

It is the 2nd millennium. For more than ten centuries the Princess has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Canterlot. She is the Mistress of ponykind by the will of the gods, and mistress of a thousand cities by the might of her inexhaustible armies. She is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Daytime. She is the Carrion Lady of the Principality for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that she may never truly die.

Yet even in her deathless state, the Princess continues her eternal vigilance. Mighty battleforces cross the daemon-infested miasma of the Everfree Forest, the only route between distant lands, their way lit by the Astronomicon, the psychic manifestation of the Princess' will. Vast armies give battle in her name on uncounted battlefields. Greatest amongst her soldiers are the Equinas Astartes, the Battle Mares, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Principial Guard and countless city defence forces, the ever vigilant Equisition and the teq-priests of the Equinas Mequinicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from buffaloes, griffins, zebras - and worse.

To be a pony in such times is to be one amongst untold millions. It is to live in the cruelest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of love and tolerance, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of friendship and harmony, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace beneath the sky, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

PROLOGUE

The perpetual twilight of Equestria was all that lit the streets of Canterlot. Guardsponies and Arbites were on extra patrols, and barked orders filled the otherwise silent night period. They swept through the streets, hundreds of ponies in a search for just three. These three ponies are not exceptional, either. They were two adults; husband and wife, and the last was their only child. No prophecy rules their fate, no legacy gives them power. The chase is the most important thing they have ever done, ever will do. They scurried from door to door, keeping only a single step ahead of their hunters, the Hammer of the Princess. The sole reason was their race...the fact that they were unicorns.

The last bits of life left in the body of the Goddess-Princess Celestia required the sacrifice of a thousand unicorns worth of power every day. Through the thousand cities of the Principality of Pony, the Black Ponies searched for unicorns hiding, evading their duty. Others willingly surrendered to the Principial Guard, knowing their duty and devoted to the Goddess-Princess. For some, their duty meant death, giving up their very life to sustain the Golden Throne. For others, greater in power, it was the pathway to greatness. Those who survived were instated into the Schola Principium Psykana, trained for service with the Principial Guard, the Equisition, and countless other Principial institutions.

But this couple had little power, and the chamber would be death to them. So they ran. Unfortunately for them the Equisition themselves were guiding the hunters, and the net was closing in. Already visible from the skies was the ambush up ahead and groups of Guardsponies herding them in. The unicorn couple started to charge forward when they saw the first Guardsponies at their sides. The cradle on the stallion's back rocked back and forth as they surged through the street. Too late to turn they saw the ambush.

They kept going. They lowered their heads and charged straight at the waiting Guardsponies and Arbites. They used the tiny magic they had to empower their horns, and when they hit the Guardsponies, they cut straight through the armour, eviscerating the poor Guardsponies. But despite their valiant efforts, the sheer numbers of enemies brought down the dissenters. As they were bound in chains enchanted so as to block

magic, one Equisitor carefully took the child, while the Arbites and the Guardsponies took the two slain to the Equinas Reclamatus.

One other Guardspony had been wounded. The second Equisitor shook his head. Most wounds were recoverable. This wound looked like it was too. But this one had been caused by an unsanctified unicorn's horn. It was all too likely to have been corrupted. There was only one cure for such as this. The Equisitor raised his left front hoof over the crippled Guardspony's head, and slammed it down.

CHAPTER ONE

Markon woke up. It was his tenth birthday today.

He had been prepared for this day his entire life. His parents told him how important this day was, how important his duty was. He was a unicorn, and those who had been blessed with the sacred magic from Celestia had the duty to repay her for her gift. He didn't know how it was done, but he knew he had to do it.

He hurried downstairs. His parents were already at the meal table, sharing their rations. They nodded a greeting to him before turning back to their food. Markon joined them.

"I'm ten today!" he exclaimed happily. They nodded. He ate for a bit before a knock came on the door. "I'll get it!" he said, and jumped to get to the door. As he opened the door, he recognised the one pony he loved and trusted as much as his parents, Venator. He didn't know exactly what Venator did (or what his parents did, for that matter), but he loved getting visits from him.

"Hello, boy." said Venator. "May I come in?" he asked as he took off his coat. Markon turned to his parents, and receiving a nod, let him in. Venator hung up his coat on the waiting hook, and went to talk with Markon's parents. Markon hovered in the background until his parents told him to go up to his room while they talked.

"So Judith, Timothy. What is Markon's progress? Will he be ready for the Sacrament?" asked Venator, making the Sign of the Alicorn when he mentioned the Sacrament. It was held to be of the same sacredness as Celestia Herself, being Her very lifeblood. Judith looked at her husband and back at Venator. "He will be ready," she said. "He longs for it, too." She banged her left hoof on the table. "That sentimental pap you threw at us was right. They do grow up fast. When can we get back to our missions, Equisitor? I detest waiting here any longer. You know the prophecy will occur soon. We need to be out in the field again."

"Patience, Judith. Until we know where the relics have been hidden, we can do nothing anyway! We must wait until our adepts can find any records giving us even a single clue.

You know how important this task is anyway. The prophecy itself requires a group of ponies raised in a way entirely different from how it is done now. We have maybe twenty ponies raised like this, at a maximum. Without those ponies, we have no chance even with the relic." The Equisitor was almost ranting now, spewing out facts all in the room knew. He stopped, and started again. "Sorry. I guess it's getting to me, too. But we don't have to worry. He'll pay his respects to the Princess today, and tomorrow, we'll be able to put this behind us." He halted, and then smiled. "Well, time to collect him. I'll see you tomorrow, then."

Up in his room, Markon was getting ready. He didn't know when he'd be back, so he had decided to pack his saddlebags with all of his precious things. Luckily for him, he had few enough that they would not weigh him down much.

A knock came at the door, and he hastily got his saddlebags on and ran to the door. He opened it, and outside was Venator. "You packed, boy?" he said gruffly, and Markon started nodding excitedly. "Good. We've got enough time to say goodbye to your parents for now, and then we can be on our way."

They went down the stairs together, and Markon said goodbye to his parents. As they went out the door, Venator used his magic to summon a light to follow them and brighten the streets through the twilight, added light now being almost essential for those trying to make their way through the world. "Venator?" began Markon. "Why is it so dark now?" Venator laughed. "If I knew that, I'd be a rich colt. I know they've got a dedicated group of unicorns in the Schola Principium investigating it. Anything more..." he shook his head.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, and then Markon asked another question. "Why does the Princess only make a few of us unicorns?" "Well," said Venator good-humouredly, "what about the pegasoi?" "Um," faltered Markon. "Um...maybe we could be both?" "That honour is for the princess, boy," answered Venator while he ruffled Markon's mane. "Don't you forget that. As to your question... The Princess knows more than you or me or any other pony. She probably has a plan for the different kinds."

Markon nodded at this, and the two continued on their way through the dark (and for the moment, quiet) streets.

Nearly an hour later, they reached the building dominating Canterlot, the Royal Palace. As they entered, Markon noticed something on Venator's flank. A mark, in the shape of a stylised E, =E=. He knew the symbol, everypony did. It was the symbol of the Equisition, the feared enforcers of Prince Blueblood's will. They searched through the lands for those who dissented, for those who did not worship Celestia properly, for those who were different... And they destroyed them. But this was Venator! He wasn't like that!

"What's that thing on your flank, Venator?" he asked, filled with trepidation. Venator looked at where he was facing, and laughed. "Oh, that's what the ancients called a pulcher mark. Only unicorns get them, and even then only some unicorns. They symbolise your duty to the Princess. Mine, as you've probably guessed, is the symbol of the Equisition. You'll learn more about them at the Schola Principium. Anyway, it's time for you to go. There'll be someone inside to guide you to the chamber. I'll see you later."

Markon went forward, a touch of fear filling him as he walked.

CHAPTER TWO

In the Royal Palace, there are many floors. Each is dedicated to a purpose for the Principality.

The lowest floor is that of the Entrance Hall. In it are two entrances. One for the unicorns come to repay Celestia. The other is used by the general public, especially those who are pilgrims. This one is permanently open, the massive queue twisting its way through the dark streets of Canterlot. The average time for somepony to make their way from the start to the finish of queue is two years, and several hundred ponies are born in the queue each year.

The second floor belongs to the Equinas Equustodes, the elite of the elite, the best trained and equipped forces in all of Equestria. They are the bodyguards of Princess Celestia, and any one of them could best twenty other ponies in ring of honour. They are constantly training, with discipline that would shame that of any other force. Their armour shines like the Sun itself, one of the last reminders of that nearly forgotten celestial object.

The next floor up is home to the High Lords of Equestria, the men and women who govern this vast land. They are the seven ponies by whose command vast armies battle, and lesser ponies die.

The first is the Master of the Administratum. The current incumbent is an efficient leader. She has reduced the red tape by approximately ten days across the entire system. This

represents the largest decrease in bureaucracy in more than five hundred years, and has saved in the current year up to ten thousand days of pony labour.

The second is the Ecclesiarch of the Equinas Ministorum. Banned from having colts under arms after a civil war that almost spelt the doom of the Principality, they instead have a force of fanatic fillies trained from infancy for battle. He is the master of the Principial Cult, the only legal religion of the Principality. He is old, fat, and comfortable, but a more cynical pony and a more talented politician would be impossible to find.

The third of the High Lords is the Fabricator-General of the Equinas Mequinicus. Master of the ever-burning forges of Cloudsdale; she is the one who is in control of the loosely organised bands of Teq-Priests. Responsible for the weapons and armour of the Principality's soldiers, and every piece of construction aside, these pegasus ponies are on the Quest for Knowledge, seeking to regain all the holy technology that was lost in the centuries following the Great Crusade. The current Fabricator-General has caused division in the ranks following his approval of new technology.

The fourth of the High Lords is, technically, not a High Lord at all. The Equisition Representative, she is merely the one among equals chosen to represent the Equisition in the court of the High Lords. But she is every bit as dangerous as powerful as any of them.

Next is the Grand Master of Assassins. He is the most ruthless of the ponies in the room. He has personally slain hundreds of ponies, buffaloes, deer and zebra. He commands a veritable legion of trained killers. Some use poison. Others, magic, rage, or trap. No one is unreachable by this colt.

The second to last is the Lord High General, master of the Principial Guard, the first and last defence of the Principality. He has a staff comprising thousands of ponies, each a master of a different style of combat, each suitable for a different situation. He is a gruff, humourless pony, grimly practical and only too ready to sign the death warrant of any enemy facing Equestria.

The last is not a mere High Lord. He is the ruler of Equestria, in fact if not in name. He is the Prince of the lands, Blueblood by name. He comes from the long line of Princes, both filly and colt. He is the grim arbiter of the government, and it is by his will that the High Lords are assembled, here to discuss the prophesied return of Nightmare Moon and the end of the world.

"Well, fillies and gentlecolts," began Prince Blueblood, "what are our options?" The Grand Master of Assassins stepped forward. "My lord, we don't have any weapons capable of killing an alicorn. If she returns, we cannot deal with her in the way we would deal with most rebellious warlords."

"We have no need to assassinate her. We can defeat her in battle!" boasted the Lord High General. "Our armies are unstoppable! No pony could stand against us!" "Our supplies are a problem, however. We only have enough supplies for two hundred and twenty five point two days in the field, assuming standard attrition and casualty rates," begun the Master of the Administratum, "And that's not counting equipment. We don't have the Teq-Priests to construct and bless enough equipment to supply our current forces with proper equipment, let alone arm a new force to account for losses." continued the Fabricator-General. "Living standards have risen too high, and our newer forges are designed for constructing domestic things, not weaponry." She snorted. "We have become too comfortable. And the encroaching night has somehow NOT lessened demand for lighting instruments. Which the army will need too."

"The Equisition are pursuing all leads to the relics at the heart of this prophecy," interjected the Equisition Representative. "Once we recover them, Luna will have no chance against us." "Ah, but you're assuming the Equisition will find them." The Ecclesiarch said. "No offence meant to the Equisition, but the relics themselves may be destroyed, held deep within enemy lines, or in other ways be unreachable. We cannot rely on mere faith to bring us victory this time. No, we must make ourselves undefeatable. If we have that, there is nothing that our enemy can do to destroy us."

"Unfortunately, on current living standards, we can hold a siege for only two thousand five hundred and twenty two days without food. Water is another pressing matter, which cuts us down to twenty seven days. A siege would be our doom," answered the Master of the Administratum.

"Fillies and gentlecolts, I need options. What can we do? Apparently we can't resist a siege, we can't sever our enemy's head, and we can't stand an open battle. Our only hope seems to be these relics. Is there something, anything, that anypony can offer except that?" Silence filled the room. "Very well, then. Our objective is to retrieve these relics, the so-called 'Elementa Harmonae'. You know your duty, fillies and gentlecolts. Get to it."

Markon knew today was a special day. He had received the Sacrament five years ago, and those five past years had been spent at the Schola Principium Psykana. His magic power had been refined, strengthened, and added to by the amount of sheer practice he had done. It was his day of graduation, and like his mentor (for that was how he thought of Venator now) he was headed for service in the Equisition. Not as an Equisitor though, at least not to start. He was to become an Acolyte. With years of training and experience, he could become an Interrogator, and then, maybe, he could become an Equisitor. But for

now, he was to be the lowest of the low.

But all that was in the future. For now, he had one last test before he graduated. Not an official test, per se, but a tradition passed down through the Schola through the centuries.

For today, the eve of the graduation, was the time when he would, with the rest of the about-to-be graduates, sneak out to the forbidden tower outside the city. There, they would recount their individual tales of the Sacrament, each being different, beautiful and horrible at the same time.

Some of the stories he already knew. Or, at least, he guessed. One student had a complete set of false teeth. The rumour was that the sheer force of the Sacrament had caused her originals to disappear entirely, or crawl out of her mouth, or any one of a thousand stories. Which it was was anypony's guess. Another had been driven partially insane by the encounter, and spent his off times babbling at the corner of a room. A commissar was watching his every move, for even the babble of a psyker was dangerous. One chanted the Litany of Protection when she slept. Another had wards put on his very tongue, preventing any mention of daemons or evil.

The rest seemed relatively benign. But as with anything that touched the Warp, it could be a simple disguise. That was the reason for the heavy indoctrination, and for the knife that was held on the edge of their throats. The Psykana Mercy knife was its name, and its purpose was to allow the psyker a quick exit if a daemon or other creature of the Warp tried to gain access to the world through their mind. It was a cold mercy.

Markon fidgeted with his clothing. Like the other Psykana students, he would have to disguise himself to get past the gate guards. The tradition, being the long held one it was, was heavily discouraged. Only by disguising their blank flanks could one hope to pretend that they were in fact graduates.

The appointed time came, and silently the Psykana students left their rooms. Each headed for one of the four different exits. By tradition, this night one of the exits was left unguarded. Whoever could get to this gate was free to leave the Schola and participate in the tradition. Whoever didn't was outside against the rules, and would be punished if they were found out.

There were four planned 'distractions' to allow an exit. The first was the most traditional, plying the guards with wine or other alcohol. Once the guards were drunk, the group would move past. Second distraction was to bribe the guards, whether with bodily desires or other. The third was to simply go through in such numbers that they would be unable to stop them all. The fourth, and last, was more dangerous - using Psykana powers to create an illusion to prevent the guards from noticing.

Markon had planned one of the second type, knowing one of the guards was an obscura addict. Now, if he could only find the guard...

He crept through the corridors. The combined dormitory and Schola was arranged across angular lines. Despite the octagonal shape, only four sides had exits. The closest one was in sight. He squinted down the long corridor, and recognised his mark. He continued sauntering down the carpeted corridor and stopped two metres from the guards.

"Ho Markon. Don't tell me you want out too?" asked the exasperated first guard. "You know it's forbidden." "Why so suspicious, sah? I'm but a friend, here to bring relief to a fellow sufferer of this night. I am expected to go out, just as you are expected to stay here and prevent me from going out," Markon began, "and I, being the kind and compassionate pony I am, decided to help at least one of you tonight."

He revealed the obscura pills. His mark stared at them, started to turn, and then turned back. "Okay, you have a deal. Janus, let him through." The other guard made no protest.

Markon suspected there were a couple of other obscura addicts hidden away in the guards. The drugs were technically illegal, but given what the guards had seen, a blind eye had been turned to all but the most outright signs.

Obscura, thank the Princess, was one of the less dangerous drugs in the Principium. It merely left the person dependent on the drugs, and given the Principium relatively often flooded the market with what were cheap placebos, designed to remove the addiction, the effects were relatively harmless. Other drugs were much, much worse.

'Slaught was one of the many combat drugs. Each was much the same, but 'slaught was the most commonly known one. They put the user into a psychotic rage, feeling neither pain nor exhaustion. Until the drug wore off, the user would fight against everything that came into range. And, of course, the drug had side effects. It rotted the mind itself, eventually destroying the user's ponyhood, leaving them little more than a machine.

There were worse ones, of course. Barrage is one of them. Used only for Arco-flagellants, heretics turned into expendable combat-servitors, it is a short term drug.

While it courses through the user's bloodstream, it enhances all of their physical responses; strength, agility, toughness...but when it passes, the user's body suffers almost a complete breakdown. Death is extremely common.

Still, these drugs were illegal, but still used. There was only one that wasn't. The street name for it was 'spook'.

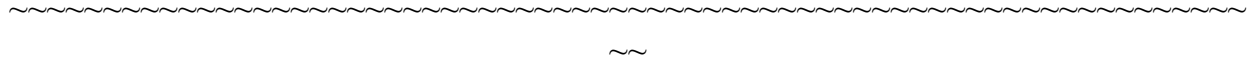
It's not because of the source. Just because it comes from the reclaimed remains of ponies is no reason not to use it in this time of extreme recycling. Many foodstuffs would be banned if that were the case, not to mention the non-consumable products that come from

the dead. Nor is it addictive. It doesn't damage the body. Nor does it destroy the mind.
No, it is far more sinister.

It contains nothing less than the quasi-mineral remains that can be reclaimed from the dead. What makes it so illegal? It is the effect it has on even the most mundane earth pony. It can give them some of the Psykana powers of the unicorns. Sometimes. Sometimes it doesn't work, the body's defenses destroying it before it can penetrate the bloodstream. But sometimes it works -too- well. Sometimes it not only gives them some psychic power. Sometimes it opens the very mind itself to the Warp. Unprotected, unknowing, the pony is an easy victim for the denizens of that dark plane. They possess the body, and use it to wreak destruction. Such a being, known as a daemonhost, can be powerful enough to destroy an army. A city. It is theorised that there could be one powerful enough to destroy the very world. So carrying anything related to spook will guarantee you a death sentence.

Markon shook his head. Time enough to think about that later, once he was back in his dorm. At least by then, the guards would be off. These two would probably still be under the effects of the opiate. It would keep them happy and unknowing of the next few hours.

He stepped out the exit, and headed for the nearest gate.



The city was almost pitch black now. Even the lanterns that people carried seemed dimmed. As Markon hurried through the streets, he could hear ponies in the distance shouting that it was the end of the world. A vague disquiet filled him. The gate was only three hundred metres away now, and he could see the guards silhouetted on the gate from their lanterns.

The sky had turned stormy. As he looked into the sky, there were brief outlines of pegasoi across the heavy clouds, lit by lightning. There was, however, no rain. One small bright side, thought Markon, as he continued on his way towards the gates.

"Halt!" shouted the guards. Now was the time for his disguise to prove its worth, Markon thought. One of the guards came closer. "Why are you exiting the city?" he demanded. "Ill relative in Equus Orichalcum," was Markon's response. "Bad weather for that, eh?" asked the guard then, now in a jovial tone. "You're telling me. When I got the news, I was half tempted to say 'Get well' and stay home. But duty is duty," said Markon. "Don't I know it! Okay. Be on your way!" said the guard, and he nodded to his companion, who swung the gate open. Markon thanked the guards, and hurried out.

The tower, his objective, loomed in the distance. He could see it only barely, by the light of the lightning flashes. He continued for a minute, until he was out of the sight of the guards. Then he stopped, and concentrated on his horn for a few seconds. He closed his eyes for a second, and when he opened them, they weren't in the physical realm. He gasped. He knew what he was looking into. The Warp. He panicked. Every second here increased the likelihood that he would be swallowed by a passing daemon. He tried to think. What was the incantation against the Warp? His head throbbed, and -something- grabbed hold of his head. It turned it to face it.

A daemon. It didn't look anything like a pony, as some of them did. Its form was constantly in flux. One second it was like a giant, hooped bird. The next it was a feathered shark. It said only one thing. "I am in you." Before Markon could reply, the vision disappeared, and he returned to the physical world with a gasp. Miraculously, his horn was glowing, and he was now alone. He continued on his way to the tower, his path now lit.

He shook his head from confusion and fear. He was safe now. The daemon was gone. He would forget it. For now, he had only to get to the tower.

In the Warp, one of the four Chaos gods laughed in joy. All was going just as planned.

...So I came into the chamber. I saw Her body. It was so bright, you know what I mean?" one of the fellow scholars was saying as Markon came into the darkened room the students were using. The rest of the packed room began to nod in agreement. "So the guards had to avert their eyes. I nearly did, too. But then I felt Her. The most comforting thing I've felt in my life. So I continued staring into Her face. Even without a horn, even without eyes, I could feel Her presence. I couldn't stop staring into Her empty eye-sockets, even if I'd wanted to. I don't know how long I spent there, only that at the end, I felt lighter, happier, joyful for the first time in my life. I've never felt like that since."

At this, Markon recognised the unicorn speaking. She'd been the one who'd nearly succeeded in her third suicide attempt. Most of the others had given up at one or two, but she had gone onto five tries. Luckily, only about ten percent of suicides were successful. There were a broad set of reasons for suicide. Some were the typical suicide attempts of those cut off from everything they'd known or loved. Some wished to unite with Celestia more permanently. Some did it out of sheer depression. That was Markon's reason. It was worse among the guards. Less than 20% survived their first year, let alone do a second.

Another unicorn started to speak. "It was my tenth birthday. I woke up in my room to an Equisitor. He took me before my parents had even woke. He had some sort of mechanical carriage. Before sunrise we had reached Canterlot. As the sun rose we entered the hall. I'm sure I saw one or two of you there, but I don't really remember. Anyway, we got into the chamber. The Equisitor left me there. I went in, and that was when I saw Celestia."

"It was horrible. The fires of Her purity were so hot; I felt I would burst into flames. They tell me that I caught fire for a second, but the flames extinguished themselves in an instant. My mane and tail were both scorched beyond recovery, so they cut them off. I still have scars from it." The story seemed ended, but before Markon could speak, another unicorn, a male this time, started to speak. "I don't really remember much of how I got there, but when I did, something strange happened. All of you might...uh...how do I put it...know that urge to do with the opposite sex?" A few cries of assent swept the room. "Well... After two minutes in there... It just went away. Didn't come back. Not ever. Never even cared about it, rest of my life. Strange. One of the attendants said I would 'cleave only unto the Princess' or something like that. I got this...um... Chattalium, I think it was, ring from it, for some reason. Ah, well. Makes for an interesting story, eh?"

Markon spoke up next. "I was collected on my tenth birthday too. I lived here in Canterlot, and my parents were friends with my Equisitor. They taught me all about it... But nothing could have prepared me for it. So when I went into the chamber... I could hear screams. Like somepony was dying. Something told me it was my mother. But...it wasn't my mother. I knew who my mother was, what she sounded like. This wasn't like that. But it was my mother. I knew that for sure. It wasn't screaming like she was shocked at her death, neither. It was in pain. Like someone was torturing her."

A hush had fallen across the room. "I kept trying to yell out at the voice to quiet. But it didn't. It didn't. It wouldn't stop! Nothing I could say quieted it. Then...something happened. I blacked out. I woke up two days later. The voice had gone. But I couldn't get the memory out of my head. I can still remember it."

The room was silent. The silence lasted for about ten seconds, and then another started. The rest of the night period was uneventful, and Markon eventually headed back into Canterlot, and from there to the Schola Principium Psykana.

CHAPTER THREE

"Adept Markon, step forward."

Proud, patriotic music played in the background of the ceremony. The hall of the Schola Principium Psykana was full, full with graduating adepts and representatives of the arms of the Principality they would be serving with. Markon had already been told who would be there to collect him, an Equisitorial Interrogator named Fluttershy. Unusually for the Equisition, this Interrogator was a pegasus.

Markon stepped forth from the crowd of Psykana Adepts, and moved towards the stage. At the stage was the current 'head' of the Schola Principium Psykana, Schola Aeternium Roth Ragaa.

"Fillies and gentlecolts. Many of you here today have worked and studied with Adept Markon. Today, he goes to work with our glorious friends in the Equisition. For those of you who don't know, the Equisition does the great work of rooting out those dissenters, heretics, and traitors that are in our society and destroying it. We wish Markon well, and hope he brings glory to the Schola and to the Equisition."

Polite applause filled the hall and a bright yellow pegasus rose from the crowd and made her way to Markon. Upon reaching Markon, she introduced herself in a gruff voice as Fluttershy. She led him off the stage to the exit at the back.

"I am working for Equisitor Mica. So are you too now. She's knowledgeable as all feth, so don't try any of your galking Schola education kak, or by Guillimare's arse and the Throne, she'll send you to get your Princess-damned thrones begging on the street of Necromareda. You understand me?" she said once they'd left. Markon, his mind boggling at the sheer amount of swearing coming from the mouth of a filly, for Princess' sake, managed to nod. "Good. I was beginning to think you were just another frak-head waiting to be fragged. Sacred Feth, you would not believe the kakking numbnuts we've had assigned to us before." She continued speaking as they made their way through the busy streets, the crowds giving a clear berth to Fluttershy, who was dressed in typical Equisition regalia.

After about ten minutes of walking in what seemed like random directions, Fluttershy said "We're finally fething here, thank Caballus. Now get the frak in there, you colt fether." She opened the door to a non-descript house and shoved Markon in. He looked about the room of the house. One pony was visible, with a dragonopath beside her. She was a purple unicorn, with black and purple hair. She stood up, and said two words to Markon. "You're late."

Fluttershy replied "We were delayed at the galking ceremony, m'lady." "I don't care. You, Markon. Tell me the Schola is still teaching young impressionable unicorns how to use their horn in combat." "Uh, yes, m'lady." "Good. We're going right now to purge a

colt-cuddling cult. Servants of the dark god Slaanesh. We're going in and destroying everything that isn't of the Princess. They're traitors and heretics. The first can be forgiven in death, but the second is unforgivable. Don't look at the walls or at any items they have if you can help it. Just destroy it. You understand?" "Yes, m'lady." replied Markon, slightly less confidently than the first. "Don't worry about the fighting.

Guardspony Dash and Arbitrator Applejack are lying in wait, waiting only upon my command to go in and slaughter the foals. As well, we have a Callidus assassin right next to their leader. Upon my command, she will destroy him. We would have further aid, but an Eversor assassin is not something to be handled carelessly."

She turned to Fluttershy. "Are you prepared?" Fluttershy nodded, and Equisitor Mica said "Then let us go to our duties. Spike, remain here and monitor the Eversor."

She led the two other ponies to the door on the other side of the room. It opened into an armoury. Both weapons and armour were there in plenty. Some for unicorns, some for pegasoi, some for earth ponies. She used her powers to pull three of each from the racks.

A force sword and a suit of plate mail for her, flying leathers and wingblades for Fluttershy, and studded leather and a blade for Markon. Markon hastily got into the gear that had been provided, while Fluttershy and Mica expertly equipped themselves with the gear they had.

Fluttershy turned to Markon. "You galking ready, you feth for brains?" Markon replied "Yeah, sure." Mica led the two out of the armoury, out of the house, and back into the streets. As they travelled through Canterlot, Markon noticed they were going into the lower, poorer layer of the hive city. Less lamp posts were visible, and several of the few that were around had been broken and the lamps stolen. As they continued through, he noticed some ponies were following them. About two minutes after he started noticing this, five gangers crept out of the shadows in front of them.

"Well, well, well. Wot 'ave we 'ere? A pair o' rich bitches and an escort 'eading into the under'ive. Well, that's going to be three thrones, you grox-swilling bastards." Mica didn't hesitate, sending a psyonic bolt the way of each of the five gangers in front, as well as the seven creeping up from behind. They fell with a burning smell and the sound of lightning crackling. They moved on, stepping over the corpses.

As they went further into the underhive, the decay was easier to detect. Entire walls had collapsed and not even been removed. The trio came to one building which had not only been repaired, but refurbished. Alone in the street, it looked like it had been cared for.

"This is the place," said Mica.

They went to the door. Mica silently counted to three, and then knocked the door open with her mind. "Principial Equisition! Make yourselves known!" she shouted into the

building. Several thrown knives thudded against her prepared psyonic shield in answer. She sent them hurtling back, and screams of ecstasy met her counterattack.

For these heretics were servants of the goddess Slaanesh, prince of sensation, lady of pleasure, and lord of pain. They willingly endured any and all new sensations, each one further corrupting their soul and body. They strived for perfection in everything, whether in their physical form, their ability to induce new sensations in their captives and fellow cultists, or their refurbishment. But now they would pay the price for their heresy and treason.

From the other side of the room, the sound of breaking and entering was heard, along with muffled yells and screams. Fluttershy charged into the room, her wings scything a heretic in thirds. The blood flowed onto the floor, and the stench of the dying was unbelievable. Mica flowed into the room; her psyonically held blade charging with psychic energy as it cut through a pony as if they were made of butter. As it finished the bisection, the psyonic force blew the separate parts apart, coating the floor with the insides of the now dead pony.

Less than five heretics were still alive and kicking, but one of them charged at the disoriented Markon, who had been unprepared for the sheer beauty of the perverted architecture, which now worked its way upon his mind. He broke free from the grip when the heretic rammed into him, knocking him down. He tried to get up, but the filly had jumped onto him. Desperately he tried to reach out psyonically to the blade he'd been given. It rose to his command and sliced out the carotid artery. The filly gasped, tried to speak, but blood spurted out of her mouth and neck instead. She spasmed and fell off, gasping for air. She took twelve seconds to die.

By this time, the sounds of battle were over, and a white unicorn filly was walking over to Markon. "Oh, do get up, dear," she said, "don't want to keep the Equisitor waiting, you know." He sat up. "Who...who are you?" he asked nervously, trying to summon the blade up to keep her away. It refused to answer his call. "Why, didn't Mica tell you about me?"

I'm the Callidus assassin she's been assigned. You may call me Rarity, dear. For, aha, that's true enough!" She helped Markon up, and led him to the door. "Mica, dear, our new friend is up again. I think Fluttershy may have spooked him just a little, dear," were her words as she took him into the street where Mica and Fluttershy, now joined by another pegasus and an earth pony, were waiting. The pegasus was rainbow-blue and was wearing the typical Guardspony chainmail, and the earth pony was orange and was wearing the half-plate of the Equinas Arbites.

The earth pony nodded at Markon, barely acknowledging the presence of Rarity. The pegasus, on the other hand, refused to even look at Rarity. "How do y'all do, Markon?"

First time on a mission?" asked the earth pony in the typical drawl of the Segmentum Australis. "My name's Applejack. I'm an arbitrator of tha Arbites. Y'all don't want nothing to do with that viper Rarity. She thinks she's above tha law." "Uh... okay, ma'am," Markon replied, but he was prevented from speaking further when Rarity butted in with "Dear, just because I'm not as puritanical as you, doesn't mean I'm a heretic."

Under her breath, Applejack muttered "Near enough does." The pegasus shushed her. "Oh, sweetie, let her speak," said Rarity. "I ain't got nothin' to say to y'all, assassin," Applejack spat. "Applejack, quit it!" yelled the pegasus. "You're an arbite, not a fething civilian. Start acting like it." "...You're right, Dash. Sorry about that, y'all." "Oh, don't worry, dear. No harm done. Markon, sweetie, this is our other compatriot, Dash. She's a pegasus, the dear, and a Guardspony. She's quite a fast flier, too!"

Dash was unmoved by the praise of the unicorn and said only "We still have a job to do. Mica and Fluttershy are heading back to base. We've got to demolish this place. Callidus, did you secure the plans for the building?" "Why, of course I did swe-" "Good. Show us where we'll be planting the blasting fire." As Dash finished speaking, Markon saw Mica and Fluttershy heading uphive. "Come on, unicorn, or we'll leave you behind," said Dash as she moved into the building. Markon hastened to follow.

As Markon entered the building again, he saw the three fillies placing black cylinders around the rooms. Dash called him over. "We're rigging this place to explode. You and Applejack are going to finish up this room, while me and Rarity will be doing the leader's room. Just do what Applejack tells you to do." Markon nodded, and Dash and Rarity left the room.

"Y'all need to put two cylinders in each of tha corners, and then one o' them in the middle of each wall. Y'all got that?" Markon nodded again, and Applejack continued "Then go do it. Y'all take that side, I'll take this."

Soon enough they had finished planting the cylinders. Applejack yelled out to Dash. She didn't reply. Applejack frowned, and told Markon to stay there and wait. She went towards the room where Dash and Rarity had gone. After she had gone through, she yelled out something. Sounds of brawling ensued. Twenty seconds later, she walked out, dragging by her tail Rarity, who she had knocked out. A few seconds later, out came Dash who looked like she hadn't been merely physically attacked. "What in tha hay happened, Dash?" she demanded. "Let alone how she did it. You're a fething Guardspony, Dash! How could you let her overpower you like that?" Dash merely mumbled under her breath, her pride visibly broken. "Gakkit, you idiot. Markon, we need to get these two back to the Equisitor. We'll blow this place once we get out."

They left the building, Applejack pulling Rarity, and when they had cleared the area,

Applejack turned back to the door, and tossed the last of the cylinders inside. She turned her head away and an explosion was heard. Before Markon could ask if that was it, the rest of the cylinders exploded. The walls blew apart and the roof fell in. Anything left in the building was crushed in the detonation.

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The rest of the trip up-hive was without incident, the visible Guardspony and Arbite gear keeping the gangers from attacking. As they reached the surface, they continued their journey towards their home base. Again, this trip passed without incident. As they reached the base, Rarity awoke and screamed. "Shut yer mouth, fethup," said Applejack. "What happened?" she asked. "Y'all almost molested Dash! What do yer mean, 'what happened'?" answered Applejack. Rarity moaned. "Just shut yer mouth. Wait till tha Equisitor deals with y'all." Applejack rapped on the door, and it opened silently. She finished dragging Rarity inside. "Equisitor! We've got a problem with our assassin." Mica's voice came from the corner. "What is the problem, arbitrator?" "She fell during our demolition. She tried to rape Dash." "Meaningless. She has skills of great worth. Get prepared for another trip. Our mission has arrived. Dash, Rarity, Fluttershy. You go with Applejack and prepare yourself as well. I need to speak with Markon alone."

The others let out a chorus of assent, and left the room. "So, Markon. How do you feel about this group, about the Equisition?" "Uh...well...uh... Fluttershy is...um...unsettling." Mica laughed. "Good that you noticed. She has...a bit of a fragile grip on reality. She's a latent psyker, very unnatural for a pegasus. She can't control it like a unicorn, but she's a slight telepath. She's constantly brushing the minds of those around her. The taint of other minds is changing hers, more's the pity, and I don't think she retains enough that she'll become an Equisitor. She's picked up Dash and Applejack's unfortunate habit of swearing. Is there anything else?"

"Rarity... I couldn't use my horn around her... Why?" "Little known secret. I'm telling you this under pain of death if you reveal it. She's a Blank, an untouchable. They're as rare among unicorns as unicorns are among normal ponies. Normal unicorns can't stand them. They block out our psyker-nature. But she can block out our enemy's psykers, as well as being a devastating weapon against daemons. She's probably the only thing keeping Fluttershy sane, too. Besides that, she is a trained Callidus assassin, too. If by some miracle Fluttershy makes Equisitor, I'll assign Rarity to her. But don't be going around trusting her. She's been assigned to me to kill me if I go rogue. If I get rid of her, another will be assigned to me. And that's all you need to know."

She paused, and added "Well. The others have come to me via other means. Applejack

was involved in an Arbites investigation into a cult I was hunting down...and still am.

She's coming with me to finish hunting down the cult that almost destroyed Urbs Caballus. Dash is the last survivor of a Guardspony platoon I'd requisitioned for another cult we'd tracked down. They had a daemonhost, the body of a pony possessed by a daemon. Very powerful, very dangerous. Pinkamena...that's a long story. I'll tell you about it later." She finished talking just as the others reentered the room.

"Everypony. This briefing is magenta level clearance. You do not speak of it outside this room. It concerns high level security matters." She paused. "Nightmare Moon has returned."

CHAPTER FOUR

At these words, almost everypony gasped. Nightmare Moon, the code name given to the greatest traitor of all Luna, was thought destroyed forever after the battle which had nearly extinguished the sun and forever clouded the moon. Now she was back.

"The night that has enfolded the lands is the proof of her return. The Equisition has decided, with the blessing of the High Lords, to send out a team on a dangerous, last hope mission. The permission was given five years ago, and a scout group made a report before being killed that gives us hope we have found the objective: a group of relics that according to legend were wielded by the Goddess-Princess in her last battle with Luna, known as the 'Elementa Harmoniae'. They are our only hope. Now, one last thing before we leave. You don't speak of this ever again, under pain of damnation and execution."

They nodded, so Mica went on "Last night segment, Celestia disappeared. The Astronomicon is fading. We have less than twenty days until it fades completely. That's why we're leaving now. As we speak, the beasts from the Everfree Forest are released from their bounds. Not to mention the cultists now rising up to make an army. We have only these twenty days to succeed." She faced each of them, in turn. "We go now to our bloody business. If you are ready, we will leave immediately." A chorus of assent came after her words, so she said "Very well. Our first stop is Urbs Caballus. From there we will go into the Everfree Forest. From there, we are heading to the presumed location of the relics. Once there, we will either secure the relics ourselves, or call in the support of a Principial Guard corps. We move out now."

They left the building, left the city, and went on their way to Urbs Caballus. They

travelled by hoof so as to prevent any hidden cultists from knowing they were from the Equisition.

In the city of Canterlot, the Principial Guard had been called out. Pegasoi patrolled the skies, while earth ponies and unicorns patrolled the walls. In the centre of the city, the High Lords were meeting.

"The current situation is as follows, my Prince. Last week, gatherings were spotted here (at this point, the speaker pointed at the map on the central table in two locations) and here. Two nights ago, when Celestia disappeared, they began a rampage. Two Guard units engaged them. After twelve hours of fighting, both were annihilated. They proceeded on to nearby cities. The cities closed their gates and called for help. Survivors from the cities reached us about two hours ago. Nightmare Moon was sighted leading both of them. She was instrumental in breaking the walls, after which she lead the groups in wholesale slaughter of the populace. Only a few pegasoi escaped. Guard units have been sent to the area. Nearby cities have been warned of the danger to civilians." The Lord High General paused, and then went on. "We don't have the power to bring down one alicorn, let alone two. Our strategicians believe that she will make a cordon around Canterlot, then besiege and assault us. What are your orders, your majesty?"

Prince Blueblood looked at the map, and then turned to the Equisition Representative. "You are our only hope. What hope can you give us? Do you know where the relics are kept? Do you have them yet? What is there?" "My prince, we know their location. As we speak, a team is making their way there to retrieve them. A corps of the Principial Guard waits for their signal to support them. They will return in time." "By the Princess, let it be so." The prince sighed. "These are the end times. No matter if we defeat Nightmare Moon, we have lost the Astronomicon, the Princess. Today the living will envy the dead."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Equisition team had reached Urbs Caballus just in time to resupply and leave before the cultists had lain siege on it. It was the closest city to the Everfree Forest area they planned to penetrate. They were now at the border to the Forest. "Forward. We have less than twelve days till the Astronomicon fades beyond use," ordered Mica as she hoofed it into the Forest. The others hastened to obey.

Before they had travelled long, they came to a cliff. "By the Princess! We'll have to get down this cliff somehow." "Equisitor, me and Fluttershy can take you down in turns," was Rainbow Dash's suggestion.

Mica shook her head. "It's far too dangerous to separate the group. We'll have to climb down together. Let's find a way down." The group moved to obey her.

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Prince Blueblood looked over his city. It was where he'd been born, where he grew up, where he studied and at last where he ruled. It was lit by the torches of the army

surrounding the walls. Even the greatest savants in the city were unable to count them. He had a mere ten thousand ponies ready to fight...and the thousand Equustodes. Two million ponies lived in this city alone. No matter how the battle turned out, the streets would run red with blood. At his side were the Lord High General and the Equisition Representative.

"What are they waiting for?" he asked them. "No idea, my prince. They have the clear advantage. My tacticians are baffled over their not-attacking," answered the Lord High General. "They're waiting for her to come here," replied the Equisition Representative. "They have no initiative. She is doing something elsewhere." The Prince turned to her. "You mean Nightmare Moon." "Yes," she answered, "she may already know our plan and be moving to stop it." Just then, larger lights were seen being lit at the edge of the enemy camps. "Those are catapults preparing to fire. She's here."

A horn sounded, the low moan resounding through the city, and the guardsponies hastened to their station. "It has begun. Good. I was getting tired of waiting," remarked the Prince. He turned to the catapults, and watched the arcing fireballs they launched surge into the city. "You have command now, Lord High General Mannerheim. Don't fail."

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The group was standing on top of the cliff. The cart was in the middle. Without warning, the cliff face collapsed. The group hurtled down with the cliff. Mica thought quickly, and shouted to the pegasoi "Grab Applejack and Rarity. I'll safeguard Markon. Leave the cart. It's already too dangerous."

The pegasoi snapped into action, years of training having honed their reflexes to breaking point. Rarity and Applejack were picked up and set down near the bottom, while Mica closed her eyes and concentrated. A purple disc appeared beneath her and held aloft the two unicorn psykers. It dived for the ground. The cart was buried under the rocks.

When they had reached the ground, the remaining members dusted themselves off. "We must keep going. Pinkamena might have already released herself. We don't have much time. Get moving!" ordered Mica. They moved off quickly, ingrained reactions getting them moving quickly enough to escape hell's wrath itself.

They quickly came to their next obstacle. The ravine that was their only way to the location of the Elementae was blocked by a daemon of Khorne, the Blood God, Who Sitteth On the Throne of Bone. There was only one way past- through him. But this was no mere daemon. This was a Bloodthirster, a Greater Daemon of Khorne. To destroy one

was a deed worthy of an army. Worse...it had smelled them. And the Daemons of Khorne hated unicorns. They were cowards, using magic instead of getting their hooves dirty in fighting. It stretched its building wide wings, and raised its tower high axe, and roared as them, its mane and horns combining to show the face as a horrific parody of a lion. Its red skin rippled as muscles bigger than an entire pony flexed. Spittle flowed from its mouth as it continued to roar at them.

“We must defeat this beast... CHARGE!” yelled Mica. The six ponies charged forward. The Bloodthirster roared again, and readied its axe. From Mica’s horn surged bolts of lightning, which hit the Bloodthirster in the chest. Electricity rippled across its body, but it didn’t react at all. Instead, it merely swung the axe down, missing the ponies but carving a huge gash in the earth below it.

Dash and Fluttershy circled its head, kicking and cutting when the opportunity arose. It raised its second hand and knocked them aside. Fluttershy managed to recover and was merely knocked out by the impact, but Dash hit the ground hard and didn’t move. Her left wing was clearly broken.

Markon charged at the Bloodthirster, a useless act as it merely ignored the small cuts he inflicted at the leg. Applejack jumped into the air, and turning at just the right moment, bucked the behind of its left knee. It roared in fury, and narrowly missed her with its axe.

Rarity came in at this time. The daemon seemed unable to notice her, staring blankly past where she was. She started climbing up the daemon’s leg, intending to stab its head with her horn.

Fluttershy suddenly woke up and screamed. Mica turned to look in the direction they had come, and paled visibly. “Disengage the Bloodthirster and try to move forward. Pinkie is awake. RUN!” She charged through, lifting Fluttershy with her magic. The Bloodthirster roared at the retreating ponies, then turned to the direction they had come, too. It stalked forward. There was a pony. Dressed in a black body-glove and with a skull mask, it looked terrible...but nothing to a Bloodthirster. She (for so the voice revealed) started to laugh. Not a maniacal laugh, like that of a great villain finally succeeding, but the giggle of a small child. She didn’t stop.

Markon and the others ran.

The Bloodthirster slammed its axe down, just missing the pony. The Bloodthirster was dumbfounded when the pony jumped onto the axe and began to make her way up the shaft. It shook the axe, but the pony hung on and kept going with a deadlock grip. She eventually got to the end and started climbing over the Bloodthirster. She was still laughing as she took a dagger out from the clothing she was wearing and thrust it deep

into the daemon.

The Bloodthirster roared in frustration, and swiped with his hand and missed again. She moved on and took another dagger out and plunged it too deep past the daemon's hide.

She kept moving, every three steps accompanied by the plunging of another dagger. All the while, she laughed. She laughed like a foal pulling a harmless prank on April Foal's Day.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

In Canterlot, things were much less filled with laughter. Flaming catapult shots had set ablaze several sections of the city, and the walls were being assaulted by Nightmare Moon's minions. The loyalists had kept them off the walls, but the continual fire of catapults threatened to destroy the wall, and them with it. The attrition was also taking its toll, with nearly one in every one hundred defenders being wounded beyond fighting. The first twenty minutes had seen the blood flow, sticky and wet, and the battlements were



almost soaked with the stuff.

From the tower central in the town, the Prince looked on. He was no military colt. He knew how to fight, his tutor in this regard being one of the Equustodes themselves, but tactics, strategy, all these he had not even the barest grasp of. But Nightmare Moon was down there. Even as he watched, two catapults managed to hit the walls and break the sections down. A cheer resounded, and the cultists surged through the gaps. At their heads were Nightmare Moons, once again in two places at the same time. He turned to his advisors, behind him.

"I must go out. Summon the Equustodes, and have my armour and force swords brought out. I will fight Nightmare Moon back or die trying." They hastened to do his bidding. He turned back to the city, and could swear one of the Nightmare Moons was grinning in victory at him.

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The group stopped once they were beyond the reach of the Bloodthirster. They panted, taking short breaths to try and recover from the panicked running they had just done. They heard in the distance the bone shaking sound of piteous horror that marked the end of the Bloodthirster, and they each got up. "I might have a way to stop her," said Mica, "But be ready in case it doesn't work."

From the distance, they saw her approach. Her previously clean suit and mask were now covered in sticky red blood. She was still laughing. Mica stood up, and shouted the word "Cupcakes!".

The pony turned her head and ran at them. The laughter kept coming. "Stand your ground!" ordered Mica. She kept coming. The laughter seemed to slow, and with it her movement. Markon tensed, his horn useless in such close vicinity to Rarity. But it wasn't needed anyway; ten metres from them the pony in the suit collapsed. The entire group let out a sigh of relief. Mica walked over to the prostrate pony, and said "Rise, Pinkamena."

The pony shot up. "You caught me that time, Twilight!" came her voice, girly and cheery. "But I'll get you next time! My hacksaw is sharp enough for you too!" "Enough, Pinkamena. You know my name is Mica, not Twilight or Twilight Sparkle." "Awww, come on Twi! I only get out every year or two! You're no fun!" "It most certainly is not Twi. Silence. You will follow and obey us. Clear?" "Party pooper. Yes, it's clear." "Good to hear."

The group moved on, now with the bouncing addition of the pony called Pinkamena. The

part of the forest they were at now had thick overhead cover. Not even the faintest light of the Astronomicon could be felt here. Even the light of the moon was blocked out.

Pinkamena fell behind. The rest of the group had gone nearly ten metres before Mica noticed that Pinkamena had stopped.

"Pinkamena, we don't have the time for this! Get a move on!" The other pony didn't seem to hear, and uttered only the words "I hate you. But not real hate. What are you and why don't I hate you really?"

Mica had no time for this, and turned to Applejack. "Go and get her. Now." Applejack made her way over to Pinkamena, but before she got halfway she stopped. She looked back at the group, and her eyes widened in horror. "No...no, y'all're dead! Ah killed you! You can't be back! Ah killed you! Ah killed you Ah killed you Ah killed you!" Her words lost structure, and she began to spasm. She fell on her back, and rocked back and forth, just saying "Ah killed you!" over and over.

Mica had just about had it by now, and stalked over to Applejack, the intent clearly in her eyes to thump her back into her senses. Before she could get to her, her eyes glazed over, and she looked into the distance. She suddenly dropped to her knees, and said "My Princess! Your loyal servant awaits Your command!"

The unaffected of the group raised their eyebrows at this. She was talking to a tree, not the Goddess-Princess.

Something hit Markon's memory. "Everypony, stay close to Rarity. Rarity, move to the others and touch them." Understanding met Markon's stare into Rarity's face, and she moved off, the rest rushing to catch up. She tapped Mica on the croup, and she started, looking around her, before remembering where she was. "What...what happened? I dreamt that I saw the Princess..." "It was a trick, somehow. Rarity freed you." explained Markon.

Rarity had gone on to tap Applejack on the hoof, and she jumped up. "Where? Where is he? He tricked me then, but now Ah'm ready for him. Where is he?!" "Applejack, he, whoever he was, was an illusion. He's gone now, you're safe." Applejack was silenced, and a blush appeared on her cheeks. "Ah... Ah was back at tha Purge of Urbs Caballus. Tha.. Tha bastard killed mah entire family. Ah...Ah couldn't kill him. Mica had to do it for me. Ah've never felt so weak..." Her face hardened. "Ah'm not so weak anymore now. Now Ah'm strong."



Prince Blueblood was at the front of the formation as they marched through the streets. Countless thoughts flashed through his mind, but all were dispelled when he smelled the foul stench of burning hair and cooking flesh. The fires up ahead were spreading, and the dead were left in the streets. He could see the vanguard of the cultists ahead of him, nearly two hundred metres away. He halted. "Equustodes, today we do not fight to win. We fight to protect the civilians, who if this evil wins, will surely be butchered. We fight to protect the other cities, which if this one falls, will surely surrender without a fight. We fight for the Goddess-Princess, who watches us still now. She waits for a hero to show her the Principality is still worth saving. Let us be the hero she waits for. For the Princess and the Principality, CHARGE!"

The thousand and one unicorns charged. Swords flashed, and they started a good accounting of themselves, sending the first of the blackguards to oblivion. Blood now coated the swords they wielded. They kept going, their swords flashing and scything through the foes they faced. The ponies tried to defend themselves, and were cut down.

The unicorns settled into a rhythm, accompanied with a cadence.

"Down from the sky." They sent their swords cutting down.

"Into the fight." They raised their swords to guard from counters.

"Hearts full of rage." They stepped forward.

"Full of thunder and glory." They trampled the survivors into the ground.

"Swords in the wind." They sent their swords darting forward, between the gaps in the armour of the enemies.

"Crossing the sky." They pulled back their swords and projected a shield to protect them during their vulnerable moment.

"Lords of Doom." They stepped forward once more.

"Bring an end to their story." Once more they trampled the survivors to death.

They repeated the cadence as they continued making their way through. The cultists couldn't stand against the might of the prized forces of the Principality. They cut through the heretics like a hot knife through butter. Until at last Nightmare Moon was facing them.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

After they finished with the trees of Illusions, the seven ponies continued their long and treacherous trek through the trees to the probable location of the Elementa Harmonae. A sound could be heard in the distance, like sobbing.

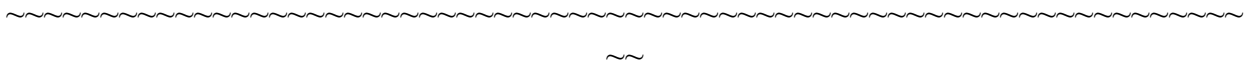
As they got closer, the sobbing got louder and louder, and with it the sound of rushing water. Eventually, they broke to a clearing, and visible was a raging river in front of them, with no bridge.

"Now what?" asked Pinkamena, a light touch of smugness filling her voice. "We'll have to find another way across," was Mica's stoic response. By now, the sobbing was clear to hear, and was starting to grate on Markon's nerves. They headed upriver, and were startled to find a purple river-serpent. It was sobbing into the river.

"What th- why is that beast crying?" asked Applejack. The serpent seemed to hear, and turned to them. "Well, I don't know, I was just sitting here, minding my *own* business, when this *tacky* little cloud of red smoke just whisked past me, and tore half of my beloved moustache, *clean off!* And now I look simply *horrid!*" was all he spoke before turning back to the water and continuing to sob in extravagant sorrow.

"Y'all are kiddin' me. That's what all the fuss is about?" demanded Applejack, a slightly angry tone accenting her speech. The serpent stopped, and turned back to her. "Ah lost mah family before Ah was ten, and y'all are whinin' about a mustache?" The tears stopped coming out of the serpent's eyes, and he said "But...but...but..." "But nothing! If Ah can endure mah family's death, you can endure losin' your fethin' mustache! Grow up, galdernit!"

The river-serpent bowed his head in embarrassment. "Now, git outta here, y'all. 'n' don't come back none, y'hear?" He nodded his head, and dived back into the river, swimming downstream. Before long, the river had settled, and the group were able to pass.



Prince Blueblood looked across the battlefield the city had turned into. No more than ten

metres away, one of the Nightmare Moons was waiting for him. She was clapping her front hooves on the ground. “Bravely done, mortal. But your battle is at an end. Surrender and your life may be spared.” He raised his swords in defiance. “I will never surrender. Death will be far better than a thousand years in *your* rule. Equustodes, for the Princess! BRING DOWN THE UNBELIEVER!”

The unicorns charged. Nightmare Moon laughed, and summoned up the swords and axes her fallen had wielded. Swirling them around in a cloud of weaponry, she advanced towards the charging loyalists. They raised their swords to parry the swinging attacks, but were brought down one by one. Regardless of their losses, they kept going, until at last Prince Blueblood was facing her. “The spirits of the ponies you murdered strengthen me, beast.” His swords whirling, parrying, breaking the weapons Nightmare Moon brought against him, he kept moving through towards her. But he left an opening, and just as she was about to bring the axe down upon him and end his defiant last stand, she stopped. “You...bastard. You tried to get the Elementa, you bastard! Cultists, finish him! I have more important matters to deal with.” She disappeared into a cloud of purple smoke, meeting up with another over the city, before roaring away to the Everfree Forest.

Prince Blueblood stood up again, shakily. He was tired. Around him the other survivors, less than a hundred of the original thousand, stood up too. The cultists were charging at them, screaming battlecries and showing no care for any wounded of theirs in their mad rush. “Equustodes...today we die. Die well!” He raised his swords one last time, and screamed defiance in the enemies' faces.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

They continued through the forest after clearing the river, until at last they came to a broken bridge, the only way to the place with the relics. Fluttershy turned to Dash, and nodded, before flying down the ravine the bridge was across, grabbing the rope the bridge attached to, and flying back up and tying it across. "Halt," Mica ordered. "I must contact our reinforcements. Markon, with me."

The two moved away from the group. "Have you ever heard of an dragonopathic choir?" Markon shook his head. "Thought not. They're very rare, and very dangerous. Normally one dragonopath is strong enough to punch any message through. Unfortunately, the same is not true for unicorns. I'm going to need to link up with you and channel your psychic power to send our message to the relief. Just lay your horn on mine, and close your eyes."

Markon obeyed, despite the obvious undertones following the act, and was just closing his eyes when they opened again. But not in the world. In the Warp. In front of him was Mica, who too had her eyes open. She was calm, and said "Let go of your power. I will provide the guidance." Markon nodded, and breathed out his power. It rose like a stream of lightning, and Mica shifted it, funnelled it together, refined it, until it was a white hot beam of pure power, at which point she sent it streaking into the 'sky'. "Come now, Markon. They'll be coming now. We had best rejoin the others."

They left the Warp, and returned to the others in the physical world. They waited, in silence. Rations were consumed, tales were told, and many of the other things people do when trying to pass the time. Two hours passed before the sound of marching feet heralded the arrival of their reinforcements. From the forest came a thousand strong force of pegasoi, here to serve the Equisition and the Principality. Their leader came to Mica, and bowing, said "M'lady, we are here. What is our objective?" "The castle over the ravine. My companions and I will be following you. We must secure the relics held in the

chamber.” “As you wish, m'lady.” The pegasus signalled to his men, and they took off across the ravine, following him in. The Equisition group crossed the bridge and entered the castle after.

Inside, the pegasoi had taken the first chamber quickly, slaughtering the few defenders. Fighting now raged in the second and third chambers, but the Equisition were here for what was in the first chamber. Five stones were held aloft on some kind of stand. Quickly, Mica used her horn to levitate the stones off and carefully landed them on the ground. Before she could try to activate them, a purple cloud entered the room. It reformed into Nightmare Moon. She sent the group hurtling back with the power in her horn, and grabbed the stones. Mica recovered quickly and dived towards them, being caught in the funnel as she teleported away.

“She can't be far away!” shouted Markon. “She must have gone somewhere in the castle! After her!” The group followed him into the second chamber. Blood and bodies littered the floor, mostly that of the cultists. The leader of the pegasoi was here, with five others looking at a diagram of the castle. “Sir, chambers four and five are still facing heavy resistance, and we've found cultists hiding in chamber three waiting for us to pass and surround us,” reported one of the five. “Move forces back and clear out chamber three. We can't afford to be dealing with deserters,” ordered their leader, when he noticed the Equisition group. “Good to see you. Have you accomplished your mission?” he asked. “No. Our Equisitor was kidnapped with the objective by a heretic, who teleported nearby. Which chambers are still untouched?” “Chamber six. It's the last, and we have been unable to muster our forces sufficiently to do any more than prevent attacks from there. We can send our defenders in with you, if you need.” “No. We'll need to go there by ourselves. Anyone else will be foals to the slaughter.” “As you wish.”

After a quick look at the map, Markon lead the group on to chamber six, heading through chamber three. The room was flashing with light, and the pegasoi guarding the entrance were getting shaky. “Principial Equisition,” said Fluttershy, holding aloft her rosette, and the guardsponies let them through. They climbed up through the staircase, and entered the room. The room was empty except for two ponies; Mica and Nightmare Moon.

“Your friends have joined us, foal, and what a pitiful bunch they are. An Untouchable barely strong enough to block a unicorn, an Eversor who doesn't have rage flowing through her veins, a novice Psyker, a half-sane Acolyte, a Guardspony pegasus who's afraid of heights, and an Arbite who couldn't save her mummy or daddy. Hahaa...And these are the ones the Equisition has to rely on. Well, do your worst. It makes it far more fun to kill you while you're still horrified over your complete failure.”

Mica summoned up the stones, and passing one of them to each of the group except for

Markon she said “You will be defeated, Nightmare Moon.” “Fat chance, foal.” “Nightmare Moon, in fealty to the Princess, our undying lady, and by the Elementa Harmonae, in the name of the Ordo Herequinas and the Equisition, I call thee heretica, and declare thee banished from the light of the Goddess-Princess.” At these words, a spark hit the stones being held in the air by Mica's magic. Lightning began to encircle them. Another spark. Another. Another. Sparks continued to flow from Mica's horn, and Nightmare Moon's expression turned from smug certainty to horror.

“The Harmonae are represented here. Rarity the Harmonae of Generosity, giving of her ability with no question as to need. Dash the Harmonae of Loyalty, risking her life to save even those who had hurt her. Pinkamena the Harmonae of Laughter, bringing relief to her friends and dread to her enemies. Applejack the Harmonae of Honesty, never letting go of her value of truth and objectivity. Fluttershy the Harmonae of Kindness, willing to do that which would save pain to those she knows.” A light appeared in the center of the room, and a sixth stone descended. “And now the last, the Harmonae of Psyonics. I claim thee. Nightmare Moon, thee are to be destroyed. Beg the Princess to have mercy on thy soul and merely destroy it rather than leave it for the daemons to devour.” A rainbow appeared from the six Harmonae, and hurtled straight at Nightmare Moon. It wrapped itself around her. A bright flash filled the room, and all inside were knocked out.



## EPILOGUE

The Equisition group awoke. Through the windows, they could see the moon at last setting, and the dawn of a new day rising. They stood up, and on the other side of the room they saw the weakened Nightmare Moon huddling, in the form of a filly. “The Harmonae have removed your invulnerability, Nightmare Moon. Thy death is imminent,” intoned Mica as she drew her force sword and moved over to the still unconscious filly. She raised the sword, and struck the head off in one swift stroke.

Before congratulations could be offered, a bright light outside the castle came in. It unfolded, and there was the Goddess-Princess Celestia.

She spoke “Who am I to thank for my freedom?” Her voice was warm, welcoming, embracing, and the seven bowed to her in reverence. “My Princess, it was only our duty, nothing more. Thank instead the ponies who fought and died that we might enter here!” said Mica in response. Celestia's eyes twitched as she heard her mention the fighting and dying. “What do you mean, fought and died? When I left, there was no war, the ponies were at peace! All but my sister were calm and happy.” “My Princess, your...sister... rose up against you, in the guise of Nightmare Moon. She rose again and attacked our cities, butchering all inside. We were kept safe by the sacrifice paid by the Principial Guard, wiping out those who refused to worship you, those who were not of ponykind: the buffalo, the zebra, the deer.” Celestia's eyes continued to twitch. “We were at peace. What happened?” “Oh, we declared war in your name, of course. They refused to recognise

your regality. We had no choice.” “Okay...Okay. Where is my sister? I watched you defy her here, not knowing of the death...I saw you redeem her from the evil that controlled her. Where is she, that we may celebrate the freedom we now have?”

**FIN**