

# CRISIS: Equestria

## Chapter Seventeen: Insubordination

*“♪ I rip your right leg out.”*

Velvet jerked Pinkie’s leg repeatedly in an attempt to tear it away, eagerly awaiting the satisfying sound of bone snapping and flesh ripping apart. She licked her lips in anticipation; she knew she was close. She could almost taste the blood flowing through Pinkie’s veins, feel the luscious liquid pulsing beneath her tendril’s grip.

The fear in the air was palpable. Pinkie’s dread and terror filled Velvet with elation and power. Not just Pinkie’s, either, but the fears and worries of Pinkie’s friends as well. The fear of a worthless peon like Commander Jetstream paled in comparison to that of these Elements of Harmony; their strength dwarfed his, thus, their fears did as well.

She was going to enjoy every second of this. Nothing was going to stop her.

Then, suddenly, the primary tendril holding Pinkie in the air erupted, evaporating Velvet’s blood instantaneously. Pinkie fell to the floor, and scrambled away without hesitation.

Velvet drew her corroded tendril up to her face to examine it. At the point of the split, her blood was sizzling like grease in a frying pan. It hurt only a little, but it was pain nonetheless. She was accustomed to pain—in fact, she enjoyed receiving as much as she enjoyed giving—but this very slight stinging sensation bothered her.

“Weird...” she muttered as she reformed her tendril into an appropriate tool again. She turned her attention back to the scrambling Pinkie. “Hmm... well, you know what they say: ‘if at first you don’t succeed’—she lashed the tendril towards her prey—“try, try again!”

Pinkie raised her hooves up to defend herself from the approaching tentacle.

It never reached her. Velvet’s tendril deflected just inches from Pinkie’s cringing form before splashing harmlessly to the floor. Velvet drew it back in shock; the stinging sensation had been much more intense this time. She tried again, but only achieved the same result. This time, though, the stinging was more of a fierce burning, and her tendril exploded, showering Pinkie and the surrounding ground with Velvet’s blood.

“What is this?!” Velvet shouted, angrily flailing her remaining tendrils about. “What’s happening?!”

She lashed out with all of her tendrils at once. The collection slammed into a glowing light just inches from her own face, splattering her visceral fluids all over herself. She yowled in

pain as her boiling blood burned her coat and skin. She looked about herself in surprise; the dark purple light had encased her in a bubble of sorts. A unicorn's shield. She glanced just off to the side, where the darkness surrounding her had parted.

Starlight strode through the darkness, her horn aglow, and a fierce scowl upon her face. "Red Velvet," she spat, "I believe you have attained the maximum amount of pleasure for one morning. Stand down. The pink one has relinquished victory."

Velvet glared at her younger sister with fiery intensity. Her eyes flashed red with anger, and the black ooze that had been seeping from them boiled. "What in Equestria do you think you're doing, boss? I'm so close. I can taste her **fear**... I want to taste her **blood**! Let me out of here this instant! I need to satisfy this **urge**."

"Sister, placate yourself," Starlight said, remaining perfectly calm in the face of Velvet's unholy anger. "You have spiraled into a state of delirium and lost sight of our goal. Have you forgotten who you are, and what you are here to accomplish? You would discard our mission for the temporary satisfaction of such a base desire?"

"**Yes!** A thousand times, yes!"

Starlight shook her head, disappointed. "Sister, you are truly an ignoramus of the highest caliber."

"How **dare** you?!" Velvet bellowed, lashing her tendrils fruitlessly against the barrier walls. "Let me out! **Now!**"

Velvet ignored the intense burning the barrier caused. The barrier flickered where she struck, seemingly weakening from the assault. She could now clearly see Pinkie huddling behind Starlight, of all ponies, staring at Velvet like she was some unfathomable beast come to destroy everything she held dear. Velvet so desperately wanted to make that fear real that she used up everything she had; the blood loss was actually making her dizzy, a new sensation she'd never experienced before. Only one thought consumed her: breaking through Starlight's barrier and drowning Pinkie in so much blood that she'd never breathe again. She'd do it even if she died trying.

Starlight raised an eyebrow. "This is quite the preternatural affair. It would appear as though you have engorged yourself with such an abundance of terror that you have accumulated great power, an almost exponential growth, I might add."

She grinned, and shook her head. "I now appreciate father's claims to perceive potential within you. You truly are a pernicious sociopath, if you are so tenacious in your desire to slaughter and terrify these ponies that you would even challenge *my* authority."

Starlight flared her horn and strengthened her magical charge, reinforcing her barrier with a honeycomb-like texture. Every strike against the barrier was met with an equal and opposite reaction as the shield readjusted its strength to focus on wherever Velvet was striking at that moment. The more Velvet attacked, the quicker the barrier responded, until it was preempting Velvet's strikes and enclosing around her.

"You will find I am exceedingly proficient with imprisonment magicks, sister," Starlight said with a coy smirk. "Cease this embarrassing display."

"Shut your stupid mouth!" Velvet shouted. The pain and dizziness had slurred her speech slightly. "Let me **out!** Or are you **afraid** to take me on like a *real* mare?!"

Starlight frowned. "My dear sister, I am sincere when I say that I cannot permit you to articulate your opinion of me in such a manner, especially not in front of others," she said with a slight gesture towards Pinkie. "Am I required to remind you that *I* am the one father established as the authority figure within our company? *I* am a supreme spellcaster, and I do *not* fear you, no matter how powerful you think you may have become. I will communicate this order to you once more, and I will *not* repeat myself hereinafter. Stand. Down. *Now.*"

Velvet roared, and, as she'd exhausted her supply of tendrils, bashed her own body against her magic prison. "**I'll tear you apart!**" she shouted.

The darkness around her dissipated completely, revealing that the other ponies—Pinkie's friends and her own sisters alike—had all begun to gather around the display. Only now were they all able to see what was going on.

**"I'll tear you *all* apart!"**

Her sisters watched her with varying expressions: confusion, disappointment, embarrassment. None of them had ever seen Velvet go to this level of power before, and she knew it. She could sense some fear in them at the sight. But, to her dismay, they were all a little more frightened of how Starlight was handling the situation. Velvet turned her gaze to Starlight as well, and now could see what they were scared of.

Starlight was mad. She narrowed her eyes; Velvet faltered just slightly—she'd seen that same look given to Commander Jetstream by their father. "If you will not even grant me the courtesy of acquiescing to my orders of your own accord, then I am left with no alternatives, Velvet," she said, shaking her head. "I cannot allow a challenge to my authority to go unanswered. Father would be... disappointed."

Starlight rooted her hooves into the cavern floor, and flared her horn brighter than ever. The barrier walls closed in around Velvet, forcing her into a tight space with powerful electrical shocks. Eventually the space was so small that Velvet could not move without suffering from a

shock powerful enough to numb whatever part of her body the magic touched.

“Stop it!” Velvet shouted. “Let me go!”

Starlight, her eyes aglow with white fire, turned to Pinkie. “Withdraw from here, whelp,” she said, “and reconvene with your friends. My sister no longer poses a threat.”

Pinkie nodded. She didn’t even think to argue. Without missing a beat, she rushed as quickly as her severe limp allowed over to Rainbow and Twilight. She crushed Rainbow in a hug so strong that she knocked the pegasus off balance, and buried her face into Rainbow’s mane before crying with all her might.

“Oh Dashie,” she sniffed, “I s-saw things. She m-made me see things!”

“Hey, relax, Pinks,” Rainbow replied. “I’m here now. You’ll be okay. That psycho isn’t gonna get you—”

“Not *me*, Dashie. *You!* All of you!” Pinkie bawled. “Oh Celestia, it was horrible! You were all... d-d-dead! I... I can’t get the visions out of my head...”

“Come on, Pinks, take it easy,” Rainbow said with a confident smirk. “Nothing’s gonna make me kick the bucket just yet. I just got slammed into the cavern wall like a rocket, and I’m still breathing.”

“Miraculously,” Twilight added, shaking her head. “The angle you impacted at should have broken your spine.”

“Hey, you’re looking at the crash *master*, here. Haven’t met a crash yet that I couldn’t walk away from.”

“Let’s try an’ keep it that way,” Applejack said.

She and Flathoof trotted over to join the other three mares, looking slightly worse for wear but otherwise in better shape than Rainbow and Pinkie were.

“Are you two okay?” Twilight asked.

“Peachy,” Applejack replied. “How ‘bout you girls?”

Twilight frowned and shook her head. “Rainbow and Pinkie are hurt. I’m going to need more time to heal them if we’re going to stand a chance of getting out of here.”

“We’ll buy ya all the time ya need, sugarcube.”

“It looks to me like they’re taking care of that just fine on their own,” Flathoof said, gesturing towards Velvet and Starlight. He tilted his head towards the other four sisters of their group, who all remained motionless and weren’t paying any attention to their former targets. “What’s with them?”

“I haven’t a clue,” Twilight answered.

They were soon joined by Lockwood and Fluttershy, the latter of whom practically clinged to Lockwood. Tick Tock and Rarity joined them soon after, and it was clear that of everypony present, perhaps excluding Rainbow, Rarity had been on the receiving end of the most punishment. Her friends rushed to her aid; Rarity looked as though she’d just barely woken up.

“Rarity!” Fluttershy exclaimed. “Are you okay?!”

“The hay happened ta *you*, Rarity?” Applejack asked, helping the unicorn stand up.

Rarity took a deep breath and shook her head. “I feel like... I’ve had the life just... drained right out of me.” She turned her glance to Insipid off in the distance. “That... loathsome brute... tricked me...”

“I’m not sure what sort of magic she used, exactly,” Tick Tock said, “but whatever it was, it increased Insipid’s powers and allowed her to do the same to others as well as Rarity can.”

“I seem to remember getting a power boost earlier,” Twilight said.

“Hey yeah, I remember that too,” Applejack added. “Grayscale said she felt somethin’ weird around the same time. Did Insipid cause that?”

“That’s my theory,” Tick Tock replied. “How she affected two non-unicorns is beyond me though.”

“And you said she injured Rarity in the process of getting this power boost for herself?” Twilight asked.

Rarity nodded and took another deep breath. “That she did, darling. A loathsome little... trick. It felt like... being electrocuted.”

“Well, at least you’re still breathin’, right?” Applejack said with a weak smile, patting Rarity on the back. “And hey, at least yer dress don’t look like it got hurt none. That’s somethin’, ain’t it?”

Rarity looked herself over, then sighed. "Well, at least... there's that..."

"Is everypony else okay?" Twilight asked.

"No harm done," Lockwood said. "Right, Fluttershy?"

"R-right," Fluttershy peeped.

Twilight turned her gaze to Starlight's brightly glowing figure, which grew in luminosity by the second; her horn and bodily aura were bright enough to illuminate most of the plateau. The incredible power Starlight was radiating concerned Twilight, both the amount, and the unfamiliar type. She'd been able to detect Starlight's impressive force before, but Starlight had mostly kept it to herself. Now that it was here, out in the open, Twilight was staggered by how powerful Starlight was.

Rainbow groaned. "Thanks for the fix-up, Twi," she said. "I've felt better, but at least my wings still work." She flexed her wings to prove it.

"I think we could all use a little patch-up," Flathoof said, cracking his neck. He rubbed a sore spot. "Yes, I definitely wish I was in better shape."

"Anypony know what caused all that there cold earlier?" Applejack asked.

"That," Starlight replied, drawing the group's attention, "was a mere sampling of my dear sister's full potential. Absolutely outstanding, is it not? If only she could maintain some semblance of discipline. Am I not mistaken, Red Velvet?"

Velvet grunted her agreement from within the pony-shaped shield. She sounded as though she were still in some pain.

"Now then, sister, are you prepared to behave yourself, or will I be required to pursue this course of action?"

"Yes... *sir*..." Velvet muttered.

"Splendid."

Starlight dropped the barrier over Velvet, who rose to her hooves and limped into formation with the rest of her sisters, all of whom watched her with mixed looks of disappointment and worry. She then turned back to Twilight's group, her horn still glowing as brightly as a star. Twilight recognized it as a basic, flat charge, nothing more than a spell designed to empower the next spell cast.

“As you have witnessed, Sparkle,” she said, “my sisters are more than capable of subduing you and your friends on their own. I need not participate.”

Twilight rose to her hooves and stood firmly in front of her friends. “If you want to stop us from leaving and going home, then that makes you our enemy. My friends and I never give up in the face of those who threaten us.” She turned to the others. “Isn’t that right girls?”

Rainbow nodded. “We’re not going down without a fight.”

Applejack stomped a hoof. “I’ve still got plenty o’ kick. Bring it on.”

“I predicted this response,” Starlight said, shaking her head. “My sisters’ powers are already insurmountable for you, even when specifically ordered to utilize less than their fullest potential. You hardly offered them a challenge. Yet, you clearly wish to attempt such a feat. Commendable.” She laughed. “And foolish. For you must realize that, even combined together with their full allowance of power at their disposal, they do not compare to me. The might that I wield with but a *fraction* of my full potential dwarfs theirs in ways you cannot comprehend.”

She channeled more power into her spell, until the light streaming from her horn was enough to illuminate the cavern brighter than the brightest day. Everypony had to shield their eyes.

Rainbow gulped and pulled Pinkie in close. “Whoa, um... can the rest of you feel that?”

“Yeah,” Applejack said with a nod. “What in tarnation is that? It feels weird...”

Twilight turned to them, eyebrow raised. “Wait, what? You girls can feel it too? But... only unicorns can physically sense another unicorn’s magic.”

Tick Tock shook her head. “Unless, of course... there’s enough of it to go around.”

Twilight turned back to Starlight. “Oh... oh dear.”

“Do you comprehend my strength now, Sparkle?” Starlight asked, a wide, cocky smile on her face. “I possess more power than anypony could imagine, even in their most fanciful dreams. You, Sparkle, bear a similar power deep within you. I can sense it. However, you lack the resolve to embrace it. You are intimidated by what this strength could grant you, because you are spineless. This is why your party is endangered. This is why they do not trust your leadership.”

Twilight sneered. “You’re wrong, Starlight. I’m strong enough to handle whatever challenges face my friends and I.”

Starlight laughed. "Are you? Allow me to invalidate your theory!"

More power raged around Starlight's horn, almost as if of its own will. Arcs of black and purple magic danced about her like lightning and fire, humming with power. Her sisters gathered behind her, whispering to one another in hushed tones. Twilight's party, on the other hoof, gathered together, anxious.

Twilight herself watched the display, curiosity and fear in her eyes. "This magic... looks so similar to that of King Sombra. It feels different, though... more focused on destruction for the sake of it, rather than for any purpose. This sort of magic feels... unnatural... and familiar."

Tick Tock felt something buzz in her vest pocket. She discreetly looked between the other to make sure nopony was looking, then took Zenith's Timekeeper out, curious as to why it was buzzing. She opened it, and looked upon the screen, which glowed with a dim green. It displayed a single image of a magical energy sphere in the center, surrounded by various warning messages, graphs, and reading charts.

"No... no, that can't be true. That's simply not possible," she whispered to herself.

She turned her attention back to Starlight for a moment, gauging the levels of magic she was radiating, then turning back to the Timekeeper's readings. They were a perfect match in frequency, source location, and size.

"This bloody thing's just old," she muttered, shaking her head. "There's no way these readings are right."

Starlight's power aura enlarged, growing brighter by the second. The earth beneath her rumbled and cracked apart; lightning bursts sprung about, tearing apart rocks and gemstones alike; a fierce gale pounded away at the ponies standing against her; dust and dirt levitated in the air, weightless in the field of power.

The surge of magic showed no signs of slowing down. It flowed from Starlight, exploding in the air around her. A bolt of power lashed out at Twilight; she leapt aside to avoid it. It ripped apart the earth beneath where she'd been standing like brittle glass. The earth shook with the ferocity of a major earthquake, loosening rocks from all across the cavern. Loosened materials gravitated towards the field of energy radiating from Starlight, crumbling to pieces and swirling inwards as they drew close. Even the ponies around her were drawn in slightly by the intense pull.

"Starlight, enough!" Twilight called, worried. "You're going to bring down the whole mountain on top of us!"

Starlight smirked. "I assure you, Sparkle, that if such an event were to occur, I possess



unlimited magical strength; no injury will befall anypony. You will owe your lives to me! You will wish you never dared show such *insolence* to a goddess amongst mares!”

Rainbow stepped alongside Twilight. “Twilight, she’s gone nuts! Do something!”

Twilight gulped, then shook her head. “I don’t think I can.”

“What d’ya mean ya don’t think ya *can*?” Applejack exclaimed. “Y’all ‘re the Element of *Magic*. That’s magic, ain’t it? Show her what’s what!”

“I... t-there’s too much,” Twilight said. “I don’t have that kind of power.”

“She just said you *do!*” Rainbow blurted. “You just gotta tap into it! This isn’t the time to be worried about what we think of your power!”

Twilight shook her head. “I... I can’t...”

Tick Tock’s Timekeeper sounded an alarm, drawing her attention. She watched the screen turn from green to red, and it began shaking violently. The charts struggled to keep up with the rise in power, and the warning messages became more urgent. The message on the top was the most jarring, reading, *Catastrophic Event Imminent. Advise Emergency Measure Two.*

She turned back to Starlight, and narrowed her eyes. She took a deep breath, then stepped forward. “Allow me.”

“What?” Twilight said. “Tick Tock, you sense the same power as I do, right? What do you think—”

“Trust me, Sparkle,” Tick Tock said, keeping herself calm. “I’ll get us out of this.”

She trotted towards Starlight with confidence in her step, wading right into the field of magical power like it was nothing. She moved forward until she was only about a dozen yards away from Starlight herself, the smuggest grin she could manage upon her face.

“Well, this proves an intriguing development,” Starlight said, raising an eyebrow and smiling. “Tick Tock, self-proclaimed expert travel guide, come to challenge me? Correct me if I am mistaken.”

“On the contrary, Shadow,” Tick Tock said. “Challenging you implies there’s a challenge to begin with. I was suckered in at first, I’ll admit, but now I can see your little display is just for show. I must commend your talents with attitudinizing magicks. Bravo.”

Starlight was taken aback for a moment, then glared at Tick Tock. "I apologize, but I must have misheard you. Would you please repeat what you just iterated to me?"

Tick Tock smiled. "Certainly! I said your magic is an impressive show of an attitudinization spell. Proper flashy, I must say. I've seen better, though. I'm impressed, but not *that* impressed."

"Are... are you positing the claim that my magic is apocryphal?" Starlight asked, eyebrow twitching. "This is *not* an 'attitudinizing' spell, or whatever inane babble it is you are spewing!"

"Really?" Tick Tock shook her head. "You must think I'm bleeding daft. Ask anypony here, they'll tell you that's exactly what you're doing. Why not ask your sister, Curaçao? She seems an intelligent one."

Starlight snarled, then turned to her sisters. "Curaçao, illustrate for this imbecile the fact that this is *not* an attitudinizing spell!"

Curaçao pointed at herself. "Moi? I... oh..." She hesitated. "I 'ave no idea vhat zat even is, ma capitaine. Je suis désolé."

"How could you possibly have no inkling as to its nature?!" Starlight snapped. "Its appellation is the surest clue!"

Tick Tock turned to the ponies behind her. "Surely you lot agree with me?"

Applejack turned to Twilight. "Well?"

Twilight blushed and looked away. "I'd rather not say."

"Uh... okay." Applejack turned to Rainbow instead. "Y'all got any idea what they're all yammerin' on about?"

Rainbow shook her head. "Not a clue."

Rarity gave a dainty little cough, drawing their attention.

Applejack rolled her eyes. "I suppose y'all know what a aduzatta... attinuzeday..."

"Attitudinizing," Rarity said.

"Yeah, that."

"Wait, hang on a second," Rainbow said, holding up a hoof. "You're all just pulling my

leg, right? No way that attitudinizing is a real word. You had me going for a minute there, guys. Good one.”

Twilight sighed. “Oh, it’s a real word all right. Look it up when we get back home.”

“What kinda spell is it?” Applejack asked.

Rarity smiled. “It’s rather simple, really. It works sort of like…” She paused, and tapped her chin in thought. “Oh dear, what is it you rough and tumble *earth ponies* do?”

Applejack raised an eyebrow. “Huh?”

Rarity dismissed the thought with a wave of her hoof. “Perhaps pegasi would be a better example.” She turned to Rainbow. “Rainbow Dash, you’re a pegasus. You are aware of how pegasi ‘show off’ their wings?”

Rainbow quirked an eyebrow. “Uh… I guess? Huh?”

Rarity rolled her eyes. “*You know*. I mean, when they *really* ‘show them off’,” she added in a sultry tone, giving Rainbow a sly wink. “I’m sure *Pinkie* knows all about it.”

Rainbow turned red. “Ohhh… oh yeah… *that*.”

“Y’all mean, like when they get all stiff ‘n’ stuff?” Applejack asked.

“Yes, that’s it,” Rarity said. “That’s the pegasus version of ‘attitudinizing’. I understand pegasi tend to use another name,” she continued, giving Rainbow a sidelong smirk. “Isn’t that right, Rainbow Dash?”

Rainbow coughed nervously into her hooves. “Wingboner,” she muttered.

“Well, it’s sort of a courting gesture, you understand.” Rarity sighed and flipped her mane. “For unicorns, we utilize an attitudinizing spell, which provides a grand, harmless display of our magic in an attempt to court a mate. It’s rather outdated; nowadays, ponies more often intermarry with other pony races, so more all-encompassing forms of courting are used: flowers, chocolates, and the like.”

“So, Starlight is *flirting* with her?” Rainbow asked. “Wait, and Tick Tock’s seen *better*?”

Tick Tock laughed. “I met a colt while I was in training, and he had a *grand* attitudinization spell. Certainly knew how to back it up too, if you catch my drift. I certainly didn’t spend all those nights *studying*.”

“Silence! I am performing no such act!” Starlight shouted, her face a furious red.

“I’m dreadfully sorry to break the news, Shadow, but I’m straight. You’re not my type anyway,” Tick Tock said, shaking her head. “But don’t get your knickers in a twist. I’m sure you’re just the bloody rage back in the city. Why, I bet the mares and stallions *come* for miles!”

“Oh Celestia, she’s gonna get us all killed,” Rainbow said, putting a hoof to her face.

“Tick Tock!” Twilight shouted. “What in Equestria do you think you’re *doing?*!”

Tick Tock ignored her, and continued. “In fact, Shadow, I’d go as far to say that that’s all you can do with this: get a bedmate for a raunchy evening.”

“Excuse me?!” Starlight snapped.

“Bloody shame, too. If you used this kind of magic for something a little less explicit, I bet you’d be *great* for foals’ birthday parties. This is easily more impressive than any bleedin’ clown I’ve ever seen. You would make some little colt or filly very happy, you know?” Tick Tock put a hoof to her mouth to cover a mischievous smirk. “Or maybe you’re more suited to *adult* parties? Wink wink, nudge nudge?”

“Are... are you serious?” Starlight asked, her eyebrow twitching. “You cannot be serious. You simply *cannot* be serious.”

“Very serious, in fact.” Tick Tock tapped her chin. “Where did you get your training, by the way? I hear Sun Glow’s School of Sorcery has a very well-regarded attitudinizing program, and very affordable too. You must have graduated top of your class!”

“You... you *must* be attempting to make a mockery of me.” Starlight turned to Insipid. “Insipid, did you strike this delusional imbecile upon her head one time too many?”

Insipid shrugged. “Um, like, no?”

Starlight turned back to Tick Tock and scowled. “I must advise you against progressing along this train of thought any further. While my orders permit me to utilize lethal force against you, I am of the opinion that apprehending you alive would be a preferable option. If you do not cease this attempt at repartee, I may discard my genial treatment of you.”

“A threat, is it?” Tick Tock overdramatically swooned. “Oh no, I am *quaking* in my horseshoes.” She laughed, and dismissed Starlight’s words with a hoof. “You want me to shut up? Make me.”

“Oh sweet Celestia, she *is* gonna get us all killed!” Rainbow blurted.

“Tick Tock, have you gone *insane?!?*” Twilight yelled.

“Trust me, Twilight,” Tick Tock said. “This feeble showpony couldn’t blast her way out of a paper bag.”

“*Enough!*” Starlight snapped. “My tolerance can only persevere through so much insult from such an insufferable ignoramus!”

“Ooh, ‘ignoramus’?” Tick Tock chuckled. “Impressive. Moving up our name-calling, are we? Well, two can play at that game, you gibbering *git*.”

“And there it is,” Rainbow said, putting her face in her hooves. “We’re dead.”

“I’ll use small words so that you’ll be sure to understand me, you warthog-faced buffoon.”

Pinkie shook violently in place. “Pinchy knee... *pinchy knee*.”

Tick Tick shook her head and continued. “Your problem is that you’re the single most repulsive creature I have ever seen with my own two eyes.” She blanched. “Foals weep when you walk the streets. Mares shield their eyes and say, ‘By the stars, what is that *thing?*’ Thousands of mirrors have lost their lives in vain at the sight of your hideous, pus-ridden, foul, grime-encrusted visage.”

“This is *not* something any delicate ears should be hearing,” Lockwood said, placing his hooves over Fluttershy’s ears.

Starlight seethed, and through clenched teeth said, “If you are quite finished—”

“I’m *not* finished, you pathetic excuse for a unicorn. Show some manners,” Tick Tock interrupted. “You may be able to speak that way to the foul, germ-infested, scum-ridden grunge that you no doubt bathe in, but you do *not* get to speak like that to *normal* ponies. My ears don’t quite pick up on the wavelength of your abhorrent dialect.

“You are nothing more than an egotistical, repugnant, puerile excuse for a pony, with nothing good to offer the world. Nothing good, save for being the bar set at the absolute lowest point possible, so that the rest of the universe can measure themselves against you and even the worst of the worst can breathe a sigh of relief and say, ‘Well, at least I’m not Starlight Shadow’.” Tick Tock slowly clapped her hooves together. “And for that, I applaud you, you nauseating heap of excrement.”

“I... am going to *kill you*,” Starlight hissed.

Tick Tock gasped. “Oh, I’m sorry, I said I wouldn’t use big words, didn’t I? Bloody irresponsible of me. I’ll keep it simple then.” She cleared her throat. “You’re just a huge, thick clod. A world-class moron. A grade-A nimrod. An idiot. You are nothing more than a knock-kneed, dim-witted, slack-jawed, pug-nosed, *trollop!*”

“Oh good *heavens!*” Rarity gasped. She then overdramatically swooned; Applejack caught her.

Starlight breathed heavily for a few moments, then paused and turned to Twilight. “Sparkle. Gather your friends and relocate to someplace safe. Preferably a pronounced distance away.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “Starlight?”

“Oh, this is rich,” Tick Tock laughed. “Look at her, trying to act like she’s tough.” She turned to Twilight and gestured for her and the others to move away. “Go on, Sparkle. Humor the poor filly. It will make her feel better about herself, and for that, the universe will thank you. The poor dear must have bloody low self-esteem.”

“Tick Tock, I am *not* going to move aside so that Starlight can... can *kill* you!”

Tick Tock smirked. “Sparkle, please, just do it. Trust me,” she added with a wink. “I’m in no danger. Look”—she took several dozen steps back and held a hoof out to the side—“I’ll even give the nearsighted simpleton a clear target.”

“She sounds confident, Twi. Let’s not argue with her,” Rainbow said. She dragged Pinkie as quickly as she could away from the line of fire.

“If she’s got a death wish... then who’re we to argue?” Applejack muttered. “I don’t wanna do it any more than y’all do, Twi, but... but what else can we do?”

“Miss Tock, you don’t have to do this,” Flathoof said.

“We can talk this out,” Lockwood added. “A little apology goes a long way.”

“That’s right,” Twilight said. “Please, Tick Tock... just apologize. You just got hit on the head too many times, and are a little skewed right now, right? *Right?*”

“I assure you, Sparkle, I am quite sane at the moment,” Tick Tock replied. “Go on. Get moving.”

“This dilatory conversation ends now!” Starlight shouted. “There is a unicorn that requires immediate vaporization! Relocate *now!*”

Twilight gulped, then moved with the rest of her friends to a safe distance. "Tick Tock..."

Tick Tock shook her head. "Don't worry about me, Sparkle. This twit isn't a threat to me."

"I have heard enough!" Starlight spat. "*Die!*"

She collected all of her ambient energy into a tiny ball at the tip of her horn. It remained there for a brief second, then exploded in a cone-shaped beam aimed directly at Tick Tock. The magical blast tore through the air, sending shockwaves of power rippling outwards, ripping apart the ground and air alike. The noise sounded like thunder, dynamite, and an earthquake mixed together in an unsettling, ear-wrenching combination.

Tick Tock pulled Zenith's Timekeeper from her pocket. The device was vibrating so violently that it threatened to leap right out of her hoof. "About bloody time."

She twisted a knob on the side of the Timekeeper, then threw it with all her might directly into the path of the energy blast screeching towards her.

The beam struck the device with a resounding crack, and a great spark of energy crackled outwards from the point of impact. A split second later, the stopwatch exploded in a terrific flash of blinding, brilliant white light.

When the light and smoke cleared, Twilight and her friends unshielded their eyes and cleared their throats. The sight they were greeted with was beyond absurd. Unimaginable. Unfathomable. Completely impossible.

The massive burst of magical energy had stopped in mid-air, bursting outwards from Starlight's horn like a great cone of light, just inches from Tick Tock's unflinching face. Shockwaves of incredible energy, also stopped, spread both around Starlight and beneath the path of the energy blast, burning a scar along the cavern floor.

Starlight and her sisters, too, were frozen in place, all caught with different expressions: Starlight stood with a look of the purest, most unadulterated rage spread across her face; Inspid's jaw hung slack, dumbfounded by Starlight's display; Curaçao had shielded her eyes from the light generated by Starlight's attack; Havocwing watched in eager anticipation, her eyes and smile wide; Grayscale stood firm and stared forward, expressionless as always, to the point that one couldn't tell if she was actually frozen in place or just pretending; Velvet was in a more eager state of anticipation than Havocwing, her tongue on her lips as if she'd been caught in the middle of salivating.

Yet, despite the other six being frozen in place, Twilight and her friends found they could all move normally.

Tick Tock trotted over to them, not just alive and well, but as cocky as ever. "You're welcome."

Applejack shook her head. "I don't got any idea what I'm seein'... an' I don't think I ever will."

Rainbow trotted over to Havocwing and bopped her on the nose. No reaction. "Okay, this is pretty cool."

"Tick Tock... what did you do?" Twilight asked. "This is... this is high-level Chronomancy..."

"I activated the Timekeeper's failsafe emergency measure, which only works in the presence of cataclysmic-level Void magicks," Tick Tock explained. "Easy peasy."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Wait, the Timekeeper? I thought you said you lost yours."

"Don't tell me you've had it all this time," Flathoof said, narrowing his eyes.

Tick Tock sighed. "Pewter... gave me a replacement, of sorts. It belonged to my predecessor and mentor, Zenith. Unfortunately, the failsafe requires a self-detonation in order to release the required amount of counteractive magicks, so... I am once again without a Timekeeper."

"Your mentor's Timekeeper..." Rarity muttered. "A sentimental item, I take it?"

"Very much so, yes. He was... like a father to me." Tick Tock rubbed under her eye. "I did what I had to do."

"You sacrificed such a treasured keepsake... for us?" Rarity frowned and patted Tick Tock's back. "Darling... thank you."

"Don't get all sappy on me," Tick Tock said, shrugging Rarity off. "This is my job, after all. I plan on seeing it through to the end, at any cost."

"So wait. I don't understand," Twilight said, hoof to her chin. "You mentioned Void magic. How is that possible?"

"Elementary, my dear Sparkle. Shadow's magic somehow stems from a Void source." She held up her hoof to preemptively interrupt Twilight's question. "I know it's as impossible as it sounds, but Timekeeper readings are one-hundred percent infallible. This would explain how she has so much power. Void magicks have nearly limitless potential, even in tiny amounts."



Larger amounts can do greater things, sometimes things that can break the very laws of magic. Void energy packed into a body of her size would theoretically contain enough power to trigger a cataclysmic-level event, if prodded.”

“So what gives with all o’ *this*?” Applejack asked, gesturing a hoof around the sight of frozen magic and ponies. “The stopped-in-mid-air business, I mean.”

“Yes, I was wondering that as well,” Twilight said.

“I think we all are,” Flathoof added.

Tick Tock cleared her throat. “The failsafe measure reacts with Void magic to alter the flow of time, allowing the Chronomancer proper time to utilize their natural Chronomancy to seal the portal causing the cataclysmic event. We can’t do that in real time because the Void magicks react too quickly.

“What you’re seeing here is all of us moving through time at greater than normal speed. The effect allows both for the activating Chronomancer and anypony else in the immediate vicinity whose magical signature they have registered to their Timekeeper, to act as normal and can interact with the world from a unique perspective.

“I registered all of you at the checkpoint while you were sleeping, so you are all under the spell with me. Of course, I neglected to register our other traveling companions, so they are unaffected. Thus, to us, they appear to be moving slower.”

“You never trusted them,” Twilight muttered.

“Not a one. Glad to see my mistrust was not misplaced.” Tick Tock chuckled. “Bloody shame, too. We could’ve used their help if they weren’t evil gits.”

“So, what does that have to do with all the insults?” Rainbow asked. “I just thought you kinda went all... *stupid* on us.”

“Or crazy,” Twilight said.

“Or stupid crazy,” Flathoof added.

Tick Tock laughed. “Stupid and crazy like a bloody fox. The failsafe requires a massive amount of Void magicks present to activate. While Shadow was closing in on that amount, she hadn’t reached it yet. I needed the proper amount of magic to utilize the failsafe and get us out of this little jam, so I goaded her into releasing the necessary energy required.”

“Well, *that* certainly worked,” Flathoof scoffed. “You had us all worried sick, Miss Tock.”

"I suppose I see why you didn't tell us, either," Rarity said. "It would've ruined the surprise if Starlight had known what you were trying to do."

"Precisely," Tick Tock replied.

"So we're really... frozen in time?" Applejack said. She removed her hat and shook her head. "I ain't never seen nothin' like it."

"It's only in effect for a short time, roughly one minute in real time. So, to us, an hour," Tick Tock said. "Although we still have plenty of time, we still should be getting a move on. We have the opportunity here to buy ourselves some distance and lose them. We have my map, after all, so they cannot navigate the caverns accurately. Shadow will likely teleport them outside and take an alternate route."

"And hopefully they lose time doing so," Twilight agreed. "It might be enough to get a decent lead."

"Best of all, we can still track them with my map if they're close, so they won't be able to get the jump on us," Tick Tock added. "We can use this advantage to ensure we stay out of their way until we reach Hope's Point."

"Why don't we do something to them here and now?" Rainbow asked, swooping back over to Havocwing. "We can like tie them up or something, so they waste time before following us."

Tick Tock shook her head. "Unfortunately, as I noted earlier, we can only interact with the rest of the world in a unique fashion. Things we touch or affect magically will have their effects manifest as normal, though to us we'd see the reaction take place in slow-motion. We cannot pick up or move objects, as they cannot change position in space at the same rate we do."

"So that means we have to leave our supplies behind too, don't it?" Applejack asked.

"Sadly, yes. While I know of a few water sources between here and Hope's Point, food is going to be bloody scarce. We have a long road ahead. But enough chatter, let's get... moving..."

Tick Tock paused to look directly at Starlight Shadow. She trotted over to the other unicorn, a curious expression on her face.

"Tick Tock?" Twilight said. "What's up?"

Tick Tock shook her head. "This can't be right..."

“Is something wrong?”

“I can’t make an exact calculation, but Starlight appears to be moving... faster than I expected.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow. “What does that mean?”

Tick Tock ushered Twilight away from Starlight. “It means that her magic is overpowering the time alteration spell.”

“Can she do that?”

“Unfortunately, I activated the failsafe mechanism for a Level One Cataclysmic Event. If Shadow had more power in her spell than I calculated, it would have required a more powerful countermeasure, which I did not activate.”

Twilight gulped, and cantered alongside Tick Tock, who was increasing her pace. “I... assume this means we need to get moving.”

“Quite. Come along, everypony! Our window of opportunity is—”

She stopped, and stared directly at Starlight again. Starlight’s head had tilted, if only just slightly, in their direction.

“Oh bugger...”

“What now?” Rainbow asked.

“Now... we run!” Tick Tock shouted. She pushed her way to the fore of the group and drew out her map. “She’s overpowering the spell more quickly than I thought!”

“Let’s move, everypony!” Twilight shouted, galloping to catch up with Tick Tock. “Applejack, Flathoof! We have injured; help them keep up!”

“Right behind ya, Twi!” Applejack said. She leaned under Rarity and tossed her up onto her back. “Hang on tight, sugarcube.”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing anything else, darling,” Rarity said, wrapping her hooves around Applejack’s neck.

Lockwood assisted Fluttershy in getting on Flathoof’s back, then turned to do the same with Pinkie.

Rainbow swooped over and scooped Pinkie up in her hooves. "Hooves off, pal. I'll get Pinkie, you worry about yourself."

"Dashie, should you be flying right now?" Pinkie asked, eyes wide.

"I'll be fine, Pinks."

Lockwood nodded. "If you're sure, Miss Dash."

Rainbow grunted, then flew to catch up with Twilight and Tick Tock.

The party only managed to make it to the opening leading for the gryphon ruins when they heard a fierce explosion behind them; Starlight's energy blast had impacted the wall well behind its intended target.

They heard Starlight scream, "After them!"

"Run!" Twilight shouted.

"This way!" Tick Tock shouted, moving along the northern path.

The party galloped at top speed towards the gryphon ruins in a desperate attempt to escape. They rounded a corner, and the cavern suddenly smoothed out into a silvery metal substance that paved the walls, ceiling, and floor. They didn't have time to ask questions; they just pressed on.

"I see them!" Havocwing shouted.

Tick Tock led the party through the hallway they'd entered and through a large archway. "Come on! We can lose them in here!"

"Go on! I'll hold them off!" Twilight shouted.

She waited outside the archway to ensure that her friends all got through. She saw Havocwing barrel around the corner behind them just as Applejack and Rarity, who were taking up the rear, passed through the arch. Twilight, too, passed through the arch, then paused when an odd sensation sparked through her body.

"What the—" she muttered.

"Gotcha!" Havocwing screamed.

Crunch.

Havocwing slammed into an invisible barrier inches from Twilight's face, and slid to the floor. Twilight didn't waste time questioning it, and turned to follow her friends into the darkness of the hallway.

Starlight and her sisters caught up to Havocwing less than a minute later, and formed a line in front of the archway.

"Havocwing!" Starlight snapped. "Did you *lose* them?!"

Havocwing grumbled and staggered to her hooves. "Ugh... I think I hit something..."

Starlight grabbed Havocwing by the throat with her magic and shook her, violently. "Havoc! Respond to my inquiry, immediately!"

"Hey. Whoa. Ease up, boss." Havocwing grunted. "There's this... *thing* in the way. Those losers got through, but I can't."

Starlight glared at the hallway. "A force field? Ha! Imbeciles."

She lit up her horn, and fired a burst of dispel magic at the archway. It struck the invisible barrier.

Absolutely nothing happened.

Starlight's eyebrow twitched. "What?"

"Was... something supposed to happen?" Havocwing asked.

"Um..." Starlight coughed. "Perhaps, as an imperceptible barrier, we could not observe the dispel occurring. Havoc, assay the constitution of the impediment."

Havocwing raised an eyebrow. "Ass the what?"

Starlight groaned. "Test the barrier's strength. I desire evidence that my dispel magic worked."

"Oh. Well, okay then."

Havocwing chucked a tiny fireball straight at the archway. The projectile bounced off the still-solid, still-invisible barrier, then blew up in Inspid's face.

“Blech!” Insipid coughed. She frantically patted black soot off her face. “Havoc! You, like, got crud all over me!”

Havocwing shrugged, barely containing a laugh. “Oops.”

“Impossible,” Starlight snorted. “This is simply impossible!”

She fired another spell. Nothing. Another. Nothing. Another. Nothing.

This continued on for several minutes before Curaçao finally stepped forward and coughed to draw Starlight’s attention. “Euh, ma capitaine?”

“*What?*” Starlight snapped. “Can you not see that I am occupied?!”

“Oui, but, zis seems to be somezing beyond you, non?”

“There is *nothing* beyond my insurmountable power,” Starlight hissed, firing off another bolt. Again, nothing.

“Per’aps, but zen again, zere are some zings zat may be beyond your understanding.”

“Nopony’s perfect,” Grayscale added.

“And what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?” Starlight asked, turning her glare to Curaçao. “Are you implying that my comprehension of magic is deficient? Who could possibly possess more expertise on the subject of magic than myself?”

“Vell, zere is *one* unicorn I know for certain zat knows more about magic zan anypony.” Curaçao put her hoof on Starlight’s shoulder. “Per’aps ve should ask ‘im?”

Starlight paused. “You are suggesting that we inquire about this with father.”

Curaçao nodded. “Oui.”

Insipid giggled. “Oh, Curie’s so smart! I bet daddy would know what to do!”

Starlight stomped her hoof. “Absolutely not! I will *not* have him made aware of my—” She stopped herself, and cleared her throat. “Of *your* failures! Why, I can just imagine how he will discipline you all,” she added, glaring at Velvet.

Havocwing rolled her eyes. “Relax, boss. He’ll understand. It’s not like it’s *our* fault there’s this barrier in the way. He might know a way through. Besides, worse comes to worst, they can’t have gone too far. We’ll catch ‘em on the other side of the mountains. No big deal.”

"Vell said, 'avocving," Curaçao said, clapping Havocwing on the shoulder.

"Yeah, well said, Havocwing!" Inspid repeated, clapping Havocwing on her other shoulder.

"Don't touch me," Havocwing muttered.

Starlight snarled. "Fine!" she shouted, shaking her head. "Fine! Since you are all so thoroughly sanguine, then *fine*, we shall go visit father!"

She channeled another spell, and she and her sisters disappeared with a flash and a pop.

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Shroud opened the door to her office that morning, and was greeted by the usual mountain of paperwork upon her desk. With a heavy breath, she brushed strands of her red mane out of her eyes, adjusted her glasses, then took her seat and immediately set to work. She always found herself saddled with more paperwork than she felt one mare was capable of doing, but somehow she always managed to come through. If there was one thing she'd learned from years of experience as Lord Silvertongue's personal secretary, it was that diligence and hard work paid off, and that complaining did not.

She glanced out the window. Today had certainly started off differently, even if now it was back to her everyday pattern. Most of her paperwork confirmed what she'd seen on her way to Pandora Tower that morning: a bright beam of light bursting through the air above the city, clearing smog and the Beacon's magic alike. It had been surreal, seeing the *real* sky above the city. She could still see faint traces of it now; the smog and magic had not amassed enough to cover it. It was early morning; the sky was filled with purples and blues.

*It really is beautiful... no wonder ponies want to move to Utopia.*

She turned back to her work; this was no time to get distracted. She had her own work to do, and she knew her employer had been working around the clock to do... something. She'd never known him to be more active than these past few days, nor to be as distant. He'd been strangely quiet, locked in his private quarters and rarely taking meals. He had only contacted her a sparse few times, and was otherwise not taking visitors. He had not, however, absolved Shroud of her duties, so she continued to provide him with daily reports on the city's happenings. It was dreadfully boring, not having actual assignments, but whatever her employer wanted, he was going to get.

Unfortunately, continued distractions seemed to be the topic of the day. The air inside

her office buzzed with magic; Shroud recognized it as the signature of a teleportation spell. There was only one pony she was expecting as a visitor.

*Oh my, a visit already? I hope he has a assignment for me.*

In a panic, she double-checked to make sure her mane was still neatly tied in a bun, that her suit and skirt were straight, and that not a hair was out of place on her hot pink coat.

There was a flash and a pop, and then the room was occupied by six other mares.

*What are they doing here? Aren't they supposed to be out in the desert?*

She knew well who Starlight Shadow and her “sisters” were, or at least knew as much as Lord Silvertongue made available to her. She knew of their powers, and of their mission. She knew not where they’d come from, nor how they’d come into Lord Silvertongue’s employ, but she knew of the mysterious circumstances and timing in which it had happened. She also knew that these six considered her employer their adoptive father. This would be their first meeting.

Two of the mares, Insipid and Havocwing, if she recalled correctly, sputtered and coughed as the teleport wore off; the others did not seem to mind much.

“Ech. Blech!” Insipid blanched, scraping her tongue. “Eww... what is that, like, taste? Ugh! Ech!”

“It may take you some time to get used to teleportation, ma copine,” the blue mare, Curaçao, said, patting Insipid’s shoulder.

While the other five mares glanced about the office, Starlight stepped forward. Shroud was of the understanding that the purple unicorn was the team leader of these six mares, so she was not surprised to see her taking charge.

“Where is our father located?” she asked, firm and confident. “We desire a conversation with him, but did not find him in his office.”

Shroud raised an eyebrow, surprised at Starlight’s bluntness and stern voice. She sounded eerily like Lord Silvertongue did when he was particularly aggravated. Though even while annoyed, Lord Silvertongue was always polite and referred to her by name. Did Starlight even *know* Shroud’s name?

“Forgive me ladies,” Shroud replied, maintaining her professionalism, “but Lord Silvertongue has been in his chambers for the past four days—”

“His private chambers, of course,” Starlight said. “I had worried about rousing him from



his slumber.” She turned to the others and trotted over to them. “Come, sisters. We go to see father.”

“No, wait!” Shroud exclaimed.

The six mares disappeared with the same flash and pop they’d arrived with.

*Well, I warned them.*

Shroud shook her head, then got back to work.

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Silvertongue shifted uneasily in his great, throne-like chair, and threw another datapad aside with disgust. The datapad landed in a pile behind him, which had by now grown so large that it took up an entire corner of his spacious personal chambers, tall enough to tower over even a pony of above-average height. It was the second such pile; the other had taken up a second corner of the room. His chambers were running out of space to discard useless inventory.

With a grunt, he grabbed another datapad from the slowly-emptying shelf near his desk with his magic, then set it upon said desk and perused it with diligence. His eyes flickered back and forth across the words and images on the display, searching for a very specific symbol, one that had eluded him for days. He wished he had not been so thorough in the past at concealing matters of great importance.

It had taken four sleepless days and nights for him to get this far in his search, and the investigation had taken its toll on his appearance. His natural eye had become bloodshot. His abnormal other eye, with its blackened sclera and golden, iris-less pupil, was quite the opposite. In fact, it seemed to be flourishing more and more by the day: the pupil had grown to the size of a typical pupil and had a healthy, luminous glow. Days without washing had made his mane and tail grow ragged and oily; his coat was sweaty and dirty. His normally impeccable uniform was now disheveled and caked with sweat, and had no luster whatsoever.

He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose, and, with a grumble, threw the datapad aside and reached out for another to replace it. But, before he could draw it forth, his thoughts were dashed by the familiar feeling of magical energy behind him; the signature of a teleportation spell. His golden pupil pulsed with enthusiasm, as if reacting to the magical energies.

His daughters were here.

There was a flash and a pop, and where there had once been no mares, there were six.

Havocwing and Insipid coughed as they stepped out of the teleportation matrix; their sisters seemed unaffected. He stifled a laugh; those two were clearly not accustomed to being teleported yet.

“Ah, my daughters,” Silvertongue said, rising from his chair and stepping towards them. “I did not expect you back so soon.”

Starlight cleared her throat, stepped forward, and bowed low. “Father, it gladdens me to be in your presence again.”

The six mares eyes him with looks of concern. He knew immediately why, but asked anyway: “You seem distressed. Is something the matter?”

Starlight nervously glanced at her sisters, then back to him. “Well... if you do not mind me prying, father, you appear... um... how should I phrase this?”

“You look like hell, pops,” Havocwing said.

Starlight shot her a glare. “Havoc!”

Havocwing shrugged defensively. “What? Somepony needed to say it. Sorry, pops, but you do.”

“You believe me to be in dire straits?” Silvertongue asked, raising an eyebrow. He wanted an honest answer; if his daughters were to be as powerful as he knew they were destined to be, they could not show such uncertainty.

“Oui, papa,” Curaçao said, taking a step forward. “Votre apparence est négligé.”

He laughed, and smoothed his oily mane back. “Ah, of course. Forgive me if I do appear to have disregarded my demeanor, but I assure you, there is nothing wrong with me. I do suppose I look rather unprofessional. I apologize if I am causing any worry.”

“Are you certain you are well, father?” Starlight asked, stepping forward and pressing her hoof against his leg. “If you require attention, we would be exceedingly exultant to oblige.”

“Yeah, some of us more than others,” Velvet muttered with a smirk.

Starlight shot her a fierce glare, and hissed, “Velvet! Silence!”

Silvertongue shook his head and put his hoof upon Starlight’s shoulder. “Fear not, daughter. I assure you, I am of spritely health. I have merely gone many a restless night as of late due to my research. I have had a curiosity that required immediate attention, for it may

prove of use to your mission's future steps."

"May we be of assistance? It would bring me no dearth of felicity to pursue enlightenment alongside you."

"Regretfully, my research is of lesser importance than other matters at hoof. Your assignments take precedence; assisting me would delay your success." Silvertongue smiled and turned to the other five. "Incidentally, as you have returned, I assume that your first task has met with success."

Starlight shifted nervously in place, which drew Silvertongue's attention to her. This only served to make her more nervous. "Well, father, we... we seem to have encountered a minor... conundrum."

Silvertongue's smile faded. "A conundrum, you say? What seems to be the problem? Don't tell me you did not encounter the Elements of Harmony. They cannot have managed to elude you; their lead could not have been so great."

"Oh no, we realized our goal of a rendezvous with them, father," Starlight said, shaking her head. "They encountered complications in the course of traversing the Redblade Mountains."

"So they *did* take the Redblade route?" Silvertongue mused, tapping his hoof to his chin. "The Chronomancer is gutsier than I had initially been led to believe. Curious... but no matter. You managed to link up with their party. What happened next, that causes you such distress? Did your attempts to persuade them to join our cause not take hold?"

Starlight looked to her sisters, then turned back to her father. "I am of the opinion that our progress in that assignment was well beyond my initial prognostication."

"I fail to see, then, where a problem could have arisen." Silvertongue gave each of the six mares a brief, scrutinous gaze. "Some unforeseen circumstance, then? Explain."

Starlight gulped, and attempted not to meet Silvertongue's eyes; she was clearly choosing her words carefully. "An altercation occurred early this morning, some two hours heretofore. Though Curaçao and I attempted to ameliorate the situation, it escalated, and our two troupes came to physical blows."

"I see." Silvertongue frowned, sighed, and stepped away from his daughters. He glanced out the window and watched the smog and Beacon magicks cover up the last few specks of open sky, then shook his head. "Most troubling indeed. What course of action did you pursue after your victory? I can only assume that you suitably trounced the Elements of Harmony in battle."

“We did indeed,” Starlight said, nodding. “Subsequently, we attempted to apprehend them, that we could deliver them to you, but...” Starlight hesitated, then cleared her throat. “The Chronomancer utilized some heretofore unknown ability to amend the flow of time for her and her companions, allowing them to escape.”

“Where did they flee to?”

Starlight gave a small smile. “Prior to the physical engagement, I precluded any chance of absconding through the caves into the eastern Wastelands. Their only option was to retreat into the Gryphon Ruins, where I was convinced they could not elude us.”

“And yet, here you are.” Silvertongue snorted in disgust. “It would seem you made a poor judgement call, my dear. What manner of escape method did they devise that they could elude you?”

Starlight hung her head in shame. “Some manner of force field barricaded the entryway, and while the Elements of Harmony and their friends proceeded within without hardship, we could not. Even *my* immeasurable magic could not dispel the barrier. Our theory was that you, father, with your expertise on the subject of magic, would be able to concoct a solution to our dilemma.”

Silvertongue stood in silence for a long moment. This was truly a perplexing predicament, one that troubled him deeply. The barrier was active? That shouldn’t be possible after all these years. What had caused it to reactivate?

He dismissed the dilemma with a wave of his hoof and laughed. “I am afraid that I possess no such solution for you, my daughters. The barrier surrounding the ruins is of a most ancient magic, far beyond the understandings of some of our greatest pony scholars. Worry not; you will surely encounter the Elements of Harmony again in the near future. This is only a minor delay at best.”

Starlight looked to her sisters, then turned back to her father, eyebrow raised. “Then... you are not disconcerted?”

“Disconcerted?” Silvertongue chuckled as he turned from the window to face his daughters again, then shook his head. “Oh, my *dear* Starlight Shadow, I am absolutely *furious* right now.”

Starlight gulped. “F-furious, father? Y-you do not appear to be in such a state.”

Silvertongue closed his eyes and let out a long breath. “It astounds me to no end, how every situation involving the Chronomancer and her charges meets with astoundingly poor

performances from my subordinates. Subordinates who, I might add, have never *once* failed me prior. They are now being made to look as useless fools, and their inadequacies reflect upon me.”

He turned back to the window. “I am beginning to think there is some higher power at work here, trying to protect the Elements of Harmony from my plans for them.”

“Father... p-please, do not become crestfallen,” Starlight said. She stepped forward and put her hoof to his hind leg. “As you iterated, this is merely an ephemeral hindrance.”

Silvertongue sighed, then turned back to Starlight and put his hoof upon her head. “Fear not, my daughter. I am well aware of how temporary this setback is. They will be forced to leave the ruins eventually, and will still need to cross the eastern Wastelands if they hope to reach their destination. They have but one sensible exit from the ruins as well, so that will simplify your task considerably.”

“Where will their egress be located?”

“The northeastern edge of the mountains, near the Blood Mire.” He turned to his other daughters. “You are to wait in ambush for them, some distance from the opposite edge of that forsaken place. Allow them to believe they have earned reprieve, and to wear themselves down in their passage across. Strike them when they least expect it, when they are at their weakest. Then, you will deliver them to me, as you intended. What little time you managed to spend with them has likely already placed the seeds of corruption in their minds. I will simply force those seeds to blossom myself.”

“Yes, father, this strategy seems most acceptable,” Starlight said with a bow. “We will depart immediately.” She turned to her sisters. “Come! We shall plan—”

“Hold a moment,” Silvertongue said, forcing Starlight to face him again. “We are not done yet, daughter.”

“Oh? What more would you ask of us, father?”

“I wish you to deliver a more detailed report of what occurred in the caves, specifically of what instigated this mishap. If your ‘bonding’ with them was proving as fruitful as you claim, I see no reason why things would have needed to come to blows. You omitted this detail earlier, and I wish it to be made plain.”

Starlight hesitated, and gave Velvet a brief glance. “Um...”

Silvertongue followed her glance for the instance it was there. “Why do you look to your sister? Should I be asking her?”

Starlight's eyes widened for an instant; she had clearly not thought she'd been noticed. "Oh! I... w-well—"

Velvet sighed. "Go on, boss... tell him..."

Starlight paused, and stared at Velvet for a long moment. She then cleared her throat, and turned back to her father. "Red Velvet violated my explicit directive: I instructed her with no uncertainty that she was to persevere in her assignment with Pinkie Pie, despite her inadequate progress. This was subsequent to her request for exchanging targets with Havocwing, who, I add, was performing admirably.

"When her request was denied, she proceeded to attempt utilization of her fear-mongering magicks against Fluttershy nonetheless. An act of insubordination of the highest caliber. Her disobedience compelled Twilight Sparkle and her friends to reconsider their decision to travel alongside us. Following this transgression, she ventured a coup, wielding strength obtained from the fears of the Elements of Harmony."

Silvertongue frowned, then turned to face Velvet. "Is this true, my dear? Did you disobey your younger sister's orders? *My* orders?"

Velvet nervously fumbled with her hooves. "Um... w-well, I... uh... y-yeah I guess, but—"

"This is most troubling." Silvertongue sighed. "My dear, I knew you possessed great potential for unchecked violence and incredible power. I had high hopes for you. I did not think your bloodlust would cloud your better judgement. I am... disappointed, to say the least."

Velvet threw herself to the floor, and looked up at Silvertongue with wide, sad eyes, placing her hooves together in a pleading gesture. "D-daddy, p-please don't be mad at me. I had to do what I had to do because Pinkie wasn't scared of anything I was doing. I just... lost control, that's all."

"Excuses tire me so. I hear them time and time again when my orders go unfulfilled. I grew weary of hearing them long, long ago, and I have no desire to hear them today." He shook his head, and took a few steps towards her. "Learn a lesson from today's experiences. Insubordination will not be tolerated. Failure will not be tolerated."

"But daddy—"

"Mildred Eleanor Velvet! Do *not* interrupt me!"

"Holy shit," Havocwing muttered. "Full name basis, dude." She nervously shuffled to the side to distance herself, as she was closest to Velvet.

Silvertongue sighed, and lit his horn with a bright red glow. "It is time, my dear, that you learned your place."

A sharp bolt of black lightning leapt from his horn and struck Velvet with enough force to send her sailing into the adjacent wall. She struck with a resounding crack, dislodging great swaths of dust and knocking hanging paintings and photographs to the floor. She slumped to the floor for only just a moment, then attempted to stand upright, though she did so with difficulty.

Silvertongue took another step forward and charged his horn again. Velvet was getting up much more quickly than anypony ever had when struck by that spell; he knew well of her high tolerance for pain, and knew that a single bolt would not be enough to suitably discipline her.

"All of my great many efforts have been laid aside by a single careless action."

He blasted Velvet with another bolt of lightning, knocking her back into the wall hard enough to dent the solid metal it was made of. When she attempted to rise, he blasted her again. She would learn not to resist.

"A single *mistake*. A mistake that I will *rectify*."

Velvet lay motionless for a brief moment, then attempted to rise once more. She glanced at her father, her eyes wide with fear.

Silvertongue paused for only a second, then fired a constant stream of lightning at his daughter. Electricity sputtered and hissed and it flared about her body; the force of the blast pinned her against the wall and slowly pushed her upwards. Sparks surged through the air, singing the floral wallpaper. There had been enough power in the blast that an average pony would have likely gone into shock from the pain, if not been killed outright.

"D-daddy... please!" Velvet pleaded in agony.

She clenched her teeth and thrashed about as another pulse of electricity ripped through her. The gash along her spine split open of its own accord, spilling gore on the wall and the floor beneath her. Her blood sizzled and boiled as electricity surged through it.

Silvertongue glanced to the side to see how his other daughters were reacting. Grayscale remained as stoic as ever, but her eyes betrayed her anxiety. Curaçao and Insipid did not hide their utter repulsion, and the latter had long since averted her eyes. Havocwing watched in dismay, hoof to her mouth in shock. Starlight watched the horrific display, her face fierce and resolute, though she nervously tapped her hoof on the floor.

Silvertongue turned his attention back to the struggling Velvet, and fired another bolt. To his surprise, the blast halted mere inches away from its target, enshrouded in a deep purple glow. The glow evaporated his bolt in seconds.

Silvertongue frowned and turned to Starlight, whose horn was aglow.

“Starlight, my dear, what do you think you’re doing?” he asked, turning to face her. He kept his horn aglow, in case he needed his magic quickly. This was an unexpected development.

“Father, I have come to the conclusion that my sister has suffered enough,” Starlight replied, her tone firm but clearly strained.

Curaçao and Havocwing rushed to Velvet’s side and assisted their younger sister in getting up. Velvet’s mane and coat were singed, and her body was bloody and bruised. She could barely stand on her own. Her eyes had become sullen and hollow, and were wet with tears.

Silvertongue huffed. “Enough, you say? My dear, you do not have the privilege of telling me when she has had enough. Or do you think otherwise?”

Starlight paused, and took a half step back. “W-well, I—”

“Now now, Starlight, you have made it quite clear with your actions that you are of the opinion that you have some sort of authority in this matter. Do tell.”

“I... y-yes, father.” Starlight gulped. “She is *my* responsibility, father, as the leader of my troupe. It should fall to me to enact disciplinary action upon her in situations such as these.” She stood tall for a brief moment. “I am of the opinion that she has suffered enough.”

Silvertongue looked into her eyes for a brief moment, then nodded. “A fair point, my daughter. Well spoken indeed. Your flock is yours to command, and thus is yours to punish as you see fit.”

“I... yes, father.”

“But just know,” he added, hardening his gaze, “that this means they are entirely *your* responsibility. Their failures reflect upon you, now. Thus, in the future, any punishments I would lay upon your subordinates I shall instead lay solely upon *you*. Do you understand?”

Starlight nodded. “I do, father.”



“Good.” Silvertongue turned back to the window and stepped over to it. “Now then, you have your amended orders. Carry them out. When I see you next, you had better be carrying those other six with you, and I’d better have that Chronomancer’s head on my desk.”

“As you wish, father.”

Silvertongue waved his hoof, dismissing them. “As for now, I have other business to attend to and I wish not to be disturbed. Leave me.”

“Father,” Starlight said, her voice cracking. “Please, do not be upset with me. I... I did not intend to challenge your authority, I was merely—”

“I believe I asked for you and your sisters to leave me be, Starlight,” Silvertongue grunted.

Starlight frowned and nodded. “Yes, father.” She turned to her sisters and stepped over to them. “Come, sisters. We must formulate our next plan of action.”

With a flash and a pop, they were gone.

Silvertongue paused for a moment in thought. His mind swirled with familiar, dark things. In a sudden burst of rage, he latched onto his desk with his magic and flung it through the window.

*This is not how I intended things to be! Something is amiss here... and I will find out what.*

He took a deep breath, then stepped over to the far wall near his bedside and pressed the button on his intercom. “Shroud,” he said into it.

“Yes, *milord*?” Shroud replied, her tone a mix of surprise and worry.

“I need to attend a meeting with Doctor Blutsauger. Have a fresh uniform prepared for me by the time I have finished my bath.”

“Yes, *of course milord*. Shall I summon Doctor Blutsauger as well?”

Silvertongue paused, then shook his head. “No need. In this situation, I desire to meet him myself. Do not inform him of my coming.”

“*Certainly, milord*. Is there anything else—”

“Just send up my uniform, Shroud. That will be all.”

*“As you wish, milord.”*

Silvertongue shut off the intercom and let out a heavy sigh, then turned to the door of his chambers and made for the bath.

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Silvertongue appeared with a bright hiss just outside the door of Doctor Blutsauger’s office at Central General. He did not waste any time walking through the doors. He glanced over at the desk inside the room. His entrance had drawn the attention of the secretary, who until now had been lazily slumped over her desk, fiddling with her pen.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, taken by surprise. She sat upright and adjusted her tie. “Can I help you, sir? Do you have an appointment?”

“I have no need of an appointment,” Silvertongue said, stepping towards the doors to Blutsauger’s inner office. “Doctor Blutsauger is in, yes?”

The secretary blinked, then coughed into her hoof. “Oh... w-well, yes, he is, but he’s in a very important meeting right now, and—”

“He’ll have time to see me, or I will make time for him.”

“H-hey!” The secretary leapt up from her chair and slammed her hooves on her desk. “Who do you think you are?! You can’t just—”

“Annoying pencil pusher.” Silvertongue sighed, then lit up his horn. “Sleep, and forget.”

A bright glow enshrouded the mare’s head, and her eyes flashed green. In an instant, she slumped back over her desk, fast asleep.

Silvertongue pushed open the doors to Blutsauger’s private office and strode inside. He found the room empty.

“Doctor! We have matters to discuss!” he shouted.

A loud swear came from the room beyond the door to his left, and he heard the clattering of metal and the breaking of glass, followed by more swears. A moment later, the good Doctor Blutsauger staggered out of the examination room, fumbling with his lab coat, his face covered in sweat. Lipstick smears were strewn about his face, his goggles, and the collar of his lab coat.

“Herr Silvertongue!” he exclaimed, giving a brisk salute. “Zis is most unexpected. Und at

such a bad time. To vat do I owe zee pleasure?”

Silvertongue snorted and shook his head with disgust. “Doctor, it would seem as though I’ve caught you with your pants down. The pleasures of the flesh can wait. Tell your ‘patient’ to leave.”

Blutsauger coughed into his hoof. “I... don’t suppose I can finish zee examination? Vee vere so close to finishink our... business.”

Silvertongue narrowed his eyes. His glare was all the answer he needed to give.

Blutsauger gulped. “Ach... ja, of course not. A moment, Herr Silvertongue.”

He hurried back into the examination room, and rushed through a heated, hushed discussion with whoever had been in there with him. He then returned into his office, busily wiping lipstick off his face with a sanitary wipe and frantically straightening his mane. A white pegasus mare darted from the room a moment later, fumbling with her nurse uniform as she flew by.

Silvertongue did not avert his gaze from Blutsauger. “If you are quite finished, Doctor.”

“Um... ja, I am finished,” Blutsauger said as he stood at attention. “Zis must be a matter of great importance for you to come visit me yourself, Herr Silvertongue. Is zere somezink I can help viz?”

“Our joint project has run into a bit of a problem recently. There is a critical flaw that I suspect may have roots in the original creation process, and I seek answers.”

“Oh... is zat all?” Blutsauger asked, eyebrow raised. “I could have brought zis to you if you’d have asked, Herr Silvertongue. Zere vas no need to interrupt—”

“I wished to make this a personal visit, Doctor, for reasons that are my own,” Silvertongue snorted. “Your whore can wait until we are finished with our business.”

“Right... right.” Blutsauger cleared his throat, and gestured for Silvertongue to follow him to his desk. “I have backup copies of all zee files on mein laptop, under heavily-encoded protection. Vee shall review zem togezer, ja?”

Silvertongue nodded, and stood behind Blutsauger as the other unicorn accessed the files. After several dozen password prompts and numerous drive changes, Blutsauger’s files were finally open to review. Twelve files in total, one each for the Elements of Harmony and for their clones, post-corruption. Everything was exactly as Silvertongue remembered it from days previous, when he and Blutsauger first reviewed them.

Silvertongue could not help himself from questioning the obvious, though: “Tell me, Doctor: why do you have these files on your personal laptop? You should have no need for copies; I carried the original files with me.”

Blutsauger’s eyes darted back and forth. “Oh, vell... um... you know, just in case I ever need to... duplicate zee procedure. For emergency purposes only, of course. I do not have your resources, Herr Silvertongue.”

“Duplicate the procedure, hmm?” Silvertongue’s eyes narrowed. “That data isn’t for you to create your own personal harem, Doctor. I truly hope that was never your intention.”

“Nein!” Blutsauger blurted. He cleared his throat again. “Er... nein. Eh heh, ah... I-let’s just... move along, ja? Vat seems to be zee matter viz zem? Zey were in peak physical condition last I checked.”

“There is nothing wrong with them physically, Doctor, I assure you. I am led to believe they performed admirably in the field, as well.”

“Wunderbar! Zis is great news!” Blutsauger cheered. He then paused. “Zen... vat is zee problem?”

“I noticed an odd trait amongst them that was not present when we saw them last, and it concerns me. They have developed... a bond.”

“A bond, Herr Silvertongue?”

“A sisterly bond, to be exact. It was absent when they departed here days ago, but it seems that days within one another’s company, working together towards a common goal, has caused them to become closer together.”

Silvertongue snorted. “Starlight Shadow hesitated to implicate Red Velvet in causing a dispute which had a negative impact on their mission success. She also lavished praise upon her other sisters, Havocwing in particular, for their successes. Further, following Red Velvet’s punishment for her role in damaging the mission, her sisters showed great concern for her well-being. Starlight Shadow even halted any further punishment, intervening directly.”

Blutsauger nodded. “Zis is logical, of course. Ponies tend to form zese relationships ven in close company for extended periods of time, ja?”

“Naturally. But therein lies the problem.” Silvertongue pointed at the files on the screen. “When I asked you to engineer this project, I was given your assurance that my daughters were *perfect* clones of the Elements of Harmony. That is correct, yes?”

“Ja, zat is correct, und zat is vat zey are. Zey are mein finest vork! Absolutely flawless copies, just as you asked for.”

“Then it would seem there was some flaw in the process that slipped us by. The spell I cast upon them that night warped their bodies and minds into perfect antitheses. The Elements of Harmony care deeply for one another, so logically, twisting that upon itself should have left their copies only concerned about themselves.” Silvertongue shook his head. “Their love for me is easy enough to explain; as their superior, they desire my approval above all else, for they know deep down that they owe their existence to me.”

Blutsauger carefully reviewed his files for several moments, then shook his head. “I do not know vat zee problem is, Herr Silvertongue. Zee cloning process vas perfect in every vay; zere vere no anomalies or complications of any sort. Zey vere perfect, Herr Silvertongue.”

Silvertongue glared at Blutsauger, and placed his hoof upon the other unicorn’s shoulder. “Perhaps, then, you are suggesting that something on *my* end of the equation is causing this dilemma?”

Blutsauger flustered, putting his hooves in front of his face. “N-nein! I merely suggest zat perhaps zee cloning vas so perfect zat zey are growing as individuals? Your magic may have given zem life and varped zeir minds und bodies, but zey are still ponies at heart, ja?”

Silvertongue rubbed his chin in thought. “Hmm... an interesting theory. And an unfortunate one, if it is true. If they continue to develop this bond amongst one another, then they may be in danger of becoming *uncorrupted*.”

“Vell, it is only a theory,” Blutsauger said. “Vee would need to test it, to see if it has merit.”

“I agree. It would seem that I need eyes and ears to keep tabs on them. A perfect reason to activate my contingency plan.”

Blutsauger raised an eyebrow. “Contingency plan?”

Silvertongue clapped Blutsauger on the shoulder. “Nothing to concern yourself with, Doctor. I will see to it that my daughters are studied, so that I may find where the problem is and rectify it.”

“Ja, that may be for zee best, Herr Silvertongue.”

“However, this would still mean that you are at fault for this dilemma, Doctor.”

Blutsauger’s eyes widened, and he sputtered in a panic. “B-but Herr Silvertongue,

y-you—"

"I asked you to have certain failsafes in place so we may avoid this sort of problem, Doctor, did I not? Obviously, either those failsafes *failed*, or they were not there in the first place."

"Herr Silvertongue, z-zee failsafes I put in vere not to prevent *zis*," Blutsauger pleaded. "G-give me a chance to—"

"I am done giving second chances." Silvertongue interrupted. He lit his horn. "Doctor Blutsauger, forgive me for using a tired old cliché, but it would seem you have *outlived* your usefulness."

"P-please, Herr Silvert-agghhh!"

A fearsome blast of magic snapped through Blutsauger's body with alarming speed, shredding and burning the Doctor's lab coat and shattering his glasses. Within seconds, the Doctor's body fell limp. Blood oozed from his ears, mouth, and eyes. His body was half-charred, his lab coat a tattered, burned mess. His corpse was completely unrecognizable.

Silvertongue tossed him callously aside like a discarded toy, breaking apart the Doctor's carefully decorated wall and causing jars of organs to come crashing down upon and around him.

"Thank you ever so much for your work though, Doctor. I do appreciate the touch-up to my face," Silvertongue said to the Doctor's lifeless corpse. "Now, though, it would seem the city needs to find a new Chief of Medicine."