

*Author's Note: Hey readers! I'd like to give a shout-out to reader Swasfews, who is doing some good work making CRISIS fanart over at his DA. [Check him out](#) and give him a watch from me! This guy is pretty cool, and he doesn't afraid of anything.*

## CRISIS: Equestria

### Chapter Twenty-Five: Inauguration

Shroud's hoof meticulously zipped across the screen of the two hundred and ninety third datapad that evening. Her blue eyes drooped, her hot pink coat itched, and her fiery red mane fell in her face, frazzled and sweaty and let free to relieve tension from hours upon hours of scrolling and browsing through document after document back to back. Three days of this at just over three hundred each day, and she still hadn't managed to find what her employer was so voraciously searching for. But she was diligent, and she would do whatever it took to assist him in his task. She only took breaks to eat and use facilities and even spaced those out as much as she could, and gladly worked double overtime thus getting only a few hours of sleep a day for these past few nights. Whatever had started the fire in Lord Silvertongue's head that made him so insistent as to ask that Shroud help him find whatever it was he was looking for, it gave her a reason to work harder than she'd ever worked before, her mind locked on task and ignoring all distractions that dared attempt to divert her attention. She was glad just to be allowed in the loop to some degree as to what he was doing, even if all it involved was just more documentation that she was used to going over in a week, let alone a day.

"Ugg..." she murmured as she threw another datapad aside, "Now, I understand why the boss has been looking in such shoddy condition all this time." She was looking very much the same and feeling just as frazzled by her own lack of progress as she was certain he was. She shook her head, "Great, and now I'm talking to myself..."

At his request, he was not to be disturbed until the document itself was found, as he too was still very much seeking it out and doing so with even more rapidity and scrutiny than she was. Shroud was to ignore *all* other duties normally assigned to her, hence why she knew this was so serious a matter. It actually felt strange, for once, to *not* know anything that was going on outside her tiny office. Working for him was an enormous task, but she knew that refusal was not an option, and that laziness would be met with due punishment. So she tirelessly read through line after line after line of document after document after document, all of it in a language she couldn't even read and had never seen before and would likely never see again. But, he assured her, that was irrelevant. She was to scan through every single document until she could find one single symbol he was looking for, the image of which she had on a tiny pad of paper beside her. It was a curious symbol, this. It looked like a pony, but not one she'd ever seen before, tall and lithe, feminine despite the size. Unicorns had horns, certainly, though typically not of this length; even Silvertongue's horn, large as it was, was not quite that big. Pegasi had wings, of course, but they too did not have such a great wingspan. What kind of

pony had *both*?

“Two hundred and ninety nine...” she muttered, tossing another document aside. “Three hundred and six...” There went another. “Three hundred and twelve...”

It was nearing the last hours she could even remain awake. Then, something caught her eye. This was strange, relatively speaking compared to the rest of the strangeness that had suddenly entered her life. On this document here, number three hundred and thirteen, there was a symbol that looked like just a unicorn’s horn, only longer, and it was not properly centered in the usual radius she’d seen the symbol for horn in, only just *slightly* off, something that an average reader would have missed but that she noticed immediately.

“A typo?” she hummed.

That seemed unlikely, even if she knew what any of this stuff actually said and could tell. How did one make a typo like that with pictogram-style writing? It was near the top of the document too, so clearly it should have been noticed by whoever had made the document in the first place and edited at some point.

Putting the distracting thought aside for now, she scrolled down and reached the bottom of the first page, then pushed a button to turn to the second one. Partway between her first scroll down, she saw it again. Well, not the same symbol, but definitely *a* symbol, curiously in the same position as the last one had been. This time, a wing. Now, the symbol she’d seen before that looked like a wing was grand and feathery, not at all like a pegasus wing but much more grandiose than this, certainly. This wing was only slightly smaller than that, and slightly off-center as well, and not fully open either but folded as if in mid-flight, but it definitely wasn’t a pegasus wing if it was supposed to be put on the symbol of a pony. This one might have been noticeable enough for an average reader to see, but likely for them to skip.

“Another typo perhaps? Two of them in the same document, when all the others don’t have anything of the sort. Hmm...”

Putting that thought aside as well, she scrolled down and flipped to the third and final page in the document. Tapping a hoof to her chin, she scrolled down again to where the other two symbols had been, just curious to see if her train of thought was progressing properly, to see if she was just connecting dots that weren’t there or was legitimately onto something. Part of her duties included paying incredible attention to details, no matter how small or how frivolous, because Silvertongue had assured her that if one paid very, *very* close attention to even the smallest smidgen of detail, they could often find out more information about a subject from a single sentence on a single line than from page upon page of endless exposition and purple prose. Sure enough, here there was the image of a pony, completely normal except for its particularly well-built body stature and pose, something that wouldn’t be necessarily noticed at all if she hadn’t seen the same pony symbol used in many of the other documents.

“Great... there goes that idea...” she sighed to herself, disappointed.

There was otherwise nothing different about this symbol, unlike the other two which were at the very least placed oddly. She thought a moment, unable to shake the feeling she was missing something important. It was too coincidental that there had been two symbols in this exact spot on previous pages, both of which were unlike the others of their type. A horn, a wing, and a pony... aha! Shroud hurriedly lit up her horn and hovered the pad of paper over to her to observe the symbol she'd been given. Her note was certainly not perfect; Silvertongue had even admitted that he'd only seen the symbol once, long, long ago in a very brief frame of reference, and was slightly hazy on its accuracy. But it was good enough that she could see that the horn and wing were nearly in the same positions and of the same appearance and proportions. Shroud tapped her hoof to her chin in thought again. How did this mean anything, if they were separate symbols? Then, she remembered something that helped her put the pieces together, literally.

“Hmmm... layered encryption? Interesting...”

When there were documents that she needed to relay between Lord Silvertongue's employees working secretly for him in the various levels of government, military, and private sectors, she'd needed to encrypt them in such a way that the average pony accidentally getting their hooves on them would not recognize anything suspicious. It was simply a matter of chopping the document into pieces and putting each piece on a separate page, doing it so that, when viewed normally, the document was perfectly legible and looked like something dull and boring but important enough to be delivered, like a tax form being returned or a court summons or something in that vein; when viewed through the encryption, however, the document suddenly looked completely different and made perfect sense to whoever was intended to be reading it. None of the other documents she'd seen these few days had been encrypted at all as far as she could tell - years of performing the task had clued her in to tell-tale signs of document altering even if these documents were in another language. Could this one be encrypted? She decided to experiment with her theory, and flipped the datapad around. Cracking open the device's back carefully, she looked around inside and scratched her head. Most of the datapads she'd been looking through were fairly old, easily a few hundred years but still in perfect working condition due to the ingenuity of techno-magic of this caliber, but judging from the inside of this one it was *particularly* old. The buttons and switches and wires she was used to seeing were in slightly different configurations, but with a breath of relief, they were at least still recognizable.

She lit up her horn dimly and latched her magic onto each individual component she would need to fiddle with, then turned the datapad back around so that she could watch the document as she adjusted it. Tweaking wires here and there caused the symbols to distort slightly, fiddling with tiny levers caused them to alter positions, and pushing buttons caused them to change in size. Minutes of messing with the components seemed to lead to nothing, but there was one thing giving her hope - the three symbols she'd before were still in the same

place and remained mostly unchanged as she went through the motions, and they seemed to be combining together. At last, they formed the symbol she had for reference: a pony, with a horn, and a wing. The rest of the document's symbols all fell into place, and everything in it looked completely different right from the title on down, all of it still unreadable to her but clear enough that perhaps somepony else could.

"Yes, this was definitely what I'm looking for," she grinned to herself.

She opened the document's editing feature and marked the symbol for easy locating, then saved her changes. She reached for the intercom button to buzz Lord Silvertongue and deliver the news, then hesitated for a second and pulled her hoof away. No, she thought. No, with how important this was to him, she knew that it would be better to deliver it personally. Something in her mind told her that was the best course of action, so that was what she would do.

Taking out a pocket mirror, Shroud shook her mane and hastily ran her hooves through it to at least lend some sense of decency to her otherwise ragged and tired appearance, but her mane was so frazzled that she found it hard to keep decent, so she took a moment to tie it up into a bun; there, she thought, neat and tidy. She'd seen Silvertongue himself exactly twice in the past eight days or however long now it had been since Starlight Shadow and her comrades first arrived, and while he certainly looked surprisingly more ragged in his second appearance than his first and logically would look even more so in his third, she felt that he would appreciate the gesture. If there was one thing Shroud had learned while working as Lord Silvertongue's personal secretary, it was that hard work and diligence paid off, and that complaining did not. But if there was *another* thing she'd learned, it was that Silvertongue always valued careful thought, and it was a very careful thought to think that he would prefer she looked like she'd at least tried to tidy up a bit when coming to see him personally. Grabbing the datapad and securing it at her side, straightening her office uniform as she went, Shroud made sure she had everything gathered together before channeling up her magic and casting a Teleport spell, warping some thirty floors down from her office near his study, to the hallway near his private chambers. She double-checked to make certain everything was in order, straightened her mane again, made sure her uniform was tidy, checked to make sure her Cutie Mark - an inkwell - wasn't showing, and readjusted her small glasses, took a deep breath, then with a surge of confidence stepped forward and knocked gingerly on the door, five times in quick succession, followed by a pause, then twice more in quick succession. Her boss had taught her the little tune to use as a knock reserved just for her, long ago when she'd first been employed, so he'd know it was important.

She heard hoofsteps on the other side come to the door with a slightly quickened pace, knowing full well what his normal gait sounded like and knowing that that wasn't it. He opened the door briskly and looked out into the hall, and down at her with the same intense gaze she'd always known, but there was something different about it. She fought the urge to let her jaw drop at the sight of him. If he'd looked a mess three days ago, now he looked... substantially

worse, and that was the most polite thing Shroud could think to describe him.

His mane was ragged and matted all over his face, oily and filthy, his coat just as filthy and stained with sweat and smelling absolutely horrible from days without bathing. He thankfully wasn't wearing his uniform still, as that had been especially filthy and even stained with blood that when asked if he was alright, as Shroud had assumed it was his, he'd merely responded that it was nothing, putting particularly disdainful emphasis on that word as he said it. Instead, he wore a casual dress outfit, certainly not his finest and especially not in its current condition, stained with sweat just like his coat and mane and clinging to his sweat-dampened body. His good - well, *natural* eye, as he'd insisted his *new* eye was better than the old one - was bloodshot and puffy from a lengthy period without sleep. Even his normally imposing figure had slightly waned, thin from lack of food. The only thing about him in good condition at all was that damned golden eye, and even *it* was slightly dimmed as well, reflecting his previous mood perfectly as a tiny golden speck in a void of darkness. But it had begun to brighten the second Shroud appeared at his door, and even his mouth began to curve in a smile, his spirits lifting instantly.

"Shroud," he hoarsely greeted.

"Milord," she curtsied.

She didn't waste his time, and especially didn't dare bring attention to his state of being; she'd done that last time they'd spoken, and he'd very brusquely dismissed it and ordered her *not* to concern herself with his appearance, as that wasn't her job, that it was merely distracting her from her duties. Unlatching the datapad from her uniform, she presented it to him, floating it over to him with her magic.

With a hopeful smile on her face, she said, "Sir, I found it. I... I hope."

Silvertongue took it from her weakly and hovered it in front of his face, gazed at it sternly and began to scrutinize it. He scrolled down on the document slowly at first, his face slight with curiosity as he read through it; Shroud was not surprised that he could read whatever bizarre language the document was in. This continued for only a matter of seconds until he reached the point she'd marked, and instantly, his magic seemed rejuvenated, his face brightening as much as his horn and his golden eye beginning to regain its luster and fill the black vacuum with gold once again. His smile was contagious, and she smiled as well, knowing she'd done her job well.

"It is it, isn't it?" she asked excitedly.

"It most certainly *is*, Shroud," he nodded, "At long last... after all these great many years, I *finally* get a chance to read that which I went to such great lengths to acquire. I have waited *ages* to have this opportunity... and now that it's here, I can hardly believe it." He noticed her looking eagerly at him, not expecting praise but genuinely glad his mood was improving. He

smiled. "Shroud, please, come inside. We have important matters to discuss."

"Oh, yes, of course milord," she hastily nodded, following behind him into his chambers.

She'd been inside exactly three times before today, and it was always impressive to see, but this time, it was impressive because of how *unlike* it was to how she remembered it last. The window was broken and hadn't been fixed, his desk was missing and hadn't been replaced, and the room was in disarray in general; this was not at all as she remembered it, and she was confused as to why he hadn't contacted her with the desire to fix any of it up. It was depressing to her, to see her employer's normally diligent tidiness thrown to the wind in his mad search for whatever this document was. Maybe now that he had it, she thought, things could finally return to normal around here. She stifled a laugh. Normal around here was hardly normal at all anyway. Perhaps, then, it would return to as normal as normal ever got around here, which was certainly much less exciting but just *normal*.

She watched as Lord Silvertongue took another hasty look through the document, his smile growing ever wider as he mouthed certain words to himself in an almost single-minded curiosity.

"Milord?" she hesitated, not sure if she should interrupt.

But he *did* bring her in to discuss things. Even shut the door behind her as she entered, a polite gesture she hadn't expected, since normally *she* would have been the one to close the door behind *him*, as was what she was used to. Whatever the document was, it was making him act suddenly very bright, almost cheery. It was beginning to confuse her, seeing him like this. She'd seen him glad once or twice, seen him pleased with the actions of his subordinates and heaping praise upon those that deserved it. But she'd *never* seen him with this kind of pep.

Silvertongue was shaken from his dedicated stupor. "Ah, forgive me, Shroud, I'm afraid I was distracted. I did say I had matters to discuss with you, did I not?" His smile was genuine as he turned to her. "Shroud, have you any idea what this document is?"

"No sir," Shroud shook her head, "I can't read whatever that language is. But it must be important to you, milord. You look that happiest I've seen you in... well, ever, if you don't mind my speaking candidly."

"I always appreciate a bit of candor now and again, Shroud," Silvertongue chuckled, "It's true, your discovery has certainly raised my spirits a great, great deal. I was afraid that all these years of waiting had been for naught, that this document had been lost to the ages without my knowledge and that all my plans had gone to waste. This single piece of literature you've brought to me changes *everything*. I have been awaiting this moment for longer than you could possibly imagine. With *this*... the war is finally over..."

"War, sir?" she asked tentatively.

"No matter, it is beyond your understanding, and I wish not to go over a lengthy explanation that you wouldn't believe even if I told you," he said, shaking his head, "Shroud... with this, you have proven to me that you are *most* dedicated to my service, far beyond what I'd expected of anypony. There is only one pony I think more loyal to me than you, though pitting his loyalty against yours would be a rather unfair comparison - he is, after all, bound to my service by rather... unorthodox means."

"R-right," Shroud nodded, unsure what any of that meant but appreciating the compliment, "It is always an honor to serve, sir."

"I have always expressed that diligence and hard work is key, have I not?" he smiled, "And, I reward dedication, as much as I punish failure, Shroud; I know such a thing seems impossible, but it is so *rare* to get a chance to do so, you understand. Your years of service have been long, faithful, and fruitful. And for that, I must commend you, with all due sincerity, for your dedication to me. So it is with a heavy heart and with deep regret that I inform you that... I no longer have need of your services..."

Shroud blinked, nervous and taking half a step back. She'd heard those words before, said to ponies much more robust than she and never seeing said ponies ever again. She'd often had to seek out *replacements* for them. "I... oh... y-yes, milord, um... r-right, and... yes... t-t-thank you."

His horn shined a brilliant red and fired a blast straight at her. She yelled as it struck her dead center in the forehead, expecting to feel intense pain and to be turned to ash right then and there, but that didn't happen. She hesitantly opened one eye half way and noticed that she was floating. She struggled futilely as she was lifted through the air and drawn over to him at a slow, solemn pace. Silvertongue's face was an incredibly odd sight indeed, in her opinion. She'd never seen such a sad smile before, not from him, not ever. But her mind was filled with panic more than curiosity, as she was helplessly carried through the air. What had she done wrong? Hadn't he just praised her? Thanked her for her dedication? Why was he doing this?

"Ah... Shroud, my most dedicated secretary," he sighed, "I will miss you terribly, more than you could know now, or will be able to know shortly. As I said though, I no longer have need of a secretary. Loathe as I am to see you go, I'm afraid I can't just let you up and leave. You... know too much."

"B-but milord, I-" she pleaded, knowing it was futile but desperate enough to try.

"Calm yourself, my dear," he tutted with a shake of his head and a click of his tongue, "This fidgety nature isn't *you*. What happened to the mare that was always willing and able to speak candidly with me? Don't tell me... are you... *afraid* of me, Shroud?" She gulped and

nodded with hesitation. He sighed dejectedly, "As you should be, all things considered. Ah... I do wish I hadn't needed to maintain such a reputation at times. In another time, another place, you and I could have been close friends. But that is not the way of things, regretfully yet rightfully so. Do not fear, Shroud. I am merely releasing you from my services."

She gulped again and nervously answered, "B-but... milord... p-please. W-what have I d-done?"

Silvertongue smiled lightly, "What have you done? Why, my dear, you've done me a *great* service, one far greater than anything I could ever have hoped for, and for that I shall grant you one in turn. As I said, I am releasing you from my service... but not in the, ah... *usual* way. I regret that I could not do the same for dear Doctor Blutsauger, rest his soul, but circumstances were unfortunate and I did what needed to be done. Here, though, I may act freely."

She hesitated, "I... d-don't understand."

He sighed again, "Of course you don't, and how could you? My reputation is all you know, though you know not what inspires it. But enough idle chatter and long goodbyes, I have business to attend to and can't be spending time saying farewells."

"Please... sir, I-" Shroud pleaded again.

"Shroud..." Silvertongue sighed, "Really, enough of the pleading and begging. It's not befitting to a mare of your caliber. I understand your fear, Shroud... but I'm not going to kill you."

Shroud blinked rapidly. "You're... you're not?" Her frown did not disappear. "That's... what you told me about Shadowstep."

"Ah, but there's the rub. Shadowstep *is* still alive... ah... in a manner of speaking. Fear not, Shroud, that fate will not befall you either. You've earned a reprieve. I am going to cast a spell upon you, Shroud, that will influence your mind. You will follow the commands I give you, as if they were your own thoughts. And after that, you and I will never see one another again."

Shroud's eyes widened. "You're... going to-"

"Wipe your memory, yes," Silvertongue nodded, "You know *far* too much to be allowed to keep any of it, but you've done nothing and have no means to do anything to be an obstacle in the future. A tragic waste of life." His horn glowed a dim dim. "Do you feel my magic in your head, Shroud?"

She nodded warily. "I... feel cold, sir..."

"Then the spell is working," he smiled. "When this spell wears off, you will have no



memory of this conversation,” he said firmly, his gaze unwavering from hers, his own natural eye glowing a dim blue like his horn, whilst his golden one still shone gold, “The rest of your memory will fade soon after that. You will not remember the datapad you found for me, you will not remember events from today, from this week or from the last. You will not remember ever working under my employ, nor will you remember any of the others who you have interacted with in that period. You will instead remember that you worked in a nameless, unimportant office somewhere in the Inner District, nothing more than a pencil-pushing clerk who happened to have some friends in high places by pure happenstance, whose names you cannot reveal in order to keep them out of trouble, whose names are so unimportant that you do not even accurately recall them. You will not remember anything about the Pandora building other than you had a loft there, as many well-to-do ponies are rumored to, and your identification has more than enough proof of that. You will especially not remember *me*, Shroud, and will remember instead your employer as a horrible lech with no respect for his office workers and who often made passes at you, hence the next set of instructions. Are we clear so far?”

Shroud nodded, her mind absorbing his hypnotic commands like a sponge and her eyes glowing the same dull blue that pulsed in Silvertongue’s own.

“I am going to teleport you to your private chambers now, Shroud, and the moment you arrive there you will suddenly be filled with the incredible urge to move to Utopia, and you will not question why you feel it nor what you’re leaving behind, but if asked you will say that you needed a change in scenery and to get into a new line of work. You will search your room and find your Passport, then you will collect your ample savings, and you will find the list of contacts that you have built up in your desk at my behest over the years, but will think you formed it entirely of your own accord. You will pack your things, and you will pack light with the intent to buy a whole new wardrobe - no, a new *life*, in Utopia. You will then leave immediately for the Gate when you are finished, and you will take the next luxury airliner to Utopia, disembark, and make a new life there, and will never think back on your life in Pandemonium ever again, blocking it from your memory because you *know* it is not worth remembering. Understood?”

She nodded again, her eyes now filling with even more blue light.

He frowned and gave a sad sigh as he slowly set her on the ground again; her eyes dimmed and slowly returned to normal. “Then... farewell, Shroud. Your reward for your service to me is to live the rest of your life in peace, though I regret that it may yet still be short.”

“Goodbye... Lord Silvertongue,” she said with a deep bow.

His horn flashed bright silver, and then, she was gone. He stood there a moment in silence, before hovering the new datapad back over to him and regaining most of his pep instantly. “Now then... to business.” He closed his eyes, his horn glowing a dull black, and he spoke out with his mind. “Shadowstep.”

The voice on the other end came instantly. "Milord."

"Well done on your observations earlier, my boy. I am glad to see that even with all the chaos of their most recent encounter, you still remained hidden. It was... intriguing, getting to watch the Elements of Harmony in action again, though I am disappointed that their dire straits is making them so ineffective. A more engaging battle would have been entertaining to watch, a welcome distraction indeed. Still, they are very much able to defend themselves, tapping into their deepest reserves like that. I suppose you and I are still of the opinion that a direct confrontation would not be the best course of action then?"

"Aye, milord. Even while starving, they put up a rather decent show," Shadowstep's voice said warily, "But that is irrelevant, is it not? I thought I was to simply kill the Chronomancer if given the opportunity."

Silvertongue laughed, "Not for long, dear boy. You see... I have a *new* assignment for you..."

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A flash and a pop, and suddenly six mares flashed into existence just inside the northern entrance of a canyon, where a massive storm cloud was rapidly dissipating overhead. It did not take long for the dark purple unicorn in the group's horn to starting glowing again, grabbing hold very suddenly of the pink earth's pony's neck and whipping her through the other four to make eye-to-eye contact.

"Red Velvet," Starlight Shadow sneered, "You... you *imbecile*! How *dare* you utilize your fear-mongering illusions against *me*!"

Velvet smiled dumbly, her voice slightly slurred. "I don't..." She stopped a second as her stomach rumbled uncomfortably. She let out a dull belch that made Starlight's eyebrow twitch and the others to make faces of disgust. "Heh... excuse me. Um... I don't know what came over me, boss. I might have gotten a... little out of control. Heh... ow... my head hurts..."

"A *little* out of control?!" Havocwing blurted from nearby, "Red, you practically *ate* everypony, you bucking nutcase!"

"Aww, were you scaaaaaared, Havoc?" Velvet giggled, "Mmm... I haven't tasted *you* in, wow... like, forever? Heh heh... *tasted*..."

Inspid stifled a giggle. "Like, wow. Red's *totally* wasted. Hey Curie, isn't Red, like, *totally* wasted?"

Curaçao smiled lightly. "Ah... oui. She seems... euh... ivre. *Vraiment* ivre."

"No I... isn't!" Velvet shouted back. "Ohhhh... woow..." she laughed dumbly as she held her head and wobbled a bit, "I have *no* idea where I am right now. Whooooa... what's the deal? Why's it so *dark*?. Heyyy, and where did those other weirdos get to?"

Starlight shook Velvet a little, bring the earth pony's attention back to herself, "You have overstepped your bounds for the last time, Velvet! I grow tired of forcing myself to monitor your activities. The others are able to carry out their assignments without any involvement or intercession on my part, why can't you follow *their* example?"

"Um... because... I'm better? Maaan can't this wait 'til morning? My head hurts..." Velvet answered half-heartedly. Without warning she let out another belch in Starlight's face. Starlight barely flinched, and immediately slammed Velvet's face into the dirt. "OW! Owwww... heyyy, watch iiiiit..."

"And your *impudence* vexes me so," Starlight sighed with great annoyance, "I suppose I had a foolishly optimistic dream, that were you to display how powerful you truly were, you'd desire to work *with* us to further father's designs, *not* become suddenly avaricious and attempt to administer our solution to everything yourself! You believe that *you* are powerful, Velvet? You only are at the pinnacle of potential when ponies are *petrified* in your presence. Without that, you are *nothing*, you hear me? *Insignificant*."

Velvet laughed lazily at Starlight. "Ohhh... man, whaaat? You're *mad* at me... or something? Whaaaaaat? It this because I kiiinda got carried away and found out your fear or something? Because oh woow, that stuff was *goood*... hee hee."

"That is a quandry I mean to quash!" Starlight snapped, her horn glowing brighter than ever, "You *dare* to insinuate that I am terrified of *anything*? I may dread losing our father's praise and love for me, but *you* are afraid of that all the same! Father would not wish that I stand idly by whilst you undermine my authority *again*! Time for your punishment... *sister*."

Starlight's magic surrounded Velvet and with all her might, she slammed her into the nearest wall of rock. She then whipped her around and slammed her into the opposite side, back and forth multiple times. Insipid, Curaçao, and even Havocwing all visibly winced with each crash, as the impacts were breaking apart the rock like it was nothing. Starlight drew Velvet over after several minutes of this treatment; the earth pony's broken body floated heavily in the air, limp and bloody.

Starlight sneered when Velvet's voice came, a dumb laugh. "Wooo... oh... yeah wow. Um... were you trying to do something? If you're trying to hurt me... uh... maybe you'd better ask daddy for help? He did a better job..."

Starlight's eyebrow angrily twitched, and in her anger she forgot she even had magic to

use and physically tackled her sister and roughly pushed her into the dirt, throttling her with her bare hooves.

“Shut up! Shut up shut up *shut up!*” Starlight shouted, “You stupid, insubordinate *cow!*”

“Ow- ow- hey- ow- whoa-” Velvet tried to say as her head was smacked into the ground.

“I said *shut up!* Why won’t you *listen?!?*”

Starlight was about to slam Velvet back into the ground again when her attention was drawn by a cough from somewhere nearby. She and all the others snapped their heads over to face that direction and began frantically looking for the source. Somepony had snuck up on them? Impossible.

Starlight narrowed her eyes and scrambled forward, accidentally dropping Red Velvet sloppily to the ground in her haste. “Who’s there? Reveal yourself! I will not hesitate to vaporize this entire stretch of wasteland, and you along with it!”

The inexplicable shadows of the nearby rock formation actually *laughed*, then suddenly melted away and merged into a single form, which slowly began to walk towards the six mares with a calm stride, undeterred by Starlight’s threat. It gradually solidified into the form of a pegasus stallion, with grand wings of silvery metal that shined with reflection from the light given off by Starlight’s horn. The mares were all off-put not just by his outlandish, nightmarish appearance, but also-

“Oh man... what is that *smell?*” Havocwing blurted as she shielded her nose and frantically waved a hoof in front of her face, “Who bucking let one go?! *Inspid!* Geez! Lay off the daisy burritos, sis. You could peel *paint* with that.”

Inspid balked and looked actually genuinely offended, “Hey, whoa, like, not cool, Havoc! I *totally* wouldn’t do something like that in front of Curie! Maybe it was *you?!?* You ate all *your* hay tacos with that, like, hot sauce and junk?”

Starlight stepped forward, ignoring the smell and the petty squabbles of her sisters, and faced the intruder, who, much to her surprise, suddenly bowed in her presence. He addressed her, his tone polite but his voice deep with a hint of reverberation in it, and strangely *dark*, for lack of a better word.

“Starlight Shadow,” he greeted.

Starlight blinked, unsure what to make of this. “You... are acquainted with me?”

“I know plenty more than just your name and who you are, my dear,” he smiled, his

pointed black and yellow teeth not at all inviting, “You’ve all been very busy mares.”

Velvet slowly got to her hooves and looked over at the intruder last, and her eyes instantly widened, her breath catching in her throat. “Oh... ohhh man! It’s... it’s the pegasus from the Chronomancer’s fear visions!” She hastily ran a bloody tendril through her mane, getting more blood all over herself and slicking it back. She turned hurriedly to Curaçao. “Oh, Curaçao, you’ve gotta help! Is my hair straight? How do I look? Do I look good? Is my breath okay?”

Curaçao blinked in confusion and disgust. “Ah... oui? Um... you... look like un meurtrier sanglant? Euh... a bloody murderer? You smell like one too... berk...”

Velvet was visibly pleased and trotted over just to Starlight’s side with a very visible limp, ignoring the looks her sisters were all giving her, especially Starlight’s, as she strut around near her youngest sister in her best attempts to look sexy for the newcomer, batting her eyelashes and flaunting her assets as best she could with little flicks of her tail and mane and shakes of her rear.

“Like what you see, stud?” she cooed, completely oblivious to his uninterested expression.

“Only if he likes junk in the trunk,” Havocwing chortled.

Velvet growled and began to walk menacingly towards Havocwing, who stifled a laugh because Velvet certainly didn’t look menacing with a limp. Starlight sneered and, very suddenly, latched on to Velvet’s limping leg as the earth pony took another step and-

\*SNAP\*

Velvet tripped and fell straight on her leg, then yowled in severe pain as bone very violently tore through flesh and muscle.

“Well would you look at that?” Starlight snickered, “Somepony’s gone and broken her funny bone. I must say, I find that... humerus?” She laughed very suddenly and rustled Velvet’s blood-drenched mane, smirking over at Havocwing who was snickering as well. “Oh dear, big sister, you *really* must watch your step.”

Velvet breathed raggedly and frantically focused all of her blood to move to the site of injury, painfully snapping the bone back in to begin repairing the damage. Her face only bore the tiniest of smiles as she laughed off her apparent accident in an attempt to seem more enduring to the new object of her affections.

“Ah... ah... bucking *hell* that stings... oooh...”

Starlight clicked her tongue in disappointment. "Oh no no no, what exactly do you believe you are doing? Regenerating yourself? I am afraid that *that* sort of behavior just will *not* stand," she said, latching onto the bone with her magic and violently snapping it back out.

"AaaahhhHHHH!" Velvet screamed.

She made to lash out at Starlight for a second, but was slapped in the side of the head with her own bone, very hard, enough to knock her to the ground. Starlight brandished it at her like a newspaper warding off a misbehaving puppy.

"Now, I will only say this once: you are *never* to utilize your fear-mongering abilities on myself, *or* your sisters, ever again. Is that clear?" Velvet remained silent, and gave a very small nod. "Good. Go on then," Starlight said flatly, flicking the bone over her shoulder, "Fetch."

Velvet's breaths were frantic, erratic, and she looked up at Starlight with a fierce glare. Starlight merely stared right back, a cold calm on her face without any trace of a smile or frown. Velvet's angry sneer grew, and her blood desperately tried to stop itself from flowing uncontrollably out of the wound. Her tears weren't black or red, but perfectly normal.

Starlight was unamused at Velvet's continued stare, and her lack of movement. "I believe I issued you an *order*, Velvet. Say... here's a conundrum for you to ponder whilst you pathetically waddle over to salvage your bone: what manner of fear is it, when you're afraid your baby sister is going to extract *more* bones from your frail little body if you do not accede to her instructions? Would that be... terror? Dread? Anguish? I am afraid that *I* am not the expert on the subject here, *sister*. All fear, to me, is simply *convenient*. A mere byproduct, a nice little side-effect of my power. I certainly don't require it to *function*. Perhaps you will have a response when you have returned? Now. *Fetch*."

Velvet angrily stumbled to her hooves and awkwardly began walking her way towards where Starlight had thrown the piece of her.

Starlight turned back to face the newcomer, who whistled coyly. "Impressive. I see why *you* are the leader of this little band."

"Who are you?" she demanded, "How do you know who we are?"

The pegasus smirked, the corner of his mouth rotting away at the gesture much to Starlight's disgust. "Who *I* am is not important. Who I *work for*, however, is. I come bearing a message from your father."

The four mares still standing behind Starlight Shadow all looked aghast. Starlight herself took half a step back. "From... from father?" She shook her head and took a full step forward again. "Well what seems to be keeping you? You have a message for me? Deliver it!"

The pegasus smiled, "You father requests your presence immediately back in Pandora Tower. He has a new assignment for you."

Starlight Shadow's eyes narrowed in bewilderment, her mouth hanging open in surprise. "I... beg your pardon? Did I hear that right? New assignment?"

"Yeah, what about our *current* assignment?" Havocwing asked worriedly, throwing her hooves into the air, "We're getting damn close to-"

"Lord Silvertongue does not share your misguided optimism," the pegasus brusquely interrupted, "He's seen you battle directly against your assigned targets twice now, and he thinks that perhaps you are... unsuited to carry out the task he has graced you with."

Starlight's eyebrow twitched, "Ex... excuse me? What did you just say?"

He repeated himself, his tone becoming bored. "You're being reassigned, plain and simple. Your father has reissued your assignment to me."

"To *you*?" Starlight scoffed in disbelief, "And who are *you* that makes you so important?"

"That knowledge isn't relevant to you, Starlight Shadow," the pegasus smiled, "You've got your own... issues, to worry about?" he added, pointing over at the slowly limping Red Velvet.

Starlight sneered at the earth pony for just a moment, then turned back to the pegasus. "For that matter, how would father even know about our recent... issues... should we have had any in the first place?" she hastily added.

The pegasus smirked again, "If I may paraphrase my master here, my eyes and ears belong to him - what I see and hear, so too does he. I have been watching you all very carefully, and your father is most displeased with your lack of progress. He has a new assignment for you, so you are to return to Pandora immediately."

"That's preposterous!" Starlight spat, getting into the pegasus's face, resisting the urge to curl her nose from his stench, "You are *lying*!"

"Am I now?" he said calmly.

Velvet sat and watched miserably, trying her best not to look at Starlight as she and the pegasus talked. Her body was still in intense pain, and even her ever-flowing blood wasn't enough to dull the fiery agony in her right foreleg. She knew she needed a little bit of a power boost to really nullify it, and in desperation let her mind wander and her eyes drift towards her

other sisters. She could still see the tinges of fear on them, all of them, even Starlight just ever so slightly; but she'd just sworn not to use any of her powers on them anymore, and this seemed a bad time to try and get cocky. So she switched her attention to the other pegasus instead. To her curiosity and worry, she couldn't feel anything over the newcomer at all. She focused her energy some more. Still, nothing.

Velvet squealed in surprise and pain as a magical chain lashed around her neck and dragged her roughly towards Starlight. "Velvet! Are you sincerely attempting to empower yourself? *Now?*"

"Y-you could feel it?" Velvet gulped.

"There was suddenly a *chill* in the surrounding air," Starlight sneered, "This is *not* the ideal time to test my steadily-thinning patience."

"I... s-sorry, boss," Velvet nervously smiled, "I uh... I just need a little juice, is all... b-but I can't feel anything on the hunky new guy, so-"

Starlight's eyebrow twitched, "This is father's *emissary*! I will *not* have father blame us for some grave misfortune befalling-"

The pegasus laughed, "There's no need to worry, Starlight Shadow. The poor dear is merely confused, is all."

He took a brisk step forward and fluttered over to the pair. Starlight stepped aside a moment in curiosity, as the pegasus seemed to be looking to say something to Velvet in particular. He leaned in to Velvet's ear, and she smiled up at him in a dreamy stupor.

"Um... hi..." she chuckled, fluttering her eyelashes.

"Red Velvet... you put on a good show, I'll give you that," he breathed, "You and I are much alike. Fear is... a *powerful* tool in my arsenal. You can't smell it on me, though, can you?" She nervously shook her head. "That's because unlike all of *you*, I can't feel fear. I fear *nothing*. So I regret to say that I'm... not your type. A week and some days ago, you and I may have been able to share an... *interesting* relationship. Pity."

He stood tall and proud as Velvet looked at him with disdain. He smirked and turned his gaze to Starlight. "That's the secret to fear, you know? Everypony feels it. Those who say they don't are either liars or fools. The trick to fear though, is that it requires one to have the capability of ending in a worse situation than one is currently in. Death. Poverty. Sickness. Loss. I am unique, because unlike the rest of you, I fear not these things. I have shaken hooves with death, greeted him as an old friend, as an ally. I have no attachments, I feel no pain, I feel no hunger or desire, I feel *nothing*. Nothing but *anger*, and *hate*. The only thing left in my existence



is endless torment... or the return of the curse of mortality. I can't honestly say either is better or worse than the other..."

The pegasus smiled again, "If you have issue with the change in assignment, take it up with your father. In the meanwhile, I have mares to murder. Farewell, ladies."

"Attends!" Curaçao blurted, "What was zat? Meurtre?"

The pegasus snickered as she took to the air. "Oh, I forgot to mention that part, didn't I? Your assignment has also been upgraded to encourage lethal tactics, as of this conversation. Of course, it's *my* assignment now, so..."

"No fair!" Havocwing cried, igniting her hooves in anger, "Horseapples *you* get to finish them off! Those mares should be *ours* to kill! We earned it!"

"Afraid not, ladies. That's the way the cookie crumbles," the pegasus laughed, "Now then, I must be off if I'm to catch up to those foals before they get across the sea. You all should stop standing around and gawking and get back to Pandora, yourselves. Lord Silvertongue didn't sound too pleased that he had to reassign you..."

And with that, he was off. Velvet watched in disappointment and ran a little ways to try and catch him. "No! Wait! Come back! I didn't get your number! Aww... shoot..."

Starlight snapped her head around and shouted at her sisters, "We depart immediately! Something is amiss, and I intend to ascertain as to *what*."

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The six mares warped into Pandora in Silvertongue's private chambers with a loud pop and a bright flash. Apart from the one unicorn that strode out of the teleportation matrix with a brisk trot and began to frantically search about, the mares all stumbled slightly after warping in.

"Ah... geez," Havocwing muttered as she shook her head, "Remind me never to teleport with the boss again when she's in a hurry. I think she might have messed up my brain. Everything tastes blue."

"I don't know, it tastes more purple to me. I like purple," Grayscale added, smacking her lips. Havocwing did not appreciate the sarcasm and glared over at the other pegasus.

Starlight was quick to call out after searching around the immediate area and finding nothing. "Father?! You summoned us?! Where are you, father?!"

Curaçao held her face in her hoof. "Ah... ma capitaine, per'aps it would be best if we do

*not* teleport directly into papa's bedroom, non? Zis is... très peu professionnel."

"Yeah... uh... what if he was like, getting dressed or something?" Havocwing added with a look of disgust, "Invasion of privacy much? Eww, no thanks, I'd rather not see my dad's-"

"Father would *not* mind!" Starlight snapped a little too quickly, "I mean... he would not be *surprised*. He requested our presence immediately, so he would be expecting us. Father?!"

"He's not here," Grayscale shrugged observantly, "If he were, he'd have said something by now."

Starlight grit her teeth and stamped a hoof. "Where could he be? And what has become of his chambers? Everything is all in disarray... I do not like this. This is most unlike him..." she said with a frown. "I do hope everything is okay. What if he summoned us because some horrid fate has befallen him?"

Inspid called from over near his bed, frantically flailing a hoof in the air. "Ooh ooh! Pick me! Pick me!"

Starlight rolled her eyes. "Yes, Inspid?"

"Maybe this note tells us where he is?" she smiled, hovering the tiny scrap of paper over to Starlight.

Starlight hastily yanked it out of Inspid's grip, causing the other unicorn to trip. She frantically read over it, then tucked it inside her jumpsuit's pocket. "Come sisters. He is on the roof."

"Zee *roof*?" Curaçao blinked, "Near zee Fanal... euh, zee Beacon?"

"Yes, that would be correct," Starlight nodded, "Come sisters, we must go to him."

The six of them gathered together, and teleported away in a flash of light and smoke once more.

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Silvertongue stood on a raised section of the roof of Pandora, miles above the city, so far above that he could see the smog cover that coated the air like a blanket, the only clearing being around Pandora itself just over his head in the central area where the light of the Beacon shone its brightest. The pillar of pure, orange light fired straight up through the entire building, which through the intricate mechanisms of gryphon techno-magic and delicate application of runic symbols, was itself a massive magical power source for the field of magic that coated the

sky of the entire northern hemisphere.

He examined the datapad once again and ensured his preparations were complete, but after going over it again and again, he knew that the only thing that required his most diligent attention was his own body. So apart from bathing and grooming himself back to his most pristine appearance, he'd replaced his casual dress clothes with his fanciest, most elaborate military armor. The black metal and leather armor gleamed in the magical light of the Beacon, with thick spikes adorning the shoulders and the joints at all four legs. The trim was a red as ever, clean and shiny and looking more like fresh-spilt blood than fresh-spilt blood itself, and the chest was emblazoned with the symbol of Pandemonium, a flaming sword made of the purest fire ruby thrusting straight through a solid gold disk. He'd only worn this armor once before, on the day Nihila made him her Warden. He felt it would be ironically fitting.

His golden eye pulsed again at the sudden influx of magic sparkling behind him. His mouth curled in a grin, and he watched as the six mares he was so eagerly expecting warped into existence before him. Starlight Shadow wasted no time in stepping forward, almost running in fact, to stand before him and bowing deeply. The others behind her stumbled slightly again as they were warped rather unexpectedly and haphazardly due to her rush.

"Father, we departed as soon as you called," she said eagerly.

"Starlight Shadow, my dearest daughter," he said, motioning for her to rise, "You have certainly outdone yourself with your punctuality; I was not expecting you all so soon. I instructed my messenger to give me two hours and it has been..." Silvertongue trailed off as he pulled a tiny pocket watch out of his armor's chest pocket; Starlight's eyes widened at the sight for only a brief second. "Ah... just over two hours. I take it he found you without hassle, then?"

She stood warily, her face mixed with hurt and pride, unsure what to feel about their meeting here and remembering well what his 'message' had been. "Yes, father," she nodded, "Your emissary relayed your... alteration of our assignment. If... if I may be bold enough to inquire... why? Were we not faring adequately?"

Silvertongue smiled. "How you were faring is... irrelevant. The assignment I have here for you now is merely more important. I reassigned your task with those ridiculous mares and the infernal Chronomancer to somepony more fitting, as I require your aid with a task that I can only rely upon you all to assist me with."

"So you're... not mad at me?" she asked hopefully, "I mean... at us?"

"Oh... my dear, certainly I am upset that you could not complete your assignment," he frowned, making her wince slightly, "But it is no matter, not now. As I said, this task is more important and requires your unique talents to bring to fruition. Now then, let's get to it, shall we?"

“Hey... um... pops?” Havocwing asked as she stepped forward, “You look... well, *good*. Badass, even - that armor is *boss*, pops. You’re feeling better, yeah? You look like you’re feeling better.”

He smiled again, and pat Havocwing on the head. “Yes, my dear Havocwing, I am feeling *much* better. I am glad you noticed, and I welcome your opinion of my appearance. Your kindness is appreciated.” Havocwing visibly beamed at the praise.

Curaçao stepped forward next, her chin in her hoof as she examined him more closely, her voice alight with curiosity. “Ooh là là... papa, what are zose... marques?”

Silvertongue lifted a hoof to the neck of his armor to tug it down slightly, giving them all a better look at the strange blue paint that seemed have been tattooed all over his coat. It was not randomly strewn about him, but looked painstakingly applied in just the right positions and patterns. The light of the Beacon made the paint look like it was actually glowing.

“Oh, these?” he asked, “Simply precautionary measures. I have no desire to see this task brought to ruin, and seeing as I’m still standing here right now, alive and well and with all my power still at my disposal, I can assume they are working perfectly. That fills me with nothing but confidence.” He turned to the datapad again. “If these work, then that would also make me assume the rest of these instructions will work as well. Absolutely marvelous...”

“Zey are... très jolies, papa,” Curaçao smiled, “Comment se fait-il que la peinture brille?”

Silvertongue smiled, “Peinture magique, bien sûr. C’est compliqué. Cela dit, c’est magnifique, n’est-ce pas?”

“Oui, vraiment magnifique,” Curaçao happily smiled, “Ooh là là, papa, je ne savais pas que vous parliez romantique.”

“Ha ha! Oui, je parler de nombreuses langues, ma fille. Il n’y a pas d’ironie dans mon nom. J’ai appris celle-ci il y a longtemps, pour élargir mes horizons. C’est une langue magique - littéralement, une langue de la magie. Et puisque vous la parlez si bien également, je suis persuadé que ce soir se déroulera sans incident.”

Curaçao bowed, “J’ai hâte de voir cela, papa.”

Starlight Shadow’s eyebrow twitched and she coughed to interrupt. “Father... what task would you lay before us?” she asked seriously, shooting a mildly annoyed glance at Curaçao, “You claim that it is of utmost importance, and that only *we* can be of assistance to you? Then please... explain it to us. What are we going to do?”

Silvertongue’s smile was wide. Smug. Happy. “Why... tonight, my dearest daughter... we

are going to kill a *goddess*.”

The six mares all took a half step back just in surprise at what had been said, looking at each other in confusion and hoping one of the others knew what the hell just had been said.

Starlight spoke first. “I... I beg your pardon, father?”

“Oh, you’ll see soon enough, my dear Starlight Shadow. That I *still* stand after that little comment lends me to believe my precautions were indeed successful. Brilliant! Ha ha! Oh... I have waited a *long* time for this. Ah, but we must work quickly, before our opportunity eludes us. Starlight Shadow. Red Velvet. Step forward, if you would.”

The two of them gave wary glances at one another and followed his command as asked. He passed Starlight Shadow a small device with his magic that had upon it displayed a single image of a circle, a circle decorated with bizarre markings that looked similar to the ones etched across his face and neck and presumably the rest of his figure. Starlight took it from him and studied it for a moment, curious as to what it was.

He seemed to pick up on her curiosity and explained. “A runic circle, one of the many wondrous fields of study that the gryphons perfected. The patterns of runes in this circle are very, *very* precise, and your power and control with magic makes you the ideal artist for it. I would do it myself, but the runes need to be enchanted as you go and your... *unique* magic signature makes your runes more powerful with less effort. I’m afraid I need to save what magic I have for the other phases of this task, otherwise I would at the very least assist. I believe my confidence in your ability here is not misplaced... is it?”

“No!” Starlight blurted. She hastily coughed. “Ah... n-no, father. Of course your confidence is not misplaced. I am up to the task.”

“As for you, Red Velvet,” Silvertongue addressed next, “You are to provide the ‘paint’ for Starlight’s ‘brush’, as it were. These rune markings need to be drawn in blood, and as much as I would like to just go out and kill enough ponies to supply her with enough material to get the job done, *your* blood is replenishable and abundant, plus you’ll be able to help correct any mistakes. This needs to be *flawless*, understand?”

“Yes, daddy,” Velvet eagerly nodded, glad to be a target of his praise and affection again, “As you say, my blood will be that which paints the picture in your mind’s eye.” She snickered over at Starlight, “See? I can do it too. It’s like poetry. I like it!” Starlight was, for what felt like the hundredth time that day, not at all amused.

The pair of them stepped forward to where Silvertongue was directing them, and immediately set to work on their assigned task. The two shared a few distant glances at one another, clearly miffed that they were working together so quickly after they’d just gotten through

fighting with one another, but putting aside their squabbles if only just for him. Silvertongue, in the meantime, turned to the other four.

“What about me, pops?” Havocwing asked eagerly, igniting her hooves in anticipation and poise, “What do you need *me* to do?”

Silvertongue smiled and spoke to Havocwing first, referring to his datapad as he spoke. “Havocwing, I require the circle to be surrounded with a flame, of a *very* specific intensity,” he explained as he handed her a small device like her sisters’, “Once your sisters complete their runic circle, you’ll go to work and create a wreath of flame around it. Like their work, this barrier needs to be *precise*, and will need to be maintained until the ritual is complete, after which the flames will die out naturally. Can you maintain it until that point with those guidelines in mind?”

“Hell yeah, pops!” Havocwing boasted as she happily took the device and started to read it immediately, “That’s no problem for a pro like me! You just watch, I’ll make you proud!”

He turned to Insipid next. “Insipid.”

“Yes, daddy?!” Insipid bounced happily, her smile wide and eyes aglow.

“You’re going to be assisting Curaçao with her assignment by-”

“Eeee! Curie!” Insipid grinned even wider as she grabbed the blue pony in a crushing hug, “We’re partners! Eeee! Oh. My. Stars. So cool!”

“Oui, très bien,” Curaçao smiled nervously, “Ah... per’aps we should let papa finish zough, non?”

“Oh, yeah, right,” Insipid nervously chuckled, not letting go of her grip in the slightest and rubbing her cheek subconsciously against hers.

Silvertongue smiled, and gave Curaçao a small device much as he’d given Starlight and Havocwing, this one with a three-dimensional image of a pony on it, apparently covered in the same markings Silvertongue himself was. “Curaçao, you and Insipid are going to be applying these markings to yourselves, and to your sisters. I’ve provided you with more than enough of the enchanted paint to accomplish the task perfectly. While right now you and your sisters have no need of them, they may very well after the next phase of the plan. Please ensure they’re completely accurate, because there may be *grave* consequences if they aren’t. Understand?”

“Oui, papa,” Curaçao bowed as she took the paper and turned to Insipid, “Ma chérie, let us get to work, oui? Allons-y!”

“Weeeee!” Insipid cheered.

Grayscale stepped forward next. "And me, dad?"

"Grayscale, you will be helping me with the final part of this first stage. Your gravity control will help direct the magical energies of the runic circle into a single point, which will tear through the veil that lies between our mortal realm and that of the Dreaming," Silvertongue nodded, handing her her own device with instructions. She nodded in return as she took it in her mouth and set it upon the ground to read.

Almost an hour of constant work followed, and finally Starlight and Velvet completed the runic circle. Silvertongue looked over it painstakingly to ensure it was accurate, then called Havocwing over to surround it with flames as the next step. When the three of them were finished, they returned to the others; Starlight and Velvet specifically walked over to Curaçao and Inspid, and the two began drawing the runic markings all over their own bodies as much as they'd done so with the others. Like their sisters before them, they needed to first strip. Velvet was barely embarrassed at all, though Curaçao was having some minor trouble trying to draw the markings on Velvet without turning away in disgust at her sister's scarred body, wondering why Velvet didn't go through the trouble to heal; Starlight was heavily embarrassed and tried her best not to look at Silvertongue, and fidgeted slightly and nervously tapped her hooves. Once fully marked, they suited back up and stood by their father to await the next stage.

"Now, my daughters, you shall all bear witness to something entirely beyond your mortal comprehension, something that even I have a hard time believing is about to be done. Only seven ponies in this world will ever know what we've accomplished here today. This... this is history in the making!"

His voice was filled with pride and wonder, and it inspired them all to smile in turn. Whatever was getting their father in such a bright mood *must* be good; they'd never seen him so... happy. So excited. So *eager*. He beckoned Grayscale to follow him, and she did so, flicking her wings to full wingspan and holding them there once she was in position. The other five mares all took a half step back as they felt an intense burst of gravity radiate from the center of the circle, strong enough that it started to suck the flames into it to create a very bizarre pyramid shape. Silvertongue cleared his throat, and began to read from the datapad aloud; Curaçao listened intently, silently muttering the words to herself, while the other five merely listened without a clue what was really being said.

"Le sang est l'essence de notre vie  
La magie, notre raison d'exister  
Leur réunion libérera des conflits  
Notre monde qui en a tant enduré  
Par la Lumière, nous aidons ceux que nous aimons  
Par les Ténèbres, nous vainquons toute appréhension  
Ensemble, elles sont un pouvoir sans fin

Qui changera un mal en un bien!  
Apparais, Alicorne, et réponds de tes péchés!"

The circle began to glow, brighter than even the Beacon just a few dozen yards away, and the markings along the coats of all six mares and one stallion began to shine bright and clear. Suddenly, there was a brilliant flash and a colossal explosion rocked the entire building, shattering windows all the way down all two hundred floors. The mares were all knocked aside, rather not expecting these occurrences to happen, as the roof itself shuddered and cracked, starting from the center of the runic circle outwards, slowing and stopping just before the surrounding ledges. As they clamored to their hooves, they could see that the Beacon had slightly waned in strength, losing a great deal of its brightness and hue. The spot where the circle had been was now shrouded in a faint cloud of purple magic that glittered like diamonds in sand. Only Silvertongue was left standing tall and unwavering, his face alight with an almost deranged excitement as the magical smoke slowly cleared until there were only traces of sparkly magic left amongst a cloud of slowly clearing regular smoke. Even now, the other six ponies could see the silhouette of a figure there in the smoke, slowly trying to stand and doing a rather poor job of it. Now the non-magical smoke cleared at last, and the six mares' eyes all widened in surprise, gasps spreading throughout their number all at once.

There was a pony there now, one unlike any they'd ever seen before. She was tall, taller even than their father, thin and elegant, built with the figure of a pony familiar with graceful posture. Her coat was a ghastly color, not quite purple but not quite black, nearly pitch and certainly darker than Insipid's but of a different shade than Starlight's, shimmering with cleanliness and luster. Her mane and tail gleamed a brilliant silver not unlike their father's coat, almost metallic in their shine. With their shape and rigidity they certainly had the appearance of bladed weapons. Her mane was in a wild, spiked style that was almost crown-like entirely on its own, while her tail trailed behind her, lifted and wing-like with sharp tips at the end of the feathery streaks, like a multi-bladed scythe. A crown rested upon her head, made of a dark gray metal that they did not recognize that did not so much reflect the light as absorb it, adorned in the middle with a fiery orange jewel, its center a ball of red that darted back and forth, a pupil-like taint of purple in its *own* center - a Gorgon's Eye of the most pristine quality. She wore matching bracelets on each leg and a matching necklace. She was otherwise completely nude, making it easy to see her most defining features: her body's tone was incredibly lithe, leanly muscled and physically intimidating even compared to Grayscale Force; her long, sharp horn, nearly a foot-and-a-half in length and made their father's look quite inferior; her great, long wings, certainly of a greater wingspan than any pegasus they'd ever seen before, made both Grayscale and Havocwing fidget in embarrassment; and, of course, her Cutie Mark, a pair of black, bat-like wings adorned with red spikes along the tops, with a crooked red tail streaking through the center.

She stood and glared at Silvertongue with such a fiery intensity that the six mares could actually *feel* the hatred emanating from her, as if somepony had suddenly thrown them all within an oven and cranked up the heat. Red Velvet licked her lips in excitement at the prospect,



feeling a powerful darkness that permeated the air around the creature, practically *oozing* towards them. Starlight Shadow watched in subdued awe, able to sense a great deal of magic radiating from the creature and worriedly calculating in her head just how much magic this pony contained. Insipid, too, was noticing this veritable cascade of magical might, visibly fidgeting and shuffling her hooves from the sheer *thrill* of being in the presence of so much power. She occasionally stole glances at her father, as if she wasn't sure she was allowed to be here. Havocwing's jaw dropped, stupefied at what she was seeing and envious of the colossal hate this one pony was capable of without having uttered a single word. Grayscale and Curaçao kept passing each other looks as subtly as they could: small, muted glances with one another in an attempt to communicate with one another that they were both busy trying to figure out just what they were seeing. Silvertongue, of course, was totally and completely unfazed by the raw effervescent hatred the mare before him was pouring out, and stepped forward with purpose, in confident, even strides.

Her voice was ice, sending chills down the spines of all present. The air around them reacted much the same, becoming fiercely chilling. They'd been inside an oven until now; the sudden chill became a wash of shocking cold.

"My *former* Warden, Silvertongue... what have you *done*?!"

Silvertongue clicked his tongue and shook his head. "Tsk tsk, milady, such a harsh tone. Whatever seems to be the matter? Can't you read my mind?" he added with a smirk as he tapped his temple, where the blue runic markings still glowed fiercely. "Well, if you're going to insist on utilizing *names* rather than *titles*, milady, I suppose it is only polite to reciprocate the gesture. Welcome to the mortal world, *Nihila*."

Nihila struggled to move, but found her movements greatly restricted. She looked about herself and at the glowing circle of runic markings she was in; the runes of blood were glowing a dark magenta that increased in intensity whenever she attempted to move. She glared at him with even more ferocity than before, as if she was attempting to set him on fire with her gaze alone.

He tugged at his collar with a playful grin on his face, showing off the markings on his neck. "My my, is it getting hot out here? We're still in the midst of the Winter season. How bizarre."

"How... *how is this possible*?! " she demanded.

Silvertongue was careful not to reveal the datapad he had now latched to his side. "I must say I regret that I'll never be able to thank dear Galdorhoff for his marvelous work, *A Treatise on Alicorns*. See, there's an *awful* lot of ancient Dark magicks in these spells, and the gryphons didn't exactly see eye to eye with him. Exiled him years before you and I even met. But I knew of him. I sought him out. I ensured his greatest work was not lost. And now, after all

these years, his work has finally been allowed to shine. A pity he'll never see it."

Nihila snapped, "You traitorous *whelp*. I will *destroy* you!"

Her horn flared with the brightness of a small star, its color a bright, sinister orange. Silvertongue's face stiffened for an instant as she unleashed a blast of magic at him from nearly point-blank range. The blast was sent careening off with a resounding explosive blast that shook the entire tower again. As the blast ricocheted away, it circled the Beacon's light like liquid caught in a drain, igniting and clearing smog all around it as it went. Silvertongue's smug grin widened as he pat Starlight Shadow proudly on the shoulder; the unicorn had stepped to his side the instant Nihila's horn had started to glow, and even now not letting her Barrier spell drop until she was sure that had been the end of it.

"You shall *not* harm my father so long as I am standing, whoever you are," she spat, her words wavering slightly at the unsettling realization that the blast she'd just reflected had carried more force in it than she'd seen from any other pony but herself and perhaps Twilight Sparkle, and of course her father. She hid the pain well.

"Well *done* my darling Starlight," Silvertongue praised, causing the purple unicorn to smile with pride, her face alight with confidence, "Strong enough to resist even the strength of an alicorn's magic. Outstanding... absolutely outstanding..."

"Alicorn, father?" Starlight asked, her eyes not daring to dart away from the creature she held in her sights.

"You..." Nihila hissed, her words dripping with poisonous bile that made Starlight take another step back as if she was suddenly very, very ill. There was no physical harm, but the venom that oozed from the creature's words stung as if they did. "You miserable, insignificant little *wretch*. I gave you *life*! You soul belongs to *me*! You would betray me as well?!"

Starlight blinked nervously, unsure what to make of any of that series of sentences directed at her and her alone. Gave her life? Owned her soul? What did those things mean? She turned briefly to her sisters, but they all looked as confused as she did, even Curaçao and Grayscale. Only her father did not seem fazed by this strange talk. All she knew was that this pony, whoever she was, was incredibly, no, *phenomenally* powerful, certainly strong enough that she could destroy her father in an instant if she so wanted. Starlight narrowed her eyes and stepped back into form. Nothing this mare could possibly do or say was going to stop her from keeping her father safe.

"I think you are forgetting, Nihila, one very important aspect of betrayal," Silvertongue said with a pompous gesture of straightening his mane with a hoof, "That word implies that one was originally loyal to you, and then betrayed that trust. The thing about me is, I was *never* loyal to you. So how could I betray you?"

Nihila's eyes narrowed and she hissed again, her words so filled with hate and anger that five of the six mares suddenly felt the same sick feeling Starlight had felt earlier. Only Red Velvet did not succumb, actually stepping forward with an almost awed expression on her face. This creature, this Nihila, was making her mind light up with inspiration, with dark intentions. The abyssal aura that wafted about in the air was almost intoxicating, and she was certain that if a lesser pony than her father had been the target of these words, they would be nothing more than a crumbling heap upon the ground, trapped in terror at the prospect of such a thing even existing.

"You *lie*," she raged, "I've seen your every thought, I've seen your every *action*!"

"I know you have," Silvertongue smiled knowingly, "All a part of the game, milady."

"You betrayed Harmonia to serve me! You say that you are still loyal to *her*? Ha! You have committed acts that she would *never* forgive, regardless of your intentions."

"Hmmm..." Silvertongue hummed, "I suppose if I really cared what Harmonia thought anymore, that might be an issue. I mean, after all, look at all the nefarious work I've spread across this great continent! I built a monument to a goddess of evil that literally obscures the sky with a cloud of darkness and horror. I slaughtered a peace-loving race of scholars and engineers after goading them into helping me *build* that monument. I created a curse that taints the very land itself and turns the dead into horrible undead abominations. I order murders on a nearly weekly basis, I have ensured that a city of millions is so fraught with strife and disorganization that it spreads disparity and hate like a virus in a self-perpetuating cycle. Oh, yes Nihila, that *definitely* sounds like somepony loyal to Harmonia."

Nihila angrily flared her horn again and attempted to attack him out of pure, unadulterated rage from being taunted. The blast of magic was, again, reflected haphazardly away by Starlight Shadow's Barrier, but the force of the blast knocked her off balance and she stumbled for a moment before recovering. She hoped her father would speed this up; this other creature was certainly powerful enough that she wouldn't be able to withstand too much more of that kind of abuse.

Silvertongue laughed. "I have waited *centuries* for this opportunity, Nihila. Year after year, decade after decade, waiting for you to finally drop your guard and to allow me but a moment of total privacy that I may at long last complete my mission that I set out upon all those years ago. And that's where these wonderful little ponies came in." He turned to Starlight and rustled her mane playfully, making her blush and happily smile at him. She was glad that she must have done something right. "Ah... you were so *easily* distracted by the prospect of destroying your counterpart that you ignored me to watch as our plan came to fruition."

Starlight blinked in confusion again. "'Our' plan, father? What... what do you mean? This

creature had something to do with all this?"

"In a manner of speaking," Silvertongue said softly, "If we all want to be *really* technical about things, Nihila here could be considered a... benefactor, of sorts. She is mostly responsible for helping your six recover from your accident. I know you don't remember her - you were all unconscious at the time."

Nihila snorted, "Why not tell her the same story about me that you told them all about you, Silvertongue? Why not tell them I am their 'mother' and be done with it?"

"M-mother?" Starlight sputtered in a panic.

"Whoa... dad, you and her?" Havocwing whistled, "Wow pops... you've got *game*- ow!"

Grayscale had elbowed her hard in the side. "Keep quiet, idiot."

Silvertongue frowned in her direction. "For shame, Nihila. Trying to manipulate these girls so. Such a pathetic attempt to win them over to your side. I am their father. I have given them all my heart," he added with a smirk, "A piece of me resides in them all. That's why they help me here and now with my designs."

"Father... what does this all mean?" Starlight asked tentatively.

Silvertongue smiled, "Merely that you accomplished the *true* task I set out for you. Nihila here was so focused on keeping you six girls in her sights, to ensure that her 'investment' was seen to completion, that you corrupted the Elements of Harmony and helped her to use them as weapons against Harmonia. That you failed in that task is irrelevant - had you succeeded, then Nihila would be watching all twelve of you to ensure that her task was carried out the rest of the way. I would not be affected in the least, for all the while... she completely ignored *me*. After centuries of being her Warden, far longer than her previous one, I grew accustomed to what it felt like to have her watching my thoughts, my actions. You said as much, did you not, Nihila? I knew the moment that feeling left my mind that I was free to carry out *my* plans without your knowing. I relish this moment to *gloat*.

"Ha!" Silvertongue laughed loudly, "To think that after all these years, I've still got the touch. I convinced so many of Harmonia's loyalest servants to follow me across the sea to make war, all of them once pacifists but each of them willing to take up arms against the darkness. I convinced the gryphons that I was bringing good to the world through my efforts, despite the fact that my plan would coat half the entire planet with evil. But none of that compared to convincing an *omnipotent goddess* that I was loyal to her for over eight hundred years, right up until the very end when I finally got the opportunity to reveal my intentions. How does it feel, Nihila? The Goddess of Disparity, who herself exemplifies evil and all that goes with it, deception included, *deceived*. Ha ha ha *ha ha!*"

"You..." Nihila seethed, flaring her horn again and firing another powerful burst of magic at Silvertongue. Again, it was reflected away by Starlight Shadow and sent careening off into the Beacon's funnel effect, though this time the blast had been strong enough that Starlight winced and fell to her knees.

"Father... what does all of this mean?" Starlight asked worriedly, unsure what to make of any of this. Her purpose in life this past week or so had been to turn those six mares into weapons, as per her father's orders... but that was all a ruse? Just to trick this goddess into lowering her guard so that her father could betray her? She admired her father's brilliance, but... something felt wrong about it.

"It means, my dear," Silvertongue smirked as he pushed her back defensively and stood in front of her, "That I win. It was nice to see you in the flesh for the first time, Nihila. So sorry that it won't be for much longer. Again, you fall for simple deception and waltz merrily into my trap."

He pointed at the Beacon, which was now glowing incredibly bright and had grown in thickness to the point that it had expanded beyond the hole in the center of the roof and was eating away at the concrete and metal around it.

"The Beacon is more than just a magical font of energy that coats the heavens with the powers of Darkness. It is also a magnet for those same Dark energies, which you have been funneling into it steadily since your arrival here. That power will be turned against you, and you will be powerless to stop it. It will destroy you."

Nihila laughed, a chilling sound that seemed to freeze the air around them all. "You bluff. What do you think you can do, hmm? If you destroy me... your precious world will be thrown out of balance permanently. It will never recover. You would destroy your world, just to sate your precious ego, Silvertongue? Or is this to make amends to Harmonia, for betraying her?"

"On the contrary, Nihila," Silvertongue said, his grin widening, "Destroying you is *exactly* what I'm going to do, and I know *exactly* what the consequences are. What's the matter? Don't you trust me?"

Nihila angrily flared up her horn again, and once more Starlight was ready with another Barrier spell. Nihila did not relent and continued to fire the stream of magic at Silvertongue, slowly forcing the bubble of magic to deflate inwards.

Starlight strained to keep up the shield, and in a panic, turned to her sisters. "Sisters! To me! Lend me your power! We must protect father!"

Four of the other five sprinted forward and entered the shield as asked. Only Velvet

hesitated. As she watched Nihila's power exploding against Starlight's, tearing away at the layers of the shield, she saw the goddess turn very briefly towards her.

*"You... my favorite daughter,"* a voice called in her head, *"You are tainted, imperfect... but there is something to you that has always struck me as exquisite. There is room for you, by my side. Only for you... and only if you can strike fear into those who claim to be fearless."*

Velvet's eyes teared up as, as for a fleeting second a rush of warmth spread through her heart, her mind, her soul. A familiar feeling, as though looking upon Nihila at last with a veil no longer clouding her vision, seeing the truth for what it was.

"M-mommy?" she breathed.

She looked between Nihila, and then to Silvertongue and her sisters. She hadn't noticed Starlight turned to face her, screaming at her to enter the bubble and assist them. She then turned to Nihila again, and without a second thought, began to walk towards *her* instead. She could barely hear Starlight's outraged cries. She turned to look at her sisters again, and for some reason, she felt the urge to smile. Her grin spread wide, fanged. Her glance then tilted upwards to look at Silvertongue.

Her heart stopped. He looked sad. She'd never seen him sad.

And, in an instant, she turned back to Nihila and shook her head, then made haste into the bubble herself. The others all gladly accepted her into their ranks, letting her past as she stepped up to Silvertongue and nervously hugged his leg. His smile returned instantly.

*"So... even you betray me..."* Nihila's voice said, legitimately disappointed, *"Without me... none shall know true fear ever again..."*

Velvet joined her sisters at last, and Starlight enveloped the six of them in a white glow, and very suddenly the Barrier reinforced itself and expanded. Nihila sneered and focused more power into her blast, forcing back their empowered Barrier slowly. Her maddened glare and enraged snarl sent waves of panic washing over them all.

Silvertongue laughed. "What seem to be the matter, Nihila? Feeling... weakened, perhaps? Unable to stand up to the six mares that hold together, united, as much power as you, alone? I do hope I didn't catch you at a bad time, milady. I know you haven't had much time to recover, after all. But I digress - it was nice to see you in the flesh at last. Now, I bid you *adieu*."

His horn glowed red, and with it the Beacon's massive energy began to flow towards him in tiny spark-like orbs, floating through the air like fireflies and collecting around his horn. He lifted his datapad again, and as before began to speak aloud from it in a language that was lost to all but Curaçao, Silvertongue, and Nihila herself.

“Alicorne, voici ton heure dernière  
Face à ma force, tu finiras par fléchir  
J'entends à présent l'ultime Lumière  
Dans les Ténèbres, je t'enverrai dépérir  
Ton enveloppe physique, pour l'éternité  
De sang et de magie sera dépossédée!”

As the incantation completed, Silvertongue's horn glowed a brilliant gold and pierced through the Barrier like lightning, striking Nihila in the chest. She screamed in pain, and her head snapped away, causing her spell to wildly screech through the air, igniting smog. She collapsed to her knees, firing the spell downwards towards the city, slicing through a large chunk of the Pandora Tower as she did so. Then, in an instant, her spell was canceled and she writhed in agony. Her screams were haunting, causing the air around them to blacken in horror at what was passing through it. Her eyes rapidly flashed between normal and a shining white, and with a final cry, her body exploded in a shower of golden sparks that rocketed out and up from the circle like fireworks. The six mares all watched in awe as they slowly began to coalesce, then without warning, raced towards Silvertongue himself and impacted with his chest, knocking him flying back and slamming into the metal railing with enough force to tear through it.

“Father!” Starlight cried, frantically flaring up her horn brighter than ever and catching him with her magic, safely pulling him back onto the tower roof. She and the others hastily ran over to him to see if he was okay; only Red Velvet did not move as quickly, holding her chest as if in pain, for only a second before joining them at his side. He did not get up.

“Father... father, no...” Starlight said in horror.

“Dad... c'mon... get up...” Grayscale worriedly added.

“Daddy...” Insipid sniffed.

His body suddenly began to glow the same golden light as his horn had before, and they all stepped back in shock. He staggered to his hooves, obviously in colossal pain judging from his awkward steps alone, but more from his anguished screams. Starlight reached out with a hoof, desperate to lend him aid, but Curaçao stopped her and beckoned for her just to watch. She visibly ached, watching him in the throes of agony. He clutched his head and screamed some more, and his horn began to *grow*, a full few inches until it was about a foot-and-a-half in length. A loud ripping sound and a flash of light, as suddenly the traces of wings burst out of the sides of his leather and metal armor. His whole body grew slightly in turn, legs lengthening and figure elongating, muscles strengthening and pressing against his armor. The glow gradually dimmed and died, and Silvertongue lay there for a long time before moving again. He warily started to get to his hooves, the runic markings that once graced his coat melting away into the air without a trace. Starlight rushed over to him and anxiously helped him stand.

“Father... are you okay?” she asked worriedly, “Please, father... speak to me...”

His breathing was ragged and short, his eyes closed. She could see that something was wrong with his left eye even here. Well, wronger than usual. She brushed her head under his chin to try and help him raise his head. The others had come over as well and helped where they could to get him over to the railing again so he could lean against it and recover. His breathing slowly returning to normal, and he blinked his eyes open. On instinct, they all took a half step back from him as he turned his gaze towards them. His left eye now was something completely different than what they were used to seeing. Completely gold, shining with a brilliance they'd not yet seen in it before, with streaks of the same magic tearing outwards out of the socket and spreading along his face like veins. There was no longer any trace of the void of blackness there, and without it no indication of where that eye of his was looking whatsoever.

“Wow... pops, you look...” Havocwing muttered, awe in her voice as she hesitantly reached out to touch one of his wings; Starlight swat her hoof away.

“Pretty...” Insipid cooed, “You look *pretty*, daddy...”

“Imposing,” Starlight added in an attempt to return some sense of masculinity to the praise, “What's happened to you father? You look like that other pony did... that Nihila character.”

Silvertongue smiled broadly and shook off his stupor, then flicked his new wings gingerly, eying them with curiosity and awe.

“Well now... that *is* something, isn't it?” he laughed, “They feel almost natural, as if they've always been there. Intriguing... flight was almost a dwindling curiosity to me, but now that it is so easily within my grasp, it feels as though I've always known how to.” His grin broadened. “I've done the impossible and killed a goddess... and with only few modifications to the spell, instead of simply destroying her... I have *devoured* her. Heh... heh heh... astounding. Despite minor setbacks here and there, it would seem that everything is finally falling into place.”

“So... father, if you do not disapprove of my prying,” Starlight nervously fidgeted, “With this undertaking of yours a grand success, I can assume we are to return to our original assignment?”

“No, there'll be no need for that,” Silvertongue shook his head, “You've served your purpose, I have no more need for you all to do anything of the sort.”

The six all looked tentatively at one another, then back to him. “But father,” Starlight insisted, “W-why? We have proven ourselves reliable, and if... if your intent now is to annihilate



them, surely we could-”

“I *said*, that won’t be necessary,” Silvertongue snorted in her direction, “Shadowstep’s orders are clear, and he will follow them to the letter; he will handle them himself. If you all want to do something, then by all means, find something to do. I have no more need of you all for such *menial* tasks. The rest of my designs do not require any outside influence, so you are free to do as you please.”

“But... father-” Starlight tried to interject.

Silvertongue cut her off and continued, “As for proving yourselves *‘reliable’*, that is a rather broad exaggeration. You failed to corrupt those six as I’d requested,” he briefly looked at Grayscale, “With one exception, but obviously that was only temporary.”

“But... you just said that didn’t matter,” Havocwing pointed out, earning a sharp glare from Starlight in the process.

“I said it didn’t matter in the grand scheme of things, to be sure, but not that it did not have impact upon your reputes. Then, when your assignment was changed to simply capturing them, you failed at that as well; were they in my custody now, I could simply be done with it all, rather than squander Shadowstep’s use - I require him for another purpose, and him wasting time killing mares that should not be an issue may prove a delay. While before these failures I was certain you could easily kill them, and despite witnessing what you are capable of, I have my doubts that if you went all out against them, they wouldn’t still somehow escape. You’ve all earned yourselves a track record of being incapable of dealing with those six, I am sad to say.”

“But daddy-” Red Velvet said, stepping forward, “We... we were *handicapped* before! You said we couldn’t kill them, but now... if we’re allowed... we... we *can* kill them! We’re stronger than they are, just give us a chance-”

“You’ve squandered your chances,” Silvertongue interrupted, “Normally failures would be punished harshly, but I had no need to do so to any of you so long as you stayed on task; dear Red Velvet was the exception, because Nihila was watching and would expect nothing less of me in that situation. Yet you still failed, but with what you’ve done here today, you’ve more than made amends for those failures. Even so, I have no desire to leave that chance to the wind. Those six may yet still be a thorn in my side if they reach Harmonia. Shadowstep will be more than enough. That’s my final word on the matter. Am I clear?”

“Yes, father...” Starlight frowned.

“Good,” he said firmly, “Now, I have matters to attend to, so if-”

“Papa,” Curaçao interrupted, taking a step forward, “Euh... if I may? Zere were some

zings zat zis 'Nihila' said zat bozered me. She said zat she... gave Starlight 'life'? She called 'erself our 'mozer'? What do zese zings mean?"

Silvertongue looked at her with a serious, thoughtful expression, then answered, "Why is any of that important? She was attempting to trick Starlight into flinching, nothing more."

"Papa... I *know* when somepony is lying," Curaçao frowned, "She was not. You... are 'iding somezing."

Inspid hurriedly put a hoof over Curaçao's mouth. "Curie! *Shh!* Don't, like, talk back to daddy! What's gotten into you?"

Silvertongue frowned. "Ah... Curaçao. Your ways with deception are exquisite. So talented in the art that you can even tell when *you* are being deceived, is that what you claim? You think I'm lying to you?"

"Father, please," Starlight hastily interrupted, "She is speaking out of place. Pay her no heed, I will see to it that she is reprimanded for-"

"No no, Starlight, I wish for your eldest sister to answer me," Silvertongue noted, "Go on, Curaçao. Tell me what you *really* think."

Curaçao nervously replied. "I... zink zat you know more zan you are telling us..."

Silvertongue smiled. "I appreciate your candor, and your honesty. Ironic, isn't it? After years and years of deceiving armies, civilizations, and a deity, none of whom could even tell there was anything amiss, I have at last met my match in a young mare that knows not where she even got her natural aptitude with that ability. Bravo, Curaçao. You *are* your father's daughter."

Curaçao blinked and looked around at her sisters. "Euh... merci? I... am not sure if I should be proud, or... worried, papa."

"So you want to know the truth, then?" Silvertongue nodded, "Well luckily, I can take care of that quite simply. Your dear Uncle Blutsauger followed my orders to the letter, and installed a very handy tripswitch for me to deal with should I ever need to reveal this information to you. I'd prefer it if I could keep it all from you, that you may live the rest of your short lives *without* knowing, but if you insist..." He shook his head. "You six are special. There is a name that I came up with to describe you all together, as a group. You are 'the Elements of Discord'."

Instantly, all six mares' eyes went blank, and they cried out in pain as visions raced through their heads all at once. The visions felt like dreams at first, distant and hazy, like fantasies or imaginations. Then, they progressed further until they became as ideas, curious

and awkward but with an inkling of foundation within actuality. Then, the visions continued and became vivid and real, sending sensations through them as though they weren't just dreams or ideas, but memories. These memories flashed through them, horrible in their truth and astounding in their clarity, until they became as nightmares. It all took but a few seconds, and when it was over, they all panted heavily and exhaustively, as if they'd just gone through an incredible ordeal that that strained their minds and bodies harder than they'd ever been pushed. For several moments, they all remained silent, their minds racing to try and register the thoughts and memories they now had.

Insipid was the first of the six to visibly react, falling back on her backside and beginning to sniff back tears, barely resisting the urge to let loose an ocular gusher accompanied by pained wails; Starlight and Grayscale fell back as well, their faces almost completely blank and unreadable, clearly deep in thought, the only things betraying their real emotions being their eyes, which were filled with anguish; Red Velvet fell to her knees, her hooves racing to her temples and holding her head as though in pain, not showing any of Insipid's incredible restraint and letting her tears flow forth unfettered. Only Curaçao and Havocwing's reactions were truly subdued, the former barely reacting at all and if anything looking quite pensive, while the latter remained muttering to herself, her eyes darting around the others in intense thought.

"There. It is done," Silvertongue said simply, "Now you all know the truth of your existences, the purpose for which you were created, the process and painstaking work that went into creating you. You were all birthed for one express purpose - destroying Nihila. Your powers all being conveniently helpful towards the summoning ritual was unintended, but convenient nonetheless. I knew when I went about the process of creating you that your incredible might would be difficult to tame, difficult to control and direct, so I ensured that an inkling of my magic was streamed through the spell that gave you all life. There is a piece of me inside you all - that is what makes you all so dedicated to me so quickly. With your purpose filled, you don't need to worry about anything else. I have no need of you as servants anymore, and so you may live the rest of your lives as you wish."

None of them replied to his words. It was almost as if he wasn't even there. All that they could think about was that everything they knew was a lie. They couldn't remember anything from before the 'accident' because there was nothing before it. The 'accident' to them was nothing but a series of sensations and flashes, now obviously the process of their bodies and souls being twisted and manipulated to the whims of a goddess, a goddess that they'd just finished killing at the behest of their father. Father. Was that even what he was? He was just as responsible for their creation as Nihila had been, but he seemed to be more. Only Curaçao would be able to confirm if his mannerisms amongst and towards them were genuine.

After not getting a response, Silvertongue let out a sigh. "So then... if that is all, I believe I said that I have business to attend to. I need to experiment with these new sensations and abilities I have been granted, and I'd rather like to begin immediately, so that I am prepared for the next stage of my plan. Farewell for now, young ones."

With a bright silver flash of his horn, he was gone.

Minutes passed in silence. The Beacon hummed away just off to the side, no more than a dozen yards from them, having lost the extra luster and size it had gained briefly and now at last back to normal, aside from the slight change in color, now a little more gold than orange. The roof was cracked and covered with dust from the fierce clashes of power and explosive detonations of magic. A now-empty battlefield contained within a single stretch of concrete and metal just barely more than fifty feet across; the remains of the spell circle fizzled as the remnants of the magic flecked into the air and were absorbed by the Beacon.

Havocwing cleared her throat tentatively, her voice filled with confusion and her hoof absent-mindedly shifting to the back of her head as she tried to put everything together. Her words were simple. "Well... that was... interesting..."

None of the others said anything at all, and Havoc was disappointed to see that only Curaçao was not actively appearing distressed. She took this opportunity to try and enunciate further what she was thinking, hoping somepony else would be able to help her put two and two together.

"I mean... okay. So... uh... we all just had the same visions, right? With the glass thing, and there was Uncle... Doctor... whatever, Blutsauger there and he was all going over stuff and... then pops was there and he did some stuff to... well, I guess... copies? Yeah? Copies? Of those six, right? So... does that mean we're... y'know...?"

The others all visibly looked like their moods were growing worse as she spoke, and this made Havoc fidget nervously. "I... well, I mean... okay, so... yeah. Um... okay, yeah I guess it's kind of... well no, *really* lame that we all thought what we did about them, and now it turns out we're just, uh, clones."

As she said the word, the reaction from her sisters was even worse than before, and Insipid actually started to cry as well now, joining Red Velvet in letting her tears flow and sobs be vocalized. Curaçao gave Havocwing a sidelong look as if to stop using it, before the word could do even *more* visible harm.

She nervously chuckled, "I mean, yeah, I'm pretty pissed about it, but... I guess for different reasons now than I was before. It's just... uh... well like I said. It's... interesting."

Curaçao spoke next, giving a heavy sigh. "Oui... interesting. Zat is certainly *one* way of putting it. I am glad to see zat at least I am not zee only one zinking clearly."

Havocwing rubbed her neck. "Well... the way I see it, somepony here needs to be the big mare of the family. I guess that's me, and you... what with being the oldest."

Curaçao sighed again. "Oldest... heh, zat seems très banal, now. Oui, I am zee oldest. Older zan you, 'avocwing, by no more zan... deux heures: how would you say, two hours, perhaps?"

"So what? Still the oldest," Havocwing said firmly, crossing her legs in front of her defensively.

Starlight Shadow suddenly interrupted, snapping her head up and flaring her horn brightly. Her face was red with anger, her eyes red as well from trying and failing to hold back tears, her mascara streaming down her face.

She shouted angrily, her voice cracking with her distress, "You immense *imbecile*! This is all *your* fault!"

Curaçao was taken aback and warily took a half step away in defense. "Quoi? *Moi*? What did I do, ma cap-"

"You... you just could *not* keep that puerile little mouth of yours *shut*! Couldn't keep that filthy, forked tongue of yours from hissing, could you?!" Starlight snapped, her voice seething with hate. She did not bother with her magic and physically punched Curaçao as hard as she could with her hooves, knocking the blue earth pony off balance and causing her to stagger back in shock.

"Whoa... boss, calm-" Havocwing started to say, reaching out a hoof to stop the unicorn.

"Muzzle your gaping trap, Havoc, before I do it for you!" Starlight sneered as she turned to face the pegasus, "Curaçao, our *dear* eldest sister, just so *constructively* dug up the fact that we're all *clones*! If this ridiculous charlatan had just kept her useless worries to herself, we'd... we'd..." She trailed off, her horn shimmering brighter and brighter, then suddenly dimming. She paced around in a circle, talking now to herself more than to anypony else.

"We're nothing more than *duplicates*." She gave a sad glance towards Grayscale, who remained silent and did not meet her gaze.

"Reproductions." Her gaze now turned to Red Velvet, who hastily turned away and shook her head, holding her ears in desperation to block out the sounds of talking.

"Replicas." This one directed at Havocwing, who snorted and otherwise was unfazed.

"Imitations." Now, Insipid, who wailed louder and pounded a hoof on the roof and let the tears flow more than ever.

“Mirror images.” Her gaze became angry and she looked at Curaçao now, who remained stoic in the face of Starlight’s enraged disapproval.

She slumped to the floor, and muttered to herself now. “Clones... just stupid... *useless* clones...”

Havocwing snorted, her eyebrows furrowed in concern as she put a hoof on her youngest sister’s shoulder to console her. “So what? What’s the problem? Big deal, we’re clones.”

“Big deal? *Big deal?!?*” Starlight spat, shrugging Havoc’s hoof away and glaring at her. “You colossal *moron*, do you not comprehend what this all implies?! It means our whole lives - all less than *two weeks* of them - are a *lie*! Everything we thought we knew is a *lie*. Everything father ever told us...” she suddenly slumped back again, her face contorting in anguish, “Ever told *me*... is a lie. Father... why?”

Havocwing crossed her forehooves and did not falter, “If you’re worried he doesn’t love you or something-”

Starlight shook her head, her voice suddenly solemn and full of dejection, the anger in her eyes and upon her face gone and replaced with immense sadness. “How could he? I... I am nothing special at all. All I am is just a tool to him... a weapon to use for a single task. With that task completed, what use has he for me? I’ve been discarded. I’m worthless...”

Havocwing rolled her eyes and put her hooves on Starlight’s shoulders. “Come on, boss, that’s not what he thinks at all, and you know. He didn’t say anything like that, and if he were lying, Curaçao would’ve picked up on it, just like she did... oh... um-” she hastily flustered, trying to change the subject away from Curaçao’s curious blunder when Starlight’s eyes welled up with tears again. “I mean... uh... so what that you’re like two weeks old and he doesn’t know you that well. He still loves you - he loves all of us! Think about it - if he didn’t, he could have vaporized us or something, what with being a physical god now. That’s gotta stand for something.”

Curaçao approached tentatively, and nodded in agreement, speaking carefully and trying to make eye contact so that Starlight could see her concern. “Oui... ma capitaine, tout va bien. We’re not worzless. Papa still loves us, d’accord?”

Starlight did not respond, and merely turned away from both her and Havocwing. The two looked at each other and sighed. Curaçao moved over to where Inspid was still visibly crying.

“Ah... ma chérie, come now... don’t cry. Everyzing is okay.”

Inspid sniffed loudly, messily and hurriedly wiping her nose with the backside of her

hoof. “Oh... \*sniff\* C-C-Curieeeeee, it’s \*sniff\* *terrible!* she wailed, “I’m... \*sniff\* I’m, like, just a \*sniff\* c-c-c-c-”

“Clone,” Grayscale muttered, making Starlight cringe in disgust and Velvet sink further into her hooves to try and muffle the sounds.

“Yeah that! A clo-ho-hoone! Wahhhh!”

Curaçao pat Inspid calmly on the back as the unicorn wrapped her in a hug, ignoring the tears that the unicorn was getting all over her. “It’s okay, ma chérie. Please... calm down, d’accord?”

“\*sniff\* B-b-but Curie...” Inspid sniffed, “If I’m just a... \*sniff\* just a clone, that means, like, I’ll *never* be \*sniff\* perfect!”

“Oh, there there, darling,” Curaçao soothed, “It’ll all be alright, you’ll see.”

Inspid then pushed away, slowly, her eyes widened and her pupils shrunk. She’d suddenly stopped crying too. “Wait... wait... no. *You’re* a clone too...”

Curaçao raised an eyebrow. “Euh... oui?”

Inspid mouthed her words to herself again, looking into Curaçao’s eyes, then averting them, then trying to meet them again and finding she couldn’t bear it.

“You’re one too...” she muttered, “I’m a clone... you’re a clone... we’re all clones...”

She shook her head, and muttered the words one more time. Then, she grit her teeth.

“Clone. Imitation. Not perfect. *Never perfect!*”

In a very sudden rage and without warning, she flailed her hooves and knocked Curaçao off of her like she was some horrible insect crawling upon her. Curaçao stumbled back and looked aghast.

“You...” Inspid seethed, “How *could* you?”

Curaçao blinked in surprise. “Ma chérie?”

Inspid, again without warning, tackled Curaçao and pushed her to the ground, pinning her violently beneath her and roughly placing her hooves at the earth pony’s throat. “If you’re a clone too, that means *you’re* not perfect! It was all fake, and that means you *lied* to me!” Curaçao’s eyes widened in shock as an electrical sting shot through her. “How *dare* you?!”

"Whoa!" Havocwing blurted as she frantically tried to yank Insipid off of Curaçao. "Insipid! Calm down, what are you doing?!"

"You lied to me! To *me*!" Insipid wailed, her eyes welling up with fresh tears, "I thought you were *perfect*, that I could be perfect too! You *liar*!"

Curaçao pleaded and tried to push Insipid's hooves away, "Ma... ma chérie-"

"Don't call me that anymore!" Insipid snarled, "I'm not your cherry! I don't want to *be* your cherry, you... you *liar*!"

She spat on Curaçao's face just as Havocwing managed to wrestle her off of the earth pony; Curaçao felt at the spot where the saliva had landed, but her calm, professional demeanor seemed to intensify. She warily started to get to her hooves, and for a long moment stared at Insipid, who simply grimaced and turned her face up in disgust, walking away from them and sitting so close to the Beacon as to be leaning on it. The sound of her sobbing drifted softly back into the air to mix with Velvet's.

"Come on, you guys," Havocwing huffed as she helped Curaçao up, "What's gotten into you all? Seriously, what's the big bucking deal?"

Grayscale spoke next, her voice deathly calm, and didn't even bother facing the others as she spoke, looking off into the endless smog surrounding the Beacon with a dull lack of interest in her eyes. "Don't you get it? It's a big deal because it *isn't* a big deal..."

"And what the hell does that even *mean*?" Havocwing snorted.

"It means nothing. Nothing matters. Everything we thought we knew about us, means nothing, nothing at all," Grayscale said flatly, "We were created. We weren't born or raised, we are *tools*, just as Starlight said. Tools built for a purpose. Now that we have completed that purpose, there is no longer any purpose for us. We are nothing. What more is there?"

Havocwing impatiently tapped a hoof, "Well, I dunno, *the rest of our lives*?"

"Everything we knew about ourselves is a lie, and the truth is that all of our personalities and powers were created. They are false images, just figments of another pony's imagination. We did not make them ourselves, they made *us*. We don't matter, not to anypony or anything, because all we are are opposites of those others," Grayscale continued, still not bothering to turn to face anypony else, particularly those she was speaking about.

"All of Starlight's power was given to her, a gift she did not earn. Her strength belonged to Twilight Sparkle, she has no right to it. She has no place calling herself anything special, any



more than a well-built house can claim its significance if there's nopony to fill it." Starlight did not look up at Grayscale at all, but nodded in disappointed agreement.

"Inspid's wants and needs and desires are all false, a pathetic inversion of Rarity's generous nature. She doesn't want to be perfect, she just thinks she does because that's what somepony else told her she should think." Inspid snarled and stamped her hooves frantically against the floor.

"Red Velvet, a monstrous, murder-loving maniac who thrives on fear and feasts on the blood of others, rather than the joy and laughter of her friends like Pinkie Pie. All of it some sick fantasy of somepony else, forced upon her on a whim. She's not responsible for how she turned out but she is responsible for what she's done with her implanted personality. That's not fair to her, but what does it matter?" Velvet was as deep in her own hooves as she could go, and even so they could all still hear her sobbing, and she was getting louder.

"Even you, Havocwing. All the anger you feel at the world, all the fire in your soul, all of it, fake. Unjustified. It means nothing."

"My anger? Ha! Gray, look, I think it's *you* who doesn't understand. My rage is *not* fake," Havoc said adamantly, proudly striking her chest with a hoof, "Sure, it's manufactured. Somepony else took that stupid wimp Fluttershy, and all of that calm, loving nature of hers and flipped that bitch straight into pure *rage*."

"All you are is a twisted copy. You're not unique," Grayscale argued.

"Fine, I get that. But you know what? It's still there, and it sure as hell ain't going away. So, all my anger is just an illusion? That's what you're saying?"

"Nothing more than false thoughts placed in your head."

"What a load of crap. I don't know about you, but you know what? I'm *still* angry. Just because I found out it was *planted* in me, that it's not really mine, doesn't mean it's not *real*." Grayscale, this time, did not respond. "I'm still angry. I'm so angry right now, that I can't even *express* how much anger I feel, that's how bucking angry I am. And you know what I'm angry *at*? Those six mares!"

Curaçao raised an eyebrow in curiosity, "Ah... zee 'Elements of 'armony'?"

"Hell yeah!" Havocwing cheered, pumping a hoof, "All of this bullcrap is because of *them*! If they'd never come to this world, we'd have never been made... so... they're responsible for all the misfortune that we've dealt with. Simple logic!" She pounded her hooves on the ground and snarled. "*Especiall*y Fluttershy. When I get my hooves on that little creampuff, I'm gonna scorch her straight on down to her bucking *soul*!"

Her face suddenly brightened immensely. "Yeah. Yeah! Yeah, that's it!" she excitedly beamed, "See, here's the thing - you know what would *really* help me calm down a bit? Killing that wimpy excuse for a pegasus, that's what. It would make me happy, no *beyond* happy, to see that little waste of space *dead*. And you know what, you should all do the same! Think about it - killing them? Solves *all* our problems. For me, it's just straight up expulsion of *rage*! Yeah! Bucking *burn* that chick into dust, and get all my hate and anger out! Just thinking about it makes me so damn excited; I *finally* get to do what I've wanted to do straight from the start! Bucking *hell* yeah!"

Curaçao coughed and tapped Havocwing helpfully on the shoulder. "Ah... 'avocwing, you seem to 'ave... partie en vville. Euh... gotten off topic."

"Oh yeah, right," Havocwing chuckled, "Yeah! Okay, see, all of you have issues that can be solved right now simply by sucking up all your stupid *angst*, growing a pair, and going out and slaughtering the mare you came from! Like for instance... ahhh... ah! Starlight!" She turned to the unicorn and smiled broadly. "You're feeling worthless, yeah?"

Starlight only mumbled her reply, "I *am* worthless... Grayscale is absolutely correct, I was *conferred* this power. I did not earn it... I do not deserve it. What does power matter if you did not acquire it by the sweat of your own efforts? And what's worse, that pathetic pushover is just that - a weak-hearted wimp of a unicorn. And I am *her* clone? I have never felt so *low*..."

"Pshaw, you're not worthless, Star. You know what will prove that to pops? Destroying Twilight Sparkle!"

"Hmph... and how would *that* be any consolation?" Starlight mumbled, "Father doesn't want us to do it... he thinks we're worthless. He trusts that weirdo to handle it over us. He doesn't care..."

"Oh c'mon, that's not true at all! So what if pops didn't *ask* us not to do it ourselves, that doesn't mean we *can't*! He told us to do whatever we wanted to do! Think about it - that weakling is still considered a threat to pops somehow, that's why he wants her and her stupid friends *dead*, right? So he wants that... that *Shadowstep* guy to do the job? So what?! You're better than him, and you know it! Pops says he doesn't want to give us the assignment, well, let's prove we're worth it! Prove to pops that you're better than his little assassin and do his job, and do it *better*. Prove you're still useful!"

Starlight brightened a little. "Yeah... yeah! If I can vaporize that utterly insignificant little nimrod, then I will prove to father that I can accomplish any task he sets before me!"

"Yeah! That's it!" Havoc said, spurring her on, "Get mad! Buck that stupid nerd! Pops'll see you've got what it takes! Pops still loves you, you just need to get him to show it! And what

better way than doing the only thing he has left to do?!”

Starlight cheered, brightening up considerably. “Yeah!”

“Yeah! You’re better than her! You’re not worthless just because you’re her clone - you’re stronger than she is! Smarter than she is! A better leader than she is! You are *superior* to the original!” Havoc turned to face in Insipid’s direction next, squinting past the light of the Beacon, “Insipid, you wanna be perfect, right?”

“Well, *duh*,” Insipid sniffled.

“But okay... you can’t be perfect if you’re just like Curie anymore right? Because *she’s* not perfect, right?”

Insipid’s lower lip quivered as she spoke, “Psh, *double-duh*. I n-need, like, somepony *better* and junk?”

“Right, right, exactly,” Havocwing nodded, giving a sidelong shrug to Curaçao in apology. Curaçao frowned, but did not interrupt as Havocwing continued her tirade. “Okay so yeah, Curaçao’s not perfect anymore, so you can’t be like her. In fact, none of *us* are perfect either. But hey, I thought of something! You know who *is* perfect? Rarity.” Insipid blinked, not understanding at all where Havocwing was going with this idea. Havocwing continued, ignoring Insipid’s confusion, “See, okay, think about it - you’re cloned from her, right? That makes her the original, and you’re just a cheap copy - like, Rarity two-point-oh.”

Insipid angrily huffed, “Gee, thanks a lot? Like, oh my *stars* Havoc, you are the worst therapist *ever*? What a jerk.”

Havocwing hastily added, “Wait wait, what I mean is, what’s a more perfect pony for you to emulate than the original? Make sense now?”

Insipid blinked again, then pointed at Starlight. “Um... no? ‘cause like, Starlight’s better than the orig-”

Havocwing waved her hooves dismissively. “That’s Starlight, she’s different because she’s all sorts of *super* powerful. You’re an inferior copy of Rarity though, sorry to say, just like all of us are copies of the others. But all of us got something more to prove! You though, you just want to be perfect. And the way I see it, the only way to prove you’re perfect is to prove you’re *better*. Just like the boss, yeah? She’s better than that stupid Twilight Sparkle, she just needs to prove it! So... so do you!”

Insipid hummed in thought, “Yeah... yeah, that, like, makes sense!”

"Exactly!" Havocwing smiled pointedly, "We find that prissy skank and you just suck up everything she's got! Her powers, her personality, her looks, her *life*. Drain her of every last drop of *her*, and you'll *become* her, no, *better* than her! Because you're *her*, plus *you*! Simple mathematics tells me that one plus one is two, which is greater than one, so if you absorb her into yourself, you'll be *better* than perfect!"

"Oh! Better than perfect? I am, like, *liking* this idea!" Insipid giggled, excitedly waving her hooves, "Eeee, this is gonna be so awesome! Totally. Major. *Fresh*."

"Grayscale!" Havocwing wheeled around.

"You don't have to convince me," Grayscale said flatly, standing up, "Nothing matters anymore. You don't matter. I don't matter. Rainbow Dash doesn't matter. But I've got nothing better to do..."

"Yeah... yeah, exactly, you said it!" Havocwing excitedly pointed, "Rainbow Dash *doesn't* matter! She's insignificant. Worthless. She's just a speck, a little meaningless speck. But! But, she thinks she *isn't*. She thinks she's the *best*. You think nothing matters, Gray? Well, you're going to have to prove it to her. Show her just how insignificant she is!"

"I said you didn't need to convince me," Grayscale snorted.

Havocwing turned to Red Velvet next, who was by now running low on tears, rubbing her eyes wordlessly, and still convulsing with dry sobs. She looked at Havoc miserably, and Havoc felt an unusual pang of remorse, but plowed on. "Red!"

Velvet's scarred body heaved with another sob, but she reined it in, and half-gasped at Havoc in a pathetic and mewling voice Havoc had never heard from her before. "What're you going to tell *me*, huh?"

"I mean... well, this is easy, why do I even need to bother, right?" Havoc said with a sidelong look of easy expectancy. Velvet glared at her, her bleary eyes already forming bags.

Havoc let out a frustrated sigh, rubbing her forehead with a hoof as she began to forget what she'd had going into her rant, searching desperately for a cue. "What the hell's wrong with *you* anyway? Whatever - you like killing, so let's go kill-"

"*Do* I like killing?" Velvet said coldly, "Or was that just something put in my head too?"

Havocwing rolled her eyes, "Ah geez, so you're *also* on about this crap? You wouldn't shut up about killing for five minutes before, you pulled all kinds of monster scares just to get a chance to torture and kill ponies!"

“Am I... really a monster?” Velvet mumbled, looking at her hooves, “Is my hunger just a fabrication? Is it real?”

Havoc didn't say anything for a moment as she stared at Red Velvet, completely bewildered. After a long beat, she took a moment to swallow, and then nervously chuckled, “Y-yeah! Sure it's real! That's why we should... go... kill those guys! Wouldn't you be happy to kill Pinkie Pie? I know how much you've wanted to kill her before. You always talked about all sorts of things you wanted to do to her. Like... rip out her heart, and show it to her before she dies! That's *awesome*, Red, that is *dark*. I love it! And when you're done, you can *eat* the heart, just to rub it in to any of the others that might still be standing! You love that stuff - eating ponies! You'd get a kick out of it!”

“Would I?” she muttered, “Is it natural to feel bad about things you've done... or is feeling no remorse the norm? Is murder normal? Is terrifying others normal? Or is that all implanted in me? What... what am I?”

“You are what you *want* to be! Nothing more, nothing less!” Havoc said impatiently, “And even if you're feeling a little confused, I know what you *want* to do is to make pops happy! We all do! So we need to go kill some stupid mares and prove to him we're not useless! Prove to ourselves we're perfect, *better* than perfect! Prove to *them* that *they're* nothing, not us! Unleash our anger, and... whatever it is that's motivating Curaçao.” She turned to Curaçao and whispered, “Hey, what's with you? You're in too, right?”

“Of course I'm 'in',” Curaçao huffed, “I want to make papa 'appy too, tu vois? And all my sœurs as well! C'est merveilleux, all of us, working togezer.”

“Right!” Havoc piped, turning back to Velvet, “We all want to do this, because it will make pops happy, it will make *us* happy! You in, Red?”

Velvet shuddered, “You don't understand... I... something's seriously *wrong*, Havoc. Something's wrong with me...” She stared off towards where the circle of runes had been, as by now the runic markings had all evaporated away into nothingness. “When Mom- or, I mean: Nihila was here... I felt... stronger. I felt the urge to kill, stronger in me than ever before. It felt... good. But in the instant she was destroyed... something snapped. I felt... sad. Remorseful. And now, I... I can't feel fear anymore...”

Havocwing blinked. “You... you what? Oh c'mon, Red, stop toying me around. Here,” she said, holding out a hoof, “Just suck some fear out of me, you know it's there. You always get off on that, don't you?”

Velvet shook her head, “Nothing. There's nothing there...” She looked at her blood as she let it flow out of her again. “Is this all I am now? Starlight's right... without fear, I'm... I'm nothing. Was all of that *her* doing? Did I feel excitement from terror because that's what *she*

wanted?”

“You’re not ‘nothing’, Red. Come on,” and at this, Havoc offered Velvet her hoof more steadily, “Enough of all this. This ain’t you.”

“You don’t know what I do now, Havoc,” Velvet pushed the outstretched hoof away with her own, and sniffed back her runny nose, “I... I *felt* her. We all know now that... she helped create us. But I... I *felt* her. I know who she *really* was. And... and what she tried to make me do...” Havocwing seemed confused, so Velvet continued, “I... she tried to lure me to her. I almost did it... I almost betrayed daddy...”

Havocwing’s face was firm. “But you didn’t. You remained loyal to him, just like you should be now.”

“But... by staying loyal to him, I betrayed a part of myself... a part of myself that now I know was planted there. I don’t know what I should feel... what’s right or wrong...”

“Red...”

“You don’t understand! That’s why I can’t feel it anymore! She’s *gone*, and she took a piece of me with her!”

“Hey... hey, Red, c’mon,” Havoc said, her face clearly not believing the words coming out of her own mouth, “You can do it. You’re always able to get something off of me, you’ve said as much! Just try a little harder!”

“I *am* trying!” Velvet cried, holding back a sob, causing a strange full-bodied twitch, “I am, I am, I *am*! I... c-can’t!”

Velvet angrily leapt up and ran over to the wall of the roof’s stairwell with impressive if not monstrous speed, her blood flailing about her with all the effort she could put into it. They were still strong, powerful enough that when she slammed them into the wall they cracked it; broke it apart. They were still sharp, enough that when she angrily swung them around her they sliced through chunks of the cement roof. But they were lacking in substance, and she couldn’t tap into any fear to strengthen their standard beyond this apparent maximum.

“Why doesn’t it work?!” she shouted in a rage, “Why can’t I make it stronger?! There are millions of ponies in this city! Why can’t I feel their fear?!”

She lashed out in a rage again, slamming the wall as hard as she could and slowly realizing she was fighting a losing battle. She suddenly drew her blood all back to her, and looked at her tendrils in a panic, and her body once again twitched all at once. The blood-lashes were dripping uneasily, not quite as solid and strong as she was accustomed to. And what was

worse, they were in pain. She'd felt pain before, even enjoyed it, both inflicting and receiving. There was something frightening about an opponent that didn't flinch when suffering injuries, and that fear gave her power. But now, the pain she could feel in her blood, in *herself*, actually frightened her.

She looked around at her tendrils, formed in various blades and spikes, and twitched again, before she began to cry again, despite the streaks from her previous breakdown not having dried yet. She pled with them, "Please... please... work. *Work!* Why won't you work right?" She slumped back in defeat.

Havocwing stepped over warily. "Hey... hey Red, you okay?"

"No!" Velvet snapped, "No, I'm not okay! What's happening to me?!" She twitched again, and grabbed one of her tendrils and tried to actually strangle it as if it were another pony. "Why won't you work right?! Why can't I make you stronger?!"

Her anger flared and she ripped her own blood apart, splattering visceral fluids all over herself. Her breathing became erratic and panicked as she looked around at the other tendrils, which remained still as if frozen by fear. She grabbed another tendril and began to strangle it as well, violently bashing the blade at the end against the wall.

"Answer me!" she screamed, "What is-," she twitched so hard as to close her eyes for a half instant, "*-wrong* with you?! What's wrong with *me*?! Why can't you do anything right?!"

Havocwing nervously began stepping back as Velvet's tendrils flailed defensively away from her. She grabbed at them like they were snakes attempting to flee a predator, whipping them around with her own hooves and narrowly avoiding hitting her sisters with them in her apparently aimless rage. At last, she crushed the last one uselessly against the wall, spraying blood everywhere and finally becoming drenched in the stuff. She turned towards her sisters, who in that instant actually looked genuinely frightened of what was happening; not *of* her of course, but *for* her.

Velvet's eyes crinkled and she teared up. She could see they were afraid, but she couldn't *feel* it. She couldn't smell it, or taste it, or see it wafting about through the air, or hear it in her mind. She knew it was there, but she was unable to tap it. She twitched and collapsed on the floor, burying her face in her hooves and sobbing so hard now that in moments her sobs went dry again, and she heaved uselessly, gasping like a fish out of water.

Her sisters watched her breaking down with a strange unity of silent fearful awe, and all together inhaled, startled. While she wept, occasionally twitching, her blood had begun to seep and move all around her as it never had before, slowly at first, then picking up pace until it was practically running along the floor like water. It slithered up and wrapped around her, entering her body in great gushes of fluid all at once and refilling her. She did not react to any of this.

Suddenly, a tendril of blood began to seep out of a great gash along her spine, thick and red. It slowly formed at first, gaining size and volume as it flowed, circling around her like a snake. The tip slithered up alongside her, and slowly molded itself into what looked like a face, one eye larger than the other and with visible fangs and even a nose, and the bizarre appearance of what looked like what was supposed to be a top hat on its head. The others all nervously watched as next, Velvet's bloody tentacle actually started to *talk*.

*"But it's too hard. I've never worked so hard before, and it hurts..."* the tendril of blood said with a screechy, high pitch. Havocwing looked to the others in concern, noticing very clearly that Velvet's lips were moving in tandem with the tendril in a display of the absolute worst ventriloquism anypony had ever seen. Starlight, the closest to her, shrugged in worried confusion. As Velvet lifted her head to respond, they could see that her eyes had become slightly unfocused, and that her mane and tail were stiff and rigid.

"It's not fair... it's not *fair*," Velvet sniffed, "I... I feel so weak..."

*"Aww... there there, my dear little pony,"* the tendril consoled her, sprouting another long lash at its side, like an arm, and patting her on the shoulder and splashing blood everywhere, which all quickly seeped back into her body. *"I'm here for you, my dear. I'll always be here for you, even if everything else in the world were to stand against you..."*

"Oh, but... w-who are you?" Velvet asked sincerely, her eyes red with tears rather than bloodlust.

The tendril actually tipped its 'hat' to her cordially and bowed. *"Sir Visceral Clottington McKillicutty the Third, Esquire, at your service, my dear."*

"That's a mouthful," Velvet giggled, twitching again, "I'm gonna call you 'Clottles'! Is that okay with you?"

*"Clottles. It is a good nickname, and I accept it,"* the newly-named tendril spoke, *"Now you know my name - what's yours?"*

"I'm Red Velvet," she answered with a smile, reaching out a hoof to shake. The tendril reached out its second lash again and eagerly wrapped around her hoof, and shook. She twitched again, her pupils becoming more dilated in the process. "Most ponies call me Red. Nice to meet you."

*"The pleasure is all mine, dear. Now my sweet, sweet Red, tell your good friend Clottles what's the matter. I'm here for you."*

"Well, my blood powers feel too weak..." she sniffed, "I feel weak because of it. Without



fear in the air, how am I supposed to get stronger?"

*"Maybe you just need more of it now than before?"* Clottles suggested, *"Your sisters aren't afraid of you enough to drain from them anymore. You're going to need new ponies to draw from. Ponies that fear death... ponies you can kill. Maybe that 'Pinkie Pie' will make you feel good about killing again?"*

"I don't know..." Velvet muttered, "When I think about killing... something feels... wrong, now. I feel... bad. Am I *supposed* to feel bad? Or good? I just don't know anymore..."

*"Oh..."* She was obviously deep in thought as she obviously took on Clottles' voice again, *"...that's just... because you haven't killed for real since that nice Jetstream lad!"* he bubbled - literally, *"You poor dear, you've only killed once before. Do you remember how you felt then? You felt good."*

"Yeah... yeah, I... I did," Velvet nodded slowly, "But... that was then. I could taste his fears and everything, it made me feel so good while I was doing it. I... I don't know if I can feel like that again..."

*"That's because he was just one,"* Clottles smiled, lifting up a tendril to help visualize the concept. *"It's like candy: if you only eat one piece of candy at a time, it's good; but if you eat a whole bunch at once-"* And he split the tendril into two, then four, then eight, and so on. *"It's better!"*

"Yeah... yeah! That makes sense!" she beamed, twitching yet again, "If I kill again... maybe I'll feel better about killing! Then... then I'll kill *more!* And *more!* Yes!"

*"See, my dear? Let the blood flow! You can make us stronger with the blood of the fallen! Believe in the power of blood again! You don't need fear as much as you need blood! Now go on, follow your sisters into battle!"*

"Oh..." Velvet face-faulted and frowned, losing some of her enthusiasm, "Sisters... right..."

Clottles' 'eyebrow' raised at this. *"What's the matter, dear?"*

"Well... I mean... we're *not* really sisters..." Velvet frowned, sinking back down.

*"Ohhh... of course you are! Haven't you been listening to Havocwing? She understands, don't you dear Havocwing?"*

Havocwing nervously pointed a hoof at herself. "Uh... are ...*you*... talking to... *me*?"

*“Certainly, my dear! Explain to Red, and all your dear sisters, what it means to be sisters. She needs you to clear up the gloomy weather!”* Clottles and Velvet both stared at Havoc, Clottles the only one bothering to blink.

Havoc stared for a moment, and narrowed her eyes. Then, she scratched her head, and shrugged back at the others, and fluttered in front of the group. “Uh... right. Sure thing... *Sir Clottles?* ...yeah... yeah! Okay! Look, Red, it’s like this - we might not be bonded by blood, like ‘real’ sisters are, but that doesn’t mean squat! Hell, we’re better than blood- er, no offense.”

Clottles tipped his hat, *“None taken.”*

Havoc realized who she was talking to, and shook her head. “Uh... where was I? ...we’re... better than... that! Yeah! And hey! I don’t give *two bucking bucks sideways* if we were just test-tube fillies, or whatever. We were brought into this world together. We still have a connection. We *still* share a common bond, and as far as I’m concerned, pops really *did* adopt us, just like how Curaçao put it. We *are* sisters! We’re *family!*”

*“See, dear?”* Clottles cooed, *“Now go on... go to your sisters. You all need to stand united. They need you, and you need them, now more than ever.”*

“Yeah... yeah! Ohhh, thank you Clottles! You’re the best horrible blood abomination *ever!*” Velvet happily smiled, giving the tendril a big hug and splashing blood all over herself, then mostly sucking it all back up in an instant. She merrily walked back over to the others, dripping and tracking blood as she went. “Oh, and thanks, Havoc. You’re not always a stupid loudmouth. I’m in!” she said with confidence, her eyes refocused and her spasms long gone.

“Ooooookay. Good, I guess,” Havocwing coughed as she fluttered back to Starlight and Curaçao, “Well... now that we’re out of... Crazytown... um...” She shook her head. “Yeah! Whoo! Family! Okay, so we’re all with it?! Let’s go kill those stupid mares! We’ve got to get them before that... whatever his name was, that assassin guy! Shadowstep! Right? That guy. We’ve gotta kill them before he does!”

“Hmm... zen zat puts us at a disadvantage,” Curaçao nodded, immediately focused on the task, “Zey are already almost at ‘ope’s Point, and ‘e ‘as a lead on us as well. Zey will most likely get to zee port before us, even if we ‘urry...”

Starlight frowned, “The nearest I can teleport us to is the canyon, which would still necessitate that we travel the remaining distance on hoof, and even then, assuming we got to the city, by the time we do they will have already acquired and utilized a flight across the sea. Even *I* cannot take us across myself...”

“Zen we need a ship of our own,” Curaçao nodded.

"We could just steal one of the ones in the airship docks here," Havocwing suggested.

"Non," Curaçao dismissed, "Zee airship docks are guarded by zee full might of zee Pandemonium military, and wizout papa to give us auzorization, we would need to cross... par la violence. While I know we can 'andle zem, it is... a delay, and zee large ships are slow. Zey'd be in Utopia days before us, wiz no time to stop zem. Non, we will get into 'ope's Point after zem, and get a ship of our own, à la place? We'll be right be'ind zem."

"Acceptable," Starlight nodded, "So then, are we all settled?"

"We sure are, bo-" Havoc started.

Starlight held up a hoof to stop her. "Please, Havocwing... do not refer to me by that meaningless title any longer. Until I have proven myself deserving... you and Curaçao *are* the oldest, and... frankly, you appear to be the most... how should I put this?" She sat back on her haunches and sniffed for a moment, taking a long look at Velvet's frighteningly distant eyes, the work Insipid had put into her appearance shattered by tear-streaks, Grayscale's unnerving trance, and finally at her own still shaky forehooves. Curaçao and Havoc both reached out automatically as though they hadn't needed to think about it, and with expressions of otherwise unreadable scrutiny they took hold of each one, and stopped her from shaking. Starlight looked up, and smiled, despite her lip quivering, "Stable? Yes. You two appear to be the most stable. Perhaps... you two should take charge. For now, at least. Until such time as I regain some confidence in myself and retake the mantle, I am merely your youngest sister."

Curaçao blinked, then nodded in agreement. "C'est acceptable, ma sœur."

Havocwing looked utterly stupefied for a moment, and Starlight understood immediately why, smiling a bit wistfully at her older sister. "You didn't have to fight or jockey for it after all, huh?"

"I... it's different now. Being in charge, well, halfway, but still... I..." She grinned suddenly, "If I've gotta make speeches every time we do something, I can see why you were... uh... *born* for the job. So basically, I'm getting kicked when I'm down again, right? But hey! If that's what you want," Havocwing's grin widened, "I guess I can suffer a little more for your sake. You've got it... *little* sis."

As she said this, Havocwing reached out, and froze for a moment, a look of wonder on her face. Both Havoc and Starlight stared at her outstretched hoof for a moment with arguably equal confusion, and then Havoc found her nerve and latched an arm around Starlight. Amazed by her own daring, Havoc, and the rest of her sisters, watched as Starlight's face considered confusion, indignity, outrage, embarrassment, and even a flicker of gratitude very rapidly. Finally, her face red, she sighed and settled on acceptance with a timid, uncertain smile.

“Awww...” Velvet sniffed, “This is *sooo* touching! Let’s *all* get in on this! Come on everypony, *big family hug!*” She happily stepped forward, lashing tendrils out and grabbing onto the other five and tugging them in before wrapping them all in the aforementioned big family hug.

Inspid fidgeted awkwardly, “Like, eww, hey! You’re, like, getting blood all over my mane and junk? Not cool, Red. Not cool.”

“Awww, just relax, Inspid,” Havocwing nervously chuckled, “Um... we... yeah. Whoo. Yeah. Family hug!”

Curaçao smiled, trying and failing to prevent it from looking obviously forced, “Oui... we will... always ‘ave each ozer. We are a... euh... big ‘appy famille.”

Grayscale remained silent, and hung limp in the hug.

“You’ll see, guys!” Velvet giggled, “Havoc’s right! For once! When we kill those weenies, everything will go back to- or, uh, *start* to be normal!”

Starlight looked at her sisters, and found she wasn’t irritated at them as much as she had been. In fact, at this moment, they were the least irritating they’d ever been. Somehow. She surprised herself, and smiled. “So... a big happy family... sure. Okay. I’m... okay with this.”