

So Long, and Thanks for All the Ponies, part 21

In the black ether of the cosmos, Discord floated happily. He had decided, in a fit of lactoseical whimsy, to turn the parent star of an inhabited system somewhere on the inner northern side of the galaxy into a piece of cheese. To be specific, a sphere of cheese weighing in at approximately 2,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000kg (4,400,000,000,000,000,000,000,000lbs). Such a thing, a vast ball of dairy product boiling under its own gravitational energies and slewing off solar flares of melted gouda and parmesan is quite a sight, although unfortunately for any beings in the local system the lights have just gone out, and they won't get to see it.

The universe maintained conservation of energy, and more specifically conservation of cheese, without complaint. That cheese had to come from somewhere, and so it did. For example, somewhere in a completely different galaxy altogether, a relatively blameless cheese shop owner halfway through his stocktake suddenly found himself looking at an empty shelf. Indeed, his whole vast stock room would prove, on inspection, uncontaminated by cheese. Uncontaminated bar a small wheel of almost unsaleable runny camembert. His subsequent encounter with an esurient customer in search of some cheesy comestibles would result in his being fatally shot.

The mass of Hydrogen, Helium and other heavier elements that had made up the sun were spread evenly throughout the cosmos, without any noticeable effect.

Discord snorted with merriment as he listened in to the panic and confusion on the planets that had been plunged into darkness. "I suppose I ought to make some sort of cheesy joke right now." He mused. He twirled in the air, thoughtfully scratching under his chin with one claw. For a moment, he seemed content. "But I can't think of one, what a shame."

The Hitchhiker's guide to the Galaxy disputes the assertion that talking to oneself is the first sign of madness. The first sign of madness, the guide suggests, is not having a towel with you. The guide further suggests that the mere possession of a towel negates the possibility of most forms of madness, as one can easily talk to the towel instead of oneself if one should feel the urge. The editor responsible for this article subsequently quit after her "Fremzo's Friendly Towels" range of semi-sentient talking towels (each emblazoned with a smiling face) made her the richest being in her local galactic sector.

The towels in question had lost some of their functionality, seeing as the new electronics would fatally electrocute any user who attempted to dry themselves with it. However, the task of actually drying oneself has long been considered a secondary feature of the towel, and did not stop the line being given 13 stars and an editor's recommendation in a recent issue of Playbeing.

"I really wish you would stop interrupting my story with all that pointless background information!" Discord snarled. He winked out of existence in a huff, but not before hurling the enormous cheese ball at its one time planet. On impact, both vanished to leave two surprised doves floating in open space, where they flew around happily for a several hours before asphyxiating.

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Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz was, by Vogon standards, a happy Vogon. Speaking in Vogon standards though reduces the significance of the above statement considerably. In this case, he may be considered to be happier than perhaps 12% of all sapient beings currently alive in the galaxy. He was also a very drunk Vogon. He was, under his breath, mumbling a poem he was currently composing.

It was almost unique amongst the complete library of Vogon work (no such library exists, though some of the more nefarious races in the cosmos do stockpile select pieces) for being, if not actually good, at least tolerable. A major achievement for any poem written in Vogspug, the native language of Vogsphere.

"Oh turlingdrome, Grommits of Fub,
Trebwull in smik Marfark formischlub,
Grunfit marp flurdled kerspok "

("Oh *expletive*, the irony burns,
This drink tastes like something which has come from the anal glands of a mustard leech of Marfark IV,
But I drink it anyway")

There was a bright flash of golden white light several feet away. To the untrained eye it would have looked very much like a bad special effect; real magic often does. Now standing there was what he had taken to calling "The Bloody Big Pony".

“Prostetnic Vagon Jeltz?”

At least The Bloody Big Pony wasn't shouting anymore. A significant improvement had been made as far as he was concerned.

“Eh?” Jeltz stared at her blankly, and a little unsteadily. Vagon blank is not particularly nice, and Celestia narrowed her eyes. Then she rolled them, tsk'd, and shut them. Her horn glowed for an instant, and Jeltz, who had been slumping forward, shuddered and suddenly sat bolt upright. His face was a rictus of horror. Having all of the alcohol in your system instantly purged is not a very pleasant experience at all: Drunkenness combines a feeling of warmth, self-confidence and euphoria with a healthy dose of apathy, and the removal of such is rather like being thrown naked into a snowdrift in front of all of one's harshest critics, and then dragged out and slapped around a bit. Jeltz took several seconds to collect himself, and then looked properly at the huge white alicorn facing him.

“My faithful student, Twilight Sparkle, assures me that you were responsible for their rescue.” she said “Fortunately for you, I am taking her at her word.”

Jeltz had been involved in Vagon politics long enough to recognise when a threat was impending and adopted a survival tactic he had not had to use for a rather long time, but had been vital in surviving long enough to get where he was today; keeping his bloody mouth shut.

“Because of this you are to go free. My student has a plan; she is going to confront an ancient being, the most powerful in the galaxy. And you are going to help her.”

“Oh.” His voice came out a little strangled.

“And IF I should find out” Celestia began, spreading her wings and seeming to radiate rage and power in a manner unlikely to sell many toys to little girls, but perfectly suited to starting cults and inducing extreme obedience in any being in the vicinity “that you are acting in anything other than an EXEMPLARY fashion to my student...” She took a deep breath, and the very walls seemed to bow outwards with awe; “I. Will. Make. You. Suffer.” She quietly stated in tones of cold steel, punctuating each word with a discharge from her horn, only to lean down and whisper “I happen to have a complete collection of live readings of the seminary works of Grunthos the Flatulent, and I am *not* afraid to use them.”

Some readers may be unfamiliar with the Asgoths of Crea and their poetmaster Grunthos, and may not understand the severity of this threat. A fair comparison is to imagine a particularly nasty school bully being sent for a weekend with Vlad the Impaler. A Vlad in a particularly unpleasant mood, and having just received a delivery from his favourite catalogue, “Unpleasantly Over-the-top Torture Implements for the Discerning Murderous Lunatic”

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Rarity was trying very hard to not to touch anything. She stood on the tips of her hooves near the middle of the room into which she had been deposited, and performed the breathing exercises she had taught herself to relieve stress. The interior of a Vagon ship is hardly better than the exterior, and she felt sure that no amount of cleaning could remove the accumulated grime of decades of Vagons going about their duties and occasionally being messily killed. As such, the breathing exercises were not being quite as effective as they usually were. She had noted that the walls and floor did not leave marks on anything when touched, but she was right in thinking that this was most likely due to being grime that had practically fossilized. Grime that could not be removed with dynamite. She shuddered, as well one might.

The room she was in was large enough to contain her entire boutique, and indeed the monstrosity taking up the middle of it was even a similar size and shape. A truncated conical tower of grimy metal, with levels separated by stretches of laddering. A panel on its side had simple markings in Vogspug on them, which, as Jeltz had quickly explained, were simply there to act as a trap to saboteurs. Pushing any of the buttons would result in nothing but an electric shock and a lot of alarms, for this was arguably the most important part of a Vagon constructor ship; the demolition beam generator. The fleet did also have the facilities to create and form matter on a continental scale, but these facilities remained mostly unused. Nobody hired Vagons to build their homes for them.

“Alright Rarity” she said to primly. “Here it is. The most important thing you will ever do.” She felt the weight of the element of generosity on her neck, and stared at the ladder with a certain amount of foreboding. She looked down at her hooves, then back to the ladder. “Trust them not to consider the needs of quadrupeds, how utterly typical of those beastly Vagons!” She tossed her mane, and set her jaw. Rearing up, she placed her forehooves on the ladder and experimentally heaved. To her horror, she had to curl her legs slightly around the filthy rungs to gain any purchase. She gingerly placed one hind hoof on the bottom rung, and pushed upwards. It felt most unnatural, and looking back she could see her rump sticking out in a most unflattering... well, actually it was a rather flattering way. Not that that was on her mind of course, but thinking about anything was better than considering the situation at hoof. She placed her other hindhoof on the next rung up, and pushed again, and hooked her forehooves up another level. This sort of thing must be wonderful for her glutes, come to think of it. Perhaps it could be the

beginning of a new fitness craze. She glanced down and back again. Perhaps some form of clothing for it would be required. Yes. And she could design it. Yes. That was a pleasant and distracting thought.

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Jeltz was back in his big captain's chair, and looked at various video feeds coming in. Six of them showed the ponies in their specific ships, and another showed the rest of his fleet vanishing into the void. Six ships left, with six ponies on board. It was rather like being a Wuntetnic captain again, in charge of clearing asteroids and threatening unfortunates who had somehow fallen foul of Vogon bureaucracy.

"Computer?"

The nervous voice came back quickly. "Y-yes captain?"

"Put me through to the purple one, I think she was called Twilight."

"At once captain."

"Thank you."

There was a pause, and the machine whirred nonplussed. "Pardon?"

"What?"

"Nothing captain, sorry captain."

The video feed showing the purple unicorn grew to fill more of the screen, the others shrank and moved to the side.

"Ahem, Twilight Sparkle?" Jeltz began, doing his best to sound respectful, Celestia's threat still ringing in his ears.

Twilight looked up, and around,

"Here Captain Jeltz, what do you need?"

"I need coordinates to the target location."

Twilight turned back to the device at the centre and top of the beam generator "Ah, of course. That's a difficulty, but I thought the best way of finding the target would be to listen to the news. Identify any news item about the right sort of thing and take us there. Sooner or later we'll catch up with him, and I'm sure he'll notice us and hang around to see what's going on. He seems to like showboating."

"What is 'the right sort of thing'?"

Twilight considered. "Anything that makes you think the universe must be going completely crazy." She whirled her hoof in a small circle next to her head, then shrugged. "Unexplained materialisations or disappearances of random objects and oddities, new and entertaining violations of physics."

"And when we find him?"

“Surround and target him, we’ll do the rest. I just have a few questions about the, er, the “guns”. How do they work?”

The Vogon paused, sluggish neurons firing in unfamiliar ways. How *did* the guns work?

“Erm, I’ve got a button which powers them up, I set the setting to dice, vaporise, rubble or scorch.”

“Ok, but how do they work?”

“Um, it’s a particle cannon. Or a laser, or an ion cannon. Unless it’s a plasma cannon.”

“So the correct answer is, you don’t really know?”

“Nnnno.”

Twilight rolled her eyes. This was getting more and more complicated. “Fine, I’ll work it out myself. Contact me again when we catch up to him.”

Jeltz made a gesture, cutting off the line. So; news. “Computer?”

“Yes captain?” The computer trilled back, sounding, if possible, even more nervous than before.

“Collect every same-time news source on the sub-ether broadband, and feed me events as they occur.”

“At once captain.”

Radio stations began scrolling on the screen, far too fast to read. Snatches of broadcast picoseconds long flooded through the speakers as the current affairs of a whole galaxy poured into the room.

“MUTE” Bellowed Jeltz over the roar of information.

“Sorry captain!” the computer squeaked in terror.

“Filter out all gossip, chat and non-news items.”

“Of course captain.” The flood of information slowed to a trickle of merely thousands per second.

“Filter out all which can be rationally explained”

The flow slowed yet further.

“Filter out all from non-reputable news sources.”

The flow seemed to stop.

It continued to seem to be stopped.

“Computer, are we still receiving any news channels at all?”

“Er, yes captain, one or two.”

“Well, play one of them if it comes up with anything that doesn’t seem to make sense!”

“Yes captain.”

In a society in which any member of the public is capable of recording, editing and sending information at any time, traditional news sources naturally suffered greatly. Quite simply, the normal method of investigative journalism would always lag behind news sourced from random members of the public by a day or two, and so in order to stay relevant the major news networks developed several concurrent channels, devoted to various periods of time.

There was future news, which told you what was going to happen in one, two or three weeks' time, providing that nobody else was listening and decided that it bloody well wasn't going to happen. Future news quickly evolved into a way to drastically shorten armed conflicts in the galaxy, as both sides could get through several different counterattacks before the original battle had even begun.

More popular among members of the public due to its comparative reliability was Same-Time news. Essentially, a reporter would compile a report on some event or other, taking as much time as they wished, and then send it backwards in time to the time in which the event was taking place. Thus, the most on the spot news possible. Power of information was put back in the hands of those who were most capable of making a profit, and people started to get nervous around large unexplained gatherings of journalists.

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Zaphod was sulking on the Heart of Gold. After being firmly told that his presence on Equestria was unlikely to benefit the planet in any conceivable way, he was effectively in limbo until his ship could be repaired. He idly wondered whether it could be; would whatever the plan was get him back the heart of his ship? He didn't like the chances somehow; something about Vogon constructor fleets left him with the impression that collateral damage would be high. True, the ship was sufficiently top-of-the-line to have very good regular propulsion, but that was still kaput, and he didn't fancy trying to outrun the police of half the galaxy using the ship's cigarette lighter. Then again, would they even find him? Were they even still looking for him?

"Pfchhh. Of course they're looking for me. Everybody's been looking for me since the day I was born!" He took on an attitude of flamboyant despair. (Poses 8 through 16)
"Usually it's because I'm such a wonderful guy. It's a curse sometime you know?"
Across the room, Marvin sighed heavily.

"You got something to say Mr Manic Mechanoid?"

"I'm not manic in the slightest. I am only manic depressive in the sense that I am depressed to such an extent that any normal being would have gone mad long ago." He paused. "Other than that, no."

"Then stop sighing and turn the radio on, I want to hear what they're saying about me."

Turning the radio on was a simple process involving telling the shipboard computer to do so. Marvin stared dolefully at Zaphod just long enough to remind him of this fact before making a tired sound, rather like clearing his throat, and then did nothing.

Zaphod looked at him, and then at the console, and then opened his mouth to speak.

"Eddie, would you be so kind as to find a radio station discussing the president's favourite topic?" Marvin droned.

"Can do Buddy, using the Zaph-to-it app to find a station currently discussing Zaphod Beeblebrox himself! Golly gee, it's just so easy!"

The "Zaph-to-it" app had had over eighteen squillion downloads in the western spiral arm alone. Everyone from fans to book-keepers to police to insurance agents needed to know at a moment's notice what was going on in Zaphod's personal universe.

An upbeat techno-sounding jingle blared through the speakers, all over the room, and Zaphod slumped in a chair, a drink in each forehoof, and several more floating in front of him. A very handsome sounding voice began talking very fast. The backing music was, naturally, awful. It sounded like a high pitched synthesizer being repeatedly struck by lightning. It served the dual purpose of drawing attention to the network when one was scrolling through them at high speed, and forcing one to listen to the voice rather than the music in order to maintain one's sanity.

"... broadcasting on the sub-etha wave band, around the galaxy around the clock, bringing news and comment to everybody out there, relationship advice to all sexually reproductive species, and to everyone else, try pulling yourself in two and seeing what happens! This is Galax-eee radio bringing you the truth as and when it happens! It's time for today's update on the Big Z, Zaphod Beeblebrox! The president remains on the run, making this the longest time he has consistently evaded capture for any crime since becoming president, overtaking his previous record by a full week! Reports from the northern spiral arm that he had been eaten alive by parasprites have been dismissed as fanciful. Galaxee Radio has this interview with a resident of the planet Trivitor" a snippet of voice was played, clearly in the middle of a sentence. "he wasn't" the clip was cut off again immediately and the announcers voice reasserted itself. "The question remains as to his current location, and we now go to our betting and gambling correspondent Sprutz Mutfin! What are the odds right now Sprutz?"

Another voice answered, and the music developed, if possible, an even faster pace.

"In today's Big Z's Big Bet, we have the following odds, all others remain unchanged:

"Incarcerated on an uncontacted planet has gone down, now at 6:1, passed out drunk in an alley somewhere has risen again to 7:2, and involved in an intergalactic war has gone down by a big way to 20:3. And of course, the big one as ever, if you think the Big Z has bit the dust finally, place your bets at a probability of 18:1!"

Zaphod's left head grinned, sulk already forgotten.

"Mute it Marvin."

With a deep sigh, Marvin relayed the order to Eddie, who was, as ever, delighted to comply.

Zaphod clopped his front hooves together, both heads now grinning broadly. He spilled his last drink, but luckily the others had all made it safely inside.

"You hear that Marvin? They reckon I'm going to live!"

"Lucky you. I suppose that means I will too, more's the pity."

Zaphod glared at him. "And what's gotten into you?"

"Oh nothing, the pain of my existence remains as far from mitigation as ever, apparently a load of ponies are going off to save the galaxy. Terrible idea if you ask me."

"Come on, Marvin, things aren't that bad, I've got a ship, a robot and a full drinks trolley!" He swirled a new drink, a phosphorescent Rumman koawq, around in the air in front of him, and settled himself back onto a sofa. "I mean sure, the ship doesn't WORK at the moment, but I've been in worse places. Now if you'll excuse me I'd like to listen to the radio some more." Marvin sighed, and sloped off towards the rear of the ship, dragging his feet.

Maybe talking to the yellow pony for a bit *would* have been nice.

"Eddie! Put it on!"

"This just in from galactic sector HH3 plural P Gamma, Galactic battleship GSS Suicidal Insanity, is launching a completely unexplained attack on the government..."

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"... in an apparent coup attempt, launched an attack two seconds ago on the Imperial Galactic Senate. The attack will appear to be thwarted when it becomes clear that the missiles currently on course will be duds. When fired, they will extrude what seemed to be flags with onomatopoeic words describing explosions written on them. Yes! There they go now! Immediately afterwards however the ships kinetic impactors will open fire."

There was a silence so profound that it could only be the sound of an explosion bigger than anything seen in the local system since the birth of creation, but on the other side of a vacuum. “We now head to our correspondent, Ridd Gadger, currently based 2 months in the future.”

“Omega class cruisers like this one typically fire iron projectiles capable of anywhere between 1 megaton and 0.3 gigatons of kinetic power.” A dry, reedy voice coming from a dry, reedy sort of life form said. “It seems in this case the projectiles were in some manner replaced with perfect scale models of the Suicidal Insanity itself. These fired further miniaturised versions of themselves, and the ensuing fractal style attack ended when a several warships $\frac{1}{4}$ of a planck length long collided with the senate. The energies involved have shown that the ships were travelling at several times the speed of light, and impacted with sufficient force to blow the senate and all three of its accompanying worlds into powder.”

Jeltz patched through to Twilight Sparkle.

“Listen to this.” he gurgled, Doing his absolute best to gurgle respectfully.

Twilight listened with a mixture of incomprehension and horror.

“The right sort of thing?”

“Oh, it certainly sounds like it.”

“It will take us about five minutes to get there, will you be ready?”

In the gun room, Twilight eyed the tower nervously.

She had been studying it in various ways, limited both by her lack of her usual lab and her minimal experience with this sort of technology. Considering these factors, she had done rather well. First, she had determined that it fired sub-atomic particles. This had seemed odd to her until she had calculated approximately how many it could fire at any one time.

After a bit of a sit down, she had gone back to studying it. Apparently it vaporised matter, before introducing to it something which came in a tank marked “Anti-matter” (the tank was actually several times larger than it had to be, just so that all of the warning labels could fit). The resultant annihilation reaction would produce a wave of radiation which would first reduce some sort of ammunition, located at one end of a gravitically controlled barrel to thermal plasma, and then strip and bunch the charged particles up at the top of the chamber at high powered anodes and cathodes. The ammunition, which in this case was a perfectly innocent heavy iron cable, now a super-heated block of particles, would be propelled both by the like charged particles’ repulsion, and its own monumental heat and pressure. This would result in a beam of various particles that would collide with a great deal of destructive force with anything unfortunate enough to be standing in its path. It wasn’t pretty, it wasn’t elegant, it just

ripped atoms to pieces and threw them at something very hard. Twilight had shivered when she had worked out the effects this would have on something it was pointed at. She hadn't studied atomic theory for this sort of thing. This was probably why Celestia had stopped her building that particle accelerator in her room when she was still a filly. Still, her early experiments had shown that these particles did interact with magical power, and could even be used to temporarily store it to a certain extent. That would have to do the job. To Twilight at the time of this discovery, this had demonstrated that magic was affected by at least one force relating it to matter. For a moment, she wished she could have studied it further, then maybe she would know a bit more about what she was about to do.

"I think so; can you put me in contact with my friends please?"

"Of course Miss Sparkle."

"Everypony?"

Twilight's voice rang clearly through five sets of speakers in five identical rooms. Five very different ponies looked up from wherever they were.

"I think we've found him, is everypony ready?"

She listened for several seconds, then nodded to Jeltz.

"As ready as they'll ever be."

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Jeltz closed the link.

"Computer, plot a course to that location!"

"Already done captain."

"Well done. Take us there!"

The machine whirred again. It seemed, somehow, to steel itself.

"Are you feeling alright captain?"

"Erm, what?"

"You thanked me earlier."

"Yes?"

"Oh... just, that... you just said I did well."

"And?"

"I... I love you captain."

Then Hyperspace happened.

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In any respectably sized galaxy it takes an unfathomable amount of time to get anywhere in anything like a reasonable amount of time using any method quite so basic as travelling through the intervening space. This is simply because the velocity at which this can be done is limited by that most pesky of things, relativity. While the speed of light is generally thought to be fairly nippy, in a galaxy which is 100,000,000 light years across, lightspeed travel loses much of its appeal. Hyperspace has been the go-to solution for reasonable space travel for most space-faring species for a considerable amount of time, albeit on and off.

The technology has been invented, lost, found, lost, found again, lost, independently invented, stolen, put on the ethernet, universally used, purged, lost again, and found so many times in the galaxy's long and eventful history that the knowledge of the hyperspace drive is, by now, part of basic racial memory for any reasonably intelligent race in the galaxy. Any race which has both achieved sophistication and considered space travel, and NOT grasped and implemented the drive within a few generations is considered mind bogglingly stupid by most independent observers. The only intelligent races not to be equipped with it are those sufficiently intelligent to have realised how not worth it the whole "Civilisation" bit is, and they generally just remain in whatever habitat they originally evolved in, mucking about and having a good time.

Hyperspace travel has its own problems of course. The computational power in making fast and accurate leaps is significant, and even a well-equipped starship will spend several minutes bugging about in hyperspace, while any being on-board experience a fairly unpleasant sensation of being twisted in on themselves and jumbled around as they pass through the gravitational distortion of all the matter between them and their destination at once. The guide advises any amorphous, liquid or otherwise non-rigid beings to consult both mental and physical health professionals before travelling through hyperspace.

Anyone observing Equestria's spacespace (like airspace, but spacier) would have seen six huge, ugly yellow ships leaving the atmosphere at high speed, before zapping out of visibility. By definition, something travelling at above light speed is invisible, and these ships were most definitely doing so.

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Discord gazed proudly on the destruction he had wrought. The shipmaster had been a little disappointing it had to be admitted; he had gone for a fairly obvious route of galactic domination, rather than anything more imaginative. But hey, it was a classic for a reason, and centralised government had gone. He realised it really had been going on rather too long. That sort of thing led to all kinds of boring once it got properly set up. In a few generations there might even have been peace, wellbeing, and eventually a proper understanding of the cosmos! He shuddered. That *Number*. Had any of them actually understood it...

"I suppose that's what happens when you stop paying attention to the big picture. Still, all better now. Don't you think?" He addressed a molecule of carbon monoxide as it flew past him. The particle had originally been a part of a Shaltanac ambassador.

"Fine! Leave!" He called out as it whizzed into interstellar space at an appreciable degree of lightspeed. He huffed, and stomped a foot. "See if I care!" He added. The particle reversed itself and flew back towards the draconeus.

"Oh, come back for more have you?" Discord eyed it. "Well I'm not forgiving you this time."

The piece of matter bobbed almost imperceptibly, as if to make out that it had only been joking.

"Well it wasn't funny!"

The molecule shrugged its oxygen atom helplessly in apparent frustration.

"Don't be like that with me, I don't have to take it you know!"

The molecule hung silently.

"Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

Silence.

"Oh I know."

More silence, in which the molecule seemed to convey a certain stern friendliness.

"I guess you're right."

Yet more silence.

"Oh, I can never stay mad at you Carbon Monoxide!"

Discord grasped the unfortunate molecule and turned it into a single atom of Molybdenum, threw himself onto his back and began performing a lazy backstroke towards the huge flagship, now hanging silently. That was when a large spacecraft hit him in the side of the head. Staring upwards he saw a vast stretch of yellow metal passing by him with a good amount of speed. The ship's name was written in Vogspug on it: Business End. Arriving with it were 5 more ships of equal size.

Discord flipped himself around, and teleported away to get a better view of the fleetlet that had just arrived. He raised a pair of opera glasses and stared with interest at the ships. THIS was unexpected, what was going on here? What had been going on with

that Vagon he'd hypnotised? "He's late to the party if he's come to declare war on the government." He snickered. With a flick of his tail, he dived towards and then into the solid steel of the Vagon ship, leaving ripples as he passed through.

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"JELTZ!" Discord beamed as he passed through into the bridge of the Vagon constructor ship, and came face to face with a very unusual Vagon.

"How ARE you doing? Got up to anything much fun?" He twirled the captain's chair around a couple of times with a gleeful smirk on his face. "I see you lost a few ships! Do be a good Vagon and tell your pal Discord all about it!" With a jerk he stopped the spinning chair, catapulting Jeltz onto the floor in front of him.

A tea set appeared in the space between them, and Discord sat himself upside down in a chintz armchair. He made the universal motion for "Oh do go on!" with his left claw. Jeltz sat, dizzy, nauseous, conjuring as much dignity as he could muster for his next words.

"You told me to let it all go."

Discord nodded eagerly, and Jeltz stood.

"I'm going to let you go."

Discord frowned. "Hrmm?"

"I mean... I'm going to let you go away!"

"I wasn't aware you could have stopped me. But thanks anyway."

"I mean I'm going to let..." Jeltz stopped, his lips moving. "I'm going to let you go the way of the Greater Drubbered Wintwock!"

"Is that the extinct one?"

"Yes!"

"So what you've been painfully trying to imply is that you wish to kill me?"

"Yes!"

"Well I wish you'd just tell me. I'm a busy being, and I get told that a lot. Didn't you want to do anything fun?" Discord looked genuinely disappointed.

Jeltz said nothing, so Discord kept talking; now flying in small circles around the room.

"So, how exactly did you plan on doing that? I do hope your plan wasn't to hit me in the head with one of your ships, because you already did that, and it didn't work." He leaned in close and pointed to a comically large bump that had formed on his head.

"See? So, what was the plan?"

Jeltz maintained a stony silence, and Discord blew a raspberry at him.

"Fine, I'll go find out for myself!" He left through the wall, but not before blowing another

raspberry, which this time caused a genuine stream of raspberry jam to spray onto Jeltz's face, and all over his console.

Struggling to maintain composure, Jeltz looked at a visi-screen showing the local area. Somewhere directly ahead of his ship, Discord was waiting. He looked huge now, almost as big as the ship itself, and he had adopted a ridiculous costume, complete with red cape, sword and little bells all up his legs. He winked at the camera taking the feed, and flapped his cape a little. "Toro! Toro!" he jeered.

"Computer! Put me through to our friends in the gun rooms!"

*

Rainbow Dash glared meaningfully at the aperture at the top of her particular weapon. If what Twilight had told her was accurate, and things Twilight told her tended to be, they could channel the magic from the elements into the beam of each of these cannons, and that would defeat Discord once again. How that would actually work she, Rainbow, had no idea. She didn't particularly care to have an idea, as long as it actually *did* work. Experimentally, she flexed her loyalty. She thought about Discord, the havoc he was wreaking. She thought about Equestria, a sanctuary apparently in a galaxy gone crazy. She thought of Twilight, leading the group once more into a fight for their lives against something far larger than themselves. She thought of her friends, Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie Pie, Fluttershy, how they had all heard what had needed to be done, and with feelings ranging from trepidation to outright terror, agreed to help. As Applejack had pointed out;

"Even if'n we don't make it, at least there will still be one of all of us to keep Equestria safe. We won't die, even if we do." The statement, though confused, had somehow cemented their resolve, and Rainbow felt her chest swell with determination. These were ponies she would die for, but she would much rather live for them. The gem at her throat glowed with power, and she felt it flashing, arcing with the metal in front of her.

"Easy now, wait for the signal." The gem dimmed slightly, but she felt reassured.

Conveniently enough, the signal came very quickly. Twilight's voice, once again coming from the ceiling in a way Rainbow Dash didn't quite like, gave the word.

"We've found, him, we're targeting him, give it everything you have!"

Game on. With a fierce ululation Dash reared up, waving her forehooves and flapping her wings, before falling to stare intently forwards.

Rainbow concentrated, picturing each of her friends in turn, imagining what would

happen if she failed here. The thought catalysed something in her head, and the beam of red light from her element poured out like a flood, bathing the entire top of the weapon with light. A glowing pool of red spread from the top, flowing down like a waterfall, all the way down to the bottom. Magic cascaded off corners and shone like a mirror on the flat surfaces, all flowing from the gem at Rainbow Dash's throat.

"Awesome" she whispered, as the weapon beneath her hummed, powering up.

There was a deep base boom, which stretched into a continuous roar. The tower vibrated hard, and Rainbow Dash felt the ground push against her as a significant amount of G force was unleashed. The colour drained rapidly from the tower as the beam drew on and on, eventually completely draining the tower and leaving the room suddenly dark. The roar ended a moment later, leaving Dash drained, a little shaken, and thoroughly impressed.

*

Five beams of brightly coloured light blasted towards each-other, colliding in an asterisk of colour, forming a glowing ball of super-heated plasma and magical energy. Through the centre of this came a sixth. There was a blinding flash, and a rainbow of magic stretching well beyond the visible spectrum blasted straight out of the mass of light at the epicentre of the beams. I went clean through Discord's little red cape as Discord artfully sidestepped the beam. "Toro! He cried, waving the now scorched red cape. The beam swung around and he let himself be caught him full in the chest. Discord realised his mistake the moment the beam hit. It was more than just a demolition beam, there was magic here. Strong magic. He was thrown backwards hard and screamed as he writhed, struggling against something he did not understand or like. The beam curled around him, forming a great spiral as the particle beams beat against him, pounding him backwards. He flew backwards further and further, twisting in a net of magic.

But something was wrong. The rainbow was not all enveloping, it was more like a thin rope, tying him up loosely rather than covering and overwhelming him completely. The beams petered out, and so too the magic dissipated like morning mist. Discord floated, panting.

"Oh you naughty little ponies." He said slowly, voice devoid of levity. "That almost worked."

*

"What do you mean it didn't work?" Twilight panted, voice strained.

"I mean it looked like it was working, but, I don't know, it wasn't powerful enough." Jeltz voice had a note of panic in it "We hurt him, but he's still up. He's just looking at us, and he's looking angry."

"Shit."

"Shit" just about covered in in Pinkie Pie's opinion. She was listening to the chatter and looking shocked. Somehow she had been so sure that it would work, that sort of thing usually did. She was suddenly terribly sad: Discord wouldn't ignore this, and she couldn't even see her friends in her last seconds.

There was a "pop", and she appeared in a flash of golden light in front of herself. She goggled, and the other Pinkie goggled back. There was a pause, during which both ignored the large amount of other noise now coming through the intercom. Simultaneously, both leaned in to get a closer look. Then quickly moved their heads side to side, with perfect symmetry. Both leaned back, then suddenly forwards, close enough for their noses to touch. Then one of them raised a hoof, and the other lifted her opposite hoof.

"Aha!" both cried out, leaping up and pointing at the other.

The first Pinkie blinked. "But I never went near that pool!"

"I know, I'm the Pinkie whose been living on Equestria for all this time!"

"The huh? Oh! Oh wow, what happened? What's going on?"

"I've come to help! Celestia said that we were out there somewhere and we needed our help, so here I am!"

"But... how?"

The other Pinkie just laid a single hoof on the element around Pinkie's neck, and Pinkie's eyes opened in sudden understanding. "Double rainbow?" She asked.

*

Discord was breathing hard. Those *naughty* little ponies. Oh it had been a good try. He didn't know how the Vagon had come to be helping those ponies, and he had no intention of finding out. He snapped his fingers, and began floating purposefully towards the ships, slow enough to let them see him coming closer and have plenty of time to worry about it. What would they do in their fear? Discord smiled. Almost nothing was as good for chaos as panic, and boy should they be panicking right now. There were just

SO many things he could do to them.

*

As the only reporter at ground zero, Pinkie Pie was in a unique position to furnish the galaxy with a cogent and accurate summary of what to do when faced with inevitable defeat at the hands of a galactic horror against whom your best idea to date has just failed. As it is, the article on the aforementioned subject has only this to say:

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”

This is good advice to be sure, as there are only two results one can reasonably expect. Either it will work second time around, or you will die. Since this was going to happen anyway, one might as well.

*

Light. Blinding technicolour light. The beam of magic shattered the bland emptiness of interstellar space with a raging torrent of love and tolerance the likes of which have never been seen before or since. Random motes of dust, hydrogen atoms, specks of dirt and ice that had lived relatively blameless existences since being catapulted out of exploding stars millennia ago found themselves transfixed and charged with several very strange concepts.

Honesty.

Kindness.

Laughter.

Generosity.

Loyalty.

Magic.

These inanimate particles had no more grasp on what was happening than a human being would have of what was occurring at an 11 dimensional Fra\|/mt-- Orgy. That is to say they had none whatsoever, but they were having a good time nonetheless. They were carried along for the ride as a pile driver of spiralling rainbow magic coursed clean through Discord, curving around to strike again, recurving, striking again, curling around like the world’s fastest vine. A fraction of a second later the matter itself arrived, now trailing behind like a lazy dog on a walk, albeit a lazy dog travelling as near as dammit to the speed of light.

The blow it struck upon Discord confounded the finest simile makers of a generation for decades. They spent weeks debating upon various deities, galactic events, explosions, creatures and anything else they could think of before they could craft something suitable to describe it. In the end, the final result was not presented by them, but merely found scrawled on a piece of paper on the corpse of a man who had devoted his life to the project. It read:

“The blow struck Discord like Zeus’s fiery first piss of the day propelled by a dragon fisted bear on steroids hitting a statue of sugar glass.”

All in all, one might have expected more.

*

The fallout from this cataclysmic impact sent ripples through space-time for thousands of parsecs all around. Across the galaxy, at least the parts of it within a certain radius of the event, things were... better somehow.

A single lonely Mardajon, weeping desperate tears over the deaths that had occurred that precise nanosecond on a billions worlds across the galaxy, and more for the uncounted cotillions that had happened in the preceding minute, looked up as though a warm hand had caressed her shoulder. Across the room was her mate, who had been sunk in the horror of it all for the past hour as he remembered all the wars and disasters that had ever struck their home planet. He was looking up too. They stared at each-other for a long while, and in that time, the patent absurdity of it all occurred to them. The sheer nastiness of their existence as beings with no emotional blocking strategies at all suddenly seemed nothing but... well, silly. She found herself smiling at the sheer pathos of it all. Then she giggled. He snorted, tears falling of his face, and for the first time not being replaced. They shared another look, in which both saw the others wet face smiling. Then they were off, shrieking out the laughter of two lifetimes in each-other’s shaking embrace.

On the Planet Vogosphere, a young Vagon clerk hurried from one corridor to another, stumpy legs carrying him as fast as they could. He didn’t have long, if the ##33TT4Vrb form wasn’t in by eight there was no way he’d be able to get the ##33TT3Vrc form to another building, countersign it, and then be back by nine. That would mean the whole previous six months wasted. He had already been firmly told that the form he was

meant to hand in was NOT a ##TT333Vrf, nor a ##33TT3Vrf, and he just had to hope that this was the right one. It was, he thought to himself, rather unfair that the office's only pen for use by the public was on a small chain on the third floor of the building, while the office for turning in forms was on the eighteenth.

With a puff and a blow, he finally arrived at the desk, behind which sat a very stern, very bored looking Vogon clerk in miniscule glasses.

He held out his form in one shaking hand, and the clerk accepted it without comment.

He waited with bated breath as the form was studied. Suddenly, a feeling of lightness seemed to wave through the room, leaving everything apparently unchanged. The clerk looked over the top of the form.

"To be honest," she began "The first form you brought in was the right one." She put the sheet down. "To be even more honest, I can just give you your birth certificate now."

On the orbiting station around Barnard's star, a huffy middle-management type of the sort manufactured en-masse by cloning companies was walking down gleaming crystal steps in the red twilight of night. In his hand was a small screen, upon which he was about to authorise a very important sale. There were two bidders for a particularly large commercial block and his eyes slid between them greedily.

"Dolphins for the Ethical Treatment of Humans" were bidding against a major mattress farming organisation, who had long ago decided all of that free range nonsense was for hippies. The land was good real estate to be sure, and worth several million Altarian dollars if it was worth a penny. The bid from DETH came through, and he whistled through his teeth. \$895,000. Small fry. Then the bid came from the Mattress farmers. His eyes bulged. His bank wasn't even large enough to hold that many Ninghies. He had seen one once, but eight of them? Zarquon.

A flood of...something...seemed to pass through him invisibly. He felt pleased, and in his mind's eye he remembered being given his first baby bottle and business suit three years ago, ready to enter the workforce at one day old. Without even looking at the larger bid, he clicked DETH with no small amount of feeling. He could afford to be a little generous.

A student, striding out of his last exam, smiled to himself. He was free. In one stumpy hand he clutched the question paper, and in the other a bottle of something or other he had just purchased. He looked down at the paper in his hand and... Sighed.

"Student number 162257" he muttered under his breath. With a pang, he looked at the empty name box right above it.

"Hey Dude! How's tricks?" It was a friend of his, ambling towards him. He arrived, and the pair exchanged an intricate handshake that lasted almost a minute.

“Not much Brah, just...”

“Tough test?”

“Nah. You wouldn’t understand.”

“You wound me Dude, lay it on me!”

“You ever... want a name?”

A shimmer of magic passed upwards from the ground at an angle, passing clean through the two without either noticing.

“I can give you one if you want man.”

“Like what?”

Both thought for several seconds.

“How about Brantyur? It was this country which was made never to exist because its enemies in the future went back and sunk it into the ocean.”

“That sounds awesome dude!”

“You can have it!

“You’re the best man!”

“I know Brantyur, I know. Now where the hell’s my beer? I need you to pay me back for the mondo name!”

“No problem dude!”

“Awesome.”

“Righteous.”

They shared a brofist. A little kindness goes a long way.

On the planet Trivitor, life was getting back to normal. The economy had recovered quickly, and you could see something new in the people’s eyes. It was hope. The parasprites were being stuffed and sold by the million, and money was pouring in. In his new office, the planet’s transition leader, reigning until the various city states could set up some proper government, shuffled a heap of papers from one side of desk to the other, to allow him to more easily see the slick suited business dog facing him across the table. The dog raised a paw, and extended it across the table. The pony extended a hoof and introduced himself.

“Hello, I’m Derrick Pumpjack; I was told you had a proposition for me.” He said roughly.

“Rex Woofter. Pleased to meet you.” He replied ruffly.

“Well?” It was clear Derrick was not a patient pony.

“I represent the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation, we supplied the towers that kept you alive for generations.”

Derrick glared. “Oh?”

“Well, naturally we were all very glad to hear of the clearing up of your little infestation, and we are looking to put ourselves back into an economic relationship with any rising young planet, and its rising young leader.”

"I'm listening."

The caninoid looked over his shoulder, then over the other. He leaned in, wet nose now mere millimetres from the pony. Siriuns have problems with personal space. "We're looking at making you, and us, very rich indeed."

Derrick leaned back. Siriuns also have problems with halitosis. "Explain."

The Siriun, apparently unfazed by the frosty reception, laid out his plan. As he did so, Derrick found himself interested despite himself. It was big. It was ambitious. Most importantly, the Siriun kept on repeating quite what his cut would be.

"... so of course, we need a way to make sure all the ponies stay inside the bounds of their new towns, and keep paying for the towers."

"You're sure they're completely silent?"

"Completely."

"So what do I have to do?"

"You just have to make sure the right ponies aren't looking while we install projectors, noisemakers, that sort of thing. It's imperative that your population believes the parasprites are back, but that it's all ok because of those wonders at the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation."

"And in exchange..."

Rex repeated the figure, which had grown by another zero.

"Where do I sign?"

Nothing seemed to happen. But in that moment, Derrick had a moment of insight. A second of clarity. He put the pen down.

"Get out." He cut the dog's answer off. "Get out and never come back here again! You can't buy me, I have my standards!"

As the dog left, he sat back. It had been close, but his loyalty had stood true.

*

Fluttershy got shakily to her hooves. She felt strange. Drained yes, tired out of her mind yes, and yet... and yet... she felt somehow full. Like she could keep on going. She looked around. She was alone.

"Hello?" She called out. "Fluttershy? Anypony?"

It was a few seconds before somepony answered her. It was Twilight.

"Fluttershy?"

"Twilight!"

"Are you ok?"

"Yes, I'm fine, I think, but Fluttershy's gone!"

"So is my other Twilight. I don't know what's happened, I can't reach the others. Can

you sit tight while I try and work out what's been going on?"

"Of course." Then, she remembered something fairly important. "Did it work?"

"Twilight took a second to answer. "Yes. It worked. Discord is gone."

"Are you sure?"

"Jeltz says he knows when something's been demolished, and he says he's sure."

"Oh thank goodness."

"Oh I think we have to thank something alright. Or rather, somepony."

*

She was right. On board the starship Heart of Gold, Zaphod tore his eyes away from the screen which had just shown him the best display he had seen in... as long as he could remember. Standing next to him was a very tall white pony, one whose wise face there was a small smile.

"It worked!" she said "Oh Twilight Sparkle, you really are something special."

"You're telling me! She planned that?"

"Simple, direct, yet nopony but she could have done it. Science and magic don't usually mix you know."

Zaphod didn't know, but he nodded anyway.

"So now what?"

"Now?" Celestia smiled. "Now we go home. But first, I think we need our friends back, don't we?"

*

Far out on the eastern rim of the galaxy there lies a uniquely small yellow sun. This sun orbits, at a distance of roughly 400,000km, a small blue green planet whose equid inhabitants are so amazingly lucky that they are able to find the perfect balance between sophistication and tradition. This is made possible largely due to the work of the planet's personal goddesses, who have not only created Equestria, made it pleasant to live on and ruled it with wisdom and care, but who have on multiple occasions seen fit to spare its inhabitants the sort of extinction events that are usually the universes way of asking "How well is that space program going then?"

In orbit around this lucky little world is a gleaming white starship.

"And that was when Celestia turned up with this hoopy statue!" Zaphod rapped his hoof

against the horn of a very surprised looking stone Draconequus. "She said that you guys needed some help, and that if I lent my ship to the task I could keep it!" He stroked the statue lovingly. "I tell you, it feels good to have the old ship back in full working order."

Pinkie smiled, though a little sadly.

"That means you're going now does it?"

"I think so, with this statue in tow and the news of half the galaxy talking about that battle, they'll probably give me another presidency!" He paused. "Can you do that? Can you become president twice at the same time? I even have a new advisor, and I'm sure he'll help me keep on good terms with the bureaucratic force in the galaxy. He knows their processes inside and out!"

Pinkie smiled. "I think he's glad to have somewhere he can put that knowledge to good use for once." She sighed a little heavily.

"Hey what is it?" Zaphod said, surprised himself at the concern he put into those words.

"I will see you again right?" The question caught him off guard.

"Hey, of course you will, I'll be sure to drop by if I ever need a few minutes of R&R, but I would bore my left head right off if I stayed here." His left head nodded vehemently before continuing. "I'm sorry Pinkie."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Care to make that a pinkie swear?"

With certain amount of ceremony, he raised himself so that he was sitting fully up. With one hoof he made a criss-cross across his chest, flapped his forelegs, and then with a twirling motion, jabbed himself in the eye.

"Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a gargleblaster in my eye."

Pinkie winced. "Don't ever actually do that."

He considered it. "Yeah, maybe not." They looked at each-other, and shared a laugh.

"Besides, I think I'd better let Celestia cool off before I come back."

"Yeah, maybe that would be best." She suddenly giggled. "I've never seen Canterlot looking quite so crazy before! I heard somepony saying they thought Discord was back!"

"Well in a sense he was, wasn't he?" Zaphod said, floating a drink into the statue's hands with a roguish grin

"I guess so."

They had reached an impasse.

"Well." Pinkie said in a bright, slightly brittle voice. "I guess this is goodbye for now! Bye Zaphod!"

"So long Pinkie, thanks for all the good times."

"By Eddie!"

"You have a nice life out there!" The computer digitally beamed back.

"Bye Marvin!"

Silence.

“Marvin?”

Zaphod scratched his right head. “Now I think of it, I haven’t seen that metal misery in a while now. Eddie?”

“Not on board el presidente! He teleported down while you were all gone, and he said he wasn’t coming back.”

Zaphod raised four eyebrows. “Really?”

“Really.”

He shrugged, looking at Pinkie.

“Guess he’s your problem now.”

“Oh, I don’t know if he’s *my* problem. Eddie? Put me down at home. And Zaphod?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

*

On the planet’s surface, Applejack was already back at work. She had no intention of telling her family anything about what had happened, but was fully aware that she would end up doing so anyway. It was just in her nature. Until then, she was here, out of the way. She kicked a tree, and the apples fell with improbable accuracy into the buckets she had set around it. Here, she felt, was where she was meant to be. No fancy mathematics, no running around on spaceships, no big green monsters, just her, an orchard full of trees, and good old Bucky McGillycutty and Kicks Mcgee. She kicked again, and more apples fell. One of them fell well away from the buckets, straight towards ground. Quick as thought, she yanked something white from under her hat and whipped it out. It cradled the apple like a stone in a sling, and she tossed the errant apple into a bucket. She chortled as she stashed the small towel under her hat. Who’d a thunk it, they really were pretty handy.

She trotted over to the next tree, and took a second to inspect it before beginning to buck it. She rolled her eyes. A certain blue pegasus was fast asleep in the lower branches, snoring loudly. With a smirk, Applejack whirled the towel around into a tight coil, and whipped it upwards. There was a sound like a whip-crack and Rainbow rose like a rocket with a cry of a word that wasn’t yet a swear word on Equestria.

“Belgium!” She hovered, rubbing her stinging flank and glaring at the orange earth pony.

“Not cool!”

“Then don’t sleep in my trees when you know I’m workin’ ya varmint!”

“C’mon Applejack, haven’t you earned a rest?” She landed, and yawned “I sure know I have.”

“It’s not a matter of having earned it, it’s a matter of having stuff I need to do.”

Dash looked at her slyly.

“That the *only* reason you’re out here then?”

Applejack looked away, back towards the big red barn in the distance. “No.”

“Not sure what to tell them?”

“Not even slightly. I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t lived it, so how can I expect them to?”

Rainbow laid a hoof on Applejack’s withers. “Well for one thing we can all back you up, it’s not like you were all alone out there. Besides, you’re not exactly known for lying are you?”

“I guess. I just wish I knew how to explain everything, I barely understand a lot of it myself.”

“And that’s just why you’ll have me along when you do! I know how to tell a story, and I’ll make it the best they’ve ever heard, I promise.”

“You’d do that?”

“Of course I would! What are friends for?”

Applejack chuckled. “A lot of things sugarcube, a lot of things.”

“And I can do all of them!”

Applejack just smiled.

*

Twilight was sitting quietly in Rarity’s boutique while the other unicorn rummaged around in a trunk at the back. Rarity was talking, half to herself, half to Twilight as she did so.

“So I thought to myself of *course* it can be done, a very simple matter really. And my dear Twilight, you should *see* the good it’s doing me already, all that glute work, I feel a new pony! Now where did I put that lycra, awful stuff, but perhaps...” She turned around, a pile of various cloth samples hovering beside her, and caught Twilight staring at nothing in particular.

“Everything ok darling?”

Twilight seemed to wake up. “Oh! Oh, yes, I’m fine. I just feel... strange. I feel misplaced.”

Rarity continued talking as she set to work.

“I know quite what you mean dear, it felt like such a long time I feel I’ve quite forgotten

how to be a pony in dear old Equestria. Except of course I have those memories..." She turned. "Oh, is that what you mean?"

"Other Twilight." Twilight nodded.

Rarity sighed.

"Well dear, look at it this way. You got some whole new memories of wonderful adventures with your friends, without having to age a day extra!"

"But, where did she go? I mean, I know she's..." she stopped, it sounded silly to say, but she said it "...inside me, but, wasn't she her own pony? Didn't she matter?"

"Of course she did, and you did too. And now you and her get to be your own pony together. Look at it that way."

"And why do I feel like I'm the original, and those Equestrian memories are all new? The whole thing just raises so many questions!"

Rarity dropped the cloth, and turned "Twilight, what matters is that we are here, and that nopony is gone. She isn't gone, other Rarity isn't gone, if anything there's just slightly more of us around."

"I guess you're right."

"Of course I am Darling. Now, if you'll excuse me, me and other Rarity have come up with some completely Fabulous work together!"

*

Angel bunny sat looking suspiciously at the large metal humanoid sitting at Fluttershy's table with an untouched cup of tea in front of him. The metal man was talking, and Fluttershy was listening, only occasionally saying something in return. Occasionally she would take a sip of tea.

Angel hopped over to the newcomer, and sniffed at him suspiciously. There was a lingering smell of rat on his right ankle, and the cold smell of metal from all of him. He wrinkled his nose and, with some trepidation, stretched out a paw to touch a metal leg. The leg's owner man paid him no attention, engrossed in talking to this uniquely understanding pony.

"...and of course nobody ever listened. I've asked for them to be replaced many times, it was one of the first things I said when I was built. "I couldn't possibly trouble you to help me with this terrible pain could you? Oh no, of course, just keep packaging me, I'm sure my new owner will sort it out". But he never did of course."

Fluttershy reached a hoof out to touch his hand. "First thing tomorrow we'll take you into town and we'll see if we can't get you all fixed up."

Marvin wasn't used to being listened too, and that was just one of the many things that were completely novel to him. These ponies seemed to have no concept of the infinite void above all of their heads and the infinite sorrow it contained, and no qualms about opening their hearts to him.

He saw her looking at him expectantly, and hastened to say something.

"Thank you." The words felt unusual coming out.

"Then you can help me feed the animals. You'd like that wouldn't you?"

Marvin found with some surprise that he rather would. "I am a menial robot, I was built to help."

"That's not what I mean, I mean do you want to?"

"I think I would."

"That's very nice of you to say Marvin. You've had a hard life, but it's all going to be better now, I promise."

"Life?" Marvin moaned, and then he stopped. "I suppose we can have a talk about life."

*

The Hitchhiker's guide to the Galaxy has this to say on the subject of friendship:

"Friendship is what happens when two beings reach an arrangement by which each gains more from the other than they lose. True friendship comes free, and as such is something that any being can afford, as long as they are willing to let another being be that friend. Friendship, and friends, serve almost as many practical and psychological applications as a towel. The Hitchhiker who learns to make friends with any being he or she meets will go far.

Even if you don't know where your towel is, you may just have a friend who does."