



To Set Right

By
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Character Profiles

+ Evening Blaze, known as Blaze (or Eve, to Bright Horizon). She is a pegasus mare, approximately 19 years old. She has a cyan coat and royal blue mane. Her cutie mark is a twisting flame in orange and yellow. Literally, this represents her ability with fire and light. If she lived in a time where pegasi possessed their normal range of control over the environment, she would be able to affect forest fires and lava flows to a greater degree than normal, but under current conditions this basically means that she is adept at starting fires, even with materials she is not familiar with. Metaphorically, it is representative of her optimistic nature: she is willing to see sparks of good will and kindness in everypony, and, although she is not a pacifist by any means, regrets harming others, as she believes that nopony is entirely beyond redemption. She has lived with Bright Horizon for a little over six years, and the two are close friends.

+ Bright Horizon, known as Bright (or Bri, to Evening Blaze). He is an earth pony stallion, approximately 25 years old. He has a dark green coat and yellow mane. His cutie mark is a trio of yellow dice tumbling in the air. Initially, he believed that this indicated a talent for gambling, but was swiftly cured of that misconception upon attempting to dice with a merchant and losing what little saving he had as a colt. In fact, this is an indicator of his ability to succeed in risky situations by acting without planning. He is at his finest in an unpredictable scenario, rolling with events as they occur. In short, his talent is risk-taking. He has lived with Evening Blaze for a little over six years, and the two are close friends.

+ Softhooves (known as Softy to Bluebottle) is a unicorn filly, approximately 15 years old. She has a light grey coat and a dark grey mane. Her cutie mark is a small blue cone with a blue sphere balanced on the tip, orbited by a trio of smaller spheres in purple. This indicates her exceptional control and precision, over her body, mind, and magic. She can move silently, and has perfected a combination of original and rarely used illusions to make herself into a perfect thief, spy, or assassin. Her remarkable control over her telekinesis allows her to control dozens of small objects at once, and to maintain heightened control over objects in her magical grasp. However, she only possesses an average level of magical strength, and is unable to lift heavy objects or perform great feats of magical strength, relying instead upon dexterity and efficient use of her magic to accomplish goals. She is shy, and somewhat emotionally detached, particularly in combat, as she detests killing, and only does so to please Bluebottle or protect herself and her friends.

+ Bluebottle is a pegasus filly, approximately 14 years old. She has a blue coat and light green mane. Her cutie mark is a pair of crossed vials, one filled with a yellow fluid, the other with a pink fluid. She originally gained her cutie mark while studying herblore under her mother, but quickly put her talent to use devising poisons, acids, and stimulants after leaving home. She occasionally shifts in manner of speech, body language, and action to cope with extreme levels of stress. Despite being somewhat domineering, she was well-raised and deeply caring towards Softhooves.

+ Rusty Bolt is a unicorn stallion, approximately 23 years old. He has an amber coat and white mane. His cutie mark is a crystalline cog flanked by a hammer and wrench. This is representative both of his talents as an engineer and of his unusual talent for enchantment, particularly in relation to inanimate objects. He is the designer of the prototype airship *Goddesses' Grace*, and constructed the engine and control system himself, while the hull was assembled by a team of carpenters hired for the task. Despite his sloppy personal habits and seemingly carefree attitude, he is a driven businesspony, with little regard for convention, and decided that the appropriate response to his fee for constructing the *Grace* being halved was to empty the vaults of the contractee, making off with hundreds of thousands of bits and the completed airship. He and Safflower have worked as business partners and friends for five years, and the two trust each other completely.

+ Safflower is a pegasus mare, approximately 31 years old. She has an indigo coat and light green mane. Her cutie mark is a white feather encircled by multiple yellow and black arrows. She has an incredible sense for air currents, to such a degree that she can sense and manipulate them to a greater degree in the current age than many pegasi could before the loss of their environmental control. However this is still temporary, and shifts she effects in local airflow tend to revert after several seconds. Nevertheless, this gives her exceptional personal agility, and allows her to fly the *Grace* by feel, without the need for spotters to identify ideal vectors. She and Rusty Bolt have worked as business partners and friends for five years, and the two trust each other completely.

Prologue

A flurry of snow gusted through the scattered, windswept trees that dotted the mountainside in a farcical imitation of a forest, while the wind howled in his ears, deafening as a dragon even through the layers of tightly woven cloth which completely encased his head. It was nearly nightfall on the third day of his trek from the valley floor far below, and Bright Horizon grinned at the thought of the warm inn less than an hour ahead, in the village of Green Meadows. That had always seemed a bit of an odd thing to name a village up here, but according to the histories it came from a time centuries ago, not long after the Fall, when the ivory blanket of eternal winter had not covered the Swayback Mountains. Still, regardless of what it had once been, the little hamlet was now the last stopping point for trade caravans and explorers such as him before the pass, making it a crucial destination for anyone not wishing to die of starvation or exposure in the barren heights.

The wind picked up, now blowing nearly perpendicular to the earth, nearly strong enough to lift him off of his feet. Bright picked up his pace, falling into a stride which was stuck somewhere between a walk and a trot.

I had forgotten how deep the drifts could get at this time of year. Too slow, I need to make it to shelter before sunset, if I don't want to be a ponycycle come morning.

A moment later, he heard a sound which any experienced winter traveler dreads: the sharp crack of ice over a hidden stream. Bright plunged through the snow, sinking below his shoulders, as his right forehoof felt the shock of nearly frozen water. He quickly pulled himself out, but the damage had been done. His shoe was so cold that it burned the skin of his hoof, and both the straps holding it to his hoof and the thick leg wrappings were soaked through. He needed to get out of those waterlogged clothes immediately, but there was no chance of that in the present condition.

“Goddesses damn it! Shit!”

It can't be more than fifty minutes to Green Meadows. You can get out of this with all your parts still attached. Just gotta keep moving and keep a positive attitude.

Shit.

However little he wanted to admit it, there was no way to make it that far without frostbite setting in. At best, he would lose the hoof. At worst, he would stumble into another hidden creek or pond and end up dead. He needed to make a fire, and quickly. There was no hope of that out in the open; even without nearly a meter of snow on the ground, the heavy winds of what was rapidly becoming a true blizzard would stop any attempt before it started. There were, however, a multitude of caves dotting the region, and with luck he could find one of those and start a fire, for he already carried enough supplies to set a decent blaze.

As Bright started to move towards an outcrop of boulders in the distance, he heard what sounded like faint traces of a voice over the wailing wind. They slowly drew stronger, drifting downslope from the general direction of the village. He hesitated, then turned and started running, as best he could.

This is stupid. Here I am with a leg that will be going numb any minute now, and I decide to go chasing after ghosts in the breeze. Might as well sprout wings and try flying to meet the Mare in the Moon, if I'm so determined to be foalish. I guess this is what Father and Mother meant when they told me what my cutie mark really represented.

Visibility was horrid, gusts of snow blasted across the landscape, and he could still hear that voice, growing ever louder. He thought that he could make out bits of words, most along the lines of "Help", or synonyms thereof.

Great. Now I feel obligated to help. Well, at least I'll have company when I die.

Bright could see the hazy line of a path through the deep snow, apparently continuing toward him of its own accord. Then he saw a hint of a royal blue mane pop up from the head of the trench, moving it forward a little more than a pace.

Three seconds later, he saw it again, and heard a small voice cry out in a heart-wrenching sob, "P'ease he'p, make i' stop chasin' me!"

Bright Horizon pushed through the last few lengths between him and the other pony and looked down. Huddled at his hooves was a small filly, young enough to still not have her cutie mark. Her coat was a shade of cyan, topped with a deep blue mane and tail. At the moment, her face was marred by streaks of frozen teardrops. He pulled a fold of cloth down from his mouth, intending to ask her what had happened...

"Hey, what happene-," he suddenly cut off, hearing the last thing he wanted to hear, something he had hoped he would never hear again. The piercing cry of a hunting griffon. At the sound, the filly's eyes somehow managed to grow even larger with fear. Bright snatched up the filly by the nape of her neck, pushing her into one of his larger saddlebags, so that nothing but her face was visible, and turned, reaching as close to a gallop as he could get under the conditions, heading for the rocks that had been his earlier destination.

Oh shit, shit, SHIT! Goddesses protect me! I thought I would never have to see another one of those damned overgrown birds again after that mapping expedition. No, this can't be happening; it has absolutely got to be a dream. It has to be.

As he ran, Bright turned his head to the sling on his right, nestled between two saddlebags, and came out with his crossbow firmly grasped. He was no soldier, but when you were out in the wilds, you had to be able to defend yourself. The cries grew louder behind him, almost as if the griffon were calling to its fellows.

Wait. This filly has to be from Green Meadows, and there is no way anyone would be allowed out into the open in weather this bad, not alone, and especially not this young. So if there are griffons chasing a filly from the village, which means...

"Oh no, no, this isn't happening. This can't be happening," he shouted to himself. Well, that is what he tried to shout, but what came out from around the well-worn oak handle of the crossbow was more along the lines of a muffled whisper. The filly in his pack had started crying again, and he felt

like joining her, for he was still a good distance away from the boulders when he heard the unmistakable sound of the huge, sweeping strokes of the griffon's wings just behind him. He twisted his head around, steadying the crossbow on the saddlebag holding his firewood, took the time to aim at the diving griffon, and fired. He missed, and the bolt disappeared into the growing storm.

At the last moment, he dove to the left, nearly making the griffon's attack into a complete miss.

Nearly.

He cried out in agony as he felt three lines of burning fire trace down his flank as the griffon's claws raked him. Despite the pain, he staggered back to his feet hobbling as quickly as he could toward the shelter of the rocks. He was still two lengths from nominal safety when the griffon returned again; trying to finish what it had begun. Bright quickly bucked as best he could, with the combined weight of the filly and his supplies on his back. He very nearly grinned with satisfaction when he heard the squawk behind him, and saw a few feathers zip past, caught in a gust of wind, but instead winced as the rapid movement aggravated the pain of his lacerations.

As the griffon rose and wheeled around, preparing for another dive, he staggered the last few paces into the rocks, sighing with relief when he saw what he had been hoping for: a depression in the snow, indicating the mouth of a cave of some sort. He quickly began to dig with his forelegs, gouging great trenches out of the fallen snow. He could still hear the griffon's angry screeches as it scratched at the tightly grouped boulders, attempting to reach him.

Bright felt the snow and ice underhoof suddenly give way, sliding rapidly downward into the widened mouth of the cave. He saw grey stone rushing up at him through his fading vision, and that was the last he knew.

I've got to escape. Runrunrun. Oh goddesses, my family! No, just keep running. Do what mama said, and keep running no matter what you hear.

* * *

Evening Blaze shivered as she woke. The world was cold, dark, and smelled of apples.

What? Apples? Where am I?

Blaze started, and then pushed against the unsealed flap of the saddlebag. She tumbled out; it was no longer oriented upwards. A short moment later, she leaned her head back against the bitterly cold rock beneath her, and saw a pony, full grown, whom she had never seen before. Well, she thought so, but they were nearly completely enveloped in thick, insulating cloth wrappings, and she could see nothing of their actual appearance. What she could see, however, was serious. The pony's right foreleg was coated with a thin layer of ice, nearly up to the knee.

Despite her youth, Evening Blaze was a talented filly, typical of those families who had chosen to continue to live in such harsh conditions. She knew that she would need assistance to get back to her village, for she had no clothing at all, much less the thick woolens that ponies of those parts would normally don for such a trek. Apart from that, she needed supplies to survive until dawn. There was no chance of the former, and the other pony's saddlebags were much too large for her to contemplate bearing on the trek back to Green Meadows from wherever she was, even if she wouldn't die of exposure inside of a few hours. If she wished to live, the only option was to save the other pony along with herself.

Oh Goddesses, aid me in my hour of need!

Blaze dug through the unconscious pony's saddlebags, hoping against hope that she would find what she needed in time. Emerging from the depths of the second on the left, she hummed happily to herself as she set the tinderbox down on the floor of the cavern. Now all that was left was...

This idiot is on top of the firewood!

She braced herself against the mound of ice and snow which sealed the entrance and pushed, hard. The other pony shifted slightly. She pushed again, and he slid down, nearly to the bottom of the pile. In the process, one of the saddlebags on the right had shifted, and a few trimmed branches had moved far enough out from under the other pony that she could work them loose. With four on the ground, she worked on the last easily accessible one, which stubbornly refused to move. As Blaze leaned back, putting her full weight on the stick, she heard a sharp crack, and found herself once again sprawled out on her back, looking up at the dim light still visible from the nearly sealed entrance to the cave.

“Hah,” a small giggle escaped her lips, “hehehehe!”

Blaze stood up, turning her attention back to the other pony.

I hope he isn't dead. By the Goddesses, if he's dead, I'm going to make him regret it, after I've worked so hard for his sake!”

She moved quickly, working with the efficiency which only comes from long experience, as she carried the wood close enough to be easily reachable, and then opened the tinderbox. It contained a mixture of cedar bark, dried moss, and small twigs, as well as a flint mounted at an angle on a small iron wedge and a steel knife with a handle molded to provide a strong grip for the jaws of the user. Both were well-worn.

Well, at least he isn't another stupid town pony up here for an “adventure”.

After arranging some of the tinder into a neat pile, with moss and twigs in an interwoven pile atop several scraps of cedar bark, she moved the flint over towards it, placing it so that the lowest part was the nearest to what she dearly hoped would soon be a fire, took up the knife in her mouth, and struck thrice, sharp and fast. A spray of sparks leapt from the flint, the brief yellow light illuminating a small circle around the filly. One landed low, near the base of the small bundle of tinder, and the bark flared into life. She pushed the flint aside and tossed the knife next to it, squealing with delight at the sudden burst of light.

“Just like Evergreen taught me!” she exclaimed in a bubbly voice that did not at all fit the situation. Suddenly, she jumped, realizing the gravity of the

moment, and quickly unfurled her wings, making slight movements to gently fan the growing flame. As the moss and twigs caught, she turned, pulling a few of the larger twigs from the tinderbox, and tenderly placed them one by one in a roughly circular arrangement centered on the heart of the kindling. She turned, and lifted the smallest of the branches from where they lay behind her, holding it in her mouth.

Once the larger twigs had begun to burn, she set the branch down as close as she dared on the side of the blaze, and then placed another of nearly equal size on the opposite side, before placing two more atop of and perpendicular to those. Blaze then lifted the broken stick, and softly placed it in the heart of her miniature inferno. She continued to quietly fan the flames with her small wings until the cut sections of branch had ignited, and then turned to face her other problem.

Well, this one really isn't that big. Sh-? Is it a mare? Or is it a he? It couldn't be; without these heavy clothes she couldn't be any bigger than Evergreen, and sis is only twenty. Besides, from what sis said, most stallions wouldn't have the sense to get out of the cold, much less dress properly for it. Although I don't recall ever seeing her spending much time with stallions, so I don't know where she got that idea...

Recalling her earlier efforts to shift the older pony, she once again braced herself against the frozen pile of snow, pushing hard with all four legs, and beating her tiny wings as quickly as she could. The pony slid the rest of the way down, slowly moving across a scattering of ice, coming to rest near the crackling flames.

Blaze moved quickly, pulling his right foreleg as close to the fire as she could manage, pounding at the ice which encased it with her hooves. Cracks began to appear, and the warmth of the fire had already started its work, melting back the frost, leaving a pool of frigid water on the ground beneath. She took the straps of the pony's wide, spiked winter shoes in her mouth, sliding them off and tossing it aside. Then, she unwound the wool from the forest-green leg, spreading it out alongside the larger pony to dry. Faint memories of her less interesting survival lessons echoed around her skull as she began to massage the pony's leg, attempting to work some of the water out of the coat and encourage blood flow to the nearly frozen limb.

Beneath the coat, the skin was dark, but not as bad as she had feared; the hoof would likely not succumb to frostbite and rot away, so long as it did not undergo a second involuntary dunking. Abruptly, Evening Blaze became aware of a growl emanating from somewhere in the darkness. Glancing about, her mind began to race, only to be swiftly interrupted by a rogue thought. She glanced down at her own stomach as she heard the noise again.

Silly filly, you haven't had your supper yet! Wait, supper... Oh Goddesses! Mother, father, sister, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to leave you behind!

Fighting back tears at the sudden return of the past few hours to her conscious mind, she attempted to focus on a less painful sensation, and one of more immediate use. The smell of apples. She stood, and stepped towards the saddlebag which had briefly been her home, sticking her head inside. Sure enough, a corner was occupied by a number of shriveled apples which would surely have begun to brown if not for the extreme cold. She lifted one out, and bolted it down. It was dry, spotted with mold, and tasted faintly of canvas. It was delicious. Her thoughts drifted against her will to the last time she had see-, no, the last time she had *heard* her mother, screaming, as the griffons tore her apart.

Blaze curled up between the unconscious pony and the fire, shaking terribly, sobbing as she desperately prayed to Celestia that she was asleep, that the avalanche and the griffon attack had been a horrible nightmare, though she knew in her heart that she would not wake.

Chapter 1

Flower petals drifted on the gentle breeze as the warm light of the morning sun spread over the lush, rolling hills and fertile fields of the valley. Dew glistened in the radiance of the newly risen sun, moistening Evening Blaze's hooves as she stood before a rough granite obelisk engraved with a simple memento:

Remembrance

She stood within a wildly colorful medley of flora they had gathered, bought, and on one memorable occasion stolen, from settlements all over Equestria, to help build this garden as a sanctuary, and as a tribute for those who, though now separated by time and space, she would always carry with her.

As Bright Horizons watched Blaze from the entrance to the cottage they had shared for the past six years, he recalled their meeting on the mountain, and what she had managed to tell him of the attack on Green Meadows. It was still a painful scar on her heart, true, but it is said by old ponies that time heals all wounds. Perhaps she was distant enough now from those memories to, if not forget, then to accept what had happened. He hoped so.

She had had no home, and no relatives outside of Green Meadows, and he had been injured badly, which had only been exasperated by the trip back down the mountain. He had made it up alone in three days, with full provisions. Burdened with a filly who couldn't keep pace in the deep snow and with almost no food, barely able to support his own weight on one of his hind legs, it had taken them close to a week to make it back to the trade post at the foot of the mountain. The innkeeper there had been kind, allowing them to stay while he recovered, but true generosity is rare in Equestria, and it had cost him every bit he had hidden in the chimney of his cottage to cover the cost of their stay.

As a result, he had turned to his old standby, and had begun taking work as a guard for the merchant caravans which travelled along the route that ran parallel to the Swayback Mountains, going as far north as Manehattan,

making sure to avoid the old ruins at Canterlot, and as far south as Mareami. Evening Blaze had accompanied him on these jobs, learning from experience, and from the stories told by the grizzled old ponies that had been running these routes before many of the merchants they protected had been born. Bright had watched the young filly absorb this like one from an older, kinder time might have learned of grammar and mathematics. Or not; a pony does not need to remember their apostrophe placement or the formula to find the area of a triangle to keep a bandit from trimming their mane extra close.

He had been unsure at first how he thought of the filly; an adoptive daughter, perhaps? Yet he was too young for that to feel entirely comfortable, only eight years older than her. Still, as time had passed and she had grown from an emotionally broken filly into a young mare, a talented fighter and craftspony, the unease had passed as well, and solidified their relationship as that of close friends.

Bright's barding felt unnaturally heavy as he turned, uneager to call Blaze from her reverie, but they needed to leave soon.

"Eve, get your gear, we need to meet Greyshanks' caravan at Ponyville by midday."

"O-oh, sorry Bri, I lost track of my thoughts... Go ahead and get going, I'll catch up in a moment."

"Alright, I'll see you in a few minutes."

As Bright started down the thin, winding dirt path which lead to the Royal Road, and from there to the town of Ponyville, Blaze trotted over to the rear door of the cottage and entered. She headed directly for her bed, tucked end to end with Bri's opposite from the wood stove and table. Her barding and saddlebags sat where she had left them last night: the bags stacked at the foot of her bed, and her barding arranged neatly on a chair. Blaze began by pulling on her barding, a tunic which covered her from her neck to the stylized, twisting flame of her cutie mark, and leg guards, all of silk and steelthistle woven in a special pattern, with flat steel discs sewn in an even pattern across the surface. The weaves used in pegasus armors were tightly guarded secrets held only by the unicorn armor crafters, renowned for their durability, light weight, and strength. They were able to absorb

heavy impacts and, with a measure of luck, turn blades, while preventing the wearer from being encumbered by heavy plate armor or chainmail. It was accompanied by a pair of thin strips of the pliant material which clipped on neatly to the leading edges of her wings, and by a light half-helm of similar design.

Upon donning her armor, Blaze turned and hefted her saddlebags, lifting the lightly loaded canvas onto her back, securing them with the clasps on the straps which trailed down around her chest and stomach, so that even completely inverted flight wouldn't cause them to fall. As a final touch, she strapped a short, retracted steel blade to the front of her left foreleg and a compact repeating crossbow to her right. Spare magazines of bolts went into a satchel hanging from her right saddlebag, which itself contained a compartment filled with loose bolts. She tightened the strap on the small, sheathed mouth-dagger that lay along her left shoulder. Hovering, she bent nearly double to fix her buck spikes in place in the slots on the armor of her rear hooves. Satisfied, Blaze took her key from the table, glided out the door, and locked it.

Propelling herself with smooth strokes of her powerful wings, Blaze coasted through the cool morning air a few meters above the low hills and dips of the valley, following the rough, loosely packed dirt track that twisted and turned to follow the lay of the land, gradually straightening as it entered the plains and joined with a larger road which ran from the town of Trottingham to Ponyville. Despite its appearance as a rough, rural byway, this road was actually one of the main routes in Equestria, and had been firmly packed and strengthened by unicorn magic long before the Fall. If she flew high enough, she would be able to see the remnants of the section leading from Ponyville to the ruined capital at Canterlot, whose broken towers and collapsed domes still loomed over the land, centuries after their former inhabitants had fled in the wake of the Goddesses' disappearance.

Glancing upward, Blaze surveyed the heavens; the faint shadow of the moon still hung high in the azure sky, and scattered wisps of cloud did little to block what promised to be a bright, cheery day. Deep in her soul, some trace of magic still tugged at Blaze, telling her to perform her duty and shepherd the clouds into a proper formation, yet she knew that were she to try, she would be faced with the disappointment of unruly, disobedient weather. No, the days of true weather control had died centuries ago with

the Goddesses, but at least she could be thankful that the passive magic permitting pegasi like her to fly had not deteriorated in a similar manner.

She caught Bright near the crux of their path and the main road, doing a quick loop over his back before landing lightly on her hooves and settling into the same steady pace. Their land was only a short trot from Ponyville, and in all truth, they had not needed to leave nearly so early, but both were morning ponies and enjoyed the magnificent sight of the rising sun immensely. Searching for a topic of conversation, both ponies began to speak,

“So do we-“

“What were you thin-“

“Sorry,” they replied in unison.

“You first, Eve,” Bright quickly articulated.

“We-ell~,” Blaze began, “I was wondering if you knew who we’d be working with on this trip. It has been a while since we’ve been in a caravan heading to New Fillydelphia, and from what I’ve heard the bandit troubles have only gotten worse. I want to know now if we’re going to be dealing with ponies that’ll run screaming for the Goddesses’ salvation if we hit anything serious.”

“Hm. When we were up in Manehattan last year, I was talking to a bartender who mentioned that the last group that tried to get to Fillydelphia along the route we’re using was nearly wiped out. With any luck, that’ll weed out the cowards. Speaking of cowar-ah, caution, remind me why we’re doing this job,” Bright answered.

“Hazard pay.”

* * *

The pair reached Ponyville in a few hours, heading for the erroneously named town square, which was in fact a paved *circle* centered on the town hall. Inns, taverns, and various shops were arranged around its circumference. There were a number of wagon trains clustered in various

spots in the square; Ponyville had been the nearest town to the old capital, the former heart of the Royal Road, and had become a de facto stopover for virtually every trade route on this side of the Swayback Mountains. After the burial of the pass six years ago, the only feasible methods of movement to the other side had been cross country treks that passed through Manehattan in the north or the port of Mareami in the south, increasing the traffic through Ponyville even further. Of course, there was always the occasional crazy pegasus that tried to make the flight straight over the mountains with a chariot full of cargo, but these individuals almost without exception met their ends by losing their way in the dense cloud banks, crashing into mountainsides, or being devoured by one of the numerous griffon tribes which had slowly been settling in Equestria for the past few hundred years, taking advantage of the power vacuum in the region.

Spotting the long, silver mane of their employer, Blaze and Bright made their way towards a group of heavy wagons, threading through knots of haggling traders, bleary-eyed townsponies, and guards dressed in a medley of different styles of barding, armed with weapons ranging from daggers half the size of her own to large axes and swords, and in one case what looked suspiciously like a saddle mounted *ballista*.

“Well hello there, my little ponies!” Greyshanks exclaimed, “I’m certainly glad to have you two with me on this run! Those savages have been growing more daring in the past months, and I need every reliable hoof I can get.”

“Who’ve we got with us on this trip, old pony?” Bright responded. He still looked a bit nervous at the idea of having to deal with the ponies who lived on the outskirts of New Fillydelphia, in the ruins of the business district, and for good reason: they had been hunted and persecuted by the Fillydelphians for much longer than the past year of turmoil, and those who had survived had grown tough and wily. The fact that the residents of the restored city had begun using their jungle clearing tools as weapons of war surely hadn’t helped matters.

With a trace of hesitance in his voice, Greyshanks replied, “Well, I managed to convince that pair of fillies from the Manehattan slums to renew their contracts with me for another yea-“

“Bluebottle and Softhooves?” Bright interjected with a slightly alarmed look in his eyes.

“Hem. Yes, those two. Apart from them, I’ve got Deadline, and some crazy zebra mare. Oh, and a few newbies that I picked up while I was in this little backwater by the name of, ah... HEY COLTS! Where’re you three from, anyhow?”

Two of the three ponies Greyshanks had addressed to that last question to, both of whom appeared to be several years younger than Blaze, kicked at the paving stones beneath them in a rather sheepish manner. The third, on the other hand, returned an answer in the insufferably self-important tone that only young ponies and certain members of the nobility can manage, “We are from the grand city of Cornstalk, and I for one do not apprec-

“Like I said, three young fools from some collection of huts next to an empty stretch of road and a grand lot o’ corn fields. Not that they’re likely to be much use in a fight, but they came cheap, and they’ll draw fire. Heh, if I had paid them what that one young foal thinks they’re worth, I’d be guarding *them!*” concluded Greyshanks.

So there is Bri, me, those fillies, Deadline, and Greyshanks. Maybe the zebra. Some of the haulers are more likely to lend a hoof than make a run for it. Call it thirteen or fourteen ponies at best to defend four wagons. Goddesses... It could be worse, I suppose. We shouldn’t have trouble until we get into Fillydelphia proper, but if there is trouble then, it’ll be trickier than tasting the rainbow. Still, we’re getting that bonus, so it should be well wort-

“Not thinking about backing out on me, Eve?”

“Don’t you worry about that Bri, not after I reassured *you* not two hours ago! I was just thinking things over.”

This brief conversation ended as they both turned to watch Greyshanks chasing one of his hauler teams out of a tavern with a rather incongruous sign bearing a sofa and quill, ushering them to their wagon while they brushed stray bits of foam and salt from their muzzles. Each of the wagons had a standard haul team: six ponies, four in the traces, and two riding. This design allowed pairs to be rotated out at set intervals to preserve

strength. The resting pair was also, at least in theory, supposed to help the guards watch for possible threats.

With the haulers in their places and the cargo secured, Greyshanks took his seat on the lead wagon, his ancient, bloodstained crossbow resting alongside him on the pad. A short, sharp whistle sent the convoy on its way, paced by the contracted guards. An absentminded light brown pony with a rather strange hourglass cutie mark suddenly twitched, hopping out of the way of the wagons as they left the square on the Royal Road. As they reached the outskirts of town, the ponies passed a massive tree, nearly as tall as some of the towers still visible on the distant mountainside. A dimly lit passage was perceptible near the front, leading deep into the tree. The indistinct outline of a foal diligently sanding away the walls of the passage was visible in what little light penetrated into the entranceway. Blaze remembered that place well; it was where she had gotten a curtailed education nearly six years ago, while Bright Horizon had still been recovering. The inside of the Ponyville library was massive, a central chamber lined with shelves, an upper level with smaller rooms, and then the curving staircase carved out of the growing trunk, with little nooks leading to dozens of rooms and storage chambers all up the massive tree. It had been... nice. But to be perfectly honest, she had truly enjoyed only the lessons on flight, and on the history of Equestria, stretching nearly six hundred years back to the Fall, when the Goddesses had vanished from the land. Ah, to be able to fly through the massive, columned airways of the legendary city of Cloudsdale with hundreds of her brethren...

Departing from the bustling town, the guards spread out along the breadth of the road, spacing themselves around their charges. Blaze and Bright took up position to the right of the second wagon, him walking at a steady pace, while she hovered a meter above his head. Blaze could see the zebra's strangely arranged mane around the hauling team of the third wagon; she had a pair of spikes, one pointing forward at an angle from the top of her head, and the other pointing back and downward from the rear of her skull. The mixture of white and black in each spike created a disconcerting visual effect, and Blaze stared, bemused, for several seconds.

"Heya Blaze! How're ya doin'? Has that thickheaded pal a yours gotten any brighta since he let dem buffal-Oi Softy! is it buffalo or buffalos?"

"Um... Well... ..buffali?" Softhooves offered.

“Geez Softy, ya need ta learn ta use yer noggin like me! Anyhow, like I said, after he let dem buffalos push him inta that ravine out by Appleloosa, did ‘e ever grow any more sense?” Bluebottle enquired, returning her attention to Blaze as she flew lazy loops around the older pegasus.

Joining the conversation, Bright exclaimed, “I didn’t let them push me, you little brat, *someone* scared them into stampeding when she started throwing her poison around like it was a fresh batch of cupcakes! And since when do you have an accent?”

“Mebbe if youse hadn’t been standing in da way, ya wouldn’ta gotten hurt!”

Bright snorted. “Just admit that you screwed up, and that you ain’t about to do it again. I knew this job was a bad idea the moment I saw you, you little monster.”

“I’m notta monster, ya country hick!”

Dear Goddesses, make it stop!

Blaze stuck a hoof out, which Bluebottle promptly flew into. “Stop whining; you’re almost a grown mare, and you need to act like one!”

“I’m not whining, I’m *complaining*. I read dat in one o’ them thingamajiggers with all da words an’ pictures, somethin’ about nobility back before da Fall. Say, d’ya wanna hear da next part? *This* is *whin*-“Bluebottle cut off abruptly, interrupted by the sudden introduction of Blaze’s hoof to her mouth.

“Okay, that’s enough. Stop teasing Bri, stop making me dizzy, and stop... *complaining*. And lose the accent.”

Bluebottle pulled the hoof from her mouth, a sharp gleam appearing in her eyes, “Hey, Blaze. You might want to watch what you’re eating for a few days. Never can tell when something...nasty...might get into the food,” she uttered, in a low, steady voice completely devoid of her affected accent. “Nah, I’m just foolin’ with ya, mare, I’d neva poison someone as funny as you! At least, not with anything that’ll kill ya~,” she finished, flying back to Softhooves, near the rear of the fourth wagon, the crossed vials of her cutie mark glinting briefly in the sunlight.

That filly is CRAZY! What kind of Goddess-forsaken parent lets a foal grow up to know more about poisons and herbs at fourteen than some ponies learn about their talent in their entire lives? For that matter, when did she start talking like that?

~ ~ ~

The sun was dipping below the horizon when Greyshanks called a halt, directing the wagons off of the road, forming them into a loose circle, declaring, "I want to make the Everfree crossing in one day, my little ponies, so get plenty of rest. We're leaving at first light."

Blaze glanced over at her friend; Bright looked nearly as tired as she felt, dropping himself down in the lee of one of the wagons. A chill breeze filtered through the gaps between the wagons, and Blaze shivered slightly under her barding as she dropped her saddlebags a short distance away from him.

Necessities before sleep, Blaze.

She sighed as she scraped a few stubs of grass from a patch of bare soil while a pair of haulers unloaded a bundle of firewood, carrying it over to where she stood. Removing the tinderbox from her saddlebags, she opened it and had a small flame burning merrily after a few experienced strikes of the flint. She, and the rest of the guards, would sleep in their barding. No point in taking chances this close to the Everfree Forest, which had gradually grown wilder over the centuries, completely overtaking a section of the Royal Road in recent years. Thinking of the long trip ahead, she suppressed another sigh. Fourteen days on the Road to reach Mareami at the southernmost tip of Equestria, pinned between the farthest reaches of the Swayback mountains and the coast, then a month north along the poorly kept East Road to the ruins of Old Fillydelphia, and into the recovered section, nearly as far north to the east of the mountains as Canterlot had been in the west.

That was the state of things in Equestria: the capital an uninhabited ruin, Fillydelphia overrun by the unnatural jungle which surrounded it. Manehattan was still a great city, but much of it had become a den of crime and poverty, and if reports were correct, Mareami had fallen to some sort of

oppressive cult. The formerly idyllic towns and villages which had been scattered throughout Equestria had either faded away into their roots as scattered farms or developed into places like Ponyville, which existed more for the sake of travelers than for their inhabitants. The departure of the Goddesses had taken more than magic from the land.

Shifting a little in the short, soft grass pressing against her body, she murmured gently, "G'night, Bri."

"Night, Eve."

The gentle light of the fire flickered, a tiny, luminous point in a massive, empty land. Faint silhouettes of sleeping ponies danced around the edge of the firelight, happier and more innocent than those who cast them, trapped in the twilight between the weak flame of the remnants of pony spirit and the abyss of a world entirely devoid of it, unable to exist in either.

Chapter 2

Weak rays of sunlight filtered down through the thick canopy, casting their feeble illumination across the dark loam, and the packed earth of the road itself. A bitter stench wafted from the tree-line, carrying with it visions of deep things, forgotten amid centuries of decay. Unnatural, even more so than it would have been in the Everfree proper, for this extension of the forest had only emerged in the past few decades, bringing with it the characteristic rapid growth of the forest. The gnarled trees which grew up over the road looked as if they predated the Fall, yet they were younger than some of the ponies who walked beneath them, casting nervous glances at every flickering shadow.

Bright Horizon tightened the grip of his jaw on the half-circle handle of his crossbow as tightly as he could without depressing the firing lever, his head moving slowly across the arc of forest to his right. The caravan had only been on the stretch of the road overrun by the Everfree Forest for a few hours, but its effects were already being felt. Not the unease that would have been felt by ponies before the Fall; there was no distinction between wild and hoofmade weather in this era. No, it was the simple terror of the unknown. Not to say that he and his companions didn't know what was in those overcast depths, so much as that they didn't know which of the myriad dangers would be the one to scatter bits and pieces of them across the forest floor.

It has gotten worse. We were down this way only four years ago, but the difference! Still, can't be much more than two or three hours before we're in the open. Just press on and hope we can stay quiet enough to avoid trouble...

His friend Evening Blaze flew several meters over the second wagon, high enough to be able to see the length of the convoy without being so high as to approach the uppermost limbs which reached out over the Road. She had a grim expression on her face, rather natural, given the magnitude of the loss suffered by her and her kin. The pegasi had borne the brunt of the Fall; their cities collapsed, killing thousands. Their age-old duty, the tending of the weather, impossible to fulfill. She had never said anything to him,

but he had known other pegasi in his life, and more than one had lived in a permanent miasma of regret and depression. Though they were no longer able to control the weather, they could still *feel* the proper order of it, and to them, the Everfree was just as unnatural as it had been six hundred years ago, an unnerving reminder of all they had lost.

A short distance ahead of Bright, one of the young new hires walked alone, apparently angry at his friends. Two of the newbies were decent enough sorts, but probably not cut out for this sort of work. The third... he was insufferable, spending more time fussing over his mane than maintaining his barding, constantly complaining about his pay. Bright supposed that he had finally reached the point of saturation, and his nominal friends had begun to ignore him.

Nothing to worry about. A brat like that will get out of the business one way or another. I'd tell him to go home and be a family stallion, but it isn't like that'd do any good, for a number of reasons. I suppose tha-

Bright's train of thought was abruptly cut off by harsh roars from just beyond the edge of the road. His eyes darted over toward the noise, and he swiftly brought his crossbow to bear.

A shout rang out from Greyshtanks' direction, "Manticore! Look lively, everypony! Keep yer eyes open, and keep moving," he advised.

For a few moments, everypony continued moving forward, breaths hushed as wary heads cast about, watching for movement in the trees, stepping quietly amongst the detritus that carpeted the ground beneath their hooves. Without warning, a shadowy outline sprang into motion, leaping across the gap between the forest and the third wagon in a single movement, landing roughly on one of the lead draftponies, swiftly biting down on his neck and twisting, producing a sharp crack that rang out over the noise of the unfortunate's compatriots. From all around the convoy came the familiar twang of bowstrings, as Bright and the rest of the guards armed in similar fashion pincushioned the manticore's back, leaving small streams of blood trailing down through the dark fur on its back.

Younger manticores tend to be around the same size as a full grown lion, yet as they grow older, their coats darken, their claws lengthen, and their savagery grows, all to feed the insatiable diet of a major predator which

must compete with hundreds of others for the few prey that wander into the depths of the Everfree. This manticore was ravenous, and had not eaten for weeks. It ignored the pricks of the crossbow bolts, content for the moment to blood the corpse in its paws, biting down on the stallion's stomach and sucking a flow of warm blood into its maw. It was interrupted by a sound foreign to it, but comfortingly familiar to Bright: the clatter of the crank of Blaze's crossbow. While he, Greyshanks, one of the new colts, and two of the unharnessed haulers reloaded their bows, she let off a steady stream of bolts into the manticore's neck and upper back, emptying the entire twelve bolt magazine before he had raised his bow again.

The manticore bellowed as Bright fired, turning towards the forward half of the caravan, charging forward at him. He hastily dropped the bow, gripping the half-moon handle of his sword in his teeth, bringing it out of the sheath into a smooth slash, cutting a thin gash across the manticore's shoulder as he rolled with the draw, away from those slashing claws and under the wagon. A massive paw pushed into the gap, casting about for him, and he cut at it as best he could in that awkward angle, staining the ground beneath him with blood. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Softhooves heading towards the manticore in an odd, sliding gait. The little grey unicorn had a pair of dirks held aloft in her telekinetic field. He turned to watch her, and as he did so, she disappeared entirely.

Silly of me. Back to the business at hand, Bright, and let the filly do her job.

As he moved his attention back to a slightly more pressing matter, the filly reappeared in his peripheral vision just as she swung her dirks into the manticore's right rear leg, cutting deep and fast, neatly severing the hamstring. As the beast turned, enraged, she darted away, easily avoiding its angry swipes. With a look of unpleasant surprise on its face, it collapsed as it tried to put weight on the now useless leg, falling to the ground with a heavy crash, stirring a cloud of leaf litter into the air around it.

Four ponies and a zebra struck as one. A quartet of knives from the direction of the striped foreigner, and a small dart from where Bluebottle perched, blowpipe in hoof, reached the target first. The manticore howled in pain, scratching at the dart, leaving gashes across its chest that wept bloody tears. Bright's own sword cut into the thick shell of the tail, which leaked a steady stream of thick ichor, as Blaze swooped down to stab at the monster's stomach. Deadline, the big orange stallion, brought his

warhammer down on the manticore's skull, the armor piercing spike at the forefront pulping bone and brain, clear through to the earth beneath.

The pair of haulers riding on the third wagon pulled the mangled corpse of their former coworker from the harness, heaving what was left of him onto an empty rack on the left side. One helped the other into the damp cloth straps, before climbing back up.

Greyshanks declared, "We can bury him when we're out. There has been too much noise as it is, and every second we spend in here is another chance for one of us to suddenly lose quite a bit of weight. Get a move on, everypony!"

~ ~ ~

The caravan had been out of the forest for close to an hour when Greyshanks called a halt near a granite outcrop, helping one of the draftponies pull the battered body from where it laid dripping, setting it down on a patch of thick grass. Bright lent a hoof, helping several others move stones to form a rough cairn, completed by a bit of firewood driven into the earth as a simple marker. Pulling a canteen from his saddlebags, he took a few quick swallows before tucking it back: they were on the move again.

~ ~ ~

Twelve days after the passage through the forest, Evening Blaze was soaring up near the thick, wild cumulus clouds which were currently obscuring the sun. She longed to break through, flying high into the atmosphere, but she had a job to do. She scanned the hills around the convoy far below, watching for the telltale signs of bandit activity.

Nothing. Either every one of the lawless ponies in these parts suddenly decided to pack it up, or there is something to this cult that has sprung up in Mareami. I guess we'll find out soon enough, won't we?

Looking to the south, Blaze could see the port city, perhaps six hours ahead. Strangely, the few ships in the harbor were all tied up at the docks, even the larger cogs which by all rights should have anchored farther out. The haze over the manufacturing district was strangely clear as well,

almost as if those chimneys weren't smoking at all! Of course, the Mareami manufactories were nothing compared to what had been recovered from old Fillydelphia, but that was no reason to shut down entirely, particularly the massive kilns which turned out the city's famous earthenware by the shipload, particularly the renowned porcelain that had made the local artisans famous.

Returning to the convoy in a slow, lazy spiral, she reported to Greyshanks, "No sign of anyone or anything out there. It was a bit unnerving, to be honest."

"News like that... I'd almost rather you tell me that half a hundred bandits are hiding over the next rise; at least that would be understandable," he replied, with a look of weary resignation on his face, "Nothing we can do about it. We'll just press on to the city."

~ ~ ~

The walls of the city loomed overhead, golden banners cascaded down the cut grey blocks, displaying a stylized image of the sun. The battlements were empty, and the portcullis was lowered in the massive, arched tunnel of the gate.

"So Bri, do you know anything about this cult that is supposed to have sprung up here in the past year or two? I haven't been down here for longer than that," Blaze queried in a hushed tone.

He answered, taking a deep breath, "Not much. I've been in other parts just as much as you have, but I did speak to a pony in Manehattan who had been down this way not too long ago. I'm not sure how much of what he said was his own invention, but supposedly they're some sort of really fervent sun worshippers; refuse to acknowledge the Goddess Luna, so on and so forth. Ponies like them sprout up like weeds every few decades, some crazy, foolish sort decides that they've had a vision from the goddesses themselves, and suddenly a load of other fools decide that their madpony is some sort of prophet. They usually burn themselves out after a few years: either the place they're living gets sick of it and kicks them out, or they figure out that their glorious leader is a nutcase. So crazy, but mostly harmless."

Blaze replied, "Well, they don't sound much like my type, then. I love the goddesses, but I'm not particularly inclined to filter my worship through some lunatic who like as not thinks all mortal mares are evil because he can't keep himself in line, if you know what I mean."

They were interrupted by Greyshanks' hollering, "Hollo the gate! Could somepony in there let some weary travelers in?"

After a few moments, a reply came, "What sort of unholy folk art thou, for thee to be on yonder road on such a holy day? Wherefore shalt the gates of heaven be rent asunder for sinners and fools?"

Blaze made a sardonic aside to her friend, "Someone woke up on the wrong side of the linguistics bed this morning. Think that mare got that from a book, or just made it up herself?"

Greyshanks replied, "We are but simple traders, passing through this fine city on our journey."

A hooded head could now be seen over the edge of the fortifications, "A likely tale, foal. Get thee in, that we may examine thee."

Bright shot back at Blaze, "It wouldn't be nearly as bad if she didn't pretend that she wasn't horrible mangling every sentence."

The hooded figure retreated from their field of vision, and a few moments later the portcullis rose, accompanied by the clanking of chains and gears. Stepping warily along the cobbles of the gateway, the ponies of the caravan made their way within the walls. As the final wagon passed through, the portcullis was lowered, blocking the gate once more. A quintet of hooded figures stood in a rough semicircle, supplemented by ten ponies in the armor of the city guard, with poorly painted yellow circles on the breastplates and helmets.

Greyshanks sallied forth with a request, "I say, ponies, I was hoping we could be directed to an inn for the nigh-," before being cut off by one of the hooded ponies.

“You will follow and be judged. Pray that the Divine Solar Goddess favors you, heretic.”

Blaze whispered softly to Bright, “So, Bri... Completely harmless, or just mostly?”

~ ~ ~

They had been crowded into one of the defunct factories with several score other ponies, most of who appeared to be locals. The wagons had been confiscated, or as their guards had put it, ‘redistributed to serve the needs of the Divine Solar Goddess’. Greyshanks had begun to offer a protest, but had quickly silenced himself. Their weapons had been taken and stored in the rough stone guardhouse that had been newly erected outside the entrance. Blaze had considered fighting, but by the time they had reached the factory, they were in the company of close to fifty of the cloaked and hooded ponies, as well as a number of armored guards. She likely could have fled; there didn’t appear to be any pegasi amongst the cultists, yet that would have meant abandoning Bri.

Blaze had noticed that Bluebottle had been acting strangely since they had entered the city; her eyes had become burning coals, and she had been putting off a passive aura of hatred towards the cultists, despite the fact that, as fairly young fillies, she and Softhooves were treated remarkably well. Disregarding her anger, the religious fanatics had been remarkably foolish in dealing with the fillies: Bluebottle’s vest had gone entirely undisturbed beneath her cloak, leaving her with her entire selection of prepared poisons and tonics, as well as a long, curved dagger and her blowpipe. Softhooves had avoided losing her weapons in a similar fashion, tucking her dirks inside her light armor.

Bizarrely, one of the hooded ponies had marked Blaze, Bluebottle, and one of the three colts with some sort of paint that left a golden stain on her forehead. Once inside, she noticed that the few other pegasi in the building were similarly stained. Striding over to Bluebottle, she questioned her, “Do you know what these ponies have been doing here? I’ve been watching you since we entered the city, and you’ve been really jumpy.”

“Hah. I guess ya dunno about what dem poni- sorry, about what these *bastards* are doing, do you? I know, believe me, I do. I... I used to live

here. I left home with Softhooves nearly five years ago, before this cult got started. About a year ago, I got a letter from my parents, warning me, begging me not to come back.”

“What? That’s horrible!”

“No, they were showing kindness to me. Kindness I didn’t deserve, not after leaving them. Goddesses, I don’t even know how they found where to send it to, but they did, bless them. They warned me about what these barbarians were doing, about what they were doing to *us*!”

“...Us? As in, your family?”

“No, all of us. Pegasi. They see us as physical representation of sin, think that we fly too near to the ‘Divine Solar Goddess’, that we are impure and seek to touch Celestia with our own hooves. The sort of stupid thing that these religious fanatics usually go for, except they *mean* it. So they don’t even bother putting us through those mock trials for heresy like they do with everypony else, they just...”

Tears had begun to streak her face, leaving dark trails in her coat, as she spoke through sobs that wracked her body, “They s-saw off our wings, and then they execute us. Supposedly it ‘purifies’ us so that when we’re murdered we are redeemed,” she spoke, delivering the last in a soft monotone.

Blaze stepped forward hesitantly, enveloping the little green filly in her wings and hooves, hugging her tightly, whispering into her ear, “Oh, goddesses... I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

Blaze and Bluebottle held each other tightly, the former trying to avoid her newfound fears while comforting the sobbing filly, murmuring soft reassurances to her as she began to formulate a plan of escape. Escape and revenge. The ponies that held this city under their hooves would not be allowed to go quietly into the night. She would send them screaming to their heaven, promising that she would give them a true taste of the sun before they died.

Chapter III

Softhooves glanced over her shoulder at the dim shadow perched on the edge of the empty window high above the streets, raising a hoof. Blaze responded in kind from her lofty perch, pushing off and gliding silently over the roof of the adjacent factory, quickly vanishing from sight. With a small intake of breath, Softhooves turned back to her own errand. She stood in the empty space between the abandoned building and current prison that the two ponies had just escaped and another, nearly identical structure. Like most of the back alleys of the city, this cut through had never been cobbled, and her hooves sank into a thick layer of grime and mud. Softhooves glanced in both directions before concentrating on her magic, and a small glimmer of light briefly illuminated a small area of the alley. Her illusion in place, she set off on the direction leading to the entrance of the factory, treading lightly as she approached the open space beyond.

Softhooves stole a look around the corner of the building, face pressed close to the crumbling brick. Casting her glance about, she did a quick tally in her head.

Three in the yard. Light and noise in the guardhouse. Probably more patrolling. Deal with the ones inside first.

She sidled across the open yard in a smooth, flowing pace, setting each hoof down lightly yet quickly. Her talent actually had little to do with her special trick, but they complimented each other nicely. The illusion she used almost habitually was a unique spell she had developed, superior to a standard invisibility spell in that rather than physically altering the world to hide herself, she merely made the minds of those who witnessed her glaze over, as if she were out of focus, to such an extent that she may as well not exist. Even those like her friends back in the factory who were well aware of it could not observe her directly. Of course, even that weakness could be overcome, but Softhooves disliked using the full power of the spell. She would not wish that sort of invasion on any decent pony.

Softhooves stepped through the threshold of the guard house, instinctively registering the type, quality, and condition of the wooden floor.

Pine. Mediocre. Poorly maintained. The craftsponies likely didn't need anyone to watch over them, so the building has decayed. Step carefully.

Wait. Fourth plank, spot to the right of the chair. Nice and easy, step on over. Four ponies, no armor. One asleep, two dicing. Hah, looks like they're playing 'Princesses' Fortune'. Bright would laugh at that. Or turn melancholy again. One drinking. Cheap wine, bottle half empty. Surprised these religious types aren't opposed to that. Please the masses, cupcakes and parties, that old saw. Easy. Light telekinetic field on the old dirks, slid them out gently. Mold a bit of the illusion around them. The gamblers first.

The two blacked steel blades, hidden under the same spell, slid with sudden jerks into the heads of the two most alert ponies, piercing through their lower jaws, tongues, the roofs of their mouths, and finally into their brains. Two abrupt movements and two corpses toppled from the soft pads they lay on. Softhooves wrapped the bodies in telekinetic fields, lowering them gently to the ground, even as she yanked both blades from them, sending them darting across the room to take the drunken guard through the eyes. He slid sideways, falling onto the sleeping pony. A drop of blood ran down the length of one of the dirks, moved onto one of the crossbars of the guard, and dripped into the ear of the sleeper. The stallion had not truly woken when the blow fell, his eyes beginning to open as the small dagger buried itself to the hilt in his throat. As he gasped silently, drowning in his own blood he could almost see a faint apparition: a light grey unicorn filly with a darker grey mane, staring back at him with pity in her eyes as she telekinetically wiped her blades clean on the vest of his sergeant.

Softhooves sighed gently, in an almost musical tone which carried deep hints of regret.

You know better than that. Never look them in the eye. Never think of them as ponies. He would have killed you if he had been able to. Never forget that.

Softhooves guided the small dagger into the sheath hidden under her own vest, and then slotted the dirks into their own sheaths on her back. They were proper unicorn weapons, made by a weaponsmith who had owed her and Bluebottle a few serious favors involving debt collectors and an angry noble. Excellent pieces, they had been crafted to order. Simple lines, no

pretension. At Bluebottle's advice she had rubbed the blades with orange juice; to her surprise it had darkened them rather well. Something to do with acids, if she remembered the subsequent lecture properly. They had no grip or pommel, consisting of the blade, guard, and a heavy steel spike where the grip would normally have begun, which acted both as a counterweight and a reasonably effective weapon against heavy barding. The spikes were triangular pyramids, designed to leave wounds that would not close normally. The thought of them repulsed her, yet she accepted that they were necessary, even if she had never used them to kill.

Softhooves moved quickly back to the doorway, slipping silently into the night, already planning the rest of her movements, when she came to an abrupt halt. A large group of ponies with torches stood in the yard, waiting as a pair of guards removed the bar from the large doors, pulling them outward. The flickering torches cast occasional shadows across the open dirt as they illuminated the figure at the center of the procession, a pony dressed in a deep brown robe, speckled with patches of ivory and crimson.

Softhooves crept closer to the group of hooded and armored ponies, situating herself against the outside wall, just around the corner. A shrill voice broke through the constant stream of whispers emanating from further within the building, "A-an Inquisitor, here? To what end? I am innocent, I swear it! I ne-never expected that one of your kind would be necessary to determine that I walk in the light of Celestia."

"No heretic expects the Inquisition, fool! Everypony here is guilty of aiding in the escape of a heretic, and are thus heretics themselves. Executions will begin immediately, ceremonies to be performed at a later date. The rot of evil is deep in this city, but by Her light we will cleanse it!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Softhooves noticed that the sky over the heart of the city had brightened considerably since she first landed in the alley. Dawn was still hours away.

Blaze has outdone herself. And it appears that these fools believe she was the only pony to escape. I had best finish my task quickly, before Bluebottle does something unwise. Goddesses know that she deserves revenge, but that would be the worst possible thing for her.

Softhooves, Blaze, and Bright had talked Bluebottle out of taking an active role, but when faced with a pony that could very well have been the one responsible for her loss, there was little hope of her restraining herself. This is where she came in. Softhooves loosened the drawstring of a small pouch attached to the cloth of her vest, taking a firm telekinetic grip on the contents. With a sudden surge of energy, she blasted them into the crowd of cultists, weaving the small, razor-sharp discs around armor and bone, cutting deep into flesh and organs. There were thirty-two of the little things, and she used them like the artist of death she was, carving paths of destruction as the blades passed through cloth and body at close to the speed of sound. This was no haphazard attack; each of the discs flowed along an elegant path, leaving traces of blood in the air as they darted into their targets again and again, skillfully avoiding harder obstacles as they plied their deadly trade. Her cutie mark shone in the light of the spreading fires, a sphere balanced on the tip of a spike, three more in tight orbits around it. This was her calling in life: precise control, over her body, and over her magic.

Seven hooded and four armored ponies already lay dying, spilling their life out onto the ground from hundreds of tiny channels cut through their bodies, hearts continuing to pump blood into shredded organs and severed arteries. The remaining five hooded ponies were in a panic, some running for the exit, others cowering beneath the bodies of their fellows. The three remaining guards and the Inquisitor herself were an entirely different matter, as the two earth ponies drew crossbows from their backs, while the unicorns readied their blades in telekinetic grips, advancing on the ponies trapped within the defunct factory. The Inquisitor had no weapons beyond her iron shod hooves, yet she pushed to the forefront of the small knot of the fanatics, a grim expression on her face.

A glass flask fell from the shadows in the eaves of the building, shattering against the Inquisitor's back. Her expression turned from anger to horror in moments, as the powerful acid ate through her bloodstained robes and into her back, exposing her spine for a few moments before it dissolved and she collapsed, unable to support her own weight on unresponsive legs. In the few seconds that had passed, Softhooves had killed the two fleeing cultists and slunk into the building, drawing her dirks again, cutting limbs and necks through the joints of the plate barding the guards wore, while mincing the three robed ponies still lying beneath corpses, breathing shallowly in hopes of escaping unharmed. The last cultist still alive fired her

crossbow wildly into the dimly lit yard. Her right eye disintegrated in the passage of one of the steel discs into her skull, where it ricocheted for a few seconds before exiting through the same path.

The air shimmered slightly as Softhooves dropped her illusion. Most of the imprisoned ponies were huddled against the far wall. Bright Horizon walked slowly around the circle of corpses and viscera which lay in an expanding puddle of blood as Bluebottle hovered over to where Softhooves stood with a morose expression on her face. Bluebottle put a comforting hoof around her small shoulders.

Never show mercy. Display no weakness. Protect your friends by killing your foes. At least show enough kindness to kill them quickly. It's over, and we need to move. More could arrive soon. Need to get to the east gate. Oh Goddesses, don't think about it.

Softhooves turned abruptly, walking towards the gate at the front of the yard, as Greyshanks herded his haulers out of the building and to their places at the wagons, which had simply been pushed to the side, near the small shack for the cultist guards. The caravan guards climbed up onto their charges while the haulers worked to fasten the extensions onto the harnesses, which would allow the full team of six to pull simultaneously. The big stallion, Deadline, volunteered to take the place of the pony that had been killed in the Everfree Forest, and the others quickly gathered their barding and weapons from where they had been carelessly tossed, tightening straps and buckles as the wagons pulled out of the yard and set a path for the east gate at a fast trot. A familiar blue pegasus swooped down out of the sky, illuminated by the inferno raging on the other side of the city.

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Twenty-eight days had passed since their escape from Mareami, and the caravan was nearing its destination. Little of consequence had occurred in that time, as the long road running parallel to the eastern slopes of the Swayback Mountains had nothing of import along its length. A few farming villages dotted the length of it, none large enough to be marked on a map. Six days ago, the group had entered the jungle. It was an unnatural place; it never grew to expand beyond the bounds it had reached several centuries ago, yet within that area, it was incredibly resilient. A tree that, by

all appearances was several centuries old could be felled, yet another would grow to replace it in a matter of days. Smaller ferns and vines regrew in hours. Worse, much of the fauna was actively hostile to food crops, growing in illogical patterns simply to reach an apple tree, or a wheat field.

They had stopped in the outskirts of Old Fillydelphia, setting up camp within the ruined walls of an apartment block which had long since collapsed, leaving two floors with a gaping hole where the roof and northeastern corner once were. This was what had truly killed Fillydelphia; the Fall had left the cities themselves intact, but here, the steady encroachment of the jungle had been an unstoppable fate. Only within the most recent decades had the descendants of former residents begun to truly push back, retaking a substantial portion of the manufacturing district, as well as a few residential blocks. This recovered city, New Fillydelphia, was situated a little less than a day's travel to the north.

The ponies settled into their temporary shelter, hacking down the various plants which filled the lobby of the ruin. Taking shovels, they scraped away a thick layer of moss, dark earth, and decaying leaves, revealing a dingy patch of tile upon which Blaze set to work building a fire. The ponies of the guard decided amongst themselves the order of the watches, both for predators and thieves at the entrance, and the plantwatch, an essential task in the jungle, who would patrol the sleeping area with shovel and machete, killing back new plants as they grew in the night.

Softhooves lay next to her friend, both divested of barding and arms, on the soft moss which carpeted the earth. She probed, in a quiet voice, "Blue, are you happy?"

"What do you mean, Softy?"

"I'm... worried. About you. You haven't said anything about what happened in Mareami."

"I do not believe that I have any reason to. I am almost a mare grown, and I can handle my emotions gracefully. Thank you, though, Softy."

"You mean to tell me that everything that has happened since you got that letter hasn't affected you?"

"It has. But I will deal with this in my own way, in my own time. To a certain extent, I have."

"You mean killing that Inquisitor. No, that has done nothing for your pain, however much you may pretend. Taking life leads to nothing but more pain. I should know."

"It felt right, though, Softy. Not like I was attaining some sort of revenge, but as if I were completing a cycle. Things are proper now, if only in my mind."

"Dream of better things, Blue."

"The same, Softy."

The fillies, grey and purple, huddled close together, each warming the other as they dreamt in the cold night.

On the other side of the room, Blaze and Bright spoke softly, occasionally glancing over at the sleeping fillies.

"Bri, I've been telling you, those two are digging themselves deeper every day."

"You know I agree with you, Eve, but I don't see what we can do about it."

"They need family, ponies that they can lean on. They need a chance to forget. Goddesses, you remember how bad I was when I was a bit younger than them, and I had you to support me. They've been living together longer than we've known them, and it just isn't right asking fillies like that to suffer through what they have at all, much less with nopony but each other to rely on!"

"Eve, are you suggesting what I think you are?"

"What else could we do? What else *should* we do, for Goddesses' sake! They need, if not family, friends. Somepony they can trust. We may not be able to give them a home, or lives where they don't have to work, fight, and kill to survive, but we can at least help them cope with it, lend them a shoulder to cry on!"

“I’ll try. That’s all I can promise, Eve.”

“Good enough for now, Bri.”

~ ~ ~

If somepony were at the very edge of the atmosphere looking down that night, they might have seen a strange thing: six points of light glimmering for a few moments, before dimming. Centuries of small events had shaped the world to what it was, setting an irreversible course for the conclusion of events which had begun six hundred years ago. If that hypothetical pony had turned their gaze to the stars above, staring up at the endless black abyss, they might have caught a hint of a smile, mirrored on two faces, waiting for the end, waiting for the beginning.

On the surface far below, life continued, in many ways. Lights shone, pinpoints of brightness in towns and cities, in cottages and camps. Ponies still trod their lands, so different, and yet so familiar. The Manehattan oligarchs and the starving poor, the cultists and citizens in Mareami, struggling to rebuild after the devastating fires. Ponies leading simple lives in tiny farms and houses across the open plains. The fires of industry in the heart of New Fillydelphia. Friends, sleeping warmly in the ruins of old apartments. The flame of an ancient life, vast and weary, resting in a ruined palace. Six figures frozen in a moment of failure, surprise written across their features, living, yet not, untouched by the ravages of time. They waited, though they did not know it, for the hope of the silent promise made by those who had departed so long ago. In the darkness of their minds, they waited.

Chapter 4

A few hours after daybreak, the weary ponies trod along a mossy valley, overgrown with ferns and vines, between the looming walls of ruined buildings, where patches of grey stone were occasionally visible. The flesh of the new world covered the bones of the old. Yet there were those who worked to drive the jungle out, to restore the grandeur of Fillydelphia. A column of thick black smoke rose from a point along the avenue the caravan was travelling, no more than ten or twelve minutes away. A shift in the breezes that whispered through the verdant canyons brought the harsh, ashy haze blowing through their path, filling the air with a nauseating odor.

Bright Horizon wrinkled his nose, frowning at the stench. It seemed familiar, yet not. He knew the smell of burning vegetation; anypony who had travelled to New Fillydelphia did, and there was more in that fire than trees and moss.

Blaze drifted over from her position farther up her column, asking the same question that was coursing through his own mind, "Bri, d'you smell something that doesn't quite fit?"

"Exactly what I was going to ask you, Eve. Something is wrong, best keep our eyes sharp, and noses not."

This smoke reeks of something, but for the life of me... I could swear that it almost smells sweet!

By this time, the wagons had gained enough ground for the source of the fire to be visible. A squad of New Fillydelphians wearing jungle-clearing flamethrowers was in the process of torching a moderately intact apartment block, and were already well into the task of burning out the abnormal plant life. This was the only reliable way to push back against the jungle: burn it out, and keep burning it long enough for unicorns to put suppression fields in place to prevent it from growing back. It was a slow process: the spells could cover no more than a city block, and could take weeks for a team of unicorns to cast, even for smaller areas. Smaller areas of coverage were necessary, as well, as the spells occasionally collapsed, allowing months or

years of blocked potential growth to burst forth in seconds, destroying everything in the area formerly covered by the spell. Even with weekly inspections and reinforcement of failing spells, accidents still happen, and this protocol minimized the damage of collapses.

What that didn't explain was why these ponies were out here in the wilds, clearing a building far from the recovered district, with nary a unicorn technician in sight. They had guards, of course, a dozen ponies armed and armored from the great foundries and smithies of the industrial district.

The world has a way of making such things emphatically clear, often as disturbingly as possible. For Bright, the moment of clarity in this situation came when the burning filly jumped, screaming, from a fourth story window. She landed on the mossy pavement with an audible crack, and her shrieks of agony redoubled as she lay burning, unable to stand. One of the guards casually strode over to the foal, and took her head off with a clean swipe of her sword.

As Bright reeled in horror, he could hear Greyshanks talking to one of the guards, who had approached their caravan, "I can't say I like the sight, but one cargo lost to thieving savages is too many. Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"G-Goddesses preserve them..."

Bright glanced up at Blaze, who was staring at the scene with disgust written across her face. She glanced at him, he returned her gaze. They nodded. Out of the corner of his eye, Bright saw Softhooves and Bluebottle sharing the same sort of wordless agreement. Out of the other, he saw that one of their companions had already acted. The zebra, whose name he still did not know, was standing over the bodies of the guard and their former employer, their heads resting at abnormal angles. She charged at one of the ponies carrying a flamethrower, who turned in surprise as her hoof caught him in the throat, crushing his windpipe. She turned to another, preparing another strike. Too slowly. A jet of liquid fire washed over the striped foreigner, coating her in a wreath of flames. As she burned, she rushed forward, drawing a curved dagger from her vest, slashing a deep wound into the Fillydelphian's throat even as she collapsed under the immense pain and heat.

In those few moments, Blaze had taken to the air, and rained a hail of bolts onto a trio of guards who sheltered behind a collapsed tree, chipping pieces of soft, waterlogged wood away from the upper face of the trunk. She was interrupted by one of the Fillydelphians' two pegasi, who swooped down, sword clashing against barding, as Blaze loaded a new clip of bolts into her crossbow's integrated magazine. As the other pegasus circled around, Blaze flipped the locks on her own blade, extending it and securing it in place. She accelerated upward, the wind of her passage sweeping her mane out behind her. The two pegasi met above the rooftops, striking at each other as they passed. The Fillydelphian's sword struck against the metal discs of Blaze's barding, while her own found flesh at the join of the other pegasus' foreleg.

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Bright saw little of this, as he was rather busy hiding around a corner while one of the Fillydelphians fanned the tongue of her flamethrower across the opposite side of it, and along the street, as she slowly moved around toward an angle from which she could see him. Gripping his crossbow tightly, he popped around the corner, squeezed his jaws, and ducked back. The heavy bolt pierced the tank on the mare's back, striking sparks. The refined fuel within caught, detonating with a low, muffled report. Bright slung his crossbow, drawing his sword as he galloped past the smoldering remains toward an armored guard standing over the corpse of one of the colts who had joined up in Ponyville.

~ ~ ~

Softhooves had cast her illusion the moment the zebra had begun to move, and was now creeping towards one of the surviving flamethrower carriers, who was sweeping the wand back and forth, letting off bursts of flame nearly at random. The stallion knew she was here, but had no idea where. Unfortunately for him.

I would be sorry about this, but you deserve worse.

One of her dirks stabbed upward, piercing through his jaw, the roof of his mouth, and into his brain. She withdrew it, shaking her telekinetic field a bit to fling off the streaks of blood. She quickly cut the straps holding the tank to the stallion's body, lifting it and the wand ahead of her as she

approached a fallen tree, behind which three guards were hiding, taking potshots at the dueling pegasi. A smaller glow enveloped the lever on the handle of the wand, cloaking the armored ponies in a fog of liquid fire. Sharp crackles started up; fat burning in the intense heat. Soft hooves cut her telekinetic grip on the flamethrower, dropping it in revulsion.

Killing is wrong, but some things are just evil. Th-this is horrible. They don't deserve justice for this. They deserve death. Killing somepony who is evil is almost like doing something good, right?

Right?

~ ~ ~

Bluebottle hovered over the last remaining flamethrower-wielding Fillydelphian, watching as the mare jumped, trying to give enough of a boost to the jet of flame to reach the little pegasus. Lingered anger clawed at the edges of her mind, mixing with fresh rage as she glanced back at the burning building, thinking of the dead and dying who were still within. She drew a small vial from her vest, aimed carefully, and dropped it. The glass shattered against the round metal of the fuel tank, the acid eating through the steel as though it were flesh, releasing the pressurized liquid in a spray that arced up, coming into contact with the jet of flame. The fire raced down along the new path, igniting the tank. After the drop in pressure, there was no explosion. Rather, the burning fuel continued to leak out onto the mare, setting her coat alight as she scrambled to remove the harness. The mare felt a sudden prick in her foreleg, which disappeared under the wave of numbness that swept through her body. She collapsed to the ground, unable to support her weight with unresponsive limbs as the fire continued to spread. Bluebottle tucked the blowpipe back into its pocket as she watched the Fillydelphian burn.

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Blaze watched the pegasus fall, limp from blood loss, the body crashing down onto the mossy pavement with a sickening crunch. Turning away, she noticed a small shape rapidly accelerating away: the other Fillydelphian pegasus. Gliding down to the others, who had gathered between the wagons and the burning building, she shouted, "We need to move, everypony, and fast! One of them got away!"

Bluebottle responded, "We should head west, try to lose ourselves in the jungle."

Bright noted something, and interjected, "It may be too late to run. Look to the north, everypony."

Each of the four stared at the bizarre sight skimming over the rooftops; a wooden construction, held aloft by canvas sails and propelled by rotating wooden blades. It resembled some of the smaller sailing ships that were common along the coasts, save that its sails were horizontal rather than vertical, and spread along three pairs of wings which sprouted from the vessel's sides. At the moment, the whole ship was enveloped by a blue glow, akin to that of a unicorn's telekinetic field, but on a much larger scale, moving it forward at high speeds. In the distance, a quartet of pegasi was visible, following it. As it neared, the ponies on the ground backed toward each other, readying weapons.

A head poked over the side, hollering down at them, "You ponies wouldn't happen to be looking for work, would you? We're willing to offer you a very nice contract, with bonus, and transport out of here. Interested?"

The four shared a dubious look, and Blaze began, "I don't like the looks of this, but we don't have a whole lot of choice. Those pegasi are wearing Fillydelphian colors. They might just be here coincidentally, but even so, that one that got away will have them sending out patrols inside the hour."

Bluebottle added, "I concur, and if by chance conditions should degrade, we can always, ah, "jump ship", though I am not entirely certain if that phrase would be appropriate here," suiting actions to words as she hooked her forelegs around Softhooves', lifting her toward the hovering airship.

Blaze quickly lifted Bright, hoping that her wings would be able to support the both of them for the short vertical flight. As she landed on the smooth deck, she glanced up, looking over the stallion that had called to them. He was a unicorn, with an amber coat and white mane, rather sloppily groomed. On his flank was a crystalline cog, flanked by a hammer and wrench. She met his orange eyes as he launched into a rapid delivery of conditions.

“We’re prepared to offer, ah, 150 bits per week for the duration of employment, which is to say, oh, until we find what we’re looking for. Additional bonus of, hmm, ten percent of any and all treasures, lost artifacts, historical documents and, oh, ancient ruins discovered in the course of employment. Duties are quite, ah, simple: you four will be assisting us in exploration, fending off hostile ponies and, ah, wildlife, and—say, do you gamble,” he inquired, turning to Bright as he noticed his cutie mark.

“Ha, no. I learned that at a very young age, thankfully.”

“Oh, that *is* unfortunate, so to speak. I was prepared to offer a 50 bit bonus per week to anypony who would dice with me. What a shame.”

“Oh, I’m not opposed to it, so long as there are no wagers involved... I’m sorry; we haven’t been introduced, have we?”

“Ah, of course, how rude of me. I am, ah, Rusty Bolt, the best mechanic in, ah, all of Equestria. And, ah, the owner, so to speak, of this flying barn. Not to criticize my own work, but I didn’t, ah, have much time to add any charm to the thing. It works though, I was right about that. And those, ah, talentless hacks decided that we should only get half of the commission. So we raided their treasury and stole this beauty of mine back from them, with the unfortunate, yet entirely, ah, predictable effect of attracting the attention of the city watch. This is, ah, where you come in. I am, ah, not exactly what one would call a pony of violence, and Safflower is far too busy in her capacity as captain and crew to fight them off. So what do you say?”

Bluebottle quickly responded with a simple statement, “250 bits.”

“Excuse me, filly, but, ah, that seems a bit much. 175.”

“You just emptied the treasury of what sounds very much like a branch of the Manehattan Central Bank, therefore you have bits to spare. 240.”

“You’re going to be protecting us, not saving the world from some unspeakable evil. 190.”

“It looks like your friends are getting closer, and something tells me that they’ll be much more interested in you. 225.”

“We have much swifter wings than you. I think they would be more likely to pursue prey they are capable of catching. 210.”

“Deal.”

The two nodded in agreement with hints of mutual respect. While Bright and Softhooves watched the proceedings with amused expressions, Blaze turned her attention to the pegasus mare on the raised deck aft of where they stood, who was busily working levers and wheels within a small, windowed room. As she moved, the wings shifted, tilting to follow the invisible currents in the air, while the propellers continued to spin at incredible speed. The telekinetic glow, however, had begun to fluctuate, and the mare tapped impatiently on the frame of her control room, startling their new employer, who suddenly turned, shouting a hasty apology as he headed below the deck.

Blaze hurried up the steps to the raised deck, watching from the doorway as the bright red mare continued to work the controls, her short mane following her swift movements almost like a contrail.

“Mhdda nmt,” she asked, through a mouthful of wood and rubber, as she cranked a small wheel through a quarter turn.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“I said, what do ye want? If that scatterbrain hired ye, then get bows and warn off those fools that’re following us.”

“Wher-“

“Aft cabin, just below us. Check the cabinet to the left o’ the door.”

“Thank y-“

“Get going, then, I don’t have time for ye right now.”

As Blaze hovered down to the main deck, she beckoned to the others, opening the small door into the cabin, turning to the cabinet. It was already ajar, and she could see a number of crossbows of different sizes, one of

which had a sort of clamp attached to the underside of the main shaft. For herself, she removed a medium-sized single shot bow to compliment her own. As she trotted out of the room, she noticed Bright remove the heavy bow, hoisting it over his shoulder to help support the weight. She flew to the edge of the aft deck and put her forehoof into the brace bolted to the front of the bow as she worked the crank with her mouth, drawing the string. She opened the satchel which had been looped around the stock of the bow, slotted a bolt into place, and braced herself against the railing. A heavy thud shook the railing as Bright dropped his own selection into place, steadying it with his forehooves as Softhooves focused on the clamp, loosening it to allow the arms to drop around the sides of the railing, and then quickly tightening them to secure it in place. Bright removed a clip of bolts from a similar satchel, and slotted it into the heavy bow's integrated magazine. In some ways, it was similar to Blaze's own, albeit much larger.

Softhooves stood next to Bright, concentrating her magic on the crank, while he shifted his aim with both hooves. Bluebottle was further to the left, busily dipping the tips of her bolts into a beaker filled with some sort of thick, brown ooze. The four pegasi continued to approach, perhaps three minutes away at their current pace. Another, larger group was visible on the horizon, moving much more rapidly.

Blaze noted, "Looks like the new arrivals stripped their armor to catch up. They might reach us before we can get rid of these four. Look, I know I don't like killing other ponies much. By the Goddesses, I don't think *any* of us do. But this is us or them, and we all saw what they were capable of back on the ground. I'm not judging, per se, but I'd rather we don't find out if they've all become that bad."

Bluebottle snorted derisively, "Blaze, you may still have charitable feelings for murderers, but I don't intend to let these monsters anywhere Sof- uh, us."

Bright concurred, "I agree. Normally I'd agree with you, Blaze, but at this point we have absolutely no reason to go easy on these ponies. Let's just disable them as quickly as possible. If they die, I'm not going to feel particularly bad, if the soldiers of New Fillydelphia have reduced themselves to burning ponies alive."