



Mystic Acoustics

A story by Vylet Pony & Sylver Stripe

I. Regarding Princess Celestia, and How Equestria Came to Be

Hullo. I am called Yorick Thana, and I am just a girl who tends the library. Though I hail from the Locus, my identity and visage should bear no importance to you, for I am only the librarian. A storyteller. Well, we both understand that your mortal curiosity constitutes I—or some such other poet, perhaps musical, perhaps lecturing—regale of stories, both fantastical and ordinary. But I suspect... Is it possible you have heard this story once before? Dear reader, should this tale knell familiar, may my account of its events prevail over any previous, erroneous chronicle. Aria bid that I impart to thee, then, a chapter from Featherdance's world.



“Have ye no courage, Ponies? We lead our children unto the Age of the Stars, which beckons thee to a destined revival of Equestrian tradition. We, Alicorns, Unicorns, Pegasi, and Earth Ponies—the brave many—stand as pillars of the lands we preside over. For no civilization endures virtuously as ours. Wise heralds of magic and science, place your faith in your Princesses and your pride in our bastions, for we shelter thee from a

degenerate world, one which knows no might in Friendship or amity. Smile, Friendless few, for the way we trot shall grant you a purpose. O' pathfinders, look to your skies. Thy brilliant day and beautiful night are promised eternal, as sure as the cornerstones we have built together. Lay down your differences. Reach out and cradle the heritage that you are fated to have."

So crescendoed a vain requiem, a pale blanket gloom which concealed the broad valleys and hidden creeks, baptizing the land in curses unseen. Threaded into seams of an earth which bled vile secrets and strange promises, wefts of her legacy—indeed, the legacy of the Princess of Light; of Daybreak; of the Sun: Princess Celestia—were dying underground. Had the world opened its wounds to mere glimpses of her seedling distortions, it would have laboured anguished, surrogate to a sapphire famine. In antiquity, ages of Creation and Chaos begot an epoch of Ponykind, harboured by her, that fair Alicorn. Then, after thousands and thousands of years, the dynasty she had conceived eroded into her Age of the Stars.

It is through Celestia that Ponies came to conduct the world around them by heralding “the Magic of Friendship,” a doctrine that Equestrians believed to be a grace intrinsic to their kind. This has always been Celestia’s way, and for generations, this ideology has penetrated even the farthest reaches of the realm. One may conjecture, as many have, that this commonplace trait—which has seemingly always belonged to all of the gods’ creatures, as it were—could in no way be the masterwork of an only species. Indeed, not as intuition—rather a sort of commodity—“Friendship” has been replicated, packaged, and divulged by the docile, common Equestrian for ages. If the Princess so much as sneezed, many would take care in observing how she covered her mouth; or how she didn't. And all would bow deeply as she, and at once borrow her stride, and then make prose in her stead. It was so that they smiled just as widely when they professed of Friendship, seeking indefatigably, as the fair Alicorn, to new Friends they had hoped to assimilate to their flock, their herd.

It would seem, though, such sentimentality would ultimately, and much later, sway naught but a dwindling congregation of starry-eyed Ponyfolk. Ponies. Well, there are Alicorns, Unicorns, Pegasi, and Earth Ponies, to be precise. All breathing, thinking, hoping, plotting, and scrounging. Earth Ponies are as you are likely already familiar with; while described by Celestia as being magical in their own way, they are but mere mortals. She has spoken, too, this way about Pegasi, and while they are not truly magical either, they have sprouted wings to fly with and oft toil in the skies, where the Earth Ponies may not. Unicorns, though, are adorned with horns ‘pon their heads; and these creatures, comparatively, harness the magicks of the ley lines, which thread spacetime in all

directions, levitating, transforming, transmuting, transcending all manner of things and peoples.

But Alicorns are all of these things, and far more vigorously. Indeed, they are not merely both winged and horned, but persist for eons at a time, wielding magicks far mightier than that of an ordinary Unicorn. Yet inexplicably, fewer Alicorns would emerge with every passing millennium; tapestries of their family trees fractured at their unraveling seams, ink sputtering into faint inconclusions. It has been surmised by scholars that, perhaps, the species is overloaded socially, economically, and evolutionarily. While there is no consensus, nonetheless, the Equestrian matriarchy has always made itself the house of Alicorns (which Celestia, indeed, is).

To describe all such equines as merely “Ponies” or “Ponyfolk” is the proper, wonted Equestrian lexicon; this is unless one wishes to specify one of the “races” for any particular reason.

Well, what follows is a consensus of Equestrian historians in Canterlot regarding Celestia’s assumption of power (or “The Equestrian Genesis”):

“Ten thousand years ago, Celestia was born to a noble family during the period of Discord. The almighty scion of chaos, who had unsewn evermore the order of all things, expunged and purged reality into a stew of perturbed motion. None but acolytes of his archaic monarchy could flourish in a world such as this. It was thus that the young Celestia’s covenant was forged, a solitary oath to usurp Discord.

She grew a century older chasing phantasms of seizing the profane draconequus’ power, till the seasons bestowed her a younger sister, Luna. It was then that their noble parents’ moribund rite, a hope contrived through fifty thousand years of Alicorn reign, proclaimed they rise to the occasion as princesses of the future Kingdom of Equestria. The imminent cessation of the old ascendancy heralded anew Celestia’s ambition, which became later entwined with the adolescent Luna.”

At last, the two eminent Princesses. Yet, fore the dawn of Equestria, when Discord reigned, the lands wrought fogs and mists that churned upon the frayed twines of barley and wheat, casting perverse spindles o’er the pale sods which stretched seemingly forever in all directions. Each tree spat sick oozes of strange sap, adhering as gauze to the spouts in their trunks, which stood not upright, but jagged and warped, evoking incongruent geometries like obstructed curves of a neglected cello. And the air smelled of both sugar and ash. What grazed these lurid meadows were beasts strange equally as they were indescribable; the tufts and twills of matted hairs and the slurries and slouches of

amorphous goos—wide, unblinking eyes attached without sense or depth to each and every animal—nibbling at bodies (acting like some manner of vulture). They were undeniably different. Checkered patterns of pink, black, and gold rested merely as patchwork arras upon flat surfaces, and sickly pale yellows had incandescenced, at all times of day and night, in, around, through, above, and below every crevice and mountain.

The excerpt continues:

Together, the Sisters prevailed in the Divergence of Chaos, banishing Discord to his prison of stone. Then, they ruled as equals, nourishing their sovereign nation of Equestria. The legends wove of Celestia's dominion over the Sun and Luna's command over the Moon. Yet, as the Kingdom prospered greatly, horrible beasts, foreign beasts—monsters, demons, apparitions—descended from the vast empyrean, envious of Equestria's abundance. And still, the Princesses prevailed, expelling the darkness whenever it came."

And so they say the Age of Ponykind flourished, though a remarkable superstition persisted in the minds of the cosmos-fearing Equestrians. Not a mere fear, but a total rejection of interfering with the world that lay beyond the skies gripped every generation. After all, even in times not yet observed, surely those beasts would continue to prey upon the common folk.

At the age of eight thousand, Celestia harbingered the arrival of an unprecedented paradigm. She professed to have foreseen an even brighter dawn awaiting the Kingdom of Equestria and declared that time itself would begin again. Thus, the Sun rose once more, but upon the first year of the modern paradigm: "January 1, 0 e.c.a." (or Equestrian Contemporary Aeon).

Such grand intuition is folly in times of great wickedness. And wicked indeed were the times rhapsodized by this royal procession. At the turn of the first millennium, Celestia fell suddenly to a malady no one could explain. As her magic began to diminish into that of a Unicorn's, she stepped further and further away from the public eye; though, it could be that she had already been sick, perhaps for thousands of years already. Longer and longer she spent condemning herself to her chambers in between addresses to the Kingdom, appearing more fragile and vulnerable with each sermon. Then, on some eve of the year 1010 e.c.a., it was revealed that Princess Luna had been banished to the Moon. Celestia sought to justify her decision by denouncing her sister for conspiring as the dreaded "Nightmare Moon" in order to seize the monarchy for herself. Luna was to remain there for a millennium until the seal that imprisoned her there inevitably wore away. It is notable that Celestia was rarely ever seen using magic again, beyond this

incident, and whatever spells she did perform were themselves pedestrian, and oft behind closed doors.

A thousand winters had swiftly passed by the time Celestia found herself a loyal apprentice. The Unicorn Twilight Sparkle—who excelled profoundly in her highly advanced, applied magic practices—proved herself through her studies to be of exceptional value to the Princess. On the thousandth year of the Summer Sun Celebration, Nightmare Moon returned. Twilight, joined by her new friends Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, and Rarity, prevailed over the Princess of the Night by exercising the power of Friendship against her, turning her back into Princess Luna.

With the Princesses reunited, Twilight’s studies resumed. She was evaluated through trials of Friendship, which served to substantiate her loyalty to Celestia. Time and time again, the frail Princess of Light called upon Twilight and her friends—a group many knew as “The Elements of Harmony,” to face the cosmic threats that plagued her Kingdom. And time and time again, The Elements of Harmony prevailed in the Princess’ stead. So and so, such and such.

Eventually, Twilight was grafted wings, gifted a crown, and promised the Princess of Light’s own Kingdom of Equestria. Alas, an unnatural Alicorn, betrothed now by the ordinary and the studied, she ambled a newborn fawn into an inheritance of seedling distortions. Indeed, Twilight had been disciplined from childhood to grow inevitably into the Sun’s heir, cursed to an unkind destiny of kings and judgements.

Twilight’s baptism as a fledgling Princess was proclaimed abundantly by the Kingdom; after all, she had earned first her reputation budding as a folk hero, a far cry from the Sisters’ otherwise shrouded lineage. But not only was her earthly comfort itself trumpeted as a blessing, so knelled also a dusk o’er the legacy the former Princesses were leaving. In the years that preceded their apparent and sudden retirement, they had grown disfavoured in their unpopular campaign to look toward the stars. ‘Twas but heresy, blaspheming the cradle sanctuary that Equestrians had so long contended for. And while at first the Sisters had insisted on their proposals, professing ardently in favour of scientific advancement and the so-called pursuit of truth, the verbal pushback in the capital of Canterlot turned to protests, then to riots. Such an exhibition had not before been witnessed in all the land. It was so that when Twilight Sparkle was set to succeed them, the Kingdom’s sudden anxieties were wished away, for she spoke not of prodding the cosmos, but of uniting the world and its many civilizations together in Friendship, as was the creed of Equestria in its nascency.

II. Forewarning

We understand, then, Equestria—through first the cutting leadership of Celestia and Luna, then, after they had retired, the brief and perceptibly more benevolent guidance of Twilight—had metamorphosed over ten thousand years into the trivial visage of a fairytale land you may know now, regarded, perhaps by the callow pups spurned by the Fall of Innocence, as a civilized, crown jewel of the world.

Broad, verdant dunes, salted with blanched, pine grasses, marigold straws, and sapphire thistles, undulated roundly this way and that, bowing there yonder to the Celestial Seas of the east, and skewing—as a juvenile moss creeping ‘pon stony facades—up to the western crags, perturbing the otherwise occasional vegetation at its base. Those mighty mountains stood as mauve sentinels over pastoral expanses and meadows, probing with their slate spires up into the empyrean that was, as you know, so feared by the common folk. At the earthly edge of that empyrean, which was oft concealed in the thick of clouds spun into cotton powders by the skilled Pegasi of Cloudsdale, nursed its seabirds, which would plunge down through the heavens’ fabric veils, lacerating vapor fibers as they dove bravely into the sea. That sea, which lapped dutifully at the Kingdom’s edges, billowed calmly and expectantly; no violent crest nor vile crash disturbed the land, nipping only at the breast of mineral and ore. Those waters constituted a defensive moat which encompassed the Kingdom, safeguarding it from far-off, different lands, known only to the Princesses and their scholars.

‘Twixt these hills, mountains, plains, meadows, and fields lay the vast metropolitan settlements of the Equestrian folk. Railroads sprawled, now scarcely used, subordinate beside the industrial traffics and modern vessels made possible by the engineering of circuits and magicks. They adjoined hither budding villages and thither enormous cityscape domains protruding from the arboreal canopies, clumped rigidly and endeavouring upright as the southern mesa ranges.

Massive cities such as Manehattan and Las Pegasus (though always paling to the capital, Canterlot) boasted skyscraping castles and towers, augmented with screens and neon bulbs that affronted daylight, apostates of Equestria’s arcadian pasts. Outstretched roadways formed sacred geometries, intricately connecting high rises which stood in command over the skies and the earth. Mostly Unicorns and Pegasi would step eagerly into crowded marble halls, ascend spiraling quartz staircases, and be entertained by moving pictures and arcane holograms long into the night.

Conversely in the villages (like those of Ponyville or Appleoosa), humble stone and brick dwellings—stacked and cobbled together, entwined steel siphons and incremented by phosphorescent crystalline apparatuses—warmed under the day’s

radiance and glow of the arcane. One would fear their thatched, golden hay roofs would be lost to a mere gust, but no; for Ponies have always prospered in their ingenuity.

Within these meeker places, the gentle masonry bubbled 'round corners, revealing unassuming furnitures and tapestries. A working Earth Pony, perhaps a mason, or a painter, or a baker, would totter open a cedar gate (whose wood croaked of three generations before, rusting clasps clattering harmoniously). Her hooves thudded as hollow percussion, the boards arching and bowing, but not splitting, under her. She propped herself up against the doorframe as she entered the kitchen, tossing her leathery rucksack onto a candlelit table, clinks and clamours of various tools, buckles, and bottles shuffling about when the bag landed. On her own, she is of no concern to you. Yet, as if wholly unaware of the rare sight of a full rainbow cascading through the raised, hobnail windows across from her, she beheld instead a peculiar machine which she had plucked from her twitching ear. Resting in her hoof was something that seemed plainly antithetical to the folk things that surrounded her. 'Twas a trifling little thing, in fact, consisting of acute angles and precision insets which glowed eerily.

This thing was what Equestrians called an "Adaptive Magic Channeling Device," or an AMCD. And unlike the sorcery-powered machines that decorated the grander provinces of the Kingdom, these devices came to be relied upon by every one of every ilk at the start of the 2030s. At some point in Twilight's fledgling administration, a corporation known as PegaSystems emerged as the sole proprietor of magic technologies. It introduced the first and only AMCDs to the market, allowing non-unicorns to use magic spells. These advancements were, at first, bulky, unwieldy, and often fit only for industrial use and implementation in public facilities and scientific instruments. So at first they innovated on such things as minimizing the use of fossil fuels, powering homes even in the most remote lands, and paving the way for highly efficient agriculture. Alas, not only were these advancements hindered (and on occasion altogether squandered) by red tape and tall tales, but despairing premonitions of uprisings—grimly hastened by the awesome, lawless power that AMCDs could supply the commoners—also rattled the aristocracy, the magic barons, and those genuflectors in Canterlot.

And indeed, as the jade arcane was unceremoniously imprisoned and herded into every home in the Kingdom, everyone—the fisherman, the whore, and even the painter—lay as seedbeds to a yet unknowable strife; had the monarchy itself rejected these things, as many of Twilight's allies and peers did, perhaps these queer magicks would have abated for a time. Again, and alas, the Ponyfolk had seen that Twilight welcomed these machines. And as perplexing as it was, few Earth Ponies or Pegasi who were offered these powers rejected them utterly.

Now, whenever nightfall came, no settlement touched by moonlight would ever know deep slumber as in antiquity; for even the quaint hamlets and backwater coves cast shadows upon themselves by the fluorescence of the AMCD machines and arcane augmentations. And then came the pursuit of resources, the overpopulation crisis, and whispers. Those whispers, first, were utterances of the Equestrian monarchy's ineptitude in solving the evident crises. While magic technologies promised to enlighten their cultivating ways, PegaSystems' miserly control over the industrial machines, which were all contracted and lent out to farms, labs, and many such other facilities, severely limited their clients, plunging many of them into harrowing debts. Whispers that, all the while, the Equestrian population had been exploding since the earlier tech revolution of the previous mid-century; this compounded even more, as countless new families had hoped to enjoy the novel conveniences which AMCDs had audaciously assured. Whispers here... Whispers there... and there.

These crises were only exacerbated by what many considered to be Twilight's timid approach to her own authority. Indeed, she did not possess the decisive ruthlessness that her predecessors had; rather, she ruled quietly, fairly, and thoughtfully. And whispers... those whispers among Ponyfolk examined her competence, questioned her authority, and hypothesized a world where the old Princesses had returned. They wondered aloud in churches, in taverns, in their skyscrapers and their castles, that if these profane engines were to remain, would then they gloam sinister 'pon a vessel to the damn heavens? But then those whispers transposed to rumours, rumours which began to conjecture at the cornerstones of what Equestria was becoming. Steadily, everyone—Unicorns, Pegasi, and Earth Ponies all, then yonder in the other lands, even the Yaks, even the Hippogriffs, even the Dragons, even the Griffons—speculated as to what the Sisters had been doing with their retirement. Two matriarchs, once so cherished, their likenesses committed as etchings to every Equestrian's heart for a myriad of generations, had made of themselves commoners, emerging only occasionally—from wherever—to be spotted in Twilight under the dim veil of moonlight. Ten thousand years of their prosperous reign had faded like a constellation's gleam becoming obscured by an infant nebula; their parting words harbingered a radio silence of more than twenty years which, overnight and all at once, constituted rumours, and rumours still.

Then, through some contingency—none could determine whether fantastical or inconceivable—the Sisters returned.

Well, I confess that I have never understood such superstitions, dear reader. For the Equestrians, perhaps their terror was wholly misguided. After all, if it is one's inclination to fear the unknown, why then ship off merrily, from harbours at practically every shore, vessels which teeter to and fro as a pendulum rod in different, perilous seas? Then, those ships, manufactured and laboured upon only by common Ponyfolk, alone ferry cosmopolitans who deliberate among each other the extent to which the seadogs are owed the very same fortunes that they had, as customers, merely discovered. And then, in reaching their destination, a place no qualm of the mind could argue, they would impress it more degenerately than the great homeland. Yet, so long as it served their delegation, passing as but a tool or touch of pleasure, it would be of the course to make merry on the beaches, and in the weathers, the natures, services, and peoples, because it pleases. Moreover, far-away places prescribe journeys, and recall those perilous seas, the ones already traversed. There below, many too many leagues of dark shroud seethe, then simmer, at its lowest points, lurked by and for different specters, a world rarely known to the realms. This place, where water crushes and vaporizes, foiling the layman's perspective of the physical senses, is yet a flounder to what stirs below. Molten crusts are pulverized and liquefied, slurring through crevices, syruping onto impenetrable slates which shield the planet's core.

Lest I get too carried away, is this not also a strange and different world in its own right, one which rests—at all times—just beneath their hooves, one which affords all manner of earthquakes, eruptions, sinkholes, hurricanes, and tsunamis? It is often that the aristocrat would brave the weather if they could find a way to sell it, or charge admission to witness it, especially if they could convince the commoner to carry out the menial undertakings in their stead. It is as I say, then, that many like the Equestrians are drawn to what they consider exotic, gawking like hippos at their plunder; however, if it cannot be sold, if it terrifies them too greatly, if—gods forbid, they may plea—it is *ugly*, then it may as well be useless to them. But what is useless and confusing to the moderate capitalist would inevitably offer a challenge to the most cutthroat among them to do the impossible: bottle the stars as fireflies to a wire.

III. The Girl With the Blue-Tipped Wings

November 30, 2034

“House, age, unit,” the guard barked, his commanding voice echoing out through the evening air. He was clutching his rifle tightly, and though he was holding his head up, chin angled out towards the opposite side of the sandy residential avenue, he was straining his eyes downward at a little pegasus in front of him.

“Ha, Ha, Haa!” The pegasus forced, even with as spry and lilted a voice as hers, a brusque chuckle—probably imitating how she’d heard the large, armoured stallion sound in jest—before swiping at the ground with her right wing, sending powdery sediment clouds fizzling upward, prodding for a sneeze from the guard in front of her.

“And pray tell,” she taunted, her inflection now like a vampire’s, “what you intend to do about it, my good liege.”

“You—” the guard started, but lost his composure as he became ailed by a brief coughing fit. He turned so that his rifle would be obscured to the girl, his armour clamouring sharply, chains clinking granularly against the broad steel plates, and leather straps flapping about the cloth accents of the man’s uniform. He turned back to her, and readjusted himself. Without turning his head away from the pegasus, his eyes darted from one side of the road to the other. Then he bent down clandestinely.

“C’mon girl, I wanna make sure you eat tonight,” he said with a hush.

The girl leaned and tilted her head, attempting nonchalantly to peek behind the stallion through the window of the residence entrance, which was fitted with a sleek, anodized door and decorated with what she knew to be the symbol of the king. The guard mimed her movements, blocking her view.

“Hey,” the girl snorted outward, as if to blow the man back, “this isn’t even—”

“It’s gettin’ late.” The guard’s eyes drifted to a mural which covered a watchtower bulwark on the adjacent road. He scrunched his snout in its direction.

Without turning her head, the girl followed the man’s gaze to look at it, too. The painting featured an imposing-looking unicorn whose posture was arched and broad. His stoic countenance would have been the most profound aspect of the illustration were it not for his scarred, featureless eyes, which gashed across his face like narrow pores of marble set deep within his equine skull; and his altogether strange and seemingly barbed horn protruded grotesquely from that skull. Furthermore, the mural itself was, even at this late hour, lit by incandescent spotlights situated just below. It was illuminated more brightly and deliberately than anything else at the interchange.

“Psh,” the girl snorted again, “you think he’s going to come for me personally?”

Now standing upright, the guard tapped his rifle stock against the iron steps that separated him and the pegasus. “Girl—”

The little pegasus giggled. “House, age, unit. Respond.”

She pointed at the guard, her poise and tone carrying a wholly manufactured bombast.. However, the ironclad stallion somehow appeared shaken, tightening his grip on the rifle.

Again she taunted. “House, age, u—”

Before the girl’s considerably less commanding parody of the guard’s orders had scarcely left her lips—*fssh-crack!*—the guard’s rifle stock swiftly struck her shoulder. At the far end of the gun, the girl tumbled backward, orbits of sediment and dust catching the ends of her snowy equine coat. On the barrel end, the guard stood with his front legs outstretched (and I shall remind you that most Ponies stand on all four legs, in the event that you are tempted to call their front legs “arms,”) gripping the weapon; but now his head had swiveled around to look over his right shoulder, scanning the road just behind the residence. Voices could faintly be heard over the subtle clip-clops of hooves—which themselves also resulted in clouds of dust that produced even fainter *fizzes*, *crackles*, and *sizzles*—and rattling of armour that accentuated each step. The stallion’s ears were perked, twitching and transposing between different angles, likely attempting to discern the voices.

“Zee,” the girl called quietly out to the guard, and now soberly, “my mistake, I’ll just—”

“You’ll not address me as so,” the guard’s muted command was subtly urgent as he continued to survey the road.

“202.”

“Yes.”

“I get it, sorry.” The little pegasus was back up on her hooves. Then her ears, too, perked, listening out for the same voices that 202 had concerned himself with. She raised her eyebrows and smirked. “Man,” she rubbed her shoulder, “could’ve just, like, told me.”

“Don’t always work on you, girl.” he muttered, turning back to her exigently.

“House, zero-three. Unit—” the pegasus started.

“Wrong order,” the guard said.

“Dude.”

“House, *age*, unit.”

“You ever thought about how that order doesn’t make sense?”

“Yep.”

The girl sighed. “House, zero-three. Age, one-zero. Unit, two-seven.”

“Alright, *in now*, quickly.”

202 started for the horizontal brass bolt, gripping its knob and sliding it out of the bracket. Then, he placed his right hoof on the door, just below the window, and his horn began to incandesce a pale green (which the King’s symbol began to emanate similarly). *Click, click, chk, chk*. All manner of magical gears and shackles became undone, then all at once silencing with a single, resonant *pang!* He reached hurriedly for the door handle and made way for the little pegasus.

“Like, how do I put this?” The girl jogged up the stubby, iron steps and—for a brief moment—peeked cautiously around the entrance, toward where the voices were coming from. “My house and unit numbers don’t change, but my age does. Why not make age the last—”

“Later, 327.” 202 hastily scooted the girl through the entrance. “And, don’t close the drapes ‘till ten-thirty.”

“But—” 327 protested.

“Be good.”

“You mean ‘be equal,’” 327 muttered.

202 lowered his brow down at the girl, and shut the door.



Inside, and straight ahead from the front door, there was a kitchen immediately to the left of an uncannily long hallway which led to the rest of the flat. The kitchen itself was humble and ordinary; there were a few fully stocked cabinets, a gas stove with a single, bubbling pot which appeared to contain an abundance of thin, stringy noodles and lentils submerged in a milky stock. To the left of the gas stove sat two whole potatoes resting on a cutting board, and to the right was a refrigerator. At the center of the room was a rather unremarkable wooden table; one would assume it would be where the tenants ate, and this was so, but there were no chairs in the room, as such accoutrements would leave no more room for anyone to walk around. Every surface was completely spotless and coated in a plain, cream white, save for the stovetop’s stone-hued burners—which coiled defiantly against the otherwise homogeneous-looking gadgets. A dainty, stained-glass lamp hung by a single linked chain from the ceiling, whose fabrile shade spun freely and independently of the light fixture; gentle breezes from the window would nudge it gently into a slow, ambling orbit, emanating gentle light beams in all directions, which crawled dutifully across the various sterile kitchen surfaces.

At last, leaving the kitchen and continuing down the hallway, a rickety sideboard sat against the left wall, precisely at the halfway point between both ends of the dimly lit

passage. Upon it sat an only plant—a succulent called “Amira’s Flower,” which featured cactus-like tendrils that poured over a ceramic bowl (there was no flower)—and, just below, a single, wooden drawer, whose thin handle quivered wildly, dinking against its intricately embossed backplate at even the faintest brush against the thing. Hanging above the table was an elegantly framed, gouache portrait that featured the same eerie unicorn from the mural outside. A small, ochre nameplate beside the painting read “Satellite, the King of Statera,” in bold, ornate letters, followed by a smaller, italicized quote: “Upon the fulcrum from which we judge, we know all men of all creeds to be not one greater than another, but archetypes evolved of all the same ambitions. In the truest unity, all would stand Equal. This is what we strive for. May the stars guide our settlement of Statera to this felicity.” On the opposite wall stood a plain, wooden door, which was fitted at its top with a latch bolt. Though difficult to discern, as most surfaces and furniture in the home appeared unblemished, this entryway seemed particularly trivial, as if it were seldom interfaced. Still, one could press their ear up against the grains and gather indistinct conversations through it. Then around, and up, and up, and up still. Whispers, wails, domestic amblings, and a tea kettle’s whining to drown them out altogether... Perhaps it connected all the particular units within the housing block into a common area of some variety. Alas, it never opened.

Now, at the far end of the corridor was a room. To suggest it was a “living” room would be an undue benevolence, as its barren setting lent itself poorly to even the most imaginative description of living. Viewing it from beside the mysterious door, the carpet continued (let us say, “north”) into the “living” room, covering every inch of the floor, then jutting sharply to the east into another hallway. Then, stepping in to occupy the entryway, the “living” room extended just over two meters west, then arced clockwise, forming a quarter-circle until it reached the northern wall to form a turret. A window was sandwiched into the middle third of the wall—separated into discrete, bowing panes—and spanned the same arc. It exposed an orderly array of housing blocks that lined a dusty, central avenue where patrolling guards regularly peered into the residences. Beneath the window, a console table also stretched across the same quarter-circle arc. On its north surface sat a television set and clock radio, which were overseen from the southwest pocket of the room by an ashy leather loveseat. Between the couch and the television was a small wooden coffee table, upon which nothing sat. In fact, the shelves of the console table, too, were empty. There were no books in the house.

Turning east, one would observe the previously mentioned east hallway. Contrary to the previous one, this passage was short and contained four sets of doors, two on each opposite-facing wall. First on the left was a door which led to the master

bedroom—doubtlessly tidy and well-kept like all the other rooms; then going clockwise, merely a closet, which contained nothing of particular interest.

At the far end of the hallway a colour photograph hung on an otherwise unfurnished wall. It portrayed the little pegasus, 327, positioned between two other adult ponies—one a unicorn, the other an earth pony. This brood was one of many in a greater assembly of others, all appearing in accumulations of 3–5 ponies at a time. There were twenty-seven faces in the photo; among them all, 327 appeared to be the smallest.

Then, to the right, one door led to 327's room. And finally next to it, the door to the washroom.

The bathroom door shut behind 327, who used her wing to keep herself upright against the wall as she hobbled over to the sink. Warm vapors and steam diffused softly from the running faucet, ascending as specters up to the ceiling, drifting aimlessly, then condensing onto the steel vents. The girl closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, allowing the fumes to thaw her coat; she could feel the warm dews manifesting onto her face. Holding a small, pale-green washcloth, she placed her hoof under the faucet and let the water trickle onto the rag. Once it was well and doused, she placed it on her right shoulder, which was reddened and rosy from her fall. She stifled a wince under her closed eyelids, grinned softly behind her gritted teeth, then finally exhaled shakily.

“Zee, bastard,” she snorted.

327 wiped away the fog from the mirror. Staring back at her was a girl, ten years only. She was of average height for her age; a little too thin, a bit too bruised as well. Her snout was faintly shallower and her jaw somewhat more contoured when compared to those of other girls her age. Her mane—like a brush that had emerged from a sea of congealed acrylics—was saturated in cobalt, draping as thick waterfalls ‘pon her shoulders (and often concealing part of her face); under the right light, subtle sheens of bluish spearmints streaked like thin fibers in her hair. Only the tips of her wings shared these pigments, as the rest of her body's coat was an alabaster white, which was an unusual, recessive colour for a pony to be born with. Indeed, even her blue-tipped wings were too rare a sight among ponies. Truly, she could be mistaken for a kind of magpie; indeed, one could not at least once avoid the thought of this (and her coat was rather feathery in texture, anyhow). Her tail fell long and straight; no waves or curls, merely unperturbed, arching naturally as a willow. And on her flank, there was no cutie mark (an emblem which, in this world, would appear to reflect a pony's developed skills).

Once she had shut the faucet, the sound of its steady stream ceased; one may have not noticed it running at first, but now the resulting silence was profound, only ever being broken by rare, indiscriminate droplets from the spout (or the vent above). It was as if it had always been running ‘till now. 327 wrung the thin cloth out over the sink and dried

her shoulder. She peered closer into the mirror. Her eyes were a pale, icy blue, ashen and stormy. The girl lifted her hair away from her face to reveal the number branded into her forehead, “327.” She raised her (rather bushy) eyebrows and began to rub half-heartedly using the mostly wrung-out cloth, raising her eyebrows. It was with a quick snort that the girl resigned from prodding the imprint and finished up in the washroom.

She stood out in the “living” room, not fully aware that she had begun staring at a wall, lost in thought.

“Supper is nearly ready.” a gruff voice cracked from the kitchen. “When your mother gets home and she sees that shoulder, you tell her you got no marks today.”

“Yes, sir,” 327’s voice monotone reply echoed down the corridor. “It was just a fall on the w—”

“Hush down,” the stallion barked.

“Well,” the girl said under her breath, “you’re the one trying to, like...” She couldn’t find the right words in her brooding.

Suddenly, a single, loud *pop* rang out from the central avenue, followed by the sound of something abruptly hitting the kitchen floor. The little pegasus’ ears remained unflinching.

“Shit,” said the father’s hoarse (well,) voice croaked.

“Warning shot,” the girl said, still staring off.

“Eh?”

“I said—”

“Just come here and tell me.”

She started down the hallway, her eyes still glazed over in thought, staring at nothing. Neighbourhood dogs had begun barking in a frenzy, warranting chastising hubbubs from the nearby residents, though it was all rather muffled from within the flat. The frothing bubble of boiling water and clattering of ceramic plates and wooden wooden spoons grew louder as she approached.

“Said it was a warning shot, sir,” the girl spoke apathetically as she peered into the kitchen. A small, diced potato was resting on the pale, grey vinyl floor.

“‘Izzat so?” grumbled the stallion. He was a tangerine, pale-orange earth pony. His subtly marigold mane was thick, puffy, and resembled matted wool, and his stubby tail flickered about, buzzing and twitching curiously. “Man” his tone softened, “Uh, girl. I—hell.”

327 grimaced slightly. “9:23pm on a Thursday. It’s those Poker Boys, I’d never bet on either of them hitting their target in one shot.” Her voice trailed off slightly as she raised her eyebrows at the jettisoned potato. “Sir,” she added rather lethargically, without breaking her gaze from the floor.

The stallion hastily set down a half-prepared bowl of noodles onto the kitchen table and trotted down to the “living” room, idly followed by 327.

“Oh those guys,” the man’s surly tone had a touch of whimsy in it, pitching upwards with intrigue. “Yeah I think they’re chewing someone out. ‘Know why?’”

“Let me guess...” The girl’s eyes had unglazed. She was staring at the back of the man’s head, anticipating him turning around.

“N-no, I was asking sincerely.” He didn’t turn around.

“Uh-huh.”

The stallion leaned over the console and reached for the curtains.

“Sir, don’t,” 327 snorted, startling him.

“Wha-huh?,” he spun his head around at her and froze up, his mane jiggling briefly before settling.

“Like, I have to...” she raised her eyebrows slowly. “...it would be best if the patrols could see that I’m home.”

“Ah,” he patted the drapes—like they were some sort of pet—before he began dragging himself back down the hallway to the kitchen again. From the “living” room, 327 watched him amble along until he stopped at the King’s portrait.

He turned back to the girl. “Some fall.”

The girl shot him quite the eyebrow raise, an unmistakable one which has almost certainly indicted her to a great many lashes wherever she’s been. Nevertheless, she approached the window.

IV. Statera

December 1, 2034, the next day // Statera, through the eyes of 327

Bwee-bwee-bwee! Some sort of exhaust pipe signaled the end of the school day. Just as this happened, 327 covertly tore a page out of her crocheting textbook, using the underside of her desk as cover.

A pale, overcast daylight peered into the classroom, which itself was rather nondescript, save for the piles of yarn and fabrics resting in piles just below a banner of the king. The students' desks sat bolted to the floor, evoking imagery of pulpits or pews; perhaps these were for sermonizing to their devotees on the spiritual value of embroidering emblems into pouches.

In any case, the students began their exodus from the room, revealing unto the professor the many curios they had fashioned of yarns and strings. One had crafted an airplane; its wheels seemed somehow completely functional. Another went by with a tank; its turret and artillery could move independently of each other (it would not be out of the question that it could, as well, make use of a proprietary soft and threaded ammunition). There went one with a model of their own likeness, they had even gotten the snout all right.

But that girl, 327, last in line, made no effort to showcase her work to the teacher and was subsequently stopped moments after she had slipped the textbook page into her saddlebag.

"Good grief, girl, what have you got there?" The teacher's voice was thin and strained. She was old, a unicorn, and she too was fashioned up and down with armour, less so than the patrols, but not insignificantly; there was even a pistol holstered at her hip.

In the little pegasus' hooves was merely an orb, an orange one, along which was donned sewing pins to maintain a flat, threaded disc on its outer edges.

"I would've imagined someone of your discipline knew what a planet was," 327's mouth became a flat line as she tightened her jaw. She snorted, "guess not even Bio would take you, huh?"

As the teacher raised her snout at the comment, her hair bun wobbled around unsteadily. "Must we do this every week? I have always made it clear that art is one of the founding principles of St—"

"Right, but does this..." the little pegasus gestured widely at the room, "constitute *real* art?"

"Why—" the old lady glared acutely at the girl, her mouth was wholly agape.

327 held up her creation to the professor. “It’s Satyrn. First exoplanet known to us. Did you know we project its ring to collapse into a new moon in a few million years?”

The teacher adjusted her glasses. “Fifteen-to-twenty million years.”

“Heyyy, look at you,” the girl’s eyes narrowed as she scrunched her snout up at the teacher.

“Look at me, indeed,” the old lady cleared her throat and drew a large pair of scissors from her desk. *Snip-snip*. The crochet model of Satyrn swiftly lost its plump, rigid shape, falling supplely as frail grasses into the girl’s hooves. “You will go home and thread these strands into something more relevant to our values.”

“Hmm,” 327 smirked down at her spaghetti of crochet strings. “Yeah I’ll think about it.”

“You will do it. Else you can take it up with the director.”

“Uhuh,” the girl started making her way out of the classroom.

“Be equal,” the teacher’s words bounced off the back of 327’s head, “and may Statera prosper.”

Statera.

To pull back for a moment and describe this place, a consensus from Equestrian historians pertaining to the account “Starlight and Paradigms: What Became of Our Town” is offered. This consensus was developed and published, in Standard Ponish, on June the 7th, 2051:

“‘Statera’ was discovered to be an autonomous city-state situated precisely where our royal consort Starlight Glimmer’s ‘Our Town’ village of equality used to stand.”

This would be just west of Manehattan at the base of the Crystal Mountains.

“Indeed, this is the very same ‘Our Town’ where Equestrian residents, under strict surveillance, were forced to concede their cutie marks—alongside the powers that were presumed to come with them—and pledge themselves to a life of ‘Equality’. After Starlight Glimmer was confronted and the villagers’ cutie marks were restored, the village endeavoured to cultivate itself as a trade hub, primarily enjoyed by craftsponies, culinary artists, and agriculturalists. Yet, this prosperity seemed to be only temporary without Starlight’s leadership, and most of its former residents began moving away by the late 2010s.

While most resources’ and outlets’ claims are still being deliberated, it is widely believed that Statera’s founding was conceived through logical, or illogical, extremes that

pertained to the original ideals of the old city-state. It was subject to a full investigation from the Canterlot News Network and the REMD, which revealed Statera to undeniably be an oppressive surveillance state. CNN still maintains its reports that the spire—”

The rest is irrelevant.

Right now, on this day of December the 1st, in the year 2034 e.c.a; Statera lay nestled ‘tween the plains and valleys, already a formidable city-state, beneath the Crystal Mountains, which preside rather distantly to the north, disappearing into the horizon mostly.

Encircling, and all the more entombing, the settlement rose an impenetrable walled fortification, looming some 75 metres tall, upon which specks of men scuttled and idled watch o’er the gorges, and in toward the city itself; those men, ironclad dogs such, who had nothing better to do than—as schoolchildren may—expel lead at pigeons in the stead of trespassers, and, equally so, defectors that they awaited. The wall slunk inward, sloping broadly as an archer’s bow, and anchored far down into the sand and rock. It was 20 metres thick, perhaps more, composed of steel alloys that were tempered and bolted into equally segmented sheets spanning the circumference of the entire city. On the outer side lay a mostly broad and dusty glen. Vegetation from the surrounding hills crept hesitantly towards Statera’s walls. Indeed, those broad hills—which Equestria is famed for, discerned even to the Yaks, the Griffons, and so on—parted as ocean currents, yielding in a manner of agrestal reproach to the unhallowed contraption which lay billowing of coal and cinder, and the flora which had been driven at one point or another seemed to prod cautiously down into the valley.

At Statera’s south wall was situated a grand egress, overseen by two spying belfries; though the gate rarely received any foreigners from the rest of Equestria proper, the infrequent wandering vagabond, or salespony, or railway supervisor in need of fuel would stop at least to marvel at the fortress. Then, if not to otherwise depart on their own terms, most travelers would be dutifully sent on their way. Only two manner of visitors would remain: those who made their covert dealings with the city-state (sanctioned by some decree and invitation from the King himself) or stragglers whose curiosities would nominate them a perennial lodging in a ditch somewhere under the city.

Wide blocks of alternating residential and industrial buildings were partitioned into equal sectors, rising both high and low, interconnected by skybridges and pedestrian overpasses that frequently attached to common areas of the apartment complexes and lobbies of the workshops. Almost every structure was externally composed of layered sheet metal, bolted in jagged, obtuse fashions, and then accented by protruding

corrugated canopies and overhangs, from which rainwater would often be funneled and drip onto the roads. Many of the apartment flats rose off the ground on stilt scaffolds and poles, revealing featureless dirt pits which collected the rainwater into a city-wide pipe system which led to who knows where. Of course, there were no individual homes, rather only suburban containers which compacted “family houses” into cramped boxes, confining groups of Stateran denizens like dubious tinned meat pastes. And these were further outwardly labeled with nameplates above entryways denoting which “family house” had been assigned to that structure and that box.

Factories quivered and swelled with tides of profane fumes right up beside the residences, obscuring alleyways and gutters first in shadows which sooted mineral alloys and floating embers, then all such other places in pallid ghosts of exhaust. Peons, by only streaks of blood ‘pon their hardened coats and damp washrags hung over their shoulders—and, occasionally even past curfew, in warehouse floors lit only by flame and cigarette—brought down their sledges onto soft metals which at first buckled and then were malleated into distinct shapes on their cast-iron slabs. Sparks would zip erratically as singed gnats onto nearby crucibles, becoming swallowed in tar scums of molten ooze aglow.

Refineries, smithing forges, butcheries, granaries, and produce warehouses were all organized and dispersed equally among the sectors. All varieties of these facilities and the suburbs they accompanied were erected beside dusty, unpaved roads connecting and intersecting at junctions—which were all uniformly spaced, and with gaslamps fitted at every equal length and corner—forming distinct cross patterns within the city expanse. Interim marketplaces, corrugated shacks, and booths for the night watchmen lay dotting the base of the greater, more enduring facilities. Of course, not all, but many things were marked with the symbol of the king, Satellite; effigies and shrines that dedicated themselves to him could be found twice or thrice on every block.

Well, along the city roads trotted (no doubt kicking up dust) Stateran commoners, whose modest garments of starchy, pilld cotton fabrics, draping always like stiff cardstock, were sewn over years in alternating and auxiliary wefts—patches which dictated where the blotches and tangles of new and old weaves began and then ceased. They hauled derelict carts of raw minerals from deep quarries at the city walls (and it is a marvel how, with innumerable chasms, tunnels, and, indeed, quarries permeating like ulcers through the underbelly of the place, Statera had not yet collapsed into itself) and drove carts of produce; of timber; of coals; of weapons. And they were always stalked by flocking patrols.

Always, there were the patrols. Always, there were the guards.

There were, in fact, so dizzying a manifold of guards, who crept, and watched, and convened, in the light of day and then by operating panel of a searchlight, in the shroud of night, that it behoves a foreign observer to inquire as to the ratio of militants to mere ponies.

Colonies and squadrons of these militants marched along as ants, or some such company of prowling rats—their armour clattering and their weapons twitching—into the backend alleys, the unfurnished nooks, and transiently ambling into the residential quarters, crawling in and out of homes at any hour. But they never stayed in the flats, no; at the end of each guard's shift, they followed down any of the auxiliary paths in order to reach the enormous central road—which spanned all the way from the southern entrance to the northern wall—and made their way to the administrative centre. It was there that they boarded and there that, presumably, they plotted, huddling in growths, guns at the ready, eyes still scanning every which way.

But the administrative centre was no mere building, nor microcosm of discrete edifices for that matter. At the exact midpoint between all things in Statera, betwixt every road and sector, was a *towering spire* which fastened itself—perhaps, at this moment, appearing for ever incomplete and crawling with scaffolds, wires, and working ponies (commoners though they were, permitted to operate on the monolith)—to the earth as if it were a steel unicorn horn, mauling open the clouds it pierced, as all mortal testaments of vain defiance endeavour. It is impossible to describe it as anything other than sinister; this foreboding thing, with a strange electromagical glow in its glassy, filament core that modulated slowly and sickly, made a formidable sundial of the lonesome city-state. The spire first rose broad, arching inward once more as a Huntress' bow, then at its apex it became a mosaic of incomplete things, pixelating into panels of untethered alloys, or better manifesting as a tempest-fractured spike up about 230 metres high, far exceeding the outer wall.

Once more, this place, where the soldiers, the guards, and night watchmen congregated and then dispersed, most assuredly boarded all of the militants—who outnumbered civilians perhaps four-to-one—as they were never seen lodging in the outer blocks of the city; on extraordinary occasions, they came dragging those most prying adventurers, the all-too-curious visitors, into the spire, then, emerging from the compound once more at a later hour, returned to their duties, notably empty-hoofed. There was no doubt to any commoner that as high as the spire ascended, so did it plunge deep underground, granting entrance to Statera's clandestine, substratum burg.

Regarding a rather expected inquisition, one which ailed not only outsiders but perplexed, too, Statera's own denizens: Where was the king, Satellite? Surely he resided in the spire. And surely he did rule this incredibly barricaded city-state. No thing, nor

pony, doth make answer to these matters, nor any answer that is not itself speculative, only. It is oft assured that he ruled, as the state operated as surely and as strictly as the laws of nature did govern (and I shall clarify, we speak of the physical laws which dictate this particular world). Orders most certainly came to each level in the chain of command, but alas, he was not to be observed, at least not by 327 or any of Statera's denizens.



The sky was homogeneously overcast, shielding all manner of pigment and direct sunlight from Statera; the diffuse pale expanse cast only faint shadows, condemning the Ponyfolk to a cauldron of steel and debris that had sunk into the valley. Though the fog augured a deluge, replete with ashen veils that curdled like wool, not a droplet fell. Thus the lowlands 'neath the Crystal Mountains were suspended in an uncanny meridian, like a for ever encroaching nightfall whose cry abated in a brine halo.

At brief moments between her strides, she would let the breeze fill the undersides of her wings, allowing her to hover imperceptibly off the ground. She accomplished this in rather a furtive manner that concealed her apparently unexampled mannerisms from glazed onlookers. None of the other pegasi whom she passed appeared even to open their wings for any reason; some, in fact, had their wings clipped or otherwise bound up with cloth wrappings, which prevented them from so much as lifting their wings a hair.

It cannot be overstated that the little pegasus made a conscious effort to move about in every way that appeared defiant of the public etiquette. At times when the sun was high, turning the sediment crusts of the city to coal grains that singed all varieties of work-hardened hooves, and when every cloaked pedestrian pulled cloth o'er their faces and disappeared into the crowds, the girl would turn her face to the sky and trot in the open pockets of the road. Then, whenever the hour of curfew approached, and when every corner of the city was barely illuminated by the stray beams of moonlight or bubbling coronas of candles and gaslamps, the commoners would present themselves plainly to the night watchmen, acquiescing subserviently to the guards' inquisitions. But 327 would merely amble aloof, snorting at the guards, assuming that they dared waste their time on the girl.

With these matters considered, it is important to establish that, while no Stateran appeared to so much as spread their wings, in public or private (whatever that may mean to a denizen of this city), 327 did not openly endeavour to leap off into a full soar. Rather, when there was enough wind to fill her sails and she had determined that her legs had built up an intolerable deal of energy, she would push herself off the ground lightly

enough to glide for two or three seconds at a time between long, otherwise unbroken sequences of trots.

The lay observer may conjecture that this was some manner of childish antics and then conclude that the girl was thoroughly unaware of her place. But there was no doubt about the discretion that she possessed. Indeed, this could be partially explicated by her restraint about flying, which, while clandestinely defiant, remained clandestine only. All the while, whenever she twittered about the guards, she was keenly aware to remain below a threshold that was rather palpable to her, where she could masterfully coax a reaction from the men, but avert any reprimanding. And after each provocation, she would smile, always as if the caustic barks that loitered behind her carried with them profound admiration rather than some such comment about her being “a plucky bitch.”

Nonetheless, at times she glided ‘tween her trots, sending pillows of dust ascending upward (in manners with which by now you are familiar), which dispersed into opaque clouds whenever she twitched her wings. 327 would raise her woolly brows at any caravans making their pilgrimage to the spire. Aside from a stray glance here or, in tremendously rare incidents, a dry half-smile there, no one appeared to acknowledge her.

Ultimately, she came to arrive at the midpoint of a hoofpath, where stood a modest, open stall, fashioned of birch wood and wavy sheets of tin. The planks themselves seemed to be unevenly coated in a sap lacquer, and while surely it had been hastily applied, evidenced by its bumps and calcified bubbles, it was a rather uncommon extravagance that few other stands on the main road boasted of.

“Three razors,” the little pegasus said, sliding a pocketable, rectangular block of marble onto the stall counter, which was merely a birchwood plank fixed to the stand’s frame. The block’s corners were rounded and its texture smooth, yet it still grated against the scraggy counter surface, inducing a hollow resonance from within the wood. “Please,” the girl added.

“Three?” a voice squawked. A plump earth pony was hunched down behind the counter; a discordancy of varying clacks and clangs erupted as she sifted around a clutter that was presently obscured by the lady’s figure.

“I definitely have enough for them,” 327 idled at the counter, her unfocused eyes hovering over what appeared to be arrays of beautician trinkets; such items as scissors, combs, polishes, glosses, and vials sat loosely in trays about the stall.

At last, after her racket, the shopkeeper emerged from behind the stall, whirling hurriedly from her enclosure that harboured a myriad of unsorted boxes and a single folding chair. She bobbed plumply, having stuffed her plush mane into a net, and was sweating profusely despite the frigid ambiance.

“Whaddya need three r—” the merchant started. “Ah. You.”

“Me,” 327 seemed to smile unflatteringly on purpose, raising one eyebrow at the lady, who was eyeing her up and down.

“I gotta say, that stubble of yours is mighty persistent,” drawled the Merchant, who turned her attention to scrutinizing the marble block on the counter.

327 felt around at her chin.

“Listen,” the lady pulled up her stool and let out a sigh as she hunkered onto it, “this much gets you three razors, sure, but have they really been dullin’ for ya that quickly? I mean...” She reached for the girl’s chin—the chair creaked and whistled in protest—but 327 swiftly pulled away, making very sharp eye contact with the lady.

“I’m aware of it,” the little pegasus snorted.

The merchant plopped reluctantly down again, turning the marble block in her hooves. It was a Stateran Credit, which featured black and emerald inlay dots that glistened in the light as tiny deltas of divergent paint speckles. It was comparable to a domino that had been stretched much too far, one that would most certainly produce vaguely musical *clinks* when rattled against other Stateran credits. Lamentably, it was alone and without its ensemble.

327 oriented herself normally again, but it soon occurred to her that she had been carrying her spaghetti of yarn out in the open, despite the fact she was still wearing her saddlebag that could easily hide the mess. As she reached back around, fumbling for the latch on one of the saddle pouches, sand particles that had been nesting in the yarn began to trickle all over her cloak. Well, the cloak alone was barely worth mentioning on the grounds of its aesthetics, and she could have just as well been wearing the yarn itself instead, in all its disorder and all its fraying; the crochet webbing would have been richer in pigment and of a thicker, perhaps more protective consistency than the thing the girl was draped in.

“Eh, whatabout scissors? For that,” the merchant motioned to the yarn as it slithered—slinking almost on its own, as if it were alive, fearing to spend any further time out in the open—into 327’s saddlebag. “Two razors and one pair of scissors.”

“Do you trust me with scissors?” The little pegasus’ voice, though juvenile as a fawn, cut with a distinct sarcasm.

“I don’t trust ya with razors neither,” the merchant said.

“Well.”

“Welllllll,” the lady chuckled.

“How about two razors, which is thirty-three point three, three, three, et cetera percent less of a threat to you, and—” 327 gestured to a small, empty vial on one of the counter displays. “Has that ever been used?”

“Wat, the brush?” the merchant squinted at approximately where the girl was pointing.”

“The glass, the tube.”

“Ah, no. The vial, that’s, er,” the lady’s voice had the consistency of a dry cracker that no amount of water could sate, “the vial costs nothin’. What you’d pay for is the cream; it’s a cream for under your eyes. You don’t look the type.”

The type? 327 thought. “Well I could start whenever I want,” she said.

“Ehh.”

“I’ll take the vial empty. I’ll forfeit the change if you let me have it.”

“Welp,” the merchant, with very little hesitation, dropped two, stamp sized blades onto the counter and bent over to reach for the vial. “I’ll say, no way yr getting a good swig out of this thing.”

“I’ll take that as a challenge.”

“Enough challenge on the road we trot, girl,” the lady placed the glass tube on the counter and tossed the ceramic credit into an open bin behind her. *Clink, clatter, tingle.* Ah.

327 turned and carefully slipped the razors into her saddlebag and picked up the vial, inspecting it thoroughly. There was a small, opaque spot on it which seemed to annoy the girl, but she merely scrunched her snout at it as she paced away from the stall. After a few steps, she yielded and turned slowly back toward the shopkeeper.

“Forgetting something?” she called out.

“Er, thank you?” the lady replied.

“Be equal, yeah?”

“Ohoho,” the lady projected her voice, replying in a tone that was uncharacteristically striking, “be equal, girl, be equal, yes, yes.”

Only after being far enough on her way did it then arrest 327’s attention that the lady—husky and nasalizing as she was—had yet smelled faintly of dry smoked meats. Indeed, the flavours which hung about the air of the city were often metallic and dusty; cigar puffs, warm coals, and salt brines spiced the breeze, not least on the hottest days where agrarian fragrances from the east valley resigned at the rampart walls of the city.

Strange, she thought, that such an aroma had only ever found her through the open casements of the processions that emerged from the south egress, wafting out from the carriages that were always swiftly escorted to the central spire. Not much else could she recall at this moment, principally not the taste of such delicacies.

She trotted—but curiously, did not glide—home.

V. Thirty Metres, Instead of Forty

December 1, 2034, the same evening // Statera, through the eyes of 327

The stained-glass lampshade rotated slowly, illuminated by its frail bulb which ordained that constellations of opaque hues would creep listlessly across the spotless kitchen walls. 327 traced the reflections, perhaps resigning that none of them formed any familiar arrangement like those stars which constituted the Ursa Major of the greater empyrean; or the Wayward Wolf; or the Tantabus' Horn. It was not as if the lampshade was created with any cosmic purpose in mind, but the little pegasus turned her eyes to the shade itself and esteemed it as if it were a solar system. It could have just as well been an asteroid belt or gas nebula which conformed to some great heavenly body. *An accretion disc!* She at first inwardly exclaimed, then "No, no," she resigned, as the thought made her suddenly unnecessarily anxious. She settled on an asteroid belt for the moment.

"No marks, then," an articulate voice—feminine?—cut through the stale kitchen air. *A question or a statement?* It was difficult to discern this.

327 continued staring at the lampshade. Well, she couldn't make up her mind between the lampshade and the reflections it cast.

"No. Marks. Then." Louder, more projecting now. Spacing out each word for emphasis. A twinge of frustration permeated the voice, which lacerated as a corvid's call.

"No, no marks," 327 sniffed, unbothered, at last ripping her attention away from the ceiling. "But I suppose I'm pretty awful at crochet."

Across the table stood two ponies opposite the girl. First was the orange earth pony, whose poofy mane quivered at even the slightest breath; who had prepared dinner the previous night, and was certainly responsible for it too this night; he, who had before been observed meandering about the house on too many occasions just before midnight, now stood with fixed expression and attention unbroken like some toy soldier. He was squeezed into a pair of thick dungarees; the denim which comprised them appeared to have been stitched and restitched many times over. A clean-shaven face was burdensome on him; it just did not seem conducive to his overall appearance. It was rather clear, though, that the raucous voice did not originate from him; this was already evident.

Besides him, though, loomed arrect a periwinkle unicorn, whose lynx eyes could sunder the air like a hot knife lacerating newborn goat skin; though somehow sharper was her jaw, which remained poised and sculpted at all times. Her obsidian-shaded mane fell straight onto her shoulders, appearing to graft its strands deep into the leather jacket she was wearing. She was practically a face that had been consumed by a jet-black silhouette, and it was as if this penumbra threatened to swallow the rest of the space that surrounded

it, before devouring what remained of her. There would have been no doubt to anyone in any room with her that the crow-like voice that addressed 327 belonged to this woman.

"Was crochet not one of your elective subjects?" the unicorn said. She then glared, as if profanely disturbed, at the man beside her, who had just finished serving a grey, dubious soup alongside a lone, unseasoned potato slice to everyone respectively, leaving himself the remaining scraps.

"Like, how do I put this," 327 yawned, "I've been perfect in maths, social studies, sciences... But—well, you saw what I left with this morning," she prodded her soup with a spoon. "It apparently wasn't good enough. I thought it demonstrated the fundamentals of—"

"The orb?" The unicorn was also not engaging with her dinner just yet.

327's ears flattened. "It was a planet."

"And what function did it serve?"

Function? the girl protested, inwardly. *Yarn can only be so much on its own.*

"Well... we live on a planet, right?"

"Not the planet, your 'creation.'"

"Well I liked it," she protested.

Remaining shadowy still in her rigid composure like a corvid, the unicorn promptly crooked over the dinner table and struck 327 on the cheek; and while this appeared not to take the little pegasus by surprise, as she remained unflinching, it did draw a gasp from the shivering earth pony adjacent to them both.

The little pegasus remained mostly unshaken, and though a serrating sting had now percolated upon the shallowest surfaces of her right cheek, it felt to her as if the pain belonged to someone else; 327 remained a mere spectator to the sensation, but so did she sink deeper into some such partition of her consciousness, now equally unable to achieve a cognizance of any other sensation, pleasurable or painful. "My mistake, 'Mum'; 'Dad,'" she recited listlessly, genuflecting with a raised eyebrow. The corners of her lips twinged about, appearing as though she may have burst out laughing, were it not for the cerebral depths her sense of self had plunged down into.

A silence permeated the room, one which made time halt as a silent clot. Between the three of them, none looked alike; without debate, it was plainly apparent that 327 shared virtually no physical traits with the ponies before her. They could all not be any more different from each other, and while this could safely—if not preferably—be presumed of a married couple, it is a biological curiosity and improbability that the girl could have at all been the offspring of such a pair.

327 endeavoured to peer out at the figures which constituted this 'Mum' and 'Dad', but she could only interface with what seemed to her contours of imperceptible matter

that solely outlined where these presences were likely to be. Indeed, she perceived mostly absences, disturbances in space-time, which—and whose physicalities could be proven by measure of gravitational influence or exchange of energy with the things that surrounded them—displaced all manner of particles and composites, but themselves remained apparitions penetrated by the faint glows of the lampshade.

It was a vague, cosmic dread, one which emerged equally true as it was languid; a faded existentialism that pervaded the senses while evading the urgency. It was so that the girl did not fear an unseen beast that pursued her in a deep dark, rather she lamented as a lavender adrift—wrapping stem ‘round seed ‘pon a waveless sea—petals open to the sun with the promise of fields beneath the ocean.

“A great soldier must also be an artist,” the mum cawed. Time resumed.

“Yes, I’ll knit them to death.” 327 was quite certainly trying not to laugh now, but turned her good cheek towards the woman, inviting another strike.

And another strike did come, but this time with an even greater exertion which prompted the ‘Dad’ to wrap his front legs around the Mum’s, pleading she cease.

“Just have her wash up the table after supper, that’ll be good’nuff for that,” the earth pony’s voice cracked.

The mum withdrew her front legs and shouldered the man off of her. “I’ll have some damn order in this house.” She turned aside to look out the kitchen exit and towards the open window at the entrance to the flat. “See to it the girl does her chores,”

“Yes, ma’am,” a familiar voice replied just outside.

“Right,” the Mum gathered her soup and potato, “I’m retiring early tonight. I must be up early. Be equal, 327.” She stood and disappeared into the hallway. “And do not disappoint your instructors, young lady,” she added, shouting from some other part of the house now. Perhaps she had already made her way to the “living” room.

The dad, appearing quite pale in angst, quickly gathered his morsels and followed her down.

327 now stared blankly at a kitchen which was empty of all living things but her. The scathing sensation that had at first been only localized with the first strike now afflicted her entire face; her cheeks were tender to the touch, yet she continually prodded and brushed them, as if to entice the dissociative entity from within her skull to, at last, see through her eyes again, so as to fully experience it.

She smiled.

“Phew.” The little pegasus had stuck herself partially out the entrance window, hung her front hooves over and down it, and stared across the boulevard of sand. Well, she realized as soon as she leaned out into the evening air that it had grown quite frigid outside. The absence of even a faint breeze or low wind was noticeable; only the sounds of marching hoofsteps and distant commands echoed across the avenues. There were no other commoners out and about at this hour; perhaps it was not conventional to, not least after curfew, stick oneself out of a window in this place. One could only guess. Though understandable, perhaps this was a shame, as the great empyrean—barely grazed now by the setting sun, aglow in the luster of the moon—had commanded away the forewarning rain clouds and fog, so that constellations twinkled ‘pon a backdrop of plum gloam.

“Clean up not too bad I’m hopin’?” 202 was standing watch at the top of the entryway stairs, on the outside of the flat. He did not turn his head when he spoke to the girl, who was hanging out the window just up and behind him.

“Nah,” 327 said. “Food’s awful though.”

“You reckon?”

“I know so.”

“Do you?” 202 smiled, maintaining his attention to the opposite side of the street.

“Tell you about it if you can fix this for me,” said the girl. She lowered the stray sheet she had torn out of her crocheting textbook.

“Think there’s even going to be a book left by the time you’re out for this quarter?” 202 peered up at 327 and retrieved the paper.

“Nah.”

“Well, just hopin’ they don’t notice then.”

“They won’t,” the little pegasus eagerly climbed further out the window, but winced at her gasp as she accidentally pushed air out of her lungs too prematurely.

“Guh...” She lowered herself back inside to a more comfortable level again. “Nobody reads that shit anyw—dude, do you think anyone’s reading about crochet?” 327 snickered.

“Hey,” 202’s gruff and boyish voice hushed, no doubt under a gentle smile. “I took crochet when I was your age and I loved it.”

“You? Haha, that doesn’t surprise me,” the little pegasus reached down and flicked the guard’s head.

“A good warrior must also be an artist,” 202 recalled, so he thought.

“A *brave* warrior,” 327 corrected.

“A... *great*... warrior?” the guard said. “Yeah, that.”

“I’m going with ‘brave warrior.’”

“If you say so.” 202 held the textbook page in his hooves. As his horn started to glow, he scanned both ends of the avenue before closing his eyes. 327 first watched as the page became completely blank, as if no ink had ever been pressed to it at all. But she was quickly distracted by 202’s horn. The magic produced a warm aura that she could feel from all the way up at the window. Reaching out faintly at the pale green bloom, the girl closed her eyes softly as if dozing off and imagined for a moment that the sting in her cheeks had begun to fade—the sting which she had, at this point, been more intuitively aware of, yet merely smiled at. And as it faded from her consciousness, so did her smile become undone.

“There,” the blank page was in front of 327’s face. 202, again, did not turn to look up at the girl. “Now, say ‘I’m sorry Crocheting.’”

“I’m sorry Crocheting,” 327 spoke completely sincerely as she took the paper from the guard’s hooves and slid it behind her onto the kitchen table.

“Now, tell me about what’s so much better than...” he paused. “Better than that stew your old man was put up to.” There was no mistaking the boyishness of 202’s voice. Indeed, it ambled between the lean command of a military man and the whimsical curiosity of a teenager; the broad fortitude in his voice could not be separated from the nasally, juvenile tone which underscored it.

Curiously, 202’s outward appearance did nothing to elucidate this duality. He was a unicorn who could not have been older than thirty years; his face and expressions were chiseled and serious, but his sea-green eyes gazed softly at all things; his pointy, angular crimson mane and shallow, fuzzy beard jutted wildly in every which way and were striking against his slate-black coat, yet were embellished by streaks of hair—which he had certainly decorated himself—that shimmered with the same hues his eyes featured; and what a stubby tail! It was curt and poofy, indeed, wholly contrasting with the rest of his mostly rugged appearance—and it wagged doggishly, swishing in quick successions. And of course, there was his voice. It was as if he could bark a most sinister order, but it would evoke only the inclination to embrace him.

His uniform was the same as every other footman that 327 had seen. Broad steel plates covered the stallion’s back and hind end, the latter of which was branded with the symbol of the king: an upside-down equilateral triangle with a dot at its center, and a three-pronged crown shape floating above it; an olive-green cloak hid under the posterior plate, draping over his flank and at least down to his knees, appearing almost like a skirt. The underside of 202’s uniform, though, wrapped around him in thick protective padding that extended into full-length sleeves for his legs, allowing for free movement of the body. His hooves were further embellished by golden horseshoe covers, which rose up like miniature crowns.

He held his rifle like every other stationed footman: gripped right from the middle; stock sitting on one of its back curves so that the rifle would be at an angle; barrel pointing up to the sky, away from the face. He never fidgeted with it, and he continued to stare down at the opposite side of the road, where only more flats and apartments stood, not identical in construction but equal in form.

327 ventured a little more out the window again, this time bracing for the wind getting knocked out of her from the windowsill jutting into her. She looked over past 202, down the street to the left (south). From where she was, she could see one of the belfries of the main entrance to Statera not too distantly.

“Once,” she huffed to 202, staring out down the road, “I stole a weird bread food from one of the caravans coming from the gate.”

“Bread food,” 202 peered up at the girl.

“I don’t know what it was. Pastry, I think. It was headed for the city centre.”

“When was this?”

“Like, a few months ago.”

“And, by city centre, you mean the ‘Obelisk?’”

“Yeah.”

202 rolled his shoulders. “Was there jelly in the middle?”

“Nah, there was like nothing in the middle. There was a hole. Like someone stabbed it with a big, round tube.”

“Doughnut. That’s a doughnut, I reckon.”

“Doughnut...” 327 whispered inquisitively to herself. “How do you spell that?”

“D. O. U. G.—” the guard started; 327 was bouncing her hoof in the air as if to count each letter in her mind. “—H. N. U. T. Doughnut. And they’re sweet usually. Sometimes they’re glazed, sometimes they’re filled with frosting, sometimes th—”

“Filled with frosting?” 327 interrupted. “But there was a hole, where would the frosting go?”

“Sometimes there’s no hole.”

“No hole?” The little pegasus’ eyes widened as she sneered at the stallion. “Dude, then how’d you know it was a doughnut if not all doughnuts have holes in them?”

202 scratched his goatee. “Um... y’said it was sweet right?”

“Nah.”

“And there was no glazing?”

“Don’t know what that is,” 327 hung her head down to stare at the ground in exasperation.

“It’s like a glossy somethin’ that sits on top of the doughnut. It’s sugary,” he squinted and paused for a moment. “It’s sugar.”

“It definitely didn’t taste sugary,” 327 snorted. “but it was warm and sweet in the way clean water is sweet.”

“Oh...” 202 trailed off. “Ok. I think that was a bagel.”

The little pegasus glared down at the stallion. “Don’t you fucking tell me bagels have holes in them too.” She couldn’t see the full front of the stallion’s face, but she knew he was cringing.

“They, uh, do.”

“Unbelievable,” 327’s the ordinarily singsong timbre in her voice transposed to a swooping disappointment, one which was no doubt sincere, but was adorned with an equally habitual sarcasm. “Well, consider me intrigued by bagels.”

“They’re hype-a-thetically bagels.”

“Hypothetical bagels, now you’re starting to sound like a real scientist, Zee,” 327 giggled.

“Girl,” 202 was on the verge of drawing his gaze away to scowl at her.

“Ooo, sorry, I meant *doctor* Zee.”

“202 is just fine,” the stallion complained.

For a moment, 327 tried to recall the memory. She pictured the Fall afternoon: the sunset overhead was a wildcat, ablaze with autumnal fires and prowling behind pink streaks that were like rows of pearl beads. All that parted the dirt roads and veined skies, dyed earth and inferno, were those dark edifices that covered the place and surrounded the spire—the “Obelisk.” A cavalcade was arriving at the front gate, carriages that were filed into two rows, side by side. At one point or another, 327 was there, trailing the convoy once the entrance had closed again. She deduced that there would be a window of time when the carriages would reach a blind spot on the main road, one which occurred naturally at that time of day, when the patrols would not be looking where she intended to be. Indeed, she had exploited this opportunity and briefly entered one of the carriages, though she could not remember if it was the left or right one. There she spied boxes full of these ringed, doughy foodstuffs. She peered closer and closer into this memory. Were they glazed? *What was glaze?* she thought. Was it a thin coating or a thick, opaque—

“Shit,” 202 ducked under the corrugated overhang of the flat entrance to look up over the rooftops of the adjacent buildings.

The little pegasus leaned further out the window, tracing the guard’s gaze up to see a winged speck ascending the outer city walls. A searchlight was promptly raised at the figure. 327 half-covered her ears.

Pop-zzp! Pop-zzp! Pop-tk-pop-tk! Gunshots erupted from the main gate, and as the pegasus seized up and began plummeting, the searchlight followed the corpse until it landed just at the base of the fortifications with a squelching *cracklrklr...*

“Bagel,” 327 remarked, letting go of her ears.

“What a sorry sight,” 202 leaned back up against the outside of the entrance door.

327 was squinting at her outstretched hoof, which was pointing towards where the body had fallen from. “Sloppy.”

“Pardon?”

“Well, you see, I’ve gotten to see maybe three of these so far. What a night, huh?”

“I don’t follow.”

“The first time I saw a pegasus try to escape, they got shot down at thirty metres.”

“Uhuh.”

“It was like that,” 327 smacked her hooves together. “Then the second time, it must’ve been like thirty-five metres. But tonight... That’s what I mean, they’re getting sloppy.”

“Tonight?”

“Tonight that pegasus made it a whole forty metres.”

“You’ve got a system for this?”

“Yep. And that shot definitely came from the Barrel Boy.”

202 almost choked laughing. “Oh, you call ‘em Barrel Boy ‘cuz of the—he got stuck in that old rum cask outside the—”

“Outside the med centre, pshahah!” 327 and 202 giggled harmoniously, the girl’s soprano tonality complemented the paced chuckles of the guard.

“Man, how’d y’know it was him?” 202 regained his composure.

“They keep forgetting to post a sniper up this side of the entrance,” 327 noted.

“And only Barrel Boy would try to make that shot with a standard issue rifle. Those shots sounded puny, and I counted two misses.”

“But he still hit ‘em.”

“Yeah, *forty* metres up, though.”

“Sloppy,” 202 mused.

“Yep.”

The guard swiveled his head, peering down both ends of the road, before turning subtly to look at the girl. “Y’got nicknames for all ‘em?”

327 played with her overgrown stubble and looked at 202, whose clement eyes—a cool Summer’s day trapped behind a stallion shroud—could not so much as ward off a rabbit. “This time of night, front gate has Barrel Boy and Corkman.”

“Juvenile,” 202 remarked.

“In two minutes, a patrol of two men—Bumbleboy and Stub Man—will be inspecting this part of the sector, where ‘House III’ is.”

“Stub Man... the one with the leg missin’?”

“Quite the liability, yeah.”

202’s expression became wistful. “Well—”

“And wait,” the girl hushed the stallion with her hoof.

A moment passed. Two. Then, the apartment began to shiver as a low drone stirred from the sky. They watched as a shadow crept over the block, the shivering and droning slowly reaching an apex before an airplane could be seen flying overhead. Once it had passed, the intersection settled back into its artificial silence.

“11:04pm. That plane comes every two days, exactly at this time,” the girl said.

202 looked back at her; he blinked intermittently as his eyes wandered aimlessly. He appeared tenuously overcome in thought, as if calculating something hidden.

“And what about me,” 202 was staring at a wall.

“You?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re just Zee.”

“Just Zee.”

“Mhm!”

The guard returned to his expected position, again watching dutifully over the road. “I dunno,” he sighed. “No. But you know...”

The girl’s ears perked up.

“Y’missed the patrol coming last night,” 202 remarked.

“I’ll adjust for it.”

“Whatever you’re up to, it sounds like y’gotta be perfect about it.”

“Well, I’m not perfect, but I’m top of my class in pretty much everything right now, at least. I think I can handle myself.”

“Even crocheting?”

“Zee, you...” 327 knocked the wind out of herself again trying to poke out the window further. “Fuck.”

“Hmm?”

The girl scooted herself off the windowsill and back into the house as two guards came trotting across the upper wall. Only appearing as silhouettes through the dull glow of the gaslamps and spotlights, one shadow maintained an upright demeanor while the shade that followed it ambled by aid of a weapon to prop themselves up. They stopped briefly at the locus of two overlooking columns.

“Don’t respond, but you know I can’t stay here,” 327 whispered through the door, upon which she rested her hoof, as a smile softly crept across her face. “I won’t need crocheting out there. Hell, I wish you would come with me. Come with me, Zee,” she had begun rationalizing aloud.

The radio clock sat in the “living room” at the far end of the hallway, a profound distance that 327 was peering down, unwilling to leave the door. She counted under her breath. 11:05pm. 11:06pm. Each minute slithered by, conducted by the girl’s swaying hooves, as the tension of her unfinished conversation seeped into her veins like a poison. It then occurred to the girl, in this boundless pause which acquiesced to the presence of the guards, that only two sleeps remained before the dusk of her planned escape from the walled city of Statera: this night, and the next. Then, on the third night, she would not sleep, but abscond from her birthplace under cover of night and discrepancy of its watchmen, never looking back, desiring to see a new day in a new place where there were no patrols, no searchlights, no shootings, counterfeit families, rusty shacks, foreboding spires, forced inspections, food limits, looming kings... and no Zee.

The very thought of these things both weighed on her as a burden and glistened about her as an aureole, and it had wholly consumed her mind so that she had not noticed that the clock now read 11:10pm, and the guards would have been long gone by now. Once she had seen the time she realized as well that her cheeks were sore, so she relaxed her mouth and slid up the door to go to the window again.

327 poked her head out. “But you can’t come with me,” she said. “I just envy the family of the next place you keep watch over. Hope it’s not wasted on this fucking place, still.”

202 turned completely to face the girl. His ears were down flat and his kindly eyes dared not open fully. “I dunno kid,” he sniffed. “I’ve only got so much time myself, y’know?”

The little pegasus tilted her head at him, her eyes met his.

“Liabilities, right,” the stallion looked over at where the guards on the wall had headed off too.