

This chapter is dedicated to Lauren Faust, who reminded me to giggle at the ghostie.

CHAPTER EIGHT: UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES

High above the fluffy clouds and sparkling waters of a magical kingdom that, inexplicably, possessed neither a king nor a queen – and never had - soared a majestic purple and green dragon that had never been on a single date with any female dragon ever.

“SHOOOOOT THROUGH THE GRIFFONS AND BUUUURN UP THE VICTIMS AND PAAASSS THE AMMUNITION TO THE COLTS IN THE COOOOORPS...”

Riding atop this ravishingly handsome and altogether desirable dragon (all of the many, many, mares he knew had assured him on numerous occasions that any girl dragon would have to be absolutely bonkers – if you’ll pardon the language – to not want him to fertilize her clutch of eggs) were what appeared to be two blobs, one an unremarkable purple and the other a more caramel sort of toffee-ish color. If one looked at them from a more reasonable distance, one would see they weren’t blobs at all, but unicorn ponies! Upon still closer inspection, one couldn’t help but notice that one of the ponies was reciting the delightfully merry chorus from some patriotic little ditty, or maybe one of those death-metal hell-worship tunes that are so popular with the foals these days.

“**SHOOT** THROUGH THE GRIFFONS AND – **BURRRRN!** - UP THE VICTIMS AND - **PAAASS!** - THE AMMUNITION TO THE COLTS IN THE COOO-HOOOORPS...”

The dragon and at least one of the unicorns seemed irritated, possibly by the lyrics of the tune, or perchance by the persistence with which it was being sung, despite the fact that the howling rush of stratosphere coursing past them combined with the furious pumping of green, leathery wings rendered the whole thing indistinguishable from the sound of a burning cat being bathed in nickel-metal hydride solution while suspended from the maw of a Guardian Changeling and forced to listen to its mother being filleted alive by the razor-spines of an Elder Marewolf. And while this may have been its intention, it was still an excruciating sound, at least to the ears of organic beings.

“ALYX!” the purple unicorn screamed over her shoulder.

“WHAT?!” the pony behind her answered.

“WE’RE ALMOST CLOSE ENOUGH!” she screamed even louder.

“Also, SHUT UP!” the dragon shouted at the unicorn named Alyx, an action her mother had figured the testosterone-fueled, hormone-crazed, angst-filled teenage dragon would do long before she did, although she was surprised that he was able to hold out against the relentless assault for so long.

Some time and slight turbulence later, the flying circus burst through a cloud bank bathed in silver moonlight, and what a vision did that young dragon and those two little ponies behold.

The city of Canterlot, the Capital of the Kingdom of Equestria, lay below them, encircled, ensnared, and in places gutted completely through with ten thousand-fold lashes of angry, billowing flame. Ten million tongues of boiling lightning lashed out at every dwelling - military, civilian, governmental, industrial, infrastructural, economic, it was of no concern, all were treated the same – and the yellow flashes of return fire that streaked into the sky from the fortifications of the fortress-city were outnumbered by the alien bolts of electric-blue by ten or twenty thousand to one. And trapped within the walls of that doomed city were some one million souls to whom no evacuation order had ever been given, nor ever would be, for there simply would never be any time - although, had it passed that such an order had been issued, one has to wonder just how many lives could have been saved in the face of so great, so merciless and so unsympathetic an onslaught. The invaders had struck so suddenly, and with such emotionless ferocity and clinical efficiency, the Princesses themselves knew of the crisis before their scouts and intelligence networks did. And as the dragon named Spike watched that shining city upon the mountain burn, he was struck with a horrid realization; with his heightened senses, adapted to hunting prey from the tremendous altitudes and distances at which dragons spend most of their waking lives, he could actually smell the sickeningly alluring scent of the burning flesh and fur of the hundreds of thousands of innocents trapped below; students and teachers burning alive inside their schools of learning and magic. Shop-owners, hoping to retrieve a few precious supplies to sustain themselves and their families in a future never to exist, instead finding themselves penned-in by the unexpectedly swift advance of flames. Young foals, asleep when the attack began, who awoke with a start to find the only homes they’d ever known were now furnaces within furnaces, and with their parents away at work, now faced the horrible decision to either burn in their homes or burn in the streets. And in the middle of it all, what remained of the city guard and emergency services fought an unwinnable battle against the swelling firestorm, their spells and systems perfectly useless against a multitude of individual blazes that grew and multiplied far quicker than

they could be extinguished. Those who were capable of fleeing – the pegasi and some unicorns - were either compelled by duty to stay, or fled, traversing a comically short distance before being lit up like fireflies in applebuck season by the unfathomable weaponry of the alien invaders – synths, as some were already calling them.

“Good Goddesses...” breathed Spike, who found it difficult to concentrate on maintaining altitude.

“Dear Princess Celestia!” gasped the most powerful unicorn in modern history.

“And Luna!” added that unicorn’s daughter.

The air of that midsummer night’s apocalypse was already warm, even at this altitude, and it only became warmer, thicker and smoggier the closer the time-warping trio came to the city limits.

Ah, yes. This little ensemble wasn’t there to fight the aliens or put out the fires, though they would have gladly given their lives to do so had they not been on an infinitely more vital mission.

Spike halted and began rhythmically beating his huge wings in steady, powerful strokes.

“So... mom...” Alyx cautiously began, her quavering voice disrupting the silence of a night that, with the war distant but still easily visible, was strangely quiet.

“You’re going to the Royal Palace... right?”

Alyx’s mother paused for a long moment, staring deep into the hell that had come to Equestria.

“...Yes. I am,” she finally stated, quite confident that she would, in fact be making her second-ever covert incursion onto Palace grounds, though this time, she wouldn’t be hiding from the guards.

Unsure, Alyx asked, “Do you think the Elements of Harmony can even fix this big a mess?”

She expertly skirted around the unanswerable question by saying, “Yuh-huh.”

“Ooookay,” Alyx replied, her voice full of doubt. And sarcasm. “That’s good to know.”

Speaking with authority, her mother said, “We’re here because there’s only one thing that would be worse than if Canterlot were to fall into enemy hooves, or hands, or tentacles, or whatever.”

Alyx thought for a moment. “What if they don’t have limbs at all and instead just use-”

"The Elements of Harmony," she declared very truthily.

And incomprehensibly more world-endingly, *she thought to herself*, the Time-Traveling Tome of Starswirl the Bearded. That, and the Elements of Harmony. Those two things.

Seven things, *Twilight corrected herself*.

Shut up, Twilight, *she snapped*.

Fine! *she shot back, appalled at how rude she was*.

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The Hunter-Killer Chopper that woke me up that morning was now approximately ten billion individual particles of debris spread out in a circle 3/4 of a kilometer in diameter within and above the Everfree Forest, excepting the tiny fraction of its mass that had been converted into energy.

However, the most annoying helicopter the Combine ever produced left an admirably significant mark upon the world when it left it in a probably super awesome explosion that I never got to see.

The Forest was burned and battered and broken; every tree immediately surrounding - and certainly including - Zecora's cottage had been stripped of its leaves and many of its branches, making them resemble telephone poles, and for 200 meters in every direction lay the tangled and twisted-up wooden entrails of what used to be a pristine, unholy, beautiful, dark, evil, haunted, accursed, habitat for wildlife and pure evil, mixed in with tiny bits and shards of the recently deceased talkative aircraft. In fact, so thorough was its destruction, the largest single piece I could find was the very center portion of the tail-rotor assembly, firmly lodged in the trunk of a Goose Spruce.

As I trotted past the several dozen fire-brigadier ponies bravely extinguishing the several dozen little forest-fires bravely doing their part to help burn the demonic, hexed, evil, foul-smelling Everfree Forest to the ground, for some odd reason I found myself fixated on their uniforms.

They were just so **tacky**.

Every single one of them would've triggered a *code clash* at any Fashion Police bureau in the

kingdom had the Fashion Police survived the Hipster Inquisition of the early thirties.

Maybe it was some freakish combination my brief exposure to that unicorn mare in Ponyville, my chronic lack of sleep, a healthy amount of morphine still swimming around in my bloodstream, and perhaps some permanent psychological scarring, but all I could think about while looking at the brave mares and stallions of the Equestrian Resistance was that the Combine could get a lock on their position simply by setting their scanners to filter out any spectroscopic data that follows the complimentary colors system. Every Resistance soldier would show up like a big, tacky bullseye.

Ugh. Anyway, as an REA-blue cart passed by that was loaded up with the bleeding corpse of the three-legged 'Hunter' that Zecora and I had researched with our guns until it stopped moving, I was just thankful to the Goddesses that I had my Heavy Repeater Rifle back, and also that I was alive.

The pegasus general who had identified herself as 'Rainbow Dash', 'General Rainbow' and 'General Dashie', was snickering before we left the cottage and had continued to do so unabated ever since.

"New Cloudsdale is an empty field of grass?" I wondered aloud in regards to the uninhabited clearing toward which we were trotting.

Instead of answering my question, she just went right on snickering.

Fine. *Maybe it's another underground deal, like with Black Mane- WHOAH.*

The cart carrying the dead Hunter vaporized into nothingness as if it had passed behind a curtain made out of reality, while at almost the exact same time, an REA troop transport - a massive, six-wheeled metal behemoth, pulled by an equal number of saddled, blue-and-white camouflaged pegasi - appeared out of the very same nothingness to replace it.

"Stay to the left, Freemane," the rainbow general chuckled.

Okay, she's ahead of me, so she'll disappear first.

It felt wonderful; my mind, previously slow and sluggish from a lack of nutrition, now felt sharp enough to predict that the pony ahead of me would cross a physical point before I- *where'd she go?*

"Just keep going, Gordon!" came a voice from the netherworld.

Doing as I was commanded by disembodied voices - which, under normal circumstances, you should never, ever do - I suddenly found that I was... losing myself, somehow.

As I precipitously inched my way forward, I watched the whole world around me get sucked up towards the sky with me following after. I saw... something... clusters of buildings, white and brown and grey, then the world flipped upside down, I saw trees that hung from a dirt sky pointing at the endless blue expanse of ground beneath them, then I was *under* the ground, through the shale and clay! It was dark, terribly, hopelessly, unchangeably dark!

“Come on, I have things to do! *March*, you pansy!” came the voice from the ether once more.

I again obeyed the order and forced myself to keep trotting, one unsteady hoof in front of the other. Compared to my departure, my return felt extremely abrupt and anticlimactic. After several more steps through the depths of darkest darkness, being rewarded with still more black nothingness, just as suddenly as I'd been lost, I found myself again, coming up through the ground and back into my Hazard Suited hooves, still trotting all the while. Though the whole ordeal - and I find calling that an 'ordeal' extremely awkward after my battle with the Hunter - lasted only about ten seconds, I was relieved when I could at last stop to take a breath and perhaps have a look around while I was at it.

I was no longer headed towards an empty field, but a plethora of buildings. Occasionally arranged in neat rows, but often not, were small cabin-sized ones that rather looked like they were simply regular houses that had been picked up and relocated from parts unknown, looking thoroughly out of place with their bright, pastel-colored paint jobs. Aside from those were larger, prefabricated-looking rectangular ones - usually arranged in rows of three or four - and in a handful of key locations were comparatively *huge* - as tall or taller than the barn at the former Sweet Apple Acres - multistory affairs resembling lodges or inns, with multiple connected roofs and awnings that looked like they'd been added-on over a period of some years. With the exception of a vocal minority of cabins, all were constructed of unpainted timber that was almost certainly logged right here in Everfree, none of them had very many or very big windows, and all of them were heaped with scores of dirty-white sandbags - some having them stacked all the way to their roofs and even covering them.

And it was all encompassed by the biggest, shimmering, oscillating, pinkish shield bubble I'd ever seen outside of the one that would occasionally be thrown up over Canterlot whenever the 'Threat Level' for terrorism reached a certain threshold.

“Shield bubble, an invisibility hex, *and* a shit-ton of personnel and weaponry... *and* a very, very tall fence!” I observed in awe, while the General... I still didn't know whether to call her Rainbow Dash

or General Rainbow... or *Dashie* - *ugh* -... simply nodded smugly.

I was about to ask her why there hadn't been invisibility hexes protecting Black Mane West or East, but I answered my own question simply by thinking it over for a few moments; both of those were already hidden, one inside a Sugarcube Corner, the other underneath an abandoned homestead.

So, 'Don't use what you don't need', I suppose, although that's kind of an odd philosophy when it comes to security, but there must be other reasons... I wonder if their radiation emissions... Oh, look, what's this? A checkpoint? I love checkpoints!

Readers, sometimes I lie about the things that I think, and sometimes I don't.

At a spot where the rough dirt trail met the base's physical perimeter – an imposing chain-link, razor-wire fence taller than the one that surrounded Ponyville – was a heavily-fortified checkpoint guarded by two earth ponies, partially concealed by a low wall of sandbags beside a wooden watchtower. One of the stallions was chocolate-brown, the other was steel-grey, and both of them were equipped with combat-saddles outfitted with matching pairs of ghastly-looking weapons - all of which either looked like pinecone-shooters or some variety of confetti-cannon compared to my Class-67 Saddle-Mounted Anti-Infantry Rifle.

They wordlessly snapped a hoof to their foreheads as the General trotted past, giving her a curt nod. But I wasn't just going to trot past, *no, no, no, no*, I was going to make a *show* of it.

I stopped and jabbed a hoof in the direction of the grey one.

"HEY, YOU!"

"Oi?" he replied in what I now recognized as being a Trottinghamian accent.

I turned my flank towards them and violently stabbed an extremely sharp - for a hoof - hoof at the SM/AIR magnetically clipped to the only part of my Hazard Suit that wasn't totally non-functional.

"Mine is bigger," I factually stated with as smug a look as I could manage.

"Gordon?" somepony who sounded just like Barney Ironbuck called out.

"WHAT?!" I screamed back.

"Holy shucks, what's wrong, Gordon?" Barney yelled back down from the wooden watchtower, his

head barely peeking out over the edge.

Oh, gumdrops. “I’m sorry, Barney, I didn’t mean to yell at you!”

I just kind of snap at random people at random times. It’s some psychological tic or something.

“Also,” I continued, “BARNEY! Damn, colt, how’d you get all the way out here?!”

Barney poked his head out again, this time with his cute little shiny helmet off.

“That’s a pretty long story, Gordon, and I think you have other business right now...” he said, gesturing his head toward the General, who acknowledged that yes, I did.

Whatever Barney had been through to get out of City 7, he certainly hadn’t injured his face, which betrayed no irregularities on its light-black surface as it always had, nor had he damaged his mane - aside from a bad case of helmet-hair - which was just as long and stringy and - quite boringly - simply a darker shade of black than the rest of him. Not to imply that he’s ugly or anything, he’s just very... *plain*. Traditional. He’s actually rather attractive, I think.

Not that I’m gay or... *curious* or whatever, I’m just stating an objective observation that Barney is one handsome stallion. I mean, he’s got those *deep blue eyes* just like a lot of the stallions in romance novels. He’s even got those bangs that hang down in front of the eyes like you always see in those magazines. Those ones that are marketed towards mares.

And gay stallions. Which I am not.

“I see you found a new weapon!” he yelled down.

“Actually, I-”

“No, Gordon, I, uh... I actually saw it last night when I came to visit ya, heh. So... I’ve uh, I’ve actually seen it before just now.”

I swear to Celestia, he’s incapable of saying even the tiniest, most insignificant kernel of anything that could even remotely be perceived as dishonest.

“Uh, hey! Dreyfus! Drew! Lend Gordon some of those clips you guys found for his HRR!” he commanded the two checkpoint guards, whom I now recognized as the two dolts who went to secure the *kitchen* in Black Mane West while I went down the elevator to meet...

NO. I'm NOT thinking about that I'm NOT thinking about that I'm NOT thinking about that-

"Hey, uh, Barney!" I suddenly called out while the sentry-ponies clumsily rifled through the stacks of crates behind them, "I got a message on my heads-up display that said... *I am not allowed to use this class of weapon*, and... *please contact Chief of Security Barney Ironbuck if I believe I have received this message in error.*"

"Okay," he shrugged.

"So... I'm informing you, right now, that I think I received that message in error," I said, hesitating.

"...because... Black Mane is gone, aaaaand... we're at war with aliens from outer space... aaaaaand because of this, the rules no longer apply to me."

"Okay," he replied, unphased, nodding his head in agreement.

At this point, the General began to lose her patience with the sentry-ponies, who were holding us up with their epic odyssey in search of the bullets for my gun.

"Will you two hurry up?!"

They gave the following extremely strange series of responses, which I have recorded here for the benefit of scientific research into whatever personality disorder, psychological condition, or social impairment it is eventually decided that those two earth-ponies are inflicted with, in addition to the fact that I liked their funny accents.

"Roight, sorry a'ffer tha' Gen'ral Rainbow Dash, ma'am sir,"

"S'right, we'll get yeh yer boolets for your chav-cannon there, space-pony, don' get yer thesis paper up in bunches, er whate'er space-diaper ya got unner there."

There was more rustling and rattling, and then one of the ponies said something like,

"Fogelsakes, Drey, show Doctah Freemane some loving ress'petcha twinkie disposal!"

"To eat' his due, Drew, to eat' his due. Andgeyorra a once-fried, twice-removed, downstream hasn't-been what sunlights as a door-licking-"

"Dreyfus!" General *'Rainbow Dash'* barked.

“-taste-testing-”

“DREYFUS!” she yelled again.

“-buckle-butler, YES, General, ma-sir, sir?”

“I *order* you to shut up!”

Dreyfus replied by simply nodding his head while Drew, standing up on his rear legs, awkwardly waddled over to the sandbags and dumped his legful of lunchbox-like magazines at my hooves.

I threw all eight of them onto the magnetic strip on my back, surprised at how light they were. I mean, they weren't *light*, but compared to the clip the gun came with, they seemed light.

“Oh, Gordon! Before you go...” Barney shouted, “I think you dropped this; I found it in your room.”

The security-pony pulled out my crowbar, clenching it between his teeth.

“Why didn't you leave it there?” I asked, sort of irritated.

“Uhhhh...”

“Never mind, just give it to me,” I said in a much more thankful way.

Barney dropped it from his mouth, and I magic'd it over to where all of its rotten siblings were congregating on my back, making me look like I had a robotic tumor growing out of my spine.

“And thank you, Barney. For everything. But, I've gotta go, so... I guess I'll see you around?”

Barney just glared at me from atop the watchtower before he replied,

“Why, no, Gordon, I'd love to come with ya, but, see, I've got to stay at my post and do my duty, but hey, thanks for offering!”

“No problem!” I absentmindedly responded as General Rainbow Dash beckoned me to join her.

Compared to the hold-up at the checkpoint, passing through the shield-bubble was incredibly easy. I just trotted through the great pink mass, got shocked, felt like I wanted to sneeze but couldn't, and watched a very entertaining light show play out on my lenses as a result of a magical interaction with the pico-projectors in my glasses, and I was through. Nothing to tell,

really.

Inside the camp, sitting to my left and right and, indeed, flying above me (this is *New Cloudsdale*, after all) were dozens of Pegasus-Powered Vehicles of all shapes, sizes, and varieties, both of military origin, and seemingly repurposed civilian craft; sitting on cinderblocks outside one cluttered shack were a couple of *sky-skimmers* - very aerodynamic recreational PPVs built for competitive racing - that had apparently been painted white and blue and pressed into service for a reason that probably wasn't very good, unless it was something like, 'I want to die *very quickly!*'

And galloping in, out, around, and above the sandbags, shacks, workbenches, campfires, latrines, and more than a handful of tents were mostly sky-camouflaged pegasi and woodland-camouflaged earth and unicorn ponies – both mares and stallions - complimented by a minority of the most diverse group I'd seen since my golden days at Black Mane; mules, donkeys, a gaggle of cows and bulls antagonizing a pair of griffons adorned in traditional-looking battle regalia - which included generous amounts of leather - here and there a few of the strange, telepathic former slaves of the Combine who called themselves Cerberi - not to be confused with *Cerberus*, a terrifying dog-like demon that guards a gate to one of the hells somewhere in the Everfree Forest - several young dragons who weren't much bigger than ponies - I wasn't sure whether to be thankful for that or not - who had apparently, for whatever reason, painted themselves the same purple and green colors as Spike, and probably most notably of all, a positively enormous blood-red minotaur with a black beard, white horns and grungy-yellow eyes, who was literally the spitting-image of a stereotypical Reignissance painting of a *devil*. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he'd actually walked straight out of that nearby hell-gate, strode up to the leader of the Resistance and, surrounded by fire and brimstone, asked if he could join up.

"I seem to recall, uhm, General..." I began, still transfixed by the sight of what appeared to be one of the dark kings of hell taking a massive drink from a water container in front of me, "uh, General, somepony told me that Black Mane West was the largest Resistance base in Equestria?"

"Uh-huh," she replied, seeming even more distracted than I was by the bustle of activity around her.

"Well," I continued, "whoever said that obviously didn't know about this place... uh..."

She glanced back at me, her grey-striped mane sparkling with either morning dew or sweat.

Oh, the way the rising sun hit her, she was just *soooo... shutupshutup* "... G... General... ma'am."

"Do I look like a *ma'am* to you?" she asked, the question primed like a Manticore-trap. The rather charged tone with which the General asked it drew a few stares from the other Resistance

soldiers.

“Uh... myes?”

She abruptly halted her advance, and I nearly bumped into her flank, which was tattooed with a cutie-mark of a raincloud shooting a rainbow-colored lightning bolt - which, it now occurred to me, would be an ideal metaphor for her personality.

“*Ma’am* stands for *Madame*, doctor. Look at me.”

I looked at her, which I certainly had no problem doing *WHY LUNA, WHY DO YOU KEEP DOING THIS TO ME?!* and several other soldiers had stopped and begun staring as well.

“I’m wearing swamp-johns and an LCR, dude.”

I have no idea if that’s even what she actually said. It was some military lingo.

“I am *not* a *Madame*.”

She gestured with her hooves at her helmet and combat vest when she spoke, so maybe that’s what she was referring to, and if that’s the case, I don’t see how wearing a helmet and a vest precluded you from inclusion in the group *Madame*, but then again, I do not speak Fañçi.

“What the hell are you all looking at?!” demanded the pony who was most certainly *not* a ma’am of the little crowd that had gathered around.

They stared at her, looking positively grim.

“Get the loving corn-on-the-fuck back to work!” she commanded the idle troops.

A large pegasus grunt timidly stepped forward from the little crowd, a little green hat with four turquoise stars stitched to the front hanging from his mouth.

“General, I was just trying to give you your cover back. I kept trying to offer it to you, but... you wouldn’t respond...”

Embarrassed, she quickly pulled off her combat helmet and swapped it for the hat, apologizing to the trooper all the while.

“Sorry for being such a rancid turnipseed, everypony,” she apologized one last time, and we

moved on. We did not, however, escape the stares and whispers that followed us like our hoofsteps as we moved through the base, and I began to suspect it wasn't *her* they were all gawking at, but *me*. And more confusingly, I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

We hung a right at a good-sized, round concrete bunker at what I guessed was the center of the encampment. It was sunken halfway into the ground and looked quite intimidating, with mounted Heavy Repeater-Rifles poking out of narrow windows overlooking wide, uninterrupted fields of fire on all sides. On top was a ridiculously tall flagpole jury-rigged with loudspeakers and sirens, and I took a few moments to feel patriotic while standing underneath one of the biggest Equestrian flags I have ever seen. The General simply continued on trotting - I paid her no mind, and she did likewise.

Gazing upon the splendor of the Two Sisters circling each other in endless harmony made me thirsty, so I took out my thermos and downed the last sweet, sweet drop of my sugar-milk. Not wanting to bother Rainbow with a trivial question and not wanting to lose her while I wandered the base looking for a trash receptacle, I magically launched the empty canister through one of the bunker's gun-ports. Making a hasty getaway after it made a series of loud, attention-attracting metal *clangs*, I caught up with my high-ranking guide (who thankfully did not notice the commotion), and asked her about a strange word I'd heard her use earlier.

"What does *fuck* mean?"

She immediately grew more tense, and returned the question like an unwanted shuttlecock. "Yeah, I dunno. Uhh... did I say that back there? ...nyeahh, I don't remember."

Sensing she knew, but wouldn't tell me, I pressed harder.

"I heard Zecora saying that word a lot back at her cottage. Do you have *any* idea what it means?"

She placed the cusp of her hoof approximately in the center of her face, then continued trotting.

"*Fucking*, Doctor Freemane, is the Cerberi word for..." she quickly glanced around, "*cuddling*."

"Ah, of course! That makes perfect sense, given the context in which it was used."

"Anyway, didn't you have a question for me, Doctor?"

I had to think about that while I watched a convoy of four REA Armored Personnel Carriages roll past on their massive talonium-alloy wheels, the lead one pulled by six sky-camouflaged pegasi and the back three getting by with only four gruff-looking earth ponies each.

“Oh yeah, uh, this place seems extraordinarily huge compared to Black Mane West...”

She cut me off. “Well, there was a lot of that place you probably never saw, and besides-” she reached into her combat vest, bit down on a silver bottle, and turned her head to the pink sky to take a swig, before continuing with it still in her mouth, “we got a flood of refugees from out of BMW and the surrounding way-stations after Breen burned the place to the ground...”

Her pace slowed. “...and killed Twilight...”

Her gaze shifted downward, her eyes shaded by the brim of her general’s cap - which she’d forgotten to pick up, she was so distracted with her thoughts.

“...just to find you...”

I was about to loudly object - to defend myself, to shift away blame and guilt - when she turned to me, bottle between her teeth, and said,

“Gordon, could you... get me a refill? Please? It’s just water.”

I don’t know what, but something about those pleading, magenta eyes compelled me to just shut up and comply with the request. I telekinetically - and, I’ll admit, more forcefully than I intended - yanked the bottle out of her mouth and went to fill it up at the spigot of an enormous black water-buffalo - a portable container for water, not an actual buffalo. In fact, I don’t recall seeing any buffalo at New Cloudsdale. All the while the liquid flowed from the tap, sparkling in the twilight of the morning sun, I thought about what happened at Black Mane West, the bipedal creatures in the laboratory, Twilight hanging there, helpless, Alyx screaming at the monstrosities to let her mom go, Spike’s stunning and terrifyingly fierce rescue that saved us both just... in the... nick... of time...

...both of us. He saved the both of us. The two of us.

The bottle was overflowing, and had been for quite some time, when I finally closed the tap.

I lugged the bottle over to the General, feeling like a headcrab zombie carrying a leaden canteen filled with liquid Amarecium. Like I was a ghost haunting the body of a theoretical physicist, just merrily going about my everyday business because I couldn’t or wouldn’t accept the fact that I was already dead, and was just lying to myself. It wasn’t the first time I’d felt that way, and it wouldn’t be the last.

Rainbow Dash looked about how I felt, sitting on her haunches atop a crudely-tied bale of hay - a luxury I admit I hadn't expected at such a ramshackle place - set in front of the huge, red cross emblazoned across the back-end of a white, nylon medical tent.

I plopped down beside her and floated her flask over. "Here's your drink, ma'am. Sir. General."

She chuckled almost under her breath while I struggled with which title she should be addressed.

Putting a hoof to the silver container, she said, "Keep it. I don't need it."

I was grateful; I recalled the thirst I'd felt as I wandered, hopelessly lost, through the Everfree Forest.

Of course, thinking about how thirsty I was once again made me thirsty, so I took a swig from the tin, which was wider than it was thick, and curved down the middle. I don't know if it was the bottle or the water, or maybe just a general routine dehydration, but though I intended only to take a gulp, I didn't stop until the thing was empty.

"Thirsty, Doctor?" the General observed more than asked, and I nodded.

Levitating the flask away from my lips, I looked at the wall of white fabric behind us and remarked,

"So... how come that's camouflaged white? Wouldn't it just stand out like sore cackles against all the-" I gestured wildly and probably suspiciously with my legs at... I'm not sure what, but I was definitely gesturing at something.

"Those weren't meant for the ground, Freemane."

After I was finished tempting somepony to shoot me for acting suspicious within leg's reach of such a high-ranking officer, I thought about the grey-maned pegasus' statement. Somewhere in the course of my eyes' natural zig-zagging to and from random points of interest - biased towards things that were shiny, moving, or both - the flapping, sun-tinted flags mounted on the shiny polished-silver flagpole in the distance naturally caught my attention.

But it wasn't the image of the Goddesses of Day and night I was interested in. I didn't mention this before, but there was another, smaller flag just beneath the banner of our no-longer-existent nation. It looked very old, with faded colors and ends that were tattered and frayed - the least of its injuries. Judging from those edges lined with strips of black, melted nylon, the flag had been burned at least once, and it looked like somepony with either chattering teeth or unstable telekinesis had found a comfy spot, sat down, and spent about half a decade taking potshots at it.

In between gusts of wind, I could just barely make out the image of a complex association of fluffy, white cloud banks, along with what appeared to be several columnar structures built into, and out of, the clouds themselves. Banking through the cloud banks - likely lined with banks - was a horribly faded rainbow – though not grey, like General Dash’s mane – and underneath it all, spelled out in golden yarn, was the word *CLUUΘSCALF*.

“Uh,” I started my sentence the way I usually do, “Wh...”

That was about all I got out.

“What?” the General asked while I continued to stare at the word ‘*CLUUΘSCALF*,’ trying to very rapidly invent some technique or mental trick to prevent me from bursting into a fit of giggles, and subsequently getting shot or stabbed.

“S-ssoooo... wh- *heh*- what happened to... *hehahaheah*... uh... Clou- *heheahahaaha*... *AHEM* uh, what happened to the place after which this place is named...?”

Rainbow’s sobering expression did a wonderful job of extinguishing my giggles.

“Long before the founding of Equestria,” she began her story as I quietly groaned, “Cloudsdale used to be its own nation called *Pegasopolis*, full of proud pegasus ponies-”

Much like how I am unable to conceal my disdain for many-worlds-theory - which is so full of shit - I was incapable of hiding my lack of enthusiasm for sitting there and listening to the General’s detailed summary of every single event that occurred between the creation of the universe and the present moment while my HEV suit was broken and I was bearing the full weight of my SM/AIR and its bullet lunchboxes without the benefit of any power-assisted conservation of posture.

“Whoah, whoah, General,” I stopped her before it was too late.

“What?” she asked, her eyebrows raised.

I swear on the Big Book of Souls - a source of incomprehensible suffering and unbounded darkness that shall never be spoken of again - I was about to explain to the four-star general that she was an insufferable old windbag when my attention was unexpectedly hijacked by the slender, curvaceous, almost unjustly *clean* body of what appeared to be a pink version of the Goddess Luna.

General Rainbow Dash was probably giving me an extremely puzzled look that I never saw as I sat frozen, mouth open, eyes staring, my whole body paralyzed by the experience of bearing personal witness to the unattainable regal beauty of not only the third alicorn I knew to exist, but also the only 'Princess' outside of the Goddesses Themselves, Princess Mi Amore Cadenza!

And because the Universe hates me and wants me to die, it was only *right at that moment* I finally made a disturbing connection between her royal visage and something that *wasn't* a royal visage!

I jabbed my hoof at her as she trot by and without really thinking about what I was going to say *prior* to my saying it - an event which occurs with frightening regularity - and blurted out,

"I'VE SEEN HER IN PORNO!"

It was true; I had. Not that I make a habit of indulging in such activities, nor that I think that kind of thing is okay or anything, but for reasons that are related to my early adventures on what was then a new and mysterious source of unending horror – the magical land of the Equestrianet – I had indeed seen this exact pink alicorn posed in immodest positions "on the on-line", as the foals say.

The entirety of the armed personnel of the Resistance base of New Cloudsdale turned to look at me, most of them with their jaws open, and one of them – a male griffon adorned in traditional battle-dress – heartily guffawing, to which his female companion reacted by hitting him very hard until he stopped.

"*Excuse me?*" asked the stunningly gorgeous, young-to-early middle-aged mare who'd been gallivanting past when I made my observation. She stopped dead in her tracks, and whipped her head around to face me, her accuser, and her suspiciously clean mane – colored three stripes of lavender, rose, and pale whitish-gold - swung around after her with such force that she had to blow on it with her mouth to get it out of her face.

I just stared at her blankly, her eyes seeming to paralyze me like a poisonous snake-bite. After risking a glance at the General, who, surprisingly, regarded me with nothing more than a reserved amusement, I formulated not a retraction, but a clarification of my previous statement.

"... as well as many other things!"

By this time an elderly white unicorn in woodland camo fatigues had cantered up to investigate the commotion. The stallion's mane was striped several light shades of blue - growing thin, short, and tinted with white at the ends - and covering his head was a dark green cap embroidered with the insignia of a Captain. Obscuring his eyes were a pair of old, thick glasses that made mine

look ravishingly stylish by comparison.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded, his voice hoarse.

I was just about to answer when General Dash interrupted me with a swift sweep of her hoof, back-slapping me in the chest so hard I nearly fell backwards off the hay bale.

“Oh, that’s just my friend...”

What, is she not going to say my name?

“...Gary!”

Cud- wait, what was that other word? That’s right, fuck. Fuck you, Rainbow Dash!

“...he’s on an insane amount of painkillers and stuff right now- he doesn’t know what the hell he’s saying!” she apologized with a smile, regarding me with some well-timed dramatic pity. “Poor colt!”

I take that back, bless you, Rainbow Dash! Bless you and your lies! Lies are good! Lies are okay! Lies are the thing to do right now! The thing you should do right now, Gary... is lie! Lie your way to freedom! Do it for them! For the Princesses that count! For Equestria!

“I CAN HEAR COLORS,” I explained to the second small crowd I’d attracted since I trotted through the front gate of New Cloudsdale.

“Yeah, so, why don’t we go inside and get you into bed, Gor-uhh...Gary? Okay?” the quick-thinking Rainbow advised, and both of us stumbled off the hay bale and began moving – I, purposely loping, and she, trotting on three legs with her fourth wrapped around my withers – and down the heavily-trafficked venue towards a large cement structure sunken into the dirt at the end of the road.

“What was his name again?” hollered the blue-maned unicorn from an ever-increasing distance behind us, his voice tinged with anger.

“I’M COVERED WITH HAIR!” I yelled back. I’ll never know if the answer satisfied him or not, as the next time I’d see him, well... he wouldn’t be himself.

I mean, outside of court-martialing me or making me drop and give her fifty, I was expecting the General to make an honest observation, like, *‘You don’t know how to converse with members of*

the opposite sex, or at the very least give me a halfhearted lecture on respect and decency, and how it related to morale and unit cohesion - something like that.

But instead, she simply asked if it was true.

"Is what true? The thing about the porn?"

"Yeah, uh... the porn."

"Yeah, it's true." For whatever reason - probably a rare manifestation of my repressed conservative values - I chose not to elaborate on my indecent on-the-line adventures any further.

She just nodded, smiling a knowing smile, and I decided it was my turn to ask a question.

"Just to confirm, that, uh, pink alicorn back there? That was, uh..."

Again, she simply nodded her head, saying, "Yup."

"How did, uh..."

"Don't know, don't care, and never - not *once* in eight years - have I been bored enough to ask."

I understood, but something else bothered me. "...I ...isn't she supposed to be, like-"

"A princess?"

"No..."

She looked at me sideways.

"Celestia's niece?"

"No." *Oh, come on, don't make me say it out loud. Celestia knows - well, I don't know that for certain, but - Celestia knows a pony like that knows some eavesdropping spells.*

"She's supposed to be what, Freemane?"

If I weren't a scientist, I probably would have told her to forget about it, and moved on.

But you know what?

I'm not not a scientist.

I covertly glanced around, then whispered, "...really fiddle-diddling *old*?"

The General's whole head recoiled like the breech of an artillery cannon as she gave what I thought was a very masculine snort. It was kind of gross. Like she was hocking up a booger.

"The little princess has got a practical monopoly on Zecora's anti-aging potions-

"Ah," I interrupted, which was very rude.

"-which, your sugarmilk-

"Oh, it's actually called that?!" I remarked, astonished at how good I was at guessing the names of foods by consuming them.

"*Freemane!*" she snapped, drawing my limited attention span back into focus.

"Which your sugarmilk is an active ingredient in. And by the way," she added, tilting her head to scrutinize my suspiciously no-longer-losing figure, "what'd you do with yours?"

"My sugarmilk? I... drank it...?" *What were you expecting me to do with it?*

"You didn't throw away that thermos, did you?"

I turned my head to face the dimly grey, cloudy heavens as if they could lead me to the thermos that I had disposed of in a large, prominent, heavily fortified and easily-defensible waste bin.

"Uuuuhhhh..." The sound I made was the sound of meditation, and it is to be respected.

"For Pete's sake, Gordon, you could've reused that."

I was so distracted tuning out the lecture Rainbow Dash proceeded to give me - *not* about publicly accusing other ponies of being porn stars, but on the virtues of *reduce, reuse, and recycle* - that I was quite startled when the ground we were trotting on suddenly became hard and unyielding, the familiar *squishing* and *squashing* of our hooves as we tramped across the short, damp grass being replaced by a much sharper *clipping* sound.

The sudden transition was extremely jarring; I'd almost forgotten what it even felt like to trot on an honest-to-Goddesses concrete sidetrot. I hadn't seen one of those since *Luna's space hair I am not freaking thinking about Ponyville, no, hell no*. The pedestrian venue was about two ponies wide, beginning at a seemingly arbitrary point, and ending at the base of a massive, squat concrete structure at least a couple of hundred meters wide - most of it barely a story tall but for a lone windowed section offset from the center that overlooked the rest of the building, surrounded on all sides by barred windows as thick as my hooves were wide. Some ways behind that was a pair of minimalistic communication towers connected at their midsections to form an 'H'. The facility's sandy outer wall was peppered with cracks, bullet holes, and burn marks in various states of repair. A few of them looked old, and I don't mean pre-Combine old - some of the scars on that building looked like damage from some battle that took place long before I was born.

The sidewalk melted into a shady alcove that housed a massive steel door and dozens of types and varieties of sensors fastened - some, rather unsafely - to the wall. Embedded in the left of the alcove was a long window almost as thick as the barred ones on the control-tower type structure outside. Set into the overhang was an expensive-looking copper sign engraved with these words:

Royal Equestrian Army Air Corps Installation
BUTTERCUP BLOOMFLOWER BLACK FOREST FACILITY

Beneath that aging plaque was a much less expensive-looking metal sign that read:

TAKE HEED

IT IS UNLAWFUL TO ENTER THIS AREA WITHOUT
PERMISSION OF THE INSTALLATION COMMANDER.

In Loyal Obedience to Sec. 19, Internal Security Act of 901 ; 00 C.A. 10906

"Are you the installation commander?" I asked General Dashie.

"Acting, yes."

"... Do I-"

“Yes.”

“Okey Dokey Donkey.”

That earned me a couple of weird looks.

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After a slight mix-up at the checkpoint that involved me being extremely heavily armed and there apparently being a rule about that - and Rainbow Dash didn't know about the rule, and *who in the hell is just goin' around, makin' up rules, and what gives them the right, and I'm the commander and I make the rules*, etcetera, etcetera - we were finally let inside the something-something-flower Black Forest Facility. What transpired was that Rainbow ending up having to pull rank and the officer - I don't know if she was actually an officer, I'm just going to assume she was because of how snooty she sounded when she was talking about the *rules* and crud like that, and also she was wearing an officer's uniform - admitting that nopony except the *Installation Commander* should have been making rules anyway, and that Doctor Gryffindor told her to do it.

“Ho-lee shit,” I breathed to the Installation Commander trotting beside me as we made our way down an oppressive and mostly featureless hallway that, in stark contrast to Black Mane, could almost be described as ‘adequately-lit’.

“What?” she asked, her scratchy voice echoing down the hall in either direction, and I noted how the wrinkles around her mouth and eyes were brought out as each fluorescent bulb we passed highlighted them in shadow.

“*Gilda* is freaking *alive*? And she's *here*?!”

“Uh, yeah,” she replied with all the astonishment of somepony who'd just been told fire is hot.

Before I could remember all the *fun* I'd had working with that easily agitated bird-lioness whose presence was both physically and intellectually intimidating, the cyan-colored pegasus pony beside me, whatever her name was, reminded me of how poor my short-term memory is – undoubtedly a side-effect of prolonged exposure to the antimass-spectrometer that is the bane of my existence.

“Gordon, I *told* you we were going to go see Gilda, like, fifteen minutes ago.”

This revelation somehow prompted me to think back to fifteen minutes previous, when General Dash told me we were going to take the hugboxed insurance write-off surrounding my frail body to Dr. Pie and *Gilda*, and – obeying a truly fascinating and poorly understood social instinct - I hit myself in the face with my hoof, signaling to anypony nearby that I was self-aware of my own stupidity.

Past a series of steel-cable-reinforced windows overlooking rooms filled with surveillance equipment and stacks of flickering monitors, through throngs of flushed-looking Resistance personnel in a hurry to get wherever it was they were going, and around one of those curious little space-suited aliens who turned around to shout ‘*Follow Freeman!*’ as we passed by – drawing a look of doubt and perhaps a pinch of contempt from General Dash - we eventually passed through a thick, heavy metal door set into the inner wall that looked like something you’d see on a big passenger airship.

The air-tight door automatically swung shut behind us, its heavy-duty locks clicking into place, and suddenly I found myself staring down a cavernous tunnel that was so poorly lit, I was unable to see the pony standing next to me. As my eyes were adjusting, Rainbow Dash began giving me a little speech that sounded like she’d rehearsed it several times in her head already, her voice coming out of the darkness like an authoritative, high-ranking apparition.

“Gordon, the Buttercup Bloomflower Black Forest Facility has remained solely the possession of the Kingdom of Equestria for over forty years now, and the ground you trot on is governed by Royal Law, Ministry of Defense regulations, and the authority granted to me under the...”

She continued on like that for some time, reaching her hoof down to nudge a faintly glowing toggle, which immediately triggered a calamity of mechanical noises, causing me to jump, and indicating my astute situational awareness and unceasing vigilance.

Unfortunately, I don’t think Rainbow caught the demonstration.

“...and what you are about to see is designed to ensure that this small piece of Equestria *remains* a part of Equestria, and not the newest territory of the *Universal Union*.”

“Cool!” I remarked, and she glared at me again. I concede that I was paying far more attention to the obnoxious clicking and clacking of chains and motors than the speech she was giving.

Just as my eyes finished adjusting to a room that was almost as poorly lit as the tram tunnels at Black Mane, a cage-like elevator crunched into the concrete ledge we stood on, and when the

General moved her hoof to the terminal that opened its chain-link doors, she hesitated.

Somepony who was very angry had taped a hastily-scribbled note over the 'Open' button.

It read,

*ENOUGH!!! THIS ELEVATOR IS FOR CARGO TRANSPORT ONLY –
THERE ARE STAIRS TO YOUR <----LEFT FOR A REASON!!!!!!!
- Dr. G!*

After glancing at the caged-in stairs to our left and then to each other, the General hoofed the 'Open' button. The chain-link doors of the elevator slid roughly apart and we stepped inside.

Almost immediately after we jerked away from the ledge, a pair of enormous blast doors at the end of the rails began to shudder apart, and yellow-orange light, colored by the echoes of a lighthearted and good-natured exchange between two old friends, began drifting through the gap, gaining in volume as the doors slid further and further apart.

"...and you know what, Pie? You know what? I'm glad you destroyed my relationship with the closest... f-friend I ever had, because-"

"Friend?! Oh, please, Gilda!" came a giggling, snorting voice that was unmistakably Dr. Pie's. *"You and Rainbow Dash were the fillyfooliest fillyfoolers I've ever... suh..."*

Oh shit! I thought, jumping up and planting my forehooves on the elevator doors in concern. *What the hell is Dr. Gryffindor doing to Pinkie?! Also, Dr. Gryffindor is a fillyfooler?! And why do I care?!*

Rainbow Dash seemed less concerned, however, her body language speaking of little else but cold agitation; her magenta eyes were narrowed about as far as they could go, and her face, as Dr. Pie would say, was made of frowns, rather looking like she was staring down a cockatrice.

The morality of her silent inaction was at last vindicated by a *"What is it?"* from the scarier, more avian, more digit-possessing of the two scientists, to which the unfathomable pink pony responded,

"My Pinkie Sense™ is telling me that Gordon is on the elevator!"

Although she was – unbelievably – correct, the nonetheless pseudoscientific assertion on her part was met with an appropriate level of professional, scientific skepticism from Dr. Gryffindor.

"My Gilda Sense® is telling me that if I can't predict earthquakes with my knee, you can't predict the future with your ASS!"

Although I did successfully stifle a whinny, a highly suspect ear-to-ear grin *did* sneak onto my face.

With the blast-doors finally fully open, we steadily sunk into the cooler air of... whatever the place was. One tick of a cricket's wick - rounded to the nearest decimal place - after the stout metal rollers supporting the ends of the heavy, groaning doors clanked against the ends of their shallow gutters, Dr. Gryffindor spoke up once again.

"What? You can't come up with some smart-Alyx comeback?"

A voice from above that sounded very similar to Alyx's shouted, "*Hey!*"

The elevator ground to a halt at the end of the train-tracks with a disconcertingly pronounced crunch, and the chain-link doors screeched apart to permit our lazy, very important butts out.

Rainbow Dash and I stepped out onto a rutted steel-grate floor - practically the first surface I'd been on since I entered the complex that wasn't some variant of concrete.

Dr. Gryffindor looked at me and scowled. I'm sure it was a friendly scowl, a scowl of friendship. The kind of scowl I imagined the white-and-brown griffon would give a boar whose life she decided to spare because she had more important things to do at the moment than disembowel it and feast upon its protein-rich entrails. Other than an even more obvious feather comb-over to hide her bald-eagle spot, the griffon looked just as old as she always had.

She greeted me with a curt "Freemane," and at almost the exact same time, a pink party-science pony with the same floofy, thinning, candy-cane-colored mane - that I admit I once dazedly fantasized about eating after I skipped lunch one particularly busy day at work - popped her madly-grinning head out of a small door in the side of the conical, cargo-carriage-sized top of what appeared to be an *Oh my wet-maned Goddesses having a Celestial cuddle in the Lunar water-park*.

"SUR- *Goddessesdamnit, Gilda!* You ruined it!" Doctor Pie profanely yelled at her poor coworkers, causing angels to weep.

Dr. Gryffindor immediately noticed and became enraged at something I couldn't quite see that apparently followed the dangerously pink earth-pony into her ambush position.

"And please get that cold-blooded... reptilian... apex predator *AWAY FROM MY NOSECONE!*"

No shit.

"Now, listen here... *oof!* ... *Gryffindor*... there's no need to – *stop it!* – to hurt anypony's feelings!"

She brought Gummy. Of course she did. Why the hell not?

"What about me, Doctor Gryffindor?" came another unseen voice significantly deeper and louder than those of the females, its origin impossible to discern as it reverberated throughout and beyond the circular room. I looked down through the floor, which was a grated metal platform partitioning off the dome of what appeared to be an enormous concrete silo, completely forgetting about the voice as I observed the hubbub of activity below.

Below us were several more platforms like our own, with worker ponies milling about with their tools, the rainbow of magic glows which emanated from their disparate horns making for a chaotic lighting scheme. Adding further confusion to a workplace that wasn't wanting for any, every slightest noise, voice and shout was amplified elevenfold in the literal echo-chamber. Neither the faint glow of unicorn magic nor the portable lamps scattered about did a whole lot to negate the pervading darkness of the place, and to put the cherry on top of all that inherent discomfort, the structure seemed to be completely devoid of any kind of temperature management - not even the simplest of climate spells, not even a damned *fan*. Depending on where you stood, it was either just cold enough to make you feel uncomfortable after about ten minutes, or there was a stream of dangerously hot air shooting up through the floor from somewhere below. Paradoxically, almost all of the pipes on the body of the vehicle at the center of it all were bone-chillingly cold, permanently surrounded by a milky-white layer of ice and dripping with condensation.

I didn't even notice Spike climbing down from a large, dark cavity above the thing's nose. Nor did I notice or particularly care that Alyx Sparkle had her front legs wrapped around his tree-trunk-like neck just a little too snugly. The squabbling between Dr. Pie and Dr. Gryffindor, the grey-maned General's extremely ticked-off but ultimately good-natured rebuke of Gilda, the hustle and chatter of the engineers and technicians scattered below, my brain filtered out all of it as meaningless background noise, for the entirety of my attention at that moment was monopolized by the miracle of modern science and technology that towered beneath my hooves, down four or five stories to the ground, an object the height of an average office building, the beautiful and terrifying product of years of government-funded research, Ministry of Defense contracts, and the bloodthirsty braying of Equestria's military-industrial complex... I did not react when General Dash spoke my name.

“DOCTOR FREEMANE!” the rainbow-lightning bolt pegasus screamed in my ear, demonstrating to everypony present her apparently very healthy diaphragm and lung capacity.

Of course, it's what she said next that made up for the auditory pain she caused.

“This is a Tartaros-Class Inter-National Ballistic Missile, the only one of its kind in existence, and currently our Kingdom's best hope for ending the Combine occupation of Equestria.”

Rainbow Dash, I want to cuddle you. Suddenly remembering a word she'd told me was an alien euphemism for 'cuddle', I added,

And I want to fuck you. I want to do both of those things.

I want to fuckuddle you.

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“...Tirek, Tirek, this is Malefactor...”

No.

“-ECHELON IS TOTAL LOSS, AND TALON CASUALTIES ARE NEAR 100%, WE ARE-”

No.

“-13 is unresponsive, any units headed to the burning academy on East Royal Court, be advised-”

Nope.

“-TO SITTING-BULL-7, TARGET IS STILL SOAPBOX-TWILIGHT, MOVING NORTH-NORTH-E-”

I groaned in frustration. *Well, at least that one had her name in it.*

Toggling through radio frequencies on my not-so-little, not-so-light portable radio was a pain in my caramel-colored flank under optimal conditions. Doing so while clinging for dear life to the wildly undulating body of a dragon currently executing a terminal velocity dive into the burning, exploding, shooting gallery known to most as the city of Canterlot, fearful of being thrown clear of

the reckless, hormonal transport each of the many, many times he decided to make a sudden and extremely violent course-correction in a much-appreciated effort to dodge stray REA anti-aircraft fire, as well as slower, more explosive, more radar-guided projectiles was, to some extent, more difficult.

“-if Black Forest has launch capability, then-”

“Hang on, Commander...”

It was tough, yes, and it took skill, concentration, guts, and a stomach for vertigo that very few ponies – especially non-pegasi – could attain, even through years of training. It required a mental state that couldn't be taught, only discovered to either be possible or impossible.

“SHINING! Stop spamming this freq! If Nightmare Proco gets greenlit, you're sure as shootin' to be the first to know, trust me!”

But this...

“LOOK OUT A WINDOW, YELLOWCAKE!”

This was too Goddessesdamned much.

*“IT'S THE SECOND RETURN OF NIGHTMARE-MOTHER-CUDDLING-MOON OUT HERE! HELLO?! HELLO?! **RADIO!** Patch me through to triple-bowling-fun-fun!”*

“Spike! Got an update for you!”

“OH, HOLY SHIT, AND AT JUST THE EXACT RIGHT TIME, TOO!” he roared back without turning his head to the slightest degree, seemingly agitated by my super-important informational PSA being delivered while he was desperately fighting to prevent both of us from dying horribly.

“I haven't picked up any reports that mom *isn't* at the Archives!”

“THAT'S BULLMILKING GREAT!”

“And I haven't heard any reports of anything bad happening there, either!” I shouted as close to the dragon's ear canals as I could get without losing my already tenuous grip on his - hated, hated, *hated* - pony harness. “So that's good!”

“Have you ever considered the possibility,” Spike began, managing to be sardonic while traveling

through an active warzone at 170 meters per second, “that the worst stuff is the stuff that you’re not going to hear reported on the radio because nopony would’ve survived to call it in?”

I hadn’t. Damned if I was going to tell that to him, though.

“You’re being negative, Spike!” I yelled, my magic-kindergarten-tier megaphone spell amplifying my voice above the deafening rush of ever-warmer, thicker and hazier air whipping past us to a level I perceived as being just above a whisper – though to Spike’s much more sensitive ears, it would’ve been about the level of a friendly conversation over tea in some sleepy little street-corner bistro.

The harrowing hail of gunfire that surrounded us like embers leaping from the roaring bonfire of our nation’s funeral pyre was not actually an effort to kill us, however close it may have come to successfully doing so in the past twenty-five seconds.

It was there for our protection. Our impossible salvation.

So thick had the smog and haze become that we were nearly below the altitude of the highest pony-made structure in Equestria – Canterlot Tower – before the target of our military’s laughably ineffective and increasingly sporadic taxpayer-purchased ordnance became apparent. Out of the cold mountain air that was interspersed with ten thousand groundswells of blistering heat upwelling from the inferno below – flames that were stoked by uncountable lances of electric-blue lightning, bright as the sun and only slightly cooler, igniting the dark horizon with an unnatural firestorm hotter than anything ponies could concoct with chemicals or conjure with magic – swarmed a thrumming multitude of hostile aircraft from another world.

I’d never seen any of them up close, thank Celestia, but from what I could tell there seemed to be two main varieties. One buzzed and was shaped sort of like a skinny raindrop – those were the ones doing almost all of the shooting – and the other hummed and was much more complex, resembling a hybrid of a manta ray and a snow crab, except with these long ‘fingers’ with glowing blue tips that came out the back of the main body like fingers come out of the palm of an ape’s hand. These, too, could shoot, but only seemed to do so when they felt ‘threatened’. Besides that, I had no idea what they did – perhaps they were command vehicles or coordinators of some sort? Both varieties looked to be the same basic color – a gross greyish-white, like really old, dried glue.

The aircraft were so legion that they formed their own cloud, their gunfire a devastatingly beautiful downpour of blue rain that burned everything it touched, burned holes in the pillars of smoke and steam, burned dirt into rock and sand into glass and stone into lava, that scorched the air itself. And wherever that strange pseudo-liquid splashed against the ground, the stone, metal and

asphalt it touched leapt into the air like water, cooling and hardening where it landed like candle wax. And - as if the universe felt compelled to give not just the doomed inhabitants of Canterlot, but all the millions of the Princesses' faithful servants who lay dead and dying across the entire kingdom a grand finale, a production, a **show** befitting the end of as vast and ancient an empire as Equestria was – sandwiched between the orange and yellow of the hellfire below and the blue and white of the hellfire above was another lightshow, produced when the innumerable bolts of that liquid flame punctured the thousands of moonlit columns of blackish smoke that oozed into the sky from the habitations below - columns so thick, a pegasus could probably have built a house on them. Some strange interaction between the bolts and the smoke through which they burned then colluded in a way I didn't understand to produce wild sparks and webs of lightning that cut through the ashen clouds, glowing green and purple and teal, the whipping tails then reaching out and touching the tips of buildings, the pavement below, and anything, friend or foe, caught between, each cumulonimbal discharge of static electricity as apparently unpredictable to the invading horrors as it had always been for ponydom. The spectacle gave me a beautiful – tragically, horrifyingly beautiful – reminder of why Spike's passenger harness was equipped specifically with nonmetallic hoof-holds.

"Hello?! Hello?! Anypony who can hear this, please respond! PLEASE!" a male voice came crackling over the radio, desperate and panicking. I thought about responding. Really, I did.

I thought about telling him to take a few deep breaths, go outside, look up, and enjoy the 3,000,000-gun-salute in memory of Equestria - to die with dignity and serenity as the mountains fell and the hills turned to dust and the kingdom of the Two Sisters screamed, thrashed, and died.

*"This is Principal Uncertainty of East Royal Court Academy! There are foals **alive** here, but **they are trapped**. Please, I can't get through to the guard, I can't get through to the fire department, no pony answers! PLEASE, for the-"*

I violently unplugged the moisture-slick headset and floated it into my hemp saddlebag. Spike's acute hearing is something he takes pains to ensure is easily and often forgotten.

"East Royal is right over- *there*," he hollered over his bony shoulder, gesturing his head toward a particularly wealthy-looking quarter a relatively short distance to our right. Somewhere on the edge of a massive courtyard, hidden from our view by a high-rise apartment block, was the origin of a pillar of smoke half a kilometer wide that would dwarf the tallest skyscraper in Manehattan.

"KEEP GOING! ... JUST..." The meaning of my words impacted me after I spoke them. It was a sad reality that the deaths of all those ponies - schoolfoals and their teachers who would've been listening to the ringing of the final bell when the attack began - were pretty much guaranteed; not because the school was going to fall down on them, or because they were going to be vaporized

by the aliens' heat-rays or consumed by the blaze that was gradually filling in what little unburned pockets of the city still remained. But because we were not going to stop to help them.

We couldn't. Mom said so.

"The Elements of Harmony are more important, Spike!" I yelled, my voice cracking - not because I was going through puberty - and my nose getting even runnier than it already was - even though it certainly hadn't gotten any colder.

Spike gave a deeply bitter grunt of discontent that genuinely frightened me, and for just one second, some primitive part of me became terrifyingly aware that there was no way off of the flying, fire-breathing monster I was riding except by jumping to the streets hundreds of meters below.

It was only for a second, though. Spike would never hurt me. Even if he really, really wanted to.

As the green and purple dragon poured some extra steam - metaphorically speaking, although dragons probably do contain some steam - into his wings and began weaving in and out between buildings as much as he could - partially for evasive purposes and surely at least some of it was just him showing off - I began to look down at the streets below and wonder why they were so empty. There were no soldiers, no civilians, and certainly no... well, *aliens*.

Like everypony else, I had difficulty classifying the things as machines or creatures; they seemed to exhibit characteristics of both and the totality of neither, moving and verbalizing like animals - *talking* to each other in an electronic mixture of guttural howls, squeals, and groans, even screaming and grunting when shot as if in pain - yet possessing clearly artificial - and extremely advanced - weapons and propulsion systems, and operating with a dogged single-mindedness and lack of concern for self-preservation that was reminiscent of automatons. And with all of that integrated into vaguely crustacean-like bodies that seemed composed of some medium between plastic and metal that, for all I knew, could have been *living tissue*, one thing was clear:

These things sure as hell weren't sent by the Griffons.

Their origin was another world, another universe, it had to be, you'd have to be flat-out stupid not to see that. I knew enough about the Black Mane Incident and my mother's work to know that the headcrabs and barnacles that suddenly appeared a couple of years earlier and now infested pretty much every corner of Equestria weren't some 'invasive species' that latched onto the hull of some commercial trade ship.

Dear Celestia, she didn't have anything to do with this, did she?

Spike banked left onto the grand and majestic Canterlot Boulevard, which led straight to the Royal Palace and the Canterlot Archives.

Because I don't think I could ever, ever live that one down.

"SHE SAID THE NORTH ENTRANCE, RIGHT?!" Spike very loudly asked.

'Oh, you're Twilight's filly, right? Isn't she that scientist that, like, ushered forth the Apocalypse?'

"TWILIGHT!" Spike persisted, and if there'd been something in my mouth I would have spat it out.

"WHAT DID YOU JUST CALL ME?!" I, Alyx Sparkle, demanded.

He unconsciously shook his head to either side, causing us to chaotically swerve.

"I MEAN ALYX! SORRY!" he barked the apology out like a very bad, scaly, fire-breathing dog that had just inadvertently reminded me of the fact that despite my sincerest efforts, I was probably going to turn out to be just like my mother.

After a short silence illuminated by the alien bombardment that shrouded everything not already aglow in a blanket of blue-white light, I told Spike that he was correct; we were supposed to meet mom at the north entrance of the Canterlot Archives, and after that, I think I said something that sounded like *'at huuAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!'* while kind of... *pointing with my face* – that's the only way I can think of to describe it – at what appeared to be at least a couple of dozen very, *extremely* tall, spindly-legged tripod things that had just finished climbing over a collapsed section of overpass a few seconds of flight-time further up the road. Their shape was such that at a distance, they were so damned *tall* and their movement just slow enough, they sort of blended in with the other tall structures that defined Canterlot, being easily mistaken by inattentive ponies such as myself for innocent things like water towers, radio antennae, lamps or power poles.

I reasoned that Spike must have been looking at the same thing I was, because he was also... well, I won't call it 'screaming', he was... gasping. I suppose it was possible that he was doing *whatever you want to call it* both at what I was looking at, and at what he was looking at.

With my harness already wet with condensation, I nearly slipped free of it when Spike suddenly decided to shoot upwards without warning. After beating his wings especially mightily a couple of times, the inconsiderate jerk then flipped his body possibly *more* than 90 degrees towards the ground – again, with no warning whatsoever – *once again* nearly bucking me off and sending me

to my painful, screaming death.

All my sensory experience consisted of was the sound of rushing of air and the feeling of my lunch attempting to evacuate my body through my mouth, followed by most of my internal organs.

I opened my eyes the instant I felt our tethered bodies come into contact with the ground, and my hayseed sandwich, along with all of my bodily fluids, returned to their naturally-intended locations. However, I immediately squeezed them shut again as an instinctual reaction to the plethora of abandoned carriages, guardrails, signs, and at least one solid-lead drainage pipe we were headed toward at tremendous speed.

And by 'we', I mean 'Spike'. And by 'crash into', I mean 'smash through'.

"Luna, Cadance and Celestia group-hugging on film!" I blasphemously exclaimed after we finished skidding to a halt in a shower of asphalt-on-talon-induced sparks beneath the absolutely massive highway overpass above us, noting the long, straight landing strip of carnage my little dragon had left behind him – including the aforementioned *solid lead pipe* that was now missing a sizable section, as well as a gigantic hole the size of a coltswagen that had been bored straight through the middle of an *aluminum passenger-carriage*.

"*Are you alright?!*" we both asked each other at almost the exact same time.

"Spike, I'm fine, but, *Luna-*"

"*Okaythen, SSSHHHHHHH!!*" he very, very loudly shushed me, spraying me with some of his dragon spittle – although apparently it didn't bother me all that much, as after I wiped my face off on my foreleg, I found it quite impossible to stop smiling.

Following Spike's pointed gesturing, I shifted my gaze toward the gaping chasm dividing the overpass in two - which, unless there was some criminal negligence going on at the Ministry of Transportation, couldn't possibly be more than around half an hour old – noting the highly abnormal sound of distant, rhythmic thumping.

I almost subconsciously huddled close to the huge, heavily-armored and sometimes insensitive mode of transport beside me. As dozens of otherworldly moans and cries - extremely deep and muffled, and like all the invaders, sounding like something synthetic trying to imitate something organic – filled our ears, Spike returned my huddle, pulling me in close and holding me tight.

Scrapes, scuffs, synthetic screams, and some sick crunching sounds accompanied a truly

massive object which momentarily interrupted the colorful lightshow pouring in from above, and more than half a dozen of the alien ‘walkers’ tumbled down through the gap in the overpass, their hard shells cracking open as they smashed against the ground like turtles dropped by a falcon. The insect-like limbs of those that had fallen on their backs folded up against the underside of their squat, sandy-yellow torsos like the legs of a spider, and if they weren’t already dead when they fell, they were after hitting the pavement. A rapid series of powerful thumps reverberated along the road from some distance further down, followed by a chorus of unnatural squeals just barely audible over the incessant pounding of anti-aircraft guns and detonations from around the city.

I looked up at Spike, whom I was suddenly aware I basically had my forelegs wrapped around (I mean, as much as I could), and his rough, scaly arms - I don’t know whether to call them ‘arms’ or ‘front legs’, and I have the same problem with griffons - were pretty much wrapped around me, though he had to hunch over pretty far to do so.

And as our star-struck gazes met, and we looked deeply into each others’ eyes, both of us wearing huge, silly grins, and a bit of hot, red circulatory fluid seeped into my cheeks, with me in the arms of my indestructible knight in purple armor, he leaned down and whispered into my perked-up ear,

*“That was Elder **FREAKING DAGGOTH!!**”*

Specifically, the former part was whispered. The latter part left my ear ringing with tinnitus.

“Who’s Elder Daggoth?”

He released me from his (admittedly enjoyable) embrace simply to free his front limbs so he could perform an action ponies would call a ‘face-hoof’, but which dragons, I am told, call a ‘face-claw’.

“He’s one of *The Four!* You know, the Royal Equestrian Dragon Corps, which he is the *leader* of – the four dragons that broke from the Dragon Communion to be formally inducted into the REA at the behest of a vision from their prophet Raszagal – you don’t know any of this?!”

“Uhhhh...” I responded, accessing the partition of my brain devoted to ‘dragons’ and desperately rifling through every quanta of data I could find.

Spike just rolled his eyes and said, “Oh, never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

“No, nononono, Spike, it *does* matter! It *does!*” I corrected him, trying not to hurt his feelings, and failing. “I want you to tell me everything you know about... *Elder Draggith* and the others!”

That seemed to temper the sullen look on his face, and I decided to take it and gallop with it.

“Spike, look at me,” I commanded the teenaged dragon that, although he’d actually lived three or four times longer than I, sure didn’t act like it sometimes.

He did as he was told, and his emerald eyes glowed like a cat’s in the shadow of the overpass. And yes, even though it was night, there was so much celestiadamned gunfire and explosions that, added to the full moon, it actually did create a clearly discernible *shadow* underneath the overpass.

I leaned against him on the tip of my back hooves and said as sincerely as I could,

“Spike... I *want you*...” I began, biting my lip and hanging on the ‘you’ for a moment before continuing, “...to tell me about dragon stuff.”

He beamed, and I swear I could see a glint in his eye. Specifically, a yellow glint. Then a couple more appeared. Then both of us had the everloving *manure* scared out of us by a deafeningly loud, pained, and most of all, *angry*, bellow from one of the tripod creatures lying behind us.

“-*BUT NOT NOW! NOTNOWNOTNOW!*” I shouted as I leapt onto his back and scrambled into my harness, “*ARCHIVESARCHIVESARCHIVES! ARCHIVESARCHIVES!*”

As he lumbered forward, beating his green wings hard and fast, and kicking up clouds of white, chalky dust, I risked a glance backwards. I could see... ports on the main body of the tripod that had ‘woken up’, glowing a different kind of sickly yellow from the rest of its exoskeleton, as well as some electric-blue coming from this long, thick shaft sticking out from under its belly that swung from side to side between its writhing legs as the injured machine struggled to erect itself.

My train of thought was interrupted by an insistent – and thoroughly airborne – Spike.

“*WHEN DID YOUR MOM SAY TO MEET HER AT THE ARCHIVES?!*” Spike inquired.

I looked down at my old-fashioned watch. By the steady light of the moon, I could see that it was a quarter past 3 PM; it had been bright and sunny not half an hour ago. When the attack began, the Princesses quickly lowered the sun and broadcast an emergency Royal Decree that all lights be extinguished and all windows be shuttered in an effort to deny the enemy the advantage of seeing their targets. Commander Shining Armor later told me that it was at the military’s request that Luna brought out a full moon, as it was reported that the alien craft had highly glossy, reflective skin that would give them a glint in the presence of a light source - which REA troops

would find very helpful.

“She said to meet her outside the archives’ northern entrance at a quarter til, and not one second before or after!”

“Okay, got it!”

“... ‘a quarter til’ means 3:45, right?”

“YES, Spike, that is what that means.”

“Okay, got it!”

After that little exchange, my extremely resilient and hopelessly - hopelessly, hopelessly - romantic dragon powered into the sky, away from one danger and straight into another, and I gazed backward at the ruined Canterlot Boulevard we’d taken refuge under. The only hint that a platoon of those walking tripods had been marching across it on their way to the Royal Palace a couple of minutes before were the dozen-odd huge, beetle-like torsos illegally blocking almost every lane, most of the them upside-down, all of them leaking some kind of dark fluid, and it looked like some of them had literally had their legs shorn completely off, the spindly limbs now haphazardly splayed across the freeway not too far from the ‘bodies’ they’d once been a part of.

I recalled the trail of destruction my thick-skinned Spike left behind when he crashed into all of those abandoned transports and drainage systems beneath the overpass, and my skin got all tingly as I realized how indestructible, how mighty, and how *massive* this ‘Elder Dragonith’ must have been to ram into a whole pack of creatures as tall as water-towers, and not only instantly kill or incapacitate almost every single one of them, but actually dismember some of the beasts... tear their telephone-pole-like legs from their sockets by sheer force...

It was like I was actually looking forward to hearing Spike’s dragon-lore geek-out.

Spike gently banked right to circle around to the back of the greater Royal Palace complex, and the northern entrance to the Canterlot Archives. If it hadn’t been for the multicolored lightning and the constant back-and-forth (mostly forth) between the *triple-A* cannons and the attacking hordes of alien aircraft, it almost would have been possible to imagine I was simply trapped on another one of Spike’s ‘unexpected detours’ that seemed to be heavily biased towards occurring only on pleasant, cloudless, and preferably moonlit nights, suffering through the fifty-five year old teenager’s embarrassing attempts to hit on me.

But alas, there was just too much gunfire to sustain my suspension of disbelief.

The Palace itself looked largely the same as it ever had; a complicated series of interconnected towers of chalk-white limestone topped with enormous gold domes often painted with long, fancy stripes of a multitude of bright shades and hues. It was so prominent that, at certain distant angles, they appeared to compose basically the entire city – and in ancient times, probably actually *did*.

Just as I was beginning to wonder why - given that there were at least two princesses, innumerable court mages, *and* my mother inside - there was no shield barrier around the Palace, a blue-and-violet bolt of magic suddenly sprung up through the slanted roof of the Grand Hall, leaving nothing more than a brief glow upon its surface before continuing on its path upwards as if there had been nothing in its way but air.

The bolt shot up to a height just above the very tip of Canterlot Tower – like the rest of the Palace, an island of calm and unblemished beauty looking out of place in the boiling chamber pot of hell that was its namesake – and blossomed into one of the largest neon-pink shield bubbles I have ever seen in my entire life. Like strawberry syrup flowing over a scoop of ice cream - and that may have been an excessively delicious description - the magical barrier quickly extended to cover the entire Royal Palace, extending so far out that it nearly enveloped us.

No sooner had my eyes adjusted to the bright pink glow than a pair of solid electric-blue beams connected with the bubble from somewhere out of the northeast, and what looked like a... *ripple through space*... slammed into the barrier with unbelievable force, sending a shockwave across its surface several meters high. A blink of an eye later, a second lance of the fabric of reality impacted the already compromised shield-wall and – after being up for about five celestiadamned seconds – crumbled into a hundred thousand million shards of magical matter that littered the meticulously manicured lawns around the palace - the walls of which were made of far, far less sturdy stuff.

“THERE! We’re at the north entrance! Spike, hover here!” I knew it killed him to hover in place at altitudes as high as Canterlot, but according to my watch, it was actually thirty seconds past 3:45 – the time mom told us to meet her at the Canterlot Archives, next to Canterlot Tower, at the end of Canterlot Boulevard, in the city of Canterlot.

So, we wouldn’t be waiting for very long, is what I’m trying to say.

The Royal Palace was still aglow with lights, making it a huge, obvious target that should’ve been as difficult to hit as the side of a barn. Spike, who was panting as he rapidly beat his wings in the thin mountain air, must have been thinking the same thing.

“Why don’t they keep firing?!” he wondered. “What, are they saving the Palace for something?!”

I was about to offer my own speculation when I was blinded by a purple flash originating some twelve millimeters away from my eyeballs, and a purple unicorn popped into existence – in my lap.

“*Okay SpeuuAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!*” was all she was able to say before she realized she’d teleported into the wrong saddle, and our screams combined as we both began tumbling downward.

And that was terrifying and everything, but... the fall spilled out the contents of mom’s simple brown satchel, and - though I was upside down and falling to my death - for whatever reason, my eyes darted to the one object amongst all those shiny, sparkling, golden pieces of jewelry that was different from the rest, and it wasn’t the large, semitransparent white spot in the center of my vision. It was very plain. Very worn. Very... *papery*.

I was once again nearly blinded by that damned purple flash, and when I opened my eyes, I was once again on the back of Spike, who was looking over his shoulder with a curious expression on his face. Behind me, there was at least one more big flash, and several smaller ones.

Spike’s eyes went wide. “OH! I was wondering why you two were so ligh-”

“***SPIKE!***” screamed my mother, clearly under an extreme amount of stress. “***PONYVILLE! FLY!***”

I swear he grumbled, “*I am flying,*” as he shunted his body into a gut-churning dive, thankfully pulling up shortly afterwards, and powering his wings up and down as he fought to gain altitude.

I glanced backwards at mom. Despite everything, she forced herself to give me a smile, and I returned it. Neither of us even tried to speak above the howling wind of that warm, moonlit afternoon, interrupted only by claps of rolling thunder and the occasional long, bloodthirsty roar of a dragon that echoed off the mountain, growing ever quieter, ever fainter, and ever more sporadic as the magical land of Equestria drew its last, defiant breaths.

I forced myself to stare deep into the inferno we left behind, which had only grown fiercer and more massive since I first saw it from this distance. I had to. So I would never forget. So nopony would ever forget that there used to be a city here, and it was called Canterlot, it was the capitol of an empire that existed for thousands of years, and under the stewardship of two beautiful, wise and benevolent princesses, over time, that empire grew to be so great and so incredibly vast, that, indeed, there were some who were unaware that there even was a world outside of

Equestria.

The kingdom of the Two Sisters, which had begun with the disposition of a malefactor, would end, it seemed, with the imposition of a Benefactor.

Benefactors...

Where have I heard that before?

I looked around me, and noticed that all of the little pinpricks and flashes of light surrounding the city had frozen in place, which seemed rather strange. Then I looked at Spike's wings in what dim light there was to see by, and they, too, were not moving. I looked behind me and saw the horrifying sight of my mother's deformed face; her caved-in cheeks making the bones of her skull jut out, her eyes were rolled into the back of her head, and a stream of congealed blood ran down her purple face, leaking out of her nostrils.

I wasn't frightened. I was pissed.

"WHO DID THIS?!" I yelled at the blackness.

Enraged, and feeling like hitting something, I climbed out of my harness, clambered up Spike's neck and punched him in the head with my front hooves – an odd course of action, but at the moment, making perfect sense. He reacted to the force as if his entire body was composed of a single solid hunk of Twitanium. This brought further frustration, as Spike normally reacts when I punch him in the head.

"AND WHO STOPPED TIME?!"

"Time, Mmmmiss Twilight Ssssparkle...?" came a voice out of the void that addressed me by my mother's name, and there was no longer any doubt as to who was screwing with me.

"Your mmmmother always had difficulty managing time..."

"My mother is dead."

"Unfortunately, yes, and she was a very valuable asset to... too... mhmm, you have my sincerest condolences, the events of Black Mane West must have been... traumatizing..."

"I know."

“...and you also know that you could bring her back if you wanted to...”

“NO!” I screamed.

The frozen blackness was silent for several moments, as if waiting for me to say something else.

“Just... no. No. She...” I trailed off, resting my chin on Spike’s head as I attempted to gather my thoughts and think of how I was going to say something I’d never told another living soul.

“She warned me, about... that kind of stuff. One day, she just grabbed me and looked me straight in the face and said ‘Alyx, honey, sweetie...”

NO. This is NONE of his business, celestiadamnit! Why do I have to tell him this?! It’s not FAIR!

I sighed, and leaned more heavily on the unbreakable statue that was Spike.

“...she said... she said, ‘Alyx, when I go...”

I couldn’t take it anymore – my throat tightened until it almost clamped shut, like my body didn’t want me to say any more, like it *knew* who I was telling this to.

“She said, ‘When I – you know, go... you... you don’t try and bring me back, you just let me go on, just let me go on and see the Princesses, Alyx, don’t you dare...”

I was sobbing. I didn’t want to talk about my mother. The wound was too raw, too deep.

“Goddessesdamnit... I can’t-”

“She told you there were ways, ‘magical’ and ‘pseudo-scientific’ as she put them, of cheating death.”

“SHE TOLD ME ABOUT BLACK MAGIC AND DARK MAGIC AND SHIT LIKE TIME TRAVEL, ALRIGHT?!” I raged at the starry afternoon sky. “Shit like that.”

“...and what did she tell you about time travel, hmm?”

“She...” I almost looked back towards her, fortunately remembering the corpse *he* had summoned.

“... she told me... it was ‘unnatural’ to stop the dead from dying, and I shouldn’t ever even *think*

about it, or the Princesses will banish my soul to Tartaros.”

“Your mother was a brilliant w... mmmmmare, one of the most brilliant minds I’ve ever encountered. However, that did not stop her from using a, heh, ‘magical’ method of time travel in a mostly – and fortunately – harmless attempt to alter an unsssssatisfactory event of her past.”

My face betrayed my completely sarcastic and fake shock. Which Mister Doesn’t-Understand-How-to-Interact-With-Other-Ponies of course interpreted to be sincere.

“Oh, yes, she never told you, did she?”

Oh, for Goddesses’ sake.

*“Your mother stole a certain scroll which instructs how one might alter one’s... ‘time-line’... and **you** stole those documents on the day of the attack on ‘Black Mane West’, and **you** are so generous, **you** are going to give those scrolls to yourrrrr... very... sssspecial somepony...”*

Everything he said was true. The Combine Advisors in my mother’s lab missed that particular artifact when they ripped open her safe. I remembered Gordon charging back in there, searching for the long-gone Elements of Harmony, blessedly ignorant of the Tome’s existence. And I was, in fact, planning on giving it to the only stallion – the only pony, the only *being* – I trusted to do the right thing with them... a stallion I’d probably never even met or seen a single time until less than a week ago, and yet... I felt like I’d known my entire life...

“Now, listen here, my dear...”

Gordon...

“...when you see yourrr very sssspecial sssomepony...”

Gordon...?

“...relay these words...”

*Gordon! It’s Gordon! Celestia Almighty, I’m in **love!***

“...prepare for unforeseen consequences...”

Wait, what? What does that mean?

I was hearing voices... several different voices... extremely loud, mechanical noises... and I was lying on something soft and warm and *alive*... and it smelled like a rotten apple core that somepony had wrapped in moldy hay and dipped in dragon perspirant – and that was putting it delicately.

“What? You can’t come up with some smart-Alyx comeback?” somepony asked, using the name my mother gave me as if it was some kind of insult.

“Hey!”

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“Oh, getting out of Manehattan was a nightmare – then the Combine invaded! Ha!”

Almost all of us giggled like school foals at the terrible joke, and Dr. Gryffindor said something to the effect of ‘hardey har-har’ before voicing one of her many, many, *many, many* reservations.

“I’m not even going to *try* to comprehend why you wanted to transport a *fully grown male alligator* from City 7 to NCD – and on top of that, why Spike actually did it!”

After spending approximately fifteen seconds in the missile silo – about five of which I spent pretty much waving a hoof at the mare I was almost completely convinced I was head-over-cackles in love with, and whom I hadn’t even seen since I left Ponyville, *and* - in fact - could only now confirm to actually be still *alive* – we all decided - and by ‘we all decided’ I mean ‘Dr. Gryffindor insisted and General Dash made us do it - to migrate our little herd of scientific, military and culinary expertise to a location known as a ‘staff room’, where, we were told, there would be pleasant temperatures, comfy seats and privacy suitable for a top-secret, high-level meeting of the greatest minds in Equestria, as well as tea and snacks.

The staff room was as promised, with air-conditioning, an abundance of comfy seats and sofas, along with a big window offering a majestic vista of a suspiciously green, boring, generic hallway, and there was indeed tea, lukewarm and tasting slightly of dust and something else I couldn’t quite identify, that we sipped from of these gorgeous little ceramic teacups – the only pretty things in the room (besides Alyx, of course) – and I could have sworn up and down that I’d seen them before, though I couldn’t quite put my nose on where.

The snacks, however, were lies; lies told to lure us into a boring and aesthetically displeasing

trap.

I was hoping to sit in the loveseat, snuggled up next to Alyx, but it was quickly occupied by the behind of Dr. Pie. Dr. Gryffindor, dressed in a - I am told, *traditional*, though you could've fooled me - robin's-egg-blue suit, rested on her lioness laurels on a pea-green sofa, alone, Rainbow Dash and I were both comfortably seated on small, cushy ottomans, and Spike was chewing on his right wing – for some reason – atop a padlocked chain-link 'cage' in one corner that boxed-in some filing cabinets and other random office furniture. Judging from the way the thing teetered and swayed with every little movement the purple dragon made, I fully expected it to collapse at any moment.

I was busy making faces at Alyx – who, in turn, was making eyes at me – and entertaining impure thoughts of hugging her sexually when General Dash suddenly began shouting in an outdoor voice.

“*ALRIGHT!* Enough chit-chat! This war council is now in session!” the General barked at our slightly frightened tea party that had run out of tea.

“Sasha! Bring up the tactical map!”

A little space-suited alien began keying in commands into a complex control console on the far side of the cramped room, and above her (I think it was a her), a blurry, outdated, crudely drawn, low-resolution, mislabeled, black-and-white map of a foreign country that I'd never heard of called 'Equesteia' appeared on a huge bank of monitors stretching almost from the floor to the ceiling.

Of course, I wasn't paying very much attention, for I was far too distracted by the feeling of fine vinyl scratching at my totally naked behind. Oh, yes, dear reader, I was *un-Hazard-Suited* for the first time since I went swimming in the Ponyville river with Alyx – which, despite all of the negative things that happened immediately afterward, remained an extremely pleasant memory - for the generous Dr. Pie had enthusiastically agreed to repair my horrifically abused HEV suit on the condition that I ceased use of it while she did so.

I made every effort to suck in my gut, puff out my chest, and flex my muscles as much as I could while in naked view of Alyx so the mare could appreciate how physically attractive or unattractive I was, and correspondingly increase her love for, and/or repulsion towards, me.

After I, and most everypony else, daydreamed through General Dash's explanation of what the map was, what maps are used for, how symbols on a map denote locations in the real world, etc, Dr. Gryffindor took the floor. And by that, I mean she began addressing our eagerly-attentive group.

“First thing’s first: As of four days ago, the Equestrian Resistance’s primary... offensive... scenario...?” she glanced over at Dash, who nodded her head in response, “was to construct teleportation devices that would enable us to place an improvised explosive device or death squad directly inside the Citadel, preferably in *Doctor Breen’s* personal office or living quarters.”

I was just about to spontaneously combust under the glare she was giving me, when Alyx loudly objected to the toffee-brown griffon’s insinuation.

“Our primary ‘offensive scenario,’ Doctor Gryffindor – and by the way, I think the word you’re looking for is ‘objective’ – was to seek out and find a new Spirit of Honesty to replace Applejack so the Elements of Harmony could be used!”

Gilda rolled her eyes and grunted before Alyx interrupted her once again.

“And then, after Ponyville, we added the Spirit of Generosity to the list! Right?”

Alyx was interrupted by a muffled voice coming from another room adjacent to ours.

“BECAUSE YOU THOUGHT THEY COULD KILL ME AHAHAHAHAHAHAHHAH!!”

I’m pretty sure everypony in the room jumped when they heard the jolly laughter of that absolutely insane mare come screaming out of the walls and into our collective subconscious.

“Sasha,” Rainbow Dash calmly stated the single word as she stole a glance down at her sidearm, her normally stoic face becoming a portrait of worry.

“I resume my place of honor at the side of The Rarity, tamer of the undead hordes of Ponyville.”

Tail wagging, the cerberus named ‘Sasha’ went willingly over to a door hidden around a corner and the sound of the clinking of dishes and things of that nature could briefly be heard. With my mind frozen in terror at the sudden revelation that Alyx and Spike’s recruitment mission had been a resounding success, my eyes randomly fixated on Gilda’s scowling avian features as they formed an even bigger scowl than they normally did, and I am guessing she was thinking something like,

It should be ‘at the side of the Gryffindor.’

My mind unfroze, and I quickly took advantage of the communicatory chaos all around me to interrupt with something I’d been wondering since the moment I first arrived.

“Uhm, yes, General Dash, ma’am – uh, sir, uhm...” I began with my typical eloquence.

She turned to wearily regard me while Dr. Gryffindor continued shooting laser beams out of her eyes in the direction of the tiny kitchenette *The Rarity* was in.

I cleared my throat a second time, and asked, “Theeeeeuh – Dispersion Field and, uh, Invis Hex...” I tried to sound cool by using abbreviations. “Those were *not* at Black Mane West, uh... well...”

General Dash facehoofed – a common reaction to the probing of an ignorant, curious nerd. Also the reaction of the scientific community to Pinkie Pie’s keynote at the 1st Summit on Precognition.

“Okay, doc, Shining Armor’s shield spell requires Shining Armor. Twi was able to do something similar on a smaller scale, but that’s conspicuous as all the blazing fires of Upper Hell, and the invis hex we’ve got – and I don’t know how many different kinds there are – but the one we’ve got requires resources we don’t...”

She looked me in the eyes, suddenly infuriated with me.

“*Look, Doc,*” she said, sounding like somepony who was under an extreme amount of stress and irritation, and was ready to snap at any moment. “***Don’t worry about it.***”

Shortly after not worrying about it, I made a face at Alyx like, ‘get a load of this mare,’ and the look she gave me in response said something like, ‘It’s not your fault, you didn’t know, but what you’re doing right now is incredibly immature and I am very disappointed in you.’

Something like that.

“AHEM. Well. Where were we?” asked Dr. Gryffindor, who then answered her own question, which is one of those things I just can’t *stand*.

“Ah yes, the objective of the Resistance. Well-” Gilda, who had stood up and begun strutting back and forth in front of the giant, flickering map of *Equestria*, gestured a talon towards Alyx.

“-*Besides* the Elements of Harmony-”

Alyx glared at her, and I breathed an inward sigh of relief that the heat had been taken off me.

“The objective of the Resistance was to use our teleporters at Black Mane East and Black Mane West to bypass the Enemy’s defenses and strike them from within – *until*, well...”

The griffon turned up her beak, doing a sort of ‘thinking jig’ as she paced in a figure eight.

“Three days ago, all that planning and preparation and hard work was blown all to hell by the sudden and unexpected arrival of a former member of the Black Mane science team in City 7.”

She paused in her little patrol to regard me with a shocking look of something approaching *pity*.

“I know you don’t remember anything, Gordon, and I’m not blaming you for anything that’s happened since your... *episode*, or whatever you want to call it...” She raised a golden talon to scratch at her feathered neck. “It’s quite obvious you are being used as a pawn in some scheme – that perhaps we all are...”

Dr. Gryffindor trailed off, lost in thought, her neck craned toward the ceiling.

The analogy came to me almost immediately. “Like players in a game.”

“Like Dungeons and Diamond Dogs!” Dr. Pie very suddenly and unnecessarily loudly agreed, and if I’d been wearing anything, I am almost positive I would have been scared out of it.

“Oh! Except we don’t know who the Dungeon Mare is,” she added, reflecting upon the rule set of the infamous game historically associated with that loathsome but fluid minority, ‘the uncool’.

“You mean the Game Master,” Gilda further corrected her, betraying the fact that she played *Triple-D*. “A Dungeon Mare is... something *completely* different,” she said with a... blush?

Why in the world would Dr. Gryffindor be blushing over an impenetrably complex and indescribably boring tabletop role-playing-game which, from all that I could tell whenever I saw it being played at MIT, involved neither role-playing nor dungeons, and certainly no Diamond Dogs!

Actually, I don’t think I thought every single word of that, but I’m not removing it.

It wasn’t exactly an unforeseeable event, but Dr. Pie’s response made us all feel... strange.

“Oooohhh, I think the way *you guys* play ‘Dungeons & Diamond Dogs’ is a liiiiittle different from the *official way*,” Pinkie said with a provocative smirk and a flutter of her eyelashes.

Dr. Gryffindor looked terrified, her white feathers dampening with sweat. General Dash just looked perplexed, with her eyebrows furrowed like she was trying exceptionally hard to either remember or not remember something. I did not dwell on the mystery for long, however, as my

eyes were drawn to Pinkie's like worker-changelings to the intoxicating pheromonal stench emitted by their Queen.

It's just... I don't know, the way she says it, just watching her face and her body language, and those big, bright, bedazzling, incredibly expressive eyes of hers... I figured she was probably popular with foals, even though the youngest couldn't be more than eight years old because of that 'reproduction suppression field', whatever the hell that was.

And speaking of reproduction... there was something about being good with foals that I just found so inexplicably sexy.

I know, I know, you should buck yourself for thinking that way about one of your fellow coworkers-slash-insurgents that way, Gordon – especially somepony in her sixties – but...

"Doctor Freemane!" barked somepony who was neither a dog nor a cerberus.

"WAH!" I replied to Dr. Gryffindor.

"I said, do you have any idea who or what might have had the motivation to send you here?"

"No," I responded, and the griffon used her eagle's eyes to give me a Gilda Stare.

While she tested the authenticity of my statement by boring a pair of holes into my soul with those damned yellow orbs, I thought,

What? It's true. I have absolutely no idea who I'm working for.

"Humph. Or, I could be wrong." She looked over at our pink confectionologist, who was playing with Alyx's mane. "A possibility we never overlook, eh, Pinkie?"

Oh no. You know not what you do.

"Yup, that's right, Gilda! Let's see... you were wrong about the possibility of a Resonance Cascade happening at Black Mane, you were wrong about the stability of the Electron Catalyst Destabilizer, you were wrong about the killing of that unarmed prisoner at Lunatanamo- that's the moon base for anypony who's wondering-"

"Pinkie," General Dash pleaded, trying to prevent our meeting from straying off-topic while Gilda loudly ground her beak, but otherwise seethed in silence.

“-and you said it was an execution but the security camera footage clearly showed the griffon attacking the guard without provocation-”

Rainbow Dash looked first to me for support – I responded only by shaking my head – then to Gilda, who now had her beak buried in her left wing in a very bird-like manner, and finally to Alyx.

She nodded in understanding, and as Dr. Pie leaned over to resume braiding her mane, her flat and probably cavity-filled teeth snapped shut on air, and those big, bright eyes widened as they locked- on to a new target. Alyx, who was about to give the pink pony a polite tap on the shoulder, was thwacked in two separate places by a pink foreleg, shooting up to point at something across the room, and out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed a bored, half-asleep Spike suddenly snap to attention, sensing a threat to his charge.

“And you!” she gasped in sudden realization, her hoof pointing at the general.

“I know it happened a *rea//llllllly* long time ago, but do you remember when Gilda blamed *me* for all of your pranks that she fell for at my ‘Welcome to Ponyville, Gilda!’ party?”

She simply stared at the grey-maned Rainbow, waiting for an answer, and she gave in.

“Yes,” she sighed.

The extremely uncomfortable silence that followed drew the griffon out of her wing like a tortoise poking its head out of its shell. However, the moment she opened her beak to talk was about the moment the good General Dash chose to shove her off to the side, probably hurting Dr. Gryffindor’s feelings and at least one of her floating ribs.

If there were ever any feelings between those two, they sure are gone, I noted to myself, making sure to think especially loudly so I could be heard over all the other voices.

“ALRIGHT! FILLIES AND GENTLECOLTS AND GRIFFONS AND SPIKE!” the airborne pegasus shouted at us in a scratchy, high-pitched voice that I found at once adorable and terrifying.

Hovering abreast the flickering bank of monitors, she produced a long yellow stick pinched between the cackle and hoof of her foreleg, and whacked it against the glass surface behind her.

“What you are looking at-”

-is a poorly drawn-

“-is a problem.”

-of artistic license.

Demonstrating her clear possession of psychic powers – the only possible explanation, as I hadn’t been thinking very loudly – Rainbow Dash glared at me with the discountenance of a thousand teachers in a thousand classrooms filled with paper aircraft and spitballs.

“Are you paying attention, Gordon?”

“YES,” I lied.

Deciding to have faith that she’d grasped my immeasurably limited attention span, she continued,

“...and that rocket-”

“-missile-” Gilda interjected.

“-*whatever*- is the Resistance’s weapon of last resort; our terminal contingency; the only backup plan we’ve got after all our other backup plans have failed-” she turned her head to give me yet another sore look, “-which, they have. All the good ones, anyway.”

I must have looked lost and confused, as the General let out a heavy sigh.

“Okay, for the pokeyponies among us...” she said, obviously referring to *me*.

I was about to loudly object – I wasn’t *slow*, I was uninformed – but Rainbow steamed on ahead.

“Here’s the situation, Gordon;” she began, steadily flapping her stubby wings to maintain her meter or so of altitude, “Three days ago, the Equestrian Resistance had three major bases of operation, three scientists who, between them, had the knowledge to construct two complete, long-distance, non-magical teleporters – that, for all we can tell, actually *worked* – and *I* had just busted Shining Armor all the way down to private for insubordination.”

That last thing drew a litany of gasps and guffaws and I think a squawk from Dr. Gryffindor.

“What’d he do?” came the deep voice of Spike, who’d been so quiet throughout the entire meeting, I’d forgotten he was even there.

She shrugged. Still hovering with her forelegs crossed, she clarified, “Oh, we were talking about

what we'd do if the teleportation test didn't work, and I brought up 'island hopping', and – of course – that set him off, aaaaaaand... he threatened to kill me if I even considered such a thing, yadda yadda. Anyway, he should be pulling weeds along the perimeter fence.”

I jabbed my naked hoof into the air like I had a question for the teacher. “Ah, yes, uhm – what is 'shining armor', and who is 'Island Hopping'?”

Not noticing my object-pony confusion, she began her lengthy reply. “Twilight is- well, was...”

Oh, Celestiadamn! I felt those eyes on me again. Everypony's eyes. Alyx's eyes.

I caught the caramel-colored mare's gaze briefly, but powerfully. I looked into her face and saw her mother's eyes staring back out at me, and Her Majesty's witness, I was more terrified by that sight than I was by the restless spirits of the dead that haunted me in *Dithering*.

Just because I don't blame myself for her death doesn't mean that everypony else doesn't.

And that's the thing about believing something nopony else does. At some point, you begin to wonder if maybe they're right.

“Sorry, I'm sorry,” the General apologized to the group, mostly to Alyx.

“Anyway, so-” She put her forelegs behind her back as she spoke, a gesture I am jealous of.

“...let me put it this way; we *had* the ability to teleport behind enemy lines, it's just that... *her* teleportation spell, her 'blink' had a limited range – I think when she was young she could 'blink' herself and a few others around a kilometer, max, and as she got older, it faded to around half a click. Problem is, if we wanted her to teleport to, say, The Citadel-” she clopped her hooves together, and the image on-screen snapped to an overlay of Manehattan with a big, red circle that cut off about a quarter of the northern end of the island and extended out into the ocean.

“-the Citadel Exclusion Zone forms a perfect circle around it with a radius of 2.15 kilometers.”

The pegasus turned to face away from our group, and the warm, stuffy staff room made me have a strange fantasy about standing under her wings and feeling the light breeze as they flapped.

“Well, one of the scenarios we developed would've involved something we dubbed 'island-hopping', in which *she*, starting inside neutral territory, would teleport her maximum distance towards an objective – in this case, the Citadel – and then, the moment she reappeared, immediately teleport again, gradually working herself towards the target. Due to the distance

limit, even if she were to send somepony else in her stead, she could only send them half a kilometer. There's no getting around her having to go along for the ride. And of course, 'going along for the ride' would entail Twi-" she caught herself, "-sending our lead scientist and organizational head into Combine territory, materializing in an unknown, unsurveyed area deep behind enemy lines..."

She spun around to face us again, her eyes halfway shut. "...repeatedly."

Rainbow clopped her hooves together, which caused a blurry, dated picture of a familiar-looking bluish skyscraper to pop up on the bank of screens. She huffed, and clopped again and again, scrolling through several colorful and complicated diagrams of the same tower, a roster with names, pictures, and statistics, a couple pictures of the missile sitting peacefully in the silo behind us, and finally a picture of a white male unicorn with blue and white striped hair and a cutie mark of a shield. After awhile, she let out a frustrated grunt and gave up with the clopping.

"Anyway, after a particularly bloody computer-aided simulation, we decided to abandon the idea entirely. And by that, I mean Shining threatened my life multiple times and in multiple ways if I allowed her to go through with it." With her hoof pointed back at the screens for some reason, she smiled her cute, radiant smile and reflected, "Ah, that would be the first time I demoted him."

She glanced back at the monitor bank, mumbled something at Dr. Gryffindor, and continued,

"So, these facts are what necessitated the need for the teleporters; they have infinite range-

Both I and Dr. Gryffindor – who had flipped the image back to the embarrassingly bad cartoonists' interpretation of Equestria – tried to interrupt her with our *science*, but she *shushed* us with the authority of somepony who has hundreds of armed soldiers waiting at her beck and call.

"For our purposes, the teleporters have unlimited range – that is, *had*."

Oh boy, here we go.

I felt it like the pressure change before a thunderstorm on the Great Galloping Plains.

"We don't anymore. To be brutally honest: we have no teleporters, we have *one* major base, and we have lost the leader of the Resistance and the greatest mind of our time, and in exchange, gained Doctor Freemane – about whom the only thing I can really say is I don't know how the *hell* you are still alive, nor do I know why the *hell* Doctor Breen is so interested in you being dead."

I was just about to volunteer that I had personally killed a couple of dozen Combine *transequines*,

but she'd thought of that already.

"I mean, yeah, you got really, *really* lucky back in City 7, got your hooves bloody, sure. But hell, Freemane, any one of us in this room besides Pinkie Pie have 'deserved' more Breen than that, and the most we ever got in return was them making me an 'Anticitizen'... I think two or three...? Eh, I don't remember. Anyway, the point is, why in the cinnamon-flavored-"

She took her eyes off of me for a second, glancing at Alyx and Spike, then continued,

"-*Darn* is Breen so obsessed with you, Freemane? What did you *do* to step on his horseshoes?"

All eyes turned to stare at me, including two that I would happily kill Rainbow Dash to have just a few moments alone with.

"I interrupted him in his office once, quite recently. Heh." I choked out the words, trying not to seize up like I usually do when I'm speaking to a crowd.

"Yeah, yeah, I heard about that," she responded. "That's not a good enough reason."

"Uh..." *Well, shit. Why would the Administrator have it in for me, specifically?*

"Perhaps he perceived that I was 'giving him the cold shoulder' at Black Mane when I passed him by in the hall and didn't say 'hi'? *I don't galumphing know!*" I said, my voice suddenly raised.

General Dash let the issue lie for the moment. "Whatever, I don't care. It's not relevant."

"What matters now-" I had the gall to interrupt about something that was starting to bother me:

Dr. Pie's laboratory, Black Mane East, was raided by the *Overwatch* – the military branch of the Combine – literally the *day* I left City 7. Pinkie, who thankfully escaped unharmed, had spent the intervening time getting settled in here at New Cloudsdale. But I'd never been told the ultimate fate of Black Mane West and its teleporter.

"Wait, wait, go back a little bit - you said we have *zero* teleporters left? Do we know what happened to the one at Black Mane West? Did the Combine destroy it?"

"I'll answer that," volunteered Spike, and I rotated my *ottoman* to face the fire-breathing monster.

"BMW is gone," he began, his voice and his face grim. "The Combine have... basically carted it up and shipped it off, or boxed it up and carted it off, whatever that fu- *freaking* saying is... all of

that shi- all of that stuff is off somewhere in some Combine hel- sorry, heck-hole, somewhere off in Celestia-know-where. Along with the Elements of Harmony. So, yeah.”

“Right,” the General agreed. “It’s been compromised, which leads me to-”

“Wait!” I again interrupted, which caused her to glare at me, and also caused a certain griffon to let out a – quickly rebuked – snicker.

“Spike, what *happened* at Black Mane West? Did anypony survive?”

Oh my Goddesses I hope they didn't kill every single pony there just because they were looking for me. Wait, what the hell is wrong with me? I don't feel responsible for Twilight's death, and yet I do feel responsible for everypony else's death? Even though they were killed in the same place, at the same time, by the same enemy?

I thought about that for a while. *Yeah, basically. Wow, that's kind of weird. I wonder if there's something wrong with my brain. I have been inhaling a lot of toxic chemicals lately.*

Spike let out an excruciatingly long sigh, then took a deep breath.

“Well, I was able to make myself enough of a pain in the Combine’s *backside* that a modest number of survivors made it out of the compound. However...”

Spike’s face turned grim, his eyes frozen to the floor. “...however, the nearest friendly territory was *here*, and... well, I couldn’t very well carry them all on my back...”

Alyx startled us all by jumping out of her seat to go to her companion’s side, laying a hoof on him as if protecting him from the wrath of our judgment.

“It was the middle of the night, and they had to trot through the Everfree Forest. *Of course* some of them got lost. Spike did everything he could, short of burning the Forest to the ground.”

Dear GODDESSES I wish you had.

Alyx’s words were short, terse and defensive. A couple of the other faces in the room looked just as shocked as I felt. The next words she spoke were mostly directed toward me.

“Based on survivor’s accounts and Zecora’s reports of timberwolf activity... we called off the search parties... after... after twenty *fourrrr...*” It seemed like Alyx was summoning all of her willpower just to keep from galloping out of the room.

“-but... but a lot of them... did... make it here...” she finished, forcing herself to give a little smile while her beautiful brown eyes twinkled like a lake beneath a setting sun.

Luna and Celestia. Those poor bastards had to hike through the Goddesses-forsaken, hell-embalmed, accursed, haunted, evil, vile, life-scorning Everfree freaking Forest at NIGHT.

I couldn't even imagine what unseen horrors were kept at bay by Celestia's Glory while I wandered, lost, in that wormwood labyrinth. I could scarcely imagine what horrors of flesh and hate and pain emerged from the Forest's woodwork after the burning sun no longer dampened its evil spirits.

“Luna, Alyx, I had no idea. Spike...” I leaned forward on my ottoman so far I nearly tipped the thing over, but I refrained from going to lay a hoof on him, keen not to wound the proud creature further.

There were so many things I wanted to say to the poor guy. Most of them started with requests for clarification regarding the feasibility of burning down the Everfree Forest, and whether doing so would, in all actuality, send it back to hell. Several of them had to do with why in the dark fires of night-hell did he send *me* tromping through it all alone with little direction, like it *ISN'T* plentifully evil, dangerous, unpredictable and – oh, did I mention *HAUNTED BY HICK GHOSTS* – during the day.

But mostly?

Mostly... I just wanted to tell him it wasn't his fault those ponies got lost and were probably dead.

I wanted to tell him that he was just doing his job... and that he did his job beyond well.

“Anyway. Everypony.”

As we all looked toward General Rainbow Dash, I felt an indescribable conviction that I wouldn't let another Black Mane West happen. I wouldn't allow any more ponies to die... because...

...because of...

...*me. Because of me.*

It was as clear to me now as a bright, cold day in Neighvember. I wasn't responsible for what happened at Black Mane West, but I was still the *cause*. The Combine came there looking for

me. Not Twilight, not Alyx, not Spike, not the Elements of Harmony, not the teleporter, not the other Resistance members. They were there because Walrus Octavian Breen wanted a knife in my gut.

Oh my Goddesses.

Sitting there, ignoring every single word Rainbow Dash said, I suddenly realized why Dr. Breen was having me hunted with such urgency, with such passion, why he had made me Anticitizen One instead of somepony who'd done much more damage to him and his order than I.

Because he knows.

He knows who I am.

He knows who I work for.

And he knows that I am here to kill him.

"... which naturally leads me to my next point – *Freemane!*" I snapped out of my stupor. Her voice was quite sharp, I can see why she made such a natural leader. "There are no teleporters left in the magical land of Equestria – *except-*"

"Except?" asked Dr. Pie.

"Except?" asked Alyx.

Sensing a trend, Spike half-heartedly added, "Except?"

"Except?" I asked, and I watched as Dr. Gryffindor rolled her eyes and repeated my question, thus completing the chain. The completion of interrogative chains such as this is inexpressibly pertinent to the nature of universal causality in ways that are so impossible to describe, the fact that I am even mentioning them at all is almost sufficient grounds, in an of itself, to have me committed.

"Except the one in the Royal Palace in Canterlot... what's left of it, anyway..."

The screen popped to show what appeared to be partially the same old Royal Palace that I and generations of ponies have known as the official residence of the Princesses, and partially what appeared to be garish, imposing hulks and columns of bluish metal with transparent tubes woven between them at intervals. It was like the 'building' equivalent of a trans-pony; the familiar and

natural awkwardly fused with the unfamiliar and alien, although the Palace itself seemed to be mostly intact – most of the Combine construction was confined to a massive annex off to one side that looked like it was designed to be... *picked up and moved*... and the idea that the Combine even possessed the means to perform such a Her-Cute-Lillian feat gave me cockatrice bumps.

“...and the other teleporter, according to our intelligence, is *here*–”

The screen changed once again to show what looked like a live video feed of that massive, blue tower in City 7 whose name I was almost positive was ‘The Citadel’, but I was afraid of being made fun of and called names if I asked in order to verify that I was correct.

“-in the Citadel. Specifically, at the very tippety-top, within trotting distance of Breen’s office.”

She inhaled deeply and loudly declared, “Fillies and gentlecolts, *that* is our new objective.”

I knocked over my ottoman when I got to all fours, and my hooves made an unintentionally loud *clop* when they smacked against the tiled floor.

“Whoah, whoah, whoah, wait, *what?!*” I exclaimed – again, probably louder than I meant to.

“What’s the problem, Doctor Freemane?” the four-star General asked in an unamused tone, like she was talking to a foal who had interrupted the adults’ conversation.

I jabbed my hoof at the screen to illustrate. “*That’s* what you call that... that thing in City 7? That’s the Citadel? That giant... monolithic... alien skyscraper that extends into the heavens as far as the eye can see, and has parts that move and shift around and spew out alien spacecraft and probes and robots and shit? *That’s* the Citadel?”

She gave me the most loathsome look I have ever been given, and bluntly replied,

“Yes.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I *saw* that giant metal tower, bigger than anything I’d ever seen, than anypony had ever seen, built by forces and using materials and processes incomprehensible to equine science, a truly and totally alien structure that seemed entirely out of place amongst the Manehattan skyscrapers surrounding it – the ones that it hadn’t destroyed.

“Is there a *problem*, Doctor?” came the General’s agitated voice, cutting through my thoughts, my physicist’s brain suddenly an electrical storm of calculations and chaos.

I regarded her with an academic intensity that, as I have said before, I only get when I'm doing science or trying to kill something.

"Rainbow Dash- I can call you Rainbow Dash, right?" If there's ever any doubt, always clarify how your audience wishes to be addressed.

She grimaced at me, then rolled her eyes. "Sure, why the hell not? We're all friends here."

"Okay, Rainbow Dash – I have *been* to the Royal Palace. I have *seen* the inside of the Royal Palace, I have *touched* its *walls*, I have used its *restrooms*."

"Your point?" she interrupted, thankfully preventing me from going into any further detail.

"I know that it's an actual *building* made out of limestone and plaster and gold – *stuff* that we actually *understand*. The Royal Palace is *not* a monolithic xenomorphic haybaling tower from *outer celestiadamned space*."

General Dash snarled, "*You watch your goddesdamned tone when you're talking to me, civilian.*"

I was rather taken aback at that. The only other time I'd ever been addressed as 'civilian' was when it was shouted at me by Royal Marines at Black Mane.

Regaining her composure – and with everypony in the room staring at our two faces, which I just noticed had somehow become uncomfortably close – she asked as professionally as she could,

"And what would you suggest we do?"

I mean, that's what she *asked*, but I don't think she actually cared what the hell I thought.

"Wh- well..." Celestiadamnit I hate being put on the spot like that.

"We should... attack the Palace, wasn't it? That's... why are you laughing?" She was laughing.

"Do you even know what the Royal Palace *is*, Freemane?" She continued to laugh as she said it.

I started to say 'yes' but Alyx's shaking head caught my attention, so I switched my answer to 'no'.

"I'll be blunt," Rainbow said with a smirk. She had me.

“The Royal Palace you grew up with is...” she paused, searching for an appropriate word.

“...gone.”

That didn't sound good.

“You remember Medical Officer Fluttershy?”

What does that have to do with anything?

“The yellow pegasus with the butterfly cutie mark? Yeah.”

“Did you notice she never flies?”

I had indeed, though I didn't think anything of it at the time.

“One day, Civil Protection burst into Fluttershy's home in the middle of the night, and after they bound, gagged, and blindfolded her, they had her put on a razor-train to Canterlot. Once she arrived at the Royal Palace, she was carted off to one of two-dozen 'processing wings' the Combine had prepared – an ironic name, considering what was done there.”

She began to pace; her head drooped, her eyelids half shut, lost in thought and memory.

“There, she was violently strapped down to a metal table, and her wings were painfully stretched out and clipped, down to the bone. She was given no anesthetic and no bandages, and no words were spoken during the procedure. They simply wanted it 'done' as quickly and efficiently as possible.”

The General's breathing grew heavier and more labored the further she got in the story.

“Fluttershy was shipped back to Ponyville and dumped in front of her house. Even though her bindings were removed, she lay there for at least an hour, too scared to move. When she finally opened her eyes, she was startled by how bright it was. All told, she'd been gone for some ten hours, on top of the hour she lay there on the ground, sweating while she shivered.”

Rainbow took a deep breath and stopped pacing.

“During that time, she was given no water, no food, no bathroom breaks, and no explanation.”

I hadn't noticed that I'd stopped breathing some time ago. *This is another one of those important*

things that nopony ever told me. I wonder how many more of these there are.

“Gordon,” came her voice, the most somber I’d yet heard it, and I snapped to attention. “The Royal Palace is a prison, a facility for medical experimentation and ‘processing’, as well as a military base and staging area. It is a place that *almost* every pegasus pony in Equestria has emerged from permanently disabled, and Celestia knows that I and every other faithful pegasus subject would give *anything* to charge in there, free everypony trapped inside, burn the place to the ground and piss on its ashes. But, Gordon, in order to do that, we can’t assault it head-on like the Termineightor. And that is why we are going to attack the Citadel, and use their teleporter to send troops past *alllllllll* their defenses and right into the *heart* of-”

Okay, I had to stop her right there. Her story was moving - indeed, bringing me to the verge of tears - but I’m sorry, I can’t shut off my brain.

“So that’s your plan? That’s it,” I said, exasperated, and the General glared at me like she was imagining all sorts of terribly unfortunate things happening to me in extremely rapid succession.

“Let me repeat this back to you, just to make sure I’m not missing anything-”

I began to pace in a geometrically perfect figure-eight.

“Because of the presence of the teleporters – which, I am assuming, we know how to operate...?” I looked at Alyx while I half-asked the question, and she nodded in the affirmative. “Okay, so after we take one objective, we’ve got the other by the hairs of its chinny-chin-chin, that I understand.”

The General nodded, momentarily staying her anger to hear me out. A good leader listens as much as she talks, I guess, and Rainbow Dash was certainly a good leader. She was incredibly *dense*, but still a good leader.

“You are going to attack the single, biggest, largest, most heavily fortified, most unknown, and most incomprehensible enemy stronghold in Equestria – in existence, in history - a metal tower constructed by *ALIENS FROM OUTER SPACE*... because you feel it is more *vulnerable* than the Royal Palace in Canterlot?”

She glared at me for a few moments, then said, “The Royal Palace is on top of a *mountain*, Doctor.”

“The Citadel is in the middle of a crowded city, *General!*”

“We can get to the Palace *from* the Citadel, Freemane.”

"We can get to the *Citadel* from the *Palace*, Rainbow!"

"I am a four-fucking-star general, and you *will* address me as such, or you *will* be thrown in the brig!"

"But I thought you said we were all friends here, *RAINBOW DASH*."

At that point, I really didn't care what the hell she did to me. I think it's because for the moment, I'd forgotten how naked and unarmed I was. And again with that 'F' word.

"Ooooookay, everypony, why don't we all-" Dr. Pie's plea for calm was shouted down by the General and I's continued exchange of thoughts and ideas.

"Who the *fuck* declared you an expert in the art of *warfare*, Gordon?! You're an analytical physicist, not a military scientist!"

"First of all, that's *theoretical* physicist, and from that perspective, I can tell you that whatever the Combine's buildings are made of, it's unlike any material I've ever seen – it's lighter, stronger, more durable, more flexible, and more non-conductive and non-reactive than any material I've ever seen, except maybe the reactive armor on my Hazard Suit, and you want to *assault* and presumably *infiltrate* a potatomashing skyscraper *covered from top to bottom in it*, a skyscraper that I swear to Celestia, I have seen *move*, and for all we know, isn't even physically *possible* to enter from eweclidean space!"

Rainbow Dash was staring at me, for the first time since our exchange began, not angrily, but genuinely confused. Very, very confused.

As even Dr. Gryffindor behind had a furrowed brow and a golden claw scratching at her beak, I thought, *I've got her*.

"Look," I began, taking a deep breath. "The Royal Palace was made of sticks and stones by equine beings thousands of years ago-"

She huffed and turned away before I finished.

"-not advanced alien beings from extra-dimensional space!" I shouted after her across the meter and a half that separated us like she was galloping away down the street.

"What do you know about headcrabs, Doctor Freemane?"

Oh, for the love of Saint Peter.

“More than I ever want to know,” I informed her with all the conviction of a theoretical physicist who had performed countless - approximately - hours of in-field research on the pudgy neural parasites.

With the blunt end of a crowbar. Often while squealing like a little filly who caught her dress on fire at her *cuteciñera*.

Whatever, it still counted.

“Then you are aware of what insanely effective biological weapons they make when they are rapidly and unexpectedly deployed in vast numbers in a target-rich environment.”

Oh my Goddesses.

“We’re going to do the same thing to the Combine that they did to Ponyville.”

“That’s a really good idea!” I told the General, who was totally oblivious to the irony of the situation.

She looked at me suspiciously, like she was expecting me to immediately retract the statement.

“Yeah... so, we aren’t going to be banging sticks and stones against the Citadel, or whatever that phrase is. We’re going to have a little *cheat* on our side.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay,” she replied.

“Alright,” I said.

“...allllright...?” she replied.

I couldn’t keep it up any longer after that. Again, I cannot shut off my brain. The damned thing just keeps whirring and cantankering and colombulating all the time, like *patapatapatapata*.

“Where is the Citadel?” I asked. Luna, I must have sounded like a blathering idiot.

“Excuse me?” asked Rainbow Dash, who was about to move on to the next item on the agenda.

“Where is the Citadel?” I repeated. She stared at me for several moments, blinking in disbelief at how apparently deficient in mental faculty I must have been to ask so very stupid a question.

“Uh... City 7? Last time I checked...?” she replied, sounding like she didn’t know whether to laugh or to buck me in the face. She’d get the opportunity to do both.

“Okay,” I acknowledged, satisfied with her answer. “What is City 7?”

Now she regarded me *very* strangely when I asked that, so strangely, in fact, that a griffon had to answer for her, coughing first – perhaps to ask permission or clear her throat, or maybe both.

“Haven’t you heard? It’s *‘One of our finest remaining urban centers.’* That’s the party line, anyway,” Dr. Gryffindor dryly snorted, followed by a cough and a wheeze.

I almost completely ignored her. “An ‘urban center’, you said? A fairly major one?” Though I nodded in Gilda’s direction, it was obvious who my question was directed at.

“Yes, that is correct.” She sounded increasingly suspicious with each passing moment, like I was the enemy, leading her platoon into an ambush.

“Okay. So...” I took a breath, taking a moment to gather my thoughts. “You’re planning to launch an INBM filled with headcrabs into the heart and transitory hub of a major population center that is home to, let’s say, 1,000,000 stallions, mares, and foals – although the foals can’t be younger than 8 years old because of that ‘reproduction suppression field’, whatever the hell that is.”

Every eye in the room was on me, nopony’s chest was moving, and because just then, the air conditioner clicked off like it, too, was holding its breath, I could hear the sound of my heart beating, so acutely, so clearly, I could scarcely believe I couldn’t hear it all the time.

“Could you please explain to me how you are any different from the Combine?”

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I have never hugged another pony sexually before. I have hugged other ponies in innocent, non-sexual ways, sure, plenty of times. I’ve even been hugged on more than one occasion – and

yes, by mares other than my mom. *Pretty* mares, I'll have you know. But never, ever, even close to the point that it would be considered a 'special hug', you know? Not that I or anypony else really fully understands who or what determines what does and does not constitute a 'special hug'.

"OW, Celestiadamnit!"

But I swear, sitting with Alyx by the bank of the little creek that runs past the bottom of the cliff-face containing BBBFF's launch tube, her holding a bag of ice to my right eye, which was slightly puffy and tender because General Dash bucked me really, really hard in it... I swear on the Book of Souls – an object of eternal death and damnation that shall never be spoken of again – I was closer right then to being sexually hugged than I'd ever been in my entire life. And it would have been with *Alyx*.

Ohhhhhh, I'm supposed to wait until marriage I'm supposed to wait until marriage I'm supposed to wait until marriage but she smeeellllllsssss soooooooo goooooood and her eyes are telling me yes...

"Gordon?" she asked, fluttering her eyelashes at me and biting her lip.

She was biting her lip. Think about that. Picture that in your head for a moment – you're by the bank of the creek, near sunset, the clouds are parting, the unnatural golden rays are making the water sparkle, the damned, evil, haunted Everfree Forest is pretending not to be evil and haunted and damned for a few minutes out of respect for the moment, and Alyx Sparkle is looking at you with her eyes full of cuddling and her muzzle scrunched and ready for nuzzling.

I don't care if you're male, female, gay, straight, you should be aroused right now. And if you aren't, there's something wrong with you, and I'll bet I'm not the first pony to tell you that.

Seriously, have you ever considered getting some help? We're all a little worried about you.

Sorry, I enjoy lingering on this memory for as long as possible – but anyway, here comes the funny part, depending on your definition of 'funny'. The part that makes me hate the G-pony more than anything, *hate* him with an intense, burning passion.

"*Gordon...*" she said again, her voice flat and trance-like.

"Yeah, Alyx?" I asked, the dilation of her pupils causing some slight worry to accent my speech.

"...prepare for unforeseen consequences..."

I remember falling over, I remember glimpsing a flash of bright yellow-orange from the setting sun – however, I do not remember the actual moment I impacted the ground.

You see, I'd heard that exact phrase before, and I'd heard it from somepony with those exact same eyes and those exact same lips... only she'd said it in a very, very different way, and under very, very different circumstances.

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Sobbing. The first thing I heard when the elevator doors torturously squealed open was somepony bawling their eyes out, and with the way Dr. Sparkle immediately got in my face and basically started yelling at me, I began to wonder if she was a contributing factor, if not the direct cause.

“Gordon! Thank Celestia you're 100% completely unhurt!”

“I'm-”

“You are 100% completely unhurt, and the Resonance-Cascade-like event you just experienced was purely the result of design-flaws in the equipment provided to Black Mane by its OEMs, *do you understand, Gordon?! Nod your head if you understand!*”

Twilight's worry-stricken face floated up and down as I nodded my head in accordance with her somewhat threatening instructions. Being new, I considered the frighteningly real possibility that memorization of this information was an actual procedure that all employees were required to follow in the event of things like Reignaissance Cavalcades and explosions happening.

As Dr. Sparkle moved away from my face, I located the source of the crying, and a little piece of happiness inside me died and never grew back.

“I... I- I t-too-hooold them... mah... my tail was tw... was tw... *TWITCHINGahhaaaahhhhhh...*”

Dr. Pie was curled up beside a large computer bank in a corner of the modest, almost blindingly white room, and pooled around her hooves was a substantial puddle of her own tears – so substantial, in fact, I feared for her hydration.

I noticed Dr. Sparkle was looking at the same thing I was, and she shook her head at me like she

was saying *'all we can do is just wait it out.'*

"Listen to me, Gordon," she said with undiminished urgency, and she jumped up and planted her forehooves on my chest, causing blood to flow into my cheeks because I think she's really hot.

"Has anypony ever told you, or said anything to you about... *'unforeseen consequences?'* Or does that sound familiar to you at all?"

I wasn't going to lie, not that lying is something I often do, or anything, but I wasn't going to say that I *had* heard of 'unforeseen consequences' just to humor her.

"Uhh, no."

"Okay, because... never mind. Well... okay, have you seen this... okay, no, no, never mind. But-"

It seemed to me that either Twilight was thinking faster than she could talk, or talking faster than she could think.

"Okay, Gordon – do you have any idea... what that could *mean? 'Unforeseen consequences?'*"

I was about to once again tell her that I didn't, but Dr. Pie chose that precise moment to cease her wailing and begin talking, which – I've said before – is something she is painfully good at.

"Goooooordon GordonGordonGordonGordonGordon, paaaaaaaaaaaaaging Doctor Freemane, Doctor Freemane, report to the Principle's office immediately-"

I was absolutely confused as to why in the hell she was doing that, but the Pink One's odd behavior didn't seem to phase Twilight, who rolled her eyes and sighed before turning back towards me, her face grim.

"Gordon, if you feel you're up to it – I mean, seeing as you're the one with the Hazard Suit – we'd *really* appreciate it if you went on ahead and got help. I don't know where Doctor Gryffindor is, all our phones are out, and the control room... Gordon, when you get to the control room, just hold your breath, stare straight ahead, and don't stop for *any reason* until you're through."

All the while Twilight was giving me crash-hazard-courses, Pinkie continued her inane rambling, something about the similarity of the words 'principle' and 'principal'. I tried my best to tune it out.

"Right, go and get help, I'll be back!"

“Noooooope nopenopenopenope, GordonGordon, we need you to *go help*, Gordon, not *get help*, weeeeeeee neeeeeeed you to go *HELP* somepony!”

We both regarded the pink riddle-wrapped-in-a-mystery-inside-an-enigma a bit stranger than usual.

“Just ignore her, Gordon. Go on, we’ll be fine,” she said with a comforting smile, and I didn’t doubt her for a second. Don’t let the fact that these are two old mares fool you; between Twilight’s envious teleportation abilities, legendary telekinesis and potent defensive spells, and Dr. Pie’s incomprehensible ability to predict seemingly any sort of impending calamity, I could easily envision them handling any unsafe situations they may face while I was gone.

“Gordon!”

That reminded me of this thing they showed me one boring day at work. They’ve got this little two-pony ‘act’ where Dr. Sparkle closes her eyes and sort of... withdraws from reality into this *trance-like* state that enables her to focus all of her will, all of her energy, her whole *being* on her magic, and while she’s like that – get this-

“*Gordon!*”

-they’ve worked it out so that Dr. Pie sort of *picks up* Dr. Sparkle and actually ‘*aims*’ her *like she’s a freaking weapon*, like a Twilight Cannon! And then they’ve got this clever little system of letting her know when to cast a spell while she’s got her eyes closed by having Dr. Pie lift up her tail – *and smack it back down like the trigger of a gun!* Like the trigger of a cuddling gun!

“**GORDON!**”

Together, the two are truly a force to be reckoned with, as Dr. Pie’s ‘Pinkie Sense’ alerts her to incoming targets, and Twilight’s unicorn magic is just... *legendary*, I mean, what they showed me was, they had her blow up a coffee mug, and I mean, the thing was just *gone*, it was *vaporized*, there were no pieces to pick up! And I’ve heard she’s gotten to the point where she can blow through solid rock, melt through metal, she’s really just an incredible...

SMACK!

...and then somepony bucked me in the face.

And the funny thing was, it felt like the second time that had happened to me that day.

I woke up on an operating table.

I have been deeply afraid of being unconscious on operating tables ever since my wisdom teeth were removed as a colt, and I refuse to record the reason why here.

This would explain why I extricated myself from that operating table with enough force to knock it almost completely upside-down, as well as displace a bunch of other really nice, really clean, but nevertheless painfully inadequate medical equipment like plastic tubs full of cotton balls, gauze and tweezers instead of actual surgical tools and bottles full of brightly-colored liquids. Based on my limited medical knowledge, I supposed that what little was here plus some alcohol would be good enough for treating a bullet wound or a burn, maybe. But if you were floated into that Resistance O.R. with any substantial internal injuries, you'd probably be floated back out, laid on the ground with a lollipop, and be told somepony would be praying for you.

"Hiya Gordon!" the enigma from my dreams greeted me.

"Hello, Doctor Pie!" I happily returned her greeting.

"Gordon!" said Alyx, who was also standing there.

"Oh, hey Alyx!" I said to her.

"WHAT THE HOLY MOTHERFUCK IS GOING ON IN THERE?!" crackled Dr. Gryffindor's voice over the PA system, using a word I seemed to have thoroughly internalized while I slept.

"ARE YOU HAVING A FUCKING TEA PARTY WHI-" the good doctor was temporarily cut off by an ear-splittingly loud crack of thunder that, despite the sky being a bit on the cloudy side last time I was conscious, I figured probably wasn't caused by bad weather.

"What the candy-colored marshmallow lemon bars is going on?!" I asked. Just because I now knew what that 'F' word meant didn't mean I had to start using it.

Dr. Pie opened her mouth to answer when the glint from a small metal tube caught her eye, a tiny pinprick of light reflected in an otherwise dimly dark room.

The tiny tube had a blinking, red light on it.

She screamed, her eyes transfixed on the object that was about to kill her.

No.

My dazed and disoriented mind snapped taut, wrapping itself snugly around the invitingly smooth surface of the fragmentation grenade, and hurled it back approximately in the direction it had come from – a dark concrete hallway filled with smoke and glowing eyes.

Dear Princess Celestia, I began my prayerful lamentation to the Sun Goddess.

The frag grenade detonated. Photons and shrapnel bounced off my closed eyelids.

It's happening again. It's happening again, it's happening again.

"Freemane?!" the intercom crackled again as blue fire burned through the newly-created smokescreen in both directions. *"Freemane have you heard a word I've been saying?! Once again; New Cloudsdale is under attack, and General Dash wants you to report to the bunker in the center of the base, which is called, hang on... it's called 'Central Bunker'... straightforward-Hello?! Hello?! Is anypony still alive down there?!"*

I show up, and everypony dies...

They didn't even wait until the next day this time.

"Hostiles down! We're clear!" hollered a stallion who hadn't said that exact phrase since the last time we played *Death-Shot: Changeling Extreme War* together at the Black Mane arcade.

"Barney!" I shouted in surprise and relief.

"WHAT?!" he responded, kind of scaring me and hurting my feelings.

"I was just saying hi, dude."

"SORRY! It's- Th- There are things! There are *things!*"

"It's no problem, Barnes, no problem!" I assured the obviously very jumpy stallion, his charcoal coat and light armor standing out against the grey of the concrete room.

It was then that I noticed my flashlight was on, which would explain why I could see Barney – the makeshift ‘operating room’ we were in wasn’t very bright to begin with, and the smoke, along with the recent series of detonations, had made the lighting situation even more abysmal, with my yellow-white hazard light easily being the brightest thing in the room.

“Everypony, check in!” yelled Barnes, who had gone into full ‘security guard’ mode. The beam of my light reflected a very familiar logo stitched on a patch on his left foreleg – he was actually wearing his old bulletproof security vest from Black Mane, the same shade of blue as his eyes.

“I’m okay!” chirped Pinkie Pie, sneezing with explosive force afterwards.

“Me too!” Alyx sounded off.

“ALYX!” I shouted, causing her to jump practically to the ceiling. In hindsight, yelling out somepony’s name in an outdoor voice in an indoor area moments after a shootout was extremely inappropriate, and I never, ever made that mistake again.

I whipped my head around, my flashlight smartly tracking with my head – a very nice touch – until I was blinding Alyx, then lunged towards her – which was probably extremely frightening from her perspective – and wrapped my front legs around her like I was a zombie trying to eat her face.

“Gordon... I’m... glad you’re...”

“Shhhhh... there’s no need for words... you’re safe, that’s *a//////////* that matters...”

You know, reading that back, it kind of sounds really creepy and weird, but trust me, it wasn’t.

It was *romantic*. Or at least, I *felt* romantic. I mean, I felt very warm and sweaty when I said it, is what I’m trying to say, or I think that’s what I’m trying to say. I don’t know, never mind. And no, I’m not removing that.

Alyx lovingly shoved me away just as Barney came over, looking ready to do the same thing. He’s a good friend.

“Gordon, you better gear up,” he advised.

“Why?”

“I, uh-” He looked over at Dr. Pie for some reason, who was fiddling with an intercom terminal.

"Hello?! Hello?!? Pie, do you hear me?!" It was the disembodied voice of Dr. Gryffindor again.

Dr. Pie's button-fiddling was bringing on some auxiliary lights as yet more cracks of thunder echoed from the concrete tunnel that had been filled with unmistakably Combine figures.

"Yes, Gilda, we hear you, and you can stop shouting," she dryly mouthed into the terminal.

"Operation Gryffin-Gore is officially underway!" the pink pony cheerily announced.

"It's about celestiadamned-" Pinkie jabbed her hoof into the intercom, silencing the excited bird. She suddenly turned to face me, with her eyes twitching as well as slowly dilating – her pupils drifting to opposite sides of her face, re-centering when she blinked, only to slowly drift away again. This, combined with the inadequate lighting casting deep shadows this way and that across her face, was really, really, *really, really* cool-looking.

No, I did not find it frightening in the least; I find the idea that some ponies are *scared* of a smiling, bubbly, happy-go-lucky, poofy-haired, little old pink mare quite comical, actually..

"Heyyyyyyy Gordon!" she said with an enormous grin that went nicely with her dilated eyes.

"Heyyy what?"

"How do you feel about your new suit?"

Shit. It now occurred to me that there was a transparent, yellow-orange crosshair over her face.

"Oh, yeah, it's really- it's *new*?"

"Kinda," she said with a shrug. I rapidly, almost reflexively flitted through my wonderfully familiar inventory screen, noting that I was the proud owner of one crowbar, one Saddle-Mounted Anti-Infantry Rifle (REA Special Issue), two nicely camouflaged military-grade saddlebags – which I could feel weighed down with those bullet-lunchboxes I stole from Slimpickins and friends – well, assisted in stealing... if you can steal from the dead... ugh, I'll have to think about that one for a while – *and what's this?*

I selected the foreign-looking icon, and my HEV suit floated out the outrageously large device.

"You like?" Dr. Pie inquired, her eyes full of fiery visions of science and revolution.

I'd seen rocket launchers before – hell, I'd used one at Black Mane – and this device certainly

resembled one, with a long, fat tube flared out in black composite at both ends. Where it differed radically from my previous experiences was its downright obnoxiously huge aiming mechanism – a metal ‘shield’ attached to the tube about a hoof and a half from the operational end of the device that reminded me of those early, massive tripod-cameras that you had to duck under a curtain to use.

“I’m really not sure I’m properly trained to use a rocket launcher, Doctor Pie.” My experience with the launcher, as well as pretty much all explosives at Black Mane had been... scary.

“Oh-ho-ho!” Dr. Pie... coughed? Laughed? I don’t know what it was that she did, but it made me uncomfortable and I didn’t want her to do it again.

There was another tremendous explosion, and during the perhaps half a blink of an eye that the lights flickered off, the pink pony appeared beside me.

“That’s not a rocket launcher you’ve got there,” she whispered into my ear, the feeling of her hot, sweet-smelling breath against my short, tepid coat making me tingle all over. “That’s SPERMS.”

It was amazing to me that my companions seemed less disturbed by the full-blown *war* going on right over their heads than they were by Dr. Pie being friendly.

Still high off the fumes of her tarty breath, I asked her what a ‘SPERMS’ was.

“Soldier Portable Evasion Resistant Munitions System, Doctor Freemane,” she sang, reciting the acronym like it was the name of a layer cake, and I took the opportunity to feel stupid as I realized that exact information was printed in huge, bold letters along the side of its cylindrical launch tube, clearly standing out against the sky-blue finish – a trademark of the Air Corps.

“Barney!” Dr. Pie suddenly shouted, and I actually did not jump that time, due to the already high volume of various *thumps*, *thuds* and *booms* symptomatic of the two opposing military operations taking place outside of our safe, secure, explosion-resistant sissy hole.

“Are the *Gryffindors* secured?”

“You betcha!” he responded while I physically cringed at his vernacular. “Eighteen LGEMs prepped, secured, and ready for transit – I even pulled off the warning labels!”

Why is he saying that like it’s something to be admired?

“Okay, that is way too many, Barnesy. Drop half your boom here and move out with the Doctor,”

Pinkie commanded, sounding like she had already spent too much time around GIs. Barney, who was breathing heavily under the weight of two bundled three-by-three racks of white tubes almost as long as his body and easily the circumference of his hind legs, unhesitatingly complied with Pie's order, and there were exactly two heavy, metallic clunks as he cautiously retired the bundle on his left side to the concrete floor.

"Doctor Freemane," Pinkie began as I eyed the extraordinarily complex, expensive, and fragile ammunition for my newest weapon. "That is not a weapon in your possession..."

Aw, shit. I thought it was. And now it turns out that it isn't.

"That is a weapon *system*. Don't forget that."

"Yes, it's a weapon that receives firmware updates and must occasionally be rebooted."

She nodded, glad that I understood, and then her face turned an unusual shade of grim.

"Striders are coming to New Cloudsdale, Gordon."

What are coming?

"And, rest assured – according to Gilda – their primary goal will be to destroy the rocket in that silo," she said with a flick of her head towards the empty, wire-strewn pair of tunnels that led further into the depths of the BBBFF.

"And the only way *you* are going to stop them from destroying Gilda's rocket..." she said, pausing - I assume - for dramatic effect. Or maybe she'd simply forgotten what she was going to say next.

"...is with the *Gryffindor Device*."

Ah, that's what that is, I thought as Dr. Pie's eyelids began a fresh fit of twitching, her expression going wall-eyed.

I wonder...

"Uhm, Doctor Pie, ma'am," I began with a shyness that you'd think I'd have overcome by now, considering how many ponies I'd killed up to that point. And that's not counting zombies.

...and that *is* counting the Combine.

"Is that, uh... *thing* you're doing..."

As the meager lights flickered off and on once again and the shadows they cast played across her insane expression, I began to understand why the mare *could* be frightening to some ponies.

"...Is that part of the *Pinkie Sense*?"

"A-yep!" she confirmed, nodding her head madly, her pink mane flipping and flopping up and down as it tried to keep up.

What she said next was of particular concern, however. First of all, it *rhymed*, which was extremely disturbing all on its own. But it was far more unsettling considering the extent to which the grounds of *New Cloudsdale* could, at the moment, be described as a *hazardous environment*.

"Twitch-a-twitching lazy eye means somepony's about to die!"

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By the aching of my hooves...

My targeting-reticule shuddered and quaked in time with the ground beneath my hooves, which really *were* aching due to all of the exercise I'd been getting since I left the safety of the bunker.

...something wicked this way moves.

The spindly, barbed legs of the tripodal monster, the sickly-yellow bug-like carapace, the 'hairs' sticking out of the top, those dead, dark, unblinking, unthinking and unfeeling eyes, whose gaze was as deep and cool and unsympathetic as the intelligences that spawned them – these were familiar to me. Surprisingly, the only visual difference between a live specimen of the things and a dead one – like the one I found in the Forest - was that the former was a great deal more animated.

Beep...beep...beep...beeeeeeeeeeeep!

The preceding was *not* a quote from the works of any playwright - at least not any that I know of - but was the piercingly loud tone emitted by the Command Launch Unit of my SPERMS to – in

theory – let its operator know that its targeting computer had acquired some very dangerous and, in all likelihood, quite scary *thing*, and was prepared to do its best to help render that thing an insignificant threat.

I magically squeezed the firing mechanism on the *weapon system*, and a long, fat tube as big around as my leg was expelled from the device's Launch Tube Assembly with a *POOMF*. Its end was dark, however, its engines unignited – it hadn't been so much as launched, as spat out like a watermelon seed.

I had already turned around to haul pony ass for cover behind a washing machine outside a sandbag -armored barracks – why a washing machine was just sitting there in the grass, unconnected to anything, I never found out – when my already-airborne missile finally decided to actually take off. I had to trust that its tiny, built-by-the-lowest-bidder electronic brain would find its way to its target without any further assistance from us fleshy, watery meat-bags who created it. Sliding behind the washer, I was greeted by Barney, my 'missile-caddie' – I believe the official title was *ammo bearer* – who was taking cover behind an adjacent dryer - again, not connected to anything.

Just as I began to ask him if he was alright, I was interrupted by a stupendous explosion that felt like a blast of frigidly *cold* air instantly followed by a second wave of the kind of extremely *warm* air one would expect to be produced by a massive explosion.

Without hesitating, we both peeked out from behind our respective laundering systems like colts peering through the door to the fillies' locker room.

The Gryffindor Device had done an admirable job. The creature's torso was utterly annihilated, its stories-tall limbs now attached to nothing but a swirling cloud of greyish-white smoke and steam, with jagged chunks of its crab-like body joining with sparks and exotic fluids in a toxic shower that fouled the ground for more than a dozen meters in every direction. It seemed the manner in which these *Gryffindors* destroyed their targets - or perhaps simply the very biochemical nature of the Combine synth's internals - produced quite a gooepy, chunky, explosive mess post-mortem.

Hence 'Operation: Gryffin-Gore'. Haw-haw, I get it.

Unbeknownst to me, directly behind that tripod had been marching another, probably nearly bumping into its companion as it slowed down to maneuver between the two-to-three story high wooden building on its left, and the concrete bunker on its right. Wherever it was, it had been way, way too close to its companion when it personally experienced the intellectual prowess of Doctor Gilda Gryffindor in the field of experimental weapons design.

The detonation of the Gryffindor Device had apparently torn off, or otherwise influenced the separation of one of the synth's two front legs, causing it to lose its balance, tip over, and crash into the wooden building at its side, its remaining legs lifting into the air as its body careened through the attic, both main floors, and all the way down into the basement.

A rather shocked two-pony team of pegasi - who had been camped out on the other half of the now extremely unstable roof - bolted into the air, maneuvered into position, and launched a dumb-fire rocket into its exposed belly just before the building's remaining superstructure yielded to the pull of gravity and caved in on the wailing monster trapped inside.

The wicked thing died with a long, muffled squeal followed by a gurgling grumble that sounded just as robotic and synthesized as the death knell of the Hunter, and every other damned one of these disgusting imitations of life our *Benefactors* sent to New Cloudsdale to help us.

Hiding back behind my functionally-useless washing machine, it occurred to me what the destruction of those Striders meant.

Striders, they called them. Striders.

These were the machines that ended the world, that destroyed my country, that dissolved the 4,000 year empire of the Two Sisters, that killed the immortal dragons guarding Canterlot...

And for the first time ever, we - the Equestrian Resistance - had a weapon that was capable of blowing the fuckers to kingdom come literally as fast as it could be fired. And before I left the bunker, I learned that these missiles were just a prototype - a test bed for a mass-production version of the Gryffindor Device that was already well into development, a version requiring no clunky, complicated launch-device that was basically a 'sticky bomb' that almost anypony could simply toss onto a Strider, and - in case of a fatal malfunction of its detonator - could even blow up simply by shooting it!

I listened as Rainbow Dash resumed barking orders over the megaphones and loudspeakers lining the giant flagpole atop the concrete bunker off to our left. Dr. Pie explained that she was doing so because the communication tower had been '*deep-sixed*' - which I think means 'destroyed' - and, presumably, because the Resistance couldn't afford short-wave trotty-talkies.

"Fourteenth platoon, rendezvous with twenty-second Tactical Air Wing and provide cover for their takeoff... uhhhh, eighth aaaaand... I guess, anypony left in seventeenth, do the same. And by 'do the same', I mean cover the twenty-second, okay, Dreyfus and Drew?!"

And for a moment, just a clear, serene, bright, shining moment, I was truly, genuinely convinced that between the creativity and ingenuity of the former Black Mane science team, the dedication of regular soldiers like Dreyfus and Drew, and the military experience, knowledge and leadership of General Dash – whom I was sure would eventually come around on the whole ‘launching headcrabs into City 7’ issue - the Resistance had a real, fighting chance of overthrowing the Combine and making Equestria safe for our Princesses to return.

It was then that a very odd coincidence occurred. See, one of the reasons I had to be the one to use the SPERMS was because Dr. Gryffindor had modified it to use the targeting systems of an HEV suit, greatly reducing the lock-on time, but it was odd because that made me wonder if there was anypony else galloping around in an HEV suit, which was *really* odd because I swear to the Princesses and their Royal Court and Luna’s moon amusement park, that right as I thought that, I saw another pony poking his muzzle over the tip of the concrete bunker, his head encased in the Hostile Environment Helmet that only comes with a Hazardous Environment Suit.

That’s interesting, I thought, and moved on.

I went and collected Barney from behind the outdoor laundering station, the little island of relative security we’d carved out of the warzone seeming thoroughly out-of-place amidst the explosions, gunfire, garbled bleats, equine screams, and at least one stupendously loud and and blood-curdlingly terrifying dragon’s roar that flooded our ears from every corner of New Cloudsdale.

Like being in the eye of a tornado, was the most appropriate metaphor that came to my mind.

Barney and I set out for the open emergency front door beneath the cabin of a sky-camouflaged Armored Personnel Carriage, which was scrunched up against the southeastern wall of the Central Bunker, blocking its entrance – it could have been the General’s transport, an escape vehicle, or both. Or, judging from the way it was parked, it could have been part of some failed attempt to establish a barricade between the bunker and the utterly demolished building to our right.

“You know,” I remarked to Barney as we made our way inside the derelict transport, “every time I hear a gunshot or a plasma bolt, no matter where it’s from or how far away, I have to fight this urge to just... *hit the deck*, you know? Like every single shot is being aimed at-”

I froze in the narrow doorway.

Lying on the steel floor, bathed in the golden-yellow of the interior lights, was the body of a very old zebra mare, her Fançi Mane-6 rotational-release pump-action shotgun lying close by.

Her right eyelid was partway open, her eyeballs turned upward, not quite rolling to the back of her head, and her thick eyeliner was smudged and smeared, like she'd wiped her eyes several times, trying to clear them, perhaps of dust and debris, or perhaps of the tears that naturally form in response to such things - likely both.

"Gordon," Barney began, "how in the hay am I supposed to fit through this doorway with these missiles strapped to my side and your big rear-end blocking the way?!"

"Oh, sorrrrr..." I whispered so quietly that even I could barely hear it. Some overpowering force was preventing me from even finishing a simple two-word sentence, so moving my entire body was out of the question. I said nothing else and I thought nothing else, but I knew who this was.

"Hey, come on, Gordon!" Barney yelled, and I completely ignored him.

The APC had armored windows which could be opened and shot out of. Two on the side opposite Zecora were propped open, bullet and scorch marks on their insides telling me she had put up quite a fight before some lucky Combine sniper made a great shot. Just, a really, really great shot.

Judging by the spatter, she'd been looking out the right window when she died. From the congealed, dark-red blood pooling beneath the side of her head that was facing down, I deduced she'd taken a round through her left frontal lobes, possibly through the eye itself, that this had occurred some time ago, and that she hadn't been moved from the spot where she let out her last breath and, according to her traditional belief - elaborated to me long afterward - that dying in the Everfree Forest is something you should never, ever do, gave up her spirit to wander it for either the rest of eternity, or the end of time, whichever came first.

I heard Barney yelling, which wasn't unusual.

I heard some giant with great, giant hooves stomping toward me, which was unusual.

I heard a very loud noise like a metal table being dragged across a cement floor. Not unusual.

Then I saw a warning symbol pop up on my HUD that I'd never seen before. Fortunately, it was written out as well as verbally announced, because, *boy*, was that weird scraping noise loud.

It was simply a flashing, orange triangle with an exclamation mark in the center, a seemingly generic warning symbol that, oddly, I'd never gotten until just then.

Below it, the words '*DARK ENERGY SURGE DETECTED*' flashed in orange, and when my

Hostile Environment Helmet unexpectedly deployed and rudely shoved something cold and rubber-padded into my mouth, I had about 1.5 seconds to appreciate the fact that Dr. Pie had apparently outfitted it with some version of an up-armored 'chomp-bit' like I'd seen on Barney's purposefully intimidating 'C7-MPE' helmet all the way back in City 7, thus enabling me to grip things with my mouth even when my helmet was on! A feature so *angrily* useless, I sort of wanted to kill Dr. Pie for adding it!

Then my body had an unpleasant meeting with the overpressure-wave from an absolutely terrific explosion that, if I had been just a few centimeters to either side, or if I'd been turned just a few degrees off of perfectly perpendicular and facing it head-on, it is a physical certainty that I would've had my neck snapped in numerous ways and in innumerable areas as it collided with the back of the APC. However, that did not happen, and I was fortunately blown out the front of the troop- transport, my Hazard Suit's health monitors penalizing a mere '15' from the number that symbolizes whether I am alive or dead.

I don't think I even blacked out at all, I was just winded as hell, like I'd been bucked in the stomach by the biggest, meanest bully in grad school for making fun of his thesis, and I was lying on my back, which, to be honest, I've never really been a big fan of. Before I could recover, or think, or really do much of anything, I watched in shock and awe as Spike, that magnificent purple bastard, swooped down from the heavens, grabbed a Gryffindor Device out of Barney's combat-saddle so fast that he didn't even see who did it, and then, leaping into the air and beating those mighty wings, he drew back and *hurled* the thing like a celestiadamned *javelin*.

Curious as to what the purple dragon had thrown the strider-buster at, I tilted my head to follow its flight path, and witnessed a strider that was slowly standing up, its utterly massive belly-cannon so hot that it was glowing bluish-white all along its shaft and even past it, and it looked...

...confused?

If I'm reading synth emotions correctly?

My brain didn't get to chew on this unique observation for a single second before the pressure-sensors on Spike's 'javelin' made solid contact with the strider's stubby little nose-turret, and the resulting explosion sent the abomination to go and live with the ghosts in the Everfree Forest.

Along with Zecora.

And Rainbow Dash.

And any hope the Resistance might have had for ending the Combine occupation of Equestria.

A pink pony sat in front of a gold-framed photograph of a timidly smiling zebra, the ground all around her damp and soaked with an unbelievable volume of tears. The photograph, resting atop a simple wooden box – the best our undertakers could do – was as black and white as the stripes on her coat, and looked like it had been taken when Princess Celestia was a filly.

On either side were a number of similar wooden coffins, carefully arranged in a semi-circle on the parade grounds of New Cloudsdale, its opening towards the Buttercup Bloomflower Black Forest Facility, and its apex facing the crumbling ruins of the Central Bunker, next to the smashed and imploded pile of smoldering debris that I am told used to be the officer's dining hall – now the permanent resting place of a dead strider, since we had no cuddling way of fishing it out of the food pantry - *also* a total loss.

Beyond that were other landmarks about which the soldiers of New Cloudsdale were already making up legends and tall tails – for example, the (only there for those who wanted it) 'Females-Only' barracks that was all but annihilated when a Combine dropship made an unpowered, emergency landing on it, leaving every single piece of an abandoned game of chess sitting on a portion of the interior floor completely undisturbed. Another popular one was the tail of the heroic last stand of Satan 'Stan' Steelhooves, the enormous red minotaur who died defending the ammo dump, carrying in each of his massive hands a mounted turret normally reserved for Main Battle Tanks and other armored vehicles, steel plating and all.

The Battle of New Cloudsdale, it was being called. And I? I *wasn't* known as the complete failure who'd been carrying a loaded, primed and ready-to-fire anti-strider weapon and who was very much within range of a strider that was barreling toward literally *the single most important individual in the Resistance*, and for whatever stupid, inane, incomprehensible reason, ***DIDN'T FIRE.***

Nope. I don't even want to write it down.

Fuck it. I'll do it anyway.

They were calling me *Strider-Bane, the Freemane Device.*

Those celestiadamned Gryffindor Devices. That was what Pinkie was primarily referring to when

she said she'd made 'upgrades' to my suit. It had been upgraded with new *software*, which gave the Hazard Suit the novel ability to imitate - and therefore completely bypass - the built-in targeting computers of a wide variety of missile-launchers - computers which, compared to those of the HEV suit, she said, 'took longer to perform floating-point operations than the half-life of bronium-115.'

That was why General Dash needed me. She needed my Gryffindors, and I gave her the brush-off.

I sighed deeply, feeling the crushing weight of depression that was further amplified by the encroaching darkness, a welcome end to the shittiest day I'd had in... well, I couldn't remember.

Though I ached from head to hoof and felt fit to collapse from exhaustion – among other things – I refused to plop down in the grass like the other mourners; I just stood, staring up at the swirling cumulus clouds still high enough in the sky to be cast in the glow of the sun. The tiredness I felt in my bones made me long for some more of that 'sugar milk' that Zecora made for me. And she'd given me that after healing the worst injuries I'd ever sustained with her unique zebra magic. And that was after she took me into her home, and in doing so, risked her life and her property as surely she must have been aware of the Combine's continued hunt for me. And *that* was after she found me bleeding to death on the floor of Slimpickins' haunted house, and even after I *insulted her*, (earning me a justified buck to the face), she *carried me on her back* all the way back to her cabin.

But, I suppose she *did* threaten to kill me once or twice.

I wasn't cold and numb anymore. I was thawing and in pain, the water dripping down my face.

Damnit, Zecora, why did you have to die where I would find you? I scolded her. *Didn't you stop to think that your dead corpse might distract piddly ol' Gordon were he to stumble across it?*

I didn't want to take off my glasses and announce to the world I was crying – it's a stallion thing, I won't try to explain it or rationalize it, as it's outside my field – so I turned my head to the heavens, letting my tears drain down the side of my face.

Celestiadamnit, I threw away her really nice thermos into the same bunker she would die defending.

Oh my Goddesses. It called to mind sins I'd committed against another pony right before she died.

*The **day** I met Rainbow Dash... I used her temporary grave as a trash can, told her not to bore me with a story about her hometown, compared her – straight to her face and in front of her peers – to the Combine, and then...*

...then I ...

The tears were starting to burn at my cheeks, and were being replaced faster than they could be magically wiped away. It felt selfish in a way. Why was I so torn up over these two ponies when at least a hundred others perished on the same battlefield? But my mind dismissed that reasoning as false logic. I would grieve over whomever the shivering *hell* I wanted to, however much I wanted to.

I was just too afraid to approach the open casket holding Rainbow Dash. Aside from that, it just felt right to give some room to the poor yellow pegasus who had practically draped herself over Rainbow the instant her dusty and bruised, but otherwise untouched body was pulled from the intact front portion of the Central Bunker. She was the one who'd pronounced her dead at the scene hours before, and while the rest of the medical staff had to stay on duty in the overflowing field-hospitals, she must have been granted an exception by the acting Installation Commander and new de-facto leader of the Resistance, Cadance – yeah, *Princess* Cadance, although it has never been explained to me to any degree of satisfaction *what*, exactly, merits her the title of 'Princess'. She's sure as freaking *darn* not on the same level as Luna or Celestia.

I went up to Zecora's casket - unlike Dash's, it was closed out of consideration for the more sensitive among us - and stood next to the surreally depressed and surely extremely dehydrated Dr. Pie, offering the crying pony a shoulder to lean on, and maybe so I could lean back a little.

"I c-called her an *evil enchantreh-heeehhh-heeesss*," she bawled, blowing her nose into a mane that was straighter than I had ever seen it.

I could relate. "I accused Rainbow Dash of being as bad as the Combine!" I tearfully confessed, drawing no shortage of audible gasps from the weary crowd of mourners.

To my great shock, Dr. Pie recoiled. "How can you be thinking about *Rainbow Dash* at a time like this?!" she demanded, gesturing with both of her forelegs at the coffin in front of her.

"Zecora's *dead*, Gordon!"

I couldn't fucking believe what I was hearing. There was no way it was a joke, it was way too unfunny to be a joke.

“...so is Rainbow Dash!” I replied, our exchange starting to attract angry, heavily armed attention.

The unknowable pink pony stared at me incredulously. “She *is*?!”

When the words I wanted to say popped into my head, something inside me snapped.

“F- wh- th...” were just some of the things I said in response before bolting off in the general direction of the main gate, not that the fact that the perimeter fence had been completely flattened didn’t make having a ‘gate’ completely pointless. And for reasons unbeknownst to me at the time, the shield bubble I saw when I first arrived was also gone, leaving nothing to separate New Cloudsdale from the Forest in which it was entombed...

...nothing left to hide the fact that, despite the manicured lawn, open sky, large population, modern technology, and safe, secure, tightly-controlled environment, New Cloudsdale was *still* right smack in the middle of the evil, Goddesses-forsaken, haunted, cursed, malevolent, undying, unpredictable and uncontrollable Everfree-Goddessesdamned- Forest.

I was galloping away from the words.

The words that I thought when Pinkie Pie asked me if Rainbow Dash was dead.

They sickened me, stung me, *burned* me, *hurt* me... because in some ways... on some levels... parts of me believed that as surely as the sun shines and electrons repel and the speed of light is *c* and the massless field-flux always, *always*, self-limits...

“YES, RAINBOW DASH IS DEAD – I KILLED HER!”

The part of the base I was in was empty, both of inhabitants and bodies, but I still sort of expected my words to echo back at me, especially considering how *loud* I’d said them. Instead, it was like the black Forest swallowed them up, saving them for future use.

Hah. Black Forest. How incredibly straightforward.

Somehow, I ended up at the demolished bunker, staring at that damned crooked flagpole lying bent and twisted across the ground, and, stripped of its flags, a naked, meaningless pole awkwardly jutting out of the derelict and decaying ruins, no different from the crooked rebar poking out of the rubble like ribs from a rotting corpse.

I don’t know why, but I just felt compelled to climb to the top of the great pile of crumbling debris. It was like King of the Hill; if I sat on top of the mess I felt responsible for creating, it was like I

took *ownership* of it. Come to think of it, that must be why monarchs feel compelled to sit on thrones.

As I sat atop my throne of Regret, gazing out upon my kingdom of Missed Opportunities, wearing my crown of Failure, I recalled the advice I imagined another monarch and/or Goddess giving me in the tunnel underneath Ponyville.

"Everything is up to you now, Gordon!"

"And a fine fucking job I've done!" I screamed. "Everything was up to me, and I *completely fucked up!*" My tears continued to flow, heavy and warm, splashing against the concrete mountainsides and flowing around the rebar trees of my shameful realm.

"...I'm a complete... ff-fucker-upper... and I don't even know what that means."

They'd come for me. They'd come to New Cloudsdale for *me*, their 'Anticitizen One'. Luna, they had a loving *codename* for me. Everypony else - *everypony* else they could kill was just... gravy.

I considered everything I'd done to reach this point – everything I'd survived, every pony I'd killed and watched kill and suffer and die, all the sacrifices others had made to push me to my next goal, all the scarce and invaluable medical supplies I'd used up, and for what?

I'd failed.

I failed.

In spite of everything, when the moment of truth came, when everything was at stake, when there was no margin for error, no time to waste, what did I do? I dilly-dallied. I stood there in the APC, staring at her lifeless body, and I was shocked, yes, and it was startling, of course, but that wasn't enough for me. I stood there as precious, irreplaceable seconds ticked by, wondering how she died, when she died, where she was standing when she died, who she was shooting, and from what angle, and who killed her, and how, and had she been moved, and did she die instantly or did she bleed out, and then I moved on to my analysis of the finer points of CEREBRAL ANATOMY, and then... then...?

Then I ran out of time.

I moved my head forward and slammed it back against my cold, concrete throne as hard as I could. Once was not sufficient, and I went into a rage, bringing my head forward and slamming it back, again and again and again and again, and when I stopped because my neck was tired, I

saw stars, and the back of my head was pounding.

*Oh, look, there's Gordon, what a clumsy klutz. Oh, Gordon, your tendency to constantly and consistently **fuck up everything you do** is an endearing personality trait that makes us laugh and giggle and chuckle and say, 'Oh, Gordon, what will you **FUCK UP** next?!'*

*Even when it really, really, really **REALLY REALLY REALLY REALLY REALLY REALLY REALLY REALLY** **FUCKING COUNTS**... he'll still... fuck up...*

...because that's our Gordon...

'...what an adorable fuck-up,' they'll giggle.

They'll giggle.

They'll giggle at... something. What do they giggle at?

My slightly stunned and pounding brain was trying to conjure an extremely specific auditory memory transcribed in the very earliest partitions of my long-term memory, a string of proteins and RNA lying dormant somewhere in my cerebrum, proteins that had not come into contact with any electrical impulses in a good bit more than twenty years - or if they had, I never knew about it.

Suddenly, I could smell crayons and almost *feel* tiny pages crinkling in my telekinetic grip, and I saw a bully whose face I would always remember, but whose name would forever escape me... and there was an old, *old* fashioned television hanging precariously over the edge of a cart that almost certainly would've killed someone if ever it finally did what it always seemed on the brink of doing.

And there, on the fuzzy, colorful screen, was an unbelievably joyous and animated little pink pony whose face I never really got a good look at because she was always moving too damned much.

But I understood her words.

"...Giggle at the ghostie, guffaw at the grossly," the tune came, its lyrics transcribed across the bottom of the screen, along with a little yellow ball that bounced across them in time to the music.

And each song was apparently brought to us by these pictures of assorted baked goods and treats, and some company's indecipherable logo... Good Goddesses, we were being targeted with subliminal advertising since practically the day we were born!

Ha!

“Hahahahahahaha!” I suddenly rasped through my tears and retches and gagging and pain.

“AHAHAHAHHAHHAHHAHA!”

I started cackling like a mad scientist because it was fun and I was one.

It felt nice. It was just like when I regained the ability to feel pain back at Zecora’s house, after the excessive amounts of morphine I’d been doped up on started to wear off.

The functioning of the equine mind is incomprehensibly illogical, and something I have never fully understood and never will – and I’ve *got* one! Have for *years!* - but my mind... for whatever stupid *cuddling* reason... it was like I *wanted* everything to seem as bad as possible. At that moment, in that state... I actually *desired* the world to seem bleak and horrible and hopeless... like I was just being honest and realistic and simply seeing and accepting reality for the way it truly was.

But it was a lie, wasn’t it?

I turned my face toward the incredible pantheon of color that Celestia managed to cajole from the sky over this unnatural Forest as she lowered the sun to make way for the moon, bringing this bloody day to an end, and I put the question to the Goddess of the coming Night.

“It’s a lie, isn’t it?” I asked in a conversational voice, like She was sitting right across from me.

As the light from Her sister’s responsibility shone through thicker and thicker stratosphere, the beautiful pink and rose and apricot oranges that somehow filled an evil sky told me that it was.

Things were *not* hopeless. Everything was *not* terrible and horrible and bleak and final. We were *not* doomed. And the notion that we had no hope left, that our defeat was now assured, that the Enemy’s victory was now inevitable and unchangeable, and that we should accept falsehood and cynicism as truth and reality was a lie; an outright fabrication.

And as I realized that even the course of history itself could be altered, that not even events that have already occurred are set in stone, I thought to myself,

Oh, no.

And as I cycled through my HUD’s inventory screens, stopping when I’d highlighted the yellow

box labeled, 'Time Traveling Tome of Starswirl the Bearded (MAGICAL OBJECT)', and a little ancient scroll of tanned papyrus floated over to my face and carefully unrolled itself, I thought,

*Awwww, **shit.***

And before I could read the first line of the ancient riddle (and also be taken in for a desperately needed psych-eval), a haunted and howling wind roared from out of the midst of the Forest that doesn't want to let go, the still slightly sun-tinted sky was consumed by an impenetrable blackness that consumed the feeble beam from my automatically-activated hazard light, and my little pony ears folded back against my skull as – I swear to the Goddesses – the Everfree Forest spoke.

“YOU HAVEN'T WINGS, AND TIME IS FLYING!”

The geographical location rebuked me in what I'm sure you can imagine was an absolutely holy motherfucking scary-ass voice, and the possessed wind whipping around me blew even harder.

“YOU CANNOT STOP THE DEAD FROM DYING.”

Ah. I see the objection. And I have a logical, well-thought-out rebuttal.

In what is easily one of the weirdest things I have ever done, I cleared my throat, held up my chin, and responded to the Everfree Forest's insulting accusation.

“I intend no such thing.”

The screeching wind that sounded like the tormented wails of the eternally damned floating up from the deepest pit of the darkest depths of hell subsided for a moment, and I got the sense that the Forest was kind of giving me a weird look – like it was waiting for me to explain.

I took the uncontested delay to bathe the extremely old and crinkled Tome floating in front of me in the whitish-yellow beam of my torchlight, silently reading the surprisingly short and straightforward riddle it posed.

Coincidentally, the answer was basically the same thing I was going to tell it anyway.

“I swear on the Book of Souls – which I continuously remind myself is an object of pure hatred and unknowable pain whose name I don't dare ever again utter – I won't change a thing.”

The soul-devouring darkness conjured by the Forest was violently banished as my body was enveloped by a luminous bubble of white ball-lightning, and a raging whirlpool of magical energy began to coalesce around my – *extremely* hot – horn.

Staring at the Tome floating in front of me, I broke out in a cold sweat as I witnessed the spectral shadow of a figure trotting towards me that, though we were little more than strangers, I'd very quickly developed an intense dislike for.

And before snatching the Time Traveling Tome of Starswirl the Bearded out of the air on which it lay, he regarded me with a look of intense disapproval, and in his odd way of speaking, snapped,

*"We'll just seeee... about **that**."*

And then, well... I simply remained in the exact same spot in every single dimension except one.

-----λ-----

Trouble.

A great white creature like a flying manta-ray trailed by great, thick tendrils of a sickly whitish alien composite that retched and spasmed as if in pain as the purple and green dragon clinging to it like a lamprey gnashed its teeth capable of chewing through diamonds and, tearing off its organic, manufactured skin, breathed its hellish, emerald-green dragon's breath over the unnatural creature's writhing, pulsating, *living* insides while it *screamed*. The abomination unto nature gave out a shrill, frightened, tormented wail, and with the hot, blood-red glow of the setting sun reflected in its own bodily fluids, the crablike pincers along its belly at last gave in to some overpowering reflex and reluctantly wrenched open as the assaulting dragon, now upside-down, with his front claws still hooked deep into the aircraft's sandy skin, scraped and scratched at its glistening internals with the scythe-like talons of its hind legs, eliciting showers of electrical sparks and a fresh litany of screams. Like a newborn foal dropped by a stork, a ribbed, blue-steel box that called to mind a cargo container fell from the sky like lightning and struck the ground like thunder.

Trouble tends to follow in my wake.

I slammed my body flat as an inchworm against the dark-grey roof of the Central Bunker, my senses overwhelmed with information, and my already exhausted brain that just minutes

previous, I'd been pounding until I felt dizzy, was now my only...

"...prayer..." I whispered, fully aware of how impossible it was to hear my own voice, gazing upward as I did so, and for just a moment, the world became wondrously dimmer and more starry as a surprisingly wide smile found its way onto my face.

Past steamy contrails of rockets and yellow-orange tracers of anti-aircraft fire, through a break in the scattered sheets of cirrus clouds, I saw the faint, white portrait of the moon, the self-motivating cloudbanks above this Magically Anomalous Region covering it back up as quickly as it had appeared. It was like Luna was winking at me.

I winked back, and for a moment, nothing in the world could've ruined my good mood - not the terrific crunch of a mortally wounded Combine dropship making an uncontrolled descent into the 'Females-Only' barracks, nor the primal, animalistic roar from Spike immediately afterward - a war cry that was laced with so much adolescent rage and insatiable bloodlust, I wondered if the Combine rank-and-file even had the *autonomy* to surrender, or perhaps offer themselves up as sacrifices - not even the crack of a sniper's bullet followed by a clear and wet - very wet - **plunk** somewhere very close to my right, followed almost instantly by a brief, muffled sound like water from a sprinkler hitting a carriage's windshield, and then after that, a sack of potatoes that had been hammering in a couple of nails having a heart attack and falling over onto the floor.

A good hearted, but just... easily irritated... sack of potatoes... that made the most delicious...

Shapes started to lose focus and definition, and the colors of the battlefield began to bleed as I thought about that sack of potatoes I knew damn well I'd just heard go to join the Forest she seemed to genuinely love. And this was in spite of it being a soul-swallowing demon-pit that was literally a *huge inspiration* to the devil of one of the hells it contained a portal to. It seemed logical that my other major sense of use to me in combat situations was also about to be diminished with a reminder that there was a huge hugboxing flagpole behind me with about 1,000 decibels evenly divided amongst a baker's dozen of tornado-siren megaphones and rock-concert loudspeakers.

"Fourteenth platoon, rendezvous with twenty-second Tactical Air Wing and provide cover for their takeoff... uhhhh, eighth aaaaand... I guess, anypony left in seventeenth, do the same. And by 'do the same', I mean cover the twenty-second, okay, Dreyfus and Drew?!"

It was then that I noticed that the large, almost condo-like building to my right was completely caved-in, with a pair of massive, spindly legs curled up like a dead spider and poking out of the pile of smoldering debris clogging the structure's stone-and-mortar foundations. Though my targeting reticule was blurred by tears, I did not miss the hulking, sickly yellow monstrosity that came lumbering through the center of my vision, stomping its way across the grassy promenade

to...

... *some*...

... *other*...

... *target*...

Of course, it was only *then*, lying on the otherwise featureless concave roof of the dull-grey bunker in my shiny, orange, reactive armor that just *twinkled* in the angry red light of the setting sun, that it occurred to my huge, magnificent, grad-school-educated, doctorate-holding brain that;

I probably stand out like a big, giant, stupid-

"PRIORITY ALERT: ANTICITIZEN ONE ACQUIRED. PRIORITY OVERRIDE: ENGAGE."

... *idiotic, stubborn, arrogant*...

"ANTICITIZEN ONE ENGAGED. EXPUNGE. ABDICATE ALL SUBLEVEL RESTRICTIONS."

...*prideful, cocky*...

I tried to make myself as small as possible as I hid behind that silver flagpole while heavy blue raindrops of magnetically-confined superheated plasma thudded against the concrete and steel, turning them into magma and molten metal, and sent tiny, glassy globules into the air that gently melted off of the wonder-materials of my Hazardous Environment Suit but stuck to my exposed ears and cheeks, singing my fur and burning my skin.

... *piddling, delaying, procrastinating*...

My helmet was only halfway deployed, every millisecond it delayed a lesson in pain-thresholds. Completely negating the brevity of their passage, the plasma bolts that screamed past my face felt *far* hotter than the molten metal and rock, their heat-radiation penetrating *beneath* my skin and fur, cooking my brain and my eyes.

... *intelligent, intuitive, resourceful*...

My Hostile Environment Helmet clicked into place, closed, and locked. Half a dozen symbols and warnings flashed, and my ringing ears picked up the muffled tones of good old fashioned auditory warnings, all demanding my attention, all receiving none.

... MIT-graduated, PhD-in-Theoretical-Physics-holding...

I rounded the flagpole and stood on four yellow-orange hooves, noting with satisfaction the noticeably dimmer shade the world now was – as it turned out, my new helmet also had tinted plates that extended over my glasses – selected my crowbar from inventory – figuring it would be a good idea to have something to bite down on other than rubber – and silently whispered to the Goddesses exactly how I felt about what They were about to make me do.

... scientist. A scientist who is about to do science.

My mind raced as I tried to recall the exact wording of the Tome in regards to its duration, but under such extreme stress, all I could recall was the basic, underlying message that I could only go back once, and only for a few seconds. And by my calculations, hell, it'd *been* a few seconds.

...or kill something.

I already knew what the spider-like machine was going to do – I'd seen it destroy the bunker, kill Rainbow Dash, and very nearly kill me. And between my Hazard Suit's extremely unusual warnings about 'Dark Energy' and the devastation I'd observed striders as being capable of inflicting, I'd constructed a picture – crude and incomplete, but sufficient for my purposes – of what, exactly, those peculiar cannons beneath the striders were; a weapon system that actually fell within my particular field of dimensional physics.

Motes of white light began to gather around me, and I felt the grim, bleak future calling me back.

Right about time.

The strider crouched down, bringing its repulsive, barb-covered, and - like all synths - crab-like torso low enough that it was blocking the nearly-gone sun, but still far enough away that I couldn't try any funny business – I almost wanted to tell it not to worry, for I wasn't to be its cause of death.

Lattices and starbursts of blue light joined my white lights in a twisting spiral that traced back to the mouth of the machine's incredibly prominent belly-mounted cannon. The light from all around us, the trees, the grass, the Forest, the buildings, all of it bent with the curvature of space, becoming more and more distorted as the pinpricks of blue multiplied and tightened into an almost solid line.

I smiled as I heard Barney shrieking at past-me to get the hell out of that APC before the strider in

front of future-me killed everypony.

You can't interrupt me, Barnes. Not when I'm in the zone.

Though I'd once written a paper exploring a strikingly similar thought-experiment – a paper for which I received a B minus – I still couldn't believe what I was seeing.

I'd been staring into the blue-tinged face of death for some five to seven seconds at this point, and instead of being very, extremely dead, I was experiencing a whole range of strange phenomena resulting from the totally unprecedented interaction occurring before my eyes between the incomprehensible forces of Magic and the equally incomprehensible forces of Nature – two disparate fields that Twilight Sparkle had always viewed simply as different aspects – different angles, different dimensions - of some greater, fundamental truth, and had spent not just her entire career, but her entire *life* trying to unify the two.

And standing there, conducting what could very well be the greatest scientific experiment of my lifetime, listening to this extremely irritating noise like a big metal desk being dragged across a cement floor while having that annoying '*DARK ENERGY SURGE DETECTED*' warning with the yellow triangle that continuously blinked on and off with no way to dismiss it from my HUD...

I knew, somehow, that if it was possible, Twilight was watching this and smiling.

I only lamented the fact that I had no way of recording it for future study, particularly the fantastically strange 'tunnel vision' I was experiencing – weirdly similar to the 'interference effect' that happened when I tried to teleport from Black Mane East to Black Mane West. But one theory I have as to what was going on, was that the strider's cannon was working just as hard as its little dark-energy heart could to frame-drag my fifth-dimensional space towards its compressed-dark-matter- singularity – thus the sound of a desk being dragged across a floor – while *my* time-traveling spell was essentially doing the opposite, sucking me away from the attractive force of the singularity as it tried to move my fourth-dimensional self to another point, distorting the field the strider was attempting to create, and dissipating its energy into the future – thus producing a *whooshing* sound.

Now, due to the extremely high amounts of science at work in this particular situation, there's some wonkiness mostly with the perception of the passage of time – I assure you that from where I stood, the strider's gun was 'powering up' for a *hell* of a lot longer than two and a half seconds. In theory, under ideal circumstances, it would have been possible to sustain such a scenario indefinitely – I know virtually nothing about strider weaponry, and everything here is educated speculation that just happened to not be completely wrong – but I was almost certain that was not

going to happen in our case; I assumed that the spell of Starswirl's Tome, being magical in nature, was a lot more powerful than the effect of the strider's cannon, meaning that it would eventually overcome the 'dark matter drag' and suck me back into the future when I belonged.

And the problem was that as soon as I left, and that equalizing force disappeared, the cannon would power up as usual, and fire as intended - killing Rainbow Dash.

I couldn't let that happen again. Thinking for a moment, I decided to very carefully see if I could use any of my unicorn magic at all while my horn was channeling the power of the Tome.

I decided to try and pick up the crowbar in my mouth.

WHOAH.

I discovered I *could* levitate my crowbar – after I accidentally wrapped it around my jaw one way, then wrapped it around my muzzle another way, and then finally straightened out the thick bar of solid steel. More than a little freaked out, I put it back in inventory.

Then I got a terrible, horrible, awful idea.

I reached out with my magic and grabbed the strider's elongated cannon, causing the stupid creature to jerk away in shock and confusion, and - somehow *surprising* me, PhD-holder that I am – when it did so, the evidently overly-sensitive and reactionary biomechanical war machine *canceled its celestiadamned firing sequence*.

Though I was, of course, glad that I was pulled through my little wormhole at least a hundredth of a second before the strider's undirected and less-than-full-strength, but still extremely unsafe pocket of potential energy was suddenly liberated, I did feel a little sorry for myself, as that blast not only really hurt, it also almost *KILLED ME* when it blew me out the front of that illegally-parked APC.

Sorry about that, Gordon. I'll try harder to think about things before I do them, I lied to myself.

Ugh.

Anyway, fuck apologizing to Rainbow Dash. As soon as I get back, I'm making her apologize to me for bucking me in the face.

“Oh, you’re not dead, you fucking *TWIT!*”

It was now simply nighttime, and one would be hard-pressed to see without some sort of aid. By the feeble light of electric and magical lamps, I could see that the mass funeral-slash-wake was almost completely empty, with the exception of a pretty pink pony princess and a mournful yellow pegasus whom she was attempting to comfort: a yellow pegasus that, it was now *incredibly obvious* to me, *wasn’t* a part of the medical staff, and *couldn’t* be, despite her supposed ‘title’ of ‘*Medical Officer*’. And it wasn’t just because she was still out here with the ‘dead’ when any other doctor, nurse or medic would’ve been in the hospital-tents, suturing wounds, emptying bedpans, and just generally *not* pronouncing ponies to be *dead* whom I had an almost indescribably strong intuitive conviction could not possibly be so. Her pink mane was simply much too long. No nurse, no medical personnel, and few food service workers would be allowed to have a mane that long.

I didn’t think they heard me, so I continued yelling in a threatening manner while advancing on them.

“*ANSWER ME!*” I shouted at General Rainbow Dash, who was lying very still in a simple wooden coffin, its singular lid leaning against a supporting stand, and its front decorated with all sorts of little trinkets like wreaths and baubles and black-and-white photographs. Lovingly heaped around its base was a bulging pile of tulips, roses, ponisettias – I’ll never be able to name them all - representing all the colors of the rainbow, and arranged to roughly resemble one.

I was almost jealous – which only made me angrier.

Stomping towards the open casket with my helmet retracted and my sweaty, dirty, partially burned and slightly puffy face cast in deep, black shadows, I understood that the pair of ponies were startled by my appearance - however, it wasn’t for the reasons I imagined.

Through bared teeth, I growled, “Unless I changed the past so that *half-charged... indirect... mis-fire* actually *killed you...*”

Princess Cadance slowly backed out of my way, as did the yellow mare – I could read her name engraved on a clip in her mane, illuminated in a blue glow – *Fluttershy*, whom I really should have recognized, but I suppose in that light, with a river of dried tears and mascara running down her face, she just didn’t look the same.

Reaching General Dash's casket, I leaned in close to her face – which, I noted, had beads of a clear liquid running down it – and, in a move I was later told would have made her proud, yelled,

“I SAID...”

I turned around and drew back one of my titanium-armored legs.

“GET...”

Given that the motile actuators in my suit didn't actually make me any stronger, my buck probably didn't even *match* the force with which the athletic career-soldier bucked *me*.

“UP!”

The air was pierced with the sound of splinters, and a hoof-shaped dent in the side of the everwood casket disappeared from my view as the whole sacred vessel broke free of its flimsy moorings, rotated about its axis and spilled its highly-decorated cyan cargo onto the grass, which was matted completely flat in an area the exact shape of Fluttershy's butt.

Instincts kicking in, Rainbow Dash's wings flared open, beating like a hummingbird. Her hooves touched the ground, and she drunkenly stumbled forwards and backwards before collapsing onto her butt in the exact same spot - only inverted - that her friend had been keeping warm for her.

As the not-dead General vomited onto my hoofboots, Fluttershy screamed, Cadance yelled for a medic, and I cackled like a mad scientist – which I no longer was, as my spirits had been lifted.

“Got you BACK, Rainbow Dash!” I gleefully yelled at the now-conscious pony.

She responded by blowing out spittle onto my hooves.

Alerted by the sudden high-pitched squeal off to my side, I managed to sidestep the yellow blur that wrapped itself around the cyan pegasus, embracing her in – I swear to Princess Celestia – a full-mouthed kiss, which she held for several seconds before breaking off, possibly afraid that she might vomit again.

“So, General,” I began, finally breaking my silence after awkwardly waiting around for several minutes while Fluttershy and a Resistance medic fussed over her, trying to get her to ingest an array of liquids as colorful as the bouquet of flowers around her coffin.

*“...so **what?**”* she rasped, cutting short a conversation with Princess Cadance that I actually

hadn't been eavesdropping on.

"So... given recent developments... uhhh..."

I was sweating, and it wasn't from the heat of plasma bolts, and though I didn't actually wish that I *was* sweating from the heat of plasma bolts instead of Rainbow Dash, I could certainly see the appeal of plasma bolts.

"Uhm, given recent developments, do you think it would be possible to maybe... reconsider what I... said...?"

She snorted, which I mistook for her getting ready to throw up again.

"Listen, Freemane, sorry about bucking you, but we're still attacking the Citadel."

My face fell as she looked over at Princess Cadance with sympathy.

"That really, *really* sucks about Shining Armor, but I can't devote any assets to Canterlot for just one pony... not even him."

My face fell several hundred more meters. My brain couldn't formulate an inquiry into the situation, but it deduced everything it needed to know; Princess Cadance would have been the new leader of the Resistance, but I had to go and alter history to stop Rainbow Dash from dying.

And Cadance would have preferred to attack Canterlot.

"-He knew what his duty was, and he did it," she said with a surprising lack of emotion. "Anyway, whatever we do, we have to do it *now*. The Combine have forced our hoof. Either we attack, or we all die the next time *they* do."

You'll all die if you attack the Citadel.

"All in," Dash agreed, nodding.

And before you all die, you'll launch a rocket full of headcrabs into Mane-FUCKING-HATTAN.

"But I just *saved your life*," I said, exasperated. "And you won't even re-"

"When the hell did you save my life?!" she demanded.

Shit was the only word that came to mind when I realized that I no longer possessed the Time Traveling Tome, nor any other proof besides my own insane blathering that I'd altered the course of history – that I'd stopped the dead from dying.

I could feel the Forest rustling as I finally realized what I had done. What I should have done.

I should have let you die, I thought as I stared at General Dash, simultaneously the Resistance's greatest hope and the singular assurance of its annihilation.

"Gordon- you're *glowing*," she suddenly gasped.

"Yeh-... yeah!" I angrily agreed, assuming it was some figure of speech.

"Ooooh, you *are* glowing!" said Dr. Pie, who'd appeared out of nowhere and scared the shit out of me, as she sometimes does.

"What?" None of what they were saying was making any sense. None of what they were *doing* was making any sense. The small, illuminated circle of General Dash's coat that was slowly crawling across her forehead didn't make any sense.

Wait, what?

I activated my suit's 'zoom' function, centering my crosshair right between her eyes – and not because I intended her any harm, it's just that that was where the curious little blue circle was.

Something else was weird; the lighting conditions made that *lit* section of her coat seem... teal.

The height of a wave doesn't change its frequency, Gordon! I mentally smacked myself. That meant this was a-

Oh piss, that's a laser-sight, isn't it?

I spun around, facing the darkness that now suffocated the camp, punctuated here and there by islands of white and yellow light, and I found myself suddenly wishing my HEV suit had thermal optics. Funny thing is, I don't think they would've shown up on thermal anyway.

I'd seen the machine-ponies, the *transequines* before. I'd killed scores of them in City 7, watched as the optical ports in their gas-masks, looking like eyes that glowed the same shade of electric-blue as their plasma bolts, filled up with their unnatural blood. Blood that was too cold. Too slimy. Too oily. But this one, this lone straggler that the clean-up crews somehow missed,

the 'eyes' of his mask weren't blue. There weren't even two of them to speak of.

I never said anything, and he never got a shot off. I simply *saw* him, cloaked in a pearly white suit that made for extremely bad camouflage at night, crouching behind that enormous black water-buffalo – which our thirsty troops were thankful survived the battle – and reached out with my unicorn magic, trying to see if it would be possible to grab or dislodge the weapon clipped to his surprisingly *equestrian*-looking combat saddle.

I *felt* like I could do *more* than that – like when you go to the gym (which I actually did a couple of times in high school) and pick up a weight that is much lighter than you were expecting.

So I thought, *oh, what the hell*, and I grabbed him – *all* of him – and dragged him across the ten or twenty meters between us. Seeing that he was still armed with a *very* cool-looking sniper rifle, and, obviously, *still alive*, I then *shot* him. Not with bullets, but with kinetic force.

A blue stream of magical energy connected the elite *Overwatch* - as they are called - soldier and the tip of my horn, and he was sent hurtling backwards into the iron tank of the water-buffalo as if Princess Celestia had accidentally sent *him* to go rise in the east instead of the sun.

He didn't stop after his body squashed against the side of the water tank, the force knocking it over, but thankfully not puncturing it. It kept going, into the side of an administration building, smashing through the wood and plaster of multiple interior walls, the body not stopping until it was nothing more than a particularly chunky slush of gore and electronics splattered against the inside of the outermost wall and the desk of some poor sergeant. An old-fashioned chimney on the roof of the building collapsed inward, flooding the space with red, white and black dust.

I rounded on General Rainbow Dash so quickly I felt my tail smack against my flank.

"WE ARE ATTACKING CANTERLOT TOMORROW!" I screamed in an almost blinding fury.

I'll never know what I looked like as I said that; what she saw as she stared into my face while I felt electricity crackling through my teeth and my horn, my bones, my whole body surging with an energy, an unstoppable fury unlike any I would ever experience again as long as I lived, and my spirit, my will, my conscience, my being, burning with a self-righteous conviction that she was *wrong*, and I was *right*, and I was not going to *allow* her to lead these mares and stallions who had just fought and killed and died by the *scores* for a cause more worth fighting for than any cause I had ever been a part of to their *deaths* in City 7, and in the process, make herself the co-signer on not only the death warrant of everypony in the entire city when her targeted plague of headcrabs inevitably spreads beyond the control of either side, but indeed, she would share some of the responsibility and shoulder some of the blame for the deaths of every citizen of

Equestria at the synthetic, bio-mechanical hooves of the Universal Union after the Resistance, which was *supposed* to burn that unnatural abomination to the ground is instead *destroyed from within* by a blue idiot who couldn't see the *Forest* for all the Goddessesdamned *trees!*

She stared at me. I stared harder.

I couldn't see anypony else's reaction, I was so focused on her. I did, however, finally notice that there was that odd warning flashing in the peripheral of my vision, once again informing me in all capital letters that a '*DARK ENERGY SURGE*' had been detected.

Even stranger; it wouldn't go away.

"Fine, Freemane," General Dash at last broke her silence, her face a mask of determination, her glare at first seething with anger, then gradually fading to more contemplative, and then serious, like she would look if she was explaining to a teenager the risks of cuddling before marriage or pulling a carriage that's as loaded as they are.

I blinked, and gulped for air, suddenly aware of how out of breath I was.

Turning to the inexplicably-present Dr. Pie, she said, "Pinkie, you and Gilda ready the rocket-"

"-Missile!" the contraptionologist corrected her.

Rainbow Dash glared at her for what felt like seven hours.

"...'*missile*'... set target coordinates for the Royal Palace in Canterlot. We attack at dawn."

Achievements Unlocked! Press Shift+Tab to View.

Allons-y! – *Travel through time!*

That's all (s)he wrote – *This author doesn't know the meaning of brevity! Or punctuality! Gaben would be proud.*