

## CHAPTER FOUR: WHY WE FIGHT

*The trio of dragons sat clustered in the rear of what was once the magma chamber of an eons-dead volcano, two of them chattering away like school-fillies to the exclusion of the third, when the leader of the group finally flew in, his ancient scales blending in perfectly with the black of that night and bearing a reflective sheen from the rain. A cold, damp breeze blew in through the entrance, which had been hewn over the millennia by a river that would occasionally form when rainwater flooded the chamber from the volcanic vents in the ceiling. After one unexpectedly wet meeting, those vents had been plugged permanently.*

*"Elder Daggoth, what significance does this council hold that it was called with such minimal travel time?" inquired the ruby-red one in his exceptionally deep voice. The elder dragon took his rightful place at the highest point in the cavern and breathed on the faltering fire-pit, which jumped like a dog trying to lick its master's face.*

*The smaller crimson one shifted uneasily as he sat, his leathery wings visibly twitching with anxiety.*

*"And, bearing no intention of intrusion, may I add that I myself was Manticore-hunting outside Griffon City when I received your message that I was needed in-country - with not so much as an explanation," he said in his higher, somewhat raspy voice. "Perish that you should perceive this as a complaint, but I should hope that this council would begin without further delay, lest my curiosity be my demise."*

*Daggoth spoke softly, slowly, and with authority, yet his voice was tinged with a certain light-heartedness as when one speaks with a smile.*

*"Your curiosity, Malachi, will be the doom of us all before it at last takes you."*

*The moment the first word left his enormous maw the other three dragons were absolutely silent, not only out of reverence for the Elder, but also because it was rather difficult to understand him, especially over the ceaseless rumbling of that dark night's torrential downpour reverberating throughout the hollow mountain, only interrupted by an occasional terrific clap of thunder.*

*"Sister Raszagal has received a vision." Daggoth gestured with his massive talons towards the ocean-blue female to his right, permitting her to speak.*

*Raszagal raised her head and focused on the stalactites on the ceiling, searching for the words to describe what she had seen.*

*"Three weeks past, on the eve of the Summer Solstice, I was startled from my nightly slumber by the most vivid and disturbing vision of things to pass that the Stars have ever revealed to me - "*

*Sheogorath began to interrupt in a mocking tone, "Consulting th-"*

*"**SILENCE!**" roared Daggoth. And there was. Without question, there was.*

*In a warm and pleasant voice, as if nothing whatsoever had happened, he said to the female,*

*"Continue."*

*She drew a breath of air that was relentlessly cold and damp despite the towering flame of the burning fire pit, and focused intensely at the empty space between Malachi and Sheogorath. Daggoth was entranced by the image of flames dancing across her violet pupils, deep and unfathomable, like the infinite void that lies between stars.*

*She began her prophesy:*

*"The barriers separating the worlds will be broken, and abominations unto nature will cascade from the breach. The Princesses will fall. The rivers and lakes will run dry, and the animals and plants will become dead husks filled with poison. Equestria, land of our fathers and our forefathers, will be ruled by beings with empty hearts and black souls, creatures of thought unburdened by empathy. Every living thing that stands against them shall fall, and their bodies will serve as fuel and ammunition for their war machine. The birds of the air and the fish of the sea, the squirrels in the trees and the adorable little bunny rabbits, none of these will survive in this new world, but the ponies will be kept alive. Those who are not enslaved will die, and those who are enslaved will envy the dead."*

*The other dragons sat in stunned silence, unsure of what to say, and Raszagal simply closed her eyes as a single tear rolled down her scaly cheek, splashing to the ground 50 meters below.*

*Sheogorath asked no one in particular, "Is this true?"*

*Daggoth looked at him with a kind of resignation in his eyes. "When has she ever been wrong?"*

*There was a long period of silence as the four ancient dragons digested this new information and all its ramifications. Malachi scraped together a little pile of boulders into a tetrahedral arrangement, and flicked them away, one by one, lost in thought. Sheogorath simply stared straight forward, his steely face giving away no hint of emotion.*

*Elder Daggoth broke the silence at last. "I have rendered my judgment: We shall break with the Communion and fight for Equestria against this new threat."*

*The other dragons were pulled out of their disparate worlds of thought and turned to him, their leader, the unshakeable veteran of three wars in the past 4,000 years, the dragon who had led them through the Twilight War against Nightmare Moon, and before her, the revolution against the chaos-god Discord. There were times, however rare, when separating from the Dragon Communion and fighting alongside that insufferable alicorn Celestia and her little sister was, in his opinion, the only moral option.*

*The apartment-building-sized red dragon spoke. "That is quite a resolution, Elder Daggoth. If what Sister Raszagal says is true, are you prepared to follow it to your grave?"*

*Daggoth let out a thunderous belly-laugh that could be heard 15 kilometers away and felt at half that distance.*

*"My grave is already dug, the headstone set in place." He looked the younger dragon in the eyes. "I do not fear my grave, Sheogorath, and if you are to continue associating with this particular circle of friends, I suggest you do the same."*

*Malachi spoke up. "Indeed, the intended purpose of this Association was never the extension of life spans but rather the shortening of certain... others."*

*Sheogorath responded glumly, "Of this, I am well aware."*

*Malachi turned to Raszagal, shock transforming into burning curiosity. "Tell me Sister, was there any more to the prophesy?"*

*She responded, "Yes. 'Twas neither a voice nor a message nor a vision, but simply... a revelation."*

*"Well, do not delay! Tell us! Please!" If Malachi's ears were capable of doing so, they doubtlessly would have perked up.*

*Raszagal glared at him in annoyance at the interruption, but nonetheless continued, her gaze on the torrent of rainwater cascading past the water-bored mouth of the cavern.*

*"We were not the first, nor shall we be the last." And with that, Raszagal would never prophesize anything ever again.*

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**"OI! STOP ROIGHT THERE!"** called out the sentry-ponies in a voice that somewhat resembled that weird New Yoke/ Manehattan accent I'd heard from other Resistance members.

I froze, and glanced at Spike, who seemed just as confused as I was.

The two earth-pony stallions guarding the heavily fortified entrance to Black Mane West trotted over to us, sporting dual pairs of positively frightening-looking weapons secured to their combat saddles, their business ends directed towards us. The dark grey one actually had his mouth on the bit-like firing mechanism, ready to bite down at a funny glance or a twitch in the wrong direction.

*These are our guys?* I thought, and opened my inventory, looking for my SMG.

Spike, meanwhile, had begun to converse with them in a tone that sounded of coolness concealing annoyance.

"Heeeeyyy, Dreyfus, Drew! How's it goin', you two? This-" he rudely stuck a claw in my face, disrupting my inventory management, "is Doctor Free-"

"We know who he is, 'Spike!' Or should I say *COMBINE HOLOGRAM!?*" accused the brown-coated one that did *not* have his mouth on the trigger of a gun.

Spike blinked, confused.

"If you're *really* Spike, then whas' my name, huh?" he demanded.

Spike began, "Uh, I just said bot-"

"SHUT IT!" yelled the brown one, presenting me with the astounding sight of a pony yelling at a dragon.

"I know a Combine trick when I sees one, tryin' to get into our super secret hideout! Well, you just report back to your alien overlords that this here establishment is nothing more than a veterinary clinic!"

"The finest veterinary clinic in all of Equestria!" chimed in the dark-grey one.

"Despite our remote location, and affordable co-pays!" added the other.

"- And rather unfortunate prox-im-e-tay to a certain zombie-infested hell town!"

"- The likes of which produces a veritable tidal wave of sick and injured animals for us to uh... uhm..." He paused, searching for the right word.

"Drew, what's another word for 'nurse back to health'?" He asked the dark-grey stallion next to him.

"Hmm... I think the proper word *would* be 'nurse back to health', Drey."

"That's not a word! That's..." he paused, "that's *four* words!"

Spike face-palmed. "If you two idiots are done..."

"Oi!" the chocolate-brown pony named 'Dreyfus' snapped at the fire-breathing dragon that could probably snap him in two without even trying. "We did not roightly say any such thing!"

"Drey, it's pro-nunciated 'rightly' not 'roightly'," said his companion in a matter-of-fact tone.

"It's called an *accent* you uneducated twit!" Dreyfus shot back.

I was so transfixed by these two curious ponies' banter that I didn't notice the pinkish-white earth-pony clad in a lab-coat trot up behind them.

"What the hay are you two doing? Why haven't you let Dr. Freemane in yet?" She demanded of the sentry-ponies.

"Roight," responded Dreyfus.

"*Right!*" hissed Drew.

"*Accent!*" Dreyfus shot back.

"*WILL YOU LET THEM IN ALREADY!?*" The pinkish-white pony yelled, and they did, and I was.

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Cherry Blossom, the mare in the white lab coat with a cutie mark of – you guessed it – cherry blossoms led the way as we descended the concrete ramp recessed into the floor of what I'm told used to be the barn of the famous Sweet Apple Acres. A scratched, dented and abused steel door set into the overhang formed by the pit split horizontally across the middle to reveal a large, aging cargo elevator that had the looks of an abused piece of essential equipment that everypony expected to just *work*, but maintained as little as equinely possible. There were skid tracks, boot prints, tread marks, and some lacerations that I couldn't identify carved into what surely was once rubber safety padding, but which now more resembled a preschooler's still-life art project made possible by a fit of rage, a box of black crayons, and a pair of scissors.

The elevator doors crankily slid their way shut, and the elevator grumbled to life. As I watched the wall move upwards, I noticed to my shock that there was absolutely no barrier of any kind between the occupants of the elevator and the concrete wall. When I expressed my concern about this probable safety hazard, Cherry Blossom replied;

"Oh, that old grate fell off a long time ago, Freemane."

I suddenly looked upon the elevator with new apprehension, as flashbacks of another resistance-operated transport strung between two Manhattan high-rises played in my mind, and I successfully dismissed them - with some difficulty, I might add. The elevator passed by several floors, each one a surprisingly well-lit concrete hallway curving into the distance to form a giant ring, reminding me of the halls of a particle accelerator. We passed an impressively-equipped kitchen where those curious space-suit clad aliens were chopping and mixing various fruits and foodstuffs into what looked to be a delicious meal. As our descent continued, I saw communal living quarters, storage rooms, ammunition dumps, and even a full-fledged *gym*, if you can believe it, where several ponies were engaged in a heated tennis match.

When the elevator passed a floor filled with stacks upon stacks of black boxes connected by a tangled rat's nest of hundreds of wires snaking around to an unseen part of the base, I asked Ms. Blossom to explain.

"That's the floor where the nuclear batteries are stored and maintained. Those black boxes you saw are the regular chemical batteries that they keep charged, which in turn power our various electronics."

"Aren't you concerned about the radiation from such a power source?" I asked, picturing some horrifically inadequate combination of aluminum foil and tin cans the Resistance had cobbled together to contain such highly radioactive elements.

"Oh, goodness, no, they're encased in reactor shielding we recovered from Black Mane itself."

I did a double-take. "From *where!*?"

"The Black Mane Research Facility, I said," she responded as if there was a problem with my hearing. There wasn't a problem with my hearing, was there? Oh, dear, I *have* been firing an awful lot of weapons with no hearing protection, and then there was that time a grenade went off in my face...

*Focus!* "I thought Black Mane was completely destroyed!"

She answered, "The dragon Malachi *did* completely destroy the entire facility - except for the Lambda Complex. It is separated from the rest of Black Mane, and concealed by the most powerful arcane enchantments and high-technologies known to ponydom. That dragon couldn't have found Lambda if he tried."

I was stunned. I remembered the Lambda Complex. I remembered reuniting with the scientists that had

holed themselves up there. They decided to send me through a massive teleporter as big a football field to travel to the higher dimension of Xen with a probably-suicidal mission: Find the seemingly omnipotent being holding open the breach between our worlds, and kill it, if possible.

I remember... jubilation! Jubilation unlike anything I had ever felt before when, in defiance of all mathematical probability, I, a scientist whose sum total previous experience of warfare consisted of shooting pellet guns at Colt Scout camp, somehow defeated the creature that the Cerberuses (Cerberi?) called 'The New Nihilanth'. Then... blackness, and... the G-pony. Whispering something in my ear. And then... well, then I woke up about eight years later on a train headed toward what used to be Manehattan in a world ruled with a synthetic, bio-mechanical fist by aliens from another dimension.

I wondered – If the Lambda Complex survives still, whatever became of the teleporter that was its heart? I wonder if it still works...

“... which is why we can't use the same spells here. Twi has the power, but she simply doesn't have the arcane knowledge that died with all those scientists. \*sigh\* We lost *so many* good ponies there, which is why I'm *so glad* you're here, Doctor Freemane. MIT graduates are few and far between these days.” She gave me a creepy smile that I half-heartedly returned, and continued talking as the elevator continued its painfully slow descent.

“Anyway, our instruments have been picking up a very weak SOS signal originating in the Lambda Core for years now, obviously indicating the emergency backup systems are *still* working, and the Combine either haven't noticed or don't care. And quite frankly, I hope it stays that way,” she said with a horribly forced laugh.

The uncreatively-named Cherry Blossom rambled on and on about something related to how great things were going to be now that I was here, and how she wished she could have worked at Black Mane, and various other things, I don't know, I was far too tired to remember or care. I just wished the talkative mare would shut up and take me to my room already, so I could plop down on my bed and forget about the world. Mentioning the Lambda Complex had dug up bad memories that I would rather forget, and a long, peaceful sleep would be of great help in that regard.

The elevator finally shuddered to a halt at floor three of seven, and I was led down one of those long, curved hallways, lined with evenly spaced, heavy steel doors and caged, shatter-proof lightbulbs, past the unisex restroom, and on to my private quarters at the very, very end: Room 342.



Cherry Blossom bid me an over-produced farewell, and left me alone – at last - in my very small, bare concrete room with a single vent and a single bulb that was too bright to look directly at, but not quite bright enough to provide satisfactory illumination. Not that I'm complaining, as I'm told that very, very few ponies get their own rooms at Black Mane West. There was a small desk, a homemade dresser constructed piecemeal from recycled particleboard, and a fat red pipe spanning from wall to wall near the ceiling. As I collapsed onto the mattress of my bare-bones bed, the rusty springs groaned in protest at the sudden load, and the thing sat so low to the ground that I actually rebounded off the concrete floor before settling. Too tired to shower at the head or to try to recreate the steps Barney had shown me to take off my suit, I simply closed my eyes and let sleep take me, but not before whispering one of my cheesy prayers to my favorite Goddess.

*Thank you for this cold, uncomfortable bed, Luna. And also for helping me survive a dozen-odd near-death-experiences today. But all I can think about right now is this forsaken bed.*

"Go to sleep, Gordon." I imagined Her saying with a smile. And I did.

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So, the problem with waking up in the morning - at least if you're male, I don't really know about females - is that you're usually pretty horny. And the problem with being horny, single, and a follower of Luna and Celestia, is that you have no real way of relieving those urges, because followers of the Princesses are not supposed to cuddle themselves. Well, not *supposed* to, but I sometimes found myself doing just that anyway. *But*, in my defense, this usually happens when I am only half-conscious, so it's not an *expressly willed* action, and therefore, *not* a sin. I'm pretty sure. I think. I hope. *Oh, Luna, please forgive me!*

So, suffice to say, I was pretty frustrated that morning. My body ached from the various contusions and burns from getting shot through with anti-personnel plasma bolts, I was extremely hungry, having not eaten anything since I left City 7, *and* I really, really had to pee, but worse than all of those things, I was sexually aroused, and there were no females to cuddle with!

"Surely science can come up with a solution to this most common of equine problems!" I thought out loud.

“What kinds of problems?” asked Alyx.

*HURGH.*

*Did NOT hear her come in.*

“Nothing! No kinds of problems! Ha! Ha ha!” I lied. *And certainly not anything to do with unfulfilled sexual desires!* I screamed inside of my head while wearing a forced grin.

“Riiight, so, I was wondering if maybe you wanted to go get some lunch?” Alyx asked with a cute little smile that did NOT help to calm me down.

“Lunch? What -” I fumbled around for a clock in a groggy haze.

Alyx facehoofed. “Gordon, it’s two o’clock. In the afternoon.”

“Ah. Well, good morning!” I said with a grin in one of my pathetic attempts at humor. *Anything to see her smile again,* I thought. Suddenly, I became very aware of Alyx’s distinctly... *feminine curves...* and shapely, well-toned... *DIRTY THOUGHTS HNGHRR.*

My nostrils involuntary flared at the presence of the healthy, fertile female. *Oh my goddesses I can even smell her. Oh Luna, she smells soooooo good... concentrate you bucking idiot! Don’t let the hormones and/or pheromones win! Wait, pheromones? Oh, goddesses, Alyx isn’t in... you-know-what is she? AHHHH! Shut up! No one cares! Just ignore the hormone/pheromone whatevers!* I mentally chastised myself.

*Because then you won’t get laid!* Added the part of my brain devoted to cuddling.

*Shut up!* I rebuked myself.

“Roight, let’s go get some lunch/breakfast/dinner,” I said in an I-don’t-know-where-that-accent-is-from accent, and hopped out of my stiff, uncomfortable bed, stretching my overstrained ligaments that rewarded the healthy morning exercise by sending a jolt of pain up my spine from any muscle group I attempted to use in such a fashion.

“Gordon?” Alyx asked as we stepped out into the hallway. “Did you just say ‘roight’?”

“Yes, yes I did.” I replied.

“That’s awesome,” she chuckled. I couldn’t tell if she was being nice or sarcastic, but whatever, I’m hungry, let’s go eat pleaseandthankyou. We trotted down the long, curved hallway, and I made a special effort to walk *beside* Alyx instead of *behind* her.

“So, Gordon, how are you liking BMW so far?” She asked.

“It’s... nice.” I said.

And then there was that long period of awkward silence that happens whenever the initiator of a conversation fails to pick a sufficiently engaging topic that would not end after two syllables’ response from the addressee. This effect is especially pronounced when both parties to the conversation are already socially awkward to begin with.

As we neared the unisex bathroom, I remembered that I had to use it. Alyx waiting, I made a motion to duck inside when the door flew open, and I was hit in the face with both it and a warm rush of steam in an odd combination of blunt-force trauma and a pleasantly refreshing facial cleansing. The action elicited one of my inadequate attempts at profanity, and I looked up to see a light-blue mare with a towel wrapped around her head, halfway through an apology. Judging by the beads of moisture running down her... nicely curved body... and round, taut rump... and her soft, wet, sweet-smelling mane matted to her - *celestiadamn it this isn’t helping!* - I concluded that she had just stepped out of the shower. I was just about to say something, but as soon as she realized who it was she had just mistakenly assaulted, she did a double-take, looked to her left and saw Alyx, did another double-take, and then galloped as fast as she could back to her room, slamming the door shut behind her.

While in the bathroom, I could hear Alyx outside, knocking on the blue mare’s door, trying in vain to assure her that she was *not* in trouble. After I was done, I came back out and rejoined my trot with Alyx.

Taking the initiative, I said, “So, Alyx, you’re pretty famous around here, huh?”

She blushed, embarrassed. “You could say that. Everypony knows that I’m Twilight’s daughter, and I’ve been here longer than anypony besides her.”

“I see,” I responded. “You weren’t dropped here, were you?”

She laughed. “No, I was dropped at... well, I was dropped right outside a normal hospital so, like any other foal, the doctors could get a look at me as soon as the bird took off.”

Ah, of course; it was a routine procedure to have foals delivered to their waiting parents at hospitals nowadays. Numerous peer-reviewed scientific studies have shown that having a licensed medical technician on scene at the delivery of a new foal can dramatically reduce the risk of injury or death from infantile pneumonia, altitude sickness, and even rare allergic reactions to the avian delivery system, among other things.

“And where was this?” I asked out of curiosity.

“... I don't really want to talk about it, Gordon. Maybe some other time,” she said with eyes pleading for me to go no further, lest I re-open an old wound that's barely had time to scab over.

I nodded in understanding. I made a mental note to ask her at another time, for now I was extremely curious as to why she was so reluctant to reveal the place of her birth.

*But for now, yonder beeth the end of these wretched castle-halls! And hark! The elevator approacheth!* I thought to myself in my 100% absolutely flawless imitation of Old Equestrian lexicon. For some reason.

After waiting an extraordinary though not entirely unexpected length of time for the way, way, way overused and under-maintained elevator to finally reach our level, we hopped on and Alyx hoofed the button with the nearly scratched-off '5' on it.

“I forgot to tell you,” she began, “there *is* no lunch at this hour, so we're going to have to go to the kitchen and have the Cerbs make something specifically for us.”

“Cerbs'? Is that what you call the Cerberuses?’ *Cerberi?* “And also, they won't mind?”

“First question – yes, second question – no,” she responded.

“Okey dokie lokie.” And now I've switched to Pie-ish. *Why?*

Like with most good things, I smelled it before I saw it. Ah, the kitchen. Not just any kitchen, no, sir or madam, as it may or may not be proper to address whatever poor, confused soul is unfortunately reading this, not any plain old ordinary run-of-the-kitchen-mill kitchen, but a kitchen staffed by celestiadamned

*aliens!*

The Cerbs, as most Resistance members apparently called them, were... actually I don't know anything at all about them, other than that they have four legs and a tail, and, judging by their full-body suits, they can't breathe our 95% nitrogen atmosphere. Either that or they're germaphobes. This calls for scientific research! And who better to help me with research on Cerberuses (Cerberi?), than a Cerberus!

First step of the scientific process: State the problem.

Problem: What in under-hell is a Cerberus?

Alyx stepped off the elevator even before it came to a total halt, and I followed her past the retractable metal gate (noting that there was only one set because the elevator's had 'fallen off', as Cherry Blossom had so eloquently put it) and stepped onto the sanitary, black-and-white checker-boarded floor of BMW's kitchen. Hard at work, chopping away at piles of vegetables with their small, gloved hands, were at least half a dozen Cerbs. They all looked up from their preparation tables when we stepped off the elevator.

"Ah! It is the lovely and talented Alyx Sparkle! And who else should be in her company but the Gordon Freemane himself!" announced the Cerb at the sandwich table in that raspy, muffled voice typical of their kind, and the others sounded similar approval at our unexpected visit.

All eyes, including Alyx's (*yes!*), were on me as I confidently strolled up to one of the spacesuit-clad gentle-aliens and ordered a lettuce, tomato, and clover leaf sandwich on a poppy-seed bun.

"Whatever the Freemane requires for his gastronomical fulfillment," the alien replied with an eye-brow raising choice of words. He set about fetching the various items required for the assembly of the sandwich as Alyx busied herself in the far corner at the salad table. I trotted to the side of the Cerb cook and began my *advancement of equine knowledge* using the second step of the scientific process: research. I casually leaned a foreleg against the table like a biped, and focused on the creature with an intensity I only get when I'm doing science or trying to kill something, which, now that I think about it, I have never done simultaneously. Except for maybe that one time...

"Pardon me, sir," I said in as non-threatening a voice as I could muster, "But... what, exactly *are* you?"

He paused only for a moment, and his blackened visor remained fixated on the sandwich he was presently layering with toppings as he began to answer.

“You already asked us this question; Your kind do not understand the communion we are. Go and learn the meaning of the word ‘coterminous’ and you will know that there is no distance between us. No false veils of time or space may intervene. You would call me a Cerberus. We call ourselves *Yllgalug*. The ones you say are ‘Combine’ mockingly called us dogs, and we once called them Master with equal sincerity. One can suppose that they *are* a combination, a grey slurry of indifference and greed, cold calculation feeding an overpowering instinct to consume. They use their gift of personhood to enslave other persons, their knowledge to spread ignorance, and their wealth and power to enforce poverty and subjection. Such people are referred to sardonically by my kind as *vpyn*, a word that is considered so vile it is sometimes censored even when communicating by auditory speech. Their genius lies in that they have spread so far, so quickly, so relentlessly, beyond even the scope of their predecessors whom our brothers, themselves refugees from some far-distant conflict, called *Shu'ulathoi*, until they, too, were betrayed by those beside whom they fought and killed and died. There is a saying amongst my people; *‘A good story deserves to be retold again and again’*. How is it that history repeats itself so exactly in realms as infinitely disparate as the third and the seventh dimensions? It is a mystery no deeper than the void itself.”

He picked up my sandwich with hands that didn't look like they were really meant for grasping things, and handed it to me, awkwardly balancing on his hind legs to do so. My stomach grumbled as I levitated my breakfast/lunch/dinner to my watering mouth, but the food part of my brain just couldn't *enjoy* the sandwich while the science part of my brain (which is everything besides the food and cuddling parts) was left entirely unsatisfied with the Cerb's response.

“You didn't answer my question,” I pointed out with maybe just a little smug satisfaction that evasive answers don't make it far past Gordon Freeman. I went to *college*.

He gave a weary sigh, and looked up at my face, which was a mask of determination. I felt like that unseen force, that puppet-master manipulating things behind the scenes, was getting frustrated at my persistence, trying to push me away from this creature. *Well, G-pony, I might be deviating from your script a little bit, but the scientifically-minded are not so easily dissuaded!* The Cerb accepted that I wasn't leaving without an answer. He rested his forelegs on the stainless-steel table, his enwrapped tail involuntarily jerking this way and that as he shifted position, and his visor-covered face turned to the far corner, where Alyx was levitating forkfuls of fresh greens to her small, feminine muzzle, herself caught up in conversation with the Cerb there.

“What are we? What are you? Ponies, miniature horses that can talk and feel and reason as if they were

people. We ask ourselves; How is this possible? How can there be such a thing as magic, that unicorns freely manipulate and pegasi coax into allowing such an absurd thing to exist as a flying horse? How is it possible that there is a natural system where cloud-walking scaled-down quadrupeds dictate the movements of weather systems? Your method of reproduction, especially, has never, to our vast and ancient knowledge, been recreated by any known species across the cosmos, and is itself the very definition of illogic! You expect us to believe that your DNA is magically transported to a plain in the sky where infants are grown, and the resultant foal is then delivered to its parents by a predatory bird which somehow evolved the instinct to transport other species' offspring to the exact coordinates of their parents at extraneous personal cost to themselves for seemingly no benefit whatsoever? Tell me, Freemane Doctor, are we so strange by comparison? Is our world so alien? Our ways so incredulous? There is a far deeper mystery here than 'what are we', a problem of philosophy, of existence. If indeed the universe was created to the specifications of an intelligent being, what purposes did this God have in making your world this way, and not ours? What would be done in one place and not in another, and to what end, if an end exists? *'The magical land of Equestria'*, you call it. To us, it is nothing more than a fairy tale; A story told to young children. It cannot be real. And yet here it is."

I was stunned. He was right. I had started in the wrong place. Before asking him what *he* is, I should first ask myself what *I* am, and return when I believe I have an answer more compelling than his. As I thought about this, I felt as if the unseen force relaxed, letting its attentions drift back to whatever cosmically important task had occupied it previously. I let out a sigh as its dark, secretive presence seemed to slink back into the shadows from whence it came.

The Cerberus chef raised his head to look me in the face, his tone changing from slightly indignant to somber and poetic.

"You, Freemane. You were there when our worlds collided. You are the breach from whence we came. You are the tie that binds the fate of our worlds. Even now, we see you still in Black Mane, clearly we see you in the test chamber. We look upon your bright face from that piece of our tormentor which was stolen from Him. We see you in the Lambda Complex as you bridge the fold between the Seventh and the Fifth. We watch in joyous disbelief as you, alone, breach castle walls that had repelled sieges by armadas of warships. Though we grieve for our kind laid scattered at your hooves, compelled by the New Nihilanth to defend His fraudulent claim to life and existence, to us, their deaths are bittersweet. We cannot forgive you for those whose cords you cut; Forgiveness is not ours to bestow. Simultaneously, you cause us to weep and to dance as you bring us pain and jubilation beyond measure. Hope, a curious thing that we had long since forgotten, spreads through our people like wildfire as the Freemane accomplishes what ten thousand million had tried and failed to do, from war to war, kingdom to kingdom, empire to empire,

across unknowable eons, for causes far more noble, against tyrants far more guilty, and a few even more wicked, than Nihilanth. Of all these, only the Freemane succeeds. The why and the how are not for us to know, though we suspect these too shall be revealed before the end.”

“We see you in that ancient chamber, we watch, breathless, as you stand in defiance before its latest occupant, the false puppet-master whom They resurrected to control us, a prison warden brought back from the dead to clap on our shackles scarcely a moment after we realized we had wrists to hold them. Ye leap, ye fall, we see you flash beyond the barriers. For a brief time, you joined us in communion with the Cerberessence, and we revealed how to slay the Beast, knowledge passed down from generation to generation from our brothers in spirit, the Vortigaunts. We bear witness to the new life that is the abomination’s death. Your song is the song we shall sing for all eternity, for once the lesser master lay defeated, we knew the greater must also fall in time. We call you Abraham, not after the figure in our Master’s sacred texts, but after the leader of one of their greatest tribes, for he too set captives free. But unlike him, your actions will decide not the fate of nations, but of worlds.”

I took the last bite of my sandwich, which was absolutely delicious, by the way, and thanked the strange little alien for everything he’d done, and everything he’d given me to ponder. Alyx was already on the elevator, impatiently waiting for me. As I trotted towards her, I thought I saw the image of a stallion wearing a suit and tie give me a very strange look from the monochrome screen of a dusty little crumb-covered television crammed onto a shelf amidst bags of spices. The apparition disappeared as the image popped and reverted back to static snow.

I hesitated for just a moment, and the impatient Alyx leaned forward and bit down on the collar of my HEV suit, dragging me into the elevator with surprising force. She hoofed the button marked ‘1’ and we had already begun our descent when the all-knowing Cerb ran up to the edge.

“Freemane!” He called out, struggling to be heard over the sound of the overworked gearboxes and pulleys lowering us. “Do you know what we call the Combine?” he asked, leaning against the retractable metal gate to the elevator shaft.

“No, I don’t believe you ever told me that,” I shouted back as the kitchen rapidly disappeared above us.

I guess I’ll never know for sure, but I’ll swear before the Princess’ Royal Court, the Princesses themselves, and all their pegasus *and* unicorn guards, he said something that sounded like “*MAAN.*”



The elevator ground to a halt at the bottom floor of Black Mane West, and we stepped out into a brightly lit, tiled hallway, packed on either side with sensitive equipment necessary for the purposes of science; banks of computers, various kinds and varieties of electronic sensors, metal crates, wooden crates, plastic crates, and filing cabinets no doubt filled with scientific documents from that dark era before the dawn of the Equestrian digital age. But even with all that clutter, the space was still more than wide enough to comfortably accommodate four or five ponies side by side.

“So, all this crap is mostly spill-over from the lab, which my mom constantly complains isn’t big enough,” Alyx explained.

“Some of this stuff looks too big to fit on that elevator,” I gestured back towards the cargo elevator, which was certainly big enough to move a decent amount of freight, but some of these machines were the size of a Coltswagen carriage. “Is there some other entrance?”

“Yeah, there’s a service elevator on the other side of the lab that goes all the way up to the surface, which we hid from aerial surveillance by moving an old pigpen on top of it,” she answered as she picked up her pace to pass by the large, dark tunnel to our left, blocked off by a massive metal garage-door, and partially hidden behind haphazardly-stacked piles of science junk and decorated with a pair of ‘DO NOT ENTER’ signs.

“I see. And what’s this tunnel back here?” I innocently asked.

“That’s... that’s the old tunnel to... ponyville...” she answered in a near-whisper, her tone suddenly changing from cheerful to grim.

“It’s the tunnel to what?”

“uhm... ponyville...” she whispered.

“Sorry, didn’t quite catch that - ”

“**PONYVILLE!** It’s the tunnel to Ponyville!” she yelled in frustration, her voice cracking a little bit.

“Ah, Ponyville,” I answered in my typical haze of social-retardation. “I used to go there to visit my brother, John, whenever I got a weekend off.”

I stopped, and frowned at the ceiling, trying to remember, as if the ventilation ducts and electrical wiring would coax the memories from my amygdale. “As I recall, he worked in an office, some kind of clerical position. In fact, I recall sending him an email from my phone just after the... ‘Black Mane Incident’, but he never replied. Huh. I wonder whatever happened to him.”

I looked back down to the sight of Alyx fighting back tears, her teeth clenched, and her eyes shut tightly.

“Whoah. I’m sorry! Did you know him?”

“**NO!**” She screamed at me.

So similar was her response to a chemical detonation, I almost felt compelled to check and see if my glasses were still on. They were.

She apologized. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Gordon. You didn’t know.”

I didn’t know? Suddenly, I remembered passing by Ponyville on the river, wondering why it was surrounded by a four-and-a-half meter high chain-link barbed-wire fence, with bright red ‘BIOHAZARD’ signs posted at regular intervals along the perimeter.

Alyx had collapsed to the ground, still struggling to hold back tears, and I joined her, putting a hoof on her shoulder in concern.

I looked over at the huge, darkened entrance to Ponyville, the source of her misery, and I felt angry. I was angry at the inanimate object that had caused Alyx to cry. But still, curiosity welled up from somewhere deep inside me, an unquenchable desire to *know* that had driven me my entire life.

It was that same desire that had led me to pursue my degree in Theoretical Physics, and attracted me to my job at the Black Mane Research Facility. That boundless curiosity had driven me to put that crystal from another dimension into the extraction beam of an anti-mass spectrometer, precisely *because* I didn’t know what would happen the moment I did so. Somehow, I just *knew* that I had to *know*. The alternative was simply unacceptable.

“Alyx?” I asked as gently as I possibly could. “What happened in Ponyville?”

“Do you really want to know?” She asked, her voice weak.

“Yes. I must.”

“Okay, Gordon,” she sighed heavily. “Listen up, because I’m only telling this once.”

She took a deep breath, and speaking slowly, clearly, her voice quavering only at first, Alyx Sparkle began to tell the story of the day Ponyville died.

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It was a bright cold day in Neighvember and the clocks were striking three. I parted the black curtains which concealed the view of my tiny tree-house bedroom to scanners and the occasional pervert, and looked out upon Ponyville, a town that had come to be known as the heart of the insurgency. It was a reputation the local members of the Resistance had bloodied their hooves many times over to earn, making Ponyville a place where seemingly every other day, the decapitated bodies of metrocops and even Overwatch soldiers would turn up in the mornings, dumped on the streets by rebels, oftentimes accompanied by threatening notes warning against collaboration with what Dr. Breen termed ‘*The Universal Union*’, but what everypony whose head was not firmly lodged in their hindquarters knew as the Combine.

There were no ‘Breenscreens’ in Ponyville, except for inside the town hall itself. The Combine had tried to hang them up on every post and street corner like they did in all the other cities, of course. But, come every morning, they would find the things sabotaged; their power cut, their screens broken, and sometimes even showing pro-Resistance propaganda or pre-war children’s cartoons instead of the traitorous Breen’s ugly mug. Some would like to refer to him as *The* traitor, as if it was some sort of honorific title, but my father had warned me long ago against doing the same. Walrus Octavian Breen was a pony, nothing more, and giving him any title other than his name turned him into a myth, a legend, and in doing so gave him power that extended beyond his repulsive ‘Breencasts’.

My face contorted into a grimace whenever I thought of Breen's pretentious virtual fireside chats, which he created to fill the weary ears of the population he'd pretty much *sold* to aliens from another dimension with his own particular brand of bullshit – long-winded rants that he spewed with such enthusiasm and candor one might be deceived into thinking he genuinely believed every word. My father taught me not to hate the poor souls who, in their piteous state of suffering, bought into the blue pony's lies. Not even the ones who went a step further and signed up with the Metropolitan Police or Overwatch. We were to kill them, not hate them or judge them. Just kill them.

But none of that was any of my concern that day. The only thing on my mind was the fact that there was going to be another full moon that night, coinciding with a sky that was to stay perfectly clear – an event that I cannot remember happening twice in a row since the Seven Minute's War ended pegasus regulation of the weather. My mother, ever the amateur astronomer, and Pinkie Pie's left knee – the Resistance's meteorologist - had confirmed it, and Celestia damn me to pony hell if I was going to miss out on another chance to talk to Luna.

"Mom! Moooooooooom!" I called out, my voice reverberating throughout the massive, hollowed-out tree trunk that was the only home I had ever known.

My dad answered, "Your mother is at work, Alyx."

"She's been 'at work' all week! Is she *ever* coming home!?" I looked down from the balcony at our cluttered living room, trying to spot the mustard-colored stallion to whom I owe my existence amongst the stacks of books, newspapers, magazines, and, in a streak of modernity, a pair of paradoxically ancient-looking computers.

"She's very, very busy, sweetie. You know that. What do you need her for?" the earth-pony answered without looking up from his copy of *The New Yoke Times*, which he infinitely preferred over *The Ponyville Gazette*, even though its widely-read articles were more heavily scrutinized by the Ministry of Truth.

"I was *going* to ask her if I could go outside tonight," I huffed.

"You just went outside last night! What are you doing out there that is so important?" My father gasped in false realization. "Have you met a colt?" he asked with a grin.

"Oh, no, you are not changing the subject to *colts* again. I just want to go outside, that's it."

“And you were going to ask your mother because you knew that I would say no?”

“Yes, I was,” I stated truthfully.

Dad sighed at my self-defeating honesty. “Alyx, honey, there is a *reason* we don’t want you wandering the streets constantly, even at night. If the Combine establish a pattern of movement- ”

“The Combine are practically *gone*, dad!” I insisted.

He looked at me, surprised. “How do you mean?”

“I mean, look outside!” I pointed a hoof at the nearest window. “You know those two guys that are *always* across the street at the Rotisserie? They’ve been gone for days.”

He got up from the red leather couch and peered out the window past the double-layer of black curtains that would normally be closed at all times of the day or night.

I continued. “I haven’t even seen an APC since last week! Remember how they used to practically circle around our house?” I said, remembering the terrible gunmetal-grey horseless carriages that seemed to be designed from the ground-up to inspire fear.

“... And occasionally unload a platoon of metrocops to search our home for contraband...” He mumbled.

“... or evidence of a certain illegally-owned dragon,” I added with a snicker. “Oh, and don’t forget the secret passageway they’re too stupid to find that leads straight to the largest Resistance base in Equestria!” *I wonder how many times those idiots pried up our floorboards looking for something that was in the fireplace?* I thought with a smirk the size of the full moon I was missing.

“And now they’re... gone,” my father continued. “Just... gone. That doesn’t sit right with me one bit. Why in Equestria would they go to all the trouble of building us that huge, nasty-looking fence to keep out the creepercolts, and then just *leave*?” The Combine had been building a massive protective fence around Ponyville to keep out dangerous creatures like zombies (sometimes referred to colloquially as ‘creepercolts’), bullsquids, and of course the occasional headcrab. Most ponies I had talked to chalked it up as a pathetic gesture of ‘goodwill’ toward the increasingly hostile population.

“I don’t know, I guess they’re up to something!” I said half-sarcastically. I didn’t really care what the

Combine were up to, I just wanted to freaking *go outside*. “So...”

“No, Alyx, you can’t go outside. Like I said, you just went out yesterday, and you may do so again tomorrow if you must, but *not* two nights in a row; it’s suspicious, it’s dangerous, and it gives them clues as to *where* we’ll be and *when*, which I wouldn’t have for my daughter even if your mother *wasn’t* the leader of the Resistance!” the earth-pony decreed with finality, and returned his full attention to the newspaper.

I did my best to sound disappointed, letting out a grunt of frustration as I plodded back to my room. I was actually excited that I would now get to go outside without anypony knowing about it, and without anypony’s permission.

Waiting till dark, I slipped into my favorite jean vest, and, not even bothering to bring a flashlight due to the ghostly otherworldly illumination provided by the full moon, I climbed out of my bedroom window and into the starry night.

I cannot tell you how much I love the night; the cool air, the quiet, the canvas of the entire universe hanging above the tree line. But most of all, I enjoy being alone, away from my dad and even my mom when she’s home. Just me and the stars, alone with our thoughts, like Luna on the dark side of the moon, which is surely where She must be. At least, that’s where I’d go if I were Her.

I was trotting down the completely dead main avenue, quietly reflecting on the last words of the dragon Daggoth immortalized on that massive piece of parchment hanging in the barn at Black Mane West, ‘Your Princesses are in another castle’, when I was rudely interrupted.

“Going somewhere?” Asked a voice so close I jumped in fright.

“Celestiadamnit, Spike! You scared the pony out of me!”

“So does that mean you’re a dragon now?” he laughed, and began to trot next to me, his huge form obscuring my view of the cosmos.

“Why aren’t you with mom? I thought she needed help!” I scolded him.

“Ohhh, no, the *real* question is; What are you doing sneaking out of the Library for the umpteenth time?”

“I just wanted to look at the stars, okay?!” I loudly whispered, if that’s possible.

“Uh-huh. And what’s the *actual* reason?” he asked with exaggerated suspicion.

“Spike, name one time when I have lied to you,” I challenged him.

“Just now,” he grinned mischievously.

“Oh, shut up,” I shot back grumpily.

We trotted and walked in silence for a minute, Spike’s huge green eyes darting back and forth, looking for scanners and Combine patrols that weren’t there. I supposed that was nice of him, not to report me to my father, or worse, my mother.

“Hey, Spike,” I asked, my tone changing from annoyed to something warmer.

“Yeah, Alyx?” The adolescent dragon asked, his voice adorably cracking on the ‘A’.

“What do you think Elder Daggoth meant when he wrote ‘Your Princesses are in another castle?’”

I looked in amusement as he tried to come up with something besides ‘I don’t know’. Spike never was one for proverbs and poetry.

“Ahm, well, he could have meant... uh... that the Princesses were... relocated to another palace somewhere else in Equestria?”

“No, I don’t think that’s what he meant at all, Spike,” I shot him down. Gently, though. He’s a sweet dragon.

“Well, what do *you* think he meant?” Spike shot back, almost as gently as I did.

I stopped, and looked at the bright full moon. “There are some who believe that they simply fled, abandoning Equestria to its fate. But my mother, who was closer to the Princesses than anypony, taught me that they would never, ever abandon us.”

I looked at Spike to emphasize my point. “Never.”

“So where are they?” he asked.

“Personally, I think Celestia is hanging out with Luna on the dark side of the moon, sipping martinis, and doing everything they can to help us win. But they sure as buck di-”

I was cut off by the loudest series of booms I had ever heard. The stars winked out one by one to form dark blots which flashed across the night sky, and some of them could be seen silhouetted against the moon, hundreds of them! They approached with a horrible whistling noise, landing not with a boom like you would expect, but with a terrific deadpan \*THUD\*.

*They don't explode*, I thought with sudden terror. The Combine were bombarding Ponyville with bombs that don't explode. That can only mean one thing.

**“HEADCRABS!”** Somepony screamed from a balcony to the east, still dressed in her robe and slippers.  
**“THEY'RE SHELLING PONYVILLE WITH HEADCRABS!”**

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“I was already halfway down the street, galloping for home, when Spike picked me up, threw me on his back, and flew the remaining distance. He skidded to a halt at the front door, narrowly missing another shell that screamed past and smashed a gaping hole through the roof of the Rotisserie, which thankfully was empty at this time of night.”

I thought, *Oh sweet Luna. They made sure to do this in the middle of the night, didn't they? When everypony would be asleep in their homes, right?*

“I looked in horror at the residential district, and saw pillars of flame and smoke already rising from the closely spaced cottages and small apartments that dominated that area of town. Judging from the gleam of the headcrab canisters streaming down from the sky, that appeared to be where the Combine were concentrating their fire.”

“All I could think was, *Celestia damn the Combine to underhell for this*, and then I bucked open the front



door.”

Alyx covered her face with her forehooves before continuing the story.

“Dear Celestia. Our home had taken a direct hit from a shell, which had blown a hole through the trunk, and landed right in the middle of the living room. The whole place was an absolute celestiadamned *mess* of scattered books, pages, debris, just... ugh, there was splintered wood from the walls just covering *everything* and... and the furniture was all overturned, and upside down and sideways, and goddesses, Gordon...” She put a hoof to her temples and began massaging them, as if the memory of the event was causing her physical pain.

“...and crawling over and under and between it all were *dozens* of the cuddling little headhumpers. And I thought, *I’m already too late, aren’t I?*”

She removed her hooves from her face, allowing me to see the streak down her cheek where the fur was a darker shade of caramel, dampened by tears. My grip around her shoulders tightened, and I felt like I should say something, but I didn’t have the nerve. So, I did the next best thing, and leaned my head over to nuzzle her shoulder in sympathy. I apologized to her in my head, as if my thoughts would tunnel out of my mind into some adjacent dimension and reappear in hers.

*I’m so sorry, Alyx. I’m sorry that I made you do this. But I had to know. Celestiadamnit, I wish there was some other way, but I had to hear it from you.*

“I flew into an absolute rage, and started killing the bastards any way I could, stomping on them with my bare hooves, and using my magic to impale them on anything I could find that looked like it could pierce flesh – it didn’t matter if it was wood, glass, metal – whatever it took. After, I think, I killed them all, I started hysterically digging through the debris, hoping and praying that maybe, somehow, he was still alive. I suppose in my chaotic mental state, I didn’t think to check his bedroom, which was probably where he was...” She paused to think for just a little too long, and I took my muzzle out of her side to cut in.

“Well, did you find him? Did you find your dad?” I asked.

“His name was Tom,” came a voice that was neither mine nor Alyx’s. We both looked up and saw Twilight Sparkle trotting down the hallway to meet us, dressed in a lab coat that looked as if it hadn’t been washed in a few days. Or weeks. Or maybe ever.

“And no, we never found him, alive, dead, or zombified. Spike went back and checked every room of the Library,” the purple mare stated with a cool distance, as if she was talking about a stranger from Griffin City rather than her husband.

This didn't surprise me. It's a common psychological coping mechanism for survivors of extreme trauma to distance themselves emotionally from the event, as if they had watched it happen to somepony else. This is especially prevalent in individuals who possessed an independent and head-strong personality, of which the stubborn physicist was practically a textbook example. And if it *wasn't* just an act, emotional bluntedness is a hallmark of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, which, if I were a medical doctor, I'd probably diagnose just about everypony in Black Mane West with. Luna, what a case-study.

“Dr. Sparkle!” I immediately unwrapped my foreleg from around her daughter, and stood up on three hooves, extending the fourth to shake hers. “It's a real honor!” I smiled.

“Likewise, Doctor Freemane. And I see you've met my daughter.” As soon as she said that, I sensed an almost instantaneous tonal shift from the Resistance leader, as if I had listened to her mind broadcast an acoustic inflection to signal it had connected the words ‘Doctor Freemane’ and ‘my daughter’ with the word ‘met’ between the two. From this modicum of information, I gathered that Twilight approved of my association with her foal. *Cautiously optimistic yet hopeful YES.*

Alyx stayed slumped against the filing cabinet she'd been leaning against, only glancing up for a moment before her eyes drooped back to the dirty tiled floor.

Before I was interrupted, I said, “Yes, Alyx was just telling me the story of what happened to Ponyville -”

“-*The Day Ponyville Died*, I believe someone poetically described it, and yes, I heard.” Twilight said ‘someone’ instead of ‘somepony’; one of the odd misspeaks she often makes, though still nowhere near G-pony levels of incorrect grammar, I suppose.

“You heard Ponyville die, or you heard the story of how Ponyville died?” I asked, momentarily confused by her statement. And secretly because I enjoy annoying Twilight, but mostly because I was confused. I swear.

She gave one of her cute little huffs. “Both! I heard both.” She sounded just like I remembered her; like an intellectual surrounded by illiterate dunces that she loves and tolerates the shit out of. And that's just

when she's around other scientists. "Alyx is quite the storyteller, isn't she?"

I continued, "Ah, yes, she certainly is, and uh, I had a question about that - if you don't mind me asking, did you ever find out what happened to... Tom, you said his name was?" I was trying my best to be polite towards the elderly mare, really, I was. Best behavior, Scout's honor.

She didn't hesitate to give the answer. "Personally, I assume Tom was possessed, and shambled out of the house sometime between Spike leaving to bring Alyx back here, and his return. And now, my husband's body is probably wandering the streets of Ponyville, looking for dead birds to shove into his abdominal stomach-mouth- "

Alyx exploded out of her silence, shouting "*YOU DON'T KNOW THAT!* You couldn't *POSSIBLY* know that."

I was so startled by her outburst that I physically jumped inside my hazard suit. Twilight, however, had no visible reaction other than to simply turn and look at her daughter. She wore a resigned expression, her eyelids sliding partway down to reveal a thin layer of mascara. She knelt down so that her old, but still beautiful, face was inches away from Alyx's, the sleeves of her already dirty lab coat becoming further soiled by the black dust and grit of the floor.

She said in a near-whisper, "Alyx, your father isn't here anymore. Not in Ponyville, or anywhere else in Equestria." Her eyes widened in sympathy as Alyx's closed shut, already drained from tears.

"Then where is he?" Alyx whispered back as if it was a rhetorical question, a statement that she didn't expect an answer to.

"He's home, Alyx. He's gone back to where he began."

Reassured, but still bitter, she replied, "He better have," and stood up. "I'll - I'm going - ..." she stammered over her left shoulder as she awkwardly excused herself back to the elevator.

Twilight smiled. "Just go. You don't have to say anything."

Alyx paused, turned, and galloped back to give her a bear hug, leaning in close to whisper something in her ear, before galloping back to the waiting elevator. The moment the doors slid shut, Twilight jumped up and pinned me to the wall with her forelegs.

**“WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?!”** She screamed in my face like a cat that had just had its tail stepped on.

I couldn't really process her inquiry due to the unprecedented volume of awkward feelings the current position was unfortunately eliciting from my stupid, stupid, dirty male brain which obviously didn't register the fact that although Twilight was indeed a female of the species, she was old enough to be my MOTHER.

AAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!! Was all my brain could come up with as an answer, which my Broca's speech area translated as: “Dyughldinot!”

**“ANSWERS. NOW. SPEAK!”** she demanded like a mountain yeti on its period.

I recovered from the shock. And sexual confusion. By far, the vast majority, it was shock, just forget whatever it was that I just wrote, it was shock, far and away. Almost completely. My neurons fired in a beautifully coordinated light-show of fantastically complex impulses that coalesced into the following eloquently composed retort:

“Heyhey, Twi, girl, I mean, Doctor Sparkle, after I jumped through that portal to Xen, it was all a *blur*, I mean, there were *things*, and I did *stuff* to the *things*, and I got hurt very, very badly, and it was really, really painful but there were these little pools of blue stuff, and oh man those little pools were the shit, I mean, I felt like I could do buckin' *anything* after I sat in one of those cuddling things for a while, and then I... I ran out of bullets so I just started swingin' and I was... freakin'... I was bashing skulls, lady, I was bashin' heads like it was *little league*, it was... I mean...”

“GORDON! What happened to the Warden!? It's name was *Shu'ulathoi* or *Nihilanth* or something like that! Do you remember bashing in the skull of somepony – er, *someone* - named Nihilanth?”

Twilight had been one of the small handful of surviving scientists at the Lambda Complex to see me off through the portal to Xen. Barney was there too, as I recall. I was glad to see that they all made it out okay, I just wished that my nearly fatal journey to what seemed like the bad neighborhood in the worst part of double under-hell had actually ended up making any kind of difference in the end.

“In fact, I *do* remember shooting a grenade into this huge dude's head. It was pretty intense,” I said in the ineloquent haze induced by my impromptu walk down *Bad Memory Lane*.

“Was that the Warden? The being holding open the breach between the dimensions?” the Resistance’s lead scientist inquired, notably calmer than a minute previous.

“... He was the size of a building. I’m pretty sure, like, a pretty good sized building. Several stories.”

She gave me the most adorable look I’ve ever seen as she said, “Yeahhh, that was probably it.”

Twilight Sparkle released me from her confusingly sexy death hold. “So, you killed the thing holding open the breach, which is to say nothing about the life forms that had already passed through, and a fat lot of good it did us in the long run. So then what?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What do you mean, ‘what do I mean’? You killed the Shoola-Nilinth whatever, and then what happened?”

I turned into an alleyway on *Bad Memory Lane* named ‘Things I don’t ever, ever want to remember ever’, and replied, “I saw the G-pony. He offered me a job, and apparently I accepted, and... then I woke up eight years later on a train to Ma- er, *City 7*.”

After listening to my response, Twilight put a hoof to her temples and massaged for a few moments before speaking again.

“Gordon, trot with me,” she commanded.

“With pleasure, Doctor,” I obeyed.

She took me down the short access hallway and through a double set of doors to her lab – the heart of Black Mane West. The room was *huge*, I mean at least in comparison with the rest of the base, it must have been two or three stories tall at its highest point. Crammed into every nook and cranny were shelves and tables filled with the same kinds of instruments, computers, and electronic gadgets that I saw in the other (literally) underground laboratory, Black Mane East, back in *City 7*. The tile and brick room was dominated by a massive quantum-tunneling apparatus that was identical in design to the one that had misfired back in Pinkie’s lab and sent me ricocheting through Sparkle-Flowers-Gryffindor space, with one of the exit points unfortunately (or perhaps exactly as planned?) being the private office of Equestria’s

forcibly-imposed 'Administrator'.

As we trotted through the lab, all of the doors to the lab magically closed and locked themselves; Twilight obviously wanted us to be *alone*, and *uninterrupted*, and there I go, I did it again. Celestia, it seemed obvious to *me*, at least, that the sexual tension between myself and Alyx's cougar mom was so thick you could cut it with a dull wooden butter knife. However, the elderly, sixty-something year old object of my newfound deep, dark, shameful desire didn't seem to notice or care, as her attention was focused solely on a single object that sat tucked beneath her horrifically cluttered workstation – an unassuming, unmarked, uninteresting, olive-green metal box.

"Gordon, there are so many things I have to tell you – and I don't know how much time I've got left to tell them." I looked at a cracked picture frame sitting on her desk, holding a family portrait of a much younger (and disturbingly attractive *celestiadamnit shutupshutup*) Twilight, an unfamiliar earth-pony I gathered was her husband, Tom, and – *Oh Celestia, hahaha!* They were holding their adorable little filly, Alyx, of course! Daww, she was so *little* when this picture was taken!

*Errngh.* The sting of sympathy felt like getting poked in the arm with a hypodermic needle.

*This was your dad,* I thought of Alyx. *This was your family.*

My eyes suddenly became just a little blurry from some kind of moisture that they were excreting for some reason that had nothing whatsoever to do with - *I cried. Like a stallion.* Anyway, I noticed that Twilight had been kneeling on the ground, the glow from her horn spreading to envelop the box with the same purple aura. It slid out from beneath the desk, and its locking mechanism disengaged with a metallic *\*click\**.

"Pinkie Pie's tail has been twitching, Gordon. And many other parts of her body, but mainly her tail. She's been telling me, privately, that something really, really bad is about to happen to *me*, specifically *me* - *Twilight Sparkle*. I know it's absolutely ludicrous to actually *believe* such superstitious nonsense, I mean, the insanity of actually putting stock in somepony's prophetic hearsay about the future, but Gordon-" She began digging through the container, carefully removing its discrete internal shelves filled with machine parts and tools that rattled in their molded plastic depressions as she set them aside on the floor next to her.

"I learned a long, long time ago to believe the silly, superstitious nonsense that comes out of Pinkie's mouth, because for some *stupid, retarded* reason, it's *true*. Believe it or not, every single thing Pinkie Pie

has ever predicted has come true, often at exactly the time she predicted it would happen. And Gordon – no scientific theory I've ever studied or theorized can explain that. I don't think science is *capable* of explaining what goes on inside that pony's mind. Honestly, I don't think I'll understand until after I die -"

She stopped at the word 'die'. She looked away, anxiety and pain on her somewhat creased and wrinkled, yet still quite pretty, face. It was the look of a mother worrying about her children. She carefully unlocked a compartment of the crate that I didn't know was there until she opened it, it was so perfectly set into the frame. She levitated out a small antique jewelry box that it had concealed.

"Gordon, I think I'm going to die. And I don't mean years from now, I don't mean months from now, I mean *soon*. And before I die, I need to make sure you understand what I've been spending every waking moment for the past eight years searching for. I need you to know the only way we can defeat the Combine, drive them back to their world, and make sure they never come back. I need you to know what the Elements of Harmony are."

She unlatched the delicate hinge of the jewelry box, and floated out five bejeweled necklaces and an elegantly decorated crown. They were magnificent; the multi-colored gemstones refracted, bent, and reflected the sterile laboratory lights back at us, as if they could absorb things that were ugly and make them beautiful again. I sensed that they were ancient, perhaps as old as time itself, like they had been there from the beginning and would stay until the end, a constant, an assurance, a covenant. In spite of their apparent age, they bore no mark of time; no scratch, stain, blemish, chip or dent disturbed the immaculate perfection of their design.

Twilight carefully set them down on her desk, one by one, starting with the crown adorned with a violet star, the same color as her magical aura, I noted. Then the necklaces, each adorned with a unique symbol; a lightning bolt, a butterfly, a balloon, an apple, and a diamond.

"These, Doctor Freemane, are the most powerful magical artifacts in existence."

I stared with my mouth agape, entranced by their beauty, and somehow I sensed that they were looking back at me, silently judging me.

"*These* are the Elements of Harmony?" I asked incredulously.

"Did you figure that out all by yourself, or did somepony help you?" she asked, I suspect, sarcastically. She leaned against the desk with her forelegs and sighed heavily before continuing, her mind seemingly

overburdened with thoughts. “Gordon, when I *finally* made it home that day, I collapsed onto my bed and went to sleep thinking that you had just sacrificed your life to close the breach between our world and theirs, and that this whole mess would go down in history as another cautionary tale in playing fast and loose with safety standards when ponies’ lives are at stake, pushing too far too fast, and not to mention a critical lack of regulatory oversight from the government. When I woke up the next morning, the biggest worry on my mind was how I was going to word that in a letter to Princess Celestia. Goddesses, I was so *stupid*.”

She turned her gaze toward the part of the quantum tunneling device that hung from the ceiling directly above us and somberly continued. “That *wasn’t* the end. They came back. Only this time, they were prepared, and we lost. In seven minutes, we lost everything we had had for thousands of years to - ‘an implacable foe that came from neither above nor below, neither the right nor the left’ - is how I believe the papers put it.”

She turned her gaze back down to look at me, an inextinguishable fire in her eyes. “I am absolutely convinced that the only way to right the wrong that we were all a part of at Black Mane is to use the Elements of Harmony to permanently seal off our dimension from all the others, however many there are. And if they refuse to do that, then we’ll use the miniature teleporters Pinkie and I have been building to go to the Combine Overworld and use the Elements as a weapon to kill the enemy where they live. And if they even refuse *that*, well, then we’ll just have to go to Plan C.” She called the teleporters ‘miniature’ even though they took up most of the large room we were in. Well, compared to the one in Lambda, I suppose the adjective was appropriate.

I considered all that I had learned about the Elements of Harmony from my magic courses. As I recall, it is not known what the Elements *cannot* or *will not* do, only that they must consent to whatever action the caster of the spell, the bearer of the element of Magic, asks of them.

Twilight frowned. “Aren’t you going to ask me what Plan C is?”

“... Yes, yes I was about to,” I said, deep in thought.

Twilight cocked her head downwards a little and raised her eyebrows, expectantly waiting for my question.

“... Uhm, what is... Plan C?” I was persuaded without words to ask.



Twilight smiled. "If all else fails, we'll chuck the Elements of Harmony in a trash bin, and teleport a bomb or a death squad straight into Dr. Breen's office, and overthrow our alien overlords the earth-pony way: No magic," she chuckled.

I nodded approvingly. "And why can't you do that now?"

"We're working on it," she gestured towards the 'miniature' teleporter. It looked sort of like a massive ray-gun like you would see in a cheesy sci-fi comic, aimed at a small elevator just big enough for a pony to fit on. In, on, around, and even *through* were tangles of huge, thick cables that looked like they could transmit *gigawatts* of current, bundled together with cable-ties like a rubber band on the end of a ponytail in a futile effort to maintain some kind of order to the tangled chaos of wires.

*The tangled chaos of SCIENCE!* I thought with another one of my nerd-squees.

"Judging from your experience with the quantum-tunneling device in City 7, I'd say we still have a lot of work to do. But, on the plus side, you survived the projection, *and* we gathered a lot of data to pore over!" Twilight's eyes practically rolled into the back of her head as she thought about studying and organizing large amounts of scientific data.

*Luna, that must be like pornography for her. Science porn.*

"What about the teleporter back at the Lam-" I was interrupted as Twilight snapped out of her fantasy and burst out laughing.

"For Celestia's sake, Gordon, you really think that thing still works? Where h- oh my goddesses! Hahahaha! I was... hahah! I was about to say '*where have you been?*'! HAHAAHAAH!" she continued to chortle like an asshat.

*An intellectual surrounded by dunces you remain, Twilight Sparkle. You have not changed at all.*

I frowned. "Okay, and why can't you use the Elements, again?"

She straightened up. "The Elements of Harmony can only be used by their respective 'Bearers' - extraordinary ponies who are the embodiment - the *spirit* - of everything their individual element represents. There are six; Honesty, Kindness, Laughter, Generosity, Loyalty and Magic. If even one of those is missing, the spell won't work. Applejack, who represented the spirit of honesty, and was that

Element's bearer, died along with the whole Apple family during the Seven Minute War, and poor Rarity was in Carousel Boutique in Ponyville..." she trailed off, her laughter suddenly extinguished.

"... on the day it died," I finished her sentence.

There was a rather awkward silence as both the doctor and I were lost in our own thoughts. I wondered how things would have turned out if we had used the Elements back at Black Mane. What, if any, limit to their power existed, and how might they behave if we felt it necessary to take them into another dimension? Would they even work? Were they capable of 'sealing off' one dimension from another, as Twilight put it, or is that even possible within the Standard Model? I know the experiments we performed at Black Mane forced a revision of the laws of physics many, many times, but what about the laws of magic? Had we ever experimented with the Elements of Harmony, to test their limits? Oh, goddesses, what if this whole thing started because we *did*?

And another thing – Twilight said we could use the Elements as weapons to kill the Combine where they live. How does she know that they will? That they would? What if they refuse to consent to killing, even if it is killing to save lives? And would they choose us over them if it came down to it? Is the Element of Loyalty really loyal? Come to think of it, how is it that pieces of stone and metal are capable of making moral decisions, anyhow? Celestia, the laws of the universe - particularly the laws governing magic - confound me, and I'm a physicist for pony's sake.

"Theoretical physicist, anyway," I mumbled to myself.

"What?" asked Dr. Sparkle.

"Nothing," I replied. *What the hell, Gordon? You talk to yourself now? Luna.*

The short, pointless exchange had pulled Twilight out of her own world of thought, and she turned to speak to me, sounding as if the weight of the world were on her shoulders.

"Gordon, what you've got to understand about the Elements of Harmony is that they are totally powerless without all six of the Bearers to use them. You take away even one, and the spell doesn't work. That is what I have devoted the vast majority of my time and resources to for the past eight years; Searching for the ponies who can wield the remaining Elements so we can defeat the Combine, drive them back to where they came from, and make sure they can never, ever come back. They have spent the last eight years doing everything they possibly could to prevent me and the Resistance from doing so, mostly by

finding and killing us whenever, wherever and however possible.”

Twilight touched the Element of Generosity with her hoof. “You have no idea what they’re capable of, Gordon. What lengths they will go to in order to stop us. Rarity does. She and everypony else in Ponyville knows *exactly* what levels of depravity the Combine are willing to lower themselves to in order to protect their false claim to our world and to power.”

Twilight once again jumped up and put her forehooves on my shoulders. Parts of me were delighted and other parts were less so.

“I *need* you to see Ponyville, Gordon. I need you to understand why we fight. We don’t have a choice.”

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*Why we fight.* Powerful words, them. Dangerous, fighting words. Words written with the blood of innocents. They are a reason and a cause, a *caucus belli* that drives nations to war with other nations, and people to kill other people. More than a logical cause-and-effect equation, they are a moral justification, something in your head, something in your heart, something in your *bones* that you call upon in times of doubt and darkness when your flesh screams in protest to your mind, *why? Why do you fight?*

When one has a satisfactory answer to that deepest and most personal of questions, the body relents, and the mind regains control, and you become unstoppable as a neutrino ejected from a supernova, a bullet through paper, or at the very least, a bull in a china shop. It is a question that every soldier who is not a machine with a machine mind and a machine heart has asked himself, every soldier at war with a thinking conscience and a living soul; *Why?* And the answer comes from the clear of mind and the pure of heart sometimes as a whisper, sometimes as a scream of righteous fury; *Why? THAT is why.*

I was headed to Ponyville on the back of the dragon Spike, at the command of the leader of the Resistance. Several things occupied my thoughts. One of those things was an explanation – finally – for the telekinetic explosion which occurred when I focused my magic on that mockery of a ski-lift back in City 7 and then pushed it away as hard as I could; While in the lab, Dr. Sparkle had revealed to me that my HEV suit actually amplifies my inherent unicorn powers by approximately tenfold. My education in the

ways of the physical sciences did nothing to help me follow Twilight as she delved into the specifics of experimental arcane enchantments – personally, she lost me once she got to the part about grinding up the horns of particularly powerful unicorns who had died and donated their bodies to science. That’s just really, really bucking creepy if you ask me, but hey, that’s pretty much the definition of arcane science.

My mind drifted to the dead town I was currently flying toward. The once headcrab-stuffed mortar shells that now littered its winding streets or were hidden inside its modestly-sized buildings had been fired by strange bio-mechanical monstrosities employed by the Combine called ‘synths’; Alien war machines that were disgustingly efficient at exterminating hostile populations. Spike had explained to me that in the time it took him to fly Alyx to Sweet Apple Acres, and then return to the Library, it was already too late; It had happened that fast. Just like the Seven Minute War. The Combine are slow to react, and capable of making astoundingly ill-advised judgment calls - both tactical and strategic – but once they commit to destroying a target, they cuddling *destroy* it.

I also wondered about the Elements of Harmony. Where in Equestria did the things come from anyway? How does one *make* an Element of Harmony or become a Bearer of one, and what god, gods, demigod, or demigods as it may be, decided that the harmonic elements would be specifically honesty, kindness, laughter, generosity, loyalty, and magic? And why did this all-powerful being include something as dumb as laughter while omitting things like, I don’t know, Courage, or Love, or... the Element of Knowledge, or maybe... the Element of Science! But, seriously, *laughter?* Stupid demi-gods.

I could easily see the town, sitting nestled in a modest, grassy valley with Canterlot and Mount Equestria in the background. It was getting late; As the sun neared the horizon, its rays made the brightly-colored rooftops glow, and produced an annoying glare off of what windows that weren’t busted out. The massive fence that encircled Ponyville cast long shadows over the once peaceful and quiet town that had turned into a violent and rebellious town and then once again into a peaceful and quiet town filled with zombies.

“HEY SPIKE!” I yelled at the magic dragon that I was clinging to for dear life. “HOW DO THEY KEEP PEGASUS ZOMBIES FROM FLYING OUT!?”

Spike hollered back over his shoulder, “Pegasus ponies are rounded up and sent to be processed at Canterlot, where their wings are clipped so they can’t fly anymore.”

“DEAR PRINCESS CELESTIA!” I shouted over the sound of wind and wings. “WHAT DO THEY DO TO UNICORNS!?”

“They haven’t gotten to unicorns yet, but don’t worry, they’re working on it!” Spike answered. “I guess they did pegasi first because a flying enemy is a lot harder to kill than a magic-using one! Ha! Just ask the Combine about me!” he laughed.

We flew low and slow over the infamous town, and Spike was banking gently in order to afford me an even clearer view of something that, thanks to my suit’s zoom function, I could already see all too well.

The once brightly-colored shops and two-story cottages that dominated the town were faded and decaying, some ravaged by fires that had burned unchecked but for the occasional rainstorm, and some with gaping holes gouged in their roofs and walls by mortar shells. The cobblestone streets that surrounded them were littered with debris and abandoned carriages, and sprinkled with millions of shards of broken glass. We passed over the once bustling market street, which was now a chaotic tangle of toppled and upended vendor’s stalls. Their goods, locked up by their owners intending to come back the following morning, having long since been liberated from their containers and spilled onto the street to rot.

A free market was one of the concessions that the local Combine overseers, themselves likely having grown up there, had given Ponyville in an attempt to placate the restless and rebellious population. However, whether they had grown up there or not, all civil authorities had abandoned the town to its fate once the order to do so came down the line; There were no police transports anywhere, nor any other sign of Civil Protection. They had simply packed up and left. I gathered that once the midnight shelling began, total anarchy had reigned in the brief time before pretty much everypony had a little neural parasite sucking on their skull, telling them to go eat dead birds.

We passed over a little red elementary school, surrounded by dead trees, cracked cement, and rusting playground equipment. The little bell tower had taken a direct hit from one of the shells and collapsed inward, down into the school, leaving a gap that was perfectly square on three sides, and was a jagged, splintered, partial-circle on the fourth. I prayed that there hadn’t been anypony inside when that happened, but then I considered that being crushed to death was probably a downright merciful fate for the ponies who lived here. Better than being possessed, or, if you managed to make it to some sort of fortified shelter, slowly starving to death.

Everywhere, streets appeared to have been deliberately blocked off and redirected by makeshift barricades, as if to funnel anything shambling down the street to certain locations. How very odd. I made a deliberate effort to trace one of the paths – It led into a huge pit that had been dug or blasted into the ground. Piled high in the pit were wooden logs, charred and blackened almost... no, wait. Those aren’t logs. They’re *people*. Dear Princess Celestia, those are the skeletons of ponies, piled on top of each

other like logs, burnt almost beyond recognition. There was no lingering scent of cooked flesh or decomposition, leading me to conclude this funeral pyre had taken place some time ago.

Spike commented over his shoulder, "I'm not sure who's been building those barricades and digging those fire-pits. They sure as hell weren't there when we left. In fact, sometimes I see somepony who's definitely *not* a zombie in an all-black cloak dinking around here and there, across town. I've never said 'hi', though. He doesn't seem too friendly, and he carries around a double-barreled shotgun."

"Not that I'm afraid of shotguns. No matter how many barrels they have," Spike quickly added with pride.

As the sun neared the horizon, we heard a long, drawn out howl drift across the wind. "One last stop, I guess," and he flew back towards the edge of town. I noted that Spike had specifically avoided showing me the Ponyville Library, but I wasn't sure I even wanted him to. Alyx's recollection had been vivid enough.

The adolescent dragon dropped me off at the main entrance to the town so I could get a better look at the massive reinforced gate that kept anypony or anything from getting in or out of Ponyville. The scene I beheld there told the story of hundreds of innocent ponies - mares, stallions, and foals - making one last, desperate attempt to escape from their hellish prison - only to be cut down as soon as they somehow, by an act of Celestia, managed to reach the main gate.

Dear Luna, the bodies. The rotting piles of multicolored corpses splayed out, broken and twisted amongst the wreckage of dozens of carriages, carts and wagons, their disdainful blue coveralls eroded away by moths, weather and time. These people had not been killed by zombies or headcrabs! They had been shot through with bullets and plasma by Combine soldiers, maybe even police officers! They hadn't just packed up and left, they'd actually stayed behind in order to *ensure* that everypony died. The same ponies that were supposedly there to protect them! I don't know what made me angrier - That the Combine had plotted to mass-murder every last one of the several thousand ponies who lived here, including my brother John, or that the citizens of Ponyville had actually *trusted* them in the first celestiadamned place! Including probably my brother John, because he's kind of retarded!

And the bodies had lain there, unfit for possession by headcrabs as they were no longer alive. The only attention they got was from birds, insects, and the occasional hungry zombie looking to shore up its fat-reserves before it collapsed back into hibernation, waiting for another victim that would never come because nopony is *stupid* enough to actually enter this place!

A sign had been hung on the thrice-chained and locked gate. A handmade, delicately crafted wooden sign, with a poem painstakingly carved into it by some mournful soul who came by to pay his respects to the thousands who died here.

WE DON'T GO TO PONYVILLE  
WE DON'T GO TO PONYVILLE  
WE DON'T GO TO PONYVILLE  
NOT SINCE THE DAY IT DIED

A short, dark, bitter poem that was, in its own way, beautiful. Beautiful in its darkness.

Spike sat quietly, supposedly keeping a lookout for zombies, but I know he was thinking about this place just as much as I was. I told him that I had seen enough, and I was ready to head back. He arched his back and unfolded his great, leathery wings as I awkwardly climbed on, and I was thankful Alyx wasn't watching. *Alyx*. I really wanted to talk to her. About everything, everything under the stars. All of a sudden, and I don't really know why, I had this desperate, burning urge to see her, just to make sure she was okay, even though I knew that, logically, she probably was.

The flight back was short and silent, but for the sound of laughter drifting across the wind from somewhere deep within Ponyville. I asked Spike if he had heard it, and he replied that he didn't know what I was talking about. Hmph.

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Alyx waved to us from on top of the barn, and I zoomed in to see that she was, to my utter delight, holding shish-kebobs in her mouth. *Cuddle yeah*, I thought as my stomach grumbled and my mouth watered, and I also felt this weird kind of tingling sensation in the top of my front teeth, like, right where the tooth meets the gum line that, I don't know, it's just been kind of bothering me. I need to see a dentist.

"I bwot woo bwinner!" she called out as loud as she could without actually opening her mouth, and, I noted, with probably the biggest smile I'd seen on her all day.

Spike gracefully landed on the roof of the enormous barn that dominated the former Sweet Apple Acres, only managing to tear off a *few* dozen shingles with his enormous talons.

“Gordon! I’m glad to see you and Spike made it back alright!” exclaimed Alyx.

Spike and I gave each other a look. “Uh, Alyx, it wasn’t really a *harrowing* journey,” said Spike.

I added, “It was more like a... tour. And I mean, it was a really, really nice tour, Spike, over here, Spike is -” I tried to think of the words that would most adequately describe the magnificent, spectacular, versatile, loyal, and graceful purple dragon. “... he is so *cool*, he is just a really, really cool guy.” *Smooth*.

They both gave me looks. “You two enjoy your dinner, I’m going to go eat some barbequed bullsquid,” Spike said with his typical air of masculine posturing that I suspect was made doubly worse by the presence of a female that I dimly suspected he had a crush on. Which, now that I think about it, would be really, really funny.

Alyx and I stood side by side, watching Spike take off into the twilight sky, and I ravaged my potato and apple and I-don’t-know-what-else shish-kebob. The sun behind us had already slipped beneath the horizon, with only Mount Equestria in the distance still basking in the golden sunshine.

“And yet the sun still rises,” Alyx whispered.

“What?” I asked.

She sighed. “Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria,” Alyx began, looking at that sunlight-bathed mountain upon which once sat the most beautiful and majestic palace in all the world, and now played host to an alien military that infested it like a malignant tumor.

“There were two regal sisters who ruled together and created harmony for all the land,” she continued, her voice cracking, and her eyes beginning to water.

*No, not again. Alyx, please don’t cry, please don’t be sad.* I pleaded with her in my mind.

She actually began to smile as she continued. “To do this, the eldest used her unicorn powers to raise the sun at dawn.” A gust of wind blew the shish-kebob stick out of my mouth, and it clattered off the roof



of the barn.

*Okay, Luna, okay.*

I finished the tale. “The younger brought out the moon to begin the night. Thus, the two sisters maintained balance for their kingdom and their subjects, all the different types of ponies.”

What happened next is; I nearly died. Seriously, I almost fell off the barn to my certain death when Alyx jumped up and planted her soft, wet lips on mine, tasting of shish-kebob. My cerebrum was tasked to capacity comprehending the fact that I had just been *kissed* by a *girl*, while simultaneously comparing the way Alyx had her forehooves on my chest to the way Twilight had jumped up and pinned me just a couple of hours previous (noting that the comparison was favorable), and my good ol’ cerebellum was very busy working with my Hazard Suit’s Motor Augmentation and Stability-Control systems to keep me from falling off the roof and dying. I noticed that my suit had automatically detected the unstable terrain, and transformed the polymorphous hoof-pads to a more suitably gripping texture, which I thought was seriously badass.

With my stability returned, I pressed in further to Alyx’s small, feminine muzzle and continued smooching her. My suit flashed a warning message across my glasses that my pulse and temperature were rapidly increasing, eliciting a mental *no duh* from me. The air was cool, and her surprisingly pleasant-smelling breath was warm and moist, fogging up my glasses and concealing the idiotic warning.

Alyx finally pulled away. “You’re all grody,” she said, trying her best to frown.

“Well I haven’t taken a bath in...” I paused, considering, “Eight years.”

Alyx gave me the exact same absolutely adorable look that her mother gave me when I described the Nihilanth to her.

“Do you wanna take a bath?” She asked.

“Do you wanna take a bath *with* me?” I asked with a grin 1.6 kilometers wide.

Alyx nodded, also grinning. *YES. WE ARE DOING THIS.*

And so we carefully extricated ourselves from the rooftop and galloped over to the highly polluted and

probably bullsquid-infested river. Thankfully, Alyx had been paying very, very close attention when Barney was assembling my suit around me, and she helped me reverse the process.

I was naked. Naked as a pony could be. In other words, I was in my informal attire, my *casual dress*.

“Are you sure this is safe?” I asked Alyx.

She immaturely rolled her eyes. “If it wasn’t, we wouldn’t be doing it, Gordon.”

“Alright,” I said, and promptly pushed her in.

Alyx had barely surfaced her head above water when I followed her into the river, the volume I displaced with my sweaty, dirty, and just a little bit bloody body forming a mini-tidal wave that collided with her face. The river was shallow enough here for me to stand, and I never took my eyes off of her. I watched as she blew the murky river water out of her nose, her wet, black mane in her eyes, and her now soaking wet coat a darker shade of caramel. She grinned evilly, and turned onto her back, bucking plumes of water at me with her hind legs.

“Damn, Gordon, you ever gonna take those glasses off, ya four-eyes!?”

I spat out river water, hoping I didn’t contract some exciting new disease as I shouted back, “Alyx, at this point, I don’t think it’s *possible* for my glasses to come off.”

“Oh, griffinshit, is that a challenge!?” she shouted back as her horn was enveloped by a sky-blue aura, and instantly, I felt an invisible hand grab my thick-rimmed frames and *yank*. I was actually lifted several centimeters out of the water before the damned things finally let go of my face, doing for Alyx what grenades, crashing through the sides of office buildings, and getting shot by an attack helicopter had all failed to do: Take off my mothercuddling glasses.

“WHOOOO! I DID IT!!! I HAVE TAKEN YOUR GLASSES!!” Alyx whooped in over-produced celebration.

I just stood there and rubbed the bridge of my nose; that had actually kind of hurt.

Alyx jumped out of the river and back onto the bank, waving my glasses in the air like a flag banner.

“I have the glasses of the *One With the Free Mane!*” Alyx announced, again, over-doing it just a tiny bit,

although she could have been doing it on purpose.

I followed her out and galloped after her, both of us soaking wet.

“Give my glasses back you evil and... positively treacherous fiend!” I shouted after her. Yeah, I got nothing. Honestly, I was playing it by ear, and that’s what I came up with. You know, I wonder how romantic encounters would play out if both parties had unlimited time to draft and compose a retort. It would probably be a lot less fun.

I galloped after Alyx through the neck-high cord-grass that grew by the river’s banks, her wet coat gleaming in Luna’s blessed moonlight, and guiding my near-sighted rump to Alyx’s rump. She made a mistake; when she came to a spot along the river where the path was partially blocked by a fairly large boulder, she faked right like she was going to go around it when I knew full well she was going to try to leap clear over it. Anticipating her move, I galloped around the left side of the rock, my hooves getting covered in the muck of the bank that was too steep for any vegetation to grow, and I looked up to see the underside of Alyx, flying through the air just centimeters above me. I kicked off the ground with all my might, just like I did back in City 7, and I caught the devious little spectacle-snatcher by her slippery hind legs.

We both tumbled onto the ground, our heaving, gasping bodies entangled on grass that appeared almost blue in the moonlight. Alyx seized with laughter, floating over my glasses.

“Here, ya caught me, fair and square,” she conceded.

I floated my glasses back onto my face, feeling my magic briefly touch hers, which felt really, really nice, by the way.

“Damn right I did.” I looked over to her still-panting form lying across from me. “You took my glasses, and I *still* caught you because your ass is so *big*, it’s impos- Ow! Hey! Quit it!” I protested as Alyx struck me. I laughed at the pain. Compared to being shot, it was like getting tickled. Although, I suppose the adrenaline *was* still flowing, minimizing perception of pain, but, whatever. Alyx hits like a *mare*.

As I giggled like a school-filly, Alyx scooped over and snuggled me, rubbing her muzzle across my neck and chest, and I reciprocated the action.

We just laid there for the longest time, looking at the moon and the stars, listening to the sound of each

others' breathing, the beating of each other's heart, and the occasional demonic howl from Ponyville. Also, I think I heard a bullsquid fighting a headcrab somewhere in the distance. From the sound of it, I concluded that the bullsquid was winning, which made me happy.

Then, I did the stupidest thing I have ever done in my entire life: I talked to a girl about feelings.

"So, Alyx, uhm... so does this mean...?"

She lifted her muzzle out of my neck, and looked me in the eye. "Does this mean what?"

"Does this-" I raised a hoof and moved it in a circular motion, gesturing to our entangled bodies, "-mean... that, you know, we're an... *'item'* now?" I innocently inquired.

Alyx pulled away from me, her eyebrows furrowed, and biting her lip – the same lip that I had been biting earlier, I noted with no small amount of satisfaction.

Alyx looked at me, a confused and worried expression on her face.

"Gordon – I- I've got – I mean, I'd better get going, mom – er Twilight, she... she said she needed me to help her out with some stuff in the lab, and... so, yeah."

I was so confused. "Wh- what? You have to go? Right now? Did I say something wrong?"

She looked at me with pity. "No, no no no, it's nothing you said, I've just, I had a *wonderful* time tonight, Gordon, and I'd really, *really* like to do this again sometime, but it's just, mom said she really needed my help down in the lab, and I just remembered... so, I gotta go, I'll see you tomorrow!"

Alyx began galloping back towards the barn when she stopped suddenly, and turned back toward our original jumping-off point on the river bank, probably remembering that she left her vest there. I smiled. We're perfect for each other.

I was standing there on the river bank, having somehow managed to put my Hazard Suit back on, looking up at the night sky and being cross with the Goddesses.

*I did what you wanted, Luna! I did! And now she hates me! You know what? This was YOUR screw-up, everything went fine on my end, this is YOUR – Oh, celestiadamnit, it was my fault.*

“Yes, Gordon, it was,” I imagined Her saying.

While stargazing/star-arguing, I noticed something very peculiar in the night sky: Some of the stars were moving. In fact, a whole *bunch* of stars were moving, all in the same direction. And also, they were getting brighter.

Then I noticed that these stars were also humming. *Oh dear Princess Celestia and her sister Luna and all of their pegasus and unicorn guards.* I began to gallop. I galloped like I had never galloped before, not even back in City 7 when the teleporter had malfunctioned and dropped me off in a dirty alleyway with every CP in a twenty-kilometer radius headed in my direction. This panicked locomotion was beyond a fight-or-flight response. I knew what those stars were. And I knew what they meant. And I knew that Alyx was in grave and immediate danger.

I was barely inside the barn door when the first shell hit. It was exactly as Alyx had described in her story; A horrible screeching noise followed by a terrific deadpan \*THUD\*. Except this thud was immediately followed by a whole string of other thuds, over a dozen. I activated my suit’s retractable helmet by selecting the option on my HUD labeled ‘hostile environment mode’.

The plate on my chest emblazoned with the Lambda logo unhitched itself from my suit, along with several other orange-and-gold metal plates, and the apparatus began assembling itself into a reactive armor-plated, air-tight helmet. The various folded flaps and extendable sections had barely finished magnetically and mechanically clicking into place around my skull when a mortar burst through the ceiling of the barn, snapping supporting struts like twigs and punching a hole straight through the floor and into the seventh level of Black Mane West.

Dreyfus and Drew, the sentry ponies, were on duty, and they ducked for cover as dust, debris, wood shavings, and a surprising amount of nails rained down on us. I flinched as a several-centimeter long nail bounced off the lenses of my glasses, which had automatically bent backward and locked in place to form the viewports of my suit’s helmet.

The two sentry ponies looked at me with incredulity worthy of Luna herself, then shoved past me to get into the elevator.

“Whoah, whoah, wait, I’m going with you!” I hollered at them, wondering if they could hear me through my helmet.

“Well then hurry your bleeding arse up, mister fancy-pants space pony!” the dark grey one mockingly yelled over the sound of dozens of Combine attack helicopters and dropships bearing down on us. Ah, so they *can* hear me.

The elevator descended, miraculously enough, as another loud series of detonations rumbled through the base and warning klaxons blared, which my helmet thankfully filtered out as background noise. Dreyfus, the chocolate-brown pony, hoofed the emergency stop button at the kitchen where the all-knowing Cerberus had told me what they called the Combine.

“Roight, Free-”

“*Right*, Drey! ‘Ow many times has we gone over this!?”

“Freemane, we’re going to secure the kitchen. You can... do whatever.”

“Great!” I yelled at them. “Can I at least have a bucking *gun!*?”

“O’ course, Doctor Freemane, sir,” replied Drew as he grabbed his pistol with his teeth and held it out for me.

I sarcastically thanked him, but telekinetically grabbed the sidearm anyway, throwing it in inventory. Just as they stepped off, a figure stirred in the darkened kitchen. All three of us spun on the intruder, our guns raised, one by unicorn magic, two (or three, or four) by mechanical motion.

“Freemane!” the figure shouted from behind an overturned tub of strawberries which sat on the stainless-steel counter. I sighed, and lowered my weapon. It was the all-knowing Cerb who fixed me my sandwich.

“Freemane, I should like to join you, if possible.”

Dreyfus interrupted me before I could even say anything that could *be* interrupted.

“Be my guest, mate!”

“You are not the Freemane, so do not pretend to speak for him!” the Cerb scolded.

“Like he said, be my guest, sir,” I said, and he came out from behind the counter and quickly trotted onto the elevator, his covered tail wagging behind him.

“No, Freemane, I am not *sir*. You,” he stuck a gloved paw in my chest. “You are *sir*. I am an inexpressibly insignificant cog in an unfathomably huge machine, but *you* dwarf even that entity.”

The doors slid shut and the elevator continued its descent to the first floor. The Cerb continued to stare at me, uncomfortably close, as he spoke in his deep, raspy voice.

“It is not known whether it is possible to see the future, the path that lies ahead. But I fear what we will find in the Twilight Sparkle’s laboratory.”

Moments later, there was an *extremely* powerful explosion that rocked the whole base. The lights blinked out, and the poor, abused elevator descended the last couple of meters in total free-fall, crunching to the ground, and knocking me onto my ass.

“FORWARD, FREEMANE! GO!” my alien companion shouted, and I unhesitatingly complied, thinking of the danger that Alyx and her mother could be in.

We galloped down the hallway and slammed into the doors to the lab, finding that they were, of course, *LOCKED*.

*CELESTIADAMNIT CELESTIADAMNIT CELE-* I paused my mental cursing and put my ear to the door, thinking I heard talking.

“You **LIARS!** You never said **ANYTHING** about a bucking memory extraction!” Was that... what’s her uncreative name? Cherry Blossom? Who the –

“*Shut up.*” Said a deep new voice I’d never heard before, its owner distracted by something far more important than its present company.

*"You said you would take them **PRISONER!**"* I can't... the dirty... that dirty rotten whore. That cuddling whore!

*"You get one more chance,"* said the deep, male voice

*"I make the fucking calls here, lieutenant,"* Came a second voice, garbled beyond all resemblance of a normal pony's voice.

*"Please, I beg of you, it isn't nec-"* Cherry Blossom was cut off by a loud boom. I heard the sound of metal hitting metal directly outside the door, and the wet splatter of fluid. I leaned back from the entrance, and to my astonishment, the door swung just a few centimeters toward me, now slightly ajar. I ventured a guess that the shot had broken the lock. Well, no time like the present. Helmet? Sealed and locked. Pistol? Loaded, safety off. I turned to my sandwich-making Cerberus friend, and he voiced what I thought.

*"Into the breach."*

I nodded in concurrence.

I focused on the steel door and, amplified by my suit's magical energy enchantment, my magic caused it to violently fly open, actually breaking the lower hinge when it slammed against the inside wall.

The first thing I noticed was Cherry Blossom's dead pink body, what remained of her cerebrum spilling out of a hole the size of a grapefruit that had been bored through her skull. *Whatever. She's still a cuddling traitor,* I thought.

The next thing that I noticed was a pair of massive alien creatures present in the laboratory, standing upright on two legs like a monkey, and clad from head to toe in some sort of incredibly advanced powered combat suit the likes of which I'd never seen before. The things were so tall, it looked like they almost touched the ceiling, and they weren't skinny, by any means or measure, quite the opposite; They were incredibly bulky and beefy, and their armored suits wore the same kind of mottled-yellow synthetic carapace that I had seen on the Combine's tripod-like synths back in City 7, complete with thorny, organic-looking spikes peppering the surface, making the whole thing look like the exoskeleton of an insect.



I also noticed that Alyx and Twilight were indeed here in the lab, and they were still alive, thankfully. Less thankfully, they were telekinetically pinned to the wall.

The all-knowing Cerb instantly became infuriated, shouting what would prove to be his final words.

**“YOU! YOU ARE NO SHU-ULATHOI! Why pretend to be?”** he raged.

The – I assumed – Combine that wasn't preoccupied with holding my soul mate and her mother to the tiled wall of the lab, pulled out what appeared to be a pistol the size of my *entire head*, and without hesitating for even a millisecond, blew away the Cerberus, spattering my right glasses lens with his bright, red blood. I was so stupidly stunned by the creatures that I didn't get off even a single shot before I found myself pinned to the same wall as Alyx. *Wait, wasn't it Alyx and Twilight?*

*Oh no.* The one who had murdered the unarmed Cerberus had grabbed her by the scruff of her fur and was holding her at eye level, its massive, apparently robotic arm hissing and squealing as it made minute adjustments to its grip. I winced. Being held like that, especially at her age, must have been enormously painful, but she didn't make a noise. The being's grey segmented outer faceplate clicked and clacked as it pulled up and back into the suit, revealing a smooth, reflective dome that slid back as one piece. The thing was hideously ugly – a wickedly deep scar ran down its pale, hairless face, and between its teeth was a thick, brown cylinder that glowed hot at one end. It spat the thing out into Twilight's stoically emotionless face, causing her to flinch briefly as it bounced off, singeing her purple fur before falling to the ground almost three meters below.

It spoke. “So you're the little purple unicorn been a thorn in Breen's side so long,” It frowned in disappointment. “You don' look so tough.”

“Just extract its memories, Wyandotte,” commanded the other Combine in its almost incomprehensibly garbled voice.

The one holding Twilight closed its faceplate and I heard it draw deeply on whatever gas it breathed.

“Right.” It leaned forward and whispered in a low, gravelly voice, “Let's see what's in that little head of yours.”

It raised its left arm, which had an extremely complex but relatively compact device attached to its wrist that included a pair of cloudy-white cylinders. A long, thin needle extended from the tip of the device and

began to spin like a drill.

As the Combine awkwardly turned Twilight around so that the back of her head was facing him, she shouted to Alyx, "I love you, sweetheart!" So absorbed was I by the sight before me, I hadn't even noticed that Alyx had been yelling, screaming and cursing like a cider-sick sailor all the while.

"Celestiadamn you, *let her go!*" she screamed.

The Combine chuckled. "Celestia's next, kid."

The needle was pressed up tight against Twilight's skull, the bipedal being taking its time to make sure the angle was right.

"Close your eyes, honey," Twilight commanded as a mother to her daughter, and the needle plunged into her skull. I closed my eyes too, but I didn't know if it was even possible to mute my helmet's tiny external microphones, so I was forced against my will to listen as Twilight's beautiful mind was sucked out through the thin tube and deposited inside one of the semi-transparent containers on the alien's wrist.

Her body hadn't even hit the floor when that immaculate bucking dragon (really, I cannot write enough positive adjectives prior to Spike's name) burst into the room through the service entrance in the roof of the adjacent hallway. He sized up the situation pretty much instantly, and immediately leapt onto the Combine that had attacked Twilight - biting, clawing and scratching, too afraid to breathe fire because Twilight was so close by, and he didn't have time to realize she was dead.

The other one panicked at the sight of an enraged dragon that was nearly as big as it was, and dropped both of us as it pulled out its ridiculously massive sidearm. It fired three shots at Spike as he and the being wrestled, the chitinous armor apparently impervious even to dragon's claws. All three shots hit Spike, the shells pancaking against the thick dragon scales that were the namesake of many a bullet-proof vest and armored vehicle, and falling harmlessly to the ground. The Combine, astounded by the ineffectiveness of his pistol, lowered the weapon, and to my great surprise, *fled*. Those suits had built-in rocket-boosters of some kind, and the whole room filled with smoke as the coward flew away, leaving his friend to die.

Spike took advantage of the momentary confusion and bit down on the first bit of Combine that his mouth came across, which happened to be the padded elbow of the thing's left arm. Spike's teeth, which were capable of chewing through diamonds, sliced straight through the creature's flexible joint-armor. It

screamed in pain and began beating Spike on the top of his head as hard and as often as possible. It reached down with its right arm for its pistol, but the sidearm was strapped to its left side, and the suit didn't appear to be flexible enough for it to reach across.

Spike wriggled his head around, opening up the wound as much as he could, the thing's red blood beginning to dribble down his chin from his tightly clenched mouth. Needless to say, it was already in an extraordinary amount of pain when Spike finally did what dragons are supposed to do, and *breathed fire*. The alien howled in protest and gave the dragon one last good bop to the head with his good arm, causing him to finally lose his grip, and fall to the floor. The air was filled with the disgusting smell of burnt flesh and plastic and... I don't know what all else. The smell was apparent even through my helmet's air scrubbers.

Its arm below the elbow was hanging literally by a thread when it took off, clutching the part still attached to its body in pain. However, that wasn't good enough. Flying that way, combined with the massive trauma of what it had just survived – being attacked by a dragon – had considerably dulled its coordination and grace. As it spun around, its thrusters prompting a temperature warning that flashed across my glasses, it bumped its thinly-tethered arm against the side of the large service entrance to the lab, finishing the job Spike had started by snapping the thin string of flesh that still remained, allowing it to separate from its former owner completely. The sudden change in weight distribution further threw off the thing's flight pattern, causing it to bump into the far wall before shooting up the shaft to the surface, its spiked armor leaving a series of long, chaotic drag marks along the entire length. In addition was the expected vision-obscuring plume of rocket exhaust that filled the outside hallway and partially spilled back into the lab, adding to the haze left over from the previous extraction.

I galloped over to Alyx, whom I discovered being sheltered underneath the wing of a very much alive and conscious Spike. He looked up at the sound of my approach and gave me a very weak smile as I retracted my helmet back into its storage position.

*Thank you, Luna. I know you had something to do with this. I mean the part where Spike saved us, not the... oh, hell, you know what I mean.*

Spike lifted up his huge, leathery wing as the sounds of the battle raging above us began to filter down through the now not-very-secret shaft, and revealed Alyx's huddled form, her sad, beautiful face buried in his side. And it was then, just then, not any time else, but *then* that I noticed that Alyx had her mother's eyes.

“Spike,” I began as he closed the huge metal garage door, leaving us on the other side of about a dozen brightly-colored signs that said ‘DO NOT ENTER UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES’. “You’re sure that there is absolutely, positively, no other conceivable way out of here other than through the-place-whose-name-shall-not-be-mentioned?”

Spike sighed heavily. “I don’t know how to use the teleporter, you don’t know how to use the teleporter, and Alyx doesn’t know how to use the teleporter, if it even still works, which it probably doesn’t after all the damage it took, and OH! Did I mention that it requires half a gigawatt of electricity, which if you noticed, we don’t have any. Well, besides the batteries in the floodlights. And the only other ways out are straight through a whole *division* of Overwatch with strider and gunship support.”

“So that’s a no?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Yes that’s a no? Or yes that’s a yes?”

“No, that’s a no.”

“That’s a no to it not being a yes?”

“Will you please, *please* shut up, Gordon,” said Alyx, finally breaking her long silence.

I did as she wished.

“I’d go with you, but there are other lives to be saved here. Things that *must* be done.” He reached through the narrow window and touched the crying Alyx on her chin. “Gordon will keep you safe, Alyx.”

She didn’t have the strength to look up.

Spike turned to me and stared into my soul with those deep green dragon eyes. He probably would have

added 'If anything were to happen to her...' but instead chose not to speak words that didn't need to be spoken.

"I'll pick you guys up in Ponyville the *millisecond* I'm done here," he said in a reassuring voice.

There was yet another distant explosion high above us that shook years of dust from the peeling walls and caused the already feeble lights to flicker.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I've got some more friends to go play with," the purple dragon said with a wink, and he was gone, leaving the two of us alone in the dimly-lit tunnel.

As Alyx sat there against the wall, the flow of tears steadily slowing to a trickle, I took a hard look down the long, dark path that lay ahead.

*Time to go to Ponyville*, I thought with nothing approaching a sufficient amount of dread.

*Achievement Unlocked! Press Shift + Tab to view.*

***And Hell Followed With Him - Escape Black Mane West!***