orders to keep from hurting you and even protect you," she replied with a pleased smile, "And I just disobeyed them. Blatantly, even. Which means..."

"That had to be the *worst* way for you to test your Pact!" I snarled, curling my wounded foot-digit up to stymie the throbbing pain it was emitting, "We are not amused, Flora!"

"I am," Applebloom trotted right past us both with a large grin on her muzzle, balancing the Codex atop her head as though she was paid to do this sort of thing every day.

"Yeah, well, short people and how they got no reason to something something whatever..." I muttered, glancing down at my socked foot with a frown before remembering that screwing around was quite possibly the worst way to eat up our borrowed time. I looked back to Trixie who looked like she was either three sheets to the wind or possibly high off fatigue. Either way, she wasn't long for consciousness.

"Stay with us, superpony," I knelt down and waved a hand in front of her face, "We need your help if we're all going to get out of here."

"Mmmyes, everypony needs Trixie," she replied with a roar of a yawn, "Very well, let us hurry before I decide my beauty sleep is... more important than... What are we doing, again?"

So dying was exhausting. Not the strangest thing I'd ever heard. Not even close.

"I dunno, can you toss up a portal?" I asked hopefully, reaching down to gently thump her horn with my index finger, "That would be helpful."

Contrary to fanon belief, there's nothing intimate about the horn, touching or otherwise. It's no different than poking someone in the temple. Just sorta irritating and a violation of personal space. Think of it like hair or something. Sorry to dash your silly hopes on the rocks.

She pursed her lips together and rubbed the spot where I had flicked with an irritated glance at me, "Such a task is not beyond Trixie's capacity, Firewall."

"Do you always have t'talk about yerself like that?" Applebloom huffed as she continued to walk

about in a small circle, gazing up at the book balanced precariously on its back, cover facing upward.

Great. I had a sick child antagonizing my only way out. I gave her a stern glance.

“Applebloom? Hushing and the big ponies? Kay-thanks,” I interrupted before Trixie could take offense and respond, “Great, Trixie. Be great and powerful and make us a damn door already, we’re running out of time.”

Trixie started to protest the rough verbal treatment, but I quickly placed a hand over her mouth and gave her a serious stare. It held no impatience, no malice. It was just a reality check. It didn’t take her long to get the message and once she did, I took my hand away from her.

“Trixie. Please. Wake up and focus,” I spoke softly, all humor having left the building. “Do you want to be here when David figures out the book is missing?”

That thought didn’t seem to tickle her fancy in the slightest. She opened her mouth to speak again but closed it after another second of consideration.

“R... Right. Where shall I take us?” she asked, her tone serious once again.

“Canterlot, if you can.” I said with an encouraging smile before turning to Azure Flora, “But first, we’ll need the Inmanipulon out of this room. So chop-chop.”

Having magic ponies for allies makes life in general pretty easy. I mean, it’s amazing how quickly you can go from ‘in a prison’ to ‘opening an escape portal’ with just a couple of mares backing you up. I mean, it took Trixie longer to create the portal than it did Azure Flora to cleanse the room and that didn’t take very long at all. It did, however, look like a close thing for Trixie judging from the way she struggled to form the portal. I wasn’t certain she was going to make it happen, for a few seconds. Eventually, though, the portal did open up, crackling loudly with energy as the path inside swirled with dark blue and grey clouds. Trixie smiled arrogantly upon finishing her task despite the fatigue that wracked her body on all counts.

She did, however, forget to take one detail into account.

“How’s Firewall *-cough-* supposed to fit in that?” Applebloom asked with a tilt of her head, somehow managing to keep the superbook perfectly balanced on it nonetheless.

I rubbed the back my neck, “Eeeyeah... That’s uh...”

Trixie blinked before looking up at me, then back at the pony-sized portal, then back at me. Her ears drooped as she lowered her head, mortified by the oversight.

“Indeed. Quite an error,” a very calm voice called from the jail/prison/brig/thing’s entrance.

Cue dramatic gasp and everyone looking to the voice’s source! Yeah, I’m sure it isn’t hard for anyone to guess that our new arrival was none other than David. I glared darkly at him before stepping forward, putting myself between him and the others.

“You guys go ahead.” I ordered. I know, looking back, it was totally cliché. That didn’t make any difference at the time, but there you have it.

The three girls immediately replied with different variations of what amounted to ‘What about you, Firewall?’

David was staring at me impassively but his attention quickly moved to the Codex on Applebloom’s head.

“The Codex,” he whispered, sucking in his breath with dread splayed upon his face.

Without so much as another second to respond, David’s feet lifted off the ground and he began hastily careening towards us.

I moved to intercept, but just before lashing out, a large dark gray wall suddenly appeared in front of me. I felt the fire inside of me nearly extinguish before it suddenly moved towards the entrance with enough speed to cause one to believe it had been shot from a bullet. It filled the entire hallway and left David nowhere to go to escape its crushingly rapid progress.

I kid you not, David went ‘*Oof!*’ as it smacked into him and carried him right back out the way he came in.

“Trixie, get the child out of here,” Azure Flora grit her teeth and looked back at the unicorn, “And don’t stop until the princesses have that book!”

Applebloom ran over and hugged my leg, “I don’t wanna leave you, Firewall! I’m s... *-cough-* I’m scared!”

AUGH! HEARTMELTING FILLY, Y U GUILT ME TO DEATH!

I bent down and picked her up, “Don’t worry, tiny. It’s not like you won’t see me again.”

I’m not sure if she believed me or not, but her pretty gold eyes were rimmed with frightened tears. I smiled at her to let her know it was all okay, but that only seemed to make it worse. She threw forehooves around my neck and let out something that was neither a cough nor a sob. I hugged her back with one arm, catching the Codex as it fell off her head. She let out a snuffle, clinging desperately to my neck before reluctantly letting go, still on the verge of tears.

“Hey. It’s going to be alright. Promise,” I swore, holding the book back out to her, “I need you to be brave, okay? You gotta get this to Luna and Celestia and tell them where I am. I’m counting on you to come save me. Can you do that?”

At first she remained fearful, but it didn’t take long for those red-gold eyes to steel themselves in indomitable ferocity. She shook with a soft cough and took the book from me before setting it back on her head (HNNNNNNNG!!!!). It made me feel pretty good, I’ve no problem admitting. Without another moment wasted, I walked over to the portal and knelt down to set her by it, giving her a nod.

“I’ll come back for you.” Her voice was still a little shaky, but her tone left no room for argument.

Trixie trotted by and surprised me with a peck to my cheek, “Stay safe, stupid human.”

Before I could respond, David suddenly burst through the wall of Inmanipulon. Trixie paled a tad before snatching up Applebloom and dashing through the portal.

“NO! Starlight, I need you!” I heard David scream just as Flora created a second wall to push him back. Rather than collide into this one, though, a brilliant white-blue beam of energy knocked a hole through it as cleanly as a hole-punch perforated paper.

I didn’t so much think as just react by throwing a tiny red ball of flame down the hall that detonated just before David reached it. I immediately felt like an idiot as the rush of flame and force sped towards myself and Azure Flora as quickly as it shoved our assailant back. I jumped in front of her and created a wall of magical flame to counteract the devastation coming our way. I was surprised how easily I managed it, to be honest. The increase in power was going to come in handy, I could already tell.

“Whew,” I huffed in relief before glancing back at the white and blue pony staring at me like I was a complete mouth-breathing moron, “What?”

“Magic does not affect me, Firewall,” she said with an irritated roll of her eyes, “And you’re not harmed by fire.”

I blushed brightly. So I’ve been known to herp some derp in my day! Sue me!

I turned my attention back towards the smoke-clouded hallway and blinked as a gale of wind pushed it all aside. Standing at the entrance yet again was David wreathed in a blue glow. Standing at his side was Starlight, her wings folding back in from blowing away the smoke.

“Get to Canterlot, Commander,” he murmured, keeping his eyes locked on me. “Recover the Codex. I will handle this.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied with a nod of her head, her bright red eyes narrowed with tenacity, “I’ll return shortly.”

We continued the standoff as the Sky Archon turned away and took off with a trail of lightning streaking behind her. I could feel my hands start to sweat with anticipation, which was a little out of the ordinary for me. I wasn’t worried about myself. I never really did give a damn about what happened to me, in all honesty. But somepony was going to make it difficult for me to work by being all cute and defiant.

“Flora,” David called out softly, “Why are you doing this?”

“If you can’t figure that out for yourself, David,” she answered with a thinly veiled degree of unwillingness in her voice, “Then there’s no reason why I should waste anyone’s time trying to explain it. I’m sorry it’s come to this”

He stepped into the room, the glow on his body slowly fading as he placed one hand inside of another behind his back. He let out a soft snort and shook his head. “Now you sound like me.”

I glanced back at the portal. It was still open. I commenced the ‘plan’ification process and stepped back a bit, positioning myself alongside my pony ally.

“Flora, you’ve a soft, kind heart.” He continued to slowly step down the hall. “I know you don’t want to hurt me and I don’t want to hurt you. This is between me and the human. You should leave while you still can.”

“I can’t just stand by and do nothing. I’ve done that for a thousand years, and I’ve had enough of it,” she retorted. Even as she said it, though, I could hear the reluctance in her voice.

This wasn’t going to work out. I mean, she kinda reminded me of my sister. She would talk of violence and anger, but it just wasn’t in her to do it herself. I mean, this pony could make blades and spears out of anti-magic dust. But she’d always used cages, chains, and metal sheets that wrap around you. All stuff to disarm or disable. Really, if she had been ruthless enough, she probably could have destroyed all opposition on her own.

“Flora, go through the portal,” I murmured softly, “You’re going to be more of a liability here than an asset.

She blinked before looking up at me in shock, her eyes betraying her fear. Even through that, though, she looked back at David who had paused his advance to let us talk it out, one eyebrow raised in suspicion.

“I can’t run anymore, Firewall. If I don’t make my stand here, when it matters most...” She let

her words trail off before pawing at the ground in determination. "I can't back down this time."

Awesome. Idealism. Yeah, fight the power and stuff! Just... not when I'm there and can easily be defeated by form of exploiting my allies. David wasn't affected by Inmanipulon and neither was his blue light blasty stuff. Whatever it was he was throwing around, it could hurt Flora. As cool as it was that she was willing to fight for her beliefs, I wasn't about to let another pony die in front of me.

"Just promise me one thing, Flora," I murmured softly as I looked down at her.

She stared at David hesitantly, her eyes void of the conviction necessary to be a part of this. As foolish as this was, I knew it would be the safest route for her and probably even me.

"I won't get in your way," she swore.

I uh... I didn't believe her.

"Nah, I was going to tell you to say hi to Winter Sky for me." I said just as I snatched her back by the tail.

Ponies are heavier than they look, despite being even smaller than an actual pony from Earth. Thankfully, Flora's pretty small as far as ponies go. I mean, when I say she's dainty, I mean she's shorter than Rainbow Dash.

"Ahh! W-What are you..." she cried out, entirely unprepared for being shoved through the portal.

"And give him a big kiss, too!" I ordered enthusiastically as she vanished within the swirling gate.

I snatched my hands back out and right on cue, it twisted to a close. David was polite enough to not make his move while I was removing yet another innocent from the equation. In fact, he even thanked me.

"That was a very selfless thing for you to do," he pointed out, sounding a tad relieved. I wasn't sure Flora could have brought herself to attack David. In fact, if I had to bet, I wouldn't have put my money on it ever happening. David, on the other hand, I wasn't so sure about. Sure, it may have assaulted his conscience later, but he probably would have written it off as a brutal and painful necessity.

"Yeah, I'm pretty stupid like that," I agreed, brushing back my hair and sighing, "Look, David, I'm pretty sure you can figure it out by now, but uh... you've lost this."

"There's still a chance that I can salvage this." He sounded like he really believed that. I don't

know if he was being delusional or had a trick up his sleeve. Didn't care.

"C'mon, like you've really got a shot. Your superbook is in the hands of Celestia and Luna by now, right?" I huffed, letting my lips flap in exasperation, "Between them and Twilight and some pony with a decryption cutie-mark, they'll have it open before you know it. You've lost, already."

He hesitated before replying, pursing his lips as he thought. Not sure what that meant. David wasn't actually human, so the subtext of any outward reaction could mean something completely different. You might not initially make the connection, but the different species have similar reactions for completely different reasons. Basically, think of it this way: You might narrow your eyes while suspicious of somebody's ulterior motives. A pony is more shocked by underhanded deeds, so they would actually widen them in most cases. David was something entirely different, so I had no clue if I was annoying him or unsettling him.

"I can no longer follow through with my original intentions. But I can still try to get the Codex back and leave this place in peace," he eventually countered with a nod, "If Starlight manages to intercept it in transit, I can prevent the ponies from learning things that they are much too young to know as a civilization and things that would disturb of them on every personal level imaginable. And in either circumstance, I still need to send you home. And not for the reasons you might think."

My shoulders sagged a bit. Yeah, I figured it would come to blows, but hey, I was kinda hoping he would just concede and that would be that. Stupid dedicated villains - if you could call him that.

"Well, let me put it this way, mate," I responded as I looked down at my hand, palm upturned. It became wreathed in flame and I let my eyes flutter closed as I covered myself in the magical red and blue flame. I opened my eyes again as the sensations subsided and glared at David before cracking my neck, knuckles, and wrists. "You're going to have to work for it."

"Possibly not," he replied, lifting his hand and doing that silly wave. As if on cue, the fire surrounding me flared up as if it had received a gust of wind.

"I cannot harmonize through your barrier. I assumed as much," he gave a soft nod before lifting his hand again and crooking the tips of his fingers to egg me on, "In which case, I'm going to have to resort to violence. Not what I wanted, but I'll admit, after you've managed to ruin plan after plan, the idea of venting a bit of my frustration... let us just say I'm somewhat overcome with anticipation."

I'm not sure what it says about you when your adrenaline starts pumping before the fight, but if I had to guess, it probably meant that I was wanting this even moreso than David. I'm not big on presumption and arrogance which David carried in spades, not to mention I had to watch a pony die in my arms because of this mouthbreathing idiot. So yeah, now that I reflect a bit, I guess

you could say I was really... *really* looking forward to this.

"I'll do my best to fail in my attempts to resist enjoying this," I informed him as I magicked a cigarette out of my pocket and lit it on the way to my lips.

That may have been an extra convoluted way of mentioning how fun this was going to be. Oh well. I didn't let it bother me. I simply lifted a hand and shoved a firewall (shot!) down the entire hallway, leaving David nowhere to run as it consumed the entirety of the area as it moved. It was just a test shot to see how much he could handle and after seeing him wreathed in a soft blue glowing outline, entirely unfazed, I figured I could really let loose.

"You're going to have to do better than t..." he started to say before I cranked up the heat to about where Celestia had ubercharged me those few months back.

"I'm sorry, what was that?" I called out, taking a drag off my cigarette and letting the torrential eruption of flames continue to flow out of my hand, "I think you said, 'Kick my ass,' right?"

I glanced back at The Nightmare, still napping it up behind me. Decided to indulge in some idle conversation as I effortlessly charred everything down that half of the corridor. "People here are crazy, don't you think? I mean, who makes that sort of request?"

Still unconscious, The Nightmare didn't have anything to say about that. Pfft. Rude.

After a minute or so, I got bored of this and finally let off the gas. As the smoke and steam slowly dispersed, I took another puff off my cigarette. Just in case David jumped out, I began to gather what felt like an endless reservoir of magic inside of me.

"Did I getcha? Are ya dead?" I called out, waving my hand to brush away some of the smoke.

"I will... forever regret... giving her... so much power..." I heard him call out between breaths. It didn't sound like he was tired or in pain. Just very angry.

When all the smoke finally faded, I took a look at my handiwork. David was ankle deep in molten stone and still wreathed in that eerie blue light. He was crouched and sporting a few dark marks. I couldn't tell if they were scorch marks or from soot. Either way, he looked very displeased.

"There's a whole lot of things you should be regretting," I rolled my cigarette over to the other side of my mouth and let my smile fade, "That shouldn't be one of them."

He snarled before floating out of the hardening stone and snapping his fingers. The resulting effect was a loud and bright burst of white magic right in front of my eyes.

I cried out in shock, completely blinded by the spell, "GODDAMN IT, IT'S ALWAYS THE (*ponycensor!*)ING EYES!"

I dropped my cigarette and stumbled back a few steps, blinking rapidly to try and regain my vision. It took a second or two, but just as clarity reasserted itself, David was already in my face. He placed his hand on my chest and instantly I could feel a freezing sensation spreading from the point of contact.

I'm not sure what, but David was draining me of something.

"Sh-Shit!" I gasped, fighting off the powerful urge to fall to my knees and pass out. I lifted a hand to throw some fire but felt it drop just as quickly. I could barely keep my head up. I stared at him as I fell back a step. He kept pace though, keeping his hand planted firmly over my heart. I felt my eyelids become heavy. Like I had run been awake for weeks without rest. Before I gave myself to unconsciousness, though, I watched as the edge of David's mouth curl upward.

My only thoughts revolved around the act of removing the goddamn smirk. Which I did.

With all the will I could muster, I opened my mouth and roared out a gout of flame that slammed right into his chest, shoving him back several steps. Instantly, I could feel the lethargy leaving my body. David tried to get back to me before I could recover but I was a little too determined for that nonsense. I roared another blast right into his approach, this one twice as strong. He was quick enough to twist around it and flew right for me, hand outstretched.

"Ahhh!" I shouted, stomping my foot into the ground and bringing a column of flame bursting from the ground beneath him.

It slammed him into the ceiling of the corridor and I sustained it for a moment before slipping under him and using fire breath instead. He vanished beneath the onslaught of superheated breath and eventually began to be pushed into the ever softening rock.

I put a lot of effort into the fire, roaring out wave after wave. I was relentless about it. But even if my magic could sustain the effort, my body could not. Ever blown as hard as you could and as long as you could ten times in a row? Try it. You'll get dizzy. Which is what happened to me.

I hopped back several steps, cutting it off before it got any worse. I almost expected him to fall out of the hole. A whole lot of magma dripped out but not much else, surprisingly enough. I didn't want to approach it and get the drop dropped on me, so instead, I spotted my fallen cigarette and magicked it right to me. I smoked that thing down to the filter before I did anything else, slowly catching my breath.

No, the irony of smoking to catch your breath is not lost on me now, and it was not lost on me then.

I kept wondering if I had toasted him in that attack, but don't think I'm spoiling anything by telling you that it just couldn't have been over that quickly.

Finally, I worked up the nerve and looked up the hole. I could see light on the other side but not much else. The heat waves were distorting whatever was on the other side and I decided I had to take the chance. With a bit of levitation and a dab of fiery rocket propulsion, I soared through the opening. What I saw on the other side was a bit of a surprise. Okay, a lot of a surprise.

I was in that unnecessarily huge cathedral room again, with David floating in the center of that ridiculous painting. He was healing himself, I discovered. The glow about him was flickering like an aged florescent light as the burns slowly faded and his hair returned. I had really taken a piece of him in that last attack, I figured.

Made sense. My fire breath was easily the most dangerous weapon in my arsenal in terms of sheer magic and heat.

As he continued to repair himself, I pulled the pack of cigarettes out of my pocket and fetched one. Luckily it repaired his clothes as well, else I'd have been blinded in a whole new way. Fire has a tendency to do away with those, after all.

"Neat trick," I called out before lighting it and smiling up at him, "Had enough? Totally willing to accept your surrender, y'know. All you have to say is 'Oh please, Firewall, have mercy on my delicate Harry Potter ass' and all this will be over."

He frowned as he lowered himself to the table that was residing in the middle of the room.

"Stephen, you're making it very difficult for me to not kill you," he replied, his voice lacking all the soft arrogance he normally spouted, "If I can't do what I must without destroying you, don't think I won't hesitate."

I rolled my eyes and took a long puff off the cigarette, "Right. Listen, David, I'm not stupid. You weren't able to defeat The Nightmare, even with your superbook. Now I have all that power, plus what you gave me to bait her with. So uh... I'm calling your bluff! Give up, before I grind you into ashes thin enough to cut lines with and snort."

"Your bravery and nobility is outmatched only by your stupidity," he stated as the blue glow began to intensify.

"I'd rather be stupid than arrogant," I sucked on the cigarette for a bit, giving him a mocking smirk, "But really, let's not lie. I'm not that stupid. I mean, compared to you, I'm pretty damn

smart.”

He stepped off the table almost robotically, his expression as passive as his stride. As he continued his approach, his glow began to diminish until it faded entirely. I didn't drop my fire; I wasn't that brainless. I did, however, relax my posture. If he wanted to talk, I was willing to listen. I was always a good listener. I'll listen you into submission!

“Given your narrow perception of the circumstances, I suppose I can agree that you're not entirely moronic. Just ignorant of the consequences of your actions.” He crossed his arms before looking off to the side at nothing in particular. “Still, my choices are few. Let me give you the briefest of insights, 'Firewall,' so that you may yet listen to reason. This world? It's not a thousand years old. It's not even a hundred years old. It's not even five years old. The memories, the lore, the inhabitants... They're all created by the Codex.

“Well, that's not entirely true... There are a few exceptions. Such as Storm Wing. He was actually born and not created.”

My brain had to make a sudden veer onto the open-minded interstate to be able to process the implications of that statement. I didn't just take his word for it, but I pinned it up as a reasonable possibility. It fit with quite a few things, actually. Questions I had always wondered about, but never bothered asking. Such as why bathrooms had toilets if ponies didn't use them?! And why Prince Jackpony Stormwing acted rather immature on occasion when he was supposedly as old as The Nightmare. I mean, I had just written it off as some people being too stubborn to actually mature. And the other races, such as cows and gryphons. I hadn't seen any of them!

“So... You and I are the oldest things on this planet?” I raised my eyebrows with a smirk, “Luna's gonna love that. And suppose this isn't a fabrication. I mean, let's be honest, your track record for honesty amongst your enemies *and* your allies isn't exactly sparkling. How am I supposed to believe it? I know a lot of ponies that would claim to know otherwise.”

“I can't prove anything to you. I wouldn't even if I could. I don't have to. Because I know if you start to think about it, you'll find it makes more sense than you might be willing to accept.” He stopped several feet away from me. He sighed before lowering his eyes and giving his head a reluctant shake. “Your words from those few days ago; the accuracy they carried was painful.

“You don't understand, Stephen. When I said this world is incomplete, I meant it. And now it is in more danger than you could possibly imagine. Not just from The Nightmare or myself. I broke a lot of rules when I gave them sentience. I broke a lot more when I gave them the power of the Codex, what you've come to understand as magic. I broke the rest of the rules when I made two beings that were above reproach of the Codex. And now, without that small metal book, I can't address the consequences of my actions. Even with it, I would find myself struggling for the next dozen or so years and may still not succeed.”

I frowned, not liking what I was hearing. It was disturbing on level that I didn't want to contemplate. He noticed my reaction and seemed to take encouragement from it. I wasn't worried about the ponies having the book, I was more concerned about these broken rules. Rules are made by something. Something that makes rules wants to enforce those rules. Something is going to have something else enforcing said rules.

It was just the rule of rules, you see.

"You were right, Stephen. They will get it open. They will get it to work for them. Now, hold onto that idea for a short while and allow me to pose you a question." He looked back up at me, his eyes serious and fierce. No longer empty and void of emotion as they had been. "In an incomplete world, you must have noticed a lot of things missing. Did you ask any questions?"

I didn't know if the question was rhetorical right away, so I didn't answer until he pressed for one.

"You must have seen things missing. Most are subtle, but there were plenty of obvious ones," he raised his voice a bit, "Twilight never talks about her family but in passing. Applejack and Applebloom don't ever mention where their parents are or if they even exist. Lavatories, that alone is something I know you can't have missed. Ponies that are supposedly centuries or more in age seem to struggle with maturity, even Luna and Celestia. You have seen these things, have you not?"

I was a little distracted, trying to focus on dissecting these rules he had mentioned. I had a sneaking suspicion where it was going, too. Bad line of thought, this was. Still, David seemed awfully worried about the ponies having that superbook. I mean, yeah, I had noticed these things. I didn't ask questions, though. Just wrote it off as wacky cartoon world. I had sorta abandoned the whole 'cartoon' theory some time ago though, in all honesty. Certain things were too real for it. But I never went back to those questions, I suppose. It was never that important to me.

In retrospect, that was kinda dumb. In further retrospect, that sounds just like me.

"Or were you willfully and stubbornly ignorant?" he asked, now glaring accusingly, "I think you were. Forced yourself to not pick at things that didn't need to be brought up."

"Nah," I answered, shaking my head.

"So, you did ask?" he stepped closer, pausing when I lifted a hand to let him know he had reached his limit in terms of proximity.

"No," I replied, glaring back at him, "I didn't ask. But I noticed. Make your point."

“My point?” his expression faded into frustration and he finally lost his temper. He flung his hands about as he began yelling at me, wild gestures conveying his pent up rage, “THE POINT IS THAT THE EQUESTRIANS AREN’T ASKING THE SAME QUESTIONS FOR A REASON! CAN YOU GUESS WHY?!”

“The Codex. You’ve done something to them. The Nightmare referred to it as a ‘Song’ earlier. Said it keeps the ponies happy with their lives here,” I murmured, shrugging it off like a smelly coat, “And it’s about to be undone, especially if Luna has any say in the matter.”

“PRECISELY! I protected them for their own good with a world wide spell. It’s called the Song of Naivete. And as complex as it is, all it takes is a simple command to undo the spell and awaken the Equestrians!” he spat, snatching his glasses off and flinging them across the room. Drama much? “WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL HAPPEN THEN!?”

“They’re going to suffer,” I answered plainly, almost as impassively as he had been earlier, “It will be really scary for them. Myriad of problems. Identity crises... Er... Crises. Existential melancholy. Lots of tears. They will all turn to whatever makes them feel most secure.”

“You *are* smarter than you let on. Anything that will bring them comfort! Pain, sadism, addiction, anything that brings them consistency!” His tone suggested that it was fighting between mockery and hope. “So you understand, then? All will be lost.”

Magic is so fun. It lets you summon up those little buzzers on Wheel Of Fortune when you answer incorrectly. And then press them to make that very sound.

“Wrong~!” I flashed my pearly whites at him, smiling brightly. “Jeez, and you created them. I figured you would know them better. What are you suspecting will happen? They become murderers? Fall into insanity? Become alcoholics and drug addicts? They will turn to the easiest and most comforting form of security they have. What the hell do you think that is, David? Duh! Each other! They’re going to all run to one another. They’re going to hug each others’ necks, cry for hours on end, panic for a few days, and then they’re going to talk it out. They’ll get over it. These ponies are tougher than they look. Sure, this is probably going to traumatize the shit out of them. No doubt there will be a few exceptions. And yeah, they’re going to be forever changed by it. But they will be alright. All they’ve known is friendship and happiness. Their shared innocence will literally be their salvation.”

“But it’s all a lie!” His glow began to return as he realized I wasn’t going to play his game.

“Doesn’t matter. Drugs are a lie. Doesn’t stop people from running to them when they need to escape from something.” I shrugged, still smiling brightly. “Thank God it’s not called My Little Addict: LSD is Magic, eh? Then we’d have a serious problem on our hands.”

“And what if you’re wrong? They’ve been exposed to plenty of harsh realities in the recent

past,” he countered furiously, slowly lifting from the ground as the cobalt glow began to further intensify, “What if they do become monsters?”

“Well, David, that’s why *you’re* the one who has gotta go,” I said with a helpless gesture in his direction. “If any of them do struggle and begin to make some really bad decisions, it will have been *you* who inflicted it upon them from the start! Wasn’t like they knew about war until you started mucking about in their affairs. I mean, sure; I can understand that you did what you had to do. And yeah, you went about it in the *worst possible way* but you were still doing things that had to be done. Well, now I’m telling you, you’ve done enough. I say let them go through this trial-by-fire. They’ll be okay. I’ll be here to help. Hell, you get outta here right now and I stand a good chance of getting them ready for that transition before it happens. Because let’s face it: It’s gonna happen, bucko.”

“Not if I have any stake left here. I created this world, Stephen,” he yelled, his cold voice now hot and hoarse, “I will decide what is best for it! You think this is my first world? My first creation? Who the hell do you think you are?!”

I almost said something about believing in the me that believes in you. I resisted. Things were a little dire at the moment and it wasn’t the best time for humor. --I know, that doesn’t sound like me at all!--

“Well, just picture me as the punk kid rebelling against his father.” I gave a chuckle, taking one last drag off my cigarette before flicking it, “The only difference is that this punk kid is going to kick daddy’s ass.”

Okay, so I still suck at being serious. I admit it. Are you happy?

“I’ll destroy you if you make me, Stephen!” David warned, his eyes becoming shining blue beacons focused dangerously on me.

“If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you could possibly imagine!” I set my feet into the stone as the fire around me grew hotter. I could feel the floor literally squish as it gave way to the heat. “But seriously, you’ve given me the perspective that I need. Basically, it’s all or nothing, now. So let’s not beat around the bush. Either I die... Or you die.”

“Such an ultimatum fits the gravity of the circumstances. I find it harder to accept, though,” he snarled, “The human ability to simplify so heavy a choice as to take life is... both admirable and horrific.”

“Oh, you haven’t seen anything.” I smiled brightly. “I’m about to redefine your concept of horrific.”

With that, I leaped at him, using a rush of fire to propel me right to him. He didn’t expect the

direct approach, I guess, because he barely had time to lift his hands up by the time my fist was already connecting with his face. His backward stumble gave me all the time I needed to stomp on his foot with one of my own and shove him backward (you'd be surprised how effective that is). He unceremoniously fell on his ass from being unable to move his pinned foot. Still reeling a bit from the assault, he lifted his head just in time to get the heel of my foot right in his mouth. I figure this sorta goes without saying but uh... I was off to a really good start.

"Y'know, you're not much of one for fighting, I would venture to guess," I mentioned offhand as I charged up a ball of fire and spiked it right into his chest so hard he actually bounced off the ground like something straight out of *Soul Calibur*. I assume it was something to do with his shield, but really, this whole magic thing really tossed my opinion of physics out the door a long time ago.

While he was still mid-bounce, I lifted both my hands, crossing one over the other and unleashed a fine impression of a thruster off a NASA space shuttle. It literally blew my hair back --which is the first time I've ever felt recoil from *any* of my abilities--, so I could only imagine how David felt about it. If I had to guess, I'd say he'd have likely lodged a complaint. But instead, he was busy getting roasted. I mean, that amount of smoke and fire sorta left me unable to see two feet in front of me.

"Damn," I whistled, squinting my eyes against the acrid smoke, this time seriously wondering if I had just finished David.

Naturally, I hadn't. I mean, if you had seen just how large of an assault that was, you'd have been wondering the same thing. To my dismay, though, such was not the case. This was proven to me by the sudden flare of blue light and the rush of wind that pushed away all of the smoke, revealing David not six paces back from where I had last seen him. I assume he was upset, but I couldn't tell by the way the light was literally so bright that it was obscuring him with its radiance.

Before another moment could pass, the light emitted a silent blue beam that carried with it the force of a freight train. If I had been a little less overconfident, I'd have been ready for something like that. As it was, though, I totally got what I deserved, which was a quick trip to the other side of the room. Being that the room was so large, you could imagine that I had to get hit pretty hard to have gone so far. In fact, it was so far and so hard that it had actually snuffed out my aura of protective flame. I ended up colliding with one of the statues hard enough to knock it over. Something in my side gave way and after standing up, I realized that a few ribs weren't in their proper place.

How unfortunate, I caught myself thinking as I instinctively grabbed at the throbbing area.

Pain is nauseating, I'll have you know. Broken ribs aren't the *worst* pain I've ever had, but man, they aren't exactly the 'choke it down like a dry peanut butter sandwich' kinda pain, either. I

gasped for air as I fought to get to my feet as quickly as I could. I never made it, though. I barely crawled to my knees when I looked up and David was standing there above me, his hand clutched over a large burn mark in the center of his chest where the sweater had been scorched away.

“I’m sorry it had to be this way,” he whispered as he lifted his hand at my face. I could see the conflict in his eyes and knew he was telling the truth. He didn’t want to kill me and doing so would probably be keeping him up at night for a long time to come.

“Not sorry enough,” I murmured before gathering all the remaining strength I had and leaping at him with a brand new flame aura. I admit, I was using his hesitation against him, but if I may remind you, I don’t like to fight. I disdain it. If I have to, I do it because there’s something on the line worth fighting for and I’m not going to risk that something on pointless ‘fair play’ and all that rot. Violence should always be a last ditch effort; and, if you’re like me and think along those lines, then you’re desperate enough to do anything to win.

Anyway, back to the action. I knocked aside David’s hand, causing his beam to go far to the right. Now close to him, I grabbed his collar and yanked his face within inches of mine. Now before you go thinking I had succumbed to Stockholm syndrome, let me assuage your fears by telling you that rather than kiss him, I instead covered his entire face in fire breath. His blue aura surged brightly in response at first but was soon overpowered with a bright flash of azure light. His scream was unnerving to say the least and I admit to being shaken enough by it to stop. Stupid, I know.

He took complete advantage of his reprieve by bringing back his aura. Before I could react, his hand surged forth and covered my mouth, glowing brightly to prevent me from toasting him further. I don’t think he need have bothered, though. I was a little busy being horrified by the damage I had done. His face was some kind of charred and sizzling, and not in a pretty way mind you (as if such a thing were possible). The smell alone was revolting enough to bother me, and I don’t think I’ll ever forget it. Rather than describe it further, though, let’s just change the subject.

“Stop this, human. Stop this before you make me kill you,” he rasped in an otherworldly voice as his skin and hair began to slowly fix itself with... squishy sound effects.

That was some nasty funk right there, let me tell you.

“Mmphmm Ffmmss!” I mumbled from behind his hand and shook off my distraction. I got my head back in the game, glaring at him before grabbing his wrist with both my hands. Instantly, they turned white with heat and I could hear David’s skin sizzlin’ like bacon beneath my touch. He cried out in painful rage, tightening his grip on my face and tossing me behind him to wrench his wrist out of my grasp. I soared like a punted cat and landed on the flagstones in a less-than-graceful manner. The impact didn’t cause too much damage, but it did remind me that

I had a broken bone or two inside my chest. I whimpered as I clutched my side, curling up and hissing as tears shot to my eyes.

“This is hopeless, Stephen.” I heard his voice becoming less distorted as his wounds continued to fade, “Only two kinds of beings fight hopeless fights. Those gone mad. And those with ideals.”

I rolled to my knees, letting out a cough and immediately wishing I hadn't when I felt the stabbing sensation from within flare intensely in response. I didn't offer David any words, mostly because I was suffering, but also because an angry part of me had decided I was done talking. I tried to look back at him over my shoulder, but twisting my body as I tried to stand was not a good idea.

“You are the second. But even idealists can be set on the wrong path.” I could hear him getting closer. “Even as I say these words, I know you will not accept my mercy. But like you, I must try.”

I gasped as I forced myself to my feet, waves of nauseating agony lancing throughout my body. I panted as I turned to face David, my sight swimming as I did. He was only a few steps away from me but he sounded much further. I watched without reaction as he lifted his hand, firing a second beam that slammed into my shoulder and smothered my aura. I stumbled back from the impact and shuddered as he brought himself even closer, lifting his hand yet again.

It was kinda silly, he actually inhaled to speak again, but the moment he did, I decided I didn't want to hear it. I grabbed hold of his hand and yanked him past me, snatching my foot across his ankles. He smacked right into the ground as I used the same hand to cover him in fire. It may not have been fire breath, but it was all I could manage at the time. I used the other hand to clutch at the damaged ribs that threatened to overwhelm me. The pain shot through my body as I slowly straightened my posture and I involuntarily lurched in response. I tried to tell the pain that the last thing I needed to do was take my attention off David but it had other ideas.

It's selfish like that.

I don't know how quickly I let go of the stream of fire that I was using to pin David down, but I do know that I eventually did and that David wasted no time answering with a beam attack thingy of his own. The difference between this beam and the others was that I was not wrapped in protective fire. The result was a hole being poked through me, just to the left of the already wounded spot.

“FIREWALL!” I heard somebody scream out my name as I stumbled back a step, clutching my brand new hole. Couldn't place the voice at the time, it just sounded hella far away. I wheezed as I felt a warm, wet sensation on my hand and looked down to see blood escaping me. A small part of me was all, ‘Hey, almost forgot what that looked like!’ but a larger part knew that I

was pretty much done for. I stumbled away a few more steps and saw a flash of white light streak past me as I braced against one of the statues. For the first time in a long time, I felt cold in an entirely natural fashion. Freezing, even.

“I’ll kill you!” I heard the voice yell out again. I glanced over to David just in time to see small white-blue pegasus collide with him. Storm Wing. They weren’t but thirty feet away, but it felt like it was much further than that due to the swimming vision and ringing in my ears. My knees gave out and I collapsed against the cold stone statue with a groan. I somehow managed to place my back to it by the time I hit the floor, using it to prop me up. I felt like throwing up, but I didn’t have the strength in me. At least I was getting a good final show, that much was certain. David was getting the everloving hell beaten/shocked out of him by Storm. He just wasn’t fast enough to keep up with the tiny archon. I mean hell, he almost wasn’t fast enough to keep up with me when I wasn’t stupid enough to let my guard down.

David was soon becoming more wild with his attacks as desperation began to set in. I would have cheered Storm on but I was busy bleeding out on the floor like a champion.

“Well, well, well.” A voice whispered into my ear, causing the hair on the back of my neck to stand up. “Isn’t this a precarious situation you’re in.”

“Can’t catch... a break... can I?” I murmured, letting my head roll to the side so that I faced The Nightmare.

This is where the commercial break would go.

“Someone isn’t doing so well,” The Nightmare said with a sneer as she softly stroked a hoof over my cheek. Weird.

“Thank you, Captain Ob... Obvious...” I smiled tiredly at her, “Defender of everything... already known.”

She smirked at me with a glance down at my wound, gently poking at the blood running down my shirt. She brought the hoof closer and examined the red liquid, fascination in her eyes.

“Ponies don’t have this fluid,” she muttered before wiping it off on my pants leg, “Did you know that?”

I blinked at her in a way that let her know that I had other things to worry about. Like extra holes in my body! And pain! Pain sucks.

“Mmm, I suppose you don’t have much time for small talk,” she reasoned to herself before sighing and glancing back at Storm Wing and David, “Your friend is strong. But he won’t last. David isn’t a creature that can be struck down physically. He may feel pain, he may grow tired,

but no amount of physical abuse will ever destroy him. He will outlast the Archon without a doubt, and then either drain him of his magic or kill him. Either way, the outcome won't be enviable for the pegasus."

I blinked again, as feelings of fear for my friend began washing over me. I'd seen one pony die today, I didn't want to see it happen again. One thing I did conclude was that if The Nightmare was sticking around despite its best interests, then it had a reason. The only thing I knew for certain was that it wanted to get back at David. If it was talking to me, then it had something in mind.

Turns out, I was right!

"Do you want to save him?" she asked as she turned back to face me, her smile wide, "Do you want him to live to see tomorrow?"

If I was feeling just a LITTLE bit better, I would have told her that Storm wasn't going to actually see tomorrow even if he lived. As it were, I just nodded, swallowing softly in an attempt to avoid sicking all over the place. I could taste copper at the back of my throat and knew that I didn't have long.

"Get on with it," I croaked as a freezing cold sweat broke out onto my forehead and neck. I'm told that's the 'flaring of the candle' or something. Where your body gives you a rush of clarity before you... y'know... kick it.

"Let us destroy David together, human," she narrowed her eyes as he leaned closer, "Your body is broken. Possess mine."

"... The hell?" Even through all the pain and general haziness, that weirded me the hell out, "What're you..."

"You have all of my power, human!" she snapped quietly, glancing back at the battle, "Listen carefully. All of it."

It took me a moment to understand what she meant but when she did, my eyes widened. I could possess ponies. I could go all gaseous and jump into her. Use her body, her stronger body --aka my former body--, to fight David. Sure, I may have more raw power, but without my aura, I was as durable as a tissue paper. She also likely knew how to truly defeat him. What was there to consider? I mean, it may have dire consequences for me, but I wasn't exactly going to get anything done in the state I was anyway.

"Take hold of this body, Human," she hissed, a mad glimmer lighting her turquoise eyes.

"Whatever," I croaked at her, feeling rather impatient on account of my death being at hand and

all that. I guess I'm just one of those guys that let little things like that piss him off. "Let's d... Let's do this. Works just... just like any other spell?"

She smirked, the action causing her pretty turquoise eyes to slant a bit, "Just like any other spell. As long as your will is strong enough, you can do this."

I nodded. Wished I hadn't. Just that small motion made my head swim with disorientation. I tell you what, spilling your blood out onto the ground like that just doesn't make for a pleasant day. I recovered enough to focus on my actions. I visualized my intent and began to take it step-by-step. Such was the way of more complicated spells.

Step one: Turn into an untrustworthy mist. I did it with my eyes closed since the last thing I needed was to forget to focus on step two by gawking at my dissipating body. Now, contrary to popular belief, shapeshifting does not fix diddly. The only physical benefit is that changing into something formless pretty much puts a freeze on your current state. However, it still doesn't make you feel any better. So while I may have stopped bleeding, I still felt like I had a couple of debilitating wounds. The only thing that actually heals anything is just that. Healing. Shame neither myself nor The Nightmare knew how to do that.

Step two: Soak into The Nightmare. Okay. Simple enough. Just hover over her and let myself drift in, right?

Wrong.

It didn't work that way, it seemed. I had to get some help from the peanut gallery. Not the most dignified thing in the world, but hey, I've been known to sit on my bed with my arms and legs wrapped around a big pink Pinkie Pie stuffed doll and watch a cartoon meant for preadolescent children. Dignity left my life a long time ago.

"What are you waiting for?" she snapped, glancing around her, "Take hold!"

"Dunno how," I coughed, my voice somewhat distorted by my formlessness. I was grateful for that, by the way. Having no physical shell meant that I could actually function without suffering as though I were being tortured.

"You incompetent... You must take hold! Disregard my will! Let thoughts of dominance fill your mind," she instructed impatiently, "Know that you will only experience triumph and do so without mercy!"

Wow. I'm glad I'd only seen that kind of nonsense in movies. I did a mental shrug and tried to comply, but my heart just wasn't in it, I guess. This obviously required a lot of emotion and with my mind as pain-clouded (rimshot!) as it was, there just wasn't a beer's chance at a frat party. Magic needs will, sure. But it also needs sincerity, that much is certain. It ain't like your

boyfriend; it'll know if you're faking it! And also unlike your boyfriend, it will matter. So I was up Chocolate Creek without a Popsicle stick, it seemed. At least, I was until I got some motivation.

"You're pathetic, Firewall. Have you not the strength to do what is necessary?! Even now, we may be too late. For as you can see, the Archon falls," she pointed out with a sneer, "Your hesitation is dooming him."

I opened my 'eyes' and 'turned' to 'see' --I'm not going to go through explaining how it actually works-- what all she was talking about. If I had any eyes at the moment, they would have widened in shock. Storm had tackled David to the ground it seemed and was standing on top of his chest. However, David had one hand covering Storm's eyes while he used his arm to hold his neck in place. Storm was crying out in pain, as though David's touch was nothing but fire to his skin. He threw kicks and lightning in a vain attempt to struggle free, and while it was definitely hurting David, he was refusing to relinquish his hold on the pegasus.

Once again, I remind you all, I'm just not that motivated to take care of myself. However, we all got our driving forces. Watching someone else suffer, especially on my account? That's an all-bets-off no-holds-barred kinda thing for me. That was all the motivation I got. That was all the motivation I needed. I would not let someone else suffer because of me yet again.

~Yes, Human... Just like that... You want to save him, do you not?~

~Shut up.~

When The Nightmare had taken hold of me, I never really felt anything different than a bit of hopelessness. However, it does *not* work that way when you reverse the situation. Because the body was so familiar, I didn't freak out at the sudden change of perception. In fact, it wasn't all too sensational except for the knowledge. The Nightmare offered me no resistance; quite the opposite, really. She was practically shoving everything she knew about magic, David, and Equestria as a whole right at me. It wasn't too different from the Knowledge Absorption spell in terms of how much of a rush it was. I felt a sense of anticipation building as I realized that this knowledge alone would give me everything I needed to win this fight. Granted, I wouldn't be able to suppress The Nightmare into unconsciousness if I was to actively draw on that knowledge, but I was willing to live with that burden.

After getting it all handled and filed away (which feels like an eternity, but really was merely a second or two), I began to feel the transformation quickly take place. The air about us swirled and became energized, turning into a multitude of violets, blues, and reds. Before long, it took shape around my body in the form of wings, armor, and height. I shuddered as the euphoria alone nearly swept me away. Once again, a little voice in the back of my head reminded me that I needed to be careful. The last thing I needed was to get addicted to the rush.

After bringing myself back to Earth, I realized just how dangerous I was with all this power and knowledge. I couldn't help but wonder why The Nightmare needed more power. Even without the destructive energies that David tempted her with, she was more than a match for anything else Equestria could throw at her.

Once I began submersing myself inside her mind, it didn't take long to figure it out.

The Nightmare was just as David had said: Incomplete. It was like standing in a partially completed house. Granted, the completed part was extremely well organized, but still. She was missing nearly half of what a mind should encompass. Her thoughts were frayed and disorganized, her short term goals weren't part of a grander design, and her desires were centered wholly around the immature lust to do whatever felt good. It suddenly made sense, why she wanted so much power. That surge of magic, to put it bluntly, felt better than any drug or sensation. I mean, I'm not a big user, but did a lot of buckling to peer pressure back when I was younger and nothing I had touched as of yet could compare. Also, don't do drugs, kids. It made me feel sorry for the thing, but at the moment I had bigger fish to fry. Bigger, Harry Potter shaped fish, to be specific. I lifted my gaze to where David and Storm struggled with one another and inhaled to shout, gathering magic to amplify my voice.

“DAVID!”

The results were magnificent. Both mine and The Nightmare's voice blended and reverberated as though I were in a stadium. Its volume shook the entire room like a rock concert, complete with dust falling from the ceiling.

Naturally, it got his attention.

I could tell by that shocked expression he threw my way that he was not happy to see this development. In fact, he looked downright afraid. He instantly put the two-and-two together that equaled the I-am-so-screwed reaction. I took a sense of satisfaction in that; I'm not ashamed to say.

“Let him go,” I snarled, slowly cantering toward him.

His hesitation nearly cost him my patience, but just before I could lose my temper, he released Storm Wing. The pegasus stumbled back and away from David, shaking his head over and over like he were trying to get something out of his eyes. David started to get up but I was quick and angry enough to prevent that. With a flap of my new wings (OMG OMG OMG OMG), I closed the distance and stomped him back to the ground. He wheezed as my heavy hoof

collided with his chest but said nothing as I glared down at him.

~Destroy him!~

~Shut up.~

“You alright, Storm?” I never took my eyes off the rat bastard under my hoof.

“Firewall? Is that... you?”

Storm sounded unsettled and distracted. That alone should have tipped me off that something was wrong. I could hear his wings flapping about and his hooves scraping the floor erratically. A quick glance at him told me that he wasn't even standing up. He was still shaking his head as though he was trying to clear his head.

“What's wrong?” I felt David start to push back up and roughly shoved him back down, “You move another inch and I'll burn you alive.”

~Destroy him!~

~I said shut up!~

“I can't see!” Storm cried, the horror welling in his voice.

“Duh.” Damn it, my mouth got ahead of my brain. Again. I really need to get a filter installed.

His fear was only offset by his frustration from having to deal with me. “No, you idiot! I can't even fly! I don't have any magic!”

Just then, I felt a hand wrap around the hoof holding David down and was struck with the familiar sensation of abundant electricity. I yelled out in pain before turning my gaze back down at my assailant. I ignited my fire shield, spicing it up with a bit of The Nightmare's shadow magic. Magic that I now knew how to use. It turned the flames violet and crimson rather than turquoise and bright red but more importantly, it caused David to cry out in pain and yank away his hand. It was then he realized that he wasn't on as much of an even footing as he thought.

He uttered something fearfully in a language that I did not recognize in the slightest. I did, however, recognize the tone and inflection of a curse muttered in fear, much like a human might say ‘Oh God’ or something. David, to put it in layman's terms, was out of tricks.

~He seeks to destroy all that you love, Human! Take his life if only to protect those around

you!~

~I swear to God, I already regret not choking you to death in that cell! Shut. Up.~

Despite my words, I was letting the fire aura grow and swirl around us. David's eyes were wide with fear. He used what I assumed was Storm Wing's stolen magic to create a tumultuous lightning shield about himself but as the dark flames swirled around him, I could see it struggling to maintain its form.

~You hate him as much as I do! Let it go! Strike him down! Revel in his destruction!~

~Sure thing, Palpatine. Maybe next I'll release my rage or perhaps I'll give in to the Dark Side.~

David's defenses began to falter and I could see the fear in his eyes grow. He grabbed at my hoof holding him down. Even through all the pain it caused him, he did everything he could to save himself. He tried to drain me, but immediately back peddled when I began to feed him the entropic shadow magic. He tried to electrocute me again, but the aura dulled it to a slight tingling sensation at best. Finally, he simply tried blasting away at my face, but The Nightmare had 'taught' me how to focus my aura to where his attacks would land, effectively nullifying them.

"No," he croaked as the terror set in.

He was spent. And was going to live or die at my call.

Even though The Nightmare wanted him dead more quickly than I was going about it, she still loved the fear he was emitting.

I have to admit, I wasn't minding it one bit, either.

~Look at him. He would scream if he thought it would save him. Tell him to scream.~

I snarled, annoyed with the request. David's horrified visage only became more frantic in response.

~You're sick, you know that?~

~I have suffered at his hand in ways you cannot imagine! His pain is my pleasure! Can you not feel his fear?!~

~Bitch, I can taste it on my tongue. Sweet as it is, I don't have to like it.~

~But despite this, it is to your liking.~

~I am drawing off your knowledge and that's the only reason you are awake right now. Don't make me put you to sleep.~

~Fine, just kill him!~

I began to channel the proper spell that would make him vulnerable. It would also make me vulnerable as well, but without either of our defenses, there was little he could do with an alicorn as large as me holding him down. It wasn't noticeable at first, but as I began to feed more power into it, the light from my horn began to intensify. The green flickering light, the same light used by Luna and Winter Sky, quickly snuffed out my shadow flame as well as David's shield.

"No," he spat breathlessly, his hands yanking at my hoof in an attempt to pry it off his chest.

"David, you murderous sonuva bitch," I snarled angrily, images of all those he had hurt flashing before my eyes. Images such as Applebloom suffering and Trixie dying. Fairly certain that was The Nightmare trying to strengthen my resolve. I'm also fairly certain she was doing a damn good job. "I'll spare you the monologue and just say it's been a pleasure doing business."

~KILL HIM!~

I lifted my other hoof, wrapped in a sharp, unforgiving sabaton. Without his magic to protect him I would-...

... Apparently get the shit bucked out of me by Commander Starlight.

Our voices cried out in painful harmony as she broke away, standing protectively over David. The green light had winked out as I flipped back to my hooves in an instant. It took every ounce of my will to not ash her right away, which was likely something The Nightmare was trying to get me to do.

"Starlight, what the hell are you doing?!" I yelled, furious enough to see nothing but red. "Get out of the way!"

"My Pact bargain was to protect David," she replied, her voice as calm as could be. "I don't break my word just because it suits my fancy. He spared Hot Shot a terrible fate."

“He tricked you into giving yourself to him, you stupid girl!” I snapped, reaching a hoof up to rub the spot on my neck where she had collided with me before continuing, “Not to mention Hot Shot would have been free a few hours later *without* that thing’s help!”

She shook her head softly, not taking her bright red eyes off of us.

“Semantics,” she said without so much as a blink of her eyes. “He did not make The Nightmare take Hot Shot and he did not make me take the deal. I gave him my word. I was of sound mind and of free will. He did not coerce me, he simply made his offer and let it be known that I was free to take it without fear of retribution. Convenience is no excuse to simply throw away my integrity. It may not be within the word of my Pact to attempt the impossible by standing in your path, but it is in the spirit of it.

“In short, Firewall, you will have to go through me.”

She lifted her wings as energy twisted violently about her, crackling in such a way that she could only mean business. I roared at her as fire and shadows erupted from within me, swirling and dancing about the room. I watched as David started to get up and thought I might have a shot after all. Starlight, on the other hand, was too smart for that, and pushed him back to the floor with a rear hoof. She stared at me and defiantly stood in my way, daring me to strike. I tried to cast a spell to knock her out or move her aside but the spell fizzled out, disrupted by the electromagic around her.

The long and short of it: She was going to make me kill her if I wanted to get to David. Or rather, she was using herself to prevent me getting to David, assuming I didn’t have it in me to cut her down.

She was right.

“God damn it,” I sighed and lowered my head. “Starlight, he’s going to make you regret this.”

She made some sort of a shocked reply, but I couldn’t hear her. I couldn’t even bother to answer her. I was too busy suddenly dealing with pain that lanced through every nerve in my body and every one of my senses. I fell to my knees in shock, my eyes wide with realization

The Nightmare was fighting back.

~Kill her! KILL THEM BOTH, HUMAN!~

~No, she’s an innocent! I’m not going to kill her just because she has a sense of duty!~

I tried to shut her out, but it wasn’t having near the effect I would have liked.

~She is playing you for the fool! It is not wrong to fight for your beliefs! That is from your own mouth!~

~And I believe killing someone innocent is wrong! Back off!~

~You swore!~

~No, I didn't! I didn't even say I would take out David! I wanted to do it, but not if it means committing murder!~

~It's not murder! She places herself in danger! She is accountable for her actions!~

~I'm not going to lawyer around my rules just so I can feel better about murder. The answer is no.~

~TRAITOR! TRAITOR! YOU'RE JUST LIKE HIM!~

~That's it, you're going in the box.~

~I perfected domination a millennium ago! You think I'm truly defenseless against it? Think again!~

The shadows swimming throughout the air suddenly twisted and sped towards Starlight. She stood her ground defiantly, despite there being nothing she could do to stop it.

~If you will not uphold your end of the deal, then I will do it for you!~

"NO!" I cried out.

Without missing a beat, David threw Starlight off of him and held his hand out. With only a fraction of a second to spare, a wave of crackling light rippled forth and dispersed the shadows. His arm dropped numbly to the ground. He was nearly spent. I wrestled with The Nightmare, but she was better at this game. Even through my resistance, she was able to take another shot at David. He was conscious enough, though, to roll out of its path.

~I am such an idiot for having done this. Flora warned me I couldn't trust you. I was too stupid to listen.~

~A deceiver I might be, but I hold true to my agreements. You, however, are just another gutless betrayer that I will crush beneath my will!~

~Another B-Villain line like that and you're going to need a grater for all that cheese and a taco to put it on.~

As condescending as I was playing it, I could still feel the control slipping. She was winning and I knew that there would be no stopping her once she had command. Her mind may have been incomplete, but that only made focusing her will so much easier. There were no inhibitions or sense of shame to make a mind like hers think about the consequences of her actions. She was strength-of-will incarnate.

~Don't fret. When it's over, you'll sleep for eternity. You'll have passed on without having died. Not many can make such a claim. It's for the best. After I've finished David, there are a few princesses to visit some vengeance upon and I doubt you will want to witness it.~

Man, was she really stretching that villain stereotype. I mean, I had an ace in the hole and such, but I was sorta afraid of using it. I just didn't know what it would do to me. After that, though? Yeah, I couldn't take the chance and I felt even stupider for having taken things this far to begin with.

~That's assuming I let you get that far.~

~As though you could stop me! You possessed me! That defense David gave you doesn't work both ways! You are finished, Human!~

~I can't stop you. But I know someone who can.~

"David, separate us!" I cried, my voice battling with the twisted scream of The Nightmare. He struggled to his knees and looked up at me in both shock and confusion. As soon as he got to his feet though, I pulled my ace and gambled on a stretch.

~Hah! That was your plan? Maybe if you had not revealed your hand so early...~

The spell I used to block The Nightmare before may not have been a viable option. However, there was one last spell I could call on. I believe I called it the Best Spell Ever when I first used it and to this day, it still holds that title in my heart. I put everything I had into that last ditch effort. Ironically, the moment I did, I lost all control and The Nightmare now had me locked

inside.

“I have won!” she shrieked with glee, flaring out her wings before throwing her head back in triumphant laughter.

And just like that, all the fire and shadows winked right out.

Both The Nightmare and David blinked in confusion. It didn't take David long to figure it out at least; what with having a bright glowing red and blue shield on my forehead to give it away. Yeah, it was the spell I had cast on Luna to lock her 'demons' away. I figured it was a huge stretch and a stupid gamble, but really, spells do what you want them to. I figured it wasn't too difficult to tweak the spell to work on actual demons –metaphorically speaking, that is– instead of inner demons. While I may not have been an actual demon, I figured an intruder of the mind and body would count. And I was right. --Damn, it feels good to say that.--

So I sealed myself inside of The Nightmare.

Along with all of my power.

“Brilliant,” he murmured, suddenly dashing forward before The Nightmare could recover from the shock.

She recovered pretty quickly, though. She didn't figure out what had happened, but she knew that she couldn't let David touch her if she wanted to keep her power –useless as it was at the time—. She hopped back and went to gallop away.

She only made it two steps before being stopped dead in her tracks thanks to Storm Wing grabbing onto her tail with his mouth. Even blind and without magic, the little pony was still ten times as strong as he looked.

The Nightmare bucked him twice in the face, but he didn't even wince. She stared at him in horror and tried bucking again, much to the same effect. Storm's the real deal; I don't know why she thought she could hurt him that way. Some crazy skank ain't got the brand of pain it takes to outstubborn the little bastard.

~Hah! @\$! you, Nightmare! In the words of M. Night: 'What a tweeeeeeeest!'~

She inhaled to do that stupid Darth Vader yell she does when she realizes she's been defeated but *thank Celestia!* She never got the chance. David closed the last of the distance and laid his hands on her flank without a moment's hesitation. Same result as before. This time, however, pain shot throughout my body as I was flung from The Nightmare's body. Or my body, depending on how you look at it.

I rolled a few times after impact, leaving a trail of blood behind me as I went. Yup. That hole was still there. Possessing ponies doesn't heal you. Just healing. As much as that sucks.

"Shit," I coughed, staring at the ceiling.

No good deed goes unpunished, as they say.

"Luck must be on my side," David murmured as he approached me. "Starlight, make sure The Nightmare doesn't go anywhere. She's rather helpless at the moment, so you shouldn't have any trouble."

I tried to glare at him, but I didn't have the strength. I was tired, in pain, and I had utterly failed to take either David or The Nightmare permanently out of the picture.

At least directly, anyway.

"Don't count your... blessings just yet, Davie," I muttered bitterly, "You're not out of the woods."

He sighed softly as he knelt down beside me, "I know. You may not have defeated me directly, but you've made certain that I won't stand a chance against Luna and Celestia when they arrive. In my current state, Twilight Sparkle could likely be able to finish the job."

That made me smile a bit. Just a little.

"You are smarter and tougher than you look, I will give you that much," he glanced down at my hand, which was busy covering my brand new orifice, "At least I did not have to kill anyone today."

I lazily blinked at him, not quite understanding. Without explaining, he gently removed my hand, causing me to wince a bit as pressure released from it. Still wordlessly, he held the same hand over the wound and with a pitiful grunt, mustered up a small shining sphere. The blue twinkling light gently floated like a feather down into my body.

"It's not much. Really all I could do," his voice sounded a tad more strained than it had a few seconds ago, "But it'll keep you from dying. I don't know any other way to heal you than this, though."

I really didn't understand anymore. So rather than reply, I just blinked again.

"Just granting you the barest amount of regeneration. It's not like you need another power, really, but I'd rather you have it and not die than not have it and think of myself as a murderer from now on. Also, seeing as how you were gracious enough to not kill the only Pony brave

enough to stand by her Pact in every sense of the word,” he said with a shake of his head. “I’m really too nice for my own good.”

“Yeah, whatever, I’m sure you’ll get a call for that Nobel any second now,” I coughed. Already I felt less nauseous but it wasn’t doing anything for the pain, “So, what now?”

“Do not worry about that,” he said pointedly, “Get some rest, it will be a little while before anything happens and you could still end up killing yourself if you try to move around again. Besides, you look like you could use it.”

And that was the first thing I think David and I ever agreed on.

* * *

I woke up with a loud yawn and wished I hadn’t. Mostly because there were several things wrong with this picture.

1. I still had a hole in my gut. Granted, it wasn’t as big, but I still had one and I didn’t like it.
2. My hands and feet were all individually bound to metal rings that were all attached to the floor.
3. I was hungry as hell.
4. I was still in that stupid cathedral room.

Four! Four things wrong with this picture! Ah-Ah-Ah! Insert thunder here.

“The hell?” I groaned, giving my bonds a testing tug.

“Firewall?” Stormwing called out.

“Prince Jackpony?”

I looked around to see him leashed to the large table like a dog. No doubt that small chain was stronger than it looked, but still. The poor stallion looked like a pet.

“You would crack a joke in a situation like this,” he snarled, turning away from me and following his chain back to its ring buried within the stone.

“I’m consistent,” I assured him, letting out a chuckle before hissing at the pain it caused, “Screw Prince Storm Wing and everything he stands for.”

“Right now, I stand for us getting out of here.” He glanced back at me upon hearing my pain.

“You against that, too, smart guy?”

I coughed with a slight whimper. "Well, there are... certain exceptions to... every rule."

"Stop talking, you're obviously hurting yourself," he ordered.

I ignored his request and continued to harass him, "Hey, Storm. Remember when I said you weren't blind until I could make faces at you and you couldn't see them?"

He blinked in confusion before glaring angrily at the floor and kicking at his chain.

"If I ever get my eyes back, Firewall, I swear, you're going to be the first one to know!" he snapped, his anger more exaggeration than genuine. "Because I'm going to find you, and when I do... Oh, I will introduce you to pain."

"We're already well acquainted." I whispered as I gave one of my bonds a yank, causing my wound to remind me I just needed to stop doing just about everything.

"Agh! Hell," I croaked, "She's in bed with me right now. Having her way with me."

Storm's voice was wrought with concern, which I found rather touching. "Are... .. Are you alright?"

"Yeah. It's not as bad as it was." I turned my head back towards him with a smile. "Thanks for asking."

"Not that I actually care or anything." He turned his head away before flopping down onto the floor.

"Now you sound like me," I replied, still smiling at him even if he couldn't see me.

"You might be rubbing off a little," he admitted as he shut his eyes, his voice now quieter, "Second time I've failed. I'm sorry, Firewall."

I sighed softly and turned my head towards the ceiling. I felt tears trying to escape and didn't have the will to stop them this time.

"Not your fault, Storm." I murmured loud enough for him to hear me, "Should have just escaped with the others instead of trying to be the big hero."

"Should have waited on Luna instead of trying to do the same thing," he replied. "Ahhh... I let myself get caught like that."

"So we're not perfect and suck at saving the day. Well... You suck more, seeing as how it took

you all of what... four minutes to get taken down?"

"Are you within reach of my hoof?" he snarled suddenly before feeling around. I thought he was looking for me but he found something just as good. A small rock.

Ah hell, this was likely going to s-**THWACK!**

"Ow!" I whined, the rock having bounced right off my bad ribs with accuracy not befitting that of a blind pony, "Damn it, I'm hurt enough!"

He smiled, "Glad to see my aim is still as good as it once was."

"You were adopted!" I snarled spitefully, even though there was absolutely no way that line would actually insult him. So before he could respond --he was busy laughing-- I decided to change the subject, "How'd you find me, anyway?"

After finishing laughing at me --ass-- he sighed and gave a helpless wingshrug.

"Was on my way back to Canterlot. Found Trixie and Applebloom on the outskirts of Canterlot. They were all unconscious. I couldn't carry them both, so I took Applebloom back to Ponyville and Redheart." He gave his chain a few more fruitless, halfhearted tugs before frowning and settling back down on the stone floor.

"She woke up before I got there and told me I had to come here to save you. I told Twilight where I was going, why, and where to find Trixie and Azure Flora. Applebloom claimed they helped, so I made sure to mention that, too. I figure the cavalry will be coming any minute now."

"Indeed, they will," David interrupted as he approached, entering by way of the door that Flora and I had used when I had first seen this place. You know what's strange about this guy? His footsteps don't make any noise. Creepy. "We've less than half an hour before they arrive, even. So why don't we get straight to business. Otherwise you won't catch that ride home, Stephen."

I'm not going to lie, guys. David looked pleased as punch. Like a man who was determined to enjoy the last few moments of his life.

Storm snarled, facing David's general direction. He was a tad confused, and thus questioned me in a low voice. "Who's he talking about?"

"Me. Stephen is my Christian name." I sighed softly, "He wants to send me back to Earth."

He blinked before blurting out loud, "What!? Why!?"

"Because I'm sexier than he is and he's jealous about it!" I drolled dramatically, "How would I

know? David, why are you sending me home?"

"I don't have time to make you understand," he said with a sigh, "Accept my word that it's for the greater good."

As we spoke, he began circling me. As he did, he lifted his hand and created, in his palm, a small colorless crystal the size of one's fist. It was shaped erratically and had a few holes of varying sizes smoothly bored all throughout it. The light danced off its smooth sides and when David relinquished his grasp on the glass-like object, it hovered in the air. It didn't move save for a slow rotation.

"Your greater good, no doubt." I snapped, ignoring the object for now.

He smirked with a roll of his eyes, but didn't bother dignifying that with a verbal answer. Instead, he just set another one of his crystalline toys in the air, whereupon it stubbornly told gravity where it could go shove its law. This one was more curved and fluid than the last, but still colorless and transparent.

"Yeah." I rolled my eyes before suddenly being struck with another question, "So what was all that about conquering Equestria?"

"Conquering Equestria would have just made my long term goal easier," he spoke reassuringly as he continued to set the small trinkets around me. "Rest assured, though, it's only been for the good of all. It's not some shallow power play, if that's what you're worried about. I'm just trying to protect this land and so many things are falling down around me at once. Even now, I'm fairly certain that it's a lost cause, but I must try. Equestria means no less to me than The Nightmare."

"What are you talking about?" Storm Wing demanded, oblivious to the creation of the crystals.

I blinked before glancing at him, "Uhh... Which part? He referenced a lot of stuff there."

"Tell me..." Storm started to say before David interrupted him.

"I'm sorry, but I simply do not have time," he declined with a flippant wave of his hand, "You may ask me after the princesses no doubt show up to take me into custody. It's not as though I will have the strength to resist them, thanks to both your efforts."

He must not know how quickly Luna can lose her temper.

"If they don't execute you first," I sneered.

David smiled rather knowingly. "Oh, I doubt they'll go that far."

After materializing a dozen or so of the oddly shaped crystals, he began to stir his finger in the air. His digit left a soft blue light trail in its wake and as if responding to his motions, the rotating crystals began to revolve around me.

“Princess Celestia may not.” Storm Wing leaned his head over his shoulder and began to --I kid you not-- casually preen the feathers of his left wing. “But Luna will definitely rip you apart if you send Firewall away.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty... crazy like... that?” Even with the weird light show and the spinning, circling crystal trick, Storm Wing fussing over his feathers like a bird was most definitely the strangest thing in the room.

“Little Luna? Driven to murder? On your account?” David actually snorted, as though such an idea were about as laughable as a tough warrior prince pegasus snuffling about in his feathers. “Forgive me if I don’t take you seriously.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right.” I had to force myself to look away from Storm, lest I stare at him for the next several hours.

I finally was able to put it out of my mind and looked up at David “I mean, she’ll definitely beat the hell out of you, but yeah... she probably won’t kill you. Maybe.”

“Your humor is usually more emphatic and noticeable.” He arched an eyebrow, still smirking at me, “You almost sound serious.”

“He’s being serious.” Storm’s voice was muffled inside of his wing. “You might not know this but Luna’s rather fond of him?”

“Oh? How fond?”

I sighed in remorse. “She told me she loved me the day you abducted me.”

“You’re lying,” he said without a moment’s hesitation.

Storm Wing was no longer interested in David or his stupid wing. Instead, he turned his head towards me and blinked, a tad dumbfounded. Either that or he just always looks that stupid.

Yeah, probably that.

“She said that? Did you say it back?” he asked.

I grimaced, more than a little upset with my honest answer. Upset or not, though, I still gave it

to him.

“No, I was too scared,” I admitted as I glanced at him.

He rolled his blind eyes and sighed impatiently at me. “You’re such a filly.”

“I know! I totally should have said it!” I’d have hit my head with my the heel of my hand if I could.

“You should have,” he agreed, “Idiot.”

“You both can stop the act whenever you like. It is not convincing me.”

Despite his words, David’s expression did seem a bit pensive. As though he were running through a checklist of facts that were proving us wrong. He must not have been especially sold on those facts. I was judging this based on the way his eyes darted about, lost in thought.

“Yeah, okay, genius.” I smiled up at him, letting my attitude shine with confidence, “It’s not like you’ve ever been wrong about anything except EVERYTHING.”

He snapped out of his deep thought as a ringing sensation came to my ears.

“Luna is under a lesser variant of the Naiveté Song.” His voice was quite matter of fact, as though his beliefs were above reproach. “There is no possible way she could have fallen in love. The only ponies not affected by the Song are the Archons, Azure Flora, and Trixie. No other pony has the potential to fall in love. The ones that are courting or married now are simply that way because I...”

Storm Wing let out an annoyed groan, interrupting David’s speech. David scowled a tad at the interruption, muttering something under his breath that I couldn’t make out for the damn ringing in my ears.

Now giving it more attention, I noted that it seemed a little louder. But only because it was actually getting louder as time passed. Without ever pausing, the ringing became louder, more defined. As they spoke, it was well on its way to becoming a melodious, reverberating whistle.

“Does he always talk like he knows everything?” Storm sneered at our captor.

I nodded, and then felt stupid for nodding for Storm’s benefit. “Yup. He thinks just because he built the place that it belongs to him. He’s got some god complex or something. You guys hear that?”

“You make a lot of assumptions, Stephen.” His smile was crooked and entirely without humor. “I

hope you never find out just how wrong you are. But if you do, you're going to be doing a lot of apologizing."

"Right right, apologizing," I nodded, still distracted by the whistle that seemed to come from everywhere at once. "Seriously, you guys don't hear that?"

As soon as I had said it, though, I came to the discovery that it was the crystals. They were spinning quickly enough to move the air through their holes and create a soft, perfectly smooth whistling.

"Oh." I stared at them as they hypnotically circled around me. "Those're noisy."

Before anyone could ask me to clarify on that, a loud thundering crash came from outside. David blinked and shut his eyes for a few seconds before spitting what was likely a curse in that language of his. He shook his head and opened his eyes with a sense of urgency. Without any hesitation, he began to circle me, swivelling the floating whistle-thingies in what looked to be a deliberate pattern that only he could recognize.

"I'm going to have to cut this short. Stephen, I apologize in advance, but this isn't going to be comfortable," he muttered under his breath, "Maybe if I had some more time, I would be able to make things easier on you, but with time constraints the way they are, I'm going to have to go with a temporary solution. I'll make it up to you the moment I can."

"Oh, by all means," I grunted sarcastically, the whistling of the small crystal glasses suddenly harmonizing and thrumming together in an almost song-like pattern. "Still no way I can talk you out of this, is there?"

"David, we're not lying to you. Luna is going to hurt you for this and there are going to be a lot of ponies that might consider getting in line behind her." Storm pointed out, trying to sound calm and collected. "You're going to regret this."

David stood up and gave his work a once over before nodding.

"It's a little too late to go back now," he replied without so much as a blink, "A lot more is riding on this than you might think."

With that, he threw his hands to the side as if he were spinning the wheel on a game show and the floating crystals responded by rotating with his movements. He repeated the gesture a few times, accelerating the little glass instruments. Their harmonized whistling suddenly began to fluctuate and began to play out a song. As they did, they left different colored lights in their wake and began to pick up speed. Before long, their velocity had increased to the point where their cacophony of colors blended into a blinding white light.

Then, without warning whatsoever, my head began to throb as though someone had bypassed my skull and went straight to crushing my frontal lobe. At first I tried to shut my eyes and tough it out. That didn't last long. What started out as a migraine soon became a stupefying torrent of agony. I was gasping before I knew it and as the sensation intensified, I soon found I didn't have the strength to even properly scream.

"David, stop this! You're hurting him" Storm... Storm 'Something' called out. Couldn't remember his whole name. Sue me.

"I wish I had a choice," I heard David reply.

Somewhere, I could hear a explosion burst into the room. I opened my eyes, the pain somehow dulling as I did.

Where the hell was I?

Someone standing beside me. Some geek looking like Daniel Radcliffe. Why was I chained to the floor? Why did my head hurt?

Where was I? Looked like Gothic meets Catholic. Gatholic?

Holy shit, there was a pegasus chained to the floor over there! Or maybe a baby pegasus. Poor guy would have looked cute if he didn't look so furious.

"Firewall!" I heard a voice cry out. A familiar voice. I couldn't place it. I couldn't place much of anything with the echoes of pain distracting me.

Wait... I knew that voice.

"David, mark my words," I heard her --It sounded like a her, anyway-- say. "Let him go or you will regret it."

Harry Potter sighed, "I cannot do that, Princess Luna. There are many reasons for which I do this. I'm sorry."

Princess Luna?

I looked over to see an indigo pegasus with a unicorn horn and a black breast plate that sported thick white moon cut into a crescent. There was a white pegasus, also with a horn of her own standing behind her, though she was much larger and had floaty Neapolitan ice cream for a mane. They stared at me with concern. Like, the kind of concern that you stare at a family with when you're watching them do dangerous stunts that could easily get them killed. In fact, they looked downright terrorized. Especially the smaller bluish-purple one. She must have been a

kind soul to regard a stranger like that.

Nah, she was probably a sarcastic little troll that would take every opportunity to harass the hell out of me. Even if she didn't love me. I bet sh... Wait.

She loves me...?

Oh my god, it was Luna. How could I have forgotten Luna?

I love her.

Wait, what...? Why am I forgetting...?

The whistling melodic crystal thingamajigs began to flare even more brightly. Without any regard for herself, Luna broke out into a sprint, her horn shining brightly as she made for me. I could feel the chains on my wrists and ankles straining, trying to tear apart.

I glanced at David who frowned at me before shutting his eyes, "I am sorry."

I looked over at Luna as the twisting circle of light began to reach its peak. I realized I might not get the chance to say what I felt ever again.

I know, it was straight out of bad romance novel.

"Firewall!" she screamed for me.

"Luna! I lov-..." I started to call out to her, but everything suddenly went blank. I don't know where I was, but it wasn't... there. I couldn't see, hear, or feel anything. Like I was in some sort of Limbo.

And that was the last thing I remember.

I love you, Luna.

Chapter 15 Sneak Peak!

*"ON THE
MOONAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"*

-

"Where is he!?"

"Safe."

"Tell me where he is or I won't be able to say the same for you!"

-

"I'm a warrior of my word. I can't step aside."

-

"Is Firewall... gone?"

"I don't know."

"He'll be coming back though, right?"

"I don't know."

"He'll be back before you know it! He'd never forget us!"

"Pinkie... I don't know. David did something to him. I don't think he ever remembers being here."

-

"Get up, David."

"Princess, you honor me with your presence. I'm afraid I can't say how long it's been. You've left me here for quite some time."

"Be grateful I've not done worse."

"Of course. And to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"We're going to make a deal, you and I. And I brought the Codex to make it happen."