

"*Somepony help!*" a voice shrieked from over the hill.

Both Shining Armor's and Alex's attention were stolen by the sudden cry, and each automatically turned their heads and ears towards its source: the hill to the south. Galloping over the top, with the growing swarm acting as a backdrop, was a lone unicorn stallion with a dark blue coat. "Help!" he continued to call out. "They're right behind me!"

"Hey!" Shining Armor shouted, attempting to get the pony's attention. The captain's drilled instincts automatically kicked in, and he moved to go make sure the stallion was alright, but he was immediately blocked by Alex, who swung his rifle in front of Shining Armor to act as a barrier. "Hey, what are you doing?" he protested. "He needs our help!"

"It's already dead," was Alex's solemn response.

Shining Armor's initial thoughts consisted of horror. To think that the human would even remotely consider declaring that pony dead before he actually was. None of the implications behind the assertion were positive. But in the very next second, Alex's choice of words registered with him: *it*. For all they knew, this pony was actually a changeling and the whole thing was a ruse.

In the end, the captain simply looked back towards the oncoming stallion, and kept his hooves in place. However, Shining Armor wasn't prepared for the *actual* implications of Alex's assertion. As the pretend stallion galloped over the hill towards them, a small red object came scurrying along the ground on an intersect with the potential changeling's path. Everypony could see the tiny machine now, but nopony saw where it actually came from. One second it wasn't there; the next it was.

Not a single Liandri or guard moved in response to the stallion, and all of them watched on as this supposed pony, starved for breath, met the tiny little machine in the grass. While the stallion was still running, the small, four legged device leapt up into the air, extending its spindly legs outwards.

The stallion had a split second to react, and only managed a loud yelp of surprise as the machine caught him by the side of his neck. He immediately fell to the ground, tumbling head

over hooves, shouting as he went. "Ah! No! No! Get it off! Get it - *AAAGGHHH!*" The stallion let out a final, skin crawling scream that tore at the guards' hearts, before a sudden explosion silenced it all. As the sound died away and the smoke cleared, everyone looked on to witness the aftermath of the spider mine's handiwork.

Red now coated the grass.

Everypony's breath caught in their throat, and many of the guards either immediately looked away or covered their mouth with a hoof. Alex's arm slowly lowered the weapon he was using to block Shining's path, and his mouth followed suit. "Oh shit..." he breathed.

"That was a pony..." Shining Armor muttered, still in shock by what he had just witnessed. He turned his head up to Alex, who was still staring straight ahead, and repeated those words - louder this time: "That was a *pony*." Though Shining couldn't see it, the glow in Alex's eyes faded as he attempted to process the scene before him. When Shining turned to completely face him, he emphasized the point again. "Your machines just *killed* somepony!"

The glow in Alex's eyes returned in full force, and his gaze snapped towards Shining Armor. "That was an accident and you full well fucking *know* it. That pony is collateral damage and *nothing more*."

"Collateral damage?" Shining repeated, an air of disbelief in his voice. "You kill somepony innocent and you're just going to *brush it off as collateral damage?!?*"

"Wake up and smell the fucking coffee, Shining!" Alex shouted back at him, pointing towards the changelings whose distant buzzing could now easily be heard. "Maybe you haven't noticed, but we've got much *bigger* problems to deal with than a single fucking pony!"