

A NOVELLA BY SOARING TRAVELS

IF YOU THINK OF PONYKIND AS  
ONE HUGE BODY, THEN WAR IS  
LIKE SUICIDE, OR AT BEST, SELF-  
MUTILATION.  
-TWILIGHT SPARKLE

A silhouette of a group of ponies and a pegasus standing on a dark, rolling hill. The ponies are of various breeds, including a unicorn, a pegasus, and several mares. The pegasus is flying slightly above the others. The background is a dramatic sky with dark, heavy clouds and a bright light source breaking through on the left side.

# A YOUNG MARE'S WAR

A dark, still body of water in the foreground reflects the silhouettes of the ponies and the pegasus from the hill above. The reflection is clear and detailed, mirroring the shapes of the characters and the dark tones of the landscape.

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It was a dreary morning in Ponyville. The day ahead would be long for Applejack, yet more apple-picking and yet more cart-pulling. She was a strong pony, for sure, but the work was starting to wear on her. She shook herself out of bed, threw on her hat, and prepared to head out into the fields.

"Applejack," her sister cried from the floor below, "the sun's up and y'all ain't even out yet!"

Applejack hadn't even noticed the lack of sunlight through the dark clouds, but was still embarrassed at having been late.

"Ah'ma comin', Apple Bloom," Applejack said as she headed down the stairs, "hold yer horses!"

There was already a small apple pie laid out by Granny Smith when Applejack reached the ground floor, so she downed it and headed out the door in one swift motion. Apple Bloom just laughed at her sister's rushed exit. Another day, another ton of produce.

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Rarity's day would be less eventful. Rising slowly, she moved at a leisurely pace through her morning activities, knowing that her business was a slow and precise one, and that demands for *haute couture* were not too common in Ponyville.

She had a few dresses on the go, and they sat majestically half-finished on their mannequins, lining the route for her as she walked to her cooler for breakfast, her mane trimmed and her pelt brushed. She imagined as she walked that those partly-robed mannequins which adorned her workshop were, in fact, the nobility of Canterlot, lined up for her, the Princess of Equestria!

Oh Rarity, you silly filly, stop it. But really, such power could be hers! She did, after all, own one-sixth of Princess Celestia's power. The Princess couldn't relish that thought too much. But Rarity, that's preposterous, she thought. No matter how much she wanted to be noble, there had only been one civil war in Equestria, and a thousand years of peace afterwards because of how brutal Celestia's rise to power had been. Dreams were all fine and well, but they would stay in Rarity's head.

With her morning fantasy pushed aside, she dug in to a bowl of oats, and readied her mind for the day's sewing ahead.

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Fluttershy flew about her house, humming a happy tune to herself. Not too loud, though, wouldn't want to bother the animals. As she came to each little door, she slowed down, and dropped a pinch of food into a small bowl mounted to the animals' homes

which decorated her living room. Each time, the grateful animals uttered a little squeak, or chirp, or other noise filled with joy which made Fluttershy's heart leap a little.

There was nothing else she liked quite as much as helping. Animals, ponies, whatever, but it really did get her going. As much as something could, anyway. She was so excitable, but so contained. She knew it made others a bit wary around her, made them think she was a bit wierd, but her friends appreciated it, and the animals didn't trust anyone else the way they did Fluttershy, so she kept it up.

Finally, each and every little critter was fed, and they all looked at Fluttershy with teeny tiny little eyes full of gratitude. She smiled at them, softly said, "Okay, you can go back to sleep now, mommy'll come back soon," then packed her bag and headed for the door. The rest of the forest needed care too. The weather was somewhat intimidating, but the animals needed Fluttershy, and she hated to disappoint.

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Pinkie Pie was up bright and early to start baking, and by sunup, the house already smelled of assorted fresh pastries. Mr. and Mrs. Cake were still in bed, but Pinkie pranced about, checking ovens and lining up sweets, occasionally taking a bit for herself.

"Lalalalaaaaa!" Her humming was contained, so as to not wake the owners, but she couldn't help it. Sweets just made her so... energetic! Well, everything did that, but sweets more so! Gummy's eyes met hers, and she flashed him a toothy grin. He wagged his tail from his perch atop the counter in that mysterious, carefree way of his. Pinkie smiled wider as she skipped along to the front counter.

An order form sat there, deposited during the night. A cake! Pinkie had just the thing! Another stove dinged, and she practically flew to it, threw the door open with a crash which elicited a startled gasp from the bedroom next door, and threw the cake into a box, before skipping to the door and using her tail to throw Gummy on her back.

"Come on, lazy, we're going for a delivery!"

Life was just so much fun!

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Twilight's morning was spent much the same way as usual. Studying. Books were her life, after all. Certainly, it was what made Twilight continue to be the Princess' favourite student. And, despite the Princess' latest lapses into solitude, or perhaps because of them, Twilight was still determined to impress.

Her project these days was to figure out why exactly Celestia had been acting so strangely. The Princess seemed more paranoid, more reluctant to speak to Twilight and her friends ever since their last escapade, the one which resulted in their reunion under the Elements of Harmony and Discord's re-imprisonment. Twilight suspected it had something to do with the waning of Celestia's signature rainbow mane, but she could find no precedent in any books. Then again, since Luna's rebellion, Twilight supposed

Celestia would have been reluctant as any ruler to have too much written publicly on her weak moments.

Darn it, Twilight thought, still nothing. And Spike's snoring was really starting to get to her. It was morning, for crying out loud, Twilight's clock said so where the overcast skies stopped the sun from doing it. The little guy was way too lazy for his own good. He was really cute, though, curled up like that. Twilight smiled a bit at the little dragon whose appearance had gotten her into Celestia's School in the first place, then turned her nose back to the book.

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Rainbow Dash and her fellow Pegasi were overwhelmed. They had woken up this morning to see the sky they had freshly cleared the day before entirely overcast with dark clouds which hovered ominously beneath and around Cloudsdale. Dash and her fellow weather-Pegasi had set off immediately, flying into the cover and beginning to spread it away from Ponyville and Canterlot's skylines, but it was almost incredible how thick it was. Almost like someone didn't want anyone seeing two feet in front of them more than a hundred metres above ground.

Dash and the others had a job to do, though. Kicking clouds across the skyline and scattering them with quick blows of her hooves, Dash moved over Sweet Apple Acres and watched Applejack readying her cart for today's harvest. The orchard was a busy place, and Dash sure was happy she wasn't stuck down there hauling heavy things. Much better to be soaring free above it all.

Another cloud bank flew past her face as a pegasus kicked it away, and in the clear sky, a glint caught Dash's eye. She looked over, and heard cries from in the clouds. "Guys," she asked, "what's going on?"

The glint from above finally resolved itself into one of Celestia's carriages. Aha, the Princess needs something. It probably had to do with the strange weather, Dash thought, maybe another villain the ponies would have to defeat with their Elements of Harmony. Before she could say hi to the Carriage-riding Pegasi, however, a lasso found its way around her legs.

"Wha-" she barely had time to utter a startled yelp, and she was being pulled to the ground.

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The day before, Celestia had been pacing her throne room urgently. Her eyes were roaming the room, looking for the source of the disturbance. Her horn was tingling hard today, and that was a sure indicator that Equestria was in trouble. It always happened when Equestria was in trouble.

It must be Luna. It must be. Celestia had checked her garden, and Discord was still there, with enough spells on him to roast a chicken, should one touch the forcefield. Celestia's guards were already looking for Luna in her tower. If she wasn't there,

Celestia would find her.

And do what? The Elements of Harmony had found new masters now! It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now? Celestia had no power anymore. The thing that drove the land was in the hands of fillies. The Princess had been happy to delegate responsibility for Equestria's safety, but she hadn't known the Elements would be so thoroughly set on staying with those little ponies.

She still acted nice, though, she had to. She received Twilight's messages, she visited the town occasionally. But she couldn't stand it. Oh well. They were loyal. Very much so. It would work out.

The clock in Celestia's room rang, reminding her of the audience she should be attending. Stupid nobles, attending to protest her closed-door policies again, she was sure. Certainly, the gates of Canterlot had been open to the other races of pony since the end of the last civil war, but there had been two incidents in the last year, limiting entry of earth-ponies and Pegasi for security couldn't be frowned on that much!

She stepped into the main hall, doors closing gently behind her, and tried to focus on re-igniting her famous mane. With her glow properly done, she stepped forward, ensuring her hooves clicked on the hardwood floor and drew all eyes to her now. The nobility dropped down on their front legs, bowing to her as she entered.

"Noble subjects," she began with a frozen smile, trying not to twitch as her horn pulsed harder even than before, "what brings you here today?"

An Earth Pony with sunglasses and a wide open collar stepped forward, and spoke up with a nasally, affected accent clearly meant to make him feel higher-class than his ground-borne, non-magic life condemned him to be. Celestia laughed a bit inside. "My lady," the pony began, "we simply must protest the latest regulations on entry and exit from Canterlot! I, Hoity-Toity, the famous fashion designer whom I'm sure you remember from all your beautiful galas, will go bankrupt!"

Certainly she did remember him, but she made sure to pretend not to in the hopes he would stop assaulting her ears with that voice.

"Madam, if the ponies of Ponyville, Fillydelphia, Trottingham, Manehattan, and all the other metropolises of the land cannot attend the royal events, why will they need clothing of such quality as I and my compatriots produce? And this, I assure you, while being an important problem, is not the only one!"

Celestia simply smiled. "Mister Toity, you simply must understand that with Nightmare Moon's rising last year, and Discord this year, security must be increased. Would your profits be at more risk if traffic is controlled in Canterlot, or if Equestria were thrown into chaos?" Her grin became much more toothy with the last few words.

Before Hoity could think of something else to say in that infuriating accent, a cry rose up from the entrance to the tower. A green-pelted Earth Pony was charging through the gate, wearing a belt of... fireworks?

One of Celestia's dark-maned unicorn guard flew from the doorjamb, hitting the Earth Pony in the midriff and throwing it aside midway through a cry of "Down with tyra-" which was ended forever when the fireworks exploded in the midst of the gathered nobles.

One second, all were frozen in shock, and the next, the room was full of smoke, dust and multi-coloured sparks. A moment later, when Celestia's hearing had mostly returned, the din of crumbling stonework was overlaid by the slowly mounting wailing of wounded ponies.

This was the last straw. The Earth Ponies would pay. By tomorrow, her guard would be in every city and township. Equestria was not falling from her grasp, Elements of Harmony or not. Speaking of which, she knew just where to start to ensure peace and prosperity. Treason would not be tolerated.

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All of the ponies in Ponyville were gathered under the dark clouds around the City Hall, shepherded by the white-maned Pegasus Guard who had swept in with the rising of the sun. Everyone was looking about, some worried about rain, others about the sudden town gathering. The Mayor was on the podium, waiting for the hubbub to die down.

When all had fallen quiet, and the weather-Pegasi had been brought down in chariots, Rainbow Dash was brought, still tied, onto stage. The crowd became loud again in protest at the treatment of their hero, but the Mayor quickly shushed them.

"Ponies, please listen closely. Yesterday, some... objectionable ponies," Twilight noticed the Mayor's eyes darting to the emotionless soldiers posted below the podium as she said this, "attempted an attack on the Princess' tower in Canterlot, presumably out of protest against her recent... restrictive policies.

"Today, in response, she has sent her Guard across Equestria to demonstrate to everyone her," another shifty glance, "willingness to protect everyone under her reign from such dangers. She has also made public whom she suspects.

"We all know that a select few of us have been made custodians of the Princess' source of power, the Elements of Harmony." Twilight didn't like where this was going, and one glance at her friends gathered around her, then at Dash, who was still struggling against her bonds, only made her heart sink lower. The Mayor continued, "The Princess believes these ponies have been using them to weaken her and... I can't continue this charade!"

That last outburst caused a startled gasp, and the Pegasi around the podium turned inwards, their emotionless faces now wearing small snarls. Two of them pointed spears at the Mayor, who spat on one's helmet. "You expect me to believe, and tell these people, that the two-time heroes of Equestria are traitors, are evil? Well you can do it yourselves. I'll have nothing to do with it!"

The Guards moved with remarkable speed, sweeping out the Mayor's legs, then restraining her, as one stepped up in her place. "You have one day to turn in these traitors. That is all."

Twilight was suddenly all too aware of the eyes which swivelled towards her and the others in the crowd. "Uh-oh."

"Let's get outta here!" Applejack shouted before running at full tilt, head down,

through the corridor Cheerilee opened for them at the back of the crowd. The friends ran behind her, hooves clattering.

"Where are we going?" Pinkie shouted from the back, already somewhat out of breath. Her sweet-based diet wasn't good for her cardio, clearly.

The question was answered by a door swinging open and a hoof waving them in. Inside, Bon Bon waited, her pink-striped mane glistening in the light of the candles which hung about her hall.

"You can wait here," she said, "what was that all about anyway?"

"We have no idea," Twilight said, "but we can't wait here too long! They've got Rainbow Dash!"

Applejack immediately turned to the door, her cart-bearing shoulder muscles rippling. "Ah'll show 'em ta take mah friends."

"Wait," Fluttershy said softly, "we need to think. There are a lot of them there. And they look pretty serious with those spears..." She trailed off with the mention of the weapons, and swallowed audibly.

Bon Bon stood in the background, looking back and forth between the friends as they stood pensively. Then the door flew open again, and Bon Bon's cousin, Jujube, barged in.

"I come down from Oatawa for a few days to see you, and- hey, who's this?"

He looked back and forth, his dark blue mane contrasting with his pale yellow pelt which matched hers. The friends stared at him, waiting for him to turn and shout their presence to the guard, and even Bon Bon knew that he had no reason to trust the five. After another glance at them, he simply shrugged. "I don't suppose dese hare who dey're looking for, hare dey? 'Cause I see no indication of treason here."

He flashed them all a big grin, partly to lighten the mood and partly out of embarrassment for his Castillonais county accent, which made him roll his r's, pronounce his th's as d's, and add h's before his a's. He knew it made him noticeable in Central Equestria, but Bon Bon had insisted he come down for the weekend. He looked back out the window.

"I guess dat's your friend dey have tied up out dere, hein?" He turned around, and peeked out at the city square, where the Guard were setting up a perimetre, as all the other ponies had scattered.

"Indeed," Rarity said, unimpressed, "you are the smart one here, huh?"

"Eille, just because I have a haccent doesn't mean I'm not smart, la." He turned his snout up, then gestured with his head. "Dey'll see you coming from a mile away, but if I pretend to be de lost touriste, I can get inside. Den you and de friends can 'elp me get out wit' your odder friend, hein?"

Twilight nodded thoughtfully. "That could work. Girls?"

The others nodded too, Rarity reluctantly. The Castillonais accent seemed so barbaric compared to her noble Palfrey one. Even Applejack's stock horse drawl wore on her sometimes.

Bon Bon just looked confused. "Well, if you're going to come back when you're done, make sure they don't follow you."

"Don't worry, Bon Bon," Applejack said as she pushed the door open for Jujube, "We'll head to Sweet Apple Acres, that's outta their way."

"Be ready," Jujube said as he began to trot down the road, the five ponies' eyes following him closely.

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Rainbow Dash could not believe the indignity of all this. Tied up on stage for the Princess? Dash had only met the Princess on occasion, and while she seemed nice, she was also aloof and haughty. Dash wasn't surprised she felt she could pull this stuff on Equestria. Good thing the Elements were locked away in different places. The Princess wasn't going to win easy.

And her friends would save her soon, too, for sure. They had never let each other down. She looked around again. The crowd was gone, and the city centre was surrounded by Guards. What now?

A loud voice reached her ears even as she saw a pale pony try to push his way through the perimeter.

"Sir, please, we can't allow anypony inside-" the Guard nearest him said, while blocking his progress.

*"Eille, mon gars, chuis ienque perdu, laisse moi passer pis j'te promets kej sort de ta ville au plus pressant, parfait?"*

"Sir, hold your-" before the Guard could finish this either, Jujube tripped him with a quick sweep of one of his front hooves, then charged in.

"Get ready, Rainbow Dash, hai will break de rope, den you must run wit me," the pony shouted, immediately before reaching her and giving the cord one swift chomp, which weakened it enough for Dash to free her legs.

"Thanks, man, but who are-"

"Come on, Dash!" Twilight shouted from outside the Guard line, drawing the two's attention just in time for them to see Applejack land her rear hooves square in the jaw of an oncoming Guard. Fluttershy winced and whimpered at the back, while Rarity and Pinkie stood by, trying to look menacing.

Dash and Jujube ran to the group, and the seven ponies turned tail to run as quickly as possible. On their way to Sweet Apple Acres, they stumbled across Spike, who stood in the road, looking worried.

"Twilight?"

"Come on, Spike!" Twilight used her horn to flip him onto her back while still running. They seemed to have lost the Guard for now, and neither Dash nor Fluttershy reported seeing anything from their perches above, but they didn't want to take any risks before getting to the bottom of this.

"Twilight, I think you should read this." Spike held down a scroll in front of Twilight even as she ran, and she quickly scanned it. When she had finished, she tripped and fell in surprise.

"What's up, Twi?" Applejack helped Twilight up, and Twi looked her in the eyes,



her pupils dilated and her expression frightening even stalwart Applejack a bit.

"The Princess has issued a warrant for the death of all 'traitors to the state and collaborators.'"

None of them really understood what that meant. Ponies died all the time, yes, it's natural, but killing each other? Only Pinkie didn't seem too rattled by that concept, but the group just assumed it was because she didn't fully understand. Older or not, she was the most innocent.

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Canterlot was in an uproar. All those who were not specifically chosen Pegasi or the noble Unicorns had been rounded up into small districts recently built just outside the walls, and the Guard patrolled everywhere with a fury. In even greater news, Luna had just been found.

She had been in her room, a perfect alibi. Celestia knew better, though. Her sister had means. Of course she did.

A wide smile spread across Celestia's snout as she looked out on the gathered crowd in front of the hastily erected wooden platform visible from the outside and the inside of Canterlot. Time to show those ponies that she was still far from powerless.

A nod to a pony on the side made the doors to the prison tower swing open onto the platform, and two grey-pelted Unicorn Guards escorted a hooded Luna out.

"I tell you, I didn't do it! I was just inside my room, and heard-"

"Silence." Celestia's commanding voice rang out over the fortress, and was immediately obeyed.

"For a thousand years, I have given you friendship, harmony, peace. Now, this is how you repay me?"

Five more grey-pelted guards stepped out of the tower, metal tubes harnessed to them, the bit between their teeth, as Luna was tied to a post behind the Princess. They formed a neat line facing the post, waiting.

"I have been gentle! I have brought Earth Pony, Pegasus Pony, and Unicorn together in one happy, peaceful kingdom! Why do you not appreciate it, why do you follow... follow... *her*?" Celestia gestured violently with her horn at Luna, whose face was now visible, the hood having been removed with a flurry by a Guard. Luna's eyes were moist, her eyebrows meeting in the middle in a tight arch.

"I'll show you what happens to those who threaten peace and kindness here!"

The Guards shuffled their feet a bit, in what seemed almost like a fit of nerves, but Celestia gave them no time to think. She made a gesture to the guards next to Luna, who blindfolded her, then put a candy cane in her mouth to suck on.

A swing of Celestia's horn made the five lined up guards chomp down on the bits attached to their harnesses. Five loud cracks echoed across Canterlot, and the candy cane fell from Luna's lips as her soft sobbing suddenly stopped.

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The seven ponies and Spike were holed up in the barn, now. Granny Smith had promised to keep a lookout, and Apple Bloom was gone off in town to get together with the rest of the Cutie Mark Crusaders. They sat in a circle, surrounded by hay.

"Well, I think I can go on," Jujube said softly, "dey won't be looking for me, la. I should be hable to get Nort to at least Mountreal, just past Manehattan. Den on to Oatawa. You can come, if you want."

"I guess-" Fluttershy began, but Rainbow Dash cut in immediately.

"No! We aren't leaving Ponyville! We can't just go! We can't give up!"

"Uh, okay," Fluttershy said, bowing her head.

Pinkie put a hoof on Fluttershy's shoulder, then turned to Dash with a stern look on her face. "You hurt her feelings! She just wanted to say what we were thinking. We could go away and not be trouble anymore."

Twilight looked around somberly, her eyes half closed in resignation. "That won't work. The Princess is clearly determined to get something. She'll stay, and keep hurting the people of Ponyville. But why us? Why are we..." She couldn't imagine what had happened. What was going on in the Princess' head?

Rarity shook her mane again, then looked at it disgustedly when she realized there was still hay in it. "Well, wherever we go, I hope it'll be cleaner than this."

After they sat around for another few moments, three energetic little balls rolled out of the hay. Apple Bloom, Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle settled to a stop in the middle of the circle.

"Hey sis," Apple Bloom said, "how are y'all doin'?" Granny Smith says to come an' check if y'all need some food or something."

"Naw, we're fine for now, thanks." Applejack offered her sister a feeble smile, then nudged her. "Y'all should go now. The less time ya spend 'round here, the better you are."

Sweetie Belle picked a bit of straw out of Rarity's hair before tossing it away with a grimace. Scootaloo just paced, anxious to move. Apple Bloom, however, stood her ground. "No way, sis, we're the Cutie Mark Crusaders! We're gonna find our cutie marks somehow, and maybe this'll be it! Viva la Revo-"

"Nonononono! Stop it, y'all, yer just fillies!" Applejack had her hoof firmly planted on her sister's snout, and the others turned towards her. "Y'all ain't gonna risk yerselves fer this!"

"She's right," Twilight, Rarity, Fluttershy and Jujube said at the same time.

"I wasn't even wanting to come down this weekend," Jujube said, "I could ave just worked at 'ome on my job, la. Don't be stuck like I ham, fillies."

The Cutie Mark Crusaders studied the ground in front of them very closely.

"Come on, gals, y'all understand. This is dangerous. Y'all just better go."

Finally, the fillies turned and trotted out of the barn, and the ponies let out a simultaneous sigh of relief.

"Now, to business," Twilight said softly, beginning to draw a map of Ponyville with her hoof.

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Silvermane stood majestically atop the clouds over Equestria. A glance East showed Canterlot in all its majesty, North was Cloudsdale, swarming with Pegasus Guards, West was Ponyville, occupied centre of the effort, and South was Stalliongrad, the main shipping centre on the Serenity river.

Each of the population centres was part of Silvermane's jurisdiction, by the power bestowed upon him by Her Majesty Celestia herself in the search for traitors. As it happened, the search had been quite fruitful. The mere presence of soldiers prompted more acts of violence as they marched the streets, proving that the unrest was a widespread issue.

Every once in a while, a golden-garbed pegasus would fly up to deliver messages to his improvised command post in the sky. Certainly, it meant his Unicorn commanders had communication problems, but really, wasn't that just evidence of faulty evolution? Pegasi certainly had the upper hand, just look at their pristine white coats, matching that of the Princess Herself.

But that was beside the point. He swore he could catch the outlaws no matter what, and he would. Oh, he would. The Princess would not be disappointed in Sir Silvermane, chosen by Prince Blueblood himself.

Another messenger approached, flying at full tilt. Silvermane waited until all four of the Pegasus' hooves rested on the cloud before shooting him a quizzical look.

"Sire," the Pegasus said, bowing forward until snout touched cloud, "News from Ponyville and Stalliongrad."

"Go on."

"Sire, the ponies of both cities are very discontented with the sudden arrival of the Guard. In Stalliongrad, there has been one riot along the docks, and in Ponyville, the ponies have escaped."

"Twilight's gang?"

"Yes, Sire."

Silvermane turned his nose up, thought for a moment. Then he looked down at the tiny town below him, glanced around a bit.

"Send more guards," he said, pausing to collect his thoughts, "more Unicorns to the treelines on all sides. They won't escape our grasp so easily. Keep the flyers over the city centre, though. They'll suspect we are still focused there. And make examples of the next rioters in Stalliongrad. Prison should do nicely."

"Yes, Sire." With that, the Pegasus flew off to relay these messages to those concerned.

Indeed, Silvermane would not be outwitted, not by a bunch of pretentious fillies.

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Night had fallen, and the ponies were asleep. Jujube rested in a corner, on his

own, while the other ponies slept in a pile across from him, Spike snoring on top.

However much of a nice guy he was, he wasn't one of them, and wasn't going to be caught like one of them. Time to go see Bon Bon and get set to go North.

He shook himself off, getting much of the hay out of his mane and pelt before slowly pushing the barn door open. A quick glance behind him showed the ponies still resting, their chests rising and falling almost in unison. He stepped out into the cold, though it wasn't nearly as cold as North, around Mountreal.

He set off at a steady trot towards town, looking around for Guards. They were sure to find this suspicious, a lone pony, wandering a quarantined town at night. Interestingly, while there were many Pegasi overhead, the streets were fairly unguarded. Nevertheless, it never hurt to look.

Another glance to his left, however, made his heart drop into his abdomen. A Guard's eyes met his from a block away. Only three hundred metres to home! Darn it all!

"You there, stop!"

On second thought, stopping could have saved Jujube a lot of trouble. Then again, maybe not. It didn't matter, though, because his hooves chose for him, throwing him into a gallop towards the farm before he could realize what was happening. At least he ran for the farm, and wouldn't lead them to Bon Bon.

By the time he got there, quite the crowd had gathered behind him, recently woken ponies along with galloping and flying Guards.

"What's all a'happenin'?" Applejack blearily said as she stuck her head out of the barn door, her hat askew atop her unkempt mane. Her eyes quickly widened, however, on seeing the oncoming horde.

A cry from the golden-maned pony woke all the others with a start, and by the time Jujube was in through the door, yelling "*Je m'excuse, je m'excuse*," they were ready.

"We aren't running now," Rainbow Dash said, her hoof clawing at the ground in anticipation.

"Oh no," Fluttershy said, shrinking back.

A number of Guards entered the barn at a full gallop, blowing the door open even as Applejack tried to brace it with her body. A spear tip narrowly missed Rarity, who knocked it aside with her horn before swinging around to hit the Guard in the helmet with her rear hoof.

Fluttershy retreated to hide in a hay bale, but a number of rabbits which had been nesting nearby leaped out to protect her, ravenously gnawing at the hooves of the two Guards who tried to pursue her.

The melee degenerated rather quickly, as more and more Guards piled in, but Applejack had finally gotten the doorway closed to block the entrance of any more when a loud bang rang out among the crossbeams.

Twilight's eyes immediately spun to the source of the sound, a smoking barrel jutting from the harness of a Pegasus Pinkie was wrestling to the ground. Following where the barrel was pointing, Twilight saw...

Oh no...

Jujube sat in a corner, gasping for air, and the fight slowed as everyone noticed him. Red fluid, dark and thick, was running between his hooves, clasped over his chest.

*“Non, non, s’il te plait, Bon Bon, s’il te...”*

Even the Guards were shocked. No pony had ever actually shot any pony before. Their harnesses were meant for ceremonial occasions. Pinkie was the first to turn even redder than usual, her eyes narrowing to a furious squint.

“NO!” Pinkie’s hooves came down hard on the Guard she had been pinning, stilling his struggling immediately. “NONONONONO!”

Even as Pinkie began lashing out with enough fury to drive a number of the Guards out the windows, Fluttershy flew to Jujube’s side. His whimpering had faded to a dull whisper, and his gasps were few and far between now. Fluttershy knew all about life, and nature, she had to... had to be able to fix this. She had to!

But she was too late. Jujube’s eyes fluttered closed, and his breathing stilled. Only then did Fluttershy notice that her unconscious, ineffective efforts to stem the flow of blood had soaked her to her elbows, and she began to sob.

“Come on, Fluttershy,” Twilight shouted from the back of the barn, “they’re distracted. We need to go.”

Fluttershy almost turned to protest, but the hard look in Twilight’s eyes showed she had seen the exact same thing, and had thought it through. They couldn’t stick around now. Celestia’s troops would kill. Had killed. Oh no...

Nopony noticed the six and their dragon friend slinking away into the orchard, as ponies carried out the body. Bon Bon sobbed, and a veil fell over the crowd. The Guard were clearly the enemy now. Everyone knew it. Even the Guards.

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Octavia was quite downtrodden as well. Playing the cello for dimes in the outer districts of Canterlot was far from her past fame playing the ballrooms of Celestia’s court. She thought with fondness of the last Grand Galloping Gala, a complete disaster, but still a better memory than this, especially due to her sister’s intervention. She worked the bow back and forth, casting a furtive glance at her bandmates.

Clavio was working away at his makeshift keyboard, pieced together from whatever debris the other Earth Ponies of the district had had laying around, while Deep Brass and Harper each played their own beat-up old instruments. It was a shame Clavio’s grand piano had been too large to bring. He just didn’t look nearly as satisfied on his new keyboard.

They were playing a reinterpreted version of the Pony Pokey, for old time’s sake, and every once in a while one of the Earth Ponies wandering around the small marketplace the quartet had chosen as their venue would drop a coin or two at their feet. There wasn’t much money floating around the segregated area, so these few coins could go a long way. Unfortunately, the lack of money was starting to make bartering a far more efficient way of trading.

Octavia almost scowled through her professional, calm playing demeanour as

she thought that while she could buy some nice jewelry with the coins they had, soon they wouldn't be able to get a sandwich without trading a few apples or something as well. For crying out loud, Celestia.

"Excuse me?" The voice came from Octavia's left, just beside the band. She turned her head just the slightest bit, her expression not changing in the slightest. She knew the intensity with which she both plays and lives disconcerted people, and she used it fully to her advantage in the district.

The blue pony who had addressed Octavia shied away a bit, but still looked her in the eyes as she said, "Miss Octavia, am I right?"

"Indeed."

"Miss Octavia," the pony said quickly, "the Guard are looking for you."

Octavia's eyes opened a bit more, and she almost skipped a note. Clavio noticed the slight shift in tempo for a moment where nopony else did, and glanced away from his keyboard to see what was wrong. Octavia gave him a quick nod, and Clavio signalled to the others to stop.

Deep Brass gathered up Clavio's bowler hat and poured the money into a saddlebag she then slung over her shoulders as Octavia nodded to the blue pony.

"Thank you," she said, prompting the other pony to nod then trot off. While the Guard scared everyone else, Octavia was rather hopeful. Maybe Celestia realized her galas just weren't the same without the Canterlot Quartet around.

The two Guards in question weren't far, and their golden armour on dark pelts stood out in the district quite enough anyway, so the Quartet reached them soon. The others were visibly nervous, but they were confident enough in Octavia's nerve and brains to just follow her.

"You seem like you're looking for something," Octavia said in her silky tones to the first Guard, who looked her up and down, then fixed his gaze on her cello.

"The Princess needs her instruments back. You have misappropriated Royal property," the Guard spoke in even tones, while his comrade moved around to Octavia's left.

Octavia couldn't believe it. Really? Celestia would stoop to that? The cello was made in Canterlot, certes, but it belonged to Octavia! She had played it since she left the rock farm and first got her cutie mark! This was unacceptable.

"No." She said the one word with all the power she could muster, and she saw the rest of the Quartet fan out, even as other Earth Ponies turned out to see this confrontation.

Deep Brass was looking around confused, but Clavio took up position at Octavia's right hoof, brushing his majestic white mane aside, and Harper moved aside to come up chest to chest with the flanking Guard. What a stupid move this was. A fight, now? This was the last thing the district needed. Then again, Octavia was not parting with her cello.

"Sirs, I suggest you step away. This young woman has had both her livelihood and her life taken from her, do not take the last thing she has." Though she wouldn't call the cello the very last thing, Clavio's comment was a powerful one, and sure to shake

the Guards.

Or not. The Guard stepped forwards again. "The Princess has made her stance on disobedience quite clear." A glance over her shoulder showed Octavia that Harper was literally touching snouts with the other Guard, who was trying to push by, now. The other ponies in the street looked on in eager anticipation.

Octavia laid a hoof gently on Clavio's shoulder. "Come on. Let's go." As soon as she turned, chaos unfurled.

The Guard directly in front of them lunged, but a hoof from an onlooker diverted him, and Clavio put him down hard with a single right hoof. The Guard to the side gave Harper a strong push, but Harper stepped aside at the last minute, and when the guard hit the ground, the crowd engulfed him.

"Come on!" Octavia shouted, hoping to get away before any attention was drawn to the debacle. A cello? Really?

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Civil unrest in the district, killings in Stalliongrad, a civilian death in Ponyville, and the veritable disappearance of Cloudsdale? If Silvermane weren't so well-bred, he may have just screamed in frustration. As it was, he was content just placing his hoof on the table somewhat forcefully, and looking at the subordinates gathered around the table.

This time, he had needed to be closer to the ground in order to get in touch directly with the Unicorn units, so he had set up his base in a cottage just outside of the Everfree forest. The others looked at him somewhat worriedly. If they ever wanted to be knighted into the Princess' family, it was in their best interest to quell this with the speed and efficiency Luna's first rebellion had been quelled.

"Sire," a Unicorn across the table spoke up first. Despite his evolutionary flaw, at least he had guts. "In Stalliongrad, the rebels have appropriated a number of our combat harnesses. At the moment, they haven't used them except in one incident, but noone was killed except the rebel. His family is in custody."

"Make an example." Silvermane knew that they had to be swift, and leave no room for error.

"How, Sire?"

"However you see fit." Silvermane's look said all the captain needed to know.

Another voice spoke up, seeing that that conversation was effectively finished. Silvermane saw that it belonged to a richly garbed Pegasus, and before the Pegasus could finish saying "Excuse me," Silvermane interrupted him.

"Cloudjumper, have you found Cloudsdale yet?"

The Pegasus stopped, and his white mane turned slightly pink around his cheeks. "No Sire, that was what I needed to report."

"What is stopping you?" Silvermane made it clear through his tone that he was to hear no excuses if Cloudjumper was ever to see the light of another day. He had lost an entire city. Silvermane had no time for such incompetence.

"Sire, the city is camouflaged into the cloud cover, at high altitudes. By widening

their streets and reinventing the city slightly, they have managed to make it indiscernable from the cirrus banks except from above, and only a few of our flyers are qualified for such altitudes.”

Silvermane couldn't argue with that. Only a few Pegasi could fly at very high altitudes for any extended periods of time. Cloudsdale ponies would only have a few hundred feet to fly at a time, and could rest in between, while the patrols would have to fly up in search patterns from bases lower down on the far more voluminous cumulus clouds, where they could relay their information to the other, less capable Pegasi. Genius.

Silvermane nodded to show that Cloudjumper had satisfied for now, but kept his gaze stony, to show he still expected results. As he turned to another of his captains for another report, the door to the hut rattled on its hinges, hooves pounding on it.

Silvermane stormed over, swung it open. Outside, a grey-pelted Unicorn Guard held a fuchsia-coated mare, who was struggling against her captor.

“What is it?”

“Sire,” the Guard said, bowing as best he could while keeping his hoof tightly wrapped in the reins which restrained the mare, “we caught this one preaching dissent to her students.”

“I did nothing of the sort!” Cheerilee protested loudly, still squirming. “I just told them that whatever you say, Twilight and her friends were good people! And they are, they've proven that repeatedly!”

Silvermane looked her up and down. “So, you are a friend of the fillies who escape our grasp?”

Cheerilee went suddenly very quiet. “I can't tell you anything, because I don't know anything.”

“No, but if they are indeed such good friends...”

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“Sis', sis'!” Apple Bloom ran as fast as she could down the dirt road leading into the Everfree forest. Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle were following close behind, but were also making sure nopony followed them. The trail they were galloping down wound around large trees, but finally brought them to a small clearing and the hut they were looking for.

Applejack had clearly heard her sister, since the door flew open just as the Crusaders arrived into the clearing. The yellow pony trotted out, a concerned look on her face, and Zecora stuck her head out to look for trouble.

“What is it, girls?” Apple Bloom ran right into Applejack's front hooves, and gave them a tight hug.

“They done took Cheerilee, sis', they done took her!”

“What?” Twilight came running out now, the other ponies in tow. “Why? What are they going to do?”

“They know she knows y'all,” Scootaloo said, “so they took her to ask her where



y'all are."

Twilight swallowed hard and looked at the others. That was bad. Celestia's Guard had proven their ruthlessness already, and Twi didn't want anyone else hurt on their account. Oh Jujube...

"Well, girls," Twilight said, turning to the others, "I think this is it. Celestia's lost her mind!"

The other ponies nodded, and Rarity cast a quick glance from side to side.

"Of course, we all know what that means, don't we, ladies?" Rarity's accent only served to emphasize the slightly dramatic statement.

Pinkie Pie rose up to her full height, stuck out her lower lip, and said firmly, "Nopony out-crazies Pinkamena Diane Pie!"

The others giggled for a bit, but the look Apple Bloom gave them quickly reminded them there was no time to lose. The girls bunkered down in Zecora's hut, planning and gathering their willpower. Celestia had shown her troops would be willing to kill. Would the six friends be capable of defending themselves, if they had to?

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"No more oppression! No more poverty! Down with the regime!" Clavio's chanting rang out between the cramped houses as he ran his hastily stitched red flag through the streets of the district, gathering followers as he went. Their chants added to the din, so that by the time he had reached the gates to Canterlot, there was nearly an earthquake in their wake from the combined hooves and voices.

"We've had enough!" Clavio shouted, his voice starting a wave of silence, as the ponies behind him realized he was about to speak.

The Pegasi posted to the walls stepped forwards to the edge, rifle barrels protruding between the crenellations. Clavio didn't shift his position atop a barrel, however. Being in plain view served the cause far better than cowering. Octavia's heart fluttered at the sight of her friend exposed like that. After the Princess' execution, everyone knew to fear the barrels on the Guards' harnesses.

Her hiding place was perfect, though. She, Deep Brass, and Harper were crouched in the attic of a nearby shop. The nearest stretch of wall was only two feet from their window, and three feet up was the ledge. A rifle barrel protruded from the crenellations just in front of them, aimed at the gathering crowd.

"You ready?" Octavia whispered to the other two, who nodded. Deep Brass cast a glance back and forth, her shifty demeanour showing her fear, but Harper's muscles simply rippled. He was ready.

Octavia uncoiled a rope, and began twirling it over her head. Deep Brass had moved to another window, her tuba at the ready, and Harper began plucking at his harp.

"You know the heavens are with us!" Clavio continued, his white mane glistening in the setting sun's light, "The Princess' actions show she is no longer in charge of them! She is insecure! We are in the right! We did nothing! Soon, the horns of the Pegasi will blow, and we will be free once more!"

Deep Brass cast another glance towards Octavia, who solemnly nodded. A deep breath, then the echoing sound of a note being held on the large brass instrument rang across the small square in front of Canterlot's gate.

The crowd gasped, and Clavio grinned, cast a glance at the shop, then leaped away, knowing what was coming.

The guard nearest the trio's hiding position swivelled his rifle towards the source of the sound, and Octavia launched the rope at it, catching a nub on the side which she suspected was meant to aim it. Whatever it was for, she pulled, and the harness, lightly mounted on the armour, pulled off and into the attic. The three grabbed it, stole up their instruments, and made like the wind.

In the square, more ropes were being thrown by sympathizers, more rifles stolen. The guard were completely taken aback, and by the time they could react and open the gates, the crowd had dispersed. Only Clavio stood in an alleyway, staring at the guards.

"Inform your Princess that her day of reckoning has come. The blood of the martyrs shall water the meadows of Equestria, if need be, but your day has come."

Before the Guards could begin to chase after him, he galloped off down a side street, leaving the Guard puzzled and temporarily defeated. Only temporarily, though, the garrison commander vowed.

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Two days later, Silvermane was on the ground again, the feeling of dirt under his hooves positively disgusting him. Oh well, it had to be done. If the captive was to be properly executed in any way to make a real message, the Commander of Celestia's forces should be there in person. Soon enough, though, he was sure, there would be no reason to traipse on the ground at all. Once this mission was complete, surely Celestia would view Silvermane's opinions with a more favourable eye.

And, of course, with Prince Blueblood being of an inferior race as well, someone would have to fill in the spot in the royal line.

Silvermane grinned wide, for a moment forgetting the filth he trudged through on his way to Ponyville's town square. Then he remembered, and his expression returned to one more suited for an execution.

If the fillies didn't turn out for this, well, Silvermane would then be sure they were definitely not the bearers of the Elements of Harmony after all.

Finally, flanked by the best Unicorns he could find, he stepped out into the marketplace of Ponyville, the centre of which was now occupied by a post, to which was tied a rather elegant young mare, her fuchsia pelt wet with sweat, and in a few places, blood. They could have at least washed her. Earth Pony or not, she deserved her dignity. Oh well, all the more powerful a message, then.

A few boos and hisses sounded from the crowd as he climbed the dais to speak. Guards waded into the crowd to root out the insolent ponies. There would be no such thing. Now more than ever, with the rumours of Earth Ponies now being armed by the black market, discipline needed to be enforced. Every Guard in Silvermane's personal

detail had new suits of armour, with the weapons and ammunition firmly mounted. Whatever Sir Goldenflame of Canterlot had let slide, it wouldn't happen again.

Silvermane cleared his throat, and silence fell over the market, save for the sound of a scuffle between the Guards and a rebellious pony somewhere near the back. All eyes turned on him.

He started his speech without thinking, imploring the ponies to turn in the main traitors, to renounce their rebellion, and to live peacefully. Another mundane speech, he thought. There was far too much of that going on these days. Honestly, now, it was clear the other races weren't listening, so it should be clear to the Princess what had to be done. Oh well.

He was starting to wrap up, and the Guards were readying their rifles for the execution. Oh well, it seemed he would lose the six he sought, but also remove one more piece of the rebel pie. Win-win, but still, the other option would have served him far better.

A loud crack rang across the square, and a cloud of smoke and... glitter? ... filled the air around the far side of the cloud. Silvermane threw himself off of the dais as the Guard spread out through the confused crowd. It had begun, after all.

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Pinkie Pie shrugged off her firework harness. "Lookie! They're all scared! Silly Guards!"

Twilight knew what they had to do next. She looked at Rainbow Dash, who leaped straight up out of the smoke, flying unseen towards the clouds, then at Applejack, who winked, then gave an ululating cry as she charged the nearest pair of Guards. Fluttershy was at the back, waiting to receive the injured Cheerilee, and Rarity was using her basic grasp of magic to keep the smoke swirling around Pinkie and Twilight.

Out of the corner of her eye, Twilight saw Applejack's hat nearly fly off her head as she landed both her rear hooves in the helmet of a Guard. Pinkie started to run, and Twi was close behind, heading straight for the stand Cheerilee was tied to through the crowd which was parting before them.

The cloud of smoke made it impossible for the Guard to aim accurately, so they tried to push through the crowd, but the ponies of Ponyville would have none of that. Here was a chance to stand up for themselves, and they were taking it. Twilight and Pinkie reached the stand in no time flat, and her magic had Cheerilee's ties undone before Pinkie could say "Uh-oh, my tail's a twitch-a-twitchin'!"

Once Pinkie had finished saying it, however, Twilight's mane stood on end, and she screamed "Get off the stage!" as she dove, holding Cheerilee's semi-conscious body in her front hooves.

A small package dropped from the harness of a Pegasus Guard overhead, exploding on contact with the small wooden stage. The post Cheerilee had been tied to flew into the air, falling back down with a resounding crash while the splinters from the stage whistled by overhead. Thank goodness for the Pinkie sense. Suddenly, Twi

couldn't imagine why she had questioned it so much originally.

Applejack was clearly having too much fun. She was practically dancing about among the Guard, knocking rifle barrels away and swatting helmets with her hooves, which were fairly well-muscled from working on the farm. Rainbow was also doing well, if one could judge from the amount of Pegasus-shaped holes in roofs which had been created by falling Guards over the last minute.

Nevertheless, it was time to go. The crowd had joined in too, and the Guard were starting to beat a fighting retreat to the outskirts of town. Applejack called out to the others. "Come on, y'all, back to Sweet Apple Acres!"

Twilight, while feeling bad about putting Applejacks' home in danger again, agreed that it was a tactically sound move. With the Guard retreating towards Canterlot, and the population roundly turned to the friends' side, the orchard would put them on the opposite side from the enemy, while still near their new support base.

The friends made off with their newly liberated comrade, hurrying to get ahead of the Guard so they could figure out what to do next.

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Octavia watched as another barrel fell down the waterfall leading out of the district. She sincerely hoped these would help whoever was receiving them. Since this was the only way for the district to dispose of waste these days, it was very unlikely Celestia would be having her Guards search everything that passed through, so she wouldn't find the fruit of the Earth Ponies' last few days of furious labour.

Her gaze was heavy, as was typical these days, as she turned around to the ponies behind her.

"When'll the next load be ready?"

"Ironhoof says his crew'll have another one in a few hours. It's getting easier, with practice. Turns out the guard had a really simple idea, it was just impressive at the start."

Octavia nodded soberly. This was the best they could do for now. They had heard from the Guard, through careful eavesdropping, of course, that the situation on the ground was going downhill fast, and while they didn't have the resources to take back the district yet, they did have enough to help others free themselves.

Knowing she had a while to rest, she decided to trot back to the house her quartet had taken up, two blocks from the waterfall. A small shack by comparison to their old dwelling inside Canterlot's walls, it was almost luxuriant here, and had been given to them for their 'spirit and moxie' by the de facto mayor.

Knocking the Pony Pokey out on the wooden door prompted a click as the latch was pulled, then the door swung open.

"How's Clavio doing?" Octavia asked Harper as she stepped in.

"Still poring over those dusty old books. Poor sod, I think he's really losing his mind here."

Octavia's heart dropped a bit on hearing it. Clavio had been withdrawing more and more, emerging only for his rabble-rousing and occasional public appearances at

the pub. The grave pony had clearly not been dealing well with the complete overturn of his life, not to mention the loss of his piano.

Octavia stepped down the stairs to the basement, where Clavio sat at a desk with a single candle flickering, books strewn about around him. The sight was somewhere between inspiring and depressing, and Octavia didn't want to decide which. She stepped up slowly behind him and rested her head on his shoulder.

"Clavio, come on upstairs. We're making dinner."

"Octavia, come on now," he said, forcing a grin which was a poor facsimile of the one he had always worn at the galas they played, "I'm making freedom. While Deep Brass' and your cooking is exemplary, so too will be the regime we bring about, no?"

She cast a glance at the book in his hands. *Les Miserabulls*. The story of the outback Castillonais ponies which had once resisted the new laws on herd placement, leading up to one of the revolutions immediately preceding the Lunar War.

"Did you know that the Red banner was a symbol back then as well, symbolizing the sunset on Celestia's reign over the sun? And that Princess Luna's rebellion was partly due to these sorts of injustices?"

"That's nice, Clavio," Octavia said, raising her head from his shoulder to look him squarely in the eye, "but while that's a very fascinating subject for a doctoral thesis at the Academy, might I remind you that we are neither allowed access to the Academy, nor able to survive solely by sustaining ourselves on words?" She emphasized the last point by gesturing again up to the kitchen.

"Ah, but I'll give it my best, darling. I'm sure there's a way, but no pony has wanted it enough yet to find it." He forced another grin. "I'm sure your food'll be delicious, especially since I hear the market has a new shipment of cabbage which is only two days old, oh joy, but I'll pass for now."

"Also, when you go upstairs, please tell Deep Brass that while I appreciate it, her constantly coming down to play me tunes breaks my concentration. Thank you!"

With that he waved her away, and she felt the compulsion to obey. She fought it, though, placing a hoof on his shoulder, and pulling hard.

"Mister Clavio, you are coming up for dinner right this instant!"

His chair tipped and paper flew all about him. He looked up at her with his tired eyes and chuckled. "Well, I lost my place in the book anyway. Let's go."

The two trotted up the steps, Octavia keeping Clavio in front of her so he couldn't turn around. The whole way, looking at his back, she smiled, knowing that the rest of the town would follow him just as readily when the time came. The smile dropped, though, when she thought of what it may cost.

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The barn at Sweet Apple Acres had become a War Room. A map table stood in the middle, little dolls from Sweetie Belle's collection representing troop dispositions. Twilight had seen the idea in a book on the Lunar War, and she had to admit, it made her feel a lot cooler.

The six friends surrounded the table, wearing their Elements of Harmony which they had retrieved on their way out of the riot. Alongside them stood the Mayor, Bon Bon, Mr. Cake, with a barrel behind him which he had fished from the river earlier, Cheerilee, newly healed and bandaged, and Big Macintosh, who had behind him a contraption Pinkie had put together. Each had taken control of a portion of the population for the purpose of the coming defense of Ponyville.

Because it would have to be defended. Just like in the books Twilight had read, a time of darkness had come on the land, and suddenly, she and her friends were the heroes. Or they would have to be. It was certainly a big responsibility. Even though they had played the heroes before, it had never been on quite this scale. Everyone around the table looked at her expectantly, and she swallowed hard before speaking.

"All right, everyone. You all know why we're here." Why did speeches always start like that? Of course they did, silly! Stupid Twilight, she thought before continuing. "So, we need to show the Princess the error of her ways. I want this very clear : We won't kill unless they do. Let's not give them ideas."

"They have killed already," Bon Bon said, her expression as dark as could be, her hoof trembling on the table.

"Yes, but we need to give them this chance! Not all of the Guard are going to be bloodthirsty. We can't give them a reason to kill. We capture where we can. Mr. Cake, your bakery is still available as the Prisoner of War repository?"

Mr. Cake nodded, his large jaw firmly set.

"Good. We also need the medical station, which Fluttershy will oversee. Bon Bon, can we still use your home?"

Bon Bon nodded, then exchanged a glance with Fluttershy. Neither wanted any more ponies to die in this stupid fight.

"Next, we will need to keep the fillies and noncombatants safe. Mayor, is the City Hall ready? The white flag on top and all?"

The Mayor nodded, smiled. "The fillies will be safe. My staff will make sure of that."

Twilight smiled back, albeit somewhat mirthlessly. "Cheerilee, are you still set on your part?"

Cheerilee's eyes were stony. "Yes. I'm not going to let them live down what they've done."

"Okay, if you say so." Cheerilee would be leading the front-line troops, and after what the Guard had done to her, Twilight was sure that she would be ruthless in her methods. Up until now, Twilight hadn't even noticed the stump of her left ear. Now that she had, she had trouble taking her eyes off it. "Applejack, do you still want to be supporting her?"

"Dang right ah do!" Applejack stomped her feet, and Big Mac shot her a somewhat surprised and worried glance.

"Something to say, Big Mac?" Twilight asked.

"Ee-yup. Ah'll be goin' with mah sis', then."

Applejack started to mouth some sort of protest to try and protect her

independence, but Twilight cut her off. "Sure, you'll be a great help up there. And so will Pinkie's contraption, I assume..." The sentence trailed off, as Twilight was hoping someone would explain the thing to her.

Big Mac was happy to oblige. Shifting the piece of hay in his mouth to the other side, he shouldered it. The tube was long, and held what looked like a large firework. "See, ah hold it, point it, an' their chariots, they explode."

"Simple!" Pinkie bounced up and down with joy at her adaptation of her firework cannons from her party kit.

"Ee-yup," Big Mac said, punctuating Pinkie's statement and indicating he had finished his explanation.

Twilight nodded again, happy that the ponies had come up with a way to clear out what would probably be their toughest enemy. "All right, and Rainbow Dash?"

"I'll take the rest of the Pegasi in Ponyville, and we wreak havoc on the weather!"

"Good. Make sure they can't safely fly, and confuse them. That'll play with their heads well enough. Rarity, you're back here with me, finishing those uniforms you've been working on. And Pinkie, you'll be downstairs, making up new toys for us."

Rarity held up a coat of patchy green and brown, and nodded to Twilight once before going back to her frantic stitching. Pinkie bounced up and down excitedly again. Twilight looked around the table again.

"Okay, mares, stallions, this is it. Mr. Cake, start handing out the contents of those barrels you've been fishing up, and let's get our people lined up outside the town. Start digging holes. The Guard'll be coming soon."

Mr. Cake smiled a bit as he popped the barrel open to take out the makeshift rifle harnesses held inside. Someone was looking out for them, and the Guard would never expect it. Twilight fervently hoped the rifles would stay as pristine and unused as they were right then and there, but she didn't dare get her hopes too high.

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Silvermane's hooves were bloody now, all right. The Unicorns under his command had heavily bungled in Stalliongrad, firing on a crowd and killing ten. The ponies of Stalliongrad had now taken to abducting any of his Unicorns who travelled in groups of less than three, not to mention vandalizing the monument to the Lunar War in the city centre.

And now Ponyville was out of his control, the ponies somehow having it in their heads that they could fortify and defend the town against him. They were positively asking for an old-style war! His Guard were already arrayed just outside firing range around the Eastern edge of town.

Curse Celestia for stretching him so thin! With so many Pegasi dedicated to finding Cloudsdale, most of his Unicorns occupying Stalliongrad, and a portion of both garrisoning Canterlot and the district, he hadn't enough troops to launch both a frontal attack and flank the Ponyville line. He was sure if he didn't distract them somehow they would quickly displace to meet him, wherever he went.

Messengers swirled around his cloud furiously, waiting for orders, but he had nothing so far. The situation was overwhelming even for a bright, noble pony like himself, he knew, because nopony had had any combat experience in the last thousand years. It was time to go down and see what the situation looked like in Ponyville for himself.

He couldn't lose. His was the way of the Sun. Nonetheless, the Moon clearly meant to make him work hard.

He swooped down, passing over the clouds gathered over the town to hide it from his scouts, then over the jagged lines cut into the earth by the ponies, finally arriving at his Ponyville detachment's Command Post. He had hoped going the long way and passing over the town would reveal to him something he'd missed, but nothing there stood to help him much.

He stepped into the Command Post, all of the Guards arrayed around the room clicking their hooves together and standing straight until he said "At ease, back to work. We don't have time for these formalities in the field today."

Commander Rubyhooves stepped around the main table in the small shack and inclined his head to his superior. "Sire, we've been surveying the situation in Ponyville for a while now."

"And what do you have for me? Don't come empty-hooved, Rubyhooves, I won't stand for incompetence from you, of all ponies, not now."

Rubyhooves was a family friend, who had been close to Silvermane for most of his life, hence why he entrusted him with the Ponyville assignment. Silvermane hoped his trust was well-placed.

To Silvermane's relief, Rubyhooves looked up with a glint in his eye. "Sire, we've found out where their command structure is centred. It's the orchard at the back, where they hid before."

"That's outside the town, and vulnerable, is it not?"

"Indeed, Sire, it would be, but the defensive line stretches far. I think everypony of age who isn't an invalid is currently standing against us. Nonetheless, the flanks have been reinforced to prevent a flanking manoeuvre, which leaves the centre vulnerable. It seems the enemy commander is too clever for his own good."

Silvermane appreciated Rubyhooves' input, but a glaring threat jumped out at him. "When we move into the centre, though, what prevents the reinforced flanks from—"

"Closing on us from either side? Sire, they are long arms. If they want to hit both of our flanks with a single crushing blow, rather than bit by bit, they'll take a few moments to get lined up. If we lead with chariots and push hard, we should be fully through the gauntlet before they can react properly. We'll just have to be sure to pull no punches. Though, if you'll forgive me, Sire, I believe we've proven ourselves willing to do so already."

Silvermane nodded, then both quoted a part of the code of command of the Guards, memorized since their time at the Academy. "Maintain the initiative, move with violence of action."

Rubyhooves smiled. "Who would have thought we'd put the old doctrines into practice within our lifetime? A historical moment indeed!"



Silvermane surveyed the maps arrayed around the room, looked back at Rubyhooves. "Indeed. Let's be sure that we make history in a positive light, shall we?"

Silvermane stared deep into Rubyhooves' eyes. "When will you be ready to put this into action?"

"Tomorrow at dawn, Sire, we'll be set. This will be a glorious time for the Princess' forces!"

Silvermane nodded again, thoughtfully. One more day until the crushing of Revolution. One day more...

\*\*\*

Celestia was pacing her throne room impatiently. The Guard had been in and out, as well as many infuriating nobles who did nothing but assault her ears with their petty demands. Didn't they understand that there was a war on? That every minute they wasted, a messenger could be coming whose words would change the fate of Equestria?

Another noble came in, and being the gracious ruler she was, Celestia sat down and suppressed her nervous tics enough to speak to him face to face.

"Yes?"

"Your Highness, I would like to express my concern as to the Earth Ponies held just outside the walls."

Celestia was interested now. Finally, a Unicorn who wasn't only concerned with his profits and his comfort! This could be good. "Go on."

"Well, the noise of construction and work, even excluding their shouting, singing and other boisterous activities, is becoming quite bothersome to me and my family. I kindly request that you solve it as soon as possible." At that, he bowed lower once more.

Celestia couldn't believe it. Another self-centred noble. At least the Earth Ponies were down-to-earth and could handle a bit of noise! Perhaps Sire Silvermane was on to something after all, about the Unicorns. She made a mental note to ask him when this was all over.

"You are asking me to kill them all?"

The Unicorn blanched. The thought of killing was still foreign to most inhabitants of Equestria. She knew that would throw him off. Not for long, though, unfortunately. He picked up again quickly.

"No, Your Highness, not at all, I didn't intend to be so extreme, simply to... suggest that you lock down on them. I mean, they're certainly working to better their lives, and I thought the idea of exclusion was to punish them for what they had done. Perhaps allowing them to keep building is... counter-productive?"

Celestia blinked. "Excuse me? You think I should destroy the fruit of their labour and give them more reason to rise against me? Right here at home? Don't worry, I have a plan to dispose of the issue soon enough, and building petty new hotels or whatever they're doing won't stop me. Thank you, you are excused."

The Unicorn was escorted from the room by two Guards. Celestia stood again,

and resumed her pacing. The Ponies were driving her insane! Even Luna hadn't put up so good a fight. Well, maybe, she *had* besieged Canterlot, but it had only lasted a couple of days.

What were the Earth Ponies doing, though? Celestia had been irritable with the Unicorn on principle, but he had piqued her curiosity after all.

Before she could step up and investigate, the doors swung open again. In stepped a beautiful white Pegasus Guard. Celestia froze. What news did this one bring?

"Yes?"

The Pegasus bowed deeply before speaking. "Sire Silvermane requests your permission to enact an assault on the rebel stronghold in Ponyville, and requests that the Commander in Stalliongrad send a number of troops away from there to assist in the attack."

Celestia quickly nodded. "Yes yes, Stalliongrad doesn't matter! The Ponies are clearly not leaving home, Ponyville is all we need now! When? When will he do it?"

"Tomorrow at dawn, Your Highness."

"Excellent. Inform the garrison commander in Stalliongrad that his troops are now directly under Silvermane's command, and tell Commander Goldenflame that he will coordinate to clear the district as well."

"Clear the district, Your Highness?"

"You heard me. I want nopony left there by noon tomorrow. Have him do whatever is necessary. I leave it to his judgment." After his last embarrassing defeat, Goldenflame would not be caught using any less force than he could bring to bear, Celestia knew.

The messenger nodded, then flew off urgently. There was much to do.

This was it. One more day until Peace is restored. One day more...

\*\*\*

Twilight looked up sharply as the doors to the barn flew open. In galloped the Cutie Mark Crusaders, capes flying, who tripped and fell in a flailing ball once they had passed the threshold.

"Girls, what's going on? Why aren't you at city hall? You should be there, it's not safe outside!"

Apple Bloom popped her head out of the pile of fillies that was in the process of disentangling itself. "Twilight, we done snuck out, and we thought we'd go lookin' fer somethin' to help y'all out!"

Sweetie Belle was the next to talk, speaking hurriedly and excitedly, "We got out of the town and we passed by the Guards, and we heard their messengers talking!"

Now Twilight was interested. Stupid idea or not, the CMC might well have gotten on to something important here.

Sweetie Belle continued in the same hurried tones, "They said they were coming for you and the other girls, tomorrow! At sunrise!"

Twilight gasped and looked around. Rarity looked up, worried, then returned to

her stitching with a new fervour. The other ponies who were on duty as runners and such looked on expectantly.

Scotaloo spoke up now, with possibly the most disturbing news, delivered with a mischievous grin, "And they say they're pulling no punches. It's all in, and they won't stop at anything to win."

Everypony in the barn swallowed audibly. There was silence for a few moments, then Twilight spoke softly.

"All right everypony, you heard. Runners, make sure the ponies know, and... make sure Mr. Cake gets those... rifles... to everypony outside, loaded. Spike, have parchment on hand for messages, then ensure Pinkie has her devices ready, and Fluttershy and Bon Bon are set to receive casualties. Girls," Twilight said finally and very somberly, "you should go back. Now."

In the face of the dark atmosphere of the room, the Cutie Mark Crusaders had no choice but to trot, wordlessly, back towards City Hall. A moment later, the other ponies galloped off to do their respective jobs. Twilight could see Rainbow Dash swooping down to interrogate one of the messengers as to the sudden flurry of movement.

Within minutes, the ponies would be surreptitiously loading their weapons and hunkering down. Everypony had been shown how to use them, the question just remained whether they would. Indeed, this kind of thing was unheard of in any of their lifetimes. Oh well. The Guard intended to do what they had to, and Twilight was sure the ponies would do the same when they had to.

Hopefully, the Guard wouldn't notice the preparations, but Twilight was fairly certain the cloud cover was still complete enough to prevent any detection. Dash was doing a brilliant job, but then, of course she was. That Pegasus would never abandon her friends by doing a half-rumped job.

Rarity was turning out the custom-made camouflage for Cheerilee's troops at a stunning rate, so they would definitely be ready when the time came. The Northern flank, under Cheerilee, was their main hope for crushing an enemy attack. Applejack held the South, and Big Mac the centre, with his firework cannon ready. Pinkie's toys were in the orchard, and though she wouldn't let Twilight see them, Twi was sure Pinkie had come up with some very interesting things.

Well, here goes. One more day until this madness is over. One day more...

\*\*\*

Clavio was standing atop the newly erected wall in the main street of the district. It was one of many now built across the district, all along roads facing the gate. They were nearly ready.

Half of the barrels of weapons that were being produced, Clavio had diverted to the local pub, where now he headed. A good number of the ponies from the district were there now, Harper in front of them with Octavia, waiting for Clavio's arrival. Barrels of assorted drinks sat in the streets. Everypony knew what was coming, and they were truly coming together. His last few days of speaking and rallying had been as effective as he

had hoped, maybe more!

Octavia still looked disapproving, but what could he say? Something about the last few days had certainly gotten a bee in her rump, but she was just as calculating as ever, and just as effective at organizing the ponies of the district.

Now was the time to rally the ponies under the banner of the setting sun. Having approached the group, a cheer rose up. Only Octavia did not stamp her hooves for him. He offered a tired grin, then pulled his red flag from his saddlebags, laying it on the ground before him.

"Everypony, serve yourselves a glass of wine. I intend to!" Clavio followed up on his words by drawing a glass from one of the barrels. In no time, the pub owner had passed out glasses, and all waited expectantly.

Clavio looked at the crowd who waited on his word. What a feeling. Harper stepped forward, spoke in echoing tones. "At the entrance and the city hall, the sections are prepared. Near the market, they're straining at the leash. Students, workers, you've got them all. There's a river on the run, Clavio, and you're riding quite the boat in it."

Clavio smiled a bit more widely, then looked past Harper at the crowd. "The time is near! I can feel it flowing through my veins! And yet, beware. Don't let the wine get to your brains, for the enemy is a dangerous one, armed and manned like we can never match. It's easy to sit here and ridicule them in theory, but the Guard will be harder to catch than we imagine."

The crowd all solemnly nodded, friends and families exchanging glances as Deep Brass and a few others passed between, handing out rifles. Clavio continued dramatically, Harper stepping aside so the whole crowd could see Clavio, "So let's have a toast! Here's to pretty mares who stole our minds, and to witty mares whose doorsteps we lined! Here's to what could have been, what should have been, and what will be! Here's to the red of the setting sun and the blue of the coming day!"

Harper stepped in as everyone took a sip, and raised his own cup. "Here's to the days gone by, to the days we may or may not still have, and most of all, to Clavio, our dearest friend and soon to be liberator!" Harper brought his cup to his lips with a smile as the crowd cheered and drank for themselves.

Clavio looked to the crowd again, but Octavia had stepped out. Oh well. She must have had other work to do. As he readied himself to refill his glass, a pony galloped up behind him, stopping abruptly. Clavio turned, looked the pony up and down.

"What is it, friend?"

"I heard the Guards talking on the walls. They come tomorrow, at dawn."

Clavio's heart tightened. Here it was. Time to go. He downed his new cup, then turned to the crowd.

"Earth Ponies, mares and colts, it's official! Tomorrow, at dawn, we fight our noble fight! By sunset tomorrow, we will have set the sun on Celestia's tyranny as well! One more day to revolution! We will nip Celestia in the bud! We'll be ready for these Guardsmen, they will wet themselves with blood!" He thrust his cup into the air powerfully, the crowd mimicking him as well. "One... day... more! "

\*\*\*

The night was restless across Equestria. Twilight rolled about in her sleep, unable to shake the nightmares of what could, and probably would, happen in but a few hours. Applejack slept in her brother's arms, ostensibly for warmth, but they both knew it was a matter of comfort for both of them, when they knew it may be the last time they see each other.

Cheerilee crouched under her camouflage, rifle aimed downrange for most of the night, sleeping only just enough to keep from passing out in the battle, the rifle bit in her mouth. Fluttershy and Bon Bon stayed awake, packing medical kits, while Rarity finally finished the last of the coats, and Pinkie tweaked her toys. Rainbow Dash slept soundly on a cloud, ready for the adventure to come.

Behind the Guards' lines, the Commanders were awake all night, perfecting battle plans, inspecting troops, readying lines. Goldenflame had his troops awake to be briefed on how little mercy to show, while Silvermane was surveying Ponyville on the horizon. Rubyhooves paced his line, ensuring the chariots were well polished and in full working order.

In the district, the ponies were hard at work, wine glass in one hand, hammer in the other, gathering their will for the day to come. Rifles were cleaned, and Ironhoof's crew worked frantically to produce ammunition. Deep Brass was preparing an aid station, while Harper ran unarmed combat drills and Clavio returned home for a well-needed rest. Octavia did not sleep, her heart too heavy with the day to come.

Finally, after the longest night anypony except perhaps Celestia had known, a red glow appeared on the horizon. Ponyville and Canterlot stirred in unison, and the clouds over Equestria were carefully moulded over the battlefields. The atmosphere buzzed with both static from the coming storms and excitement in the hearts of the ponies.

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A Guard stood in the street, just outside of Canterlot's gate. The plumage in his helmet indicated his rank as that of Captain or so, Clavio reckoned. A number of rebels, including Clavio, had their sights lined up on his chest, but all held fire, be it out of fear, reluctance, or an attempt to hide their positions as long as they could.

The Guard spoke up, his voice echoing between the houses. "You at the barricade, listen to this! No pony is coming to help you to fight. You're on your own, you have no friends. Give up your guns or die!"

Clavio turned to the ponies arrayed behind the barricades. "Curse their warnings, curse their lies! They will see Equestria rise!" Sometimes, his poetic spirit made him chuckle. Now, though, was no time for laughing. Or for rhymes, he thought fleetingly, smiling despite himself.

The Guard, he answered with a single shot, spraying rocks up around his hooves. The Guard turned his snout up, and smirked. As he turned, a drum began to beat a careful marching cadence on the other side of the gate. He trotted through the

gate, then out came a column of armed Guard. The Officer in charge shouted back to his men, "Clear the streets! Leave nopony!"

He was cut off as a bullet punched a small round hole in his armour. His eyes widened, and he fell, and the troops behind him faltered in their march. They gathered their wits, however, at the prompting of several lower-ranked Pegasi overhead.

"Form a line, return fire!"

Suddenly, the district erupted into a sound resembling that of a bush fire, crackling and popping, as hundreds of home-made rifles began firing into the tightly packed Guards. Within moments, as bullets bounced at angles from armour or blew smoking holes in Guards, the column had retreated behind the gate, leaving behind a dozen or so writhing bodies.

The Earth Ponies raised a great cheer, and red flags unfurled from balconies, but Clavio shouted at them to be still. This was only the start. They had surprised the Guard, but the initiative now belonged to the enemy.

\*\*\*

Lyra was huddled down in her foxhole, the clouds gathering overhead. Ominous. A crack opened in the clouds, one hundred and fifty metres ahead of the Ponyville defensive line. Light streamed through, and rain began to fall from the cloud cover. The line of light would make it hard for the advancing Guard to see the defenses in the darkness beyond. On the other hand, the people sitting in the trenches would see the Guards silhouetted in the light very early on.

Over Lyra's shoulder, she could just see Ponyville in the distance. The nearest house was two hundred metres behind their segment of line, where Big Macintosh had set up his cannon. It would overlook the centre of the line, and had a very good arc of fire.

To her right was her blue friend Bubbletoes, chewing nervously on the bit in her mouth, and to Lyra's left was Ditzzy Doo, the delivery girl. A strange one, but she had seemed fairly enthused about the fight. If she could line her eyes up long enough to draw a bead, she would certainly give it her all, they just didn't trust her flying enough to send her up with Rainbow Dash's flyers.

Unfortunately, the rain was starting to make the fortifications muddy and uncomfortable to be in, but Lyra was sure the fight wouldn't last that long. They'd push the Guard back, show them the power of Ponyville's friendship and camaraderie, and all would end early enough for her to wash up and get back to life.

Cheerilee's line would be the ones, if any, who would continue the fight, chasing the Guard into the sunset. Big Mac was just not concerned enough to do more work than he needed. Cheerilee, though... Lyra shuddered, not from the cold rain this time, at the thought of the near-execution of the mild-mannered schoolteacher. No wonder the mare was so determined to take as many of them with her as possible.

The sunlight running in between the clouds had an eerie red tint, and the sight of lightning in distant clouds was strangely distorted through the curtain of orange glow.

The whole thing seemed ethereal, unreal. The weather, the war, all so unusual. Unheard of except by scholars. Oh well, Lyra thought, maybe she'll get to be in a history book, maybe Cheerilee'll teach fillies about her. Then again, Lyra thought sadly, the history books normally only mention the dead.

Suddenly, Bubbletoes gasped. "Look! In the light!"

All down the line, ponies raised rifles, squinting to see, then, as one, they gasped. A chariot was approaching at high speed. And another. And another. The mud was sticking to their wheels, making it harder for them to ride, but easier for their Unicorn support to keep up.

No pony moved along the line. Everypony waited, expectantly, but they couldn't bring themselves to fire the first shot. Finally, though, the lead chariot burst into smoke and flame as a firework hit it right at the joint between harness and reinforced body. As the pieces fell to the mud, the Guards began to open fire erratically at the house.

In response, the ponies in the defences fired, most without aiming, but the sound alone was enough to make the advance hesitate. A voice behind them shouted, and the advance resumed quickly enough, however. Lyra worked the bolt on her harness frantically to chamber another round, then chomped down on the bit hard again, this time trying to line up the sights on the Guard nearest her. The harness heaved hard, and the shot went wide for the second time in a row. In response, a cloud of smoke blew out of the Guard's own rifle, and warm dirt and mud splashed Lyra's face.

Lyra worked again, ejecting another casing into the mud, then fired for a third time. This time, the Guard stumbled. She took the opportunity to look up and down the line ahead. The Guard were pushing with a purpose, covering the ground quickly. There were many more than they had been led to believe, and the chariots were deflecting bullets on all sides. When the stallions pulling the chariots were felled, the Unicorns inside used magic to continue the relentless advance. Another of Big Mac's projectiles disabled a second chariot in the field, but the others were unfazed.

Lyra's eyes turned back to the enemies ahead of her, and she fired again. Another Guard fell. She was getting better! A guard to the left of the one she had felled fired then, and more warmth splashed up onto her face. She worked the rifle and fired, killing that one, then decided to shift firing position. When she did, a jolt of pain shot up and down her left leg. When she looked, she saw that what she had thought was mud was, in fact, blood. Her eyes widened, and she felt faint.

"What's wrong, Lyra?" Bubbletoes called over, but Lyra only answered with a prolonged groan. Bubbletoes looked at her, and squealed a bit when she saw the wound.

"Ditzy! You have wings! Pull her back to Bon Bon's house!"

Ditzy looked over, and her face fell. Quickly, she scrambled out of her own hole, rushed over, and took Lyra's harness in her teeth. Bullets were churning up the dirt around the two as Ditzy pulled, flapping frantically to give herself more traction on the slippery ground.

Halfway to Ponyville, they were met by a couple of ponies with a stretcher, who took over. The last thing Lyra saw before losing consciousness was Ditzy's back as she

scurried back to the noise and flashing visible at the line.

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Octavia shuddered as another volley sounded from the barricades. It was taking all of her willpower not to run there and stand shoulder to shoulder with Harper and Clavio, as well she should. She was needed here, though.

A number of the Earth Ponies were gathered around a section of wall three blocks from the gate, and Octavia was supervising and providing cover as they dug a hole, which they were then to proceed to fill with gunpowder Frothbottles the alchemist had been brewing and which had not been packed into bullets by Ironhoof. Octavia and the group were going to blow a hole in the wall to distract the Guard and give morale to the barricades, which would then rush the gate. Hopefully, Clavio and the others would be able to push through at that point.

If not...

Octavia was getting distracted again. She couldn't allow that. The sounds of battle faded away again at the gate. Another wave repelled. Or, perhaps, the barricades were overrun, finally? The red flag continued to flap in the wind atop the City Hall, lightning from the clouds above silhouetting it, so Octavia assumed the barricades still stood. A cheer rose up, to confirm her hopes.

Another victory. How long could it last? They had been watching chariots full of Guards coming from the West for a while, and the garrison had already heavily outnumbered the rebels. Well, if they died, they would die free.

Somehow, that didn't satisfy Octavia nearly as much as she felt it should have. She saw her sister's face, pink and ebullient. Where was she now? A wanted criminal, perhaps shot like Luna? The old rock farm seemed like a great future now.

Then she thought of the future she should have had. She had been so hopeful, a life with Clavio, the quartet remaining wealthy and famous. Clavio had never properly acknowledged her. First, he ran the quartet, and focused too much on it, then this revolution, never a minute more for Octavia than he had to give as the generous stallion he was.

Octavia blinked away what she was sure was tears, though the rain now running through her mane probably hid them more than adequately from the others gathered by the wall.

She turned her rifle back to the crenellations, searching for a Guard who might see them, but as usual, the Guards were too focused on the gate. They severely underestimated the determination of the 'inferior' Earth Ponies. That would be their downfall, indeed.

Another drumroll from the gate, then, moments later, another flurry of gunfire. The crackling and popping ran back and forth for a few moments, pierced here and there by a scream or shout which made all of those working at the wall wince.

Finally, the barrels of powder were placed into the hole and, and by the end of the latest burst of fighting, everything was ready. Time to turn the tide. Or so Octavia



hoped.

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Silvermane couldn't believe it. Using the weather against him? Who would've thought that Ponyville had a weather control team of its own? Well, the troops were moving ahead rather splendidly, nonetheless. The Pegasi which had been tasked with finding Cloudsdale were recalled, and the troops in Stalliongrad were being split between this front and whatever it was Goldenflame's messenger had said was happening back at the castle.

It couldn't be nearly as important as this, Silvermane was sure, but nonetheless, he had to look gracious. And while more was better in an offensive such as this, he already surpassed the recommended three-to-one manpower ratio, had better equipment, and was far more confident in his own tactical ability than whatever they had managed to scrounge up. Overkill was safer, but he would win one way or another.

The sound of battle was almost drowned out by the peals of thunder now cracking the sky, but soon enough Silvermane's Pegasi should have the sky clear. They were returning quickly, or so the messengers said. They couldn't arrive swiftly enough for Silvermane. The initiative had to be maintained, and so far, the weather had daunted the Guard and slowed them enough that they couldn't quite push through the line yet. Sir Rubyhooves was up there in a chariot, but despite his frontline leadership, the battle would depend on far more than just that.

Another thunderous crack rent the sky, coming from the East, and Silvermane almost flinched. The storms were getting out of control. They did lend a certain pathetic fallacy to the day, however. The dull red glow that seeped through here and there convinced Silvermane that this would make beautiful embroideries to hang on the walls of his palace.

Oh yes, his palace. Soon, he would be *Prince* Silvermane. He chuckled a bit, turned to his most trusted Lieutenant, Sir Limestone. "Are you ready?"

Limestone looked at him for a moment, a glint in his eye, before confidently answering "Yes Sire, the Pureblood Platoon is at your command."

Silvermane smiled. "Good. You know what to do?"

"Of course, Sire." Limestone bowed deep. "It's time to show the superiority of the well-bred Pegasus to Canterlot. We will swoop in, slay Blueblood, blame it on the rebels, 'save' the Princess, and inform them of your... clever intervention."

Limestone grinned widely, and Silvermane nodded sharply at him. It was time for him to exploit the situation. Maintain the initiative, perform with violence of action. He grinned back at Limestone again.

"Indeed. Make for the skies, Sir Limestone. I'll see you again when you are a Commander yourself."

Limestone jumped away, followed by fifteen handpicked Pegasi as they cut through the clouds. Now Silvermane only had to worry about the town. His status would sort itself out.

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Rubyhooves was crouched as low as he could go in his chariot, but the bullets flying over head still occasionally made his ears pop. The Unicorn next to him snapped off a quick shot, and his smile told the Commander that it had hit something. At least, he hoped so.

Next to them, two of the dismounted Guards fell in quick succession, their snouts driving into the mud. One of them rolled over and began to moan, holding his midriff. Rubyhooves hid his face for a moment, composing himself. Then he rose up again, waving his swagger stick in the air.

"Come on, Guards! You're going to let a few fillies, farmers, and Earth Ponies defeat you? I thought you were Unicorns and Pegasi, not rabbits and mice! Show that you deserve the golden armour our Princess was so generous to grant you!"

As soon as he had finished, he ducked back down, three bullets moving to occupy the space he had just stood in. One drew a few sparks from the rim of the chariot. Rubyhooves glanced around nervously. Silvermane was counting on him to get his troops through the line quickly. If they got flanked, the column would not be able to push through to Sweet Apple Acres without having a much larger fight on its hands.

To that end, he knew this chariot had to move. A quick glance over the rim showed him the smoking hulks of the first two in line. He would have to brave it. There was no leadership like front-line leadership. "Guardsmen, use your horns, let's get this thing moving faster. Much faster."

The Guard in the chariot with him hunkered down, and his horn began to glow. Suddenly, the chariot lifted slightly out of the sticky mud, and it began to move twice as fast. The other chariots in the column saw this example, and took it on for themselves. The Ponyville defenders were clearly caught off guard, since Rubyhooves was halfway to their lines by the time he heard the first explosion.

To his left, a chariot erupted into brilliant blue and green flames. The house had to go. He stood again, barely keeping his balance in the bucking vehicle. "Destroy that house! Destroy the house for your Princess, and for Equestria!"

A number of nearby guards directed their gunfire at the windows, pinning down whoever was inside, but it was unreasonable to expect the house to fall from rifle fire. What could collapse it, however, was under Rubyhooves' hooves.

"Guardsmen, when we cross the line, keep going. I want this thing driven straight into that farmhouse."

The Guard blinked once, then nodded and set his jaw. The chariot picked up a bit more speed now, and drew ever more fire until finally it went up... and over a foxhole. The back of the chariot was open and offered no cover, and Rubyhooves thought it had enough momentum now, so he threw himself and the Guard out into the mud as the vehicle continued to hurtle forwards. The splash of their landing was muffled by the crash of the chariot passing through the nearest wall of the farmhouse. Rubyhooves rose slowly, the Guard beside him, and drew his sabre. The Guard fixed his spear to his

harness, and the two set off towards the house.

Clearly, the defenders assumed the two had died in the crash, since no more fire came their way. This allowed them to step into the wrecked living room unmolested. As soon as they had, however, they found themselves face to face with a burly red farm stallion.

"I assume you're the one who has been destroying our chariots?" Rubyhooves asked, sabre at the ready.

The other pony just hefted a pitchfork, shifted a piece of hay in his teeth, and drawled, "Ee-yup."

The standoff held for a few more seconds, before the guard let out a "For Celestia!" and leaped forwards, spear thrust towards Big Mac's neck. The pitchfork rose up and batted him out of the air. With one hoof, Mac broke the spear, then stepped on the Guard's neck to hold him down.

"You intend to make this hard, don't you, Earth Pony?"

Another shift of the hay. "Ee-yup."

What a simpleton. Well, Rubyhooves would have to take care of it himself. He started to circle to Mac's left side, hoping to make the use of the pitchfork more awkward, since his hoof would have to remain planted on the Guardsman.

Big Mac wasn't going to be taken in that easily, though. He lifted his hoof up, and brought it down with a resounding crunch, then readjusted his footing, pitchfork held out. Rubyhooves felt himself visibly blanch a bit, and he swore he saw the farmer grin at the sight.

Rubyhooves' sabre suddenly felt shakier in his grasp, but he gritted his teeth and took another step towards Big Mac, who didn't move at all. The pitchfork gave him at least twice, if not three times, the reach Rubyhooves had with his puny sword. The Guard knew he was at an immense disadvantage here. He couldn't do anything to help it, though, except win.

Rubyhooves ventured a swing in on his right side, but Mac quickly knocked it aside and jabbed with the pitchfork, a move Rubyhooves narrowly avoided by leaping to the side.

"Y'all aren't scared, are ya?" Big Mac smiled a bit more and kept swishing the piece of hay about in his mouth.

Rubyhooves swung again, a backhanded strike aimed at the pitchfork itself, in the hopes of hitting the wooden shaft. Instead, Mac twisted the fork, catching the sword between two prongs, then twisted again, snapping it off just above the hilt.

Rubyhooves' heart fell into his abdomen. Now what was he to do? Big Mac just kept that unnerving smile on his face, and began circling Rubyhooves. Suddenly, his eyes widened a bit.

A cry rose from behind Rubyhooves. "Get down, Sire!"

Gunshots rang out, and holes were punched in the wall. Big Mac simply levelled his pitchfork and charged past the now-unarmed Rubyhooves, shouldering him out of the way.

Rubyhooves turned from where he now sprawled amidst the house's living room

wreckage to look out at the ongoing battle. Silhouetted by lightning and gunshots, Big Mac swung the pitchfork powerfully, felling one, two, three Guards in as many sweeps. A lunge pierced another, blood spraying up Big Mac's arms but becoming near-invisible between the cleansing rain and his red pelt. The last Guard fell onto his rump, then scurried backwards.

"You're... you're going to kill me, aren't you?"

Big Mac just looked down, his gaze fixed on the other's snout. Water dribbled down through his pelt as he pondered. The pitchfork's tip raised up from its position pointed at the Guard's chest, and Big Mac simply said, "Nope."

The Guard smirked as he leaned forward to point his rifle at Mac's chest. "Your loss."

The crack was synchronous with a lightning bolt, which silhouetted the scene and burned it into Rubyhooves' mind. The Commander just lay in his place, mouth agape, watching as the large farm stallion, who had just mercifully let the Guardsman live, toppled majestically, like an ages-old tree. The Guard simply stood, brushed himself off, and rushed to help hustle Rubyhooves to safety behind a rock.

For the life of him, the Commander could not think of a reason to stand back up, and the Guard just left him there, suspecting that he was planning. How wrong the Guard was. Not planning. Thinking. How he wished he couldn't...

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Clavio fired again, his rifle now steaming as drops of rain hit it. The waves kept coming, and the Guards would come forward, fire a volley or two, then retreat behind their walls. Every volley killed or wounded a few more of Clavio's brave followers, as he was reminded by a warm splash washing over his left shoulder as the Guards fired their first volley of this wave.

The Guards knew they were winning. Despite the fact that every advance left another dozen or so of them writhing or very still in the square, they kept coming. Clavio had been supremely confident, but now he was losing his cool somewhat. Every free moment he had, he stole glances to his left, towards the segment of wall Octavia should be working on. Is she all right?

No time for that now. Though the previous unit had withdrawn, the drums rolled out another tune, announcing the advance of the next line. This was ridiculous! Celestia couldn't hope to hold the castle against the Earth Ponies' steel will! And yet, she was. Although Clavio hated to admit it, the battle was not in their favour. The red flag hung from the 'city hall' of their poor district, but it was tattered, torn and hanging crooked, and a dark patch in its corner suggested the fate of the last person to try and right it.

Clavio blinked to get the irritation of the powder smoke out of his eyes, then chomped at the bit again. His rifle barked, warping the course of the falling rain, spouting grey smoke which diluted quickly in the wind, and felling a Guard from the front rank, throwing him to his knees. The rest of the Guards simply stepped over and around their fallen comrade as his rear hooves flailed in the air.

The others in the nearby houses and manning the barricades were no better looking than Clavio. He saw other ponies blinking, looking around, crouching and praying to the sun. Rain flowed through ragged, dirty manes and pooled on the ground, with the puddles often turning pink immediately on touching the cobblestones.

All of a sudden, there was a resounding boom. Smoke rose up over the rooves to Clavio's right, and despite himself, he smiled surprisingly broadly.

"Up and at 'em, Earth Ponies! The Guard will rout or we'll be out!"

Clavio leaped the barricade he hid behind, firing his last shot as he did so. A quick glance to either side showed him that maybe half of the ponies still holding the barricades were following. Considering the circumstances, it was more than he had expected. He just fervently hoped that those still behind wouldn't shoot their comrades by mistake.

All of the home-made rifles Clavio had held back had a singular surprise, and that was the point at the end of their barrels. It was a small design element that offset the accuracy a bit, but Clavio had considered the risk of running out of ammunition greater than the risk of engaging at any truly long distances. As it stood, the ponies had certainly been shooting well enough, and now the Guard looked positively terrified of the haggard rebels charging their way.

That is, the first Guards did. As soon as the screaming mass met the front rank of the Guard, they realized they would have a harder time than they had hoped. Clavio bowled the Guard immediately in front of him over, then stabbed the rifle once, twice, three times into the soldier, his teeth drawn back into a snarl from the combination of rage and exertion. The rank behind, however, had taken a few steps back, and were all lined up and ready. The officer in front grinned as he opened his mouth to order his troops to fire.

It was all Clavio could do to duck and use the body of the Guard he'd just slain as cover before the world erupted into smoke, flame, and screaming lead around him. Rebels twitched and jerked as bullets punched through, and pieces of the cobblestone beneath them blew up in clouds of dust and gravel as rounds ricocheted away. At the barricades, all was very silent, until Clavio stood again, facing the reloading Guards, then turned to the others behind him

"Come on, friends! Are you ponies, or are you mice?"

Without waiting for a response, Clavio proceeded to re-cock his rifle, fire a round into the line of stunned Guards, then plow into them, pointed rifle swinging wildly. He would go down in style, if he went down today.

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Octavia and the others had breached the wall, but unfortunately, it was clear that Celestia had dealt with far grander sieges in her time. Three hundred metres ahead, there stood the inner wall, with only a few bakeries and such small buildings dotting the grass between the two layers. Why had Octavia not thought of this? Clearly, she had been just as caught up in the revolutionary optimism as everyone else.

To her right, she saw where the Guards were staging every wave, a drummer and an officer in gilded clothing standing watch over their troops' battle.

"Come on!" Octavia yelled to the other sappers, cocking her rifle as she began to trot towards the Guards' flank. The cry of the charge had just risen, Clavio must surely be pushing through soon.

Then, all at once, there was a sound like a peal of thunder from the gate. No way had the revolutionaries advanced that far, or had organized such a volley. Oh no...

Octavia gritted her teeth and galloped the last bit of the way. Ahead, more Guards were coming through the gatehouse to the inner portion of Canterlot, and one turned to notice the ragged ponies charging their way.

A startled shout roused the attention of the other Guards, but Octavia kept her eyes fixed on the leader. She chomped at the bit while galloping, but her shot went wide. Only one chance left then. She pointed the tip of her rifle at his chest as he turned.

At the last moment, the drummer leaped in front of Octavia, his warning to "Move, Sir Goldenflame!" cut off by the point of her rifle piercing his breastplate, catching, bending, then finally breaking as she was thrown end over end by the unexpected collision.

"Curse you rebels and your filthy kin! Kill the Earth Ponies!" Goldenflame shouted to his troops, who quickly began forming up on the road they had been descending. The rebels following Octavia fired all at once, then plunged into the Guards in order to break them up before they could organize themselves. Octavia slowly got back on her four hooves, shaking some of the mud from her grey pelt and blowing the loose strands of her black mane, once so beautifully kept, out of her eyes.

She turned to see the drummer's hooves finally fall from the metal shaft jutting from his chest, and emit a last gasp. Before, that would have stunned her, but even before the last week, she had always been cold and practical. Now, with the adrenaline coursing through her veins, the sight prompted a snarl which made Goldenflame shiver. She slowly began advancing on the pony, backing him into the melee which was degenerating in the gatehouse.

"Stay back, Earth Pony!" Goldenflame drew his ceremonial sabre and held it shakily in front of himself, but Octavia batted it away with a laugh.

"Afraid?" Octavia asked, stepping forwards with the same unchanging pace. He was matching her step for step backwards, but every step, his face fell a bit more. Finally, she had had enough waiting.

Octavia kicked with both back feet, throwing herself forwards straight into the Guard Commander, and driving her front hooves into his throat. His eyes widened more as he coughed from the impact, then fell to the ground, Octavia perched atop him, resting her front hooves on his chestpiece.

"Un- Unhand me, unhand me, Earth Pony!" Goldenflame choked the sentence out, but Octavia only smiled, before pushing down, and pointing the warped, broken piece of iron that was all that remained of her rifle at his throat.

Goldenflame's eyes shut, and he let out a whimper. Octavia closed her eyes, rocked forwards, felt a splash on her snout, then stepped back, not looking at the

Commander. Closing her eyes didn't shut the rattling, gargling sounds he made out of her head, however.

What was this war doing to them? Any other pony may have been shaken by the thought, but Octavia had always been a professional mare. Now wasn't the time. Pondering the morality of their actions wasn't the best way to ensure she would attend another of her sister's famous parties.

She opened her eyes again, to see all but two of the ponies who had breached the wall with her galloping past towards the melee in the gate.

"Come quick, Octavia, Clavio's in trouble!" Fantella's cry got Octavia's attention in a second. Although the Guards who had been coming as reinforcements had routed quickly, seeing their commander pinned and being attacked from the flank unexpectedly, the Guards already in the fight had no idea what was going on.

In the centre of it all, Clavio was sneering at the guard, a scratch under his eye outlining the bags which had formed from fatigue and cold. The rain was running red down his flanks, hopefully not with his own blood.

"Come on, Guards! Are you tired of being Celestia's pawn, or are you simply afraid of us now?"

Behind him, many more of the ponies from the barricade were jumping the bodies already piled in the gate to face the Guards who were there. Octavia charged in with her own ponies from behind, and within moments, the Guards who remained lay in the gutters. An Earth Pony scrambled up to pin a red banner to the gatehouse, and a cheer went up in the district. They had won their first victory. Now on to Celestia's doorstep.

A glance around, however, made Octavia seriously question whether there were enough Earth Ponies in Canterlot to do it.

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Sir Limestone set down almost without sound, his hooves making only the lightest click on touching the tiles of the balcony, but the meager sound was drowned out by the pounding of the rain. His troops landed with the same grace behind him. A glance downwards and to his right showed him powder smoke rising into the sky from the Earth Pony district of Canterlot. Only his firm dedication to Sir Silvermane kept him from going down and pounding respect into the lesser ponies himself.

"Let's go, Pegasi."

They stepped through the door into an ornately decorated hallway, the walls of which bore many exquisite paintings of Prince Blueblood in various poses and environments. Limestone sneered. Such an ego.

A door opened, and the Pegasi readied their rifles. They were not needed, however, as the Unicorn servant who emerged greeted Limestone warmly.

"Sir Limestone! You have arrived!"

"Yes, thank you, Jives. A bit quieter would be nice, though."

"Indeed. You still require my magical services, then?"

"You know what to do?"

"Yes, Sire."

Limestone nodded, then stepped aside. One of his troops stepped forwards to take his place facing the Unicorn. The others bowed a bit to him. They all understood the sacrifice he was making.

"Just remember, this is for the good of everyone. I'll ensure your fillies know of your sacrifice, and are taken care of."

The Pegasus nodded to Limestone in thanks, then waited. Jives' horn began to glow, and he scrunched his eyes closed. Unicorns would need to remain, Limestone thought, even in the new world order, for their magical services. Some, anyway, and far better trained for respect than the worms who inhabited Canterlot these days.

A moment later, a glow enveloped the Pegasus. His wings retracted, and his armour fell off, leaving only a separate rifle harness he had worn beneath. He changed from his pristine white pelt to a dirty green, then the glow faded. The Guard looked down, his expression stony. He was a perfect impression of an Earth Pony.

The Guard-turned-rebel locked his jaw, gathered his wits, then, once Jives had stepped aside, charged down the hallway noisily. Limestone and the others set off after him, just a bit slower.

"Go! Quickly, catch the rebel!"

The decoy broke through the door at the end of the hall, and the Guard posted outside Blueblood's room simply gawked with an open mouth at the sudden appearance of a rebel on the twelfth floor of the castle.

"What are you waiting for? Catch him!" Limestone shouted, knowing full well a grey-pelted Unicorn Guard would never best even a disguised Pegasus from Silvermane's personal retinue.

Just as Limestone had predicted, the decoy landed one, two blows with his front hooves, breaking the Guard's nose and collapsing his throat, before shooting him at point-blank range through the snout.

The pursuing Pegasi slowed down enough to give the 'rebel' time to reload before kicking down the door to Blueblood's chambers. They then followed close behind, charging into the ornate guest room. A beautiful wooden table was the centrepiece of the room, upon which the rebel leaped, and at the opposite end was a pair of doors which led into Blueblood's bedchamber. A cry came from the bedroom.

"Guards! I've locked myself in, quickly, save me! I see him, through the peephole! It's a rebel! Quickly! Guards?"

The 'rebel' cast one quick glance at Limestone, who gave him the slightest nod. The decoy's rifle fired, blowing a hole in the door just above the level of Blueblood's peephole, eliciting a startled screech from the Prince. Immediately afterwards, before the smoke had even had time to clear, five of Limestone's troops fired as well.

The exquisite table was bathed in blood as the 'rebel' collapsed. The other Pegasi showed only the slightest flicker of emotion. They all knew it was necessary.

"The rebel is dead, Your Highness. You can come out now," Limestone said.

The door opened slightly, and Blueblood's snout peeked out. "Are you certain it's



safe?" he asked, drawing a sneer of disdain from Limestone.

"Yes your highness, it's all clear."

The door swung open fully, and Blueblood took three steps before gasping dramatically, and exclaiming, "What have you done to my table?"

Limestone could have answered. Honestly, though, he just didn't want to hear anything more from this pompous stallion's mouth. The Lieutenant just chomped his bit, and shot the Prince clean through the head.

"Move the body back a step or two, so that the shot through the door looks to be the one that killed him."

One of the Guards stepped forwards to do as instructed, then they all headed back into the hall.

Time to report to Sir Silvermane that his position was secure. Then, hopefully, to get stuck in against the Earth Ponies.

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The Ponyville line had dissolved. The centre was broken and collapsing without Big Macintosh to hold the enemy vehicles and inspire them, and ponies were retreating to try to protect their homes. Applejack's right flank was driving backwards hard, in the hopes of cutting the Guard off at or around City Hall, which was being evacuated towards Zecora's hut. Cheerilee's troops had abandoned their positions entirely, but even Twilight had no idea where they had gone. Between the camouflage, the rain, and the loss of runners to Pegasus Guards sneaking through the clouds, the left flank had simply vanished.

Rainbow Dash was above it all, trying to keep the weather as bad as possible over Equestria. Her and the other Pegasi, however, were having a great amount of trouble ever since the Guard who had been seeking Cloudsdale had come to the front.

Both sides were flying in and out of the clouds, trying frantically to get on each other's tails to get a shot in, while working to support their own side on the ground. Some of the Guard carried explosives to drop beneath them, but Rainbow's flyers had become quite expert at stealing the bombs when the Guards ventured too close to heavy clouds.

Dash was waiting inside a dark raincloud again, hoping to ambush Guards who were sneaking by to intercept Twilight's communications runners. A number of ponies lay in the mud between Ponyville and Sweet Apple Acres already, and the Guards had even come to swooping down on stretcher carriers heading to Fluttershy and Bon Bon's medical station.

A glint of gold caught Dash's eye, and she was off. A quick kick launched her like a rocket, and within seconds she was flying at a very startled looking Guard. She bared her teeth as she pulled at her bit, and a red mist mixed with the cloud as the Guard suddenly entered a tight spiral towards the ground.

"Woohoo!" Rainbow cheered, then pulled up out of the cloud. She could feel the static electricity in her mane, and no one wanted to be in a thundercloud during a lightning strike. Sure enough, as soon as she emerged into fresh air, the cloud lit up

beneath her.

Two Guards who had been circling overhead waiting for targets saw her, however, and began a steep dive out of the sun to catch her. A bullet cracked past Dash's ear, and she dove back into the cloud.

She jinked and juked, but the Guards were hot on her tail, so she decided to take them for a ride. She rolled on her back, then dove hard, out of the cloud and into the maelstrom beneath.

The wind was whistling, and bullets and projectiles were flying everywhere. As it happened, Pinkie's latest project was a catapult, prepared to launch explosives, tastefully packed with confetti by Ponyville's resident party master, anywhere in the town. Pinkie's time had been occupied by mapping out the town in detail, so that she could accurately target any point within it with minute precision.

The balls of powder and ribbon were flying by, tearing through the rain and shrugging off the wind, and one of the Guards following Dash was swept aside by one almost immediately upon exiting the cloud cover.

Dash just laughed and started a barrel roll towards the City Hall tower. Beneath her, the line of fillies, colts, and the elderly was streaming West out of the city, and just ahead were the flashes of gunshots and explosions.

The Guard deftly followed her through the small gap in the bell tower, and she smiled. This one would be fun. Another bullet cracking by her head reminded her of the odds.

Dash threw herself into a tight left turn, narrowly avoiding a house which reminded her how low they'd gotten. The troops on the ground began firing upwards, but the Pegasi were travelling far too fast for anything but a lucky shot to be a threat. A glance upwards showed a v-shaped formation of Guards on a bombing run, bags of explosive falling from their harnesses.

Dash pulled up hard, and started firing and cocking as quickly as she could. Two of the Guards in the bombing run began unrecoverable dives before the others climbed into the clouds, and Dash immediately started back downwards again. Had she continued climbing any longer than she absolutely needed to, she would've slowed just enough to give the Guard behind her the upper hand. No one got the upper hand on Rainbow Dash.

The Guards she'd just shot down splashed into the mud hard among their own troops, splashing the Guards who were struggling through the thick mud which had been plentifully churned up by bombs when the Ponyville inhabitants had held the ground.

Now, a bomb from Pinkie's catapult hit just ahead of Dash, throwing the nearby Guards away both whole and in parts, then churning up a column of mud and dirt which Dash barely avoided. The Guard, however, wasn't so lucky, getting a face full of it.

By the time he had blinked away the dirt. Dash was no longer in front of him. He realized he'd lost only a moment before a searing pain tore up his flank. Dash flew by as the Guard flyer hit the mud with a wet smack. One more for Rainbow Dash, she thought triumphantly.

Another wing on a bombing run was flying by off to the left flank of Ponyville's

now-nonexistent defensive line, trying to slow down Applejack's tactical withdrawal. Dash flew that way next, narrowly dodging a lightning bolt which ignited some unfortunate Guard's ammunition on the ground.

Dash came up on the bombers from below again, firing as quickly as she could, and two who had dropped all of their munitions swooped to intercept, but quickly joined the other three Dash had felled in the meantime, as they flew into the flurry of bullets. The other three in the formation made it into the clouds. Just in time, too, as Dash's rifle made a sad *click* to show it was empty.

She turned back towards Sweet Apple Acres to reload, but found her path cut off by two more Guards, hunting flyers. They turned her way in unison, and she scowled. Perfect.

Dash dove towards the ground to gain airspeed, stopping just above pony height and making a number of fighters dive to the ground in fear. She waved in passing at a few of the inhabitants of Ponyville, but didn't slow down. The Guards weren't so easily fooled, however. They swooped down to cut her off.

Dash felt a tingling on her neck. More static in the mane. Quickly, she swooped into an open window as lightning struck in the street where she had been flying. The Guards, who had been focusing on where Dash was, were momentarily blinded, so she flew back out to the street and up into the sky.

The Guards were hot on her tail, however. A round clipped her wing, and she cried out in surprise before beginning a series of loops and turns to throw off their aim. Why did she have to use the last of her ammunition? Darn it, Dash, you need to plan ahead more often!

She climbed through the clouds again, hoping to lose the Guards there, but they kept following. Oh well, no one could outmatch Rainbow Dash in a clear-sky sprint. She would escape. Emerging into the clear skies, however, she stopped dead in her tracks with a gasp.

The sky was full of Pegasi, and the sun was obscured by... Cloudsdale?

"Rainbow! Watch out!" a Pegasus screamed as she swooped by Dash, who dodged to the left just as the Guards emerged from the cloud shooting. The Pegasus who had shouted at Dash hit one in the chest, then bit his wing, so he fell like a rock. Dash kicked the other in the face while he hovered, stunned, so that he too fell through the clouds.

"What're you guys doing here?"

A larger looking male Pegasus flew down, stopping by Dash while most of the others flew by.

"We've been hiding, making bombs, guns, ammo. Now that the Guard have stopped hunting us, it's time to retake Ponyville, don't you think?"

"Yeah!" Dash said with a smile, "But what's your name?"

"Most people just call me Soarin'."

Rainbow Dash almost just fell from the sky right then and there.

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Applejack's troops were galloping as hard as they could in the mud, but the falling bombs and occasional fire from the advancing Guards were slowing them down tremendously. Where was Big Mac? Why had the centre collapsed? Applejack didn't have time to think about that, they just needed to get to the City Hall as quickly as possible.

"Come on, y'all, y'aren't gonna let a few firecrackers slow ya down, are ya?"

Apparently, they were, but she had to whip them forwards. Were it not raining so hard, she would be visibly sweating buckets, as she was running back and forth, helping those who were stumbling or falling behind. They wouldn't make it at this rate.

"Sweets!" Applejack cried to a grey mare trudging along near the middle of the column. When Vanilla Sweets turned to face Applejack, the apple farmer continued, "Y'all take the slower ones ta catch up with us! Ah'll take the quick ponies an' get set up at the City Hall now!"

Vanilla Sweets nodded to show that she understood, then fell back a bit. Applejack charged ahead, the stronger ponies of the group working to keep up. Years of hauling carts and working in fields, even in this kind of weather, had conditioned her perfectly for this.

Another load of bombs hit the ground behind them, making Applejack flinch as she thought of Sweets' group, but they were making far better time now. They may actually be able to cut off the enemy so the evacuation could finish.

Applejack's ragged group reached the City Hall relatively quickly, but it would only be moments before the Guards got there as well. The defenders from the centre were hiding out in houses and only putting up meagre resistance now, so the rear guard of the enemy advance was flushing them out one by one while the point kept on thrusting forward. It was clear the enemy leader was aiming for a quick victory, but had already been denied that right.

"Serena," Applejack said to a light blue mare who had kept up with the group, "y'all better go tell Twi what's a happenin' here."

Serena nodded, then wearily set off to the West. Hopefully the Pegasi didn't get her. In the meantime, though, Applejack started assigning stallions and mares to all the cover she could find, and getting some to dig rudimentary cover from the mud that had once been the city square.

The sounds of battle were dangerously close now, and the Mayor was not quite finished shepherding the kids and elders out of town. It was too late, though. A whistling caught Applejack's ears through the hammering of rain, thunder and gunshots, and she looked up to see white silhouettes flying by over head.

"Get down!" she yelled as she dove face first into the mud, holding her hat on with one hoof.

The bombs made smothered *crumps* as they drove into the mud then threw it into the air. Screams rose up behind Applejack, who lifted her head a moment after the last bomb had hit, and saw something she had hoped never to see.

Two fillies lay bleeding, and the Mayor was... decorating the side of City Hall. The

fillies were screaming loud, and frightening all those around them. Sharpener, another teacher from the Ponyville school, came out to take charge, but three little ponies scurried around her to begin pulling the wounded away. Applejack saw with pride that the little heroes were none other than their very own Cutie Mark Crusaders. Good girls!

Bullets started flying by overhead, and Applejack turned back to the matter at hand.

"We just gotta hold 'em, folks! Just gotta give them fillies a chance ta get on outta here!"

Applejack fired into the advancing Guards, and settled back into the entrenched soldier's routine. Fire, cock, fire, cock, stay as small as possible in your cover. The Guards were encountering the first organized resistance since the Ponyville defensive line, and it staggered them heavily. Now that the Guards were slowing down, chariots were sinking deeper and deeper into the mud forming under them, and the ponies still remaining in houses behind them were harassing them.

The ponies of Ponyville might just win! Well shoot, Applejack thought, that's a crying shame for Celestia, ain't it? Embarrassing, too!

Another wing of flyers on a bombing run passed overhead then, as if to remind Applejack that the war wasn't quite won yet. One of the bombs hit smack on top of the bell tower, collapsing it into the now thankfully empty City Hall. The others, however, hit all around Applejack and her comrades, and a few wails rose up in their wake.

Applejack thanked goodness she still had her wide brimmed hat to keep the falling debris from her eyes, so she could start shooting right as soon as the bombs stopped exploding. The Guard hadn't stopped for the explosions, so they were threateningly close to the pony positions around City Hall now.

Applejack kept fighting, but it was clear that with the Guards having gained so much ground, the City Hall wouldn't last long one way or another. Their resilience was stunning! One of Pinkie's projectiles hit a house across the square, and planks of wood as well as Guards flew wildly through the air. A whoop rose from one end of Applejack's makeshift line, but was immediately cut off with a squeak by a gunshot. Applejack hoped the squeak was one of fright and not pain.

Suddenly, there was a flurry of gunfire from Applejack's right. Sweets had arrived, and the others from Applejack's flank had formed a ragged line. Their volleys, while not as concentrated or as disciplined as what the Guards could do, tore through the Guard column with a fury, but when two chariots turned towards the already exhausted ponies, a number turned and galloped with the last of their strength in the other direction.

The chariots in question, however, suddenly burst into flames, lighting the square and making the retreating ponies turn about out of confusion. When a third suddenly combusted, Applejack raised herself up a bit to try and see what was happening.

All at once, a number of mounds of mud rose up, and revealed ponies under well-concealed camouflage netting. Right in the centre of the Guards was Cheerilee, toting another of Pinkie Pie's toys, an auto-cocking rifle. She wore a sloppy grin as she began cackling and firing everywhere around her. Guards were falling all across the square, and the now-revealed ponies galloped about, placing explosives covered in

sticky putty from Pinkie's stores on more chariots.

Applejack smiled despite herself. Well dang, that Cheerilee is something special. Dealing with kids for so long made her creative and patient like nopony else. Cheerilee's cackling grew in intensity as she chased the last few Guards from the square, then turned back.

"To ground, ponies!" she shouted, and the ponies with her threw their netting back over themselves, fell to the ground, and began crawling again. Within moments, Applejack couldn't distinguish their movement in the mud from anything else through the rain. Quite the trick!

While Cheerilee moved off to, no doubt, cause chaos somewhere else, Applejack knew the Guard would be back. They would need to be ready, and this wasn't the place to do it, with most of the houses and cover levelled or damaged. The next, and last place, would have to be the orchard.

\*\*\*

Octavia, Harper, Deep Brass and Clavio were enjoying a glass of wine in the gatehouse. The battle had gone on long enough that both sides were taking a few moments worth to nurse their wounds, collect their wounded, and regroup. The cut on Clavio's face still worried Octavia, though, she mused, the scar might just make him even more handsome.

He was smiling, though his eyes didn't seem to share the expression. Harper had a long gash along his left front leg, and his hooves were soaked in blood which he insisted wasn't his. Deep Brass had blood all down her front, certainly not hers, and her gaze was a bit distant. Octavia was the only one who seemed fairly normal, mostly because she had always been a bit detached.

The quartet were all unarguably happy, however, that they were all still there to share the glass of wine. The other ponies had insisted they take a break, due to how much they had put in over the course of the last week, and so they sat, dry, under the gate, while the other ponies built new barricades in front of the other gate. None of them felt good about it, but the others had been quite insistent.

Every once in a while, a sniper from one side or the other fired, making everypony flinch, though they knew perfectly well they couldn't dodge the shots. By the time they heard them, whoever was targeted would be hit, and that was that. To remind everypony of that unfortunate fact, a whinnying scream normally floated through the air a few moments later.

Octavia couldn't help but glance at Clavio again and again throughout their little reunion. He was a bit quieter than usual, only speaking when Deep Brass or Harper made reference to him, though he was as charismatic as before when he did speak, so the others didn't notice. Octavia, however, was noticing a whole lot more about him.

Clavio had always been closest to her, since they had both met in Sharpener's class back in Ponyville as kids. Neither of them could possibly have predicted that a few years later they would be playing every important event in Canterlot, or that after that,

they would be hiding in a gatehouse, sipping cheap wine and covered in other ponies' blood.

The rain had washed much of the filth from them in the off time, but Clavio's mane remained a light pink in places, and his pelt showed distinct stains. Octavia was fairly happy her dark colouring didn't show marks as easily. Harper's colouring also hid it well. Deep Brass, however, was quite the horror to behold.

Octavia found herself staring at the patterns sprayed across Deep Brass's chest and face with a sort of morbid fascination. On her pale pelt, the blood showed up in splendid contrast. It also showed in her eyes, albeit not physically. Her gaze was hollow, even as she laughed at Harper's efforts to lighten the mood, and whenever she thought the others weren't looking, she gazed off, lost in thought.

This had been hard on all of them. They were almost done, though. The main spire of Canterlot lay just on the other side of the inner wall. Breaching the curtain had brought them so close to victory. Maybe they would live to see an Equestria where the Earth Ponies did more than just the menial labour of the Unicorns and Pegasi. Maybe.

Another shot cracked across the no man's land, and another, and another. That wasn't just sniper fire. Clavio was the first to his hooves, looking out and across the gap between defenses.

"They're coming!" he shouted, "Make ready!"

The ponies were at their new barricades in moments, rifles snapping at the oncoming Guards. The Guards were unfazed this time. They had expected the same tactics, and were only too pleased to have been obliged. The Guards fanned out, presenting individual targets rather than the masses the rebels were used to shooting at.

With that simple shift in tactics, the rebels found themselves at an immense disadvantage. While Octavia and a few others had taken the time to learn to aim with their own rifle, many of the others had made it this far simply by shooting into the masses of enemies, which required little to no skill at all. Now, the ponies behind the barricade were simply filling the air above and around the Guards with lead to little or no avail.

The Guards had also manned the gatehouse ahead, so that the small windows were obscured by smoke from snipers who were peppering the rebel positions. To make things worse, the rain seemed to be picking up. At this rate, Octavia knew, the Earth Ponies' morale wouldn't hold for more than ten minutes. They needed to end the battle quickly. The question was, of course, how?

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Cheerilee was grinning ear to ear again. Her ponies had performed spectacularly so far, cutting the advancing column into little bites for Applejack to take on separately, but now was the time for them to really get stuck in. Applejack had fallen back to the orchard, there was nowhere left to fall back to. From her place concealed under a mound of leaves, mud, and rotting apples, Cheerilee could just turn her snout enough to see Applejack and a distraught looking Twilight talking out in front of the barn.

Years of watching kids talk in the back of her classroom had made her quite proficient at lip-reading, so she indulged while she waited for the Guards to hit the line. Applejack tilted her hat back a bit to stop the rain dripping by in front of her snout.

"Y'all gotta understand, we've done all we could, but they've kept on pushin'! I don't know where my brother has gotten to, but I don't like it none at all!"

Twilight pursed her lips, and Cheerilee could swear that even through the rather heavy precipitation, she saw Twi's eyes get a bit wetter.

"Applejack, why... why are we here?" Weak. Cheerilee chuckled a bit at Twilight's hesitation. Then again, the purple pony hadn't been in that locked room with Cheerilee and the Guard. Cheerilee shuddered again, but her smile grew back as her hoof felt the cold steel of her weapon. She would show them.

Applejack looked gravely at her friend. "Ah wish ah could answer thathonestly, Twi, I really do. Right now, looks like we're here to save our and our friends' lives. Is that good enough?"

Twilight set her face with steely resolve, and nodded. "You're right. You should get back to your position. Dash says they'll be here soon."

Cheerilee looked around to see how Twilight knew this, and saw a hole in the clouds slowly tracking towards the orchard. Oh Rainbow Dash, you are a clever one.

It would be time soon. There was a ripple through the bushes and the ground on the edge of the orchard as Cheerilee's troops readied themselves. A few others among them had the automatic weapons Pinkie had adapted from her roman candles and other toys, and they were sure to give the Guards a good bloody nose. They would wait on Cheerilee's shot to begin firing, however. This had to be perfect.

The first Guards began to appear at the edge of Ponyville, but stopped before moving into the open. They seemed to be gathering their strength. One in particular, an old stallion with a bright grey mane and the most ornate armour there, caught Cheerilee's eye. Had he not been so far away that she couldn't be sure of hitting, she would've killed him on principle, because she knew who it was. It was Sir Silvermane, come to survey the carnage he'd wreaked.

Since Cheerilee knew the shot would only reveal her position, she held fast, and decided to simply eavesdrop on his conversation with his winged aide with her suddenly very pertinent lip-reading skill. Maybe something useful would come of it.

"Guard," Silvermane began, "what do you think of Princess Celestia's own redecoration effort?" He waved grandiosely with a grin to encompass the panorama of Ponyville. The Guard only smiled a bit to placate his master.

"Just you wait. Soon, not only will there be no more Earth Ponies rising up, but we'll have our own special place in the hierarchy, we Pegasi." He bared his teeth in what seemed to Cheerilee to be more of a predatory gesture than a real smile.

The Commander looked back out over the orchard. His efforts to push through quickly had finally worked out, though to be fair, it had taken the whole morning. He needed his men in tip top shape for the next round. "Make sure my Captains have their men grab some food from the houses, and get a bit of rest. I give them one hour to be on this start line, in tip-top shape. Understood?" Silvermane fixed his gaze on the aide



for the last word, and the latter swallowed hard, then galloped off.

An hour. Cheerilee waved discreetly to the pony behind her tasked to taking messages. Without looking, she scrawled “1 hr 2 grd atk” into the mud next to her with her hoof. A fallen apple landed next to her to confirm message receipt. Now to wait. In the meantime, Cheerilee slowly reached out and pulled the apple into her cover. Silvermane had a point. Cheerilee was dreadfully tired and hungry by this point, she could at least satiate one of those issues.

When she awoke to the sounds of sudden gunfire, she realized she had tended to both needs, whether she wanted it or not. In front of her, smoke drifted away from the windows of some of the houses on the edge of Ponyville. Another volley of shots from the concealed sharpshooters cracked through the rainfall as grey-pelted Guardsmen began to line up between the buildings.

The chariots pulled up slowly as well, moving with great difficulty through the mud which had been softened with rain for six hours and churned constantly by explosions. Oh, the Guard wouldn’t get Sweet Apple Acres easily. The third volley of the battle rang out, and the Guard immediately got visibly tenser. They would move on the next, then. Though no ponies were visible in the cover of the trees, Cheerilee knew every one was picking a target.

When the Guard came into range, they would receive quite the greeting.

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The Earth Ponies had regained their positions around the base of the gatehouse in Canterlot’s curtain wall. It was time to finish the battle. Deep Brass had reported that most of the wounded had stabilized, though her haunted look told the stories of those who hadn’t. At the same time, Harper had organized a team to go from body to body, in order to gather ammunition and spare powder. Unfortunately, the rain had made most of the powder which had sat on the wet cobblestones unusable. The Ponies would be hard-pressed to keep firing.

With that latest concern in mind, Clavio had prepared the final plan of the battle. He knew that if they failed now, they would be killed. Every last one, even the few fillies and colts still living in the district. Clavio gritted his teeth at the thought. “Harper,” he called, “bring the ladderponies forward.”

Harper moved quickly, keeping low, to reach Clavio’s section of barricade. While he did so, two shots rang out from the Guards’ positions atop the walls, drawing chips of stone from the gatehouse behind the rebels. “Clavio,” Harper said with his loud voice ringing out among the Earth Ponies, “they’re ready. I believe it’s time to overthrow a tyrant, wouldn’t you say?”

Clavio smiled despite himself. “This is why we’re friends, Harper.” He slapped his friend on the shoulder, then raised the small whistle he had found among the fallen Guardsmen. As he wrapped his lips around the cold metal, he ran his eyes one last time over the rampart. When he exhaled, he would throw himself and the last of the Earth Ponies in Canterlot into what he knew would be an almost unsurvivable gauntlet. It was

a heavy burden to bear.

He blew with all his might, then set off at a gallop, realizing only a few steps later that the whistle had fallen from his mouth, and that he was unconsciously adding to the din, the screaming, ululating warcry that had risen up from the Earth Ponies as they rushed towards the wall. The Ponies Harper had chosen rushed ahead, ladders on their shoulders, and one fell just ahead and to the right of Clavio.

A red mist painted Clavio's side as he ran by the unfortunate rebel, but his peripheral vision showed another Pony taking up the fallen one's cause. His heart swelled with pride.

Within moments, though they seemed like centuries, they were at the inner wall, and the ladders were up. All around Clavio, there was nothing but a roiling cacophony, Ponies scrambling onto ladders, blood tinting the rain running through the grass a rusty red, smoke and flames bursting, popping and swirling like a hellish cauldron all around him. This was animalistic and primal, this was natural.

Clavio bared his teeth as he grunted then screamed again, heaving himself up a ladder and firing as quickly as he could. Shards of stone from the pock-marked parapet showered down on him among the raindrops which bit like nails, and a lightning flash only added to the chaos, blinding a few of the Ponies who had been looking straight up as they climbed the walls.

The walls themselves were a mess. Bodies were tumbling off both sides as Earth Ponies and Guards met in a heated confrontation which left the firearms as side pieces to the unleashed fury of both sides' fanatical desire to win the battle, finally, once and for all. Neither Guard nor Earth Pony had ever seen war or felt the pain and agony of killing, and watching those near them killed, before that rainy day. Both sides wanted it over and buried, along with all evidence of the opposing faction.

Clavio had stepped onto the parapet right in front of a Guard whose eyes were wide at the sight of Earth Ponies streaming over the walls. As Clavio swung his weapon to face the Guard, the other pulled again and again at his bit. The weapon clicked once then made no more sounds. Clavio fired, and pulled back his cocking handle, something he was glad the other had not done.

Another Pony stepped onto the parapet behind him, and smoke blew by Clavio's ear, deafening him for a moment, as the other fired at a distant target. Without sound, the battle was even more surreal, with the smoke coating both the rampart's top and many windows of the keep. Flashes and bursts of orange light dotted the rolling, twisting grey smoke, and more rain fell dissipating the smoke once it drifted out of the walls and away from the centre of the battle.

Once Clavio's hearing had returned somewhat, he moved along the parapet to where more fighting was occurring. As he did so, he stepped over crumpled Ponies, Unicorns and Pegasi, armour glinting in the light from the thunderstorm above them, blood running, dissipated by water, through all the cracks in the wooden parapet. Clavio closed his eyes for a moment to focus.

When he opened them, he was standing behind two Earth Ponies locked in a ferocious struggle with two of their Guard counterparts for dominance over the stairs to

Canterlot's inner sanctum. The Ponies were biting and scratching for all they were worth, and one of the Guards had lost his helmet already. Over the shoulders of the wrestling parties, however, Clavio saw a Pegasus Guard lining up his shot.

The Pegasus fired, and gobbets of meat and blood flew from the shoulder of one of the Earth Ponies. Clavio squeezed a shot off himself, tearing a piece from the Guard's wing, but even as the Pegasus fell to the parapet, the Earth Pony immediately in front of Clavio received two hooves to the snout, which landed with a wet crunch. The Pony stopped moving.

Clavio angled the point of his rifle towards the soaked, exhausted Guard, and charged the last few steps. The Guard batted the sharp metal away at the last moment, and the two collided in a tangled heap. Next thing Clavio knew, his head was hanging over the ledge, with nothing but thirty metres of air between him and the inside of Canterlot. He kicked up with his rear hoof, which was pinned under the Guard, hoping to dislodge the other, but the Guard wasn't fazed. He simply slid his hooves to Clavio's throat, and began to squeeze.

The rain was falling down into Clavio's eyes and nose, and breathing became harder and harder as the hooves tightened their grip. He began to panic. His vision was dimming, his heart was pounding. He kicked again and again with his rear hooves, then finally planted his front hooves on the edge of the parapet. With an extraordinary effort, he pulled himself up, then further in under the Guard so that he was no longer hanging over the edge.

When the Guard leaned back to see what Clavio was doing, the pianist-turned-revolutionary gave one last heave with his hindquarters, and the Guard lost his balance. A moment later, a crunch was barely heard through the sounds of battle and torrential rain from below the parapet, and Clavio stood, catching his breath. He turned around and fired his rifle at the other Guard, still locked in combat with the Earth Pony from before. The Guard crumpled in a heap, and both Clavio and the bruised Earth Pony slumped down to rest for a moment.

The adrenaline was starting to seep out of Clavio's system as exhaustion set in. Now wasn't the time for that. There was still a battle to be won. The gunshots and whinnies all around him were proof of that. Just as he debated standing again to continue pushing down into the courtyard, a gentle hoof set itself on his shoulder.

Clavio looked up into Octavia's soft violet eyes. She offered up a small smile, the dimples in her snout accented by the dark gunpowder residue which the rain had not managed to quite wash out. Her dark mane was hanging straight by her side, knotted and lumpy with mud and blood.

"Come on Clavio, we've almost done it." Her voice was almost drowned out by the gunshots and explosions, but he nodded sharply and stood to face her. As he did so, her eyes widened and her mouth formed a small "o" as she looked over his shoulder.

Clavio turned quickly to see what had caught her attention, but even as he saw the Pegasus with the mangled wing aiming at his back, grey arms enveloped his midriff and swung him about. The Guard's rifle popped, and something warm splattered Clavio's chest as he fell to the ground, turned completely around, a dark, soft mass crumbling on

top of him.

The other Pony fired, and the Pegasus' scream reached Clavio's ears even as he heard the Earth Pony gallop away along the parapet, presumably in hot pursuit. When those sounds had faded, something far more gentle and touching reached his ears. The mass currently covering him was breathing, short gasping breaths.

Clavio slowly moved Octavia aside so he could stand, the rain already beginning to wash her blood from his body. He laid her down on her back and covered the open wound in her torso with his hooves. When he tried to pull a piece of cloth from a rebel's clothing over to cover her from the rain, she looked up at him, eyes half-closed, and smiled a bit.

"Clavio, don't worry, I don't - don't feel anything. A little fall of rain can hardly hurt me now. You're here, that's all I need to know. You will keep me safe, and you will keep me close, and the rain... the rain will make the flowers grow." She cast a slow glance at the Princess' gardens, visible beside the keep.

Clavio swallowed a lump in his throat, cried for a doctor, then looked at her. "But you'll live, Octavia, don't worry, you'll live."

The same small smile stayed on her lips as her eyelids drooped ever more, and she looked back at her old pianist. "Just... just hold me now, let it be." She snuggled up against his chest a bit more. "The rain can't hurt me now."

Clavio cried for a doctor again, and hooves clattered on the wooden parapet. "Stay awake, Octavia, stay with us. I'm here."

Her eyes fluttered closed. "That's all I need to know." A soft cough escaped her lips. Clavio put a hand on her chest. The heartbeat was terribly faint.

"Octavia!" Harper's voice boomed, and a whimper came from Deep Brass. Deep Brass dropped to Octavia's side and quickly applied pressure to the wound. Clavio could tell from how worn her hooves were and how empty her medical bag looked that she had been busy lately. He could also see from her expression that though she did not want to lose another friend here, the odds were very bad. He tried to help, but Brass looked him in the eyes with a steely resolve. "Go. We've almost won. Make them pay."

Harper pulled Clavio away with a strong hoof, and the two set off down the stairs.

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Twilight cringed with every explosion, watching with fascination as plumes of dirt rose up, spreading in beautiful clouds intermingled with Pinkie's almost disturbing choice of sparkling, joyful confetti over the fields leading to Sweet Apple Acres. The open ground had become a very appropriate tribute to Princess Luna, a veritable moonscape, dotted with craters, and speckled with limp forms, or worse to Twilight's eye, those which still writhed.

Runners had been coming constantly ever since the first bout of fire against the mustering Guards. So far, Pinkie's catapult and concealed Roman Candles had done well enough in conjunction with the sharpshooters that the Guard had yet to come within range of the main force. Nonetheless, the battle would be joined soon, and precise

coordination was key.

The breaking of the centre was a very unfortunate incident, and Twilight had sent many runners looking for Big Macintosh to find out what had happened. The lack of a response worried her immensely, but the situation was chaotic enough as is. Pegasi continually brought her reports of pockets of lost Ponies behind the Guard lines, left there in the hasty Guard attack and now harassing their flanks.

The arrival of Cloudsdale had done a lot for Ponyville, since the airspace was now firmly in Twilight's side's hooves. The bombing runs were over, and the Pegasi were running regular strafing runs on the Guard, as well as reporting any and all troop movements. This had allowed Twi to send Applejack to counter two possible flanking offensives before they were properly staged. Sir Silvermane must have given up on flanking manoeuvres, judging by the rush of troops currently crossing towards the orchard. Without the element of surprise, dividing one's forces is simply inviting disaster.

Another wave of grey and white Guards in their armour, whose gleam was now obscured by all sorts of foreign matter, pushed outwards from the edge of town. The remnants of the two previous waves were hunkered down about halfway to the orchard, hiding in craters and behind bodies, laying down a base of fire to allow the newest additions to their ranks to advance even further.

The fire and movement tactics were classic, straight from the textbooks of the Lunar War. When the forces assaulting the Hoofers Dam to cut off Celestia's water supply had met with heavy resistance from the Guard, this same sort of leapfrogging advance had allowed the rebels to reach the Guard positions and complete their objective. Twilight had been doing copious amounts of reading in preparation for the battle.

As such, she already knew what was necessary. "Rosacia!" Twilight called, and a red pony with a dark green mane galloped over from inside the barn where most of the rear-echelon ponies were sheltering from the rain. "Rosacia, get Applejack again. Tell her to attack the right flank of the Guard as they move across the field. And send Sapino to tell Cheerilee that now would be a good time to cut off circulation to the attack at City Hall."

The runner nodded, then headed back into the barn to pass on the message to her brother Sapino. Twilight looked back at the field, which was now erupting again in the roiling flames and smoke that had become all too familiar to the inhabitants of Equestria recently. The next line of Guard were rushing forwards across what grass and solid ground hadn't been churned too much by Pinkie's bombardment in order to keep good footing. A scream from above caught Twilight's ear, and she watched another brightly coloured projectile fly by and land among the Guards before blowing apart in a loud crash, in which Twilight could swear she heard a kazoo.

Pinkie really worried her sometimes.

The gunfire exchange between the concealed sharpshooters among the carefully placed bushes in the trees and the bunkered down Guards continued for some time while the fresh Guards worked their way forward. Finally, as Twilight was beginning to think the next step of the advance would finish, so the enemy would be out of the open, a loud "Yeeee-hawww!" rang out from the right flank.

Applejack was galloping ahead of a group of muddy Ponies, Unicorns and Pegasi, and guns fired randomly within the crowd, leaving a trail of smoke puffs in the rain which reminded Twilight of a train. The Guards who had been advancing were caught out in the open, exposed to fire, and a few fell almost immediately. Those who remained fell to the ground in the hopes of presenting smaller targets, and the return fire began punishing Applejack's force for their attack.

Exactly as Twilight had expected, Silvermane sent another wave forward, far too soon after the first, in order to overwhelm Applejack's forces. This would stretch him forwards, and thin his forces along his supply line, and...

A series of booms echoed out through the storm from Ponyville, barely audible. That would be Cheerilee, exploiting Silvermane's shifted attentions. Well, the game was afoot.

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Cheerilee laughed wildly as she sprayed the retreating Guards with her automatic rifle. The ruse had worked perfectly, and now Cheerilee's shock troops were lighting up the ruins of City Hall with dreadful enthusiasm to flush out the last Guards defending the square. Silvermane's troops would hopefully take long enough to respond that Cheerilee could have the storm troopers bunkered away somewhere safely out of the way along his supply line.

When the last whinnying cry rose from the debris the Guards had fallen back to, and the Guards falling back to their previous positions had disappeared into the curtains of rain, Cheerilee loaded up another belt of bullets for her rifle. "Brace yourselves!" She shouted to her followers, who quickly moved into what was left of the brush around the edges of the plaza, crouching under their camouflaged tarps. Cheerilee went straight for the centre of the plaza, hiding between two slumped Guards next to the fallen white flag and waiting.

Sooner than she had expected, more Guards came, and from the opposite direction from that which she expected as well. Rather than pulling back from the attack on Sweet Apple Acres to consolidate their position, it appeared that the Guards were committing their reserves to close the gap while allowing for Silvermane's assault to go through.

That was unfortunate, but wouldn't stop Cheerilee from disrupting things as much as necessary until she got a shot at the Pegasus who had taken her ear. She would take much more.

The Guards moved into the plaza, looking all around them as they did so. They had learned. It was only a matter of time before one of Cheerilee's storm-troops was spotted. The chariots flanking the advance slowed it down, but would also hinder any attempt by Cheerilee's troops to move in close quite a bit as well. They had expended most of their explosives collapsing the houses to the West to make the expected counter-attack harder.

One of Cheerilee's troops took the initiative. With a wailing war cry, the Pony

stood up and began firing as fast as she could as she charged the nearest chariot. With stunning speed, the Guard force rearranged itself to fight an attack from that direction, and the poor storm-troop collapsed within seconds.

The others took that moment, as the Guard turned to face the oncoming attack, to begin firing from all sides. The ornately dressed Guard at their centre waved his hoof in a circular motion above his head, and his soldiers pulled inwards, forming a circular perimeter around him, with the chariots in the centre, and laying down with regular spacing so that a single bomb could not kill the lot of them. From that position, they were able to lay down fire in every direction.

Cheerilee's forces were quick to realize that the fire arrayed against them far outmatched theirs, so they stopped shooting only moments after the Guard had set up, to hunch down in camouflage. Moments later, the Guard stopped firing, to preserve their ammunition.

A few moans drifted across the plaza from assorted wounded on both sides. Cheerilee was fairly confident most were enemies. From her slightly elevated vantage point in the ruins of City Hall, she had watched the whole exchange of fire, and knew for sure of only one of her ponies, excluding the hero who had charged to her death, who had been killed.

The Guards would be very hard to break, in this formation. Their officers were arranged in the centre between the two chariots, well-protected and mostly out of harm's way. Cheerilee couldn't get a clean shot, and she doubted any of her troops could either. Well, they couldn't just sit around and wait for the Guard to sniff them out.

Cheerilee rose up a bit more from her hiding spot, moving the bodies to either side of her to clear her automatic rifle's feeding mechanism. She lined up the barrel on the nearest Guard, and prepared to fire. Before she could, though, the wind was knocked out of her by a wave of compressed air as a plume of mud and flame rose up near the centre of the Guard formation.

A chariot flipped end over end, and the command team were thrown to the ground as exposed Guards near the centre of the explosion were wholly or in part turned to pink mist and small pieces. Before the thrown-up mud had even hit the ground, another momentous explosion bloomed in the Guard formation, and the plaza degenerated to complete chaos.

Cheerilee started firing without thinking as the Guards scattered and a few headed her way. Some of the Guards began firing into the sky, and were swiftly picked off from the bushes. The Guards heading towards Cheerilee were quickly and decisively punctured by her fire, and she then directed the automatic weapon at the enemies who had quickly broken into a disorganized retreat.

Another explosion threatened to knock Cheerilee over as it toppled a building in the path of the retreating guards. Finally she gave in to curiosity. She looked up, and laughed despite herself. A pink and purple balloon was floating overhead, and in the basket beneath it, Pinkie and Spike were frantically tossing baskets full of explosive down onto the gathered Guards. Spike was going out of his way to avert his eyes, but Pinkie was giggling like a maniac as she watched the flailing and the limp tossed about

by her bombs.

The chaos was perfect. Having spent years teaching young, excitable fillies, Cheerilee was very much at home where there was little to no order. In fact, the flashing lights and loud noises reminded her of her youth in the discotheques of Equestria. The smile remained on her face as she galloped down into the plumes of flame and dirt, firing at the running Guards.

Another bomb blew dirt across Cheerilee's snout, knocking the wind from her and causing a sharp pain in her chest cavity from the concussive force, and leaving her hearing nothing but a faint ringing. The effect was surreal. The smoke and flames continued to belch from her rifle, and she could see the mouths of the fallen Guards and ponies wide with surprise, no doubt screaming or sobbing, but none of it reached her.

For a moment, she felt removed from the whole thing, and was almost revolted at it.

Her hearing returned just in time to hear a shaky male voice call out to the Guards. "Turn around! Turn! Continue to push, they must break!" Rubyhooves called to his men. Cheerilee saw the stallion standing atop a ruined chariot, and lined up her rifle. Six lead projectiles punched through his pelt before he disappeared from her sight.

One less imperialist to haunt Cheerilee's town.

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The battle for Sweet Apple Acres was getting desperate. The enemy hadn't turned around, and Pinkie was no longer manning her catapult for some reason. She was reliable, but that pony's attention span sometimes...

Applejack and her remaining forces were now cowering in craters not twenty metres from the attacking Guards. The volume of fire the enemy was able to put out from both their forward troops and those hidden among the houses was impressive, and sure to keep the ponies in the field pinned down. In return, the ponies in the orchard were doing their best to keep the Guards down, but the ratio was simply not favourable.

Applejack knew only one thing that could settle a crazy situation : a crazy pony. It was her time to shine.

"Let's go, everypony!" she shouted at the top of her lungs as she leaped from her crater. Almost instantly, her hat snapped from her head as a bullet caught it just above her hairline. She was committed now.

What happened next was a massive blur. Many of the other ponies stood to charge at her side. Dirt flew, and smoke choked Applejack, bringing tears to her eyes. Blood was everywhere as the ponies fought from crater to crater, bullets snapping past their heads from the houses.

Neighs, gasps, booms, cries, sobs, snaps, it all blended in Applejack's head. Combat didn't give her time to think. If she thought, she was reacting. If she reacted, she died. She had to act, every time. And decisively.

Guard after Guard turned tail towards the advancing ponies or turned belly to the sky, but finally someone noticed how few ponies were left. "Applejack!" a voice cried



behind her, "Get back, your flank is exposed!"

Applejack cast a quick glance around, her filthy ponytail of a mane flying about. There were almost no ponies left advancing with her, and both teams took note at that very moment. The volume of fire from both sides' entrenched troops increased noticeably, either to kill the last ponies, or to cover their retreat.

A column of Guards was already streaming by to Applejack's right. The field was lost. It was just the orchard and the farm now, and the two were being cut off from each other. Applejack figured Pinkie could protect her contraptions well enough, and Fluttershy had brought the field hospital back to the barn in the retreat. A moment after that thought, Applejack set off at a gallop towards the barn, miraculously avoiding the curtain of bullets ripping through the rain all around her.

The situation was falling apart fast. The picket fence was now lined with Guards, and the farmhouse was crumbling as lead bullets punched boards from its facade to tear through the defenders within.

The barn was in no better repair, as rounds from captured anti-chariot launchers pounded its sides. Good thing Applejack was a gosh-darn good carpenter.

Stone and wood projectiles flew from the barn door, propelled by magic at speeds which provoked a satisfying, or maybe sickening, crack on impact with Guard helmets. Rarity and Twilight were hard at work, clearly.

Twenty metres from the flank of the hunched down Guards at the periphery of the farm, Applejack stopped to catch her breath. Her usually sunny orange pelt was almost brown or grey now, and hundreds of tiny cuts seeped blood onto her. She could feel the bags under her eyes, and her shoulders, even though they were used to hauling carts all day, were aching from carrying the heavy rifle harness all day. The few other ponies gathered around her looked even worse for wear.

Well, the Guards couldn't be feeling too much better. That was little consolation, but when she voiced it to her companions, Applejack earned at least a few tired chuckles. "Awright, everypony. We either win it, or lose it, here. Let's go."

She hefted her rifle, turned to the Guards, and let out a piercing, ululating scream, such as she had heard of the country ponies doing in the Lunar War. The Guards froze, and the firing at the farm seemed to stop for a moment as everypony looked at the banshee screaming down on them.

Applejack fired until she had no more munitions, an impressive feat in the short distance that she galloped. A few Guards were already writhing when she got there, and her hooves lashed out, felling two more.

A cart flew by, sparkles surrounding it as it smashed into the fence, throwing Guards and pieces of wood in every direction. Twilight called from the barn door : "Come on, Applejack, get over here!"

Rarity grunted as she tossed a barrel past Applejack's ponies, who rushed to the relative safety of the barn. Bullets chipped at the hardwood boards which made up the walls of the barn, and the wounded inside moaned as another beam creaked. Fluttershy flew gently from patient to patient, hushing them, checking bandages, and giving sips of water to the thirsty. In her hands, and with Bon Bon's attention at her side, Applejack

knew most of the wounded would make it out alive.

The Guard seemed staggered, as their fire faltered a bit in the wake of Applejack's breakthrough. A moment later, though, another rocket exploded, and a moan of timbers rang out through the rain as the farmhouse collapsed. A cheer drifted to the barn from the waiting Guards, and a single commanding voice rang out from above them.

"Ponies! I am Sir Limestone, Lieutenant of Celestia's Guard! Turn in your weapons now, you can still come out of this alive."

"He's on the roof," Rarity said softly. The others nodded. Twilight jerked her horn upwards.

"On three." The ponies aimed at the roof, and waited.

"One... Two... Three." All of the armed ponies gathered near the entrance peppered the roof with holes, and Twilight's horn glowed with a vengeance. The roof sparkled, then broke apart over their heads, its structure weakened by the bullet holes. A few screams came from the roof as it blew up and outwards, letting the rain into the now-open barn, and thumps were heard along the walls as Pegasi tumbled down.

"Get them! Go!" Limestone screamed from the air above them.

The Guards rose from their positions, and began to rush the barn. Bon Bon ran out in front, screaming "There are wounded in the barn! There are-" and was cut off by a slapping sound as she was hit in the leg with a bullet.

Even as Bon Bon sank into the mud with a moan, Rarity stepped forward, horn glowing. "First you ruin my studio, now you burst in shooting my friends? I'll have none of it!"

Rarity propelled one of the barn doors outwards, throwing a number of Guards to the mud, and the other ponies at the barn entrance took cover behind the other door to fire.

Suddenly, though, a series of thumps was heard behind them.

The ponies turned to see Limestone and two other Pegasi standing inside the barn, Fluttershy held tightly to Limestone's chest as a hostage. Twilight gritted her teeth, and Applejack scowled even as Rarity stepped forward.

"Unhand her, you lout..." Rarity said menacingly. As response, Limestone simply shot her. A burst of blood misted the air as Rarity gasped and fell down to curl up around her shattered shoulder.

Without warning, Fluttershy suddenly went very stiff. What happened afterwards would always confuse Applejack.

"You... do... not... hurt... my... FRIENDS!" Fluttershy exploded outwards, wings striking Limestone and the Guard beside him. In a moment, she had whirled around, and pressed the Guard Lieutenant's snout into the mud, where she sat on it. A stare at either Guard set them aback long enough for Twilight to magically strike one with a broken beam from the roof while Applejack shot the other straight through the breastplate.

Bubbles rose up around Limestone's snout as he struggled, but Fluttershy's pupils were contracted, and her breathing heavy as she batted her wings to hold his face in the mud. Soon, he stopped moving entirely, and Fluttershy fell sideways. She had

fainted. Other nurses ran over to tend to Rarity, and Twilight turned to retrieve Bon Bon.

The Guards had stopped in their tracks, staring in. They had just witnessed an act of extreme violence, perpetrated with the purest of intentions, protecting Fluttershy's best friends. It had also rid them of their immediate supervisor. None of them had been all too set on the war, or the killing, from the start, and a panoramic glance showed them bodies upon bodies adorning the once beautiful landscape outside of Ponyville.

All at once, the Guards dropped their weapons. Soon enough, behind them, Twilight could see the same thing happening up and down the line.

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Silvermane couldn't believe it. He galloped through the mud, dodging every sign of movement he could, with only three of his most loyal Guards in tow.

The entire line had collapsed! His perfectly orchestrated plan, his offensive to turn the tide of the war and earn his place at the Princess' side, thwarted? By... Earth Ponies, Unicorns, and sympathizers? Never. It couldn't have happened.

But it had. The sounds of celebration behind him told the whole story. They were blowing horns and kazoos, Celestia knows where they found those in this wasteland. What a joke. They were mocking him. Even now, the sky was clearing, the rain had stopped, and the sun was coming out. Was this some sort of cruel joke? The sun should be emerging over a land once more under its control, not a rebellious land!

At least he had gotten away. He could rally more Guards, certainly Celestia wouldn't stand for this. This time, flying chariots and balloons. Flatten the place. Leave nopony alive.

A good start on the way to the proper recognition of the Pegasus race. He grinned to himself.

But first, escape.

The bodies strewn throughout the town in muddy craters whose bottoms held small ponds would haunt him, he knew. At this point, however, the only thing he could do was avenge them. He stepped slowly over a green pony who lay very still on the ground, the indentation in the earth around her filled with mucky brown water. Her eyes were open, gazing up at him. He quickly looked away.

Darn it, Silvermane, you can't be distracted now. The battle may be over, but getting to Canterlot is of the utmost importance. Especially with those ominous plumes of smoke coming from it. What had Goldenflame done, the bumbling idiot? Could nopony do anything right?

The escaping commander crept into a broken home on hearing what he thought were hoofsteps. Hiding behind a counter scattered with cutlery and what looked to be old cupcakes, he waited a few heartbeats. No more noise. He was just being jumpy. The battle is over. He was, however, famished. He looked around the kitchen of what, he decided, must have been a bakery before. A few cakes rested in ovens, slightly moldy from exposure to the elements.

He wasn't quite that hungry. He was still a nobleman, after all.

The four Guards set off again, casting wary glances behind them. The town truly was in shambles, like the pieces of a colt's block set, tossed about in a fit of childish rage, unexplained, unprovoked, but unleashed with a vindictiveness only children or the most misguided of adults could bring to bear.

The sunset on the horizon filtered through the scattering cloud cover, its warm orange glow enveloping the churned streets and skeletal frames which had once been homes and businesses, and making Silverflame feel suddenly comfortable. The warmth, he felt, could almost certainly dry his dripping pelt. Of course, it couldn't but it was an encouraging thought.

What he wouldn't give to simply take off, to fly up into the clouds and disappear. The fleeting shadows which occasionally passed by reminded him of the impossibility of that most base of wishes, though. With the Cloudsdale flyers still out and about, the odds that he would get very far as a suspicious speck in the sky were very low. At least on the ground he had his mud-streaked pelt to keep him somewhat camouflaged.

A purple building towered ahead of him, remarkably intact except for the spire, which seemed to have collapsed inwards. Perhaps this pony had a proper idea of refrigeration.

On entry, Silvermane immediately saw that it had been a library in a past life. Books were thrown about and scattered, loose pages fluttered by in gusts of wind. At the back, in what looked to be the living quarters, though, he saw something which, for the moment, mattered far more than any dusty old tomes could to him.

An icebox.

Silvermane headed to the back, intent on his prize, and flipped the icebox open with a hoof. He dug past a pile of gemstones, a curious discovery, and withdrew a neatly made grass sandwich. Simplistic, but it would fill him until he left enemy territory.

After finishing the meal, he decided to turn and offer some of the food to his Guards. Goodness knows he would need them at their best if they were found out.

What he saw, however, chilled him to the bone.

His Guards were nowhere to be seen. Instead, he saw a fuchsia-coated mare, whom he unfortunately recognized, despite the blood, sweat, dirt, and gunpowder residue which coated her from head to hoof. She wore a cape of mottled green, brown and black, which now hung loosely across her shoulders over the nasty looking rifle which seemed to have a chain of bullets reaching from it into a saddlebag. The most disgruntling part, however, was her smile.

A thin line of teeth under her snout, contrasted by the deep furrow in her brow.

"Sir Silvermane. Fancy meeting you again," she said quietly, almost under her breath. He strained to hear her over the whistle of the wind in the gutted rafters.

"Wh-What do you want from me, Earth Pony?" He had wanted to sound impressive, with the Royal Canterlot voice, but that was not possible at the moment. Instead, his sentence had begun as a squeak which he carefully rectified to a whisper. Cheerilee just laughed.

"You remember me, then? Good, then I don't need an introduction." Cheerilee began to pull at her bit, but Silvermane wasn't going to go down that easily.

Silvermane flipped the icebox, throwing gemstones at Cheerilee and deviating her aim so that the burst of smoke and flame just blew a hole in Twilight's bed, up in the loft. The Guard took the opportunity to leap onto the stairs and go for the window. When he reached it, he stopped abruptly.

Outside, a number of other Ponies in similar garb to Cheerilee's were waiting. Among them, Silvermane could see two of his Guards, being restrained with rope. The third was nowhere to be seen, but it was safe to assume that he didn't need to be tied up.

It was over, then. Celestia was finished. Silvermane was captured, most of the Guard High command was either dead or captured. Goldenflame was too hot-headed, and Cloudjumper would never be able to fill Silvermane's enormous shoes.

He slowly turned to his captor, and unsheathed his sabre.

"Take it, Pony. You've won. I hope you're statisfied. You've succeeded at throwing Equestria into chaos as Discord never could."

Cheerilee laughed once, a soft laugh, which had once been just the thing to raise the spirits of young fillies having trouble in school. The seeming gentility of the now-one-eared pony hurt Silvermane to think about. It was a worthy cause, but a dirty, dirty method they had used to attain it. And for what?

She spoke quietly again, Silvermane straining his ears to hear. "I don't want your sword, *Sir*," she said, turning his title into a curse, "Just come with me. I'll get what I want from you, but Ponyville deserves to see their demon dispelled for good."

An ominous statement, but he knew he would die if he resisted. This way, it seemed like she would perhaps hand him over to the others. From all Silvermane had heard, Twilight Sparkle, the leader of this ragtag army, was a very merciful mare. He may have a chance to return to Canterlot after all.

He followed the other pony outside. On crossing the threshold, he felt the stares of the other ponies standing about the mud burning into him. His heart froze over again as his eyes fell onto the splayed out body of his third Guard, lying in the plaza ahead among what may well have been a hundred other bodies.

Oh, there would be no mercy. No quarter. He was a criminal. A fiend. A demon.

As Silvermane stepped onto the makeshift gallows, built from beams torn from the fallen City Hall, his eyes stung. How could something so right, so pure, as his beautiful Princess' plan to unite Equestria in harmony, have turned to something so wrong? Silvermane's world was upside down. He barely noticed the rough sack placed over his head by an emotionless pony, also garbed in a camouflaged cloak.

None of the ponies who had gathered to watch spoke a word. The sunset shone red over the scene, and only a click, a thunk, and a faint crack were heard as Silvermane fell through the trap door.

Wordlessly, without celebration at their triumph or sobs at their loss, the crowd dispersed, lacking even the energy to take the stallion down.

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Clavio's heart was racing This was it. The tapestries lining the gilded hallways bore pictures of the Princess raising the sun and banishing her sister, the stained glass windows filtered the light from the slowly clearing sky into brilliant rainbows through their scenes from Equestrian history. The white marble floor clicked under Clavio's hooves as he stepped into the hall, flanked by two ragged rebels.

A few more Earth Ponies wandered the hall, going from body to body in search of valuables or signs of life. Clavio stopped by one, silently sobbing, her head in her hooves, and set his hoof on her shoulder. When she looked up, he offered a smile, and she slowly returned it. Yes, they had lost greatly, but they had won. Celestia was holed up in her throne room. Only the very centre of the keep remained barricaded.

By the time the sun had set on Equestria, it would also have set on Celestia's reign. The poetry of that satisfied Clavio deeply. He set off again, towards the faint sounds of combat echoing down the gaudy halls.

After passing two more heavy-looking hardwood doors, breached and shattered on their hinges, Clavio was faced with another of the great portals which characterized Celestia's palace of oppression. Once upon a time, he had marveled at the wood and brass, carved and shaped with such care into patterns and images too intricate to take in with only a glance. Now, knowing what Celestia was capable of doing, deep down, it didn't even hurt him to see the rebels piling powder at its base.

"Ready to blow?" he asked the nearest Pony, who nodded with a smile.

"She should come down nice and easy," the Pony said, "it's the Guards on the other side what worry us. We're just a hall away from the throne room."

Clavio nodded thoughtfully, considering that point. The amount of fire the Guards would direct through that door when it blew would be devastating. He looked over to a fallen pillar, knocked over somehow in the fighting.

"Hey," he called to a few inactive ponies, "pull that pillar over here, line it up in front of the door."

He trotted over to help, and with a tremendous effort, they managed to slide and pull the huge piece of stone over.

"There. Cover," Clavio said matter-of-factly

When the charge was laid at the door, a line of gunpowder was poured, leading behind the broken column. The rebels arrayed themselves there, and the one Clavio had spoken to before looked over at him.

"Let's show Celestia the power of her ponies. Down with the tyranny!" Clavio called, hoping to rouse the haggard ponies in the hall with him.

They would follow him anywhere, he thought as they all took a deep breath to cheer with him, many grinning at the thought of the heroism about to occur. The fuse was lit, and the flames and smoke traveled quickly towards the door.

Boom.

The explosion was like a wall, traveling down the hall, breaking windows, deafening ponies, and exerting tremendous pressure on Clavio's head for a moment. When the pressure wave had passed and all that remained was the vibration of the great doors passing through the floor, everypony stuck their heads and, more importantly, their

rifles out of cover, and the dust already drifting down the hall was thickened with gunpowder smoke.

Orange flashes lit the dust from the next hall over, and ponies' heads jerked back abruptly to either side of Clavio. He wanted to shout, but the ringing in his ears reminded him it wouldn't be heard anyway. Instead he continued to fire, the shockwaves from the rifles firing ruffling his white mane.

A few minutes passed in the exchange of fire before more rebels arrived, rushing to the sounds of combat. Harper hunched down beside Clavio. "We need to push," Harper said, "Celestia's Guard have stopped us getting to the gardens. I think she's trying to escape that way."

Clavio gritted his teeth. More ponies would die if he rushed forward instead of fighting from cover. Then again, how many more ponies would be oppressed and later killed if the tyrant escaped. It had to be done.

"Forward," he cried abruptly, "to victory! We're only a few steps from peace!" Clavio charged around the corner of the fallen column, preceded only by Harper and another pony whose pink mane flew majestically behind her as she galloped.

The few Guards remaining in the next hall, crouched behind statues and tables, stopped firing for a moment. One tried to surrender, but was promptly shot when he stood. The others redoubled their rate of fire. It was pointless, however, as within seconds the fight was over.

The door to the throne room was slightly ajar. Celestia hadn't thought they would make it this far. Clavio was only too happy to disappoint. He stepped into the room, and admired its ornate furnishings for a moment.

Only a moment, though. Harper stepped up next to him. "The throne. It's askew."

They rushed over, and moved the heavy chair. It fell with a thud into one of the fountains flanking the steps onto the Princess' elevated platform. Where it had previously stood, the two ponies saw a hole and a staircase barely big enough for the Princess to have fit down it.

Resolutely, the comrades headed into the dark tunnel.

At its end, they pushed open a wooden door, and found themselves emerging from what looked like a hedgerow. They were in the garden.

All around, the sounds of battle roared. The rebels were pushing hard, but the Guard seemed to have set up a stalwart defense of their last bastion. Celestia was definitely escaping this way.

Clavio and Harper galloped into the hedge maze before them, Harper leading the way to break through the hedges before them. They didn't have that kind of time to waste.

A few layers in, they burst into a field, scattered with ponds and fountains. A voice boomed out from everywhere and nowhere at once, and both Clavio and Harper's gazes flew all about them in search of the source.

"Oh, you foolish Earth Ponies," Celestia crooned, "you almost got me. But you forget, I am the magical Princess of your land, and Goddess of the Sun, no less. My treasonous pupil may have appropriated my control of the Elements of Harmony, but her

plan failed!" Celestia's voice cackled menacingly.

A rock flew across the field, a trail of shimmering light behind it, and narrowly missed Harper, who dived away at the last moment. "I still have my magic! I can still fight you!" Celestia continued.

"You crazy old witch," Clavio said in low tones, "you've nothing but parlour tricks left, and you know it. Come out, that we may judge you for your crimes."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" Two trees uprooted themselves from the edge of the clearing, and flew towards the Ponies in the entrance. Clavio and Harper ducked low, and something caught the former's eye. A glint of light from a ditch across the field.

Even as he began to stand up, he nodded to the fading light. Harper winked to show he had seen it.

When the light burst into existence again, and stones began to levitate from the edges of one of the ponds, Clavio and Harper burst into a gallop.

"Why won't you die?" Celestia screeched, as the rocks flew through the air, bruising Clavio and Harper, but not stopping them. Her magic truly was much weaker now.

When they reached the ditch, they leaped in to either side of the hiding Princess, whose horn's glow was only just fading.

"You're caught, 'Your Highness'," Harper said with a sneer, "you may as well give up now."

Celestia screamed and lashed out with hooves, horn, and wings. Clavio took a bound backwards and narrowly avoided the limbs, but he heard a grunt from Harper's side. Clavio brought his rifle to bear on the mad-looking Princess, and she stopped moving as she turned her bloodshot eyes onto him.

The gunfire in the background had stopped. Singing and cheering could be heard from the maze, and many voices were echoing out through the maze.

"Through here!"

"Look, more holes in the walls!"

"She must be this way!"

Soon enough, the clearing was full of rebels, all of them panting and bearing looks of pure exhilaration. Clavio smiled.

"Out of the ditch, Your Highness."

Celestia stepped out, but quickly snapped back at him, "You can't kill me! I am a Goddess! I am your Princess! I am eternal!"

"Time to be judged by your people, Princess, the worst trial any ruler can undergo." Clavio kept smiling as the people began to chant.

"Guilty. Guilty. Guilty."

He led the Princess around the Castle, in the middle of the crowd. She didn't say a word. Her mane, for the first time in centuries, hung limp at her side. When they arrived on the steps to the Castle, the whole population of Canterlot, Earth Ponies, Unicorns and Pegasi alike, had gathered.

She was stood against a wall, and amidst a storm of cheers and whirling smoke, shot by a mix of her own Guards and the rebellious Earth Ponies. Equestria had had



enough.

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The next day, Twilight Sparkle met Clavio for the first time at the bridge over the Serenity river. Both factions had headed towards the other's battlefield to see what the commotion was, and both met in the middle.

On the cobblestone bridge, ponies of all sorts hugged each other and cried. The rebels cried at the news that no army would be coming to exact vengeance, Ponyville's residents cried that the Princess would no longer rule with her iron hoof again. Apart, either campaign could have failed, but in typical Equestrian fashion, it was their teamwork, inadvertent or not, that had clinched their victory.

Pinkie Pie ran to Octavia, tearing up at the sight of her sister's bandages and the shadows under her eyes. The two met, hugged, and walked to the side to discuss old times.

Rarity and Fluttershy trotted side by side, the former protectively close to the latter. Rarity had been very impressed at what Fluttershy had done to try to protect her. Fluttershy, for her part, needed someone nearby, to distract her from the memories, both of the wounded she tended for the whole day, and of her 'heroic' act. They met Deep Brass in the field by the bridge, and Fluttershy immediately felt close to her through their shared experiences behind the bandages.

Rainbow Dash was finally with the Wonderbolts, sitting by the edge of the river. The difference from her fantasies was that this time, she was talking, telling the stories of how she had cleared the skies of Ponyville against the odds. The show flyers could only listen in awe, having arrived with the bulk of the force, and missed that whole debacle.

Applejack was sitting with Harper, both strong-bodied Earth Ponies leaning against each other as they shared a bottle of apple cider in the shade of an oak tree. Applejack had found her hat, and a patch of fresh material was sewn on just above the forehead.

Off to the side, Cheerilee was sitting in a field, teaching the fillies and colts about what had just happened, and what would soon happen. Were it not for the stump on one side of her head, it would seem as if nothing at all had changed. When she came to the point of explaining the aftermath of the war to the children, she pointed to the bridge.

There, Twilight and Clavio discussed how they would divide the powers, guarded by a mix of ex-Royal Guards, Ponyville residents, and rebels. They would have joint rulership, for now, until elections could be organized. They discussed laws and policy, and regulations, Twilight arguing out of books and Clavio from the point of view of the proletariat to find an optimal middle ground. When they had hashed out points, Spike took them down, writing the new Equestrian constitution on a piece of parchment he had salvaged somewhere. When they had finished, they shook hooves and smiled before retiring to their own groups. Twilight headed over to her longtime friends, and Clavio headed towards Octavia, who was waiting in the shade for Pinkie to bring cupcakes.

It was the dawn of a new era for Equestria, and all were, deep down, proud to

have seen it. They would deal with the cost later; for now, cider and wine were passed through the field and everyone did their best to rejoice.