



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 towards 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, towards 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 dewes 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. 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 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 with an affection that one would assume was meant for a small domestic 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 towards 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. At the exact midpoint between all things in Statera, betwixt every edifice and block, was a *towering spire* that 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 great steel horn, mauling open the clouds it pierced, as many mortal testaments have endeavoured. It is impossible to describe it as anything other than sinister; this foreboding thing—with a strange electromagical glow that fluoresced from within its glassy, filament core, modulating 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 disparate sherds, pixelating into panels of untethered alloys, or rather 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. It was certain that they 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 only to snort at the guards, drawing inflated reactions that delighted her, assuming that the troops 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 blatantly 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), dispersing 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 towards 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 the constellations of opaque hues it produced would creep listlessly across the unblemished kitchen walls. 327 gazed at them as they went, 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 greater cosmological purpose in mind—that much was obvious—but the little pegasus traced the beams 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 swiftly rejected the thought, as this fiction likely roused an unnecessary anxiety within her. She settled on an asteroid belt for the moment.

“No marks, then,” an articulate voice—uncertainly 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 trails it—

“No. Marks. Then.” Louder, more projecting now, each word now sundered in deltas of silence. A twinge of frustration permeated the voice, which lacerated as a corvid's call.

“No, no marks,” 327 sniffed, perceptibly not bothered by the encroaching call, yet at last lulling 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; he, who had prepared dinner the previous evening, and was certainly responsible for it too this evening; 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 a 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. And that clean-shaven face was burdensome on him; it just did not seem conducive to his otherwise craggy appearance. It was rather clear, though, that the raucous voice did not originate from him; yes, this was quite evident.

Beside him, though, loomed arrect a periwinkle unicorn, whose lynx eyes could rend the air much like a hot knife flensing 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 that she was wearing. She was practically a face, only, 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. Though discerning her through this umbrageous pall was troublesome, slender she was like an outstretched tree branch, straight and stiff. 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 portioning a grey and dubious mire of dregs along with a solitary, 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 at her soup, showing clear restraint in not turning up her snout completely. "It apparently wasn't good enough. I thought it demonstrated the fundamentals of—"

"The orb?" The older 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, rather, your 'creation.'"

"Well I liked it," she said.

Remaining shadowy still in her rigid composure, the unicorn crooked over the dinner table. She towered over—as if to swallow the sun into her back, casting a stygian blanket over everything like a stalking corvid's shadow—and struck 327's cheek with the back of her hoof; and while this appeared not to take the unflinching little pegasus by surprise, it did draw a shivering gasp from the older earth pony adjacent to them both.

327 remained yet visibly unbothered, 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; she 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 could have burst out laughing at any moment, 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 with the grave suspension of a deep clot arresting the vital flow of blood. 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 from the back of her mind 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 beheld only absences, mere disturbances in space-time—whose physicalities could be proven by measure of gravitational influence or exchange of energy with everything that surrounded them—displacing all manner of particles and composites, but themselves remaining apparitions penetrated by the faint glows of the lampshade.

It was a vague, cosmic dread that settled in her, 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 or a labyrinth for it to pursue her in; rather, she lamented as a lavender adrift—wrapping stem 'round seed upon 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, it could not be mistaken, but she turned good cheek towards the woman, inviting another strike. It is as if she had done this a thousand times.

And another strike did come, but this time with an even greater exertion that 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,” the familiar voice of 202 replied just outside. He had certainly heard the commotion already.

“Right,” the ‘Mum’ gathered her soup and potato, “I’m retiring early tonight. I must be up before the gallows are treated. 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 only been 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 stood high up on her back hooves and bent herself over the flat’s entrance window, straining to peek her head out. She stared across the sandy, unpaved boulevard towards the other residential units on the other side. They were identical in form and structure to the girl’s flat, but each metal sheet and ribbed box pane that comprised the buildings was arranged disparately, eroded sometimes more and sometimes less, and occasionally had altogether different materials.

Well, 327 realized quickly that the night had grown remarkably frigid. Not a faint breeze nor a low wind could be detected; only the sheerest of puffs and motions dared disrupt the otherwise perfectly still air. And the air bit with chilled fangs, carrying with it, too, the muted commands and marching hoofsteps of the armed companies that prowled routinely through the blocks. None of the common ponies stepped hoof into the avenues.

One could gather from only a night in this place that it was not commendable or even advisable to stick oneself out a window past curfew to even consider the unique silences and desertions that the city harboured at this hour. Though perfectly understandable was the barrenness of midnight or so, perhaps it was also 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 instead the constellations twinkled ‘pon their gloam stage.

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

“Nah,” 327 said. “Food’s awful though. Though, everything tastes awful to me if it’s not coming from one of your guys’ troughs.”

“You reckon?”

“I know so.”

“Do you?” 202 raised his eyebrows, maintaining his gaze towards the opposite side of the street. “I’d like to know about that.”

“Only if you can fix this for me,” said the girl. She lowered the stray sheet of textbook paper she had torn out earlier in the day.

“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 had started to climb further out the window. Too eager was her ascension such that she had not anticipated that the ledge would jut abruptly into her gut, drawing a gasp and a wince from her, the air quickly escaping her lungs with an embarrassingly clumsy groan. “Guh...” She lowered herself inside again, back to a more comfortable level. “Nobody reads that shit anyw—dude, do you think anyone’s reading about crochet?” 327 snickered loudly.

“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, careful not to be overcome by the window sill’s wicked angle again, 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. He scanned both ends of the avenue before closing his eyes; then his horn began to glow. 327 at first observed as the ink on the paper began to fade, becoming totally blank as if nothing had ever been printed on it at all. But then the girl became distracted by the aura that encased the guard’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 she were 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 page, now completely blank, was dangling before 327’s face. 202, was holding it up at the window, still unchanging in his stance, still not turning to face the girl. “Now, say ‘I’m sorry, Crocheting.’”

“I’m sorry, Crocheting,” 327 said this quite 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; though his chiseled face and sparse expressions were serious and unyielding, his sea-green eyes yet gazed softly at all things; a strikingly echinated, crimson mane and equally angular facial stubble jutted out in every direction with an intentional precision, yet rare patches and streaks of dye embellished his hairs like carnations stippling the grasses of a feral prairie, shimmering with the same hues as his own eyes (how charming and how playful, this!). In this register of facts and foils, it is perhaps dismaying that there was no exact duplicity when it came to his slate-black coat, which was shadowy, perfect, not matted, without tufts, and rather well-kept, perhaps at last reinforcing the serious demeanor he attempted at all times to cultivate. But, oh, what a stubby tail! It was plump and poofy—indeed, wholly contrasting with the rest of his mostly rugged appearance—and it wagged doggishly, swishing in quick successions at any faint sensation that prodded it. And of course, there was his voice. Boyish it was, as if he could bark a most sinister order, but evoking only the inclination to embrace him.

In any event, his uniform was identical to any 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 thrice-pronged crown shape hovering above it; an olive-green cloak first hid under the posterior plate, draping over his flank like a skirt. The underside of 202’s uniform, though, wrapped around him with thick protective padding that extended into full-length sleeves for his legs, allowing for free movement of the legs. His hooves were further decorated by golden horseshoe covers that were surprisingly polished for so much time on the road.

He held and handled his rifle, again, identically to every other stationed footman: gripped right from the middle; stock resting on one of its back curves so that the gun sat with the barrel pointing up to the sky, away from the face. He never fidgeted with it.

327 ventured a bit more through the window again, bracing herself for the ledge. She looked over past 202, down the street to the south. From where she was, she could see one of the belfries of the main entrance to Statara not too distantly.

“Once,” she huffed to 202, finding a comfortable position on the window sill, “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 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... you 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 something 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—well I guess it was sweet, but sweet in the way that clean water is.”

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

The little pegasus glared down at the stallion. “Don’t you tell me that 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 poisoned 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 ablaze with autumnal fires and prowling behind pink beads that hung like rows of pearls. All that parted the dirt roads and veined skies, dyed earth and inferno, were the dark edifices of the city that 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 had deduced that there would be a window of time when the carriages would reach a blind spot on the main road, one which occurred routinely at that time of day. The patrols would not be looking at the point she intended to slip in. Indeed, she had exploited this opportunity and briefly entered one of the carriages, though she could not remember if it was the left carriage or right. 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.

"Shit, get away from the window," 202 said suddenly. Ducking under the corrugated awning that hung over the flat's entrance, he motioned for 327 to also stay down; his attention had been drawn up and over the rooftops of the adjacent buildings, just down the road.

The little pegasus, in fact, leaned *further* out the window, tracing the guard’s gaze to spot a winged dot ascending the outer city walls. A searchlight had been promptly raised at the figure. 327 half-covered her twitching ears.

Pop-zzp! Pop-zzp! Pop-tk-pop-tk! Gunshots erupted from the main gate. The hovering figure seized up and began quickly plummeting; the searchlight followed it 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 stretching her hoof out, pointing towards where the body had fallen from. She squinted. “Sloppy.”

“Pardon?”

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

“I don’t follow.”

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

“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. “Barrel Boy. Ain’t he the one that got stuck—”

“In the rum cask, outside East Market, pshahah!” 327 and 202 giggled in unison; the girl’s soprano tonality harmonized naturally with the paced, rhythmic chuckles of the guard.

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

“Have you noticed, 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 repeater. 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. “You got nicknames for all ‘em?”

327 played with her overgrown stubble (and it is worthy to note, here, that the manner in which she caressed the fuzz of her chin was slow and considerate, evoking the same brooding pose that her friend, the guard, appeared to strike at his idlest moments) 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 and Corkman.”

“Juvenile,” 202 remarked, though there could be detected a faint smile.

“In two minutes, a patrol of two men—Bumble and Stub—will be inspecting this junction.”

“Stub... the prosthetic fella?”

327 nodded at him.

202's expression became wistful. "Well—"

"And wait," the girl hushed the stallion with her hoof.

A moment passed. Another. Then, like a stone cast that agitates a pond abed, rushing out in nebulous distortions that at once converge and then spill out in an untold many echoes, formless and pellucid, the stillness of air and shroud of the night sky were suspended in an ambient ripple. A low drone, born as hollow murmur, transposed over the next few moments into a roar that perverted the empyrean. It conducted a dissonance of metal clatters and sediment shivers. Every building shook, and it could be heard that the trees and grasses beyond the city walls fizzed, too, in a myriad of anxious rustles. And as this oscillation grew steadily, a yet darker penumbra spilled out from the alleyways and beyond the rooftops, eventually flooding every corner of the sector as the thundering bellow apexed. There, obscured in a gloomy veil, a series of bright dots passed high above Statera, leaving a faint trail of incandescence in their wake. As they disappeared behind the ramparts, slipping out of view, the shuddering windows and pulsating steps abated. The drone grew quiet behind its echoes, dissipating into only a hum again. Then silence.

"11:04pm. That plane comes every two days, exactly at this time," the girl said. "It starts in the east and ends in the west."

202 looked back at her, and at first he could only blink. Then he appeared tenuously overcome in thought, as if calculating something unseen.

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

"You?"

"Yeah."

"What about you?"

"Do you have a nickname for me?"

I thought that was obvious, one could practically hear 327 contemplate. "You're just Zee."

"Just Zee."

"Mhm!"

The guard returned to his expected position, turning his attention to the road again. "I dunno," he sighed. "No. But you know..."

The girl's ears perked up.

"You missed the patrol comin' last night," 202 remarked.

"I'll adjust for it!" 327 squeaked.

"Whatever you're up to, it sounds like you gotta be perfect about it."

"Well I'm top of my class right now."

“Even crocheting?”

327’s eyes widened. “Zee, you...” she started to climb through the window but then hesitated. “Wait, no, they’re—agh!” Resting her body on the corner of the ledge knocked the wind out of her, again.

“Hmm?”

The girl scooted herself off the windowsill and landed back in the house quite ungracefully as two guards came trotting across the upper rampart, which had a direct sightline to the flat entrance from way above the city proper. Only manifesting as silhouettes through the dull glows of the spotlights, one shadow maintained an upright demeanor while the shadow that followed it ambled by aid of a rifle to prop itself up. They stopped briefly at the locus of two overlooking columns.

327 sat right up against the front door and rested her hoof on it. “Don’t respond, but you know I can’t stay here,” she whispered, before turning to face the hallway. Her soft smile was betrayed by the tremble in her lips. “I won’t need crocheting out there. Hell, I wish you would come with me. Come with me, Zee,” she had begun rationalizing aloud.

She peered down at the radio clock that sat in the “living room,” unwilling to take her back off the door. Methodically, she counted the seconds under her breath, highlighting each passing minute. 11:05pm. 11:06pm. Each moment 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 that only two sleeps remained before the time 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 this place—away from the guards, from spotlights, ration limits, warehouse fumes, forced inspections, and routine hangings; but of course, this also meant there would be, at some point soon, a final exchange between her and 202.

The very thought of these matters both weighed on her as a burden and glistened about her as an aureole, and it had wholly consumed her mind such that she had not noticed that the clock now read 11:10pm, and realized that the guards would have long vacated by this point. She slid up the door and rushed to poke her head out again.

“But you can’t come with me,” 327 said, pensively. “I think I’m just going to envy whoever you watch over next. Hope it’s not wasted on this place, still.” She had inched herself out as far through the window as she could.

For a moment, 202 said nothing. The silence lasted long enough that one would begin to feel uncertain as to whether or not he had heard her. But then he turned—rifle held behind him—to face her. Completely.

“What I think is,” his voice was uncharacteristically affected and his eyes shimmered half-closed, “you’re destined for way more than this, you know?”

327’s eyes met his, but she remained quiet.

“You have such a heart, a thing that power wants, but never has for long. And you have it,” 202 continued. “I’m afraid of someone wantin’ it from you, out there.”

“What could...” the little pegasus’s gaze softened. “What could be more awful out there? Really?”

“I dunno...”

“Whatever kind of heart you think I have, it still grew here,” she said.

The guard swiveled his head around, checking his surroundings, before approaching the window directly. He set his rifle down, stood up on his hind legs, and wrapped his front legs around the girl, embracing her. “I can’t protect you if you go,” 202’s voice broke under his hush.

For what seemed an eternity, a rigid smile had been stuck on 327’s face. It had persisted there moments ago, hours before, and in the many days that had gone by. But as 202 hugged her, the smile vanished, and along with it emanated a profound ache that radiated through the girl’s jaw. *I know*, she felt her lips transpose the shapes that would have propagated these words, but only formless wisps tempered the air in front of her. “I know,” she tried again, her voice cracking. Slowly, her muscles relaxed as she allowed herself to be held, to be shielded from the wintry ambience.

“Do you ever hear the train?” 202 merely whispered.

327 gasped slightly at the question, and as she did, she also detected a vague fragrance on the guard. She couldn’t be certain of what it was, but its saccharine essence saturated her. “The train,” perhaps she became distracted by the aroma and had forgotten what they were talking about.

It was as if no world existed beyond them, that in their quiet embrace, the slightest twitch of the ear or the shallowest motion between them was profoundly tangible.

“Maybe you can find it,” 202 withdrew his front legs, leaving the little pegasus to readjust herself back onto the window sill.

“We’ve read about trains in social studies,” the girl slumped back onto the ledge, grinning once more with a twinge of dismay. The warmth had gone, and so had the scent. “But I hear lots of things that I can’t describe very well. What does it sound like, Zee?”

The guard held his rifle and had started returning to his post, but seized at the utterance of ‘Zee.’ Yet, he did not protest. “Like the puffs of the Ironworks, followed by a long howl.” He said this without looking at her, focused again on the road.

“Yeah, yeah, I do think I’ve heard it, somewhere outside the main gate,” the girl said. “Chh-chh-chh-chh-chh,” she rocked back and forth, imitating the sound. “They move things around on metal tracks. And with no magic, not even electricity sometimes.”

202 nodded. “And they move people, too.”

“Obviously,” she resumed swaying back and forth, mimicking the sound of the train to herself. A few moments passed without a word being shared between the two of them. 327 appeared either too entertained or at least vaguely distracted by her locomotive duties to notice that 202 had been staring at her.

“Kid, ah...” the guard started but quickly trailed off.

“Zee?”

“Do you mind if I tell you something?”

The little pegasus stilled herself. “Yeah, dude,” she snickered.

“I dunno why I’m tellin’ you this, but...” his ears flattened. “I dunno. I have this condition, see. There’s this thing about me.”

327 tilted her head intently.

“There’s a phrase for it, but whenever I get a cut or scrape, it takes forever to close up.”

“Huh,” the girl sounded more fascinated than lamenting. “That could be one of many things, as far as I know.”

“It’s somethin’ tha—”

“Wait!” 327 interrupted, giggling quite excitedly. “If it’s hereditary, if it’s, like, hemophilia, that could be the secondary trait I need to...” She became keenly aware of the solemn expression that had come across 202’s face. “...find your real parents.”

Something close to a smile tugged at the guard’s mouth. “Hemophilia, yeah.”

“Zee, I can figure out who your birth parents are.”

“Well,” with ears perked again, he now seemed to be unable to subdue his grin, which was rather befitting of his meek face, “I’m sure there are countless benefits to bein’ family-reassignment twins, don’t you think?” The sarcasm, however, was not quite as earned.

“Bastard,” the girl snorted, and 202 seemed to jump slightly at the noise, “why didn’t you tell me?” However, she didn’t give him the chance to respond as she quietly slid back inside the house. “Oh, and Zee,” she called out, starting towards the hallway. “Searchlight.”

202 promptly turned to direct his full attention to the opposite side of the road again, presumably to go about his night watch as normal, when he became bathed suddenly in a massive beam of light. “Ghh,” he endeavoured to hold a hoof up quickly enough to avert his gaze and shield his eyes, but it was wildly evident from his rapid

blinks and head wagging that it was going to be a few moments before he could see clearly again.

†

327 collected the blank sheet of paper from the kitchen table. She then drew the window blinds and shut off all the lights in the flat, before hurrying quietly to her bedroom. There was very little to speak of regarding her quarters, whose shaggy carpet was the same that graced the “living room.” A painting that featured the little pegasus, who was flanked by the “Mum” and “Dad”, dangled quite alone on the far wall, in a space all to itself. The expressions of the subjects were stern and their demeanors rigid, which, while expected of a traditional portrait, did not achieve any sense of familial affinity; this could certainly be discerned by any lay observer. On the right side was a closet—its sliding wooden door ajar—where there hung inside a few plain shirts and grey trousers; below these sat an ornate wooden chest, and upon it: a repeating rifle, whose extended barrel was polished so meticulously that its wielder could see their own reflection without labouring to do so. Opposite the closet, on the left wall, a twin bed was tucked into its corner, the sheets of which were neatly folded. A small, wooden nightstand, adorned with an equally modest lamp, stood beside it with only a single drawer to speak of. The girl’s saddlebag rested in the nook beneath it.

That was all. It was a box. Its pale hues and quotidian essentiality—if not altogether clinically uninviting—rejected all known variations of a space where one was meant to truly live. Its only source of light, that paltry lantern, flickered unceremoniously, abating at the faintest jostle or hoofstep. The family portrait (which, in itself, is already a daring characterization of the thing) served more as a strategic reminder of who belonged to the particular house that 327 was assigned to, rather than being a keepsake.

But there the girl sat, with the door now closed and the covers of her rickety bunk dressing her in a faded warmth. A banshee she appeared to be, dragging her flowing white gown across the carpet.

She had been fiddling around with something in the bed until she eventually produced a tattered, thread-bound notebook from under the sheets. The paper that 202 had cleared away for her had been sewn into the spine with orange crochet yarn. In fact, even without opening the book, it was clear that the pages alternated and varied between different sizes and materials. Makeshift bookmarks had been stuffed haphazardly between practically every other leaf, bending and twisting every which way. Each tab could be discerned by its respective pigment (some of which seemed to have been printed

that way at the time of manufacturing, while others had been scribbled with colours that otherwise seemed unavailable).

327 dropped a razor into her half-open saddlebag and opened the excessively bulging notebook. All pages but the brand-new one that had just been added were filled with a litany of disparate subjects. She sat there flipping through them and reviewing intently.

“*The Chitin-Men: 14,*” one header detailed. An entry, presented with its errors uncorrected:

Observations for September 27, 2032:

- *yeah there definitely real. saw 1 at spire while gathering.*
- *i could spot that there [She continually misspells this in the entry] exo skeleton was dark and the wings ~~was~~ were a see through green color*
- *they turned back into a pony before i could see more*
- *they looked like the same ones from August and July observations*
- *todo: find out of there scared of honey, and i dont know why they pretend to be ponies still* [It is presumed here that the latter item is intended to be a call to investigation of her inquiry]

Another entry titled “*People: 88.*”

Observations for August 10, 2034:

- *Zee tired today. didn't want to talk. its ok. i gave him a cracker and he was [The scribbles were unintelligible].*
- *i saw zest, ~~birdie~~ twist, and dufffel. nothing interesting from any of them.*
- *tophat was at the rations office today. they moved his newborn somewhere.*
- *no pursuits today*
- *1012 the chemist prof. was happy with my blood culture experiment.*
- *barber lady seemed clean finally she wont last long if she keeps smelling like her scores*

“*Operations: 154.*” This entry featured occasional diagram etchings that appeared to entail different sectors of Statera.

Observations for July 14, 2034:

- *main gate routine remains mostly the same but caravans at 14:30 have started arriving more towards 14:32. overheard nearby that equestrian surveillance keeps slowing down the caravans w/ inspections.*
- *week 3 of no long range at main, day-round. no rumors.*

- *overheard two visitors are staying to be reformed willingly*
- *overheard that last week's attempted escapee was from house 13*
- *patrol shortage on west roads T1 and T3 between 21:01 - 21:04 [An arrow connected this item to the line about the main gate routines.]*
- *accident at north forge. no deaths or injuries. it apparently happened over a week ago and nobody knew who didn't work there.*

One page featured a curiously specific entry titled "*Family 10*" with only one item detailed in it.

Observations for September 14, 2034:

- *mum expecting*

She turned to one page and underlined "blood culture experiment," then to another and etched an arrow (and here she knocked it, like a huntress, through the spine that annexed the two pages) between the phrases: "house four" and "porcupine." Repeating this process for a few entries, which all at first seemed juxtaposed in their content, she annotated, underlined, and marked connections between the details. Entries flashed by. "Real Parents," "On Equestria," "Useful Compounds Index," "Gate Rumours," "Rifle Disassembly" (this entry had several small diagrams in addendum, loose parchments fastened by crude shrapnel bits that functioned as paper clips), and "The Whirr."

Once this ritual of amendments and explications had come to a halt, she flipped the notebook to the very end again, eyeing the blank page. She procured a quill from under the bedsheets. An initial impression of it would be that it appeared merely to be fashioned together with crochet yarn and a feather. But upon deeper scrutiny, finer details came into view. The plumage—of what was likely the tail feather of a flycatcher, stubby and brown, quite unusual for a writing piece—was wound up so as to bind its delicate fibers into a stiff tube. And in fact, it was not a pen at all. A long fragment of charcoal had been stuck into the quill's end, protruding so deep inside that the extent of the otherwise milky-coloured stem became a chalky grey. The charcoal lead had been clasped at the tip of the device with an additional shrapnel bit, tempered into a half-circle shape, a claw that held everything firm.

Using this, the little pegasus began to scribble away at the page, the pinion wagging as if to beg for its relinquishment from the strings that confined it. Somewhere in the building a knock came, followed by a muffled exclamation. The girl's eyes briefly traced the ceiling, but she remained still and continued to inscribe a myriad of hatches, smudges, and words onto the paper. No noise followed; no patrols could be heard investigating. *Maybe that rat finally got hers*, she thought; *good for her*. She brushed away the dangling cerulean strands of mane from her face in order to employ both her

good eyes in this task, revealing now clearer than ever the “327” that had been branded into her forehead. It was not entirely salient what procedure brought this emblem about, given that it left no raised skin beneath her coat, nor tangible embossing or texture that would be expected of such a blemish. Silent still was her world, as we give her privacy to work, that no one spoke gravely of the numbers. Rather, they were a fact of life in the streets of Statera and within the vain fringes of her housing unit. 202, whose mane always sloped and protruded like the narrow summit of Mount Aris—miniature variants of this accenting the rest of his mane like the angular extremities of a stag beetle—always showed his number at all times. Most footmen wore their manes short as it were; thus, their markings could always be seen. Whether their foreheads being visible at all times was a requirement for the corps, 327 could not say, as the thought had never occurred to her at a moment where it would be appropriate to ask 202.

About fifteen minutes had passed by the point that the girl had put down her pen—pencil?—and one whole side of the page had been filled. What had once been a leaf from a text on fashioning yarn into discrete things had been wiped clean by 202, then populated again by 327’s etchings. What lay there now was the avenue upon which her apartment was situated, sketched in charcoal. She had captured the sandy, unpaved expanse of the road through intentionally careful stipples that had been granularly spaced and clumped. The apartment itself was quite in view; broad undulations formed the corrugated surfaces that decorated most of the peripheral joints of the building, with varying densities in the hatched shading to represent both the diversity of the metals and their age and rust, as well as the complexities of the shadows that slithered and slumped about them. The whole scene was canted, as if the viewer were a cat that had settled onto the walkway edge of the high-risen city walls and tilted its head with inquisition.

What this hypothetical cat would observe, if it intended to discern further the figures that inhabited this backdrop, was the backside of 202, who was perched high on his hind legs and reaching up into the window beside the doorway. Hanging out the window was 327, who had nestled her face into the guard’s shoulder armor.

It was first curious that she had depicted her embrace with 202 from the angle that she had. The guard’s rifle was nowhere to be seen; the windows of the adjacent apartment were entirely empty; in fact, the empty road took up at least half of the composition, with the main scene of 327 and 202 occupying the upper third. All the more curious, though, was the fact that when this had all played out just an hour or so before, the girl’s front legs were limp at her sides, with the guard enfolding her as if she were dead. In the picture, however, her front legs were shown to be wrapped back around him.

A caption read: “To the world, you were last of the few. To me, it was as if you were my brother. Like a doughnut, when I’m gone, a hole will be left in me that won’t be

filled. I will still thank you, from wherever and whenever I end up, for shaping me this way, anyway. Bastard.”

VI. Razor

December 2, 2034, the next day // Statera, through the eyes of 327

Overcast with an etiolated pale the heavens had transposed, as if dried up in the evil of winter. The whole sick of ash had concealed the empyrean, confounding the sun in its endeavours to peek through. O'er the rooftops and altogether out of reach to even the most ardent pegasus, such a prison the sky had been fashioned that—

Crack! A gunshot. And so much for reveling in anything, I shall say. *Crack—tk!* A gunshot piercing its target. *Crack-tk! Crack-crack-crack-tk-tk-tk!* A volley of shots loosed by the hooves of a skilled marksman.

“Right on, 327!” the firing instructor remarked. “Right on, indeed! I would hate to be on the other end of a firefight with a girl like you.”

“I like those odds,” the little pegasus spat at the ground. *Crack-tk! Crack-tk!* It appeared that to wield these instruments, it was required of her to stand on her hind legs.

“O-odds?” they said with the frail squeak of a mouse. “But, um, I will say,” they heedfully stepped towards the girl, hanging their head almost as if to bow in reverence, “would it not be more constructive to, um, well, aim for the head?”

“Like, how do I put this?” She squeezed the trigger again—without at all wincing or appearing to physically anticipate the recoil—but the rifle responded instead with an exasperated and dejected *chk-k*. Rotating the rifle with an unflinching discretion, she inspected the ejection port. Empty. She removed the slim magazine, which arced rather subtly, and further scrutinized it, confirming it, too, was empty. “What if I wasn’t trying to hit the head?” Here she scrunched her nose at the paper man at the far end of the range. All but one distinct perforation had found themselves in the extremities of the target, with the outlying headshot being a dead bullseye.

“D-don’t dry-fire your firearm, miss,” the instructor failed to get a rein on their stammering whilst their outstretched hoof appeared to be shakily gesturing to the girl’s gun.

“Dude,” the girl snorted, maintaining eye contact with them, as she slid another magazine into her weapon. Then, she grasped the bolt and drew it back—*shhk!*—and let it go—*chhk!* She relaxed her shoulders and brought the rifle up to her view, forming a perfect right angle to her chest. “The whole hitch with the dry-firing was figured out by the time they put the MKII in circulation.”

Crack-tk-crack-tk-crack-tk! Crack-tk-crack-tk-crack-tk!
Crack-tk-Crack-tk...chk-k...

“Shouldn’t you know that?”

Back over the girl's shoulder, the instructor scooted briskly behind a small wooden podium that was bolted to the floor. They held their hoof up, probably half-expecting the sun to catch their eyes, but alas, the overcast gloom that hung over Statera, the grey homogeneity that cradled the whole of the universe behind it—

“Why yes, you are correct. Quite the trouble that old MKI, quite the trouble indeed,” the firing instructor ran a hoof through their shaggy mane.

“Quite the trouble indeed,” 327 murmured in imitation, noticeably short of such a highbrow cadence. “That all good enough, then?” The girl set down the rifle and began a thorough disassembly of it.

The teacher shuffled some papers before ambling out from behind the podium again. Casually at first, they glanced downrange. “Oh my,” they uttered, and at this observation, they began a hasty, shuffling approach to the firing line. “W-wh...” their jittering awe toddled between veneration and perplexity.

“And look at that,” 327 remarked, the weapon's larger discrete components now lying on the steel shooting bench before her. The girl gesticulated overdramatically at the underside of the upper receiver. “The inner rod survived the dry firing, too,” she snorted.

“So it did,” the instructor—who was bending down quite unflatteringly over the table, their uniform unbuttoning in the most awkward places and their hind belt becoming unseated from the beltways of their otherwise spindly trousers—adjusted their round spectacles as if it were a magnifying glass, but failed still to see any clearer than before. They straightened themselves, as a queer fellow ought not to do, and squinted at the girl. “Why not always aim with the exactitude you just displayed?”

327 swiveled her head over her shoulder, briefly eyeing the pony up and down, before altogether turning to face them completely. “Well, say it was you down there, and me right where I am. Where would you want me to get you?”

Not a sound came from the teacher. Instead, they maintained what seemed initially to be some manner of eye contact, but rather it was an unfocused glaze that remained aimed at wherever the girl's eyes had been about three or four seconds prior. It remained unbroken.

“Me—like—me, personally,” 327 sauntered up to them, “I think I'd just take the leg shot. Gives me some time to think, you feel me?” She patted them on the shoulder and trotted to make her exit from the shooting range, which mostly sat in the open air but for a few corrugated canopies and makeshift reed walls. The instructor, whose glazed stare remained unbroken still, did not turn to see her off.

At the far end of the range, the paper man stood with eight new bullet holes. Two made a snake bite mark in the neck. Five more were situated within the inner rings of the

head. The last was nearly impossible to discern, as it overlapped with the previous bullseye the girl had left.