



Ultra Eternal Prodigal Furious Very
Big Sonic Fearless Perpetual
Heroic Epic Legendary

By Sir Ostentatious

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Book 1

Chapter 1

To Fight for Valor or to Fight for Glory or to Fight for Valorous Glory or to Fight for Glorious Valor!

I asked myself this question the day my father died. As the rain beat across his tombstone and the wind whistled in my ears, the engraved letters marking my father's final words began to well up with rain and flood. The wind and thunderclaps watched kindly over my shoulder in my scheduled time of brooding and self reflection. A single tear trickled down as my face remained stoic, powerfully portraying my inner turmoil to any onlookers. In the distance, through my individual tears, figures rustled and skulked about, but I knew I was not their target. During the period of brooding over the loss of a father, no fights could be initiated, for that would be in bad taste.

Fondly I recalled those fond memories of my father like it was only yesterday. My father was always there for me; always made me laugh, always made me happy, and always made me feel special. His toiling hooves fostered book after book and toy after toy for me to enjoy. Whatever I may have asked for, his munificence searched high and low for the item and retrieved it, no matter the obstacle. Just yesterday, he regaled me the wonderful fights his business partners engaged him in on his most recent search, displaying his unsheathed and victoriously stained dagger. Quite the business pony, his exchanges, as he would say, were always brief and to the point. Coins jingled as he carefully placed the dagger back in the blackness of his cloak's sleeve. Retiring for the night, he would tend to the other gifts he got himself in his room.

He taught me everything: when I wanted to learn to battle, by god he had at me. When I wanted to learn to elevate my vocabulary, he found a dictionary for me and I studied it religiously. When my mother was sick, he

taught me the proper method of titration and the correct amount of time coupled with the appropriate temperature in order to brew up a remedy. Of course, all these skills came naturally to me with no practice at all. As the rain pooled at my hooves, I could see my chiseled appearance, but had to look away, for the combination of my immaculate chestnut mane, shimmering horn, and flawless teeth fostered a healthy reflection that nearly blinded me.

Another tear slipped away and I looked longingly towards the clouds. Mane flowing valiantly in the wind, I saw myself: avenging my father's beautiful legacy, seeing his name remembered through me and in the annals of time. Others would know my name and know my mission. My mission was beautiful, and served the purpose of raising to a higher plane my father and the good he brought about in relation to his fellow pony. Such was my mission, one that would soon obtain a status of ubiquity around the world. I knew it to be true, for I had thought this over countless times, and the current state of my mission was undeniable in its beauty. Thus, it was to be embarked on, this cohesive and beautiful mission to do the actions necessary to succeed.

Before I would sleep, my father would speak fondly of a gallant quest, one surely, as he so excitedly told of, to make the adventurer who conquers it famous across Equestria. Enamored and mystified, I gazed wild-eyed into the storyteller for more. "Seven beasts of Hell", he went explained, "bared their fangs only to the most noble and purest of heart and vocabulary. On rampages! Wasting all ponies in their way! With no regard for decency or property damage, these dark dogs of the hunt did scour the world for their next meal, and they had a penchant for horse."

Despite my lack of any knowledge on the creatures, I planned to surprise him one day with the heads of all seven, but such surprises were now severed.

I felt the familiar grip of my father's band around the base of my horn and shivered slightly. Nostalgia brushed over me like rain, dampened my mind, and a new tear fell. Dampness pervaded as I felt the weight of the nostalgia push me closer and closer to my father's grave until I was almost kneeling at its end. Tears hugged and kissed the dirt as lightning crashed nearby. A flash illuminated the sky and called my name. The divided clouds beckoned my attention, though the beacon of such a transcendent

message bore the shadowed face of my father. I raised my head to the heavens, eager and ready to embrace the undead love.

“Heed this, foal of mine!” The voice boomed, rocking the earth and collapsing the trees. Indeed my ears were open and my mind and body stood ready. “Stay home. Do not desert thy mother nor abandon your town for foolish delusions of fame. The world is unrepentant and wanton in its deeds! It transforms rags to riches while hunger becomes drought. Such a tool cannot be utilized by ponies, for even I succumbed to it! I have since appropriately addressed such changes and now abide by a higher code. I plea you retreat home and tamper not with the horizon!”

Mane flowing exuberantly in the wind, I pondered the message, hooves sinking into the mud. What could this prophecy mean? Confusion overtook my body like the rain and demanded an answer. I looked back to the grave as a new flash appeared and took my father’s appearance away from the canvas of clouds. Nimbus mountains rolled fast and began to clamor, though my eyes widened as I recalled my father’s guidance, allowing me to deduce an answer to this message.

“What trickery lies in such hallowed manifestations? The temple is poisoned and false, and I shall embark in the morning! Fear not, my father, for you shall not fall from the sun in vain! As you instructed, I shall return with seven heads of Hell or lose my own!” I yelled to the sky. “I will not return to these holy grounds until I have slain the demons and created for myself a title worth remembering!” Thunderclaps cheered my resolve as I rose from the mud.

Around me lightning flashed, vigorously approving of my deductions and praising my abilities. A stray bolt attacked a tree, fire exploding in all directions and licking at the grass. The heat ate and ate and soon began to voraciously graze at the graveyard. In amazement, I watched this new sign convey its message. My father’s grave quickly became engulfed in the blaze as I backed away and let it roam, setting aflame the borders of his grave. Magnificently did the light portray the burial and the message. The inferno personified my father’s rage in relation to the demons trying to lead me away from my destiny, and thus retaliated from high in the heavens. My journey was secured as I watched the fire never waver beneath the onslaught of the now intense rain.

One last tear fell from my face. I silently nodded to the grave and left it to burn along with my fervent energy. The energy would guide me,

carrying me from town to town, adventure to adventure, uncaring even of the natural, temporal, and spatial boundaries which may attempt to bind me. I looked towards my father's band embracing my horn, feeling the intense nostalgia and accepting it as the final sign of the commencement of my journey. His solid gold band glimmered in the storm's might and guided me on. As the fire raged and my mane flowed triumphantly in the wind, I said my silent amen, wished my father the bounty of all the afterlife's harvest, and took to home to prepare my noble future.

The sun climbed to its perch in the guardhouse above the horizon. Anxiety propelled me from my bed and allowed me to take in the sun from the safety of my window for the last time in a while. Absorption relaxed my skin and shaken mentality after the devil's failed attempts at trickery the night before. Such is the nature of a hero as heroic as myself, or soon to be, for I shall become heroic and avenge my father's heroic legacy. I said it to no one in particular, but I wagered the demons could hear me, so I went on. Other heroes would kneel to me, for my heroism will cripple their senses and they will know I am the most heroic of them all! I felt an aura of energy emanate around me, as if embraced by the heavens above in their celestial folds.

I stopped in the reflection of my large vanity mirror, as such important items must maintain an efficient size, and gazed into it; a beautiful tool I used to identify and examine every single physical feature I possessed in great detail. I would have gladly listed them, but time was of the essence.

In the mirror my shape appeared no different, though my reflection brought back more of my father. Ponies said I looked like my father, though it was my mark I fixated on: against my mint green coat stood a majestic quill, blackened by war, unsheathed, and ready to be employed in the heat of battle. As the most powerful of writing utensils, the quill served as a treasured insignia among my family. What transpired, though, on that day my father and I frolicked among the roses and tulips scarred my body and mind: a monstrous battle between I and a villainous bunny which dared to threaten my stability and safety. I bravely declared my independence from its tyranny as it cowered in fear, no doubt contemplating his bunny life and all his bunny related sins and atrocities.

I was about to bring about its imminent demise. With all my power I galloped at it, though it used its shadowy powers to dodge and lunge at me.

Startled by the foul cheat, I ducked and very strategically concealed myself in my hooves. When the dust had settled, I taunted the monster's trickery before it scurried away into the bushes, thus making me the victor. Proud of my achievement, my father applauded me and pointed to my flank, now illuminated with maturity. A moment almost worth letting out a dramatic tear or two, but such are sacred and must not be spared lightly.

The sun raced higher and higher into the sky and I stabbed at my father's band and elevated it oh so delicately, allowing it to slide down my horn and rest comfortably. The window yielded the guardian of light rising above the distant mountain tops. Colors burst and reflected into every direction as my horn's trinket collided with the radiance, and I could see my future in the colors. Innocence pervaded the band as it shimmered in the sunlight. A smirk came to my face and anxiety fled for the sun, never again to pose a threat to me, my heroism, or my mission.

I pushed open the bedroom door, though was stopped by a tiny figure. Silhouetted by the hallway's darkness, the creature stood motionless. I let my hoof flow freely towards the creature's head, but a retaliatory bite narrowly missing caused me to retract and retreat into my room. The opponent was wily; truly a crafty beast. It followed me with small feet and small steps, but began to change. Still a solid black figure, its arms exploded from its sides and its legs rose, elevating the monster to a new level of intimidation. The roar which escaped from its prison of daggers shattered the glass of my bedroom window into a flurry of arrows. From the impact, the sun fell from its roost and died behind the mountains, leaving the sky crimson over my roof. Fire flew from the jowls of the beast and scorched my bed. My floor and desk followed suit, leaving me not helpless, but startled by the ethical paucity of the creature in terms of the manner in which it chose to pursue my death. Thus, I chose not to engage it, for fear of positively stimulating the bad behavior.

The beast's wings flapped and sprayed tornadoes of ash and ember about the battlefield. Burns and singes grew all around me, much to my horror and screams of macho abhorrence. The beast leaned in its head close to mine. Through my heroic cries of manly and handsome pain, the fiend, quite solemnly, said: "Follow your dreams!" A confused look grew on my face. "Follow your dreams!" it roared with new vigor, swinging its head from side to side and growing berserk. Flames were thrown from its mouth all around me, and screamed an obnoxious buzz. The figure froze, as did time, and all I recalled was the buzz.

Between my defiance and my future rang the chirp of a clock. Almost deaf to it, I woke up from my stupor, mouth hung open and dry. Such a vivid dream, but there was no time for recollections, as the time did blare and declare my sleep in a state of overindulgence. Follies of this nature were not a habit of mine, though the dream must have sapped away my hearing. My routine became a blaze and my preparations the night before had paid off indefinitely. I reached for the door, though a wave of familiarity shocked me to recoil. Fearful of what might sleep beyond the threshold, I took the creature's now apparent advice and jumped out the window.

The solution was quite thrilling and the acuteness of the pain which stemmed from the stunt transcended me above the grogginess of the morning. I took off in a gallop, my satchel beating against me with every step and my hooves taking me where I so desired. Chestnut blades rode in the wind and whistled rhythmically. Exhilaration ran through my frame and revitalized me with every step towards my destiny.

Under the glare of the sun stood the door I burst through. A magnificent oak, hardened by time, yielded the first stop on my victorious road. The room was vacant, so I advanced. Machinery guarded each wall with stolid determination and shined their steel blue and grey hues. Bookshelves overloaded with knowledge shared the space and were tucked snugly beside science. A long desk had been cleared of any signs of life, as did the room, and I called out for anypony. The worst of situations seemed to rush my senses and assault me all at once as I stood beside the desk. I cursed that dream, for it must have been the denizens of Hell rearing their ugly heads in order to spread earthquakes in hopes that I may fall through the cracks. My spirit rekindled, though, as I turned my neck sharply to see a figure open a door across the room.

"Hello? Can I help you?" An elderly mare asked. Marred by the passing of years and events were her features and her deep purple mane, though an air of intelligence and experience still met her kindly.

"Humble librarian! Please allow my burgeoning mind to be quelled by the gift of a book of shadows and secrets! My father demands it! Nay! Beseeches it of me that I fulfill his dream in a timely matter!" I cried, gracefully kneeling before her.

"Whose son are you?" She asked.

“I am of the mare and late colt who bear the name ‘Stu’, for I raise high on my banner the name ‘Sir Stu Saint Ostentatious’! Though you, fair and elderly librarian, may simply call me ‘Ostentatious’”.

“Ostentatious? Yes, that name does ring a bell, though you said something about your father? I may have something for you. Feel free to look about my shelves.” She seemed to back away in a hurry, but as a librarian, surely she was quite busy with her quiet books.

“Any consolation prize is enough medicine for me! Thank you!”

“Just let me know when you’re ready to check it out.” She said with an uneasy smile and returned to her room. I could feel the rolling of clouds, in the distance perhaps? Definitely within a twenty mile radius of my own location! In haste, I ran to the shelves and scanned them.

Of all the books and records of the history of the world, no such encyclopedias of monsters seemed to make itself known. Book and body snatchers, all. I could see those demons laugh around their fires and laughing at my misfortune. The laughter ceased though when a tome enclosed in glass appeared beside a back shelf. Ancient in appearance and apparently charred by time, my eyes widened and sparkled with giddy excitement, though time was of the essence. I could hear them again! Dancing!

The glass shattered with the force of my hooves and the book was prime for the borrowing. Not taking. Stealing and any such tomfoolery without asking permission before an acquisition is a terrible offense the likes of which the purest of heart, such as myself, would not have ever committed! Thus, as my father had always advised me before borrowing something, I left a note.

“Dearest Librarian,

The book’s location now under my own satchel does procure my destiny’s trail and I shall subdue it! Fear thee not and prithee peace! I shall return unharmed and sing of you, the beautiful mare that did not pursue me after so graciously and generously letting me borrow “The Big Book of Bad Beasts”!

Consider this letter an “IOU” entitling you to a piece of the great mound of treasure I shall accumulate in my travels!

-Yours Platonically,

Sir Stu Saint Ostentatious!"!"

Over the music of my galloping towards the horizon, I heard the librarian's screams of elation and I could tell she knew I found my book and would fulfill my destiny. A brave sacrifice would be rewarded when I return to the quiet town, but their lives called for quietude and solace and mine call for loud violence and fighting and avenging my father! I knew she would sleep soundly knowing she contributed to my purest and noblest of causes. Allotting my heed to the journey ahead, the glorious battles and titles which beckon for my presence only threw my gallop into a higher velocity and acceleration. With my guide now forged and my father whispering to me in the wind, I followed its path and never looked back.

Chapter 2

The Imbroglios of Life and the Tempests They Render

Disregarding my mother, neighbors, and friends, I raced off into the canopy overhead. The portal from youth soon blot out the sun and surrounded my frame. The isolation imposed on me by the environment proved a suitable venue of initiation into the life of a lone warrior, as signaled by the caws of unnerving shadows and the calls of hidden monsters. My ecstatic pace became an apprehensive though still quite graceful walk, swinging my head in all directions in rhythm with my shuffling feet. Nature heavily tolled my composure, though I steeled my resolve, threw up my nose at the shadows, and kept my steps constant yet soft.

Swoops overhead and a fallen tree branch sent an uneasy chill across me like electricity. "Such was the life I shall bear," I reminded myself. An adventure to say the least! My father is all around me and I shall not disappoint him! More screeches pierced the dense foliage and sparked hysteria within me. Like millions of ubiquitous serpents gasping in harmony and sizing up their next meal, the sounds of the unknown froze my stride. Circled by trees and concealed faces, I bravely sprinted towards a wider and more illuminated section of that plane of terror. Just barely out of earshot I swore I made out what seemed to be the sweet coo of bells.

I stopped, the sun's breath rejuvenating my spirit and reaffirming my spine. Too soon, the screeches started back up, but in a select area. Divinity showered me and colored my horn with a mystical force. Like a seismic wave, my foot collided with earth and signaled my distaste.

"Many's the mare who trots too close to my lands! Few have ever lived beyond my powers to warn the world, for I possess craft and magic beyond the boundaries of mortality and comprehension! Pray thee show thyself lest detonations thrust your shadow into a light one cannot escape!" I decreed, hearing the rustling die down and the similar shake of bells.

"What did you say?!" A shrill voice returned, shock in its throat.

"You heard me villainous villain!"

“You attack girls?!”

“No!” Red flirted with my cheeks as the wordsmith I battled appeared to have found a flaw in my tongue. “Rhymes normally augment the vigor of a battle cry, though you have got me thinking on my hooves and I could not quite form an elaborate sequence in such time, though my message possesses the same gist!”

There was a pause before the retort. “Are you trying to read me a novel?”

“Trust me, such camaraderie will not be spared on thine callous spirit! Reveal your shadow!” I replied to the ribald creature.

“For the birds! Caw caw! Caw caw!” The villain mocked with those ugly sounds of birds. “Go back the way you came!”

“My language nor I deserves such insults!” I called out to the voice with a snort. “I shall press forward.” Turning up my nose once more to the darkness, I gracefully took my leave and delved further into the woods.

“No wait! Come back!” The voice called hurriedly. “You don’t even want to fight me?” Disappointment played a sour note in the question.

I scoffed. “Melee and all associated sports are of little use against a demon of no solid form. A body for a brawl!”

There was a rustle of leaves and bells and the flight of an object, its trajectory aimed for my skull. Pain flashed and ran deep, though I swung my head around to catch the fiend. “Who threw that?” I demanded.

“Not I.” Called the little voice.

Ignoring the fool I followed the trees to safety.

Another rock collided with my cranium.

I looked back around. No one was visible.

“Calm yourself,” I told myself. “Surely his supply is limited.”

Dense woods began to populate the area and most ways were nonnegotiable. Through a few tight tree placements I could squeeze, too

soon coming to the realization of a dead end. In mere minutes of my trek the area became a never ending maze composed of green and the occasional rock whizzing past me. Overhead sunlight began to dwindle of the balance and begin a decent. All the while followed by the fiend and his incessant bells.

Devoid of any life beyond the incessant rock slinger and myself, this forest seemed eerily dead. Vibrant fruits and flowers grew on trees and the grounds in abundance, though all were motionless and dared not utter a sound. I filed it away as a simple attribute of the land and kept my pace brisk, dodging an incoming rock.

Frustration built all too quickly as something dastardly hatched. Caught in another frustratingly dense dead end, something hit me. An idea or a rock perhaps. I stared intently at the trees, hoping to hear the launch of a rock or the cracking of a twig or a stray bell twitch. For minutes I stared and waited and listened, though the imp slipped up.

A rock flew its simple flight, though passion and fervent energy caught the projectile and reversed its motion. Returning the package to its sender, a child's cry broke out over the gallery of tree trunks and canopies. A giddy smile grew on my lips. Not even the capricious personification of the hunter and his tribe can jeer, for ecclesiastical channels replenished my veins and flavored my blood beyond comprehension!

"Summon the nonbelievers," I scoffed with the raise of a hoof to my chest, "to call into discussion this beginner, then return to your holes as the evidence sends the courtroom ablaze with envy!"

"Jerk! What'd you hit me for?" Called the bells and the voice. Sunlight did perfect my astounding elevation atop the pedestal of victory, though my curiosity begged the question of what baddie my skills had struck. Eager to discover the artist behind this facsimile of horror, I called for the criminal to reveal himself.

"Hah!" called the voice. The owner traipsed through a northern bush and proclaimed his motivation: "Cower fool! For I am an esteemed guard of Paradise Gorge!" A forgettable face and a tiny frame, though an ominous jet black coat trimmed with a pearl mane and marked with the insignia of a vermilion bell painted an image of confusing color schemes within my memory. Violet eyes stared intense gazes into my soul. Around his neck glistened a beautiful pendant and the companion bells.

The hoof he pointed at me addressed his target. "Do you, marauder, now wish to duel?" I asked, horn eager to smell the singe of fur.

Without a word or rhyme, the marauder reached a swift hoof to the ground and grew a devilish smirk. My heart raced as the possible scenarios of battle revealed themselves: perhaps he would call for help, or simply charge, or use his shimmering little hooves which flared threateningly in the sun? Though a new tool, much worse than the previous tools, was released and presented. "So! You must be a traveling poet! I get it now! Well buddy, I bet my haikus are ten times better than anything you can muster! Now we'll see how smug you are!" The miniature marauder confidently barked.

Freely diving into prose, he closed his eyes, raised his head to a nearby evergreen, and began: "Big and tall green tree!" He declared, mouth wide and projection heard above all the wind. "Grow bigger and greener today! Today is warm!" With a smirk he looked at me once more. "Your turn! If you can impress me, I'll take you through this maze!"

Soft laughter escaped from my lips and became unexpectedly boisterous. "As the sun sets I see the time is amateur hour! We are not in the mood for free verse! Pray count the syllables of your speech and direct me free of these woods!" My guffaws would not cease and began to scare the birds.

"Huh?" The confused child went back and counted his words in his head, then returned with red spreading violently across his face. "Aw dang! You win this round, poet! What's your name?"

"Simple guard, I am Ostentatious, but as I said before, I have not the time for pleasantries with you. Freedom is which avenue?"

Reluctant to uphold his bargain, he scowled at my superiority and, with his inferiority, held open a previously unexplored section of hedges leading to a surprisingly spacious system of routes. I followed without delay.

From what little small talk the foal attempted to create and that I acknowledged, I gathered his name: Slay Bells. Apparently he was leading me into the direction of his town: Paradise Gorge. Every clop of his hooves and every word spoken lead to the obnoxious clang of the series of bells strewn about his neck. The rest of his chatter did not interest me nor my

quest as I simply watched the trees go by and grow from forest green to several vibrant shades. Energy and life became a pattern among the branches and trees as I could make out the tops of homes in the distance.

The guarded path of trees eventually emptied out into a small field abundant with colorful arrays of flowers and fruit bearing trees watching over a brick path. Beside the path stood two stallions, both of whom greeted Slay Bells and I quite warmly.

“Did you have fun playing in the forest, Slay Bells? No scrapes I hope. Don’t keep your dad waiting too long!” chimed one of the guards. Crimson rushed to the young foals face once more. The garb, for guards, appeared disheveled: helmets not matching, an air of casualness between the two, and practically unimpressive builds. I could have overtaken them had I not been in a hurry.

Beyond the guards resided the sleepy city Slay Bells proclaimed to be “Paradise Gorge”: a town surrounded by the forest behind us and the lush hills on all other sides. Flowers shared the space among the grass and shimmering brick streets. Homes of the lightest teak and natural canopy roofs dotted the sides of the streets and street corners as we strolled by each. A marvel of architecture and quite overwhelming to the eyes, it was a sight vastly different to my comparatively dull village and only served the realization that this was my first time in a new town, so I took in all the available sights and surroundings.

As the houses did greet the two of use with light hearts and lighter eyes, so too did the pleasant townsfolk who released “Hello”s and “How are you today, children?”s like the air they breathed. Each we returned with a similar reply as we roamed the brick streets. It was a quiet and demure bustle around us as ponies of every vivacious color imaginable were selling goods or eating in the cafes or simply enjoying the bounty of light around them. An alluring thick smell of grass wafted our way and lulled me into peace. Quite the serene way to begin a journey of my caliber, but I accepted it readily.

Crossing the rims of the roofs and over the street flew streams of crimson flowers like the flight of magnificent spirits. Enthralled by their beauty, I barely noticed the path Slay Bells was leading me on or the destination, until he halted and announced: “Here we are, poet! The Mayor of our village lives inside! I shall let you in.” A deepness to his voice rose with a regal façade.

Teak in all different hues and vibrancies lined the magnificent estate. I followed Slay Bells up the ramp to the porch and Slay Bells grasped a pull cord in his mouth and yanked on it. From within the wood panels a bell chimed and I heard hooves hit wood.

Slay Bells opened the door and we walked through the opulent threshold into a wide room rivaling the beauty of the town. Affluent rugs and décor drew my gaze, though a figure entered from across the room. A plump neck raised a rosy head to see us, and a loud chuckle was heard.

"Well, my boy! You found a new friend? I don't recall seeing his face before." The elderly colt trotted over with heavy cream hooves and examined me.

"No dad! This is a poet I found hiding about the forest. He says he would like an audience with you." Slay Bells corrected. I did not recall asking for an audience, though I took advantage of this opportunity.

"The forest, eh? What's your name, son?" The mayor asked me.

"I am known as Sir Ostentatious, though be merry and call me 'Ostentatious'." I bowed my head to the figure.

"A fine name indeed! I am Mayor Liberty!" He said with a bow of his head in return. "I see you have met my son. I trust he treated you well?"

"Hospitality may need refining, but why does he where such bells?"

The mayor chuckled. "As a young boy, he does not know what is best for him. The bells make sure he doesn't get into too much trouble." Slay Bells turned away with a groan, bells shaking in the process. "But tell me, what brings you to Paradise Gorge, son?"

"I am in search of seven evils and a title! Upon my father's grave sleeps a promise of glory for his only son, and this humble town is my first stepping stone." I finished proudly, punctuating my quest with a stamp of my foot.

"Quite the admirable one!" Chirped the mayor. "A bit lofty, but it comes with that spry youthfulness! Pardon my lack of hospitality! Do make yourself at home. I've some tea brewing that I'm sure you'll find divine."

"I appreciate your extension of home, sir, though my stop in this town must be brief as the sun grows drowsy. Forgive my forwardness, but have

you any evils or evil paraphernalia that needs reconciling? I am sure I can do wonders against such plagues!”

The mayor was not moved. “What have you liked best about the town so far, son? The architecture? The music? All of my own design to make guests feel right at home in our little town.”

“Trust me good sir, it is all so fine, but please! For the matter at hand, I do declare—“

“Say no more! I’m sure it was our crown jewel, the majestic ‘Birds of Paradise’ along the streets which mystified you the most! I can’t blame you, son. They’re grown right here in the tender loving care of our eccentric florist. Have you visited the Florist? She is quite a face. Do you think she is free, Slay Be—“

It was to last no more. A thunderous hoof stamp brought a rapid silence to the home and shook the rafters. “Please acknowledge my request: have you or have you not a quest for me, and if not I shall leave you be!” I finished, the mayor’s smile unfaltering.

Rosy cheeks began to flee and turn ghostly as the mayor looked down his nose at me with the same smile, in a sort of thought. “In this country, ponies seem to live for action as long as they can and sink into apathy when they retire. I’d hazard a guess that the only problem our town has is ponies passing through the canyon and never returning. But you won’t have any problem with that, for the canyon is off limits due to the deadly attributes it possesses.”

Bewildered, I pressed on. “With all due respect, I am not interested in these sleepy lives. I yearn for the open road and making my name along its expanse! If this canyon path is my only route to advance, I shall take it. I am to rove across the world and learn its secrets, like the glorious equines of the past! Have you heard no tales of their gallantry?”

The bravery he saw in me took the smile from his lips as he sighed a heavy sigh. “The past is a foreign country,” Mayor Liberty solemnly let out, walking to an adjacent table. “They do things differently there.”

“I have a particular revulsion towards monotony, good sir.” I called to obtain the colt’s drifting eyes and attention. “So many lands, so much to do, so little done, such things to be!” Slay Bells stood frozen and silent behind the duel.

“Monotony?” returned the mayor with a new smile. “Like the bee, we make our industry and livelihoods our amusement! Festivals abound and never a dull street corner in Paradise Gorge! Why do you not see the beauty in such establishments? I must insist you stay at least the night to see all the our lovely town has to offer.” A tea kettle in the back began a sour whistle.

“It’s but a bee and his clones, though!” Broke in Slay Bells, words screamed to overtake the whistle. “One does not get a harmony when everypony sings the same note!” A fervor unseen in such a small lad, even his melancholic father took wind.

“You speak out of turn!” Yelled his father, eyes furious with fury. “Your poor mother would surely faint if she were to hear such foolishness!”

Eyes widened but soon surrendered behind raven lids. Slay Bells simply hung a defeated head and excused himself from the discussion. The door shut behind me and the gravity of the room became all too cumbersome. I turned to Mayor Liberty, his gaze fully spent on the portrait above the table. Somber upon the canvas stood the expression of a mare. Deep blues ran into blacks and I could barely make out a smile on the beauty. Eyes free and his large hooves carrying himself to the clamoring pot , he asked, “Do you mind going after the boy? We’ll continue our discussion later on tonight, should you truly decide to leave.”

The door swung open fast as I felt myself almost fly from the fresh air and colors washing over me and relaxing myself. Once outside, the black foal had vanished, leaving me alone on the porch.

An unexpected turn of events for not even a day out of the gate. As night began to trumpet and herald in the moon, I found a cafe to quell my rising hunger. Fellow mares and colts ate their food and casually talked and thought nothing of the path beyond the hills. All the tables were filled with couples and families and friends who talked and ate and laughed while I took my solace to my own mind and the empty chair across from me.

A pony approached me and asked me what I would like. I told her I was but a traveler and asked for something of the nature. Enthused by my simple origins, she promised me no charge for the meal and offered to return with a “traveler’s special”. Graciously I thanked her. Every breath felt

a little bit fuller than in my own hometown, like a different sort of atmosphere here. It was infectious: this quaint charm of togetherness and kindness and harmony among fellow ponies tugged something in my heart previously untugged. I wondered what I was leaving it for.

In my thoughts, time seemed to slip by like a phantom. The waitress and her glowing smile brought me a hearty plate of greens and wished me a pleasant meal. A bite fostered ecstasy on my tongue which spread throughout my system. A whinny nearly escaped from me as the wondrous dish met my tongue, begging me only to eat more. Such delectable yet delicate lettuce! Cooked in a way even perfection has yet to master! Voraciously I consumed the plate and reveled in every second. Truly a culinary marvel, and the ambiance of the establishment beckoned me to stay a bit longer. I may have obliged had not a disillusioning sound of bells hummed in the distant. Astonished I could pick up on it in such noisy conditions, I excused myself and followed the sounds.

In the bright lights and festivities of the night a white stream bounced across the street and bells chimed. I followed the signal and met an ecstatic little foal.

“Ostentatious! I’m glad I found you! I have a plan to get you through the town!” Chirped the child proudly.

“I don’t know, little one. I may need to stay here a little longer. Your father truly does not give this place enough credit!” Over our conversation I could hear the growing of music. “I’m sure being here a little bit longer won’t offset my journey too long.” I convinced myself.

“What?!” Asked Slay Bells with shock. “What about your dad and stuff? Isn’t he waiting for you or something?” The music grew and I fell into it further. A beautiful flute began a beautiful tin tune.

“Nah, man. He’s dead. He can wait a while.” Slay Bells did not share my same relaxation at the mention of my father.

“You’re falling for it too!” Accused the child.

“For what? The town’s just so peaceful and ideal. Why would I want to leave?”

“Where have you lived all your life, under a rock?” Incredulous eyes stared into my clouded eyes, but they began to drift to the festivities across the street.

“I must have been to not know of such a heaven!”

Violet eyes were rolled and pearl locks swayed in a shaking motion. “So much for your grand quest then huh?”

“Seems like it.” I agreed.

“Looks like you’ll end up like every other pony here.”

“Feels good.”

“I thought you were some special kind of hero.”

I could not hear him.

“Your dad must be disappointed.”

And then the music died. A triumphant gale blew through the city and took with it a cyclone of those beautiful and enticing crimson flowers. Petals began to soar across the brick paths and instruments ceased their melodies. There was a scream as a flute took flight with the flowers. Red fairies all around me and that cyclone took its prisoner. Lights on the streets flickered and dimmed for a moment or two as the whirlwind raged and showed me my captors. Eyes now open, the wind dropped with the petals and fell to the earth. A moment or two passed until the event was shrugged off and the ponies around us in their meals ate once more and began talking. Minus a flute, the music played on. Slay Bells and I, though, were gone with the wind.

I followed Slay Bells’ quiet melody to the outskirts of the gorge. There slept a quiet cottage of modest appearance and flowers easier on the eyes. He led me to the door and peered around the home.

“My friend lives here, though she must be upstairs sleeping. When you wake up, make sure you tell her I sent you! I’ll be here tomorrow morning to see you off!” Too ashamed by my previous display of coarse language and betrayal, I silently nodded and bid him farewell.

The door creaked almost lyrically as I made my way inside. Drowsiness fought off better judgment as I simply shut the door and found the nearest couch to slumber upon. Before I withdrew though, I recalled my satchel and the log I promised to keep of my travels. With a yawn I cracked it open, fresh paper greeting me. With my quill I began:

“Dear handsome log of adventures,

I pray thee father! Forgive me. The tempest only begins from this day on. Never again shall I waver! I have it in writing now. Tomorrow I embark on whatever may lie beyond this gorge. Guide me on father. Oh father! How many wondrous creatures are there here! How curious ponykind is! Oh brave new world that has such ponies in it!

-Sir Ostentatious”

Chapter 3

The Thaumaturgical Exodus of us, the Eternal!

T'was the morning of the Exodus, and all through the house not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. The clouds were hung in the sky with care, in hopes that I, Ostentatious, would soon be there. I was still nestled all snug in my bed when the voice of a young mare turned my face red. The girl with a scream and I from my nap; I tried to explain until I heard a loud snap—of my bones.

Teeth and fur all wrapped in a killer had me positively pinned between the floor and a pillar. Sienna paws threatened my face until the mare raised a hoof and regarded my disgrace: “What do you think you’re doing here?” She said, displeased tone loud and clear. Again I tried to talk, but the bear atop me scared out all of my rhymes.

From the thick body of my captor I spotted the creature: Gentle eyes lead to an even gentler mare of a simple shade of an airy yellow. Fearsome wings marked her territory I seemed to have disturbed as those gentle eyes tried their best to stare daggers into the bear’s next meal. A mouth parallel to her two eyes like cerulean balls with two black dots on them lead to a nose like a nose is a nose. All, though, so feminine and sheltered as was personified by her flowing celadon locks unable to be corrupted by the morning’s cruel hand. A countenance like that of a mare’s if that mare was a storm and hooves like that of a mare if the mare was a colt. It was surprising she could escape my vocabulary so easily with her mystique.

“You hungry, Honey?” I attempted to answer, until I realized she has addressed the bear and it growled hungrily. It leaned in close to consume my fear, and it may have, had I completely forgotten I was magically inclined.

To the chagrin of the beast tamer, my horn hummed with kinetic energy, releasing me from the grip of death and thrusting it across the room. Slender legs of an innocent coffee table cracked and collapsed beneath the flying circus. Triumphant over the elements of nature, I jumped to my hooves and erected my neck over the defeated duo, eager for an apology, though I got a different result. Was that...whimpering I could hear?

The flotsam and jetsam of the bear's flight left scattered ornamental objects damaged if not destroyed and I shuddered to reiterate the table's fate. A rug became a passenger as Honey, as the beast was so inaccurately named, shook the wall he collided with and displaced the hanging pictures. Glass shattered around the killer as my neck grew a little limp from my stunt. The mare was horrified and ran to her companion.

"Are you okay, boy? Show me where it hurts." An unexpected demureness rose in the pegasus's voice as she tended to his wounds with tender rubs of her hooves. The whimpering died down and Honey seemed to make an instantaneous recovery, but the beast smelled my guilt and played his role well. "You brute!" She threw an uneasy gaze at me. "He's just a little cub! He doesn't know any better!" Honey nodded furiously and hid his head behind the mare's neck, seeking unjustified comfort.

"Ahem." I coughed, attempting to ease the tension of throwing her friend across the room as much as one could possibly attempt to do. "I have no quarrel with you, my lady. I am here at the request of Slay Bells, for he promised me a safe voyage through the canyon yonder." Her worry faded and became intrigue.

"The canyon?" She paused, before tending to the matter and hoof and sighed. A soothing quality rested comfortably in her tone as she helped Honey to his feet. She told him to rest outside, and then surveyed the destruction before releasing another heavy sigh. "I'll get the dust pan."

Wings took flight as she entered a doorway behind her and disappeared. Guilt wedged its tentacles around me and compelled me to help. As she returned with her pan and brush, I victoriously asked "Where would you like it?" referring to my horn's balled collection of glass fragments and wood.

"Oh! Uh, in the bag." Her teeth retrieved a garbage bag draped over her back, but I would not have her lift a hoof on my account.

"Don't worry, my rose. I will not have you lift a hoof on my account!" With another telekinetic arm I drew the bag to the mound and swallowed it into the depths of the bag, never to be seen again.

"Thanks." She said. "Sorry about Honey. We so rarely get visitors around her, not to mention ones that spend the night. He must have been startled."

“The apologies are all mine.” I decreed, kneeling. “As a gentlecolt, I must acquaint and leave an impression as such. I am Ostentatious.” I looked back up at her, my eyes smoldering. “I hope you will forgive my intrusion. I assure you I mean no harm.”

She distanced herself. “Awfully rude to spend the night at a lady’s home without so much as a consent. Not only that, but you scared poor little Honey!” The demon bear looked from the window with eyes mentally picking apart my limbs. I used my magic to close the shutters.

Another sigh was lost. “It seems we should get on some sort of common terms. My name is Scattershot, and I’d like you to join me on my back porch to watch the sunrise, Mr. Ostentatious.”

“A majestic name, and I shall accept your invitation, Ms. Scattershot.”

Scattershot. The name still sang to me. She was an animal enthusiast by nature and divine intervention, as her mark portrayed a magnificent rising phoenix. Attuned more to the needs of the more beastly variety of creatures, her relationship with Honey began to come into focus. Moonlight still lingered in the morning air as we went on and talked. I foretold of my quest to be and the lands I was to explore. The journey sparked that previous intrigue I spied before.

“How long do you plan to be gone?” She asked.

“However long it takes.”

“What are you looking for?”

“It remains to be seen, otherwise I would not look for it.”

“Well, what provisions have you packed?”

“Nothing but a few pieces of gold, rations of food, and the earth’s energy.”

“Oh.” She sank a bit. “How long have you been planning this trip?”

“A good night’s worth of planning.”

Hope faded from her face. “And you expect just go out into the wilderness and conquer it, just like that?”

"Not just like that, for my father is in the wind and guides me along my way!" Scattershot looked to the sky for a current and felt nothing.

"Maybe you should consider simply settling down. You seem more inclined for housework than adventuring." She giggled. "You're only a smile and a dreamer." She said with a motherly tone.

"Well, he is not great who is not greatly good." I said with a returning smile. "What do you do, Scattershot?" I queried.

"Well, I am the florist for the town, but I normally keep to myself out here with the animals who are, um, how shall I put this. No offense to you!" She looked to Honey tenderly. "Scarier?" Honey gasped and nuzzled Scattershot, retrieving the love he was after. "As bunnies scurry around the square, the bears and boars come to me for solace."

"Where does such a soft spoken mare come by such ability?"

Her knit brow begged me to reconsider my opinion of her. "What you call 'soft spoken' I call politeness." She paused for a moment. "Jerk" she finally let out, though quite muted. "I guess I got it from my mother who I suppose got it from her mother."

I took in the gallery of crimson protruding from the grassy fields in neat rows and columns. Those brilliant Birds of Paradise looked especially radiant in their prime, though I dismissed their beauty and told myself they were but plants.

"You planted all these yourself?" I wondered.

"Yes. It takes quite a toll on my hooves, but I think I prefer it that way, and Honey is a big help."

Honey cooed before throwing me another dirty look. "Is it not an occupational hazard to befriend these animals? Who knows what they are really thinking?" I glared back at Honey.

An incredulous giggle flew into the wind. "You see, I have had, and may have still, a thousand friends, as they are called, in life, who are like one's partners in the waltz of this world—not much is remembered of them when the masquerade is over. Animals, however, are reliable, many full of love, true in their affections, predictable in their action, grateful and loyal. Those are difficult standards for ponies to live up to."

“But am I not of an admirable state, dearest Scattershot? We creatures need wide open pastures and worlds to explore!” She continued her gaze, eager to capture the sun. Those celadon streams hid her eyes from me.

She snorted. “I see you are an idealist, whatever else you may be...”

“Don’t be foolish!” The sun still hid beyond the distant hills and I grew irritable at her irreverence. “Do not be timid or squeamish about your actions. All of life is an experiment! You can not let it sit idly by and age.”

“But how practical is that?” Truly this “soft spoken” pony knew not the term in the argument’s heat. “It’s cozy here and blistering out there. Here food is abundant, out there it is scarce. Here there is stability, out there is anarchy.”

“Don’t you wish to know it? To have lived among it and conquered it? The unpredictability of it all is what draws me! Flowers will always be their reds and greens, but who know what colors are in the horizon?” I stamped my foot to get her to look me in the eyes, but she remained frozen towards the empty sky.

"What is there to see in a land our princess could not even govern? Here I know the sun will actually rise."

“All empires fall, but that is the enticing aroma and air of mystery to the journey. And what if the precious sun was to not rise but fall out of the sky? Would you not regret your sheltered life?”

“The crash of the whole solar and stellar systems can only kill me once, Ostentatious. I like to think I have a good idea of the world around me simply by watching the sun.” She soothed, hearing the passion grow in my voice. Those first rays of sun dared a glance. “Evil is a myth in this empire. I don’t wish to look for it.”

“I guess I am not as leveled as you then.” From my satchel I retrieved a delicate pendant for the mare. I cracked it open. “My father gave me this amulet as a memento to remember him by. The inscription reads: ‘The whole course of history may depend on a change of heart in one solitary and even humble individual – for it is in the solitary mind and soul of the individual that the battle between good and evil is waged and ultimately won or lost.’” With a small clap the pendant was shut. “I choose to fight on. So many ponies in this town have lost and submitted, but I see fervor in

you, Scattershot. Your individual action made a haven for these otherwise shunned out creatures. Who is to say that same action cannot save others?" I turned to her once more, sunlight enveloping and sweeping across the porch. Her mane began to fly and those cerulean eyes squinted in the morning glory and searched for the words to respond with. In the silence I went on.

"Dare you leave the safety of your home and join me on my quest? I do hope you'll say 'yes'." The quote struck a chord with the girl as the sun burst over the horizon.

Tremendous breezes spilled over the mountains and picked up our manes in unison. Mine flowed with determination, hers with irresoluteness. A face well lit with the morning, she saw something in my words, I believed. Her beautiful gems revealed themselves, as if by an epiphany, and she looked to me. The world opened itself around the timid creature as she saw the horizon become a great deal smaller.

"We had better start packing." She said with a pleasant smile, apathy melting with the darkness.

With the morning sun drew an ebony foal from the shadows of the houses. The child crept to the door of the cottage and let himself in. He spotted Scattershot and I surveying the items in her closet and pantries and sorting out what to bring and what not. Honey had curled himself into a ball outside and continued his loud cries at the thought of his friend leaving, though I reveled in them maliciously.

"I see you two have gotten friendly." Slay Bells chirped, alerting us of his presence. "You helping him pack, Scattershot?"

"Well, you see Slay Bells, I've decided to join Ostentatious on his adventure. I think he could benefit from someone keeping him firmly on earth." I am sure she meant that only with endearment as it sounded like serenity.

Slay Bells eyes only widened with admiration. "No way!" He said with glee. "I thought you were gonna work on your flower business! Besides, you told me you hated the idea of leaving the town!"

“What do you mean, Slay Bells?” She giggled nervously. “I can handle it! I have a pet bear, aftera—” and she punctuated her sentence with a tiny squeal as a fist met the side of the house, possibly a disgruntled bear upset of his new title as “pet”.

“She’ll do fine, young guard.” I added. “She’s got a knack for these animals that I cannot make up for with brute force. Every battle needs an anthem to orient itself by.”

“Awesome!” He cooed, eyes bright. “Like a dynamic duo! When do you leave?”

“As soon as we finish packing. What has your father got to say about our trip?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about him. He means well and all he wants is everypony to not have to face the wastelands because he’s been there. Most ponies who say they want to adventure there, he says, only go for the glory without knowing what they are actually getting themselves into. He said Paradise Gorge was founded decades ago by nomadic ponies who finally found a green pasture amid the deserts, so they hoped they could create a paradise so nopony ever has to deal with the deserts ever again.

“I just think it’s so boring here, so I am going to prove myself overtime and one day go there as well. I hope that you two return so you can tell me how it is and take me next time you go!”

I put a hoof on the little tyke, feeling the flame still young yet reminiscent of my own youth. “I’d say such a statement already warrants your maturity. You have grown since I met the little imp in the forest. And it’s an amicable gesture your father has created, but in what taste is it? Why not spread the green across the world rather than concentrate it here? Tell him to remove the wastelands, not isolate them. The beast may then finally die and sloth may disappear with the memories of deserts.”

I turned to Scattershot, her eyes wide with inspiration. “What a great idea!” She flew back into a closet, retrieving a bag of seeds. “These are my ‘Birds of Paradise’ seeds. They helped the gorge flourish when it was first discovered, so maybe we can spread them on our own path?”

Slay Bells and I were in agreement at this proposal. Thus our mission was set and engraved in the annals of this sleepy town still snoozing in its bed as Scattershot and I prepared to embark on a grand adventure. Slay

Bells offered me the pendant around his neck, though, and told me to keep it.

"My mom gave me this pendant. She's out there somewhere, Ostentatious. She went out into the wilderness with others to find other ponies. I know she's still out there doing miracles and every day the message she left me in the pendant reminds me of it. But I think you should carry it. It fits you better. Whenever you need some hope, just read the message inside, and maybe if she sees it, you'll tell her I'm doing okay? She's got a pendant just like this one, so that's how you'll know! You promise?" He finished, a lip bit and eyes intent on a "yes".

With a friendly laugh I picked up the pendant with my magic and delicately set it around my neck. "Of course, Slay Bells. Every seed and every town will foster a new road for which perhaps your mother and I shall cross paths. Fear thee not! In fact, my father gave me a pendant similar to this one in appearance."

His eyes lit up. "So, maybe they have met? Maybe she's doing alright?"

"I'll see to it that she is. But as the day matures your father is sure to soon wake. Say your goodbyes to Scattershot and wish us the greatest."

He nodded, wishing his florist friend a good trip and was off into the morning, teething gritting away tears as his friends embarked.

Honey was the most torn up, practically fusing himself to Scattershot as we made our way to the canyon. The beast of burden may have proved to be somewhat bearable had it meant bearing the bloated bags Scattershot insisted we bring. Unfortunately, when he had to depart, I would be left with the heavy lifting. As the two walked and shared goodbyes in their own special way, he only glared at the colt tearing him away from his long time friend and wished me dead.

A weathered sign came into view and hung crooked and lifelessly upon the grassy hill side. It read: "Everfree Wastelands. No pony's land."

Of all the things Scattershot charged Honey with while she was gone, the name "Felicity" had come up as someone Honey was to keep company. It was harmless information at the time, though when we rounded the

corner of the canyon walls and they began morph from lush and green into a rocky exterior, a thickness and mist began to rise in the air. Humidity beat down on our coats as something, like a barricade, came into focus. Rising and falling in the fog, a shade of pink appeared in the distance.

Wedged between the rocky faces of the canyon stood, no, slept an amorphous creature. As we approached, the gargantuan size of the behemoth towered stories over Scattershot and I. Head slumped over a large paw, the creature looked almost feline in its features. A deep rumble kept in time with the behemoth's heavy breathing, that snoring nearly sparking an avalanche. I stepped back and pondered what manner of barriers manifested themselves into such a figure.

"Oh Felicity, how many times have I told you not to sleep with your mouth open?"

Into the satchel Scattershot somehow, amid all the trinkets and items, withdrew a tiny whistle on a loop. To her lips she drew the tiny instrument and blew a soft note on it; so soft I did not even hear it. Lazily, pink eyelids began to flutter and notice her friend's present. The behemoth lapped her mouth and yawned, our manes twirling in the feline's breath. "Good morning, girl. Could you please get up? My friend and I must pass through here."

Without a word, stubby legs lifted the beast into the air and stretched with another yawn. Felicity dipped and arched her back to remove drowsiness before waiting for us to go by. Scattershot placed the whistle around Honey's neck as a passing of the torch.

"Be good. You have a big responsibility now, Honey. Make sure Felicity doesn't sleep too much and make sure to keep the cottage tidy, alright?" The bear rubbed against the motherly figure and cooed an uncharacteristic coo. It was genuine though.

Before Honey could finally turn and depart, a statement caught both of our displeasures: "Don't you want to say goodbye to Ostentatious, Honey?"

A deep frown grew on my face, but I turned and faced the slaughterer with the best smile I could muster for him. I extended a hoof, not sure what I was to receive from the gesture. Honey approached me, staring intently at me. For a moment he did nothing, but then motioned his head to

Scattershot. Back at me, he drew a claw over his neck, putting the responsibility for her dead set on my shoulders. I nodded with an uneasy nod and backed away from the beast as he turned and ran to say goodbye to his friend one last time.

As Honey disappeared into the mist, my new cargo could not even falter my sense of glee. Felicity stood motionless, only watching the two of us, Scattershot and I, as we passed beneath her belly. I looked to Scattershot as we exchanged giddy smiles.

Though as we passed through the gate, a ray of light shined down from the heavens and enveloped me. Spinning and dancing in the light, a card made its earthly descent. The two of us watched the ballet until the card came into my grasp. No bigger than an index card, I held the card with my magic and read it.

“What does it say?” Scattershot read.

A large platform from which to leap to towards the world! The horizon was in my hooves and my father would make sure of it. “It reads: ‘Eternal’”. Glee overtaking me, I placed the card in the satchel pocket and reveled in the brilliance of the sun until the portal closed and replaced itself with mist.

“Let’s go, the fog is rising.” She said, and I followed as we left the mouth of the canyon. Felicity sat herself down and began her slumber once more. Beyond us was only opaque white and no signs of life. A fresh start.

“A misty morning does not signify a cloudy day, Scattershot!” I galloped off into the mist, Scattershot following on her wings without pause.

-- END OF BOOK 1--

Book 2

Chapter 4

Riders of the Temporal and Metaphysical Storm

Perhaps my expression of optimism was too eager, but the absence of a radiant beacon did not make us stumble. As the white mist faded, a barren landscape housed by foreboding gray battleships tumbled through and marked there in the sky a permanent harbor. Unfaltering and seemingly motionless, clouds for as far back and as far forward as our eyes could perceive marred the sky. An unnerving breeze swallowed the environment as Scattershot and I silently trotted along. A stark emptiness filled only by rocks and dead trees.

Admittedly, the melody of this duo had not yet played lyrically, though this company did present fewer shapes in the shadows and frightening noises I may have heard otherwise. Paradise Gorge and its canyons had already sank into a grim vista as we traveled towards the unknown. I missed the shine of the sun and thought of my mother's complexion, but not of my father's because he is dead. He is but a star flickering behind the sun; dormant, not gone from this spinning top, but threatening to fade if not properly tended to, something I planned to remedy. Such a plan though pondered Scattershot's role, as did I.

A florist did not equate to a traveler, for her breathing grew deep and she opted to simply fly over crevices dotting the treacherous wasteland we traversed rather than simply leap their boundaries like I did. Cliff sides could not escape her grace, but a delicate frame needed time to scale them. If I could hazard a guess for her age it would be astronomical compared to my own, though she followed without question.

The wide realm of lands untouched by time stood before us, as did a figure sitting nearby. From behind a sickly tree he beckoned Scattershot and I over. Hair follicles flew in every direction, resembling spikes, though colored in a pallet of saffron. A wild scarf of white flew in the wind and

flirted with the spikes. A laurel green coat hidden by a dusty cloak seemed to rise from within the earth, practically begging for some sort of entertainment. I could see it in his eyes: that flame only found in the most elite of travelers. Perhaps he was an adventurer as well? I normally did not get excited about these random meetings, but to interact and share poems with the likes of such a respectable fellow incited a giddy pep in my step.

“Hey bud.” He said.

“Hey!” I said back.

“What’s up?” He asked.

“Not much. You?” I returned.

“Nah.” He finished. With that, he took his leave and went into the mist behind us, fulfilled by our engaging conversation. Disappointed, I looked back to Scattershot and she was at a loss for words.

With the whisper and whistle of the wind in our ears, we pressed on. Every step seemed to take us to the same location as we made our northern trek. What if this mysterious land I was so strongly rushing headlong into may foster an ambush of some sort? This ambush, or the feeling of not knowing? Perhaps my father may have opted for my safety above his redemption. Perhaps I, in my state of living and serving as his only son, in any endeavor I embarked on served as the beacon of his life. Vicariously, his soul lived on through me, even without a famous title upon my name. This journey may in fact have held no purpose, and I may have served a higher calling if I simply returned to school. I halted, these thoughts boiling over with questions and decisions needing to be made. If only a sign, perhaps maybe the hoof of my father, was to extend from the faceless grayness and direct me in the right direction.

“Are you okay, Ostentatious?” Concern brewed in Scattershot’s tone, though she immediately sat down to catch her breath.

“Breathe easy for a moment. I am waiting for something.” I replied. Extending my neck and drawing my eyes shut, I waited. I waited. I waited. I waited some more. What was that? I felt a movement, like a brush across my cheek. A wind had picked up. “Do you feel that?” I asked Scattershot, eyes still shut.

“I think I felt a drop.” She said, raising an upturned hoof.

I only waited until another brush kissed my spirit and I. "There! The wind is blowing from the west! There we will find what we are looking for!" I proclaimed.

"What? You suggest we run into a storm!?"

I turned to her, eyes bright enough to replace the missing sun. "The wind is picking up, meaning rain. Thus there must be a rainstorm in the west! My father loved the rain, therefore he must want me to go where he loves!" I did not wait for a reply and only ran to the eye of the storm, Scattershot reluctantly following.

As I predicted, raindrops grew more fervent around my body and enthralled my senses. Was this the personification of my father? I took it as so, for my father loved the smell of rain. If the storm embraced me, so did my father's approval. A single tear down my cheek, the path became undoubtedly clear as I ran to retribution.

After only half a minute of travel, my father's signal finally centralized. Beyond the canyon precipice stood the land I sought after. Lightning threw its fist against the earth and shook the land with every impact. Furious winds and torrential rain threatened our new destination, though I ran beside Scattershot to assure our safety. I heard her breathing growing frantic with my own, though my smile overshadowed the cramps. Our manes flew wildly in the wind and I shouted for our resolve.

"This way Scattershot! I know it is here! Just a bit more!" I yelled as rain filled my lungs with nature's bounty.

Passion encouraged our pace as my hooves guided Scattershot and I to the area's entrance. No figures peeked out of bushes or plotted against me, thus ushering me into a haven of safety amid the hostile climate I now knew these journeys to posses. From the slippery craggy faces of the land we located a large silo and found refuge inside its pleasant emptiness.

With a slam of the door, the wind pulled it shut and Scattershot and I relaxed in the tranquility of the shelter. Both out of breathe from our marathon, we gave each other ample time to recollect ourselves before we pondered where we had actually ran to. Stray droplets sent a whooping cough throughout my throat, though it subsided. Scattershot seemed at ease, just exhausted. Time seemed to have no bearings on that world of

eternal dismalness, thus we opted to stay in the silo until the storm had passed.

In the darkness of the silo I could hear her. "It looks like we're on a farm." Scattershot deduced when she could finally speak.

I nodded weakly.

"That was really reckless of you, Ostentatious!" Scattershot chided. A piercing noise had muffled the comment, most likely the lightning outside. Scattershot yelped. Shivers erupted across my frame.

A retort was formulated and ready to be said, though a pain in my chest stopped me short. Sharply it constrained my heart, like the grasp of a demon's hand. Slowly it ran nails across my capillaries and vesicles until it forced me to the floor. I groaned, and heard a faint gasp and the rush of hooves as my eyes flirted with darkness and were won over by the abyss.

I threw open my eyes to respond to Scattershot, but saw no one looking down at me. All was silent. No elements beat against the metallic walls of our hiding place as a simple candle flickered nearby. A blanket had been draped over me and my mane had been matted down, as if dried by a towel. The warmth of my breath felt heavenly against my damp coat and I took solace in the serenity of our stop. So much so, I pondered leaving the dimness and safety of the silo, but I needed to find where Scattershot had gone off to.

Blanket still over my back, I dared to peek at the outside world and what nature had made of it. Not dilapidation, but an idyllic whiteness scattered itself across the horizon. I took a step, powdery to the touch and uncharacteristically out of season. The mountains in the distance too slept beneath their snow banks and a gentle pace of snowflakes kept the rate even and constant. Against the canvas I could make out the silhouette of a home and a light in the window.

Who authorized this epoch of winter? Surely any weather patrol had known the month of May was a time of sunshine and prosperity among the leaves, but such assumptions were ignored in this strange, strange land. I crafted an aura around the blanket and tightened it around me as my teeth clamored. The candle light invited me across the ice like a trance.

Of a modest length, width, and height, the area of the house did not impress. A small size though followed behind a small range to heat, and the crackle of a fire and all its glory filled up my senses. The door creaked and a conversation stopped.

“Oh Ostentatious! You feel any better?” Scattershot asked, walking towards me from the fireplace.

“A pantheon of the wicked and transparent had their hold of me, but I have arisen. Are you in somepony’s company?”

“I am. She’s in the living room.” Warmth spread across our bodies and the walls of the room as we neared the fireplace of the home. Beside it sat a comfortable mare of muted cobalt and an air of enigma. Blends of charcoal and gray ruled her mane which rested in wild paths around her body. Freshness and youth met her smile well and her eyes gleamed in the embers. She cocked her head in my direction, spectacles resting on the tip of her nose. Of a similar nature, she rested beneath a plain quilt of uninteresting colors. Austere walls watched our brief exchange of glances until she spoke.

“You must be the young adventurer Scattershot has told me about.” She said, beaming. “Please have a seat by the fire before you catch your death of cold!” Scattershot and I obliged and sat around the fire. Absolution from the ice ran through my veins and warmed my blood and lulled me. A yawn escaped and shook the fire. “Feel free to rest here, dear. The snow should surely change soon.”

I looked to Scattershot. She shrugged with a smile. “You need the rest anyway, Osten. You probably swallowed the storm with all your shouting.” The two mares giggled as my head slipped to the floor in the embrace of the fire’s aura. I liked the nickname.

“Snow begets an untimely arrival.” I said, eyes closed in relaxation. “Esoteric weather patterns abound, who is in charge of the sky?” I asked inquisitively.

“I see it is true. You are from Equestria.” Her gaze was drawn to the fire.

“The whole world is Equestria.” I reminded her.

“The long reach of the monarchy ends at the barriers of mist. You are in a mad world now.”

“Who rules this land, Bellamina?” Scattershot inquired. “Do you have a princess?”

“There is not one definitive ruler, though many seek to stake their claims around here.” She looked up to the dingy wood roof. “They’ll surely have this house when I dance with my last storm.”

“A somber metaphor.” I chimed in.

“It’s actually quite exhilarating. The smell of rain and the sound of lightning make these old bones feel alive again. I never miss a storm, but of course I’ve got nothing to do to make me miss it. You see, every storm is supposed to bring a rainbow, and I wouldn’t forgive myself if I was to miss it. So far they’ve gone missing, but hope is abundant around here.”

“Don’t make me feel old too!” Scattershot laughed with Bellamina, though soon knit her brow. “Doesn’t the sun come out?”

“I haven’t seen a ray since the mist first fell on these lands so many decades ago. Other ponies did not seem to mind and they went on with their lives, though others succumbed to the madness here. But my hope lies in that I’ll have plenty of time to watch every storm until I see the rainbow or the lightning.” She smiled at the crackling fire.

“Where are your parents or your siblings?”

“Mother and Father and my sisters live elsewhere. I took the farm long ago when I came of age. My parents and sisters I cannot speak for, but I trust they are doing well. One must not dwell on what could be when there is so much.” She looked to me. “What are you to be, Ostentatious?”

“I endeavor to be the most venerated, unlike all before me. By this test I am to ensnare evils and beasts, my father’s legacy is my cause. I plan to live up to the connotations of my title: ‘Eternal’.”

“How whimsical!” She cheered. “Just remember that prospect is often better than possession.”

“I’ve heard that tune before and she too changed her mind.” Scattershot did look at me.

"I don't know what I'd do with myself if I finally saw the sun. I suppose I would be able to die happy. Surely I would!" Bellamina rested her chin on a hoof and thought. I flirted between the waking and sleeping world as she talked.

"With such resolve, why not go with Scattershot and I?" I asked, in between yawns.

She was about to answer, though a knock at the door broke the spell.

"More visitors?" Bellamina looked to us, but we did not expect anyone. The cracking and scream of wood shattered the tranquility of the gathering as a hinge sputtered to the floor. A second hinge gave way to the impact of kicks, flying across the room and landing before the hearth. Wild eyes stepped through the threshold, dirty hooves and an even dirtier coat following suit. The feral stallion gazed, eyes glazed over, into the fire. Mouth open with heavy breaths, teeth missing, and black like an abyss. Colors were gone and washed out by dismal ashy grays. It grunted and moaned and began a slow advance on us.

Without reply, Bellamina shot to her hooves, twisting as she stopped before the stallion's mania and brought hooves to face like a comet. With a whimper he backed away and fell into the snow outside. Other voices were heard from outside the missing doorway.

"What's happening?" I demanded.

Visibly shaken by the intrusion, Bellamina stared with frightened eyes into Scattershot and I, though I reacted when the savage rustled in the snow. My magic enveloping him, a flick of my horn threw him farther back into a deep snow bank.

"Fear not! Gallantry rises above this pool of evil, and I shall swim with such dignity!" With that, I leapt from the home and surveyed the opposition: two others looked over the fallen stallion with empty eyes. Not sure of what they were looking for, I eagerly invited them to a sight worth remembering.

To the heavens I threw my head, gathering energy from the universe around me. From the mechanical and potential and kinetic and solar, small orbs began to flow from the air and culminate around my horn. Its base shined triumphantly, a paragon of supernatural excellence. All sweetness and light flew in droves to meet my call for power to vanquish these foes.

“Should you choose to not leave in a prompt manner, I shall not dry your tears!” I called, gritting my teeth and sculpting the force into a tool of slaying. Slender body, curves like a battle axe, though I spawned a string to connect the creation. Crystals stemmed magnificently from the frame and shined with their own power. To fit the bow, a prismatic arrow began to extend and take form. Head sharpened by sheer vigor and vitality, it glistened with the bow and began to melt the snow around me. Finally, two majestic wings spread from the base of the arrow. They fluttered and tested the area around them before they took flight. With a sweeping motion of my head, I pulled back the bowstring, letting the arrow ready itself.

Dull and listless eyes did not blink in the arrow’s presence. Motionless, the empty shells before me only watched the pretty lights in awe. The energy neared its zenith and tears began to fall from the savages’ eyes. Mystified and still, they waited for me.

“Dynamic Redemption Arrow of Destiny!” I screamed to the world, the built tensions escaping with my words. The massive span of angelic wings stretched wide and took with it the momentum of the galaxy. Paradigms of the gods themselves gazed in awe as the arrow shot and sliced through the air. Its path of travel tore open a rift in the clouds above, letting precious sunlight exude its glory upon my projectile. With a thunderous collision amid icy howls, the three feral stallions were no more. Snow in furious flurries and tornadoes spiraled about the battlefield as I simply basked in the sunlight.

When the snow finally settled, there was no sign of the marauders, making me the victor. Scattershot and Bellamina emerged from the home, though Bellamina rushed passed me. Atop the rock and melted snow, she craned her neck. There in the sky, the ancient father of time smiled upon her, though clouds began to mend the opening. As she basked in the fading light, her colors shined but began to grow a grayer tint. At zen, though the sun stole decades from her. Features became rigid against her once youthful figure. Her mane wilted with the approaching age as did her color, but her smile only grew with the feel of mortality upon her. What manner of sorcery spirited away the young mare? Her eyes did not move from the gap until the light was gone.

A new gem glimmered in the light. Something appeared on her flank, an image of some kind.

The wound mended itself, the soul and youth returning to her smile and her colors. More saturated and brilliant than before, her colors returned as did the years. Left in the darkness and constant surveillance of the clouds once more, Bellamina turned to me, her countenance visibly brighter and vibrant. Cobalt colors became a more lustrous blue and her mane seemed livelier, even more than before. Despite the vibrancies, her mark had disappeared again. Her smile would not fade. She ran to me, embracing me and sobbing. I heard her whisper, "It is true. You are from Equestria."

The snow had settled as had our spirits as we adjourned to the company of the fire once more to talk. Bellamina seemed shaken, her grin fading into a bittersweet mixture of elation and regret.

"These are the best of times and the worst of times. It is our spring of rebirth and the winter of our despair. We have everything before us and we have nothing before us. Living is death; dying is life." Uneasiness welled in her eyes, fire crackles filling the silence. "We are not what we appear to be. On this side of the grave we are exiles, on that side we are citizens; on this side orphans, on that side we are children and sisters and daughters." Scattershot began to console her with the brush of her hoof.

"How many times must I break this night's shadow until you are cured?" I asked, staring intently into the aged eyes of a young mare.

Through her spectacles she replied: "A river of shadows runs through this world. If I could escape I would be free, but where would I go? This is a terrible thing you two have done."

"Are we under the same curse now?" Scattershot asked.

Bellamina's eyes widened though withdrew themselves in a reluctant nod. "I believe so. I don't remember how long I've been asleep in this spell, but surely I've passed my time, maybe a bit less."

My yawn cut the tension and silence. "Another cog in the scheme I must face down and overcome. Temporal boundaries are a hindrance anyway. One less coal in the pile I must sift through to find the carbuncle buried beneath their depths." I yawned again. "I enjoy the thought of remaining in my prime. Make it your cornucopia."

“Are you sleeping already? Aren’t you hungry?” Scattershot asked, a question I could hear almost a shred of maternal quality resonate in.

“As I walk the surroundings, the universe feeds my body with energy so much so I may last through the night.”

“That doesn’t sound too filling. Why not stay up a bit and humor us?” A foul note in our harmony, but I conceded.

Bellamina then withdrew a three bowls, chipped slightly around the rim, of what appeared to be a fruit of some kind. Not wanting to besmirch this extension of hospitality, I ate voraciously.

“So, you are after your dad? Mind if I ask what happened?” Bellamina asked in between bites, the sustenance easing her turmoil.

By the hearth’s glow I grew passionate and bright and heard it like an applause goading me on. “Cut down in his perfection, my father could no longer brave what the world dared him to. No wounds but only the internal horror of betrayal and toxins. The kiss of death and the spit of a God upon this undeserving stallion crumbled his world and left a son with one less father. Depraved were these creatures of death and their dance, as the overturned body of my father lay deceased on our doorstep with only a note to show for his symptoms which read: “A pony with no title but ‘dead’”. My father, as a tactful business pony, went by many names, though he could not have expected this title. I intend to write this wrong however I may, and this journey of mine may just show me what clues I am missing to this puzzle. Just as he was known by many names, I too venture to add any and all adjectives to myself so that the very utterance of my name in a city street may rile up and recall wonderful and vivacious words.”

“It’s a wonderful journey, but aren’t these words and words only; what telling do they have on you?” Scattershot asked, the two mares engrossed in my mission.

“These words are but letter arrangements, I agree, but the connotations of these arrangements are what strike certain emotions and cords within ponykind and cause actions where they may not have occurred otherwise. Words have the power to turn citizens into rebels and colts into stallions, thus whatever solidifies my position as a threat to all those who may have opposed my father serves to bolster my mission.” I

paused and looked to Bellamina. “How would you describe me in one word?”

Without thinking and pausing for only a second between a bite of an apple she let out “lofty”. Scattershot and Bellamina chuckled in unison. I took the word with acceptance and as a testament to her support of my own journey, for it seems to always begin this way.

I turned to the snickering Scattershot. “If I am simply ‘lofty’, riddle me your reasons for following me. Surely it wasn’t that I just inspired you to go, no matter how flawless my skills in eloquent locutions were.”

“No reasons other than the point that you seemed like you were going somewhere and you knew where you were going. From the moment you snuck into my home and slept on my couch, I knew you would be somehow influential to me, at least in the back of my mind I did. You see, I believed I was invincible like you see yourself as, though when you foretold of the world beyond my doorstep, it put the world into context and how small I might be. Apply it to yourself and your desire for words, for once you lose them, you’ll see they aren’t and never were solely yours.” There it was again: that blend of “matter-of-fact” and motherly wisdom which skirted an issue I could not identify.

“If I ever lose a battle than may I choke on my own words and titles, but until then I claim them as my own.” With that, Bellamina and Scattershot went on, but I could not. The employment of magic performed previously finally caught up to me in an exhaustive wave. As it washed over me, I became stone and would not budge, even for my nightly entries into my adventure log. I would catch up on it tomorrow, as would my search for a definitive answer to my offering to expand my team. I saw Bellamina’s mark again in my sleep. The fire felt calming as I drifted off to sleep there on the floor.

Chapter 5

Triage of these Specters, Aggrandizement of the Self!

Episode 1

I and a newly acquired figure trotted side by side on that lovely spring morning. The grassy lawn of the town, delicately spotted with lush maples and healthy oaks, epitomized the serenity of the excursion. The climate was ideal and the weather was clear; everything seemed at peace; nothing budged in the wake of the chilled morning breeze. To my surprise, though, an ominous cloud arose above a nearby tree, and a siren wailed. Closer and clearer, the siren screeched for attention as it haled beyond the cloistered greens. Perking our curiosity, I and my companion decided to inspect the siren's call.

Protected by the bushes, we could see the tragedy: flames poked and prodded the façade of a set of buildings while firefighters prepared to tackle the situation. The building was almost hidden in a thick blockade of smoke; it was almost indistinguishable. It was a nasty sight to behold, yet my companion seemed to be more indifferent to the disaster.

"Such a terrible thing to happen to the library, huh?" I asked, breaking the heated silence.

The silhouette in black flatly began: "Yes, but I wouldn't call it terrible, for I don't believe in it."

"What's there to believe in? It's a fire!"

"How do we know the fire is really there?" He countered.

"Because it's hotter over there than it is over here?" I replied, dumbfounded by his denial.

"What a shame. You are so naïve. One cannot simply prove a truth based on characteristics! You have simply presented me an unproven

conjecture, to which I can conclude nothing concretely!" My companion declared, each word of profundity leaving with an air of nobility.

"So how can you be convinced that that is really a fire?"

"I cannot. Our minds may just be telling us it's a fire because we heard a siren. We may have heard a siren because we assume the day is too ideal to be without conflict. We may assume the day was too ideal to be without conflict because we expect conflict daily. Thus, I cannot be sure that what lies beyond me is really a fire."

Enthralled by his use of such sound logic, the entire fire seemed to not exist, but I did not care anyway, because the fire did not exist. The climate was now heated and the weather was hazy. I wanted to know more of what did not exist, lest something that did not exist present itself and attempt to trick me into believing it existed, like the fire.

"If the truth cannot be proven, how can I know the truth cannot be proven if the truth that the truth not being proven cannot be proven?" I asked through fits of coughing.

"Obviously, your mind, propelled by the notion that truth cannot be proven, rejects the very driving force, yet that is only because you expect this faultless theory to have fault," my companion said, raising a hoof into the sordid air.

I could smell the smoldering ashes gliding through the torridity as my enlightenment rose to a fever pitch. "So, what does exist?"

"As far as I am certain: nothing; our mind and body let us believe what they perceive, yet their perception may be skewed by our instincts or previous perceptions." His philosophy seemed concrete in every way that I looked; my gaze remained fixed on this burning issue as I smelled the horrible flames around me.

I turned away from my companion and reflected on my own life; what if what I had for breakfast was a lie? What if my father was a lie? What if I was a lie? Sitting on the warm ground, my head rested in my hooves as I thought. The truth could not be proven, yet the truth not being able to be proven is true, even though I am not presented proof that the truth about the truth not being able to be proven is the truth. My mind is simply tricking me! It is just all in my mind. I laughed at the fire then coughed violently.

I could hear the shattering of glass behind me and the tumbling of debris. More sirens roared, unbending to the fire's intimidation. The once healthy oaks and lush maples were ablaze and the breeze was polluted with ashes and smoke. I turned to my companion's side, but he was gone; he was probably just in my imagination anyway. I could see hooves that did not exist under the veil of smoke that did not exist as torrents that did not exist vainly assaulted the fire that did not exist. There was no reason to help them, because "them" did not exist; the cause did not exist, thus the effect does not exist. Why do anything if nothing exists?

Meteors were heard as they collided and crashed with the undeserving earth, yet I paid them no heed. Uncomfortable with the nonexistent smoke choking my lungs, I opted to walk away, but the imaginary fire blocked my path. In my mind's present state, the trees around me had turned into pyres and there was no visible route to escape. I could not believe how absurd my mind was functioning by allowing the fire to permeate my landscape. If nothing exists, why not turn the fire into cake?

I and my companion walked side by side in our beliefs, but not in physical being. My vision obscured and choking on smoke, I sat down and waited in the illogical inferno, hoping some imaginary firemen would save me from getting an imaginary burn.

Then it all went black. My lungs cleared and I could stand. My eyes darted in every direction of the abyss and saw nothing. From behind, a light enveloped me. Peels of piercing whistles and screeches exploded all around me and nearly burst my eardrums. Turning to meet the lights and sounds, a train thundered down its tracks and collided violently with me.

Then it all went muted grays, but I assured myself it was only the house and not another dream sequence. With that realization and impact, I had forgotten what I was so furiously mulling over a few minutes ago. It seemed so distant now. Only righteous energy filled the void in my mind of the forgotten dream. Heaven's flood gates were free from their chains and allowed fervor to flow through me like blood through a buffalo. My elation rocked the globe and drew from sleep the two adjacent mares.

"What time is it?" Scattershot asked, clenching her eyes from the rude awakening.

I looked outside: still overcast and no sign of whether or not it was night or day.

“What a concept! This world is our blank slate eternal and our cube to carve, and such frivolous trivialities plague thy mind?” I laughed, erecting myself before her. I looked to Bella who did not stir. I giggled and nudged her with a hoof. “You know this world better than us all and have drunk from its fountain, so join us! Don a smile the clouds cannot crush and derive a blessing from our curse!”

The brightness I saw in her yesterday had somehow melted away in her sleep. For a moment there was no answer, but words met ears. She swatted me away and turned over. “I’m not going with you. I thought about it long into the night, but I had a curious dream which helped me decide. Without my cutie mark, I have no purpose, so I think I’ll live here for a while.”

I shook my head and laughed at her silly sullenness. “Does it not make more sense to laugh than to lament? Laughter is day, and sobriety is night; a smile acts as the twilight that hovers gently between both, more bewitching than either! In the world there is comedy as well as tragedy, but confined by these four walls is nothing but gray.”

She did not move.

“All these answers to be found! What about the caper of your mark and time? Does it not interest you to find the source of this dark magic?”

She did not move.

My smile slowly faded. I was about to dismiss her sourness and press on, though Scattershot raised a hoof to my body. She whispered to me that she would work with Bella. With a shrug I left the two to go pack our belongings from the silo and ready our team for the trek ahead.

Snow had taken its leave and allowed the rocks and crags to flourish once more. Under the ceiling of rolling clouds I quickly packed the candles and the blankets into the satchel. Eyeing my adventure log, I figured I would catch up on it tonight. In this downtime I made myself presentable for the journey: Scattershot’s brush glided lovingly through my locks to shoo away the morning. Without a light source, the band around my horn and the pendant around my neck looked a little dull, but I knew of their nuclear show and they would shine soon enough. The sun caught in their metallic

bodies knew no limitations of beauty. My admiration came to a halt when a mighty bolt of laughter shot through the sound waves and shook the silo's walls.

Bag over my back, I checked the disturbance only to find Scattershot and Bella trotting out of the house, Bella in a fit of laughter.

"What have I missed?" I asked.

"Oh man, Osten! Scattershot knows the funniest jokes! At first I thought they were all corny and lame, but then something twitched in me, now I can't stop laughing!" All the while giggles and bits of chortles escape with words and broke up her staccato sentence lyrically. In her panic of laughter, she whipped her head violently enough to dislodge her elderly bun. From its restrictions emerged a waterfall of a dazzling mane washing away the air of gloom she once possessed. The color returned to her again.

I just looked to Scattershot incredulously. She walked over to me and leaned in close. "Words can create action, though it depends on the tone and formation of the sentence." With that she winked at me, and I could not help but smile. I laughed with Bella and Scattershot. Something ignited within me, like a flame.

"Trust me, Bellamina: if I like a pony's laugh before I know anything of the pony, I may say with confidence that the pony is good." All three of our manes flowed harmoniously in the wind. We were in good company.

A world's army could not hold us back. Drawn to the horizon, we left the home in the silence of the frozen clocks. For a while we just walked, not knowing where we were going.

"Do you know of any towns around here, Bella?" Scattershot asked.

"Nope. You don't know how long I've been in that house! Now that I think about it, it's all so silly I ever stayed there all this time! Who knows how many friends like you two I missed out on?" It was nice to hear that.

"Then all we have is the wind on our backs and a ballad to write. We will walk and trek and traverse and travel till we see life!" The two approved our mission and we went on. Silence for the road ahead, like the gentle dove on its trip to salvation. Oh our pledge to ponies and to this world was

tremendous indeed! Our passion nailed us to the stars with bravado above—

“That’s a lot of jewelry you have!” A voice chirped. Bella walked beside me and was examining me.

I laughed and erected my neck and walking pace. “They are not mere pieces of jewelry. They are ancillary devices integral to my power.”

Bella was not inspired but more amused. “Sure.” She giggled a skeptical giggle.

A thought occurred to me. “Does the pendant look familiar, Bella?”

“Sorry, can’t say I’ve seen it before. It looks a little too gaudy for my tastes.”

Not at all uneasy about my masculinity, I opted to change the subject: “Bella, you spoke of a dream? How did it transpire?”

“Hmmm.” Her eyes looked upwards as she thought. “I can’t seem to remember anymore. Just someone talking to me and trying to tell me I shouldn’t go.” She shrugged and forgot the rest.

“And you, Scattershot? A dream of such drew from you something?” I asked, turning to the mare lagging behind.

We waited for her to catch up. “I don’t think so. I don’t remember if I did. Sorry.”

“Not at all! Such is hope: heaven’s own gift to struggling mortals, pervading, like more subtle essence from the skies, all things good and bad.”

With that declaration fell a silence as we progressed. Bella’s farm dissipated into a storm behind us as an ugly thickness grew in the air. Only minute at first, though its pungency became more acute as we neared the apparent source. From the outcrop of a rock formation, a path seemed to flatten out and invite us along it. Holographic and glistening in what little light escaped through the clouds overhead, this obsidian pathway was clearly carved out. Around it grew steep inclines and sharpened ledges as the sides progressed upwards to the heavens. Prisms of beautiful volcanic glass like steps to the roost, though they slipped away behind the walls of the path.

Strikes of glittering red began to spread across the faces of the walls and the roof of the cave the path had led us into. The ground grew warm beneath our hooves as the mouth of the cave became obscured and hidden in the dimness of the volcanic cavern, only the ruby stripes and arrows giving off light to continue through. Activity and lava pools took their toll on the temperature, an oven we seemed to have stumbled into.

Relaxing breezes from the cave's escape washed over the beads of sweat collecting on my forehead. This landscape surely was curious. As we exited the cavern of magma, the open sky was visible, though on all sides we were boxed in by walls of that familiar striped obsidian blend. Before us stood stolid gates like barricades, though voices could be heard beyond it. A tycoon of soot and ash, a guard in her guard tower peered over her perch.

"On what wind did you three mares drift here on?" The guard bellowed.

My hoof personified by anger to the gender classification error. "Do you have a leader here? We are travelers on a mission of divinity!"

The pony in the tower gasped when she heard me. "What is this? A spirit?" She wondered.

I smirked. "No, for I eat and sleep and have senses such as thee! I am but humble and eternal Ostentatious. You may call me Ostentatious. In the name of the heavens themselves I decree you open these doors to us!" Without a word or response she was gone and the crank of wheel began to spin. Gates spread their arms open to let the town embrace us, as did the gaze of a few dozen ponies who crowded around the opening. A sea of eyelashes and a crowd of only mares.

All staring at me.

An uneasiness swept over me and I tried my best to assert myself. "I am Ostentatious. My two companions are Scattershot and Bella. I have come from across the barriers of mist to free this world." Their eyes began to widen. "Please, does this village have a leader?" There was no answer until a pony pushed her way through the crowd to greet us.

Covered in a little less soot than the crowd, she exuded a sort of regality and authority. Curses seemed to spread themselves across this world: All faces in the crowd looked in the prime of their youth, all without

insignias or symbols or marks on their bodies, and all with a bewildered look upon me. "I am Grassy Knoll. We are a village of distraught and disturbed ponies. We could use your help."

"What disturbance?" Asked Bella curiously.

The question drew the sound of a swoop from the air. Slicing of wings crossed the air and picked up two stray mares in its path. Scattershot and Bella found themselves on the other side of the gate with the crowd, leaving me out and in the heat of all the inquisitive eyes. A series of blurs sucked my mane in all directions until the vortex stopped and a lone figure blocked my route to the town and my displaced friends.

Extravagant wings stretched and tucked themselves at the figure's side. Trickery hidden away by a mask and goggles, this pegasus scowled in my direction and looked me over. Hair voluminous and curls abound, streaks of magenta and scarlet ran side by side across her mane. An ocean blue frame to this feminine demon, her grimace at my sight only highlighted itself among the volcanic surroundings.

"What's the meaning of this, Tempest?" Grassy Knoll inquired, taken aback by the stunt.

"I could ask you the same thing!" She returned, a gruff female voice turning to the village leader. Her goggles shined with the reflection of the obsidian. "Stallions have not been here since our grassy hill became this disgusting volcano and the monsters took our sun. They took them all and made them those accursed souls, and now you are about to let one in without even the smallest interrogation?" She snorted. "You're lucky to have me, Knoll. Who knows what havoc this spy would wreak on us all."

"You're wrong!" Called Scattershot. "We are his friends of our own accord!"

Tempest rolled her eyes behind her thick goggles. "Don't speak for him for he is a traitor! That's his spell. The monsters taught it to him to get you to lead him here!" She threw a hoof in my direction. "He's here to take the rest of us to those creatures!" Finally she turned to me, the apparent offender. "Isn't that right, spy?"

I laughed. "No, as I am a pony!" Though the crowd, and quite possibly the two mares once at my side, began to waiver in their opinion of me. Some seemed convinced, others drawn between the two options. "What is

this? Becomes thyself lightning and assist me! I am here to galvanize, not terrorize!”

The heroin took over the laughing role. “No one here wants your help! You can’t even prove yourself.”

“And how should I go about such a process?” I asked.

She thought for a moment. “Prove to us you are who you say you are! This unicorn from Equestria. Perform a spell or trick you could only have learned there!”

People in the crowd fidgeted in anticipation of my feat and whispered in agreement of the validity of the test. I had a trick in mind to employ. A moment was used to gather energy, then a thrust of a linear line of light into the atmosphere. A few gasps escaped, though the crowd was mostly silent. As the beam traveled higher and higher, it eventually met the barrier of clouds. Like water or a liquid of equal viscosity, density, size, appearance, matter, and chemical makeup, the beam cut through it like a knife through bread. A fine whirlpool of clouds swirled and breathed a stream of light around me for the skeptical eyes to marvel upon. The pendant and my band caught the light in their metallic bodies and knew no limitations of beauty. For a few moments it lasted, a pleasant aura around me. As such glorious things come, they must go, the sky finally correcting itself and moving on.

The crowd was awed by the spectacle, though the heroine seemed more frightened. “Now you’ve done it! You see?” She turned to the crowd. “He’s signaled the monsters to our fortress!”

“I am but a noble spirit! I performed to the point the spectacle that thee bade me! To every article!” I yelled over her frantic cries and the crowds’ gasps and whispers.

“Hell is empty, and all the devils are here! Everyone get insi—“

“Tempest, stop.” Said Knoll, raising her hoof to the upstart pegasus’s back. “We’ll all go inside, including the young stallion.” With a triumphant grin I followed Grassy Knoll through the gates.

The faintest whisper escaped from the lips of Tempest. Perhaps a curse or other indiscernible remark. I ignored it and followed my two friends and Grassy Knoll to a nearby home to discuss matters further.

A heavy thud met the wooden desk as the tome I had borrowed from the library finally proved its use. Magic flipped the pages and scanned the titles, finding the name of the creatures Knoll had spoken of. By the flickering light of the candle I dictated the script.

"Titan

Ancient deities formed of the natural elements they are born of. Towering high above the equine body and on two legs these monsters charge. Ruthless yet obedient, they follow a master as slaves. A mythical creature only destroyed by breaking the seal of their animation."

"Shall I read on?" I asked. The heat of the rocks and walls around us drew a tense environment.

"No, that creature fits our description. What of this seal?"

Tempest yawned, leaning herself against a back wall. "It's probably the weird green mark on their backs. I've kicked it multiple times, but they always seem to put themselves back together."

Knoll nodded. "Well that's where you can help us, I suppose. Do you know how to break a seal?"

The concept seemed foreign to me, though Bella had confidence in me. "He can shoot arrows with magic, does that help?"

I took over. "I will have to face these demons in the ring to see what I may do to destroy them. Where can I find them?"

Stopped short of an answer, the pulsation of an alarm rolled through the town and shook us from the slump of the heat. Tempest took flight and exited to meet the warning. The rest of us followed, knowing the battle ahead.

Episode 2

Turns out there was no battle but it was only time for dinner.

To this extent I bid Bella and Scattershot to eat while I stayed behind. Perhaps break the walls of the heroin, see if she has kindness yet undetected. The two mares smiled, but I saw the dust and the debris of travel on them. The rest was well deserved for such delicate creatures, as they were not trained to be brilliantly athletic or eternally spotless, unlike myself.

Grassy Knoll understood my concerns and waited for me back at the desk. Her eyes skimmed the pages of the tome as I returned. "Don't worry about Tempest. Her loyalty to the village seems to have turned into paranoia, but it's all with good intent, I'm sure."

"Then you know her?" I asked. "Has she always been like this? My olive branch is met with only reproach."

Knoll drew her head from the book to look at me. "Trust me, she's probably not used to the help, especially from guys. The titans, they came from the volcano. In the night they slipped into the homes and abducted all the males, be they adults or children. For what malicious purpose we have yet to figure out. Even after that terrible ordeal, they tried to attack again, and that's when Tempest appeared. She's a regular idol around here, you know, and the ponies here adore her and treat her like a sister."

"A hero to what end?"

"No compensation, only to help us in this grave time of need. She's been this town's protector ever since that caldera formed where there was once a lush hillside."

"Where does such a gallant heroin hale from?"

"I'm not quite sure. She flew from a cloud and told us not to fear of any other attacks. We were all tormented and skeptical, though she swiftly dispatched the monsters, but I think she expects them daily now. I don't remember the last time they attacked, but she seems certain they will strike again soon."

“An idyllic gift from the sky. How fortunate.”

“Think of it what you will, but she is good and she is an unwavering protector. She colors us with hope, something we all once abandoned. As she fights back, we see ourselves in her and realize we too can rise up against this darkness. Maybe that’s why we still have our color.” She paused, observing her hoof: a light green dulled by soot, though still a beautiful shade. “Why don’t you go see her? Who knows? Maybe she just needs someone to talk to.”

“The mouth of a cannon is safer than the mouth of an angered mare.”

Knoll laughed. “You seem like someone she’d warm up to.”

The connotations and undertones of the remark left me a little unsettled, though I did not blush. “What has her origins and her motives clouded in enigma, this I must discover.”

She looked me in the eyes, gentle and benign. “Thank you, Sir Ostentatious. She should be in the café down the street. Good luck!” I nodded to her and turned to leave. Knoll returned to the pages religiously.

Upon the streets sprouted a few homes and the familiar streets of vitreous earth. As instructed, I followed the paths to the foretold café at the base of the mountain, a peculiar scene meeting me: three mares, Bella, Scattershot, and the vexatious Tempest were gathered around a table. The table positively glowed with laughter and good tidings, Tempest offering jubilations to spare. I heaved a sigh of relief. Friendly grins looked over a card game as cathartic sounds of joy and dismay drifted in the air. I could hear Tempest’s voice from afar.

“I can fly faster and higher than any other Pegasus here! The sky’s the only limit for me.”

I approached the table, Scattershot and Bella greeting me kindly, though Tempest did not notice me. Her eyes remained fixed on the cards in front of her. She flipped a final card, forgetting her ignorance of me and chuckled proudly. Apparently she had won or something to that reasoning as Scattershot bowed her head in defeat and sighed. “Do you want to take over for me, Ostentatious?” Scattershot wondered.

“Hey! I thought it was Bella’s turn!” Tempest interjected.

“No problem!” Chirped Bella. “Osten hasn’t played yet, and I’m sure he’d enjoy this game!”

I shrugged and said, “That sounds marvelous.” I shot a confident smirk at Tempest. Scattershot and I shifted places as Tempest huffed and scooped up the cards.

“A guy’s idea in a card game is war and cowardice.” Tempest mocked, spreading the cards across the table to shuffle them.

“And yours, my lady, is that of a combination of larceny, embezzlement, and deceit.” She merely scoffed and tucked the cards together into a neat deck.

A hoof dealing out cards, she began to explain the rules. “The rules are simple so you won’t have to think that hard.” Cards began to fly from the top of the deck to the table like sumptuous eagles. “I deal out six cards. We each take turns flipping up cards until all the cards are up, then we count up our points. Whoever has the most points wins.”

“A game of chance? What will this prove?”

“Hey, if you don’t want to play, that’s fine. You can go read a book or something while us girls play.” She motioned to clear the cards.

My legs tensed at the smugness she radiated, like a cloud of poison. “Oh I’ll play your game. Ladies first.”

Tempest snorted and took her lead. She looked over the green faces of the six cards. With the beat of a wing, a current flew to the card of her choice and flipped it over, revealing a nine.

An admirable start, though I reacted and chose the card to my left: an unimpressive four. Tempest’s reaction was obscured by her mask, goggles shining like justice.

“Quite a good poker face.” I complimented. “Perhaps the mask is an advantage. Why not take it off? The heat must punish thy skin most brutally.”

“I’ll manage.” She let out, eyes determined and choosing her next card carefully. Another created wind swooped across the table and picked up her second card: a ten.

I flicked my head upwards, my horn responding well. The rhythm of the heart of the cards carried me back into the potential winner's arena: my choice revealed an ace. Bella gasped.

"What luck!" Tempest let out as she continued to study the blank backs of the cards. With two cards left, she chose the card directly in front of her: a queen.

I pursed my lips and pondered the numbers. She ended with a score of thirty one, while I only had a score of eighteen. Motionless, I flipped the last remaining card, pondering Lady Luck's current opinion of me.

She seemed to have an affinity for me, as I drew from Tempest exclamations of disbelief as I revealed the regal king atop his throne. Though victory belonged to no one, the tied score was enough to shake her devotion to the game's infallible qualities in deciding another pony's worth.

I smiled and chuckled at the fortuitous circumstance. "How beautiful maleness is, if it finds the right expression. Shall we play again?"

"Nah." She waved a deep blue hoof of dismissal. "I'm bored of this game. You three play. I've got stuff to do, anyway." Disinclined to wait for a response, her wings picked her above the table and she flew over the dirty roofs and disappeared in a trail of scarlet.

"Hmph. Frailty, thy name is mare." I hissed.

"Don't be too hard on her, Ostentatious." Scattershot soothed.

"She was fine a minute ago." Bella added with a shrug. "I guess she just doesn't like you."

I hung my head at the comment. "Irrationally perhaps?"

"I'm sure she'll warm up to you as time goes by." Assured Scattershot, a friendly smile shining. "She was talking to Bella and I like we were long lost friends."

Streets began to grow empty along with the adjacent tables. The three of us walked from the table back to the Knoll's home. "We don't have that kind of time." I replied. "Tomorrow I will embark to the center of the volcano and destroy the source of these homunculus monsters."

"By yourself? You sure?" Worried Scattershot.

"I entreat thee, do not fret on my account, for I shall not be alone. Our valiant friend will surely go with me. You two will stay in town to ready the townspeople in case of the worst."

"Don't talk like that guy!" Bella laughed, playfully punching me with a hoof. "I'm sure you didn't come all this way just to lose in some stuffy volcano. If any of the books I've read are right, then the hero never fails!"

I laughed. "A kind gesture, though is that what I am? A simple storybook character to be molded by the whim of an author? I am my own pony, whimsical Bella, though I do prophesize my safe return, rest assured." Bella giggled.

As we neared the door to the home, a crash was heard. As something came in the window, it was the sound of a crescendo. A beast came into the apartment and left magma stains on the carpet. She ran underneath the table, but the monster could see she was unable. We ran into the bedroom, she was struck down. It was her doom.

"Knoll are you okay?" I called.

Sprawled out beneath shards of wood and broken table laid Knoll, out cold from the blow. An igneous fist retracted itself by its master's side, a sharpened and spiky monstrosity. It towered fiercely over our frames and looked to strike. Blackened blades of molten biotite and hornblende protruded from the creature's shoulders and other parts of the body like armor. This bastion of thermal destruction raised sunken eyes towards us, flames burning wildly. A jagged mouth opened and let out a thick cloud of smoke with a terrible groan. It lifted a leg and an earthquake shook the earth with every step. Swiftly it brought down a hammering fist to crush us.

In the wake we escaped, though we were out of the frying pan and into its line of fire. It targeted me and employed unexpected speed in its shuffle. An unnatural and unsettling limp brought the creature across the room and to my fallen body. Stone fingers wrapped themselves around my neck and drew me into the air. Burning sensations stormed across my neck, the hellish nails and fingers scalding and charring my neck and tightening their grip. Awkwardly, I struggled to free myself from the grip of death, this figure of vice simply looking on me without emotion. I could not get out the words to scold the beast's unruly temper as my eyes fluttered with darkness.

The abyss shunned me, for a piercing screech broke my stupor. I fell from the control along with the arm of the monster. Never before had I been so glad to see that shield of scarlet.

Tempest planted herself on the ground and reveled in the abomination's scream. Leaning in her head to the suffering titan, she asked, "Need a hand?"

The distraction drew the beast off of me and towards the heroin, though I caught the weakness of the creature: A small green insignia firmly placed upon the upper back of the titan. Tempest nodded to me, and I knew my task. Silently I collected a small palette of magic to sculpt a crude missile. I cast the magic missile at the darkness, colliding with the horror's mark. From the collision drew another piercing scream as hands frantically threw themselves at their master's back to remove the offender, though the enchantment had seeped its poison in and undone the incantation. Fingers crumbled with the body as an inanimate pile of rocks and stones replaced the terrible fiend.

Bella and Scattershot tended to Knoll as Tempest approached me. Without a word she helped me regain my balance. "How was that for frail?"

I laughed but stopped as pain flashed in my neck. "Uncanny how you heard that and knew to come to our aid, don't you think?"

"What?! You're saying I followed you?"

"Perhaps spying on us." I raised an eyebrow. Tempest giggled.

She examined my neck's wounds. "The burns shouldn't be that severe. They'll be good in the morning, as you should be if we're going to the citadel." I smiled back at her.

Knoll got herself to her hooves. Woozy from the attack, Scattershot took her to a nearby bed. Bella came towards Tempest and I.

"Knoll's good!" Bella piped with a grin. "She's just a little unconscious."

"And if this is any indication of the future, these monster's will be on us by tomorrow." I turned to Tempest. "We'll embark in the morning for the mountain."

She thought for a moment, but the thoughts released themselves and painted Tempest with an unusually friendly air. She smiled. "It's true. You are from Equestria."

"Dear handsome log of adventures,

I've gone without diligence in this practice, and I must rectify the mistake. Tomorrow I will save this town, even if that means joining forces with Tempest. I know not her intentions, but I believe she will enlighten me soon enough. A foreign nature surrounds here, a thick coating of mystery with a hidden center. I shall break this shell and draw the secret from her. I hear something at the wall, perhaps you, father? I must cut this short.

-Sir Ostentatious"

Neither elegant moon nor eloquent sun presented their effects on the charred land. For what I could only assume was morning, I awoke to the tapping of glass outside. No one else stirred. Silently I slipped through the doorway to meet Tempest. From the obsidian floor she floated to lead our trek to the colony of devils. The cadence of her wing beats drummed me on in harmony with my steps.

Pyromania and pyroclastic geysers dotted the sloped path from the sleepy town to metamorphic faces of the volcano. Breaths became polluted with soot and we could go no further. Thankfully, as any good hero of the land would, Tempest directed me to an obtuse boulder protruding rather oddly from a sunken in portion of terrain. Dislodging the obstruction, Tempest revealed a pathway big enough for our bodies to walk comfortably, though darkness lined the walls and suffocated the passageway. Inside the smell of sulfur assaulted our senses and made Tempest gag. A frigid wind drew us in.

"I'll let you get this one first." She said when she recovered. A simple illumination charm propped itself upon the tip of my horn to herald us into this new hell. Tempest followed.

The road was marred with nothingness and the unbearable smell, so naturally the time seemed as valuable as ever to talk. "So, what is your story, Tempest?"

"Huh? Why do you want to know?"

“All ponies are siblings, like the seas throughout the world, so why do our winds and waves clash so fiercely?”

She snorted. “Fine, I’ll humor you. I’m from a different village where the same thing happened here where monsters came to take the stallions away. My dad told us not to interfere, though my mom was too strong too let them take them all away without a fight. He said if we let him go the monsters would not come after us. But he’s an idiot for thinking that kind of evil would go by their word. So without a fight or a word he was gone. They demand to be the guards and protectors and demand to make all the decisions. They believe they are without wrong, but this was a purge of the illogical.”

“So you idolize your mother?” I asked.

“Heh, yeah. She was great. No one could take her away from a fight, especially when those monsters came.” She paused. “So they took the fight from her. Dad didn’t seem to notice.”

We wallowed in the awkward silence now casting its shadow over us. This crevice seemed to run to the center of the earth. I racked my brain to think of something neutral to say.

“Do you know I fight on for my own father?” I asked when I could finally cut the stillness of speech. “He was a valiant stallion until the bitter end.”

“I’ll wait until I see it. It even remains to be seen in you. Guys don’t fight, they accept. I’m the example these ponies here need, to show them that they can fight on by themselves!”

“You’ve got a very general idea of me. I’ll indulge you as well: Every mare is a rebel, and usually in wild revolt against herself.” I finished, not looking back to meet her eyes.

“Girls also have an air of mystery you cannot hope to shatter. I don’t know if you’ve ever heard the story of the girl who saved a ship from mutiny by taking a torch and sitting atop a dozen powder kegs, though she knew full well the kegs were empty. Mares keep the world in order by sitting on the mysteries of life, and knowing themselves that there was no mystery.” Tempest laughed in the dimness.

I shook my head. "For my part, I distrust all generalizations about women, favorable and unfavorable, masculine and feminine, ancient and modern. All alike, they result from paucity of experience." Tempest did not answer nor laugh.

An orange glow in the distance drew a silence over us as we advanced. Miraculously, our passage lead us to what appeared to be the center of this mountain. No pools or plumes of lava rushed with vigor, but rather an empty room of a single artifact. Tsunamis of heat and pressure pounded upon our coat and hooves. In the center of this room, the artifact atop a pedestal shined a vibrant rusty color. An orb of a genuine and familiar quality, the kind used to store magic. The kind that also breaks into a rather nice series of pieces when colliding with the ground.

That thought seemed to not set well with the globe. Swirling smog and gas within the article grew vicious and boisterous as the ground shook. Hands like daggers shot up through the floor. Many of them, though they congregated around one spot in front of the mystical orb. Thickness and a rectangular armored body began to rise and take form as the final and ultimate guardian of this domain.

I allowed the opponent to form, as to initiate a proper fight, though Tempest was less inclined. "What are you doing?!" She cried as her wings kicked into shape and spaced herself between the monster. "Go for the orb!"

I suppose such evil did not deserve cordial battle etiquette, thus I took her advice and began to gallop. In circles I charged around the behemoth, charging spell shots and firing them at its perimeter, hoping to stumble upon the seal. Tempest took to gliding through the air to pierce or slice the monster's armor, though no such advancements were made. A full circle around the fortress revealed no such weakness, as the other titan had bared. Crouching over its treasure, the massive titan surrounded the orb with its body, unbreakable and impenetrable.

Offensive measures did not faze the protector, but it also did not seek to harm us. The titan chuckled a deep and earthy rumble. As it finished, its mouth remained open. From some unknown location, a voice distinctly not belonging to this titan swept through the room. "Water water everywhere, not a drop to drink!" The voice cackled.

“Who goes there?!” I demanded, throwing my head in all directions. Tempest landed beside me, goggles flaring in the flaming glows.

“How convenient!” The voice lighted up. “Both targets in one place: Ostentatious, the upstart, and Tempest, the hero. You know, you two are the reason the village is still under attack, mainly you, Tempest.”

Tempest did not speak. “How did you discover our names? Why is the town still under barrage?” I demanded.

“So demanding, huh?” Mockery did not scratch my resolve. “You two do not fit into the game, so you must be removed from the board.”

“I will resist thee, yet Tempest is but a fair mare, what has she done to disturb this plan?”

There was a pause. Was it thinking or pondering something? The voice stammered for a moment, then melted into maniacal and ghastly laughter. Fits of it bounced around the walls of the room and startled Tempest and I well. Unbridled delight, almost to a malicious and hellish degree. As it stopped, the voice drew a breath to regain its composure. “Ah, I see. What a good mask, Tempest.”

I didn’t follow. “I don’t follow,” I said.

“I didn’t think so. Here, I’ll help you out, Ostentatious. Don’t say I don’t do anything for you, buddy.” The evil snickered and faded for a moment as the behemoth hacked and coughed. A wave in its body climbed its throat and was regurgitated, the molten projectile clinging itself to Tempest’s face. The bomb knocked her off her hooves and she was sprawled on the heated ground, screaming as the magma began to eat through her mask. Pain only lashed out for a moment before, from above our scene, a cool inundation remedied the searing offender and removed all traces of it from Tempest’s delicate features.

“A test of loyalty, my friend, for such an egregious liar! The masquerade and ‘hide and seek’ game is over. See what you can do about it, Ostentatious. Prove you are that little king you think you are. As a bonus, though, I’ll let you have this one.”

With the remark the voice had vanished and evaporated into the thickness. The behemoth also melted away into the floor as the orb felt

fresh air upon its frame. A smile shot to my face. I looked to Tempest, but she was no more.

“Tempest...?” My voice trailed off. No burns upon the face, but an astounding and stark shift of physical definitions. Those goggles and the mask were no more and were gone with the lava, leaving only the hidden face of what could no longer be who I had ventured into this volcano with. Hooves finally flew away from the face and a new sort of jaw emerged. Tempest stood back up, but who was this new form? Those familiar magenta and scarlet strikes in Tempest’s mane remained as did the deep blue coat, but once rounded facial features were now rectangular. Pupils lacked that previously seen sparkle and lead to eyes devoid of luscious eyelashes. The pony, no longer Tempest, stood up to face me.

He tried to look me in the eye, but failed and hung his head in shame. “It was a good mask. It was my mom’s most generous gift. My dad didn’t see hope, but she did and fought on for me.” That feminine yet gruff voice was now only gruff.

What kind of sorcery...I was dumbfounded. “But you knew the titan’s were after you, and you still stayed in town?” I managed to get out.

“No!” Tempest, er...no, *his* head shot up to defend himself. “Even after the initial abductions they returned! I am this town’s protector!” The heat of the volcano was palpable. Not waiting for me to respond, he recalled the orb. A thunderous kick fired the orb into the side of the wall, shards of glass falling to the floor and the smoke escaping into the air. As it dissipated, earthquakes and seismic activity rocked our battlefield and threatened to cave in around us. Pieces of this most peculiar and irregular puzzle were still being added in my head before I realized he had picked me up and flown me out of the cave. The grip was dainty.

The outside world greeted my confusion with a smile as instead of landing upon volcanic earth, grass met our hooves. Final rocks hit the cave floor and sealed away the evil. That malicious caldera had vanished along with the hazardous air and geysers. A quiet wind flowed across the lush hillside and flowers swayed in the breeze. Upon the village of obsidian now grew verdant fields and flourishing vegetation abound. The sky was still blanketed over with grimness, though the ground was pleasant to stand upon now. He tested the realness of this amazing new landscape by leaning down to a few blades and tasting them. I did the same: a heavenly taste. We had succeeded.

I trotted away from him, unable to resolve this perplexity in his presence. He noticed and flew in front of me to stop me. "Hey, Ostentatious! What's wrong? We beat them! The village is finally saved!"

I blinked. In that statement, I ignored the voice or the speaker. In the words I felt the same valor Tempest exuded. "You're right!" I said, realigning my smile. "We did!" I chuckled and stamped my hoof. "Another day, another demon!"

He tried to laugh but it fell short

"What will you tell the villagers?" I asked. "I believe I can see them forming some sort of congress."

He threw his head back to the village and saw the many heads behind fences and buildings marvel in the new green arena. At first he was shocked, though acceptance grew on him. A breeze picked up his mane. "I have been loyal to them, and that's all I wanted to be when I came here. I can only hope I am still the same to them."

I put a hoof on his back. "I don't think you've hit the sky yet, my friend. You've discovered a new continent here, Tempest."

He snorted and looked back to me. "Tempest is the other me. My name is Sirocco."

As one could have imagined, the looks and stares which Sirocco and I received as we returned to the town symbolized mixed results. Whispers in the crowd asked who I was with. Some were too elated to be concerned. Others were simply confused. Bella, Scattershot, and Grassy Knoll emerged from the street to greet us. Bewilderment met them readily as well as Sirocco approached the three mares. He flew to a nearby table and stood atop it, preparing for a proclamation.

"My friends! Please listen to me!" Now all those eyes and their eyes lashes looked on with colorful arrays of confusion. "I am Sirocco, not Tempest. Tempest was heroin, but am I not a hero? I hope that my achievements are still that I have fought for what was right and fair, that I have risked that which mattered, and that I gave help to those who were in need. Perhaps I may have left this town a better place for what I've done, even if it was at the cost of a lie. For that's what a mare, a mother wants: to

teach her child to take an interest in life. She knows it's safer for the child to be interested in another pony's happiness than to believe in his own."

He hopped down from the table. "I cannot expect you to forgive me for the lie, so I will let myself out." His head drooped as he expected and accepted his fate to be cast out, though he met a barrier. Sorrowful eyes met a mare blocking his way. Many of them in fact. Leading the blockade was Grassy Knoll. She put a hoof on Sirocco's chin and raised it up to meet her.

"Why did you stay here, Te—" Knoll faltered. "Sirocco. They were after *you* all along..."

He picked his head up. "Every time they struck I made sure no one fell to them! I took every precaution to keep this town safe!" Though as he realized he had only solidified the status of his deceit, his head slipped away again. "I am a coward. It's my destiny."

Knoll, for some reason, found his reply amusing. "A coward would go into an active volcano and remove this monstrous threat and return to us our green?"

Sirocco's eyes widened. I could tell they had a twinkle in them.

"It's a lovely day today. Why not stay a while, hero?" She looked to her support with a smile, then back to Sirocco. "I think we'd all like you to stick around for a while."

Cheers roared throughout the crowd. All the mares of the town had picked Sirocco off of his hooves and put him above the crowd, showing their trophy to the world. As he rode the crowd, Sirocco could not speak. Eyes welled with tears at the unexpected results and the crowd traveled off to the café. The hero never fails.

That college of mares all gathered to see our quartet off before we ventured once more into this mad, mad world. Sirocco stood alongside our squad. I was quite happy for the recent gender configuration, as that meant he now bore the task to bear our bags. The whole town wished him well and wished him the best. Grassy Knoll approached the stallion.

"I guess this is goodbye for now." She said, raising a hoof to shake, her color superbly matching with the fresh grass.

Sirocco nodded. "Such a beautiful color." He said, raising his own hoof.

"We owe it all to you." She put her hoof down and embraced him, startling Sirocco, though he soon returned the embrace. Warmth fluttered into the air and revitalized the area. Finally they released each other, our group heading off into the world as we waved goodbye to the group behind us.

As they faded into the distance, Bella raised a question. "So Sirocco, how did you get such a mask?"

"Well, my mom got it for me from a bazaar near my old town."

I paused. "Do you know what direction such a marketplace would be?"

Sirocco thought for a moment. "I think I traveled on the northern wind, so south of here. What are you thinking?"

"If we find that kind of magic, we may find an even greater source. A glorious lead!" I expressed amusement triumphantly and audibly. The mouth of the meadow's cave presented itself and we exited. Grass was swiftly replaced by rock as we were left in the unknown once more. Tender light in its traditional beam broke through those sky blockades for a well deserved delivery. A new card I eagerly watched as it twirled in its angelic travel. Gracefully it floated to my hoof and rested itself neatly and face up. Glee welled in my heart as the sun bid me farewell and went back to its slumber. "Prodigal."

"A new direction and a new guardian for our crusade!" I stood on my hind legs, allowing my other two to flow freely in happiness. I could hear it, a lovely plot advancement calling to me in the south. As my hooves met floor, I took off to the song, beckoning the others to follow. Sirocco, Bella, and Scattershot followed as our southern bound charge of the light brigade.

--End of Book Two--

Book 3

Chapter 6

The Meditation and Lamentation of the Sedentary

The gray grayness of the day was pretty gray that day. Enough days and nights of travel, or so we assumed them to be, terraformed the land into more inviting colors. Sand grains like pearls glistened and met our hooves as we stepped off that final face of rock and found the next frontier. Clay formations abound guarded our valley of travel. True to the endless dunes and sparsely strewn bushes before us, our quartet trotted alone and with no stream of hoofprints to guide us. Rain always seemed to loom, but never came. Grains flew on their cycles and spirals to the foretold direction of South, as Sirocco had assured us. No fiends seem to lurk in the dunes, so we could all walk a little easier. This amount of travel may put one at peace amid the calamity of the world, plenty of time to make notes in my book of eloquent words I needed to remember to use later on.

I walked in front and lead our pack. Sirocco and Bella guarded the rear with voices loud like thunder making me ponder when the rain would follow. Laughter rolled out in heavy doses, though it was pleasant ambiance. Odd to recall the shell once worn by that Bella in her old home, and now she was laughing with angelic qualities. Sirocco too eased himself and assimilated into our folds. He carried the satchel with no complaints. A smile trying to find a stable platform and eager for company. I was sure Sirocco was enjoying himself with their chat.

That left benign Scattershot somewhere as a soul among this fervent train. She trailed behind me and answered questions or conferred which side was correct when asked by the two boisterous ponies behind her, though she made no effort to join the conversation. She seemed to like the quietude as much as I, though the sands were too harsh for floral guidance.

She pressed on and amused herself, I would suspect, with what animals may live in this forsaken sandbox. I heard her yawn.

“Hmm...” I thought to myself, my mind aroused by the sumptuous melody of a new word. “Arcanum! What euphony!” My quill quickly scribbled the word below a long list of equally beautiful and obscure words. Every so often glancing up from my notebook to observe the endless sand, I looked to the world for inspiration. All it presented me was the winds and their play. We passed a meager cactus, no water in this existence. The sand dunes began to slope upwards. I read over my word banks for something new to see.

“Hey Osten, what are you writing?” asked a cautious voice. Still maintaining my quill and book’s flight, I turned to see Scattershot catch up to my pace and walk beside me. She peered over to see my writings.

“What does,” she squinted to make sure she had the word right, “palaverous’ mean?”

I chuckled a bit as I flipped the pages. “Ah, it’s nothing. Here! I’ve also been scribing our goals thus far.”

“Why write down those kinds of words? Aren’t they a little outdated?”

“Well, one must always remain magniloquent, as such reserves allow one to brave the unexpected.”

She gave a light sigh. “Never mind. Show me your list.”

I moved the book in between the two of us as we trotted along the sand. “A long world of mysteries awaits beyond us: Slay Bells’ pendant is the most curious. Sirocco assured me he never saw it nor anything like it from the village. The orbs, the flowers to plant, the evil to destroy, and my father’s legacy to save.” I clapped the book shut and slipped it into my bag, raising my head to the sky. “An adventure’s magnitude is only measured in its goals and missions, thus ours is truly marvelous!” Scattershot giggled at my enthusiasm, most likely inspired by me. Something struck me though. That evil, I was supposed to get something...

“Hey!” My head shot to face Scattershot. “I have not procured a single head of evil yet!”

“Pardon?”

“I am supposed to get seven heads of hell and bring them back to my father’s grave! Yet no such appendages have lent themselves to be taken!” My head drooped. I felt a single tear acquainting itself with the brim of my eye like two old friends and one of the friends died and the other friend promised to avenge the fallen friend but failed to meet such ends and felt a tear acquaint itself with the brim of his eye.

“But you still got your adjectives.” Scattershot soothed. I did not rise from my slump. “Well, maybe it’s less about violence and more about helping others?” Her tone picked up a passionate quality. “Like a metaphor?”

Her remark lifted my spirit and drew from me a hearty laugh. “Naivety meets thee well, though I am a gentlecolt of literary and artistic prowess unchallenged by the gods themselves. As such, I am a master of subtlety; any sort of metaphor cannot escape me, and I assure you of the literal meaning behind my grand quest. I appreciate your concerns, dear Scattershot.”

She commented, but something in the distance caught my eye and I did not hear her. I stopped and threw a hoof to my ear and leaned into the horizon. “What ho? On yonder mesa!”

A stray glance caught the end of the pearl dunes as they began to reach a climax point. The apex yielded a higher point lead to by a circular path. This small lookout fostered a beast overlooking the vista. Our band treaded softly upon the sand, following to where the sand became adobe and a wall grew. The figure on the mesa appeared to only be interested in the sights and ignored us for the time being. To us, the sights beyond the dunes lead to an interesting development: in that basin beyond we spotted lights, the roofs of homes, and that thing called life? It was all so! But troubles arose when the basin beyond our safe adobe perch sat at the base of this cliff and at a veritable drop.

“Wow, the bazaar sure has gotten huge! Look at that tree!” Sirocco admired. That once humble market place grew into this city of unimpressive buildings, save for the mighty oak spire rising above the town. It loomed over and shaded and watched over the small city beneath its massive canopy. From our lookout we were almost rivaling the top of the oak. Ornate with rosary and carvings and monuments, no splendor dared escape the beauteous façade of wood. All carved from its base and boldly defending the fortress.

Hell itself awed at the sheer ninety degree angle and the length that followed such sharp declines. Scattershot yawned as Sirocco and Bella went on talking while I surveyed the area. I instructed the three to gather strength while I attempted to tame the beast on the mesa, hopefully discovering a plan of escape. They had no qualms.

The spiral path of the rock soon led me to the precipice and the fantastic vista before me. Those walls of adobe and rock seemed to stretch around the busy basin, but peculiar geography lead to an ocean beyond that bustling city and its mighty tree. Our next frontier, surely. To my surprise, the one who I came to talk to had snuck up on me with his silence, motionless and only looking out to the world. No pony of any natural design, but a creature of a peaceful aura. Exterior rough and gray like the rocks, though some sort of beard formed around his face. Steeled legs of determination dare not move. It seemed as if the creature was gathering energy.

Settled on the tip of the creature's snout stood a magnificent horn, sharpened by time. A horn of physical and magical prowess I could only dream of obtaining. Lids were shut as were all senses, not even knowing my presence or approach. I trotted beside the fellow, the birds on his back taking wind of this plot and flew into the direction of the ocean. Still, he did not notice me. "Good morrow!" I greeted.

Gray muscles of the rhinoceros began to come into activation and move minute features of the face. Eyes began to wake and meet the world and my cheery disposition. Slowly he moved his head towards me. "Good evening. I am the sedentary oracle." He smiled as his eyes finally adjusted themselves to see me. "Do you have any eggs?" It replied with a creaking voice.

"Eggs?" I asked, confused.

"Eggs," it replied. "If you give me some eggs I'll teach you a new move."

I looked back over the mesa to see my three companions, and then back to the fellow. "No, I haven't an egg for you."

"Okay then. Good Evening." The creature closed its eyes again.

"Wait, good sir! Can we not barter anything else?"

The rhinoceros thought for a moment. "You are of a refined speech, my good friend, and I could use a conversation this evening."

"Evening?" I asked. "Is it so?" I looked to that thick barrier and saw only gray.

"Have you forgotten? The sun has a power to it that can be sensed by those who allow themselves to sense it." He closed his eyes again for a moment, and then returned. "The moon is ascending."

"Surely one of such ability cannot be stranded on this cliff side?" I asked.

"I am in observation." He faced back out to the ocean and closed his eyes. "I sense that power in you as well, my friend."

"Thank you for noticing." There was a silence as he gazed and I tried to see what he was seeing. "Do you know why a city sits between a desert and an ocean?"

"A riddle that to this day I may only attribute to this world and the nature of this world. It's not natural, but it is there."

"What's the cause, then?"

"That tree, of course. It is of a special design."

I let him have another pause, seeing he was deep in some form of thought.

"Why does the tree matter?"

An eye twitched, though he answered. "All these questions from someone so traveled. It's from where the madness spreads. I prefer this distance from that behemoth."

"Surely one of such greatness should easily remedy these disconformities." I added.

The rhinoceros shook his head, eyes still closed to me. "I don't know that I ever wanted greatness, on its own. It seems a lot like wanting to be a writer, rather than wanting to write. It should be a product, not a thing in itself. Otherwise, it's just an ego trip."

The comment struck me with perplexity. "But you have it nonetheless, and it is your curative arcanum! The power is yours!" I felt proud to use the word.

"The abuse of greatness begins when it disjoins remorse from power."

"Are you not going on in years? A final swan song for your time does not interest you?"

He opened his small eyes, a tired look in them, and faced me. "I am not nearing any sort of age, and neither are you, my friend. Even so, I am not without a helpful bone to me, and since you have no eggs for me, you must do a favor to have one returned." He paused for a moment, a faint glow surrounding his horn, then fading away. "I see you want to get down this cliff, and I've perfected a new skill I'm sure you'll adore. I can help you if you want."

As we stopped to stare into each other, the presence he spoke of pricked my senses for a moment. I felt some sort of majesty rising. Exhaustion would soon be upon us, therefore this mesa would serve as a pleasant station of sleep and discussion. "I shall gather my companions for your tale, my friend, for it must capture the ear strangely!"

The rhinoceros chuckled. "Tell them your friend 'Nomad' wishes to tell them a tale by a fire." He looked back out to the sea. "We similar creatures always seem to meet and talk about the most important things to perfect strangers. In the perfect stranger we perceive unbridled wisdom; the image of knowledge is not disguised by color or frame. Don't you agree? Go and get them, they must be tired."

Three ponies lead by my enthusiasm returned to the summit of the formation and were welcomed by Nomad and a newly created fire. Its origins unknown, so we must have been in the company of true power. Sirocco and Bella sat beside each other as I sat to face Nomad, Scattershot following me. I tried my best to contain a yawn.

"I am Nomad. You truly have got an impressive group. What is your adventure now, my friend?"

I spoke up with a giddy smile. "We are here to war with and conquer the darkness of the Everfree Wastelands and rip away those boundaries obscuring the light of the sun."

Nomad blinked. "Is that what they're calling it now?"

"I suppose." I replied.

Nomad shook his heavy head. "At any rate, you play a repetitive tune on your trumpet. An adventure lies in where a problem is set and creation is stimulated. There is no adventure in heads-or-tails, in betting that the toss will come out of life or death. War is not an adventure, and one must remain civil and moral."

Something was irked in Sirocco. "Civility and morality are to be defined by the revolutionary, Nomad. Such concepts also have questionable importance in the teeth of evil. One might find it in bad taste to observe the teeth being polished." He shot a smug smirk at Nomad, but Nomad did not seem to see it.

Scattershot looked up from the fire. "What is your story, Nomad?"

For a moment he closed his eyes and smiled. "Such a lyrical voice I haven't heard in many passages of time. I am an old creature who finds frailty in his joints and a lack of motivation to move them. For a while I walked, this desert behind us taking the biggest toll on me. As I came to this peak, I saw an image before me and knew nothing else would rival it. I was aging and ready to pass, but something grabbed the hands of time.

"The darkness fell upon this world about the time I planted myself here. I paid it no mind, but I was just as ignorant to the laws of nature. An ocean grew, the cliff began to rise from the earth, and creatures began to build a city and raise an oak. Now I see the perversity of natural order and I am eternally spellbound in this realm."

"A foul curse, indeed!" I added.

"Why don't you just leave and go somewhere else?" Sirocco asked, an air of skepticism wafting in the words.

"Well, if I moved, I couldn't be the sedentary oracle, could I? I'd have to pick a new title, and that's cumbersome." Bella giggled. Nomad looked back to Scattershot and I. "Though I can see that you two are not of the same world as we are." I believe he noticed my shining mark.

“True, Scattershot and I hale from beyond the walls of mist and where the sun shines with magnificence unchallenged. I plan to bring that wondrous sight to all the creatures of these wastelands.” I finished my proclamation by rising to my hooves and erecting myself like a mighty statue, allowing the radiance of my mission to permeate and glow.

A chuckle was drawn from Nomad. “Sit down, my friend. It’s always been a mystery to me why such majestic and headstrong creatures define themselves by such magical charms as ‘cutie marks’. I have not one and I lived all the same. My art and profession is to live. I cannot see their use.”

Sirocco felt the need to chime in once more. “And I cannot see why anypony would stay up on a mesa their whole life.” He said flatly.

“Thus we are different species and different beings,” returned Nomad in calm and didactic manner that annoyed Sirocco to no end. He turned his head away and rested it on the ground. Bella giggled more and began whispering to Sirocco.

“Such a youthful bunch of ponies you have gathered, Ostensible.”

That name. Those syllables. A sight and mind to this oracle demanded I pry.

“Sir! Where did you hear that name from?” I demanded, my head shooting up from drowsiness.

“Excuse me?” Nomad blinked for a moment and leaned in closer to my, attempting to focus. He gasped. “What is this? Am I not talking to my friend, Ostensible?”

“I am his younger generation: Ostentatious. You knew of him?!”

“My apologies, Ostentatious. Yes, I knew your father well, as he visited with my and philosophized and brought me many eggs. How is he doing?”

My gaze fell to the floor as I mustered all my macho energy to relive the tragedy without crying. Scattershot put a comforting hoof on my back. “Recently he encountered demented forces who struck that sun down.”

“Is that so? I am sorry. It seemed like only yesterday he was talking to me about his travels.”

A smile grew on my lips as I raised my head. "True. It seemed like but mere days and hours that he bid me farewell for a day of work, but other forces were at work as well. What can you tell me of him?"

A surge of enthrallment caught me by the mane and I eagerly awaited the news and the tale, though a snore was heard. Annoyed, I looked over the roaring fire to spy Sirocco and Bella, who had since fallen asleep. I looked to Scattershot and she seemed awake.

Nomad cleared his barren throat and began. "He was a creature of uninterrupted prosperity and power. I sensed it somewhat in you, though thought it odd the power was so reserved." His eyes grew an unusual spark in them in the light of the fire. "As I watched the city grow, he offset my disgust with the humorous way he turned a phrase and his copious supply of eggs. I am but a simple creature, and he yearned for the world. It is a shame he fell so soon."

I was about to respond, but I felt something light, as if a feather had brushed my back and landed. A blanket of celadon locks obscured the sleepy face of Scattershot as she found a spot to rest. It was a sight to behold: not a noise nor grunt was made, only the airy sweetness of her warm and even breathing across my body. A giggle escaped from me. I knew she deserved the rest and needed it well, thus I picked her up from my back and rested her head gently on the rocky mesa, knowing she would sleep soundly on nature rather than on all my muscles.

I looked back to Nomad, the same tiredness plotting against my racing mind. His powerful head slid to the ground and refused to raise itself. I pleaded for him to continue.

Nomad yawned, his grand jaw creaking open a final time that night. "Walk on a rainbow trail; walk on a trail of song, and all about you will be beauty. There is a way out of every dark mist, over a rainbow trail." His eyes lost power and fell into the dream world.

Severed from the discussion, I rested beside Scattershot and pondered my father and his ties to this world. I pondered and pondered until I found myself not pondering anymore but asleep.

The street corner was beautiful that time of day: majestic rays lit up the universe and the windows of the buildings all around me, like

mountains of glistening diamonds. The sky was blanketed in clouds and there was not a soul on the street; only diamonds and mirrors for as far as the eye could see vertically and horizontally. Strictly perpendicular were these stunning monuments, almost like towers reserved for the perching of only the noblest angels. Cobalt tiles filled the streets and mirrored myself in them. Kneeling down to feel them, they were icy and reflected my apprehension disturbingly well.

I began trotting down the sidewalk of this immaculate street, looking for another, but only seeing myself in every direction; the clouds even showed no sign of individuality, reproducing my image in the heavenly sky and mocking my anxiety. Feelings of unease and desire came on stronger with every step I took, and my trotting pace turned to sprinting.

No smell; no sound; only my sight to see the magnificence beyond me.

Frantically, I called out to anyone listening, desperately hoping for a response. I stopped and yelled to the clouds. I yelled, seeing only myself all around me. My breathing became quick and heavy as all the mirrors began blending into a white haze.

“Are you okay?” I heard a sweet, lovely voice ask as if singing a soothing melody.

I looked up, still surrounded by the mirrors, but a mare looked on my fallen body with confusion and worry. Her hair fell like drops of golden dawn down past her neck and complimented her beautiful black coat. A simple and ebony body, devoid of any complications. Her face remained blurry, though it may have been the fall. Giggling, she walked to a table by a newly emerged café. I could hear chipper music and smell sweet drinks brewing, and I followed. Coffee was already on the table, and she was already gazing into my eyes.

We talked for what must have been hours, and all the mirrors around us only produced a quaint image of the girl and guy, both struck by some unforeseen arrow. The table soon shifted into the center of a stage surrounded by the towering complexes, and we kept on talking, laughing, and growing close. I felt so at peace with her; it felt liberating. Smiling was the only action I did other than talk and laugh, and she followed suit. Around us was only us, and as I stared into her eyes, I could only see us. In my soul, there were only us.

She picked up her cup and took a sweet, almost lyrical sip from it. She set the glass down, yet my heart skipped a beat; her eyes were still beautiful, her hair was still gorgeous, and her body was stunning, but her mouth had shifted in transit. Coffee began to bubble in her cup as words went nowhere. Her now alien figure took the bubbling mug and threw it to the side, smashing one of the mirrors. It was a terrible shattering sound, and rumbling was heard all around us. Her determined eyes remained fixed on me, and I on hers.

Paying no heed to the glass, she offered her hoof to me to hold. Keeping the flame alive in the face of the shattering, I took her hoof with both of mine, guarding it from the shrapnel. Another mirror exploded in a flurry of crystals and the explosion pierced the mare. More and more mirrors began crumbling and smashing and breaking, and the mare began melting away in an incredible blaze. It started with her torso, and soon the crimson light overtook her neck and limbs. Flames engulfed her head, and all I was left with became a hoof. The last mirror fell to pieces louder than all the others, and the hoof turned to scorching ash.

The ash spread, engulfing me in the way she had left the void. Like wildfire, it spread across my legs and body. I screamed a silent scream, and all around me was her eyes, simply looking at me, indifferent to my pain. As the flames ate up more of my body and burned my flesh and charred my bones, the eyes faded away into the darkness. I too fell to ash, and had not even myself to lean on. Picked up by a fresh breeze, my ashes were spread across the dark abyss, sinking into oblivion.

Truly, I did *not* see that coming.

I heard a voice speak. "Pity to any forlorn souls sent unto this world of magnificence and hell. With this world's magnificence so radiant and hell so fiery, sight is nonexistent."

Chapter 7

When Quixotic Dogmatism Suffers a Miscarriage due to Babylonian Apostates

I awoke several hours later, groggy and hot. Nothing had changed in our sleep, yet I seemed to feel something strange in my heart. My forehead housed beads of sweat and I could feel a fever in me. Slumber brought upon a hatred of a kind I could not understand, though I felt it in all its fury and power. I did not even care nor realize I had completely forgotten to fill in an entry for my log the night before. A terrible fever, indeed.

Scattershot and Bella were gathered next to Nomad and looking out to the ocean. Eyes closed to the sea, Nomad leaned in and muttered something: "There: The sun is rising!"

A power drove me to the floor, inhibiting my movement and keeping my head still. Through the stockades of clouds drew a beam of gold. Like an arrow for my head, it collided and forced from me a terrible cry. Radiance surged through my bloodstream and I felt the fire from my dream, but it was comforting. Nurturing warmth began to settle over me and sooth me, dowsing the fire in me and establishing peace. Mellowing out, I looked up to see the sun gone again and three faces looking upon me.

I shot to my hooves, cleared my throat, and smiled. "I trust my party slept well?" The two mares nodded. "Excellent!" They seemed to still remember my scream, but I had ways of changing the subject. "Shall we wake up Sirocco?"

They did not move, especially not Nomad. As such, I took it upon myself to nudge Sirocco's sleeping form vigorously and persistently. He stirred, swatting me away with a hoof and rubbing his eyes with the other. He groaned loudly as he lifted himself off the ground.

"Great! You're awake!" I looked back to the others. "Shall we depart?"

Nomad beckoned me over, swaying his head towards himself. "To keep my promise, young Ostentatious, I'll bestow to you a new power." Eager, I trotted towards the oracle. He leaned in to me, uniting the tip of his horn with mine own. A magnificent sienna flash erupted all around us and

filled our senses with electricity. Magical forces threatened to knock me off my hooves, though Nomad remained still and collected, allowing the power to flow into me and take shape. Something felt tight around my heart, a tension never before placed upon me, though it began to pass and cool my capillaries. Nomad dropped his horn, the thick color around us disappearing and melting into the morning.

I dropped my head and had to catch my breath. My coat seemed to stand on its end and sparks cracked at the tip of my horn. Sweat ran full, meeting the tip of my snout before a descent. "What do I know now?" I inquired between breaths.

"To guide your friends across these lands, I have given you the power of an oracle. That should serve you well and help you off this cliff." Nomad turned back to the sea.

Testing the power, I imagined a form to give us flight. A plane of sorts to safely herald us to the bottom of the cliff, and I pictured it: a rectangular platform began to form and hover over the cliffside. A light green shade enveloped the platform, an intriguing opaqueness following. I peeked through an eye, yet the shape remained. Both eyes open, I found the plane easily held in place and secured with little focus. An amazed laugh and smile soared from my face and into the morning wind.

On the banner of glee, I dared a hoof off the cliff and tapped the creation. Hoof met magic, yet they did not pass through each other. I leaned my weight on it, and it stood. My eyes widened with every new part placed on the ship until I had climbed aboard, my mane flowing gallantly in the wind.

The others also shared in my amazement. Scattershot cut the silence, raising herself over the edge and landing at my side. Bella followed suit, though Sirocco remained reserved, opting to hover beside us as we rode off. But that would not be for a while, as I had numerous questions for Nomad regarding my father. As I thought of all my inquiries, I felt the pull of the platform beneath me.

Nomad cocked his head to us and returned it, applying a supernatural shove to the ship. As we began to sink behind the cliff, I attempted to halt the motion, yet my horn fell futile to the force and had to submit. I frantically called: "Please wait! Tell me how my father escaped this world's hold! Please!"

Nomad merely chuckled. "Visit the city. Investigate it. Seek out your answer, and never lose that spark of morality!" His voiced faded and trailed away as we fell, and I returned my own call, promising to follow his advice. Stardust glided on the morning breeze from the cliff and flew towards the ocean, directing us as inspiration.

I turned, that regal hierarchy of leaves and immaculate wood now taking on a massive scope and scale. Our chins raised to the city and our resolves tightened, we would tear away the darkness and revel in the shine. The oak was the source, I was sure! In its many facets concealed the orb controlling this city's evil, just as was previous in the volcano. I smirked, scoffing at the rising size of the tree and imagining I and my father's legacy enveloping the behemoth by the end of the day!

From the cover of the natural walls around the cliff our party exited the ship and I let it fade away. Trees wept and hung their arms as death robbed them and the rolling tumble weeds taunted them. Dust and sand twirled in dances around the area and flirted with the sickly cacti. Arid gales would sneak along the sandy surface and blind us if we were not careful to catch them in their arrogant ballet.

Clouds were growing a whiter and more brilliant color to them, threatening their grays with airy browns. A prophecy for our time, yet a road to travel to those city walls appeared to be marred by obstructions. Bulking figures clad in shadows guarded those gates with their axes. Foreign demons of rough and malevolent red shades flicked their tails about and twirled their dark mustaches and dared anypony to overtake them.

Thunder clapped faintly in the distant. Among the rocks and dead trees scurried tiny creatures to their home. Sickly feelings washed over me with the sight of those revolting and malicious jackrabbits dashing about as opposed to being in cages or dead, though in their fear I saw hope. Tiny feet thumped the dry earth with a hesitant metronome as something wicked approached in the sky. A nefarious power frightened nature and I had to inquire, despite my own hatred towards those imps.

"Scattershot!" I turned to her, she too shaken by the unseen wickedness. "You must act as the representative of our band. A melody will lull these savages into a peace so that you may question them. Would you mind a song?"

She threw a startled gaze at me. "What?! Why me?"

"Angels flock to your lyrical appearance and gentle voice. Surely gold rests in your vocals?"

Scattershot looked away, shyly kicking a rock as she formed a sentence. "I...I can't..."

"What was that?" I asked.

"I...I can't sing!" She blurted, though immediately turning deep reds.

We all stopped. "What do you mean?" Sirocco piped. "Everypony can sing!"

"He's right, Scattershot. What if our adventure's events lends themselves to needing musical accompaniment? How shall I write your solo now?"

Her face exploded with shame and embarrassment, though I consoled her with reassurance on her shoulder and the promise that we shall refrain from songs if we could help it, though if necessary she could supply narration. I suppose her deficiency in taming the rabbits could not be helped. The next option would prove much more enjoyable anyway.

Just as I was about to go overtake the demon guards, the clashing sounds of stones to wood began to fill our crevice. The rattling of wheels ran its cadence from the opening of a nearby cave and we readied ourselves. An enormous cart emerged, its long bed trailing behind the puller. As I feared, her flank followed the pattern of emptiness known to this world. A delicate physique, though dirt and sweat spoiled her beauty. Lids hung wearily over those benign sapphire eyes. Cavernous blacks clawed at her silver coat and tainted the lustrous sheen, though still she pressed on and did not waiver in the cyclones of sand. Tirelessly she strode and pulled her massive load, and perhaps a bit delirious, as the four of us piled into the back of her cart without her knowledge.

Under the cover of a tarp we hid among the rocks and fragments. Jagged passengers drove into our skin and made the ride seem an eternity, though we dared not speak above the tumbling wheels. Bella scrunched her face, attempting to ward off a feared sneeze, yet it escaped. Wheels dropped and the stones jumped in time with the sneeze, allowing a safe passage of sound.

“This must be coal!” Deduced Bella in an urgent whisper and a resultant apologetic smile. “I’m allergic.”

Sirocco rolled his eyes. “Of course.”

Motion halted as the rocks rolled from their places and displaced us, though darkness thankfully still shielded us.

“Welcome back to Elyograg, pony,” greeted a deep voice of what I assumed to be the first demon guard.

“Good morning,” replied a light feminine voice. “I am returning to my home to drop off my bounty of platinum.”

“Platinum?” Scoffed the second guard. “Not in these caves, pony. The creature that finds that haul would make a pretty piece of gold.” Both guards chuckled. “Perhaps you found steel?”

A misty gray aura summoned a lump of coal close to the edge of the cart. A charm of sorts morphed the ugly stone into that of a radiant sparkle. Metallic beacons flashed across the specimen and allowed an otherworldly shine to bleed across the cart. Her magic withdrew the rock, revealing to the skeptical guards a marvelous chunk of platinum ore. “How’s that for steel?”

Both guards stumbled over their words before one began. “What?! Let me see this!” The guard moved closer towards our refuge, though it was caught before a heavy crimson hand could rip away our safeguard.

The platinum fell into the open palm of the demon. “Here, why don’t you two take this and see if there is anymore? Surely a weak pony such as myself could not have taken all of it.” Surprisingly, there was no protest as the wagon began to move. As we rode off into the ever growing volume of the city, we could barely make out the guards’ cooing over the stone and their plans to search for more.

Indiscernible noises and words were tossed and shot across the street. Robbers and hard sellers alike threw names of supplies and goods into the ears of all who would stop to listen, coins jingling in every creature’s bags. Bella’s eyes welled as her hooves threatened to dimensionally jettison her nose away in a fit of nasal impulses. As we desperately tried to bring fresh air into the coal mine, dirt and dust picked

themselves up from the street and swam in our throats most rudely. Suffocation slithered into us all with alacrity and carelessness.

A terrible sight attacked our senses as Bella lifted the side of the tarp for air: two stallions of faded and washed away colors moved like machines beside our path. An absence of light in their coats was reminiscent of the ferals faced on Bella's farm. Ropes secured around their restricted and malnourished frames well, uprisings were surely unspoken. Not much was said of these silent prisoners, eyes glazed over and listless, only moving with each direction of the crack of a whip. Sirocco and I were particularly perturbed by the precedent now set of the two of us, should we be caught.

One of us was surely to break and rip away the tarp had the clamor of the city not died down and the cart stopped. The sound of a door colliding with the dirt floor lifted our spirits for escape, yet persuading our driver to most graciously dismiss our free ride posed a new challenge. As the hoof beats appeared around cart, we all exchanged frightened and apprehensive glances, though I steeled my nerves and braced for the intrusion.

"Hey, I think the coast—"

She could not have even begun to fathom my brilliant tactic: as freshness brushed across our backs, I burst from my position. Adrenaline and action guided me on as my only lanterns. To the surprised face of our assailant I delivered a physically stunning kick, temporarily incapacitating her. Despite the objections from my party, I elevated the door of the shed and demanded they exit quickly. Reluctantly they followed, I sending a wink to the fallen mare as she began to slowly come back to life. The wink mailed, I took my leave under the cover of the falling shed door to join my companions.

As these capricious events do twist and turn themselves into malformed recollections of hell's hymns and lullabies, afterthought now pounded on my resolve and suggested that maybe my previous violent action was not called for. But afterthought is foolish! Obviously that mare was of the devil's backbone where no shred of generosity may emanate.

"Osten!" Scattershot called around the vacant corner and behind some barrels. These back streets held a safe haven from the shops,

though the other two entrances were walled off by shopkeepers and shoppers. I crouched down to join them. "Why'd you do that?" She demanded, eyes cut in anger.

"Yeah!" Sirocco added. "She could have helped us get another mask!"

"Who said we were going to get a mask?" Bella protested, putting a coal stained hoof before Sirocco. "We're just going there to talk to the seamstress, right Osten?"

I raised a hoof and shook my head. "My friends, such malevolence as did exude from that alchemist's shifty form surely could not have helped our mission. All we must do now is find the artisan behind Sirocco's mask and we will be one step closer to finding the source of this town's darkness! We shall see the artisan to discuss this world, not procure a mask."

"But where do we go?" Wondered Bella, furiously wiping away the coal residue from her coat and nose. Sneezes began to fire like gunshots and Scattershot placed a desperate hoof over her nose to quiet them.

To our chagrin and silencing of each other, the empty alleyway met a new visitor as the sneezes finally fell mute. A vivacious pony of electric blues and yellows trotted down our way and our barrels seemed to shrink. Tact would have to be employed to convince the girl of our innocence while also not alerting the outside world, though Sirocco had a separate plan. His eyes widened and wings flared as she neared our hiding place.

"That guy's got one!"

The mare looked around to find the battle cry, though Sirocco was upon her already. In a swift and fluid motion he glided, attached himself around her neck, and drew her into our hiding place. Goggles held back terrified eyes and a familiar mask obscured her face.

"What do you wa—" Her eyes realigned themselves from the fall and looked upon Sirocco and I in horror.

"Nice mask you have there!" Sirocco mocked, almost bloodthirsty. He loomed over the frightened pony.

"What's your pr-problem?!" Demanded the cowering pony behind the mask, though her tone began to shift. "I don't want any trouble!"

Sirocco snickered and smirked. "You remind me of my father." Closer he leaned in to the face of the confused and horrified pony. Even beneath the goggles her shock was visible. "I hated my father!"

The act was met with a quick shove by a cobalt hoof and Sirocco tumbled away. "Look," Bella began, looking back to Sirocco's victim with sternness, "are you a...?" She thought the awkward question could be posed, yet it hung in the air, hoping the answer was "yes".

The victim's vibrant mane fell over her goggles as her head drooped. "What do you want from me?" Her voice became frail yet grew an odd deepness to it unheard of in the common mare.

Bella paused, yet seemed to regain herself. It took a moment, though a spark ignited in her eye, a twinkle of sorts. She managed to grow a gleeful smile and giggled a cheerful note. "Don't be glum, guy!"

The pony raised her head, though was not impressed. "I see no reason against it." The reply regained the expected mare qualities.

Bella giggled again. "Sure there are! In fact, we're going to free the city by the end of the day!"

"You are?!" The pony's voice lifted with the question.

"We are?" Questioned Sirocco incredulously.

"We sure as hay are!" Passion combusted in those hopeful eyes of Bella's. "We just need to know where you got your mask." Energy burned, yet the pony's gaze fell back to the ground. Bella extended a hoof to help the pony up. "Like I told Sirocco, to be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is something worth smiling about!"

There was hesitation, though she eventually accepted and thanked Bella warmly. Once standing, the masked mare's horn lit up like a florescent sun and the clicking of a zipper followed the movement of her magic. The mask and pair of goggles flew into the air and onto the dirt, discarding the accessory. Features grew muscles and hardened their lines. Legs became longer and her neck became thicker, holding a new head atop the once female figure. "I am Thunder Beef. May I ask your name?" Thunder Beef took Bella's hoof in his own. Her smile did not falter.

"I'm Bella!" She chirped. "See? You look a lot better without the mask."

Energy spread in the connection and Thunder Beef could not help but find a sparkle in his own eye. "The name sings to me! You've inspired me, miss! Turn the corner over there by the lane between these two streets and look for the red square shed door. Knock three times and a pony should answer. As for me, I shall take to the streets and rally my fellow ponykind to take back our city! Our masculinity will not be hid in shadow anymore!"

Thunder Beef bid us farewell and trotted towards the busy street, defiant and unafraid. It was an enchanting sight to watch and Bella still beamed with pride and momentum. "You ponies ready to go or what?" She walked merrily around the corner and whistled a chipper tune, Scattershot, Sirocco, and I following. Sirocco looked back at the discarded mask, though Bella pulled him along.

To Thunder Beef's specifications, we walked along the buildings until a red door revealed itself to us amid the dry browns. It was a familiar color, though at the time I paid it no certain portion of my mind. I held aloft my hoof and knocked thrice.

"Yes, how can I help you?" Asked the door.

"We would like to talk to you." I replied.

A misty gray aura pulled away a peep door on the shed. My heart sank. Demonic and fiery eyes replace those beyond the door! Anypony, any creature but her!

Sapphire eyes looked upon their customers, widened, shot a sardonic wink at me, and then disappeared behind the immediate slamming of the peep door. A wicked cackle broke out in the room, unable to cease its enjoyment in our predicament. Scattershot did not look impressed.

She knocked three more times on the door. "Please! Let us come in and talk with you!" Scattershot pleaded. "We need your help!"

Laughter picked back up. "Karma sure is a cruel mistress, isn't she! I've been putting ice on my cheek ever since your friend so rudely kicked me, and not ten minutes later, the culprit returns, wanting my help no less! That's too rich!"

I threw my hoof down to silence her. "Do not punish my friends for my shortcomings! Allow them passage at my expense, at the very least!"

There was a pause.

“We are in grave danger!”

A groan followed the turning of gears and the mare revealed herself. Step one of my glorious infiltration plan complete. Still caked in the grime of the morning and her mane still in disarray, the cooling bruise on her cheek did not add to her appearance. She offered us to come in.

“Please make yourselves at home inside so we may talk, though do wipe your hooves.” We entered, though she blocked my path. “Except you! You can wait in the shed like a good colt.”

Bella and Sirocco looked sorrowful at me, though ultimately deposited their bags and entered the room beyond the shed. Scattershot raised a hoof to my shoulder to console me. Step two would come as more of a challenge, though I was prepared.

“Console me not!” I steadied myself with a hoof to my forehead and grieved. “I shall remain here: alone!” Like a true thespian, I completed my graceful performance with a descent to the floor, my transformation capable of drawing pity from even the most stone cold of creatures. Motionless, I waited for an apology from the grimy pony, as I would graciously forgive her and excuse her unbecoming ploys at revenge. Unfortunately, as I peeked through a lid to see my audience, the door to the room closed in a silver flash and I was alone on the dirt floor.

Voices rose above my disappointment. I picked myself and sprung to the door, finding it was locked. At the base of the door lay a frivolous amalgamation of colors upon canvas now smeared with the earth of five ponies, though the words “Welcome” had been scrawled across the unfortunate design. Ear to the door, the conversation came in muffled, though I could manage.

“To whom do I have the company of?” The dirty pony asked.

“I’m Scattershot. This is Bella and Sirocco. Sorry about your face.” Scattershot soothed as best as she could.

I’d be sorry about her face too. “I am Argenta, and it’s quite alright. Hopefully he’ll spend some time to think about what he has done.” She laughed haughtily, though my indignation was cut off by something colliding

with the door. Metallic to the sound, the projectile's impact rang through my ears and I toppled backwards. Laughter roared from within the room.

I rubbed my temples tenderly with my hooves to dull the ringing. What else could be expected from such a treacherous mare? Back to the door I called: "Clearly thou hast not seen radiance as bright as I, the incorruptible and moral paladin!"

She ignored me. "What business do we have, then?"

"We know you sell special masks." Sirocco began.

Argenta giggled to herself as she moved about. "Ah I can see where this is going. Fear not. With fruity colors like that I'd beg for a mask too."

"Crimson and mauve are not 'fruity'!" Sirocco returned with annoyance in his tone.

"I agree. Too bad your mane is scarlet and magenta." Sirocco's rage stopped itself as something hummed before him. "One mask."

"We don't actually want—"

"How much?" Sirocco cut off Bella with the question.

"How much do you have?" Returned Argenta.

"That's a shady way to do business."

"Well, this is a black market, you know. You pay my price or you go find your own mask."

Scattershot broke in. "Please, we are more interested in talking with you about the town's darkness. We figured since you made these masks to rebel that we could trust you. Can we trust you?"

Argenta probably smelled the gold's goodbye and had to act. "You know, I knew you all hopped in the back of my cart. It was rather obvious actually, since one pony was sneezing the entire ride." I can only assume Bella was blushing at this point. "I'm more than happy to talk to you all, though I was just about to shower before you all got here."

"That was awfully nice of you to sneak us in here," laughed Bella.

“Apparently I’m *too* generous, since my kindness brought me a kick in the face.” She just would not let that die. “I was hoping to have this meeting about fifteen minutes ago, though you left in such a hurry that I—”

Words fell away in the presence of a knock on the front door of the home. Incoherent muttering and the sounds of fabric fumbling and a zipper being zipped traveled meekly through the wood to my eardrum. A gentle and refined knock in a catchy tune presented itself, though rather moot, as I heard the door swing open upon arrival. I heard the tap of hooves.

“Ah, my dear and devious seraph, Argenta,” greeted the new voice. “Forgive me! How outrageous of me to not introduce myself to your company. Chancellor Fragonard Octavius Rococo is my name.” The rolling of any “R” was customary for equines of such gargantuan titles. “Pray, Argenta, is this a good time for a chat?”

“I suppose the matter isn’t really my choice, is it?”

“Afraid not, I’d dare say. You and I have an urgent matter to discuss, well two actually.”

“I’m sure we do. To what do I owe this displeasure?”

“First and foremost, the painting I sent you seems to have gotten lost in transition, for what other reason would you have to not have hung it upon these dusty walls? I used almost every color in my collection for that portrait of you. The silver shade I found to be especially divine. For you it was created by my artistic magic and touched only by the hairs of my brush, all of which were plucked from my own voluminous mustache of course.” I looked beneath my hooves and felt a pain for the artist.

“Oh no, I found another use it, rest assured. Is that it?”

“Haste sees you well, though I am a garrulous gentlecolt of Elyograg. How goes your...eh, business?” The dust seemed to make itself known.

“Just fine. If you’ll excuse me, I desperately need a shower. Do you mind?”

“What travesty finds you in this desperation? Is that a twinkle in your eye? I for one believe beauty comes in the form of what the world foists upon one; dirt and all may not stifle it. Beauty ought to look a little surprised, for it is the emotion that best suits such a face. But of course, the

beauty who does not look surprised and accepts it as her due reminds me too much of a prima donna.”

“Hmph. You are a wicked beast. Whatever has moved you here should remove you before you force my hoof.”

Rococo chuckled and moved closer to her. “The wicked, you see, obey from fear. The good, the fair, and the virtuous, like myself, obey from love!”

“That I’ll test!” Another pan clanged against the wall. The far wall pulsated with the metallic resonance of the shot.

Severity grew in the regal voice. “I swear I’ll cuff you if you strike again.”

“Strike me and you are no fair and virtuous pony!”

“None of us escape as so!” He spoke in a new gleeful tone. Magic hummed in the air and Argenta grunted, as if in a struggle. “Since you insist on brevity, my greedy pet, I’ll indulge you. As these circumstances normally arise, it appears a simple pony thought it prudent to march into my streets and form an uprising.” He laughed again with an insane joy. “Oh how delightfully absurd the spectacle was! Of course the fool is locked away now, but he let slip a piece I would think anyone named “Gen” and of a home with a red shed door would love to hear. Did I hear a voice from the other room?” A cold sweat approached my neck.

Argenta felt new air in her system as she breathed heavily. “Possibly. My sister is here for the day. What is it you want from me?”

“I am on the word of a panicked faith, eager for a deal, that in this hovel hides a stallion. Four were foretold to have entered, yet I see only three new faces. Of course,” Chancellor Rococo cooed, the dropping and jingling of a heavy bag upon a table following, “there are monumental rewards for such captures. Have I not jogged your memory?”

There was a pause.

The coins began to sing to the mare.

Another period of silence.

The delicate nature of Scattershot's demure eschewed itself in fear and hysteria. "Osten!"

Thus, the forces behind Karma do have an unpredictable manner to them. I tried at the door, though an energy repulsed me from it. My frantic poundings on the door were met with only pleas for me to flee. "You hear that?" Asked the arrogance from beyond the door. A new series of impacts and collisions drew my attention to the shed door, now full of dents. Devilish laughs and chants rolled into my prison. Before my surrender, I withdrew some pages and a quill and created an impromptu package. Rococo mocked me more. "I declare 'checkmate'!"

The final piece of paper was wrapped around the writing instrument, but from a shadow flew a scaly crimson hand. By my neck the monster hung me in the air, though I was not helpless or without a trick to my name. Unfortunately, tricks can be double tricked or something along those lines. Merely a sputter of power trickled from my horn before the fearsome hand of my captor was driven into my neck, letting me sleep while I regained my energy and thought of an escape plan.

Chapter 8

The Collaboration

“Dear Scattershot,

I wrote this letter as we walked the many miles in the desert in case I was abducted. If you are reading this, I must have been abducted. How foolish of me, though I suspect where my captors are taking me can only be described by grays and boring walls. As such, my angle of our epic will most likely be filled with ennui and descriptions of my surroundings. No matter how vivid and beautiful the descriptions are sure to be, such analysis does not lend itself to properly portray our narrative, thus I entrust to you a quill and parchment for which you *must* write down everything that occurs from your perspective until we meet again.

Do not miss a detail or single account of dialogue, for they will all be integral not only to my request, but to perhaps finding me. Hopefully I have quizzed you extensively and helped you to memorize the numerous golden words I require of you to employ in your report of the happenings around you. Even if I have not, I shall attach a word bank of just a selection of expressions I wish you to utilize as you trek to find me. I have faith in you and the others!

Sincerely and Clairvoyantly,

~ Sir Ostentatious”

Beneath the paper I found his list, tucking them both away in my bag before returning to face Argenta. I heard the laugh of the chancellor. “How sly of you, Argenta. Even though I love you, I shall not forgive you so easily for this! I’ll return later for my payment after I visit with the criminal.” A hunger was in his voice, snickering to himself as he shut the front door behind him.

Sirocco had already left to search for Osten from the skies and Bella looked in the nearby streets. Something so different surged through me as I felt my normal reserved personality melt away. Argenta unapologetically counted her coins, her eyes wide with the dirty money’s reflection. I could not hold myself back. A wave of anger washed over me: anger against

myself and at my age at the time. It was that silly age when I was too great a riddle for myself to be interested in the riddles around me; when other ponies were mere walking mirrors in which they show me my own emotions and my own worth.

“How could you do that to him?!” I demanded. “What has he done to deserve that?”

Argenta looked up from her silver. “Ow! Lower your voice!”

“Answer me!”

“Are you still on that guy? He had it coming. Don’t we all?” She said, returning to her money.

“I can guarantee he had nothing bad due for him!”

She laughed haughtily in time with the clanging of her coins. “And that’s where he has manipulated you. It always seems to happen with those with long manes. That kind of hair is only for an empty headed princess. We are all inherently evil and self serving. It is the foolish ones that try to dilute it by reasoning with themselves that they have selfless motives. Tell me, why does he matter so much to you?” I hadn’t noticed before, though her mane was crudely split along the edges and quite shorter than mine or Bella’s.

“Because...because he promises to bring light to this world and free you all! How is that self serving?”

“Are you sure he has no *other* goals?” She seemed so sure of something.

“Well, he is looking for his father’s killer, b-but tha—“

“Ah ha! You see? You are a pawn to help his empty search. Trust me, look inside yourself and realize that where that kind of foolish ambition ends, happiness begins. Look at me!” She said, rubbing a hoof lovingly across her bounty. “It’s done wonders for me! Cut your losses and let the profits run.”

Something twisted in my heart. That apathy I thought long since dead seemed to creep in again and accept the easy idea. My eyes began to swell with tears, though I bit them back. My gaze fell to the ground. I thought I heard him in my ear.

“W-we...we should thank those ambitions because it’s they who raise the sights of all the others...” I felt my voice break with the threat of tears.

She snorted. “You sound so monotone when you recite that. Looks like he’s brainwashed you too thoroughly for me to save.” She finished, casting a pitiful look upon me, like how one would look upon a sickly dog.

I simply shook my head. I had to avoid my submissive tendencies. Slowly I looked up, though soon I raised myself to face her, feeling the flame of Ostentatious in my heart warding off my fears. “You’re wrong! Though we may travel far, we will only meet what we carry with us, for we are all mirrors. What we do will be portrayed in those around us. Our attitudes and actions are only a reflection of our own world, as yours must be terrible. Look inside yourself and correct yourself and your world will change, I promise. Ostentatious showed me that, and since then I’ve felt his bravery in myself. I no longer feel apathetic, and that kind of light may do you some good.”

She simply laughed and held on to her position, waving her hoof in a matter of fact way. “I see his headstrong way of speaking has rubbed off you. Can’t you see that on the congested roads for those kinds of fighters, all they’ll get is death and a cheap label?”

I felt his voice again, like the pulse of my heart. “Whatever honor there is in giving up, I want no part of it.”

Argenta rolled her eyes, thought stopped. She thought for a moment, and then looked intently into me, a devilish smirk growing across her face. “That’s it! You follow him like a sheep because you have a thing for him!”

“I am not beast; I am a mare of her own free will.”

“It’s true then, and you are blinded and manipulated by his wiles.” She got off her chair and walked towards me. “Open your eyes! Love does not carry the fanciful meaning it used to. Before the darkness came I might have thought something divine of love, but now, after all this time of hearing it, it is hollow. No one knows what it is anymore. They seem something that pleases them and they say they ‘love’ it. They love the new thing in the shop or they love what you’ve done with the place. Love is only for objects and tools. Does it hurt you to hear this? Love drives you to greed and to be greedy, so I opt to eschew the process and skip to the greed.” She walked back to the table and looked over her money. “What makes you so noble?”

I thought about the idea before replying. It was an unceremonious conclusion, though I did not feel it needed anything special to it. "You know, for a while I was alone. Not because I was shunned, but of my own decision because I had no idea what I wanted. I kept to myself and the animals when I found myself not wanting the company of my fellow townsfolk. I suppose that's because we don't like ponies who share the same faults as we do.

"When you're alone for so long, you take up reading. I did, and I read of the flight of eagles and the mountains high and the heroes and their happy days of picturesque love. 'Love is a symbol of eternity. It wipes out all sense of time, destroying all memory of a beginning and all fear of an end.' When he showed up that morning, I had no idea what to make of it. He was naïve, but blissful. He knew his mission, and that's all that mattered to him. I don't fear an end or dwell on my old life when I am around him, so I guess I am smitten. It won't harm you if I am."

"The harm is not to me, but to you. Someone is the item when someone is loved. You've seen my suitor. It's not worth it." Her hooves slumped upon the table and stopped their work. There was a call from outside the room.

"Scattershot! Bella and I saw that they were taking Ostentatious to the big tree, though he was surrounded by guards." Sirocco cried, walking into the room. He noticed Argenta over her table and grimaced. "You ready to go?"

"Yes, I am. I just need a second, sorry." Sirocco obliged and returned to gather our bags with Bella.

"Have fun." Argenta said with an ominous song like quality. "Personally, I don't think he's worth the trouble."

"Is that why you felt the need to take him away from me?"

She sighed, coming to my side and raising a hoof to my shoulder. "Look, if you're so eager to remember your colt friend, then do me a favor, and forget me. I know for sure I'm not worth the memory." Her horn shined with unicorn's magic, the magic attempting to take something from my mind. She channeled it to seep into my head, but I kept on talking to her.

"I've thought many things were not worth it, but he told me something that even to this day I've thought about and remembered: 'The whole

course of history may depend on a change of heart in one solitary and even humble individual – for it is in the solitary mind and soul of the individual that the battle between good and evil is waged and ultimately won or lost!” I whipped my head away, my mane flying away from my eyes so she could see them. They were clear.

“That quote!” Her spell ended, color and light fleeting away. She pondered it, putting a hoof to her forehead. Suddenly, the money seemed to have much less of a glow to Argenta.

“It changed me, as well.” I said. “His quotes are quite powerful and uplifting, something like a miracle. You’re welcome to come along, and I wish you to not stay here. It’s far too dark and dull in here.”

Argenta paused. “I’ve made a pendant that had that same quote in it.”

There was another silence. “You must come with us. Please.”

“I will. I was thinking about staying here and mulling it over and showering, but I figure I’ll eventually want to see this colt anyway, so I’ll skip the sulking. I’ve got to see your coltfriend about that pendant, however I’ll warn you now that I’m doing this for my own means.” I didn’t respond and only acknowledged her companionship with a smile. Once in the shed, we all spotted Argenta’s cart and all had the same idea. You were right Osten: those magical strings of words are what strike certain emotions and cords within ponykind and cause actions where they may not have occurred otherwise.

The wheels of the cart began to turn again as Argenta moved out of the shed. Tucked under the tarp again, Bella, Sirocco, and I waited as the town went by. It was noisy all around us, though I kept busy writing the previous conversation down and soon catching up to the present. After that, I could only think of what Osten might want me to right. Umm...ugh, probably not just “um”s and “uh”s. Ah, I know! Argenta had assured us that she knew how to get us into the tree. It seemed odd that for one who was so worried about manipulation, she was sure confident in her ability to manipulate.

No, I just used “manipulate”. Hmmm. I looked through the list Osten had left for me, quill held awkwardly in my teeth as I scrawled away while looking through the list. Should I write every word I read, or...or just the

ones I thought to use? This was so confusing. I'm definitely not ready to be a writer. "Beguile" might work, but so could "bemuse". No, I think...wait, what does "sesquipedalian" mean? Why didn't he give me any definitions...?

It seemed odd that for one who was so worried about manipulation, she was sure confident in her ability to beguile. I'll play it safe with the word list. I sighed. What else do I describe now? It's too dark to see what Sirocco and Bella are doing. I can barely read what I'm writing. I need to pause and save ink for when we get to the tr—

"You okay, Scattershot?" Bella asked, cutting off my stream of conscious with something coherent for me to write.

I let the quill drop from my mouth to catch my breath and respond. But if I dropped the quill, I couldn't write! "I'm fine." I mustered, though a bit overworked, quickly realizing my mistake and furiously capturing the past moment before I forgot it.

"If you're overworked, why didn't you tell me?" I probably shouldn't write my inner thoughts, especially when she was peering over my shoulder as I—

She put her hoof on my head to pause my frantic scribbles. "What 'cha working on?"

Against my better judgment, I let the pen fall from my mouth again to speak. "Osten told me to write down everything that happens while he is gone, though it's more difficult than I thought." She let me go and I quickly scribbled what happened since she stopped me.

"I can tell." She said with a giggle and a smile. "You want me to take takeover for you? I can write pretty quickly."

That's better. Scattershot's too kind for her own good.

"You sure you want to do this? I don't want to trouble you with thi—" I put a hoof to her mouth and pointed to the bed of the cart. She needed some rest and to calm herself. We were all a little worried since Ostentatious was gone, but hey! He's been through worse. Reluctantly, Scattershot finally rested her sore jaw and closed her eyes. It was only morning and we were already pooped.

Sirocco didn't budge while Scattershot and I talked. He was pooped as well from all the flying he did. I liked the ride, even though I should feel bad for Argenta having to pull us, but it seemed like just desserts for her anyway. That's right, we hadn't eaten all day. Oh well! I still smiled on and held on to it as best as I could. We weren't in a bad spot anyway! It was an adventure for us, and Osten was probably already escaping from wherever he was already and leaping into action. He was probably smiling too.

Creek! Creak! The cart stopped. Deep and scary voices were raised and began to talk with Argenta. "What business do you have here, pony?" The monster grumbled in his best monster voice.

"Who, little old me?" Argenta asked, definitely playing coy to lull the guards into a false sense of security, but they were tricky monsters! They weren't going to fall for her convincing act so easily. It was the first monster's last day before retirement, and the other monster was a fresh young recruit ready to do monster things and live up to monster expectations. "I'm here to see my snooty coltfriend, Chancellor...whatever." I couldn't remember his name and she said it too fast.

"You could at least shower before asking for an audience." Grumbled the monster with another fearsome grumble, most likely the grumble champion of monsters. He roared in a monstrous way like none I'd ever heard of. I don't hang around with monsters, but that roar must have been really big.

"He urged me to come over in my natural beauty, as he so fondly describes it. We are such big lovers and he wants to take me on a romantic love date, so I came over as fast as I could." She said, deeply in love for sure. The guard almost fell for it!

"What's in the cart?" Grumbled the younger voice. He could be a contender, I believed, for a grumbler title, but not in the same league as the big guy.

"It's my coltfriend's dirty laundry, of course! I did it for him and now I'm bringing it back."

The guards nodded to each other. "Well, he does have dirty laundry. We'll let you in now."

Then something really crazy happened. Before the monsters could let us in, Argenta began to recite something: "Be the green grass above me

with showers and dew drops wet; and if thou wilt, remember, and if thou wilt, forget!" A flash came out of her horn and blinded the guards. They fell back, rubbing their eyes like mad. Wicked screams broke out from the monsters as Argenta pulled us along. Sirocco shot up from the sound of the cries.

"You okay Bella?" He asked, wondering why I was moaning. For some reason my eyes felt like they were on the sun. I don't think I had my head that far out of the side of the cart when she used the spell. When I could finally see, I searched my brain for what happened, but it was empty! I hadn't been writing down what was happening! Scattershot was gonna' kill me! I picked the quill up in my teeth and began to write, hopefully getting at least some things right. I may have messed up some talking parts, so I gave it to Sirocco to read over.

After a moment, he spoke. "No one said any of this, Bella."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Did you just forget what happened?"

"Maybe...But Argenta used a spell and I forgot! Isn't that how she got passed the guards?"

"Wait, how do you remember the spell if you lost your memory?" Sirocco asked.

I opened my mouth to speak, but my brain hurt too much already. I was pooped now. "Ughh, you take over!" I said, pushing the paper and quill to Sirocco.

"Huh? Sure, why not? I'll leave your dialogue though. It was a lot more interesting than what she really said."

"What did she say?"

"Huh?" He paused. "Uhh...I don't remember. It must have been really boring and I was half asleep anyway. Here, give me the quill."

This was harder than it looked. I guess a horn really comes in handy when all you've got for a grip is your teeth. I disregarded the fact that Scattershot and Bella both had their mouth all over the quill and scribbled a

bit of whatever I saw. Nothing much around here, especially in the darkness.

“Don’t forget to use some of these words.” Scattershot whispered, sliding me a piece of paper filled with words I could barely wrap my head around. Ostentatious sure must be bored a lot to get all these things down. I bet half of them were not even words. What kind of jibberish was “saxicolous”? I slid the list back to Scattershot.

The mask Argenta gave me was starting to feel tight. Bella seemed so against it, but I don’t know why. I know who I am, so what’s the problem of wearing the mask to get through the city? She acts like if I wear the mask enough I’ll become a girl or something crazy like that. Same thing with Scattershot: they both seem on edge for some reason. Ostentatious was probably going through the tree right now looking for us or for whatever he was looking for.

This whole adventure was still kind of a blur. I guess we were on it to save the world and destroy evil, but that’s incredibly vague. He seemed so confident for his age. Especially if he is really from Equestria, he must not have any idea what this world is. Bella and I knew, and we knew the feeling of our lives just stopping. I’ve heard you’re supposed to get stronger and wiser with age, but I’m not interested in age. Ponies who tell me their age are stupid. You’re only as old as you feel. I feel good, so I guess I’m still young, right?

I thought back to before the sky wasn’t black. When we were still remembered and still a part of Equestria, but the memories were hazy. Wow, I didn’t even remember my cutie mark. I guess your true age is measured by your memory. I should write faster.

The cart finally stopped and Argenta removed the tarp from over us. “Time to go, kiddies.” Her age was up to speculation, especially since the dirt from this morning was still caked in her mane. Give her credit, though: she had a lot of stamina. We followed her. I raised myself up with my wings, quill still in my mouth and paper close by. We had traveled down a corridor to a series of steps. Atop the steps I spotted a door and I flew to it. I scribbled my flight on the paper pressed against the stony wall, though Argenta was saying something I couldn’t quite hear.

Reaching for the door, I heard the rumbling of something on the other side. The huge doors swung open, knocking me back and revealing dozens

of faces. The faces of stallions no less. One of them called for the others to follow, all of them barreling out of the doorway. I escaped their stampede with the others and watched the racing ponies go towards the light of the corridor's entrance. Many colors and brave expressions galloped past us, though none that we could tell was Ostentatious. The last stallion ran by, though I felt a tug on my jaw. Something was trying to get the quill from my teeth.

"Verily so I escaped and not a moment too soon! It was quite cramped." I lifted the quill from Sirocco and placed it behind my ear, my magic proving its usefulness yet again. My dear friends seemed well and in good health, though that temptress Argenta for some unknown reason joined their ranks. Scattershot ran to me with relief and a smile, Sirocco and Bella following suit. "What did I miss? I trust you wrote down what I asked of you, Scattershot?"

"Oh of course! We all took turns with the quill." A confidence met her well and brightened her countenance.

"Yeah!" Bella chirped. "We were all sure to get everything down exactly how it happened!"

"Well I didn't have much to say on my bit." Defended Sirocco.

Argenta did not speak. It should be so, as I may have revolted to hear that harpy's voice speak its foul rhapsody.

"Please all spread peace among yourselves. We shall all reconvene for more catching up, but I need you three to assist my fellow comrades in their rebellion. Watch them and aid them in taking back this city!" I raised a hoof to dramatically punctuate my request, though Scattershot was reserved.

"Huh? Why don't we go with you?" She asked meekly, though the question gained a firmer ground as relief washed over her tone.

"Trust me, I'll be fine. I found you all, didn't I?" I said, inspiring confidence in them no doubt. "These freedom fighters need all the help they can get, and I have a duel waiting for me at the summit of this mighty tree."

“Just...be careful!” She twitched a bit as it seemed like she was leaning in towards me, though she recoiled and turned herself away, following Bella and Sirocco to the rebellion outside. Scattershot must have suffered some sort of trauma I would suspect while I was gone. Oh well, she was of an age to work it out and she probably just needed a rest.

“Go on!” I called to them as they galloped off into the fray. “Whatever honor there is in giving up, have no part in it!”

They ran to the light and departed, though one pony shared the solitude of the enormous room with me: Argenta. She cantered up the stairs and we exchanged a prolonged stare. Definitely a stare of intense inner thoughts and turmoil, as if to say she respected me as her better, yet she was too proud to admit it.

“I’m going with you. You are arrogant and have unwarranted self importance, but I have a bone to pick with a stallion that overshadows you completely in those departments. Like I told your fillyfriend, I’m here for myself and for my own selfish revenge.”

“What?! I have no such relationship! What pony could you have possibly misconstrued as my soul mate?” I was flabbergasted she would use such a term. I was far too busy for that kind of commitment.

“Play the fool all you like, though we both have a similar goal here.” Our stare went on, though I eventually broke it with a friendly smile. She was correct, after all.

“We’ll engage the fiend above as soon as I scribe my encounters with my comrades in the prison. My photographic memory grants me a precision untold, so offer me a few minutes to write.”

Argenta leaned against a wall and sighed. “Go ahead. It’s not like I’ve got anywhere to be or anything.”

As my quill hit paper, a deafening siren went off throughout the wooden castle. I wrote faster.

Grayness met me in all direction, as I predicted. I had awoken in a daze, raising myself up to find my legs bound and shackled to the floor. Movement restricted, I perused the surrounding area: barely a window to the outside world hung what seemed like miles above my prison. Torches

burned around the ceiling and many figures were illuminated by the light. Shadows cast themselves wherever the dim light above could not reach, all limp and without vigor. Some were bound together, some isolated.

A barred and guarded door to freedom glistened across the room, yet no one watched with me. No one stirred nor plotted nor planned. Dimness bit down on them all and sapped them of resolve. My fellow prisoners knew not a sense of determination, all waiting for perhaps the day they would miraculously be set free. I would have to forge such hopes. I tapped the sleeping body beside me.

“Wake up, friend!” I whispered with urgency. “What have you all planned to escape this domain?”

The pony did not stir. I tapped him again, this time with greater feeling.

“Awaken!”

“An awakening we could all use, but you think I could sleep in here?” The pony finally let out, hiding his face in the shadows.

“If you are not in sleep, then rally the others with me and we can escape!”

“I don’t feel like it... I can’t.”

“You can!” I returned.

“No, I cannot. These chains are of a magical purpose designed to suck the hope from your bones. Even now you must be feeling their grip.” He let out a heavy sigh and turned to face me.

The face drooped with gloom. The once vibrant hues of yellow and blue now waivered amid the steel tethers of the prison. Even his horn was limp and could not act to free us.

“Is it you, Thunder Beef?” I asked.

“Aye, it is me, but only a shell and a skin. I just don’t have the will to get up. It’s too hard...”

“You’re speaking from the depression! Reach into the heart and find a fire!”

“All these words and yet my brain won’t think for me.” He paused, taking a deep and prolonged breath. “Do I know you?”

I tried to speak, yet something in my jaw was slowed and lax. The magic once prominent in me began to dwindle away. Thankfully I had plenty to spare, yet even my reserves threatened my livelihood with emptiness.

“Get up, my friend! You must believe in me!” I looked around to them all, raising my voice to the lifeless ponies. “You must all believe! It is the very spirit which ignites true movements and power! You must believe! You must all believe! If you can, then I may tap into your collective whimsy and summon a force to free us all!”

Thunder Beef took another long and dreary inhalation before responding. “Hmm?”

It was of no avail. I needed Thunder Beef to recall life, otherwise my rebellion may fall on deaf ears. With a final portion of my resolve, I leaned into him, channeling within him life and light and new blood for his heart. He blinked for a moment as the spell washed over his body, but it took form and his eyes widened. Shooting to his hooves, he shot me a triumphant grin.

“I feel it! I do believe!” He looked to the others, shaking those around him and rallying with his voice the rest. “You must all rise up and—” He noticed I had fallen to a knee, the fatigue of the chains turning into my oppressor. With his new vigor he slashed the chains of him and me away in a magnificent stream of light. He put a reassuring hoof to my back, the other raised in passion to the rest of the prison.

“Heed my word! This stallion speaks of world without the chancellor! He will rise up as our emperor and guide us into a new world of light and sunshine! I believe!”

There. The power I felt in his belief surged through me, albeit a small supply. I would need more power to rise to my full potential. By the guidance of my father and his own wisdom, I drew from the very depths and chasms of my mind and mustered the only weapon I knew powerful enough to destroy this prison.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t want to be an emperor.” I said to Thunder Beef, rising to my hooves. “That’s not my business here.” I winced through the pain and stiffness, erecting myself to the room.

“I don’t want to rule or conquer anypony. I should like to help everypony, if possible. We all want to help one another; ponies are like that. We want to live by each other’s happiness, not by each other’s misery. In this world, there is room for everypony and Equestria is rich and abundant. The way of life can be beautiful, but we have lost the way.

“Greed has poisoned ponies’ souls. It has barricaded the world with hate and lust. Our inventions which foster abundance now leave us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical. Our cleverness is hard and unkind. More than advancements we need kindness. More than cleverness we need friendship. Without these qualities, life would be violent and all would be lost. Our magic and speed and flight have brought us closer together; the very nature of these inherent gifts cries out for the goodness of ponies. We can write and speak and emote. Even now my words are reaching millions of individuals across the world.

“Individuals marred by despair. Victims of a system that makes one torture and imprisons the innocent. To those who understand me, do not despair! The misery that is upon us is but the passing of greed and the bitterness of demons that fear progress. Hate will pass and dictators will die. The power stolen from us will return to us! So long as tyrants die, liberty will never perish.

“My friends! Don’t give yourselves to brutes! Brutes who manipulate you and regiment you. Tell you what to do, what to think, what to feel! Do not become the machine! A machine of machine hearts and machine minds! You are not machine, you are a breathing creature with the blessing of goodness coursing through you. You don’t hate. Only the unloved and the unnatural hate.

“My friends, don’t fight for slavery or revenge! Fight for liberty! In the seventh ‘Book of the Stars’ it is written: ‘The kingdom of Equestria is in the hearts of all creatures’. Neither one creature nor a group of them! It is in us all! You have the power! The power to create hope and to create happiness! The power to make this life free and beautiful and to make this life a wonderful adventure! Then in the name of Equestria, let us all use that power! Let us all unite!

“Let us fight for a new world...a decent world. A world that will give anypony a chance to work. Youth will own the future and old age will be a security. By the promise of these things, brutes have risen to power! But they lie; they do not fulfill their promises, and they never will. Dictators free themselves but they enslave the rest! Now let us fight to fulfill those promises! Let us fight to free this world and do away with barriers and greed! Let us fight for a world of reason; where our progress will lead to the happiness of all.

“Comrades, in the name of Equestria, let us all unite!”

All bodies had risen to meet me. Cheers and cries broke out of them all. Our new world was in our grasp. Energy ripped the chains from the floor and the prison door from its hinges, all our spirits pouring out into the halls. Guards ran and hid and could not oppose us. We were an unstoppable force.

Chapter 9

From the Tree like Whales we Surf the Universe

We walked in those halls and twists and turns of architecture for what seemed like a month and three days. Empty halls of banished demons poisoned the air with the stench of brimstone. Argenta and I remained quiet as we walked down the ornate halls of the tree. Paintings and tapestries of Chancellor Rococo met our eyes in every direction, the dark eyes of the art following us. Flames twisted the images of shields and heraldry all glorifying his image glistening in the smoldering ashes. Paint began to melt and stain the walls as the colors ran. Beneath our hooves and amid dunes of soot ran the lavish rug with the colors of the chancellor burning at the border. Chandeliers swayed in the unnatural breeze of the hallway, their diamonds jingling and reflecting our apprehension in them. All the doors were left open, darkness seeping in from their rooms. No sounds from the darkness were heard and any sight was masked in the opaque abyss. In front of us lay thick shadows and behind us grew the same darkness.

Argenta's stoic expression was dimly lit in the small fires scattered across the floor. She carefully stepped over a fallen sword. Around us the explosions of lightning crashed with the screams of battle, all faint and so distant. In her city, outside of her little slice of existence, raged a war. She turned to me.

"You have quite the set of accessories." She commented.

"Excuse me?" I said turning to her.

"Your pendant and ring."

"Oh? Well I suppose I do." I turned back to the endless hallway.

"Oh don't end it there. Talk to me. It will keep us focused."

As a gentlecolt and noble adventurer, I was contractually bound to indulge her request.

“I suppose if one hears bad music, it is one’s duty to drown it by one’s conversation. What about my pendant and ring?”

“I want to know about your pendant. Where ever did you get it?”

“A friend tasked me to carry it across myself and see it finds the hooves of his mother.”

“I see.” She paused for a while, perhaps thinking. “I’d guess this ‘friend’ is a child?”

I turned back to her and knit my brow. “Quite. How uncanny.”

“Did the foal have some sort of dark colors? Maybe black with a dark indigo mane?”

“Dark purple mane.”

“And this foal carried the name ‘Bell’?”

I stopped. Something whirled in my brain. “I hear it in your language and your connotations...you know the boy’s mother!”

She kept on walking. “We won’t get anywhere with you standing there like that. Story time is this way. Believe me, I have much to tell you.”

I galloped back to her and stopped her. I stared her down and steeled my resolve. “With all due respect, I have little inclination to trust you, as you did sell me out for money; your games and selfishness are of your own business, but to me they are an obstruction of justice! I have little time to spare on you, so allow me to breathe new light into your memories.”

Without receiving an answer, a fresh orb shined at the tip of my horn. Quickly it formed and took shape and fell from my horn to Argenta’s. Magic was indeed powerful in the correct hooves and innovation, especially when I invented telepathy. Barely a flicker of the flames could be heard in the emptiness of the halls. The violence outside seemed to have subsided

momentarily. The link forged between our two minds, Argenta sighed and remembered.

The primitive age of the spell casted cast difficulty over my vision, though the mist began to clear. Argenta's thoughts and dreams came into view. Sceneries flashed by in seconds, memories were sorted through and organized. All ages of Argenta, from birth to present could be viewed and examined as Argenta remembered, though she could hide nothing from my eyes. If she would recall it, I would see it for what it was.

Finally the landscapes began to slow and solidify. The geography of the previous Elyograg came into view, a nameless city, though very much restored. Streets were clean, a fountain bubbled in the square, and windows were left unbroken. Beaming pearl colors shined from the homes and their azure tiles smiled back at the world. Shops were organized and orderly, and only ponies ran in the streets. No hellish denizens mixed with the benign population, a rather utopia of sorts amid fields of surrounding green.

Silence cursed the visions, sights guiding me through the scope. A lamp shined down and illuminated a familiar foal of silver toiling over a workpony's desk, her horn bright with determination. She wiped the sweat from her forehead beneath her crimson mane and worked on. In one hoof she held a slip of paper, eyeing it every few seconds as her horn guided the chisel across a small slab of iron. True craftspony ship masterfully directed the chisel to carve the tiny words into the pendant. Punctuating the job, the foal clapped the locket shut, smiling and reveling in her work as the image began to fade away.

She materialized over a shop counter, the vision's landscape sliding into a new segment. The sun beamed victoriously through the window panes of the beautiful shop. Across the immaculate floors trotted a proud mare approaching her purchase. I could not mistake the three vermillion bells on her flank. Like Argenta mentioned before, her black colors mingled with her indigo mane and flowed peacefully as she trotted. Across her back rested her hood, as natural protection of wings and horns could not be found on the traveler. The foal lowered the locket around the traveler's

neck, both marveling at how well it fit. The traveler popped the locket open, a warm smile growing brighter as she read over the inscription.

Darkness breathed across the streets packed with eager ponies all focused on a sight in the distance. A tree began to bud in the cloudy horizon, growing with every passing minute. Upon a platform where all eyes were cast, a pony was delivering an address to the ponies. His mustache bounced with vigor after every declaration. Words were silent yet actions were passionate and clear. A savior had arrived, directing the ponies' attention to the mighty oak and calling for support. Silent cheers broke out and ponies leaped in joy, one silver pony, now fully grown, shared their glee, though caught the eye of the speaker. They shared a gaze, for perhaps a second or so, before the speaker shot her a pleasant wink.

Clouds raged and tumbled in the skies, though two ponies over a dinner table laughed and talked and smiled together. Both, like the darkness had cursed the land, had already had their cutie marks stolen, but what was the use dwelling on it? The view from their table on that balcony overlooked the city below; signs of degradation began to show, though no such interruptions could stifle the palpable aura of love shielding the couple. The silver pony and the savior talked on and for a while simply looked into each other's eyes. The savior whispered something into the silver pony's ear. She giggled and followed him from the table, both sharing another look over the vista of the city before racing into the tree. The door slammed behind them.

The two had settled in together in their kingdom in the tree. They shared their hopes and dreams and what they would do in the world; how they would escape the darkness and make their own stake in the land. The silver pony grew confident, a new and magical bravery about her. Over dinner once more they shared a kiss, though the silver pony caught the world below in her eyes and gasped. Love in the heavens obscured her attachment to the world, dirt and grime now caking the streets. Strange creatures and dark beasts moved in the streets and ruled as mobsters and

sharks. She looked to her lover, the savior, and he pondered why she was so worried. He spoke, though I understood one word he mouthed: "Love."

Lightning cracked in the distance, startling the silver pony. She found comfort in the warmth of her lover, he in turn wanting to preserve the serenity of their unity. Floating in from the room, a small cubical box danced along the breeze guided by magic and presented itself before the silver pony. The box opened, the gem and gold inside sparkling brighter than the hidden sun. He knelt before her and asked her, and all she could do was nod. Tears streamed down her face as she returned to his side, the image of the two slipping away.

Time seemed to pass again. Beasts in the town were the norm now as was the stains across the city and grim look of the town. The fountain's once bountiful gurgling had since ceased, the base dried and full of debris and dust. The silver pony lay alone in their bed, her lover hunched over his desk, examining an orb and writing furiously. Many nights had ended this way. Tonight she would ignite their love again. She called to him, he did not answer. She trotted over to him, peering over his shoulder to examine his work and the artifact. Something revolted the silver pony as she recoiled from what she read. Her lover looked up at her and tried to ease her fearful expression, though she questioned him. They argued, she accused, he denied. She backed away, he drew her closer in. She levitated the papers over and showed their flaws to him, he fighting back against her arguments. Finally, she turned away from her lover and ripped the papers cleanly down the middle. Her lover flew into rage, shoving the silver pony away with a hoof impacting against her face as he tried to piece together his work. Head dug into his papers, he hardly noticed the silver pony walk out and never return to that room.

Returning to her old home, it had fallen into disarray and been the subject of vandalism, yet she felt safer there. Exhausted and on the verge of tears, she pulled up the trapdoor in the floor revealing stairs to her basement. She trotted down them and found her bedroom untouched. Tiles were still sparkling and not a soul had breathed the air. Austerely set, a bed and a simple bookshelf decorated her room. A stark change, though she

welcomed it. On her bed, where she had left it, a book was marked and placed for future reading. Through her drowsiness she skimmed the pages, all heralding a nameless adventurer and his deeds across the universe. He had just found his perfect love, though she believed she knew the ending and burned the book in the fury of her magic and tossed it to the other side of the room. The smell of burning papers filling the room, she paid it no heed as she slipped under her covers and fell asleep amid falling tears.

As days and months and years passed, the clouds never shifted and darkness prevailed. Her shop reopened and she went along with her life. Periodically she'd receive gifts, but they were all disposed of. Whenever she was on the streets and passed by that forsaken tree, she could hear a faint melody from it. Something sad, yet not defeated. Lovesick, but not met in return. It was a somewhat hopeful song, as if it was scheming something. I heard it grow even louder.

The song of piano keys began to rise in the darkness of the hall. In the distance the dignified melody haunted us and beckoned us on. Releasing each other from Argenta's mind, I made no more judgments on her. We shared another stare, though I smiled and nodded to her. We broke into a gallop and followed the faint song. Fires and soot eventually became scarce as the end of the unnecessarily long hallway came into view. Two thick and beautifully carved doors barred our entrance, though no system of portals and jambs could hope to withhold me. A flash of piercing light shattered the wood and we entered.

Upon the piano a pony played a playful melody for the empty room. Silk dressed a bed set for two beyond the piano. An enormous abstract portrayal of what I could assume to be Argenta hung on the wall. The rest of the room was filled and crowded with ornate and expensive items of all varieties. On the opposite side of the room, two doors were left open to a balcony overlooking the clouded night and the smoke rising from the city beneath the view. Some sort of enchantment must have been on the hallway to bring us to the highest room of the fortress. Uncaring of any of it, the chancellor played on, finishing the concerto triumphantly and letting the sound of the keys fade into the air.

“Ah. I knew you’d come back for me. I knew you’d finally see your mistake.” Chancellor Fragonard Octavius Rococo excused himself from the piano. There he was, just as I saw him in the visions, though twisted by time: a top hat decorated his head, a monocle over one eye, and a thick blonde mustache accompanying his golden mane. He smelled of smoke and children’s crushed dreams extinguished by the stomp of an aloof hoof. Choking clouds of the stench suffocated me as he drew nearer. An ugly and supercilious chuckle poisoned the air with the sound. His light blue frame moved to confront us.

“You see, Argenta? It’s exactly as you remember it! I do hope you’ll excuse the mess you saw in the halls. It seemed some damned fool incited a rebellion and banished all my guardians back to Hell. Thankfully I had plenty more patrolling the streets and in reserves. But it was meant to happen this way, you know. It’s all happening for a reason.”

I approached him. “What method can there be to this madness you’ve brewed? A cauldron of evil bubbles over with your colors, chancellor!”

Rococo snorted. “But we are all of such temperatures and temperaments, aren’t we Ostentatious? Don’t be alarmed. I don’t know you, but I know *of* you.”

“Cease this idle chatter! You are the villain and I am the hero, and as we are of such roles, I am to overcome you in a duel! En garde!” Argenta remained silent.

Rococo laughed and levitated a cup of tea from his desk to his mouth and sipped it villainously. “These empty gallantries are tiresome. Have you not heard me? You and I are of the same olive branch, my friend, and we are more alike than you’d like to believe.” He took another evil sip of his drink.

He started again. “Do you want to know what I’m doing here? Ruling a city and drinking tea in a tree? It’s relaxing, without a doubt, but I did build this city of Elyograg up from nothing but a nameless shanty town. When the darkness fell over this world and stranded us, I calmed myself and opted to

prosper in the wasteland. For the ponies' devotion, I promised them a taste of my prosperity. I grew this tree with my own energy and it took in the fresh water for miles around and gave life to this city. Deserts surrounded us and an ocean of a reservoir grew in the east, sheltering our paradise from the world. I rose up from nothing and became a god, and for a while I was content with that."

He took another malicious sip and twirled his thick mustache.

"But then I was delivered something: a gift from an anonymous subject. An orb and a pedestal. It was a novel piece, though the novelty wore off as the aura of the decoration began to speak to me in my sleep. It told me of a prophecy. A glorious and valorous pony would rise up and free us from the clouds and let us see the sun again. It sounded wonderful, but the more I thought about it, the more it made me wonder why I would want that. Of course I assumed the prophecy referred to me, so I simply let it pass and kept my peace peaceful. But when the orb spoke again and told me the name of the prophet, I devised my plan to find him."

A frenzied look began to form on Rococo. Argenta spoke up. "You turned sinister! Did you ever even figure out who this prophet was?" Her voice quivered. Rococo only laughed.

"Stupid girl, do you really have to ask. If I am not the prophet, who else could rival my brilliance?"

I paused for a moment to think, and then smiled hopefully. Rococo smiled as well. "You see? He's figured it out. Of course *he* figured it out."

"What?!" Argenta gasped. "You mean that...?"

"The prophet's name was 'Ostentatious', the pony to bring about the end of the apocalypse. As I searched my city and systematically weeded out the males of society, I concluded this prophet could not harm me as he was not among me. Who would have known you would have made my search so easy, though. Your friend actually tipped me off. The green haired one. She said your name with such passion."

“I’ve heard I’m a pretty important pony around these parts, so I’ll take this prophecy and add it to my list of things to accomplish.” I thought back to my hefty list. “Did any of your beasts of Hell happen to leave a head behind?”

Rococo blinked. “Not a head here, I’m afraid. I’d be more concerned with your own head. These things have a way of losing themselves, you know. I’ve lost mine.” He took another antagonistic sip of his tea.

Rococo stared hungrily at Argenta. His magic possessed her and drew her close to him against her struggling. “My queen has returned for her king! As I am king of this land, I must have an obedient queen. We are in love, after all. We have been since my first day here. She’s never left my thoughts, and now we shall unite as royalty. Look out there, my queen! If it is not already, we shall paint the town red!”

She struggled but could not break free. She was in his web once more. Her memories filled my mind again. That flame was now monstrous. They all flashed before my eyes and summoned from me her escape. Teleportation had been added to my repertoire, a spark of my magic taking hold of Argenta and transported her away in thin air. I knew where to send her, and she was safe. Rococo looked desperately at his empty hooves.

“Already taking from me, eh Ostentatious?! I should have known. You cannot let lovers be, can you?” Rococo’s tea cup shattered beneath the crushing pressure of his magic gone untamed. Madness was alive in this arena and a combatant partnered with power. “We shall begin then.” A magnificent chord fell from the ceiling and dangled from the boughs above. Rococo eyed the chord with wide eyes.

I cleared my throat and prepared myself for the battle. “I shall begin. What sonnet shall I recite? I’ve prepared dozens.”

Rococo looked dumbfounded at me again. What had I said? “Poetry? In my kingdom? In these trying times I’d rather opt for more ferocious barbarisms. Something concrete and meaningful! I had a failsafe in case we would ever encounter each other like this. With this monster’s guidance

and power, I saved this town.” Rococo yanked the chord with his teeth, the chord snapping and falling to the ground. Something stirred above us.

“We are ponies of greater destinies than we could ever imagine. Or can we imagine them? Is that what makes us so noble?” Rococo posited wistfully.

I threw a hoof down like thunder. “Nobility sees thee smited! What are you proud of with your enslavement of the innocent and abusing a city’s good ponies.”

That demonic laughter escaped him again. He looked out the window to view the carnage. “Princess Celestia, you know I am a righteous pony.” He closed his eyes. “Tell me, princess, why am I given this role? To rise from squalor only to be lit as the villain?”

He would not answer me. He walked away to the balcony, almost singing his words in a mad trance. I followed him, wary of his forces.

“The desire for a name for myself was what turned me to sin. The desire to save these ponies! I intended that! It’s not my fault! Whose plan was this? Who made the devil so much stronger than a pony...?” His voice trailed off into the rising ashes.

“She cannot hear you here in this no pony’s land. Please talk with me. There is another way!” I pleaded. He whirled around, eyes filled with uncertain rage. He trotted slowly towards me.

“Protect me, Princess. Don’t let this prophecy be true. Destroy Ostentatious and let him taste the fires of Hell, or else let me be the prophet my father believed I was!”

The canopy overhead blew open. Debris of leaves and branches exploded in every direction, though I held my ground. A blood curdling screech pierced the air and rolled out from the darkness of the canopy. Stone wings beat and lowered a body to the floor. Hardened claws rested obediently beside Rococo, the beast ready to pounce and strike. A sharpened tail rested behind the beast of stone.

“But why a gargoyle? What prosperity does it bring?”

“It draws the water from around the area, feeding the city and its own power.” Rococo explained.

“It does?”

“Of course!”

“How does water feed a stone gargoyle?” I asked.

“How doesn’t it?”

I could not argue, though, that thing from before whirled in my brain again. I could see it! This town and its meaning! His devotion to the monster became apparent.

“Elyograg!” I exclaimed with feeling. “It’s ‘gargoyle’ spelled backwards!” I paused, shuddering from the next equally frightening realization that was very bad for my health.

“And this is their kingdom!” Rococo declared, confirming my realization.

Another screech slashed at my ears as the gargoyle leapt into the air. Its claws unsheathed and ready, it dove for me flailing its daggers wildly. Speeds like lightning blazed across the room and caught me by the throat. Air fledged away, though the energy and momentum of all those fighters who believed me in drew from me enough strength to summon another spell. Binds of light spread across the monster like chains and crippled its movement. Free at last, I raised my front legs high and brought down the hammer of justice on the beast’s head, only in the aftermath realizing that now I did not have a head to take home.

The stone body crumbled and erupted across the room and dressed the antiques in debris. Putrid smelling dust twirled in the air and clouded our battlefield. Rococo shrugged it away, breaking out into a smile.

“Who is to say I am any sort of prophet?” I demanded. “This orb and pedestal I have encountered before. Evil bleeds from them and their blood is toxic. They are composed of deceit and you are under their spell!”

Rococo smirked. “Toxic? What does not kill you only makes you stronger! The job is mine to enlighten you!” Rococo spread his legs and dipped his head, drawing in the darkness around him to form a solid shape of energy. Spikes protruded from the growing form, its shape ominous and life threatening. Rococo held aloft his mighty horn now acting as a sword. It oozed with hellish black force.

Targeting me, he stampeded towards me. If he was to be darkness, I, of course, of such divine notions and entities, would act as light. Quickly I formed a sturdy shield to evade and hold off his frenzied charge. I could see my father in the heavenly shine of it, his smile glistening and fueling my fervent counter. I smiled back.

“And I shall smite the wicked and plunge them into the fiery pit!” Rococo screamed, his battle cry leading into the crushing swing of his sword. Poison and gravity flew in every direction of the hit as shield met sword. Darkness struck then fell away in the presence of my divine shield, yet Rococo continued his hacking stance. His blade’s edge danced with my shield’s body, the two caught poetically in their bitter rivalry. They knew each other and knew each other well, yet they could not bind themselves by each other’s elements and limitations. They were as different as day and night, yet what were those concepts here?

“Rococo stop!” I had not spoken, nor did Rococo. The voice was female, as if Argenta had contacted us. We both stopped, though I took advantage. Holy light blazed from my defenses, blinding the warrior. In his daze and screams of agony, familiar chains of light bound the chancellor. Eyes mad with darkness, he struggled vigorously against my binds, yet he could not break them.

“I suppose this is where you’ll kill me?” Rococo spit, relaxing himself in the wake of his defeat.

From the open window a convenient breeze flowed in and lifted my mane, allowing it to blow victoriously in the wind. I looked at Rococo's fallen body. "Nay, villain. Hell need not be merciful when I am."

"Arrogance be thy fall, for too soon do you revel in the breeze!" Barked the chancellor. "Do with me what you will."

"I merely want answers." I began. "I wish to inquire about my own father, Ostensible. Does this name recall anything?"

"Why would I tell you anything?" Rococo fired back.

I smirked for my own brilliance. "My chains of light are enchanted with a convenient exposition incantation. At my will and command, you are forced to honestly exposit what I desire to hear!"

He felt the binds on his throat draw from him the words he knew. "Quite clever. I submit. To your misfortune, I know nothing of your father. I was but a vagrant before I came here. I could have met him, but I don't know him."

"And what of this darkness? What is the source?" I demanded.

Rococo sighed and looked out the window. "That reminds me of my plan. Argenta and I were going to take my boat across the ocean and find the epicenter of the storm. You see the rings in the sky? They originate from a point. That's where the darkness spreads from. It was so many years ago."

I raised a hoof to my chin and pondered his story. "Hardly a veritable litany of exposition. Are you sure you know nothing else? That will only be a few sentences at best. Normally these sorts of accounts take a shape akin to a wall, yet you've supplied me with little to work with."

"Perhaps, but here's a twist to it all! What's got eight letters and can regenerate when destroyed?" Riddled Rococo with a demonic grin.

Rocks and fragments of stone began to gravitate towards the center of the room. A crude shape formed, arms extending along with wings. Hardened by magic, a mouth grew and shrieked violently. I screwed my

eyes shut and ducked my head beneath my hooves to escape the sound. The screech pierced my brain and shattered my magical concentration, thus interrupting my spell. Rococo leaped to his hooves and retreated, jumping on the back of his gargoyle.

“I’ve given my monologue, my false hope of victory coupled with exposition, now all that remains is a climax to this action, don’t you agree? Our game of cat and mouse is like a very well written story. If you wish to give me chase, abandon your cause and have at me!” Atop the stony fiend, Rococo laughed manically as the gargoyle shot through the open doors and into the open air of the battlefield.

I galloped to the window on only my passion and prayers. Leaping from the balcony, I conjured as my means of flight the spirit of my emotions. My horn shined with my ring glowing like a beacon as time seemed to slow in my ascent. Coated in the shine of holy magic, scales like diamonds flickered on the mighty dragon beneath me. Furious storms of wind and rage danced from the wing beat of the giant dragon, stifling the gargoyle’s flight and threatening to knock Rococo into the war of fire and brimstone below. In the distance he turned to me, laughing proudly.

“You are my rival, to be sure! Such a beast you’ve made for yourself!”

“Rational thoughts may still lurk within you! It does not have to end this way!” I screamed over the sounds of battle.

“Funny. I never knew you as a pony. Only as a name and something to conquer the day you would inevitably oppose me. I thought the same of the world, but the world is far too massive. These are our inexorable roles to play. Let’s give the universe what it wants!”

Reluctantly, I accepted the terms of war. Upon the declaration, the gargoyle unhinged its jaw and charged a devastating laser. The dragon and I glided beneath the abyssal cannon as it launched, the assault following us as we flew against the body of the tree. My mane had never felt so much wind in it. Invigoration and momentum guided as the dragon ascended and

the laser quieted. The dragon's head collided with the gargoyle, cracking its body and causing the beast to spin out.

Aerial evasiveness corrected the flight of the demon and it returned fire. Hell's fireballs rained down on us from above, the turret of stone slicing through the air. My spirit dragon's wing began to blaze and the dragon roared in anguish. The stone fiend flew below us, an easy target for the dragon's breath. Furious crystal gusts swarmed the air and fell like daggers upon Rococo and his beast. The monster's own artillery assaulted the raining crystals, smoke and dust erupting from the impact and obscuring my vision. I paused and waited. Silence.

Through the storms of dust shot Rococo's gargoyle, a mad smile on the rider. Why didn't I think of that counter attack? His noble top hat had long since fallen from his head, his mane now wild with wind and fire. Rococo's eyes were as black as night and bursting with dark aura. The head on collision met my spirit dragon's body devastatingly, more painful roars filling my ears. Transparency threatened my flight of the dragon as the fires below came into view. This was the summit of our duel. Rococo flew below the staggering dragon, taking aim and charging some sort of magic on his horn.

Words were meaningless here. I leapt from my dragon, diving towards Rococo. He challenged my dive and commanded his gargoyle's flight into me. Darkness would encounter light. In the winds of the world rushing past me and through my mane, I felt a single tear slip away from my eye and into the sky. I was content with the last words I had spoken to my friends. A noble sacrifice to be remembered as the day good triumphed over evil. Those eyes of darkness on Rococo, opaque with Hell possessing them. He was an adventurer who heralded love above all else, yet fell so demented. If I was to escape with my life, never again would evil claim another brave adventurer's mind and body. Of one I could absolve Rococo.

"Mind Crush!" I held the vowel sound for as long as possible before our collision. The supernova exploded in every direction, two stars blazing in each other's power. I saw Rococo scream, light shooting from his eyes

and mouth as his mind was finally purged. In his final moments, he faded away into the light, his faint smile to meet heaven's gates. Frigid energy engulfed my body. I felt myself falling, my eyes closing.

Two stars I knew brighter than all the lights of the universe burned out in each other's glory. In one direction, an explosion of white blew away the darkness. A pony's body burned and was picked up by the breeze. Ashes rode high on a flight of angels who sang for his rest. What really happened to you? He was not inherently evil. Outside forces made him that way, I suppose as they made me the same. I turned away from the blinding light. I loved him, though I could not cry.

When it ended, all I could see was a single statue falling. The hardened body of a pony fell from the collision and struck the floor of the city. The war had ended. No longer were axes swung or lives risked, but at the cost of the bravest knight. Silence spread across the area, everypony gathering to view the destruction and the fallen. Wounded or not, their city was saved.

A pony stood over the statue, screaming at it and crying. Her celadon hair fell over the statue and caressed it, the young mare unable to accept the events. All ponies were silent in their respect. She cried and called for him. She called his name. No answer. What did she expect to happen? She shook his stone body. No movements.

Her two companions felt the gravity of the loss, the grey mare breaking into similar tears, hiding her face in her dark blue friend. Unknown warriors and soldiers wept as well. Ponies who had no memory of Ostentatious cried. Streams of tears ran from all fighters, their waters pooling around the statue.

I trotted closer to the statue. His face was caught in dignity, eyes shut as he boldly accepting of his fate. Crying would do no good, so I skipped it. I followed what I knew and stood stoic, yet something began to occur. As tears ran from everypony around, they began to sing and grow bright. Waters glistened and surrounded him, forming a shell. Slowly, the statue rose from the dirt and into the sky, everypony still silent in amazement. It was a stunning array of light, the hero's ascension to immortality, as it

were. Unfamiliar emotions coursed through my veins and my head began to shiver. I smiled widely, even laughing a bit at what I was witnessing. Succumbing, the dams of expressionless attempts burst and shattered, my eyes welling with joy. Two tears, one from each eye, were all that were needed to complete the mysterious ritual.

The two tears floated to the case around the levitating statue, the water racing around the body and preparing it. From across the sky, pellets like seeds were summoned and rained across the rising statue. The seeds found salvation in the soil below and bathed in the tears of the city. Bright red stars sprouted petals and stems and created a heavenly garden. A crimson cross rose from the bouquet and forced a break in the clouds above us. Sunlight so beautiful as I had remembered it fell from the sky and blanketed the statue and the water bubbled and foamed with magic. Blinding flares of light erupted once more, the sun escaping again behind the darkness as the statue began its descent. In the sun's place, rain fell upon our city. The water felt pure running through my dirty mane.

Lightning struck the tree, setting a blaze the top of it, though the rain began to fight back and control it. The head of the statue began to move and stir. His eyes blinked and he met the waking world once more.

"And that's how I came back from the dead."

Scattershot greeted me ecstatically with a nuzzle under my chin and tears of joy. The crowd of warriors and rebels all cheered for my safety and their freedom.

"Scattershot! You're safe! What was the tide of battle?" I asked on bated breath.

"Great, Osten! We had no casualties at all. Everyone is safe." She smiled gently.

"A flawless victory!" I cheered with the crowd.

Bella and Sirocco ran to my side to welcome me back. I returned their own joy with my own for escaping death, though I had a special thanks for

one pony. She approached me, a light and confidence in her eyes I had only seen in her memories.

I tried to thank her, though I sleep proved to be a stronger force. I took a step, though fell to gravity's pull and collapsed from exhaustion and the day's events. After all, we did topple a tyrant all in one day.

Energy returned to me as my eyelids fluttered. I awoke on a bed in a strange location, yet from Argenta's memories I recalled it. This was her haven. Her basement. In the corner by the bookshelf, a pony laid curled up with a book beneath a burning candle. The mattress squeaked with my new movements, Argenta now aware I was awake. She was clean, fresh from the shower and an adventure. Smiling and radiant, she shut her book and trotted towards me.

"Good morning, hero." She greeted with a sense of mockery.

"Good morrow to you to, Argenta. How long have I been asleep for?"

"About a few days."

"A few days?!" I exclaimed. Time was of the essence in this time stopped land.

"Woah, calm down. I'd say you deserved it after what you went through. You and Rococo."

I sensed the sadness in her language. I was sorry for her loss, though she assured me she preferred it this way. "What became of Rococo?" She asked.

"He is in a better world, now. He was shot through the heart, as he was to blame for giving love a bad name." I told her.

"He wasn't to blame. It was his overwhelming ambitions." She reasoned. She levitated Slay Bell's pendant from my neck and popped it open.

"I want to read to you what is inscribed here. Have you ever read it?" Argenta asked.

“I have not. Go ahead.” I said.

“That’s what I thought. That is what has been troubling me.”

She cleared her throat and began. “‘The whole course of history may depend on a change of heart in one solitary and even humble individual – for it is in the solitary mind and soul of the individual that the battle between good and evil is waged and ultimately won or lost.’ The quote never left my mind when Scattershot mentioned it. She told me of Slay Bells. He sounds like a nice kid. If you’re looking for his mother, she’s going to have a locket similar to this with the same quote in it. That’s what she ordered from my family’s store all those years ago.”

“Well, I’m glad we’ve got some sort of lead, I—” I stopped. The description of the locket we were to find sounded eerie, the thought of what I had imagined sending a chill up my spine. Leaping from the bed, I asked where our bags were. They had been set beside the bed, I rifling through them to find the memento my father had given me before his death. My magic gripped the chain of the pendant.

“What do you make of this?” I asked, fearful of the answer.

“How did you...? Open it!” Argenta said, understanding the disturbing train this discovery might take us on.

“I know what it says. It is how I knew the quote. My father gave me this amulet as a memento to remember him by while he traveled. I cherished it after his death. Is it a match?”

Argenta examined the pendant with wide eyes. Her brow began to knit as she took note of the craftsponyship. Reluctantly, she nodded and confirmed this was the match to Slay Bells’ pendant.

“Looks like you had it all along, Ostentatious, as I feared. I don’t understand why your father would have this. Clear Bell treasured the locket with her life as a constant reminder of her son...” Her voice trailed off into terrible territory.

I was silent, only looking at the locket with millions of questions. “Oh father, where have you been...?”

Argenta and I agreed to leave the mystery be for now and prepare for our departure. She accepted my offer to join my band of adventurers on our grand quest, for the town could repair itself now and restore itself. Continuing our southern bound trek, our group focused on the ocean and its secrets. I took note of the rings of clouds and directed our path to the apparent center. We bid the town goodbye, the townsponies in turn singing of our names and our ushering in of their freedom. These good deeds felt good to complete, even if I had no heads of Hell’s monsters in my possession. Could it be a metaphor? It would be a pretty awkward one if it was, so I kept it literal for the time being.

Argenta directed us to the ship Rococo had hidden away behind a cove. The sails caught miraculous wind and took our band off into the horizons. The sails following the southern current, the town previously known as Elyograg faded into the distance and into my adventurer’s log. We traveled for only a few minutes before a single beam of light shot through the clouds overhead. Something descended from the heavens like a trophy for my bravery. That familiar rectangle of justice glided gently in the sunlight and broke into its own current, flowing on the wind and finding myself on the boat. My four friends gathered around to see the card’s contents. It held a single word.

“Furious.”

My eyes sparked with life and vigor. Whatever beasts lay beyond the dark horizons, confidence promised their speedy defeat and our success. My father was waiting. I took the time to write an entry into my adventurer’s log.

Dear handsome log of adventures,

I pray thee father! Give me clarity and light as we travel on. These orbs of evil are desecrating the name of adventurer’s across the land and destroying them. It disgusts me that one fell to them, and I shall never let it

end that way again. Though your locket...did it belong to Clear Bell, brave huntress and mother of Slay Bells? You two must have been really good friends, perhaps adventuring partners! She knew you could deliver the pendant home to Slay Bells, so you gave it to me...yeah!

We are on an epic sea voyage to the center of darkness. Surely these clouds must originate from a wicked factory. Where that is, we shall find it and rip open a righteous cut in the sky until the sun can shine through once more and declare her domination.

Love is a complicated emotion. I'll opt out of it until my adventure is over. It leads to ruin and heartbreak eternal in exchange for a meager taste of paradise. Father, was your love as complex for mother? I wonder how she's doing. She probably hasn't even noticed I'm gone. She's probably busy doing girl stuff, like her hair. Love may be something special. Someone to hold and be held in return.

We're running with the shadows of the night, yet whose hoof can I hold to know it will be all right? I'll surrender all my dreams tonight, for they'll come true in the end.

-Sir Ostentatious

--End of Book Three--