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The fanfic *Cupcakes* was created by “SergeantSprinkles, World’s greatest party Clown” and is visible at <http://www.equestriadaily.com/2011/02/story-cupcakes.html> and elsewhere online. It is recommended that you are familiar with this fanfic and the entire mythos of alternate endings it spawned before reading this.

The basics of the forensic technics described in this fanfic, as well as certain facts concerning Equine physiology and behaviour (such as the use of “twitches” to alleviate stress) are grounded in reality.

Part five: body of evidence

Wedge and Biggs spent a few hours in that office, going through witness reports and the lists of physical evidence, looking for any trace of a coherent plan in the suspects actions. There was none. If someone had found a way to control Pinkie, to rig the lottery to set who died next, they couldn’t see any pattern to it. The problem was, they had very few missing pony reports: there were some, of course, but the problem was that Ponyville was on the edge of the Everfree forest, had easy links to Cloudsdale, Canterlot and Appleloosa: a lot of ponies were either just passing though, or could have vanished into thin air without gathering suspicion because everypony would just assume they had moved to Cloudsdale or wherever for a bit. Even those reported missing, the Everfree forest was blamed with almost all disappearances of hikers: Pinkie had killed enough to generate some interest in the local police into unusual disappearances, but not enough to give them anything to work on.

Put simply, it was hard to spot a pattern when you had no clue how many ponies had disappeared, and there were no bodies, only body-parts, to work with when it came to establishing *who* was actually dead.

“Okay,” said Biggs. “We have no witnesses to an actual killing, no clue how many there may have been, possibly up to a hundred and twenty if Pinkie was picking three numbers a week for a full forty weeks, no clue as to if she had outside help.”

“She said she did.” Said Wedge.”

“She may have lied.” Said Biggs, “No clue as to who this help may have been if she had it, but Fluttershy is our best bet, and even if we found who was helping her, we don’t know if that was the pony who sabotaged her lottery. If that about it?”

“We know that body in the morgue isn’t Rainbow Dash, if Pinkie’s telling the truth that is, so she’s probably killed at least once since Dash went missing three or four days ago; so it’s possible that the other pony, this fourteen-oh-eight or four oh nine, is already dead. And we have no clue why Rainbow Dash and this other Pony were killed, why somepony would add these two to the random killings.” Finished Wedge.

“Arrrg. Let’s go over the witness statements again, check it against the physical evidence we gathered this morning and look for any discrepancy and- Celestia!”

“What? What now?”

“No no, Celestia! She’s here!” said Biggs, wedging himself against the window. Sure enough Princess Celestia was outside, consoling grief-stricken ponies. Wedge instantly felt on edge: although he was trained as a crime scene officer, and knew he was one of the best in Equestria, he was first and foremost a member of the Palace Guard, and so felt ill at ease every time he saw Celestia out and he wasn’t the one guarding her. He felt a little better when he saw a security detail at a discrete distance, and Aquilinus sticking close to her on the pretext of showing her around the scene and explaining what had happened: if Pinkie Pie’s “friend” tried anything, at least Celestia was protected.

“Where’s she going now?” asked Wedge. Biggs squinted: lip-reading was one of the optional advanced training options taught to palace guard: everypony had to take three advanced options in addition to bodyguard training, and while both he and Wedge had taken detection and crime scene forensics, only Biggs had taken lip reading. It worked well, although peanut butter often gave false-positive results, to his acute embracement.

“Oh No. she wants to see into the basement, but Aquilinus has told her it’s not possible when it’s still a crime scene.”

“That’s good, nopony wants to *have* to see that.”

“Oh *No*: she’s says she must learn exactly what’s happened, if she’s to understand how her poor subjects have suffered at the hooves of this killer. She’s insisting on seeing the scene, and the physical evidence. Oh that’s just great, she’s looking into our cart.”

Wedge winced. They had brought an unmarked covered cart to load the physical evidence into for transport back to the place, and with all the stuff they had removed from the basement, it was a carnival of horrors in there at the moment.

“Well, she is Princess, and that sounds like her: she’s never been one to turn a blind eye to suffering.”

“True, but I think the crowd would be a little put out if she hurls in front of them.”

“Biggs!”

“Hey, I hurled, you hurled. It’s just a possibility, that’s all I’m saying. Huh, she coming out. She looks, well, sad but serene, if that makes sense. Okay, she’s gone into the town hall to talk to the witnesses.”

“Good. And Biggs for pity’s sakes, she’s over a thousand years old: She was never going to hu- to be sick. You think in all that time she’s never seen something like that before? Don’t get me wrong, serial killers are rare in Equestria, one this bad in a century maybe, but that still means odds are she’s done this at least nine times before.” He considered what he had seen in the basement. “Okay, probably not quite like this, but she’s good at what she does. The best.”

“Yeah, And I guess as she was at least told what to expect before coming down; she could prepare herself. Although that said, I’d not have liked to have been the one to tell her she may have eaten cannibal cupcakes before now.”

“True. Okay, she’ll want to talk to us, you know? See how the case is progressing? We better have something to tell her. Let’s go over checking those witness statements against the physical evidence one more time.”

“Oh all *right*. Although I still think we should just wait until we find this Fluttershy and then arrest her.”

“Meh. It’s a good starting point though: let’s check over the statement of *all* the suspect’s friends again. I’ll go over the written statement Rarity gave the local cops before we spoke to her, compare it with what she actually said, you go over this Applejacks statement, her Brother Big Mac’s too: if Pinkie had help, there’s probably some clue to it in her friends’ statements. We’ll need to find Celestia’s student at some point too, but that can wait.”

“How are you going to compare the written statements to what she actually said... Oh come on Wedge, are you *still* carrying that stupid Dictaphone under your armour? I thought you’d finally outgrown all that talking-to-yourself, look-at-me-everyone-I’m-describing -the-crime-scene-to-a-Dictaphone phase! You said it was a crutch for Crime-scene officers who couldn’t make proper notes on paper like they were supposed to. Besides, you have almost perfect memory!”

“*Almost* perfect, and yes it is a crutch: I don’t use it to keep my notes anymore because I was getting sloppy in my written notes, and we nearly lost a case because of it; chain of custody almost got broken. But you’ve got to admit, getting witnesses statements and even other officer’s observations on the record when they don’t know you are doing it does help sometimes. Besides, this thing was expensive; I’m not just going to throw it away.”

“Does Celestia know you still have that thing? I thought she didn’t approve of them.”

“She doesn’t approve, but she doesn’t know, and to my knowledge she hasn’t outright banned them.”

Biggs snorted. Wedge put on his earphones, and begun playing Rarity and the suspect’s verbal statement over and over as he read the corresponding written statements and looked at the crime-scene photographs and the index of all the physical evidence removed from the scene, hoping that this time, something would jump out at him as inconsistent.

The physical evidence didn’t lie: spot an inconsistency between that and a pony’s version of events, and you had something to work on. The problem was, there wasn’t a lot of diagnostic physical evidence at the moment: Pinkie Pie may have been painting her victims skulls and mounting them to the walls, and that would help them identify the victims eventually, but she’d been very good at removing anything that might help them reconstruct the exact chain of events. They still had no clue in what order any of this had happened. She’d clearly cleaned extensively after each killing and disposed of the fleshy parts of the corpse very quickly: The only blood splatter patterns they’d found were from the last victim, so the old trick of working out which victims had died first by seeing whose blood was overlaid on top of whose was out, in fact most of the blood they had found looked like fly-cast; spots of blood left not by splatter, but by flies feeding on the blood, overeating, and then landing on the walls and regurgitating it in distinctive comma shaped spots. Blood was out.

She'd kept the place clean and cooked the bodies so quickly that flies hadn't been able to hatch any lava in the bodies, so dating how long ago victims were killed by identifying the remains of larval instars of flies was out. Normally you'd get dozens of maggots or similar, and as you knew how long it took fly lava to grow to a particular instar, or larval stage, at a certainty temperature, you could use that to date when the body had first been attracting flies. Most times you even got flies whose lava fed of the other flies larva, which let you date with surprising accuracy, but there were simply no bodies left around to gather bugs: no Holarctic Blowfly, no predatory Black Garbage fly: the only insect they'd recovered was a silverfish and you found those in every crime scene there was, and most non-crime scene basements as well. Silverfish didn't grow up in bodies giving you a date of death, they just turned up near them, they didn't tell you anything. Bugs were out.

It was possible that some of the trophies that had been painted or jarred would have pollen stuck in the paint or jars, and that could establish time of year, but it was inaccurate. Bugs they could pin it down to a few days, pollen, a few weeks. You could hardly ask possible accomplices to provide an alibi for where they were an entire week. Pollen was out.

Hair? Even if they found hairs that they could prove weren't from Pinkie or any of the victims, half of Ponyville had been to that shop to purchase food or for parties in the last month, hairs from a dozen ponies who'd never been in the basement could still end up getting blown or swept down there every time Pinkie opened the trap door. Finding somepony's hair in that basement didn't prove they'd set hoof there themselves.

Fibres? So few ponies wore clothing unless it was a special occasion, it was barely worth considering.

Hoof prints? All looked the same.

Pinkie may have been crazy, but she wasn't stupid: the only mess in the basement was from the last victim. There may have been dozens of souvenirs from older victims, but they had been so striped of any value as evidence they'd be next to useless for establishing a time-line, and no time line meant they'd not be able to check possible accomplices alibis as they'd not know what times and dates they should have an alibi for. No, if there was going to be a way to crack this case, it was to check for a discrepancy between the few things they knew for sure about the scene, and what the witnesses said about it. After about fifteen minutes the sounds in his ears had faded to background noise, and Wedge was engrossed in the written reports, but he knew that out of that background noise a phrase would jump out at him. It was just a matter of time...

"WEDGE!" yelled Biggs, yanking out an earphone and shouting.

"Arg! What! There was no need to shout!"

“Really? I did call your name three times. Look at this... Applejacks statements ‘I just couldn’t believe it. She was just standing’ there laughing, wiping her bloody hooves on that awful suit, smiling at me like she always used to, as if all this was just normal and fun’.. What suit? We didn’t recover any clothing from the scene. And look, here it is again in her statement. And look, here in her brothers ‘that dress’. What dress? And the mayor was blabbering on about needlework when I saw then ship her off for treatment in Canterlot, I thought she must have seen the awful banner, but in hindsight...”

Wedge looked, and then checked the evidence index. There were a few garments listed, but all innocuous, and recovered from the rooms of the shops owners, Mr and Mrs Cake, or from the suspects bedroom. There was no mention of anything unusual or untoward, no mention of any clothing recovered from the cellar, and no mention that the suspect was wearing anything when arrested. Or rather, Wedge thought, there wasn’t by the time the Palace guard arrived on the scene.

“Biggs, how long after the Mayor burst out of there screaming did the local cops arrive?”

“Town constable arrived within two minutes, and promptly passed out. Doc Whooves was patching up the mayor as Big Mac made a citizen’s arrest and put the suspect in the cell down the corridor after five, first message got to Canterlot within twenty minutes. Aquilinus arrived with the rapid deployment team to secure the scene within half an hour of the Mayor’s little discovery, I got here within forty five. You, what? About an hour, seeing as you were dragging that evidence cart?”

“About that, the point of the cart is that nopony suspects its holding valuable evidence, so it’s a non-flying model, designed to blend in with local traffic, so even loaded onto an express train it takes at least an hour overland. So what you’re saying is for half an hour the scene was unsecured, the local law and the mayor were out of it, the M.E. busy with his other medical duties, and anypony could have just waked into our scene and removed or tampered with evidence? How could this get worse?”

“The evidence cart... on fire.”

“Oh haha.”

“No! Wedge, the evidence cart is actually *on fire!*” yelled Biggs.

Wedge snapped around.

Outside the window, smoke was pouring out of their cart. There were no visible flames yet, but a flicker of light shining through the doors to the back of the cart left little doubt as to what was happening.

Palace guard training took over. Without a second's hesitation, Wedge hit the window hooves first, eyes closing for just the minimum amount of time necessary to protect them. Biggs was though after him and in the air over the cart, beating his wings and wincing in the convection currents.

"I can grab a rain-cloud, put it out that way, but the evidence, I'll be soaked! It'll all be ruined!"

"Beat it out! Fly and get a tree-branch or something! I'll try pulling as much of the evidence out of the cart as I can, then you beat out any flames on the actual evidence!"

"You open that up it'll explode! You'll be hit by the backdraft!"

"Well then you'll just have to pull a double shift pulling the evidence out and then betting it, won't you!" yelled Wedge, hovering by the door to the cart. The cart was still locked, and the metal padlock too hot for him to even think of grabbing it for long enough to use the kea, so he bucked the lock off. Cautiously, feeling the heat through both the wood and the thickness of his hooves, he took the door handle, angling himself carefully to avoid the worst of the backdraft he knew he'd get when he opened the door and let more oxygen in, and he braced himself to open the door, wings beating to try and drive some of the heat away from him, blood pounding in his ears, and the tin taste of adrenalin in his mouth. He wondered if the victims had felt a little like this, underneath the pain and fear: the backdraft may well burn or even kill him, he knew but he had to save the evidence no matter what the cost, just as they knew they had to escape, and like them he knew it was futile, but had to be tried anyway. He felt he no longer had control over whether he lived or died, and in a way that was easier. What happened happened: if his number came up, it came up...

"Guardspony Wedge! As you *were!*"

yelled a voice. Even though the booming of his heart and his rising panic, it cut right to his core. He leapt back. He could not but obey.

A bolt of cool pastel light slammed into the woodwork where he'd been standing moments ago. He saw the frost blossom, spreading out from that point like ripples and leaving a perfect chrysanthemum pattern that melted almost instantly, like dew. The flickering light stopped. The smoke vanished, like magic. A second later, the doors popped open. Somepony had posted burring paper or rags through the thin gap between the door and the door frame, but thanks to the sudden bolt of unearthly dry cold, the damage was minimal and the vast majority of the evidence was saved.

He was aware of Biggs flapping his wings and dropping the tree-branch he had grabbed to the ground in mute shock and admiration. Slowly, he turned.

She was about ten paces from him, head down, horn aimed at the door of the cart, panting slightly with a mix of exertion from the spell and surprise, but she still, in spite of all the horrors of the day, she managed to smile grimly.

“Gaurdspony Wedge, however good it looks on you, I’m fairly sure that gold armour I issue you isn’t heat proof.” And then she smiled again at his shock and at the irony. Wedge was so shocked he dropped onto his knees, unable to stand.

“I’m glad I can do my bit to protect *you* for once, loyal guardian. And although I am royalty, there’s really no need to bow in order to thank me.” Said Princess Celestia. “All in a day’s work.”

Part six: chain of custody

“Majesty!” Said Wedge and Biggs almost simultaneously, Biggs dropping to the ground to bow, wings flared, Wedge pulling himself up from the ground to do the same. Evidently Celestia found this mildly amusing as she smiled again, but said nothing. She turned and nodded to Aquilinus, and he and the other guards shooed the crowd back inside so that Celestia and her guards were alone.

Celestia moved closer to the damaged cart, and peered inside.

“How great is the damage?”

“Minimal, thanks to you your Majesty. We were preparing a report for you when we looked out of the window and saw the smoke.”

“The mayor’s office I see, I’m guessing Aquilinus let you back there despite my orders, but in hind sight it’s just as well, you’d never have seen the smoke except from that office. And the nature of the report?”

“As to whether the killer Miss Pie was acting alone. We had some evidence that she may have been aided, but I think that this answers that question.” Said Wedge, still in his bow.

“Humm, that rather precludes against any premise other than the one that the sole aim of the fire was to interfere with your investigation, and it is possible that there could have been other reasons for this fire.”

“With.. with humblest respect majesty, I can’t think of many other reasons.” Said Biggs. Celestia stared for a moment, and then smiled weakly.

“Biggs, you really don’t need to keep bowing, I fell silly talking to the back of your neck. And although I agree trying to sabotage the investigation is the most likely I can think of, I can still think of plenty of other possible reasons for setting that fire. A distraught relative or friend of a victim, disgusted with the trophies the killer had made, determined to destroy them? Someone in denial that this could happen in their town trying to destroy the evidence? A gruesome souvenir hunter trying steal something and then torching the cart to try and destroy the evidence of the theft? A colt daring a friend to look into the cart full of horrifying stuff, and then once there being daring to pull a further prank...” she then looked back to the broken window. “A diversion, to keep the attention of the guards out here whilst they either tried to free or tried to lynch the suspect?” Wedge and Biggs glanced nervously at each other. “Oh don’t worry; I jumped to that conclusion when I saw the smoke: while you were running towards the evidence, I sent Aquilinus to secure the prisoner.”

“Majesty, it’s not safe here, you should return to Canterlot.” Said Wedge and Biggs together. Celestia snorted.

“Jinks.” She said she realised the look she was getting and coughed. “I’m sorry, it’s been a very sad and tiring night, but the two of you saying that together, when you look so alike in uniform. Jinks: That what Luna and I used to do as a game when we were little, and spoke together, the first pony to realise it and say Jinks forces the other one to stay silent until they say hear their name said three times...”

“Majesty...”

“Gaurdspony Wedge, you concern does you credit, but my ponies come first, and they need me. I need to be seen here, with my subjects, in their hour of need. I’ll be perfectly safe.”

“We thought that the cart was perfectly safe, majesty.”

“Ah, well, yes, Aquilinus was guarding that, but I’m afraid I rather monopolised his attention. I asked him to show me about, and that must have left it ungraded.”

“Even so majesty, both you and the cart would be safer in Canterlot.”

“Well, there’s no reason the cart can’t go back. I’ll send a message to Spike, asking him to pass it on and get another deployed. That way you have a cart for any new evidence that might appear, and this one gets sent back before it or the evidence can get any more damaged. I’ll get Aquilinus to take it.”

Wedge considered this. In an ideal world, the same officers who collected the evidence would, be the ones to take it back for analysis: the less Hooves it passed through on its way to court, the lesser the chance of somepony making a mistake. But so long as Aquilinus signed for it, the chain of evidence would remain unbroken, and so the evidence could be used in court without claims that it was unaccounted for at any point since collection. Most courts would ask difficult questions about how it nearly caught fire, but given the flaming rags were posted in the gap under the door, it wasn’t as if they could accuse any one of actually getting inside the cart the same way, even if, as Celestia pointed out, there were valid reasons for someone *wanting* to. Then Wedge realised something else.

“Spike is in Canterlot? So your student..?” Celestia sighed.

“Yes, Twilight Sparkle is back in Canterlot. She’s been terribly hurt by all this: I sent her here to *learn* about friendship, and I must say, she surprised even me. Even I couldn’t predict how much the power of friendship would change her, improve her, and now... well, I think a little time away from Ponyville will do her the power of good. In fact I think I’ll have to keep her at Canterlot for quite some time, until I feel sure she’s coping.”

Wedge stepped forwards. He was sworn to always obey Celestia’s wishes, but he was also sworn to always uphold her laws, and the suspect had distinctly threatened a unicorn in her rant when she’d realised somepony had rigged her lottery. “Majesty, although I’m sure it is best for your student to be returned to Canterlot, I still need to interview her with regards to my investigation: she was a close friend to both suspect and victim, and her information could prove vital to this case.” He stood rock still, awaiting any rebuke with dignity, as befitted a royal guard. To his surprise Celestia looked back at him with something akin to pride.

“That took a lot of courage Wedge: I’m glad you speak your mind, even to me, I’ve always admired that about you. Her information will keep a day or two until you can finish here. She’s my student, Wedge, my prize student: when I heard of this the first thing I did was

look to her safety and get her version of events. She was no-where near Sugercube Corner, she had yet to leave her library that morning, she hadn't even heard what had happened when I arrived to take her home. Telling her was heart-breaking, but I got her account of what she was doing this morning, and I know when she lies: there are spells that will compel the truth; they require you to know the person you're casting them on almost as well as you know yourself, but they are next to infallible. And, more importantly, easily corroborateable with witnesses. No buts Wedge: this has been extremely emotionally painful for her, and she stays in Canterlot until I feel she is better."

"Majesty." Said Wedge, bowing. "If you say she's telling the truth and didn't see or know anything, then I accept it whole-heartedly." He said, not quite meaning it " And a thousand thanks for saving the cart, and saving me. I don't know what we'd all do without you."

"Given I control the sun, probably resort to *that* when the food runs out." Sighed Celestia, looking to Sugercube corner. "Remember Wedge, no matter how horrific what you've seen today is, that anypony could be driven to similar if things got that desperate. I remember the last time there was a major famine in Equestria, back during the reign of Discord, when it snowed ice cream in winter and cotton candy clouds circled raining chocolate milk in summer, and there was nothing at all to eat for ponies because although it has the taste and texture, magically generated food has the same nutritional value of the air from which it is formed. Just because it amused Discord to watch ponies starve when they could see food all around, and eat it, and still go hungry. Don't hate Pinkie Pie, Wedge, pity her: she was at least mad, once pony ate pony for survival. Be glad I'll never let that happen again, no matter what. Oh, and I understand you both... became unwell... when you found out you'd eaten the suspects cooking in the past, so I brought you some sandwiches from Canterlot because I thought you'd not trust the food in Ponyville anymore. You'll have no appetite, but eat anyway, and that's an order; you'll set a pretty poor example to the local cops if you pass out with hunger! And now, if you'll excuse me, I have a sunset to organise, and some very sad ponies to deal with."

They both bowed, but Wedge couldn't help but push his luck. "Majesty, we are having trouble locating one of the victims friends, who we have reason to believe may have been colluding with the killer." Celestia stared, stunned

"Who?"

"Fluttershy, Majesty."

"F... *Fluttershy!*? Wedge, when you went through that window, did you hit your head by any chance? She's the only pony I've ever known to apologise for her apology being too apologetic! Why in Equestria would you even suspect her?"

“She had access to controlled drugs, similar to those used to drug and torture the victims, Majesty.”

“She had? Now where would she... Oh... After that incident with the cockatrice, I thought even if I couldn’t protect her from everything, she still had better have some of the basic medicines I’d want on-hand to deal with dangerous creatures if I were a Pegasus with no magic...”

“You sent them?” Celestia closed her eyes, and nodded.

“And now you find I may have been part of this, Forgive me, Wedge, for what I’ve done. I’ve helped her. I’ve helped her kill.”

“Majesty! You couldn’t have known!” Celestia snorted.

“My apologies, Wedge, and you too Biggs. I’ll put out Fluttershy’s description, and see if I can get Spike to send you a photograph; you’ll need one for wanted posters and whatnot, I assume. Now, this time I really have to go. Aquilinus, can you escort me inside please? Maybe there you could explain why these two were in a room off the corridor the suspect is being held in, and why Big Mac is holding the door of that room shut, despite my strict orders that the prisoner was to be kept isolated...”

Aquilinus sheepishly put the evidence he had picked up and was examining at Wedge’s hooves, and hurried after her, looking nervous. Wedge and Biggs watched her go inside, and then sat down and half-heartedly ate their sandwiches as they looked at the mess. A few other guards had started packing up the evidence back into the cart, ready to move it out.

“Did the Princess say she had to make the sunset? Is it really that late?”

“Fraid so Wedge. Doesn’t time *fly* when you’re investigating multiple Equicides? Huh, you’d think Luna would have taken over her share of the work by now. There’s only so long you can mope and let your big sister do all the work, even if you’re still finding your hooves after a thousand years spent banished. So, what now?”

“Well, our evidence is all being carted off so we can’t look at that. Celestia will be moving the prisoner, and even if she wasn’t we’ll not get in to see her again, and of the victim and the killer’s closet friends, one’s in Canterlot, two counting the dragon, one’s probably on the run, and two are in yonder dressmakers. I’m not sure about this Twilight, even after what Celestia has said, so I want to talk to her, but that’s not possible right now. So, all we can do constructively is try and find

Fluttershy, or interview this Applejack, and re-interview Miss Rarity. If it's that late, do you want to talk to the two in the morning and focus on finding Fluttershy for now?"

Biggs looked at Wedge. "You're actually going along with my idea of looking for Fluttershy? *You Mr near-perfect-memory, senior officer, doing what I said?*"

"Well, yeah. Don't let it go to your head. I don't know about you, but after what I saw, I'm not sleeping tonight, and that fire got me feeling wired. Let's do something: lets catch this Fluttershy! If only we knew what she looked like, that would be a start... Ah..."

Wedge looked, and Biggs followed his gaze. Aquilinus was flying over with a photograph in his mouth, he looks in quite a hurry, as could be explained by the fact that Princesses Celestia was standing in the doorway, watching him deliver it.

"A photo of Fluttershy, sent from Spike just this moment." He hesitated, unable to put it into Wedge's outstretched hoof for some reason.

"Thanks. What is it Ack? Did you get into trouble with Celestia for letting us thought to see the suspect? If so, I'll talk to her, take the blame myself..." Aquilinus giggled a little nervously.

"It's too late for that, I'm afraid. Too late for that." He said. He then quite deliberately put the photo on the ground, near the jar he'd been holding a moment before. He then flew strait back to Celestia. He did not stop or look back. Wedge was left standing with his hoof out for no reason. He looked at Biggs, who shrugged.

"He always was a little weird, that one. Well? Let's look at the picture, before it gets completely dark here!"

Wedge raised the picture to his eyes, and although he should have suspected it, was still a little shocked.

"She's... she's so *young!*"

"Let's see? Huh. Pretty little thing too. Come on, let's not give into clichés and say she didn't look like she had it in her. If today has taught us anything, it's that you never know *who* has it in them." Said Biggs, as one of the guards celestial had ordered to pack up the cart quietly tried to edge past.

“Yeah.” Said Wedge. The guard hovered in the background as Wedge stared at the photo. “Strange, she looks almost familiar...” eventually the guard lost his patience.

“Excuse me.” He said, gently nudging past and reaching down he picked up the jar Aquilinus had left by Wedge’s hooves. As he picked it up Wedge glanced into the jar. The jar glanced back.

The guard nearly dropped the jar, and Biggs, who had heard some pretty interesting language out of Wedge over the years still took off into the air out of sheer shock at the level of profanity. He hovered overhead, uncertainly.”

“Wedge, you okay partner?”

“Stupid stupid *stupid!* Pinkie said it in the interrogation Dashie was the very first of her special friends, why didn’t I see it then! And *arrgg!* she said the pony she did after Dash wasn’t totally surprised, as if she’d got suspicious, well of course she would, if she found someone had been stealing her medicines! And her address, public bridleway seven, number four oh nine! I’m so stupid! It was there right in front of me the whole time: Dash’s file said she lived at 1408 cloud dale plaza! I’m *stupid!*”

“Not really.” Said Doctor Whooves, plodding over and looking tired. “You’re no-where near as dim as this one.” he said, nodding at Biggs.

“Oh ha ha Doc. Now, can you give Wedge a twitch? He’s acting funny!”

“Yeah, and you’re flapping around overhead for what reason exactly? Funny is where you find it.” Said the doctor, as Biggs lands next to him. Biggs’s nostrils suddenly flared, he looked panicky, and he almost took off again, but in the end he just turned his head away from the doctor, covered his nose with both hooves and swore. The Doc smiled, grimly and without humour.

“Yeah I know, I reek of blood, and worse. I though you boys would want the autopsy report the *second* I finished it, so I didn’t stop to clean up. Multiple injuries, but death was by a combination of shock exasperated by substantial exsanguination, and suffocation; she went into shock and blacked out from the blood loss, drop in blood pressure, and pain, and unable to wake she simultaneously choked on her own vomit, probably whilst she was being flayed, given the flaying showed signs of being both perimortem and post-mortem trauma. Happens often enough: we’re not designed to vomit, us ponies, that’s why colic is such a big killer. Actually, you Pegasus tend to survive colic better as you better at vomiting; you guys have a weaker sphincter mechanism at the gastroesophageal junction because of all the adaptations you have for flight deforms you ribcage

slightly, so everything internally is slightly re-arranged, making it far easier for you to, as we medically put it, blow chunks.”

“Eww, well thanks for that doc, but at the moment, we’re trying to find this Fluttershy, so...” Biggs tried to shoo the Doc off, so he could find out what had freaked Wedge. The Doc just glared.

“Find Fluttershy eh? We’ll let me give you a helping hoof there, ‘cause I’ve just spent the last two and a half hours with her.” he said tossing the autopsy report onto the ground in front of them. “Dental came back: You’re dead Pegasus in the basement? None other than the much maligned mysteriously missing mortally mangled Miss Fluttershy.”

“I know.” Said Wedge. Biggs and the Doc started. Wedge tossed down the photograph of Fluttershy, like a hand of cards he really didn’t want to play, and then nodded to the rather perplexed guard standing watching them. He was still holding the jar. Two perfect blue-green derp’ed at then from inside it, eyes which were dead ringers for the rather more co-ordinated ones in the photo.

“Woah! That. **Aint. Right!**” said Biggs, turning away from the jar. Doc Whooves reached out to take them, and the guard hesitated. Doc gave him a look.

“I know they’re evidence, but I’ll sign for them as M.E., and Wedge will witness the transfer. No? I’m still hoping we’ll find her hide and give her some dignity before this is over... but do you really want to have to explain to the parents why their little filly doesn’t have her eyes when they come to bury her?” said the Doctor gently as he took the jar. He then looked Wedge in the eye, and nodded. Slowly he turned, and walked back the way he came.

After a while, Biggs spoke.

“We’ll, may as well call of the pony-hunt.”

“Yep.”

They sat in silence a moment longer, as the sun set. Celestia came out into the town square to address the assembled ponies in the dusk, and whilst she was doing this, Biggs nudged Wedge and nodded to the rear of the building: The suspect was being stretchered out, still sedated, and into an awaiting unmarked ambulance cart. Doc Whooves supervised her being loaded in, and then signed her over to the guards before greeting a pony Wedge recognised as a medic from Canterlot, and getting in the ambulance with her. The plan clearly was to get her out of there and to Canterlot quickly and quietly whilst the crowd was distracted, to avoid an angry mob converging on her. However, for some reason Big Mac who had been one of the ponies carrying the stretcher was stopped from getting back in by one of the guards, and told to ride in the ambulance too. Whooves had already gotten into the back of the ambulance, clearly intending not to abandon one of his

patents no matter how deranged, and with no other pony he knew to consult, Big Mac got in somewhat nervously. Wedge glanced to Biggs, who had stopped chewing his sandwich and had narrowed his eyes in concentration.

“They’re saying that he’s needed to confirm some details of his witness statement, and he may as well ride to Canterlot with them now rather than walk or get a train tomorrow. They say that the mayor, the shops owners, the food Hygiene inspector and the town constable are already there, so if he and Whooves comes that will be everyone who was at the scene with it was first discovered, so if he comes they can cross-check their stories and get it finished quicker. I can’t see his reply. Now they’re all looking in to the cart, Doc must be talking... now, they’re all nodding: it’s settled, he goes with them.”

Wedge considered this, as the doors slammed shut and the unmarked cart pulled away into the evening twilight.

“Odd, it’s not usual to let a civilian ride with an injured suspect, but perhaps Whooves suggested it for some reason: If I was the Doc I’d sure want someone that strong on stand-by in case she woke up. Pity they’ve gone though, I haven’t had a chance to ask Big Mac about that suit he said he saw.”

“So, with Fluttershy dead, the list of most likely accomplices is now Celestia’s prize student, who certainly has the magical power to do almost anything, but is miles way and can’t be questioned yet, as is the other main witness Big Mac, or the two in that’s dress shop, who we could question right now..”

“Yes, that would seem to be it. Want to go clothes shopping Biggs?” Asked Wedge jokingly. Biggs snorted as he put down his half eaten sandwich.

“You bet, partner.”

Part seven: stitched up.

As they approached the shop, Wedge stopped, and nodded to a pony standing some way away, at the edge of the crowd Celestia was addressing. Everypony was facing their Monarch, except two: Aquilinus, hovering nervously at her side and scanning the cowed, and the little yellow eavesdropping filly.

Biggs, remembering how she had run away rather than tell them anything useful before, instantly went into “suspect” mode, and dashed towards her. She understandably panicked and fled deeper into the crowd. Biggs bore down on her too fast for her to escape, except that the guards dragging the damaged evidence cart back to Canterlot pulled out in front of him, and as he tried to dodge around them he ploughed into another stack of inexplicable cardboard boxes. He recovered quickly

and nearly caught up to her, at which point two ponies who were repairing the window they had damaged earlier stepped in front of him, carrying a large sheet of glass. He instinctively tried to duck under it, and would have managed if his wings hadn't caught, leaving him more or less face down in the dirt struggling pointlessly as she disappeared under somepony's legs and was gone, vanished into the crowd. After a brief struggle and a lot of swearing, he pulled himself out from under the glass without shattering it.

"Darn it! I nearly had her Wedge!" he yelled, he then noticed the half-amused look his partner was giving him, and glared. "What!?"

"Oh nothing, it's just firstly she had useful information we want, it's not like she's a dangerous criminal or anything, so you shouldn't have scared her off, and secondly it must have been a longer day that we thought: you can *fly* Biggs, you could have just gone over all those obstacles." Biggs stared blankly for a second, before rearing up and stamping both front hooves down in frustration. The noise spooked the already bemused ponies carrying the glass, and one of them, Caramel, dropped his end, shattering it. Biggs stared in embracement for a moment as every pony including Celestia turned to stare at him, before walking away towards the dress shop with the blank expression and quiet dignity expected from a place guardspony. Once out of sight, he burst out laughing, slightly hysterically. It had reached that point in a murder investigation: laugh or cry. Even Wedge had to see the funny side of it.

"Well," said Biggs, wiping away a tear "at least it wasn't a-

"Fruit stall?" asked Wedge, pointing. An apple cart was parked up outside Rarity's shop. They made a note of the VID number, but it was pretty obvious who it belonged too.

"Sweet Apple Acers, the best in the West." Biggs read. "Well, this Applejack sure isn't shy about adverting her product now, is she?"

"Seems not. Okay, now, before we go in, let's keep it non-confrontational. We've already spoken to Rarity today, and although we said to expect more questioning, she may be surprised or put out to have us turn up after dark. If Pinkie had an accomplice, which she must have, it's most likely one of these two or Twilight, but it's still possible that it's someone we've never even considered, so no slinging accusations around. Okay?"

Biggs nodded, and knocked on the door. "Priorities?"

“Applejack. Unlike Rarity we’ve not had a chance to speak to her, and she was one of the first ponies on the scene. We’ll ask her about this suit or dress that’s mentioned in the statements of her and the other witnesses first on the scene but which then seems to disappear. I’ll interview her, while you keep Rarity busy, going over her statement word by word, forgetting you place and starting over: the usual drivel. Then once we’ve got the two of them giving statements independently, we bring them together, see if their stories change when they tell them to each other. And we probe them about their relationship with Celestia’s student: she has the power to do almost *anything*. Celestia may be convinced she’s in the clear, but I’d prefer to see how her story checks out under close examination before saying that.”

“Got it. I take it you’ll be going easy on Applejack for this first interview, on account of the whole walking-in-on-your-best-friend-being-mutilated-by-one-of-the-others, having-breakdown, getting-sedated-for-most-of-the-rest-of-the-day thing?”

“Yes,” said Wedge, turning on his Dictaphone and tucking it under his armour: he didn’t want to interview Applejack and not get it on record. “so if there is any problem, given I’ll have to go soft on her to start and so establish myself as the good cop from the outset, so you’re the one who pulls out the bad cop if we need it, okay? We’ll try not to, even if the openly lie, just make a mental note and then ignore it and we’ll confront them with it latter, but if we have to, you get to be the angry one.”

Biggs grinned “Sweet.”

“Humph. Don’t go overboard.” Said Wedge, knocking on the door somewhat louder. A light appeared inside: It was now fully dark. “They are still witnesses, not suspects: we don’t just arrive at people homes after dark and start grilling them. Ah, Miss Rarity, is now a bad time?”

“Oh, I, well officer I.... can I help you?”

“We were wondering if the effects of the sedative Doctor Whooves had given Applejack had worn off yet: if it has, she should probably try to get up, eat something, get some fluids in her or she’ll start to feel ill effects.”

“Oh, how kind of you officer, I’ll be sure to pass the message along.”

“In fact, we were wondering if we could come in and have a few words with Applejack? I know it’s very late, but time is a factor in these matters and we would like to question her the same day as the crime if possible. If she’s too unwell to see us, we’ll come back in the morning, but of course from the investigation’s point of view it would be better if you could both spare us just a few moments of your time now...”

“Yes, yes of course, you must come in.” said Rarity, opening the door and showing them into the shops front room. Dozens of dresses and some displays of other merchandise sparked at them. Wedge was instantly made to feel relaxed despite himself: the soft tones and fabrics and the light reflected of the gems was a world away from the garish colours and horrific subject matter of Pinkies cellar.

Rarity pulled the door shut behind them, glancing around outside before she did so.

“So quiet: I suppose the whole town is listening to Celestia speak?” she asked. Wedge nodded.

“Yes. I... I wish I was there too.” He said, and realised how deeply he meant it. “Even after so long in the guard, seeing her so often, it’s still a deep comfort to hear her speak to you.” Biggs nodded; everypony in Equestria thought so, it was just a fact, a part of the way things were. Rarity tilted her head on one side: she was wearing glasses, Wedge noticed. She hadn’t been before.

“Do you know her well, the Princess?” Wedge hesitated before answering. It was standard practice never to answer a personal question that a witness or suspect asked you: it was just plain dangerous to open up to them. But he wanted to keep this interview friendly.

“I... I feel I know her as well as any pony in my position can, yes.” Rarity gave him a long, slow look.

“Yes, yes I suppose position dictates so much; we don’t have a choice you know, it, it makes it easier, once you realise that.” Rarity shuddered, and shook herself. “I’m Sorry, it’s just, everypony else listening to her majesty speak, and here we are, suddenly isolated form them. No-one but us and our problems... I’m sorry, I’m rambling. Stay here, I shall go and fetch Applejack for you. I’m sure you’ll be glad to see her.” Rarity paused by the doorway, and gave them a bright, brittle smile “I’ve been making her over, you see. Given everything that happened today, well I feel a good makeover can bring out the best in a pony, don’t you? At the very least it made me feel better about the situation. I shall just go and get her out of bed, shall I?”

She vanished though a curtain to the back of the shop. Biggs and Wedge shared a glance; she seemed to be behaving a bit oddly, but given what she’d been though, they were not expecting much else. Left alone with nothing to do and little to say, they did what police always do when left unattended in someone else’s home: they begun idly wandering about the room, nosing into the owners private correspondences and examining their personal possessions.

“Hey look Wedge, that’s the dress my mare-friend wanted me to get for her last time we were here.” Wedge looked. His jaw dropped. “Celestia! That’s a gem-depository held together with cobwebs! I’m amazed that doesn’t collapse under its own weight!”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought, and the cost: apparently Rarity has to use a special quadruple-stitching that only she knows on the straps to make them strong enough to hold the weight of all those gems on such a skimpy dress.”

“Skimpy? Biggs, No pony wears clothes most of the time!”

“And that dress emphasises it, my friend. She modelled it for me, and darn it if I didn’t almost drop then and there in the shop. Took a *lot* of self-control to avoid major embarrassment, yanno? Even then I think my wings might have given the game away. Would have bought it to, if I could afford it. You ever met my mare-friend?”

“Can’t say I have, Biggs” said Wedge. Biggs pulled out a small photo from under his helmet, and Wedge looked.

“Classy, Eh?” asked Biggs. Wedge nodded. He felt I had to say something, “Nice photo. Is that a cello or a Double Bass?”

“Dunno, can never remember. She’s played it for me lots, though. She’s getting good money. We’re thinking of getting married, once we’ve saved up a little.”

Wedge was surprised. “You’ve never mentioned any of this before.” Biggs shrugged. “I don’t want my private life and my work mixing, yanno? I mean, I don’t mind seeing you after work, grabbing a couple of ciders, you’re a good pony to hang out with... but I don’t want to be worrying about my private life when we’ve got a case to work, and I *don’t* want to be thinking about stuff like I’ve seen today when I go home to her. I try to keep my life as two separate worlds.” Wedge nodded. He didn’t spend much of his free time with other members of the Guard either, for exactly the same reason. They may have been the best ponies in the world when you were working with them, but you didn’t get much time away on leave, and if you worked forensics then you didn’t need to be reminded of what you did at work when you were on leave.

Biggs put the photo away, and begun to wander around the room again. Then he stopped “Huh.”

“What?” Asked Wedge, admiring just how gem encrusted the dress was: he’d not been joking when he said it was close to tearing itself apart under its own weight; it was more engineering than dress-making. That said, there were sewing machines that he could see mid-way through being taken apart and re-built, plus tiaras, ornamental pectoral panels and coronets, so clearly Rarity had a good solid understanding of engineering, gearing and basic metalworking.

“Rarity stocks saddle-bags.”

“So? It’s a common accessory.”

“Same make as the receipt I found in Fluttershy’s house, the one that made me think she’d packed and run. Still, nothing that odd in itself, small town, ponies buy from their friend’s shops, try to keep them in business. Fluttershy could well have bought a bag here...” Biggs ignored it and moved on. He’d spotted something far more interesting: Rarity’s mail. Wedge wandered idly around, looking at dresses. He’d always vaguely admired sewing as a skill, simply because he knew that as a Pegasus with nothing but hooves wingtips and mouth, he’d never master it: it was one area where Unicorns really did have a mono... where unicorns really did have a monopoly.... He very, very slowly turned his head back to the dress Biggs’s mare-friend had wanted. He stared at the special super-strong quadruple stitching on the straps, for some time. Behind him, Biggs also froze mid idle.

“Wedge... Rarity used direct advertising for her shop; she posts out flyers and coupons to attract custom. According to this letter here, she had pre-paid postal accounts. *Several*. It’s a letter from the post office complaining that although three of her accounts are fine, one is being threatened with closure due to the low volume of letters sent: one letter per week. To *Pinkie*. Wedge, Wedge are you listening?”

“Biggs, these extra strong straps on this dress your mare-friend likes with the quadruple stitching only Rarity knows? They’re a dead ringer for the straps on the restraint harness in Pinkie’s basement. And Biggs, How did Pinkie make those restraint straps, that banner *or* any sort of dress, when, if you think about it, only Unicorns sew?”

There was a thud from upstairs. They both looked up, Biggs still with his hooves on the letters, Wedge with his on the dress. It was a very loud, unpleasantly *slithery* thud, like somepony dropping a sack full of eels. It was not the sound of one pony getting another out of bed, not if the pony being helped up was going to do so under their own power again.

“Biggs, get out the front door. Fly round and seal the back exit, and put out the hue and cry. Holler until you get a response. Bring backup. Bring all the backup we have.” Said Wedge, his voice low and urgent. He didn’t take his eyes off the ceiling. He heard a floorboard creak and, ears twitching to triangulate, moved his gaze to where he thought it was, keeping track of the movement upstairs. He heard Biggs rattle the door handle, with increasing desperation.

“Biggs! Now!”

“She’s sealed the door with magic or something!”

“She’s a dress-maker whose only known magical talents are using telekinesis for sewing and a single spell for finding precious stones! How the *hay* could she seal it!?”

“It’s been sewn shut from the outside!” snapped Biggs as he turned to glare at Wedge. He then tried bucking the door a few times, and then checked the windows.

“No big panels like the Mayor’s office, small glass panes, leaded in place, wrought-iron frame and no room for a run-up. We could smash it, but we’d still not get out without getting ourselves cut to ribbons on the tangle of metal and broken glass left in place. And darn it, like she said, everypony is listening to Celestia talk! Ghost town as soon as you get off the main square!”

“So no pony to hear you scream, My Little guardponies...” came a powerful and deeply seductive voice from beyond the curtain to the shop’s back room. It was recognisable as Rarity’s, just. “So, you’ve admired my work both here and in Pinkie’s basement, so why don’t you come and see where the magic happens. Literally. Please... step into my fitting room...” behind them every pin and sewing needle in the room suddenly levitated as one, and both Wedge and Biggs were suddenly very aware they were Pegasus in a low-ceilinged space, taking on a Unicorn who spent all day every day making lots and *lots* of very small holes in things for a living. “I think it’s time you boys got a makeover.” The voice purred.

Part eight: reap and sew.

Biggs and Wedge looked to each other, Wedge spoke, trying to get a fix on where behind the curtain Rarity was.

“It was you, who made the restraint harness, and the banner and all those other hideous little pony-hide furnishings and that dress that the witnesses saw but which then vanished from the scene.”

“Of course. Who else? Pinkie... I mean *really*? Pinkie Pie sewing? Don’t make me laugh.”

“And as a Unicorn, you could levitate items out of the cellar when no-one was looking...”

“Yes, well, after a manner of speaking. I think somepony would have noticed if a dress made from pony-hide and Fluttershy’s recently vacated hide had decided to walk across the street to my shop on their own. Thankfully, Applejack and Mac were first on the scene...”

Wedge remembered the cart outside. “And in all the panic and confusion, when everyone was on the ground floor trying to deal with Pinkie, you could levitate it out of the basement, stuff the dress into the cart under all the apples, and then with it hidden rush in to comfort Applejack....”

“And suggest she recuperate from her shock at my place, letting me *generously* wheel the cart over myself. Oh dear sweat AJ... she was always such an honest and straightforward pony, but never particularly bright. Not much in the way of brains in that pretty little skull. Trust me...” the voice snickered. “I know.”

Wedge hunkered down low and moved forwards slightly, treading carefully and quietly. He thought he had a good fix on where the voice was coming from.

“Why move the dress? Why risk being caught stealing evidence from the scene? Fluttershy’s hide I understand, you couldn’t pin the crime on her if she was identified as a victim, but the dress? Afraid somepony would recognise your work? That quadruple stitching, that’s not something just any dress maker uses...” there was a noise from behind the curtain. Wedge couldn’t decide if it was a laugh or a sigh.

“Ahhh... if only that were the *most* recognisable thing about that dress. Let’s just say I thought it best if nopony saw it and stared asking questions. “

“And Fluttershy? Dash? Stared asking questions?”

“Dash? Oh my dear Guardspony, Dashie wouldn’t waste her time with questions beyond ‘I wonder if the Wonderbolts will be impressed if I do *this*’. She was our element of loyalty, and the naturally loyal are the last to ask questions of their *friends*. Even when Nightmare moon arrived and she suspected Twilight of being a spy, she soon got over it and within a day was risking her life for a pony she’d never met before. No, Dashie was far too dumb to pose any threat. Fluttershy, though, she needed to be disposed of.”

“Why?” said Wedge. He was almost sure he could see a shape beyond the curtain, slowly, he begun to tense himself to spring.

“We used government-surplus drugs to keep the victims... in whatever state we wanted them, to be honest. Pinkie may have had many talents, but procuring drugs and sweet-talking authority figures weren’t among them.

"I found out where drugs that were about to pass their expiration date were taken to be disposed of and I charmed my way in. I have connections in the fashion world that could guarantee a bored and lonely guard a date with the model of his choice, and I'm *hardly* unattractive myself. So many prescription or controlled drugs have some black-market value as sliming or beauty aids, so once a week he was paid to look the other way whilst I removed what I told him were a supermodels little fix. The records said the drugs were taken to disposal, and no pony ever saw them again, so they must have been. It was a perfect system. Until the wretch got the flu and was replaced with another guard last week. A female guard. A *married* female guard. I'm good, but I'm not *that* good."

"And you remembered Fluttershy had the appropriate drugs in her first aid kit..." Wedge mouthed instructions to Biggs, confident that if anypony could understand them he could. Biggs nodded, and walked as close to the wall of hovering needles as he dared, then turned sidelong to them, and closed the eye facing the tight and covered his head with one hoof and both wings.

"She never touched them, never had any reason to! And I could replace them in a week or so when the usual guard was back and she'd never know, but no, she just *had* to go and fetch a bandage for some disgusting wounded animal or other, and she noticed they were gone. And the *bitch* worked out right away I was the only pony who had been anywhere near them since she'd last seen them--"

"So you put her name on the lottery?" Asked Wedge, as Biggs begun to sway from side to side, counting. One...

"You found the lottery? You found the *Lottery*? I'd not expect you to understand."

Two...

"The lottery served a higher purpose, quite beyond anything your kind could grasp."

One...

"I serve a higher power!" yelled the voice from behind the curtain "A higher--"

"**NOW!**" Yelled Wedge, as he leapt forward and gave a single powerful beat of his wings which thrust him towards the curtain. Behind him, in response to Rarity's realisation that's something was wrong, a hundred needles darted forwards-

-Right onto the amour of Biggs, who hurled himself sideways into the wall of floating needles, hooves over eyes. The needles that would have shot forwards into Wedge could only move a few inches before, unable to build any momentum, they were smashed between the wall of the building and the considerable weight of a fully armoured stallion. Around eighty per cent of the needles were caught, bent and broken between the armour and the wall. Some more ended up in Biggs, but it was still far preferable to throw yourself into them at low speed than have them aimed at your bodies weakest points at higher speeds. A line of needles he'd missed stitched themselves into the floor where Wedge had been a moment before, and only a dozen or so actually managed to re-deploy fast enough to hit Wedge. He felt them stinging his legs and his ears as he sailed through the curtain, into the shape beyond as the room's lanterns went out. It was pony-shaped, and responding to his training he quickly reared up and kicked it lightning-quick with his front hooves, no time to buck, dropping it like a stone. Biggs was already rushing over to help, but already Wedge knew something was wrong. He'd made contact and his hooves didn't hurt... no jarring of steel-shod hooves on bone, no crunching, no warm spray of blood. This target felt far too soft to be a living pony. He yelled "Biggs, light, quick!"

"May I?" said the voice. It sounded amused.

A single lantern lit, levitating at the top of the room, it gave insufficient light to show much, barely defining the darkness, but it showed enough.

Wedge had taken down a dress-makers manikin.

The room was full of them. Three concentric rows, all looking inwards to the centre of the room where Wedge's mad charge had carried him and his target, and all covered with cloth, hiding their true nature.

Somewhere, amongst all these half-lit pony shapes, a voice snickered.

Wedge, panting, looked aghast to Biggs, who pulled a needle out of his leg with his teeth, spat, and then grunted: "Well, at least it couldn't be *harder* to find her in this lot."

There was a pregnant pause, and the curtains between the fitting room and the front of the shop shut, as did the full-length curtains over all the windows, making them almost identical. The light flickered, and slowly, the sets of manikins began to rotate, the middle ring spinning opposite to the inner and outer like some deranged country dance. On the far outside of the room, a stack of full-length mirrors the customers had once used began to levitate, then started orbiting the outside of the rings, creating a rotating wall of mirrors that threw the reflections back towards the centre of the circle where the two guard-pones found themselves attacked by offcuts of cloth smeared thick

with a sticky and evil-smelling glue, which picked them up and spun them around and tried to obstruct their vision and stick them to the ground. With seconds both Biggs and Wedge realised they had no clue which way was the way in or out of the room.

Wedge pulled a half-finished Princess-Celestia-sock of his face and glared at Biggs as the storm of cloth buffeted him. "You just *had* to open your big mouth!" he yelled, pulling himself free from the sticky cloth prison. Biggs, however, was sniffing the glue with a look of intense horror.

"What's this glue *made* of?" he yelled. Somewhere in the room Rarity laughed.

Wedge, pulled his hoof away from a scarf that was trying to entangle it, and snarled. This was far, far too much magical power for Rarity to muster on her own, and he had a nasty suspicion as to how she had managed it.

"I'm guessing it's not just Pinkies baking, the trophies and this glue you used the victims' bodies' for, was it? I remember reading in a forensic journal about serial killers who believed that by consuming parts of their victims, they could take on their characteristics or abilities... and how it might, might have some basis in old magic, long since banned under Celestia."

"Powdered unicorn horn: you'd not believe the buzz it gives you. The *grated* and *powder-full* Trixie. Her number came up, and it couldn't have happened to a more deserrrrrrving pony. *No pony* makes fun of my hair-style!"

Wedge thought he had a fix on the voice, and gestured. Biggs leapt up, spun mid-air using his wings to control the move, and landed a powerful double-hoofed buck onto one of the shapes in the darkness that he'd spotted had a unicorn horn. It fell, but turned out to be another manikin. The manikin leapt back up, knocking Biggs into the centre of the room again.

"Trixie's talents included ventriloquism. Don't think I can't throw this voice wherever I want. And speaking of throwing wherever I want..."

A heavy cast-iron sewing machine spun out of no-where and smacked Biggs on this flank, creating a loud clang as it glanced off his armour. It then went mad and attempted to sew his own tail to his legs, but Wedge stamped down on it. He was still trying to hold it down when he heard Biggs yell "Wedge!"

Wedge turned, and saw two long knitting needles (or possibly crochet hooks; he wasn't that interested which at this stage) Heading towards his eyes. He instinctively raised his hooves to shield them and, responding to his training, turned the hooves outwards at the last moment.

The two needles diverted at the last possible moment, and stuck to the hooves with a dull "clank" Wedge smiled grimly, crochet hooks, and smashed them thought the wooden frame of the manikin

he'd already knocked over, doing it hard enough to imbed the hooks into the woodwork so Rarity couldn't pull them out again.

"What? You caught them... how is that possible, you're just a.."

"Pegasus? And you're a unicorn, and so being able to move things with magic, you'd never have invested in magnetic shoes. I mean, it's even called a horseshoe magnet. Magnet to pick up, and then hold the two oppositely poled magnets against each other to drop. They're common enough if you work in a job that requires you to pick thing up things without using your mouth, which is necessary when dealing with forensics as you can't contaminate items with your saliva. It doesn't work on everything, which is why we get issued bit-mounted tweezers in the forensics service, but useful none the less. I mean, how do you think Pinkie was able to use a scalpel? Or did she use that trick of curving you're hoof in towards your wrist and holding things in the fold created? I didn't ask her. Do you know? Or didn't she let you watch her work?" he said, hoping the taunt would draw her out. He had to keep her talking.

"What? Down there in that ghastly little basement, which all the blood, and sweat, and pee and tasteless interior décor... and... and... no, she never let me in."

"Jealous?" Wedge asked.

"I secured the drugs, I got her the lottery, I even made that dress for her! How come she got to have all the fun!? One! All I wanted was to get to do *one!*"

"Great" muttered Biggs "Obsessive psycho neat-freak secretly wants to get things disturbed and dirty in her spare time. I think I dated a mare like you in collage, you know?" He edged towards a cloth-covered shape; it didn't quite match the pose of all the other manikins. "Why don't you just give it up before we find YOU!" he yelled, ripping of the sheet covering the shape. He stared for a long moment, and then recoiled, fighting not to vomit again. "Oh Celestia! Oh dear Celestia!" Wedge, trying to spot Rarity in the shapes on the other side of the room looked over his shoulder, and swore.

"Oh look, I did get to do one..." said Rarity. "I don't think I did it quite the way Pinkie would have, and poor little AJ was still a little groggy from the sedation so she was hardly what you'd call responsive, but I think I mastered the basics. Not bad for a first attempt, no?"

Wedge growled, and partly re-covered the body to give her some dignity. He couldn't cover it completely, or they'd mistake it for a manikin or Rarity again. "You took drugs too, when you were stealing that dress and Fluttershy's skin from the basement?"

"Why heavens no! No drugs, that was Pinkie's thing. I got her drugs because she said she needed them, not because I approved of that part of it. No, I flayed her, in the end, but I at least let her die naturally rather than try to keep her alive with medication. That would not have been... generous."

Wedge ducked another low-flying sewing machine. "Generous?" he asked, incredulously.

"But of course I gave her everything. All of my time, attention, I poured out my secrets to her, bared my soul, and I let it all happen naturally, and without pretence: when I do something for somepony, I give it my all. ahhh... Pinkie will be so jealous when she finds out; I know she was quite looking forward to getting AJ one day. When it's just you and them, like that, and they know they're going to die, Pinkie said that as they have nothing left to lose, they are open with you. Sincere, open, *honest*. True, Applejack was like that anyway, but the intimacy... I can see why Pinkie got quite so *enthusiastic* about this. She said after she did Dashie that it was one of the most intimate, meaningful experiences of her life, and you know what? She was right!"

"You mean when you did Dashie!" Yelled Biggs, flying to keep up with a spinning rank of manikins so he could inspect them one by one, trying to spot Rarity in ranks of similar half-lit shapes. "You rigged the lottery!"

"Yes, and you said Rainbow dash didn't pose a threat to you..." said Wedge, glaring into the dark. Those infernal mirrors were making it even harder to see what was what. "Fluttershy knew you were stealing drugs, and that might have led to awkward questions, but why kill Dashie?" what had she ever done to you?"

"What had she ever... what had *she* ever done to *me*?! Haven't you been listening! When I work I put my heart and soul into it! I give my all! What did she do to me! *What did she do to me?* TWENTY BLOODY PER CENT COOLER! **TWENTY PER BUCKING CENT COOLER !! THAT'S WHAT SHE DID TO ME!** **What** kind of feedback is that to give an **artist** mid-project! After all those ponyhours of work **that's** how she thanks me?! And when the dress is finished, the little **bitch** decides to flip some random passer by onto her back and ruin the way it hugs her flank? In front of everypony! In front of **Royalty! Arrrrggg!**"

The manikins dropped to the floor and stooped rotating, as Rarity flew into a rage. Objects started flying back and forth as she ranted about philistines and peasants and ponies who think bespoke is the bit that connects the rim of a wheel to the hub. Biggs had to duck a low flying cat before it

slammed into a wall at speed, and Wedge was forced to kick a ballistic iron away from him. It hit one of the mirrors, which cob-webbed and then shattered into tiny pebble like fragments as the cat went though it backwards and yowling. Wedge and Biggs stared. They'd been expecting razor-sharp shards of glass, but it looked like Rarity had paid extra for tempered safety glass, presumably in case a customer broke a mirror and then sued. The pair were sufficiently good partners that each didn't even need eye contact to know what the other was thinking. They charged. Rarity, mid-rant, was slow to catch up. "-And then Fluttershy, *FLUTTERSHY* of all ponies makes a scene, charging in with all those *filthy* little animals, and her dress utterly utterly *RUINED!* She deserved a flaying just for demanding French *haute couture* at short notice, but then proceeding to *sully* it like that... what? No! Not the Mirrors, no no no no NOOOOOOOO!!!"

Suddenly the storm of flying items focused on Biggs and Wedge as they tried to kick-out the mirrors, but if anything, that helped. They ducked, rolling in opposite directions as the swarm of needles and sewing equipment annihilated the mirror behind them, and thinking fast, they ran in opposite directions around the circle of mirrors, head down, hooves striking sparks of the floor, breath streaming as they raced staying inches ahead of the spots where Rarity was aiming, hearing the smash of glass and the ping or ricochets just behind them. In moments they had made it almost right the way around the room, the mirrors destroyed as they passed by Rarity's crummy aim, both bearing down on the final mirror in the-

****sMAaaaaaaSSSSSHHH!****

- room....Both running heads down, they both piled into the final mirror from opposite directions and ended up in a painful and tangled heap on the floor, as Rarity lobed what were apparently the only projectiles she could now find projectiles, two measuring tapes and a now *severely* annoyed cat, at them. Biggs recovered first and leapt up, badly scratched and dripping with sweat after his race around the room, but jubilant.

"Aha! Got you know Missy! You're out of ammunition, you can't run, and without that little trick with the mirrors and manikins you can't hide for long. Why don't you give it up? It's only a matter of time before I see you-"

Squelch

Wedge's world filled with white feathers, beating and smashing against the sides of his consciousness, and panicked swearing, and he couldn't understand any of it. He wondered why he was being pressed under a great weight, and why everything stank of Biggs's locker in the guardroom back at Canterlot, and mostly why the feathers. He realised that Biggs had collapsed back down on top of him flapping his wings madly, and Wedge struggled to get up and see what had happened to his friend.

Biggs had a pair of pinking-sheers embedded in his eyes.

“Oh gods! Oh Celestia, I’m blind, Wedge, I’m blind my eyes! Oh gods.!” Biggs stopped struggling when he felt Wedges hooves touching either side of his face, and he just collapsed onto his haunches and begun to shake.

“Oh gods Biggs, just, just stay calm. You’re, you’re going to be all right partner. We’ll, we’ll get you to a doctor, no, to Celestia, and they everything will be alright...”

“Pull them out! Pull them out!”

“Biggs! I, I can’t, for all I know that could kill you. Just... just thing about your mare-friend, Okay? You don’t want to die. Just stay calm and don’t touch them, and you live to s- to meet with her again. Just, oh gods, oh Celestia, just stay calm.!”

“Calm? I’m a blind lip-reader, what am I going to do? Oh Celesta, how bad is it, is.. is there anything left of them?”

Wedge felt both sick and faint, but tried to be reassuring. “I... I’m not sure.” he lied. “I think... well.. Errr.” He forced himself to look closer, and to his surprise noticed something.

“I think it only got the left one, it’s embedded in the right eye *socket*, but only at the corner of the eye. I think you’re right *eyeball* might still be intact. Can you see anything?”

Biggs shuddered. “yes.” He whispered. “But only coloured lights.” Wedge felt sick, and had to hide a sudden intake of breath. He stared lying again.

“We’ll, we’ll get to a doctor, to Celestia to save that eye, and everything will be fine and you’ll get a glass eye, or a cool eye-patch and you’ll be back on duty in no time. Hay, you’ll be the only one of us that civilians can actually recognise in a crowd. It’ll be okay partner. I’m here for you.”

“Is... is Rarity still here?” he whispered, like a foal asking Nightmare moon will really carry them away to the moon and gobble them up if they don’t do as they are told. Wedge looked over his shoulder. A shape had detached itself from the gloom and was waiting, made ragged and terrible by a garment Wedge really didn’t want to look at too hard.

"It's okay. I've got her under control... you just hold tight there buddy, okay?" I'll just go and sort things out, and then we can get you to a doctor, okay?"

"You, you really say one of my eyes is okay? Do, do you think I'll be able to see Octavia again?"

Wedge fought to hold back tears. "You'll see her, and all the little brats you're going to have with her, okay?"

"I'm scared Wedge." Wedge paused, and then nuzzled him briefly.

"You'll be okay. Everything is going to be okay." He said soothingly, before taking Brigg's ear in his mouth, and giving him a twitch. Lip would have worked better, but there was just too much blood and aqueous humour for him to try that.

Wedge straightened up, wings spread wide, just in case he needed to take off. He could feel Rarity's gaze in his back. He closed his eyes, composed his breathing and counted to ten. Then, trying not to show hatred or fear, he turned around.

She was waiting. Her expression unreadable. He walked over. Not fast, not slow. Needles and broken glass crunched underhoof.

When he was some distance from Biggs, she spoke, not quite loud enough for Biggs to hear.

"We both know that if he's seeing shapes, it's either pierced his brain or is embedded in his optic nerve. Eye or no eye, he's blind. Plus I'm going to kill you both. "

"Are you going to tell him?"

"No. That would not be generous. Last moments are important: you couldn't do this, what we do, if you didn't believe that. I'll not spoil it. The point, as I see it, isn't torture, it's testing. Only in last moments do you see who ponies really are. Your friend is a family stallion who worked that out too late, Applejack was surprisingly vulnerable under all that choler, and under my fabulous little façade it turns out I'm just a killer. I had hoped *you* would prove to be a coward; that may have made things better for you, if you had been."

"Not a coward, just a fool. I should have realised that no pony would throw so many weapons away over nothing unless she had better ones left. You can kill me any time, can't you?"

Rarity didn't answer. It wasn't really a question anyway.

“So what now?” he asked. Rarity shrugged.

“Now, we face off. You the noble knight-guardspony in his golden armour, me the wicked witch in my admittedly rather hurried coat of ponies’ skins; best I could do at short notice with Fluttershy and AJ, but I think the rough edges actually add to the serial-killer look, don’t you? And the colour contrast, yellow, orange, red and pink... it works quite well. Anyway, here’s how it works, you charge for truth and justice and AJ’s famous home baked apple pie and defeat me and you take Biggs home and he can suddenly see again and everyone goes home for tea and crumpets having learned a valuable lesson.” She paused. “What? No rebuttal, not angry? Aren’t you going to tell me not to mock you?”

“Why did you do it?” She stared at him, then shifted uncomfortably. “I told you why Dashie and Fluttershy-”

“No. why did you do it? Why did you help Pinkie Kill at all? Why all those innocent ponies, all of them dead, for what?”

“I told you, I serve I Higher power, I’d not expect you to understand but.” She caught his expression, and burst out laughing.

“Oh what they hay, I did it because I did it. What’s it to you? You’ll never understand, and you can’t win. Forget it, Wedge. It’s Ponyville.”

“What’s that even supposed to mean?” Muttered Wedge.

“It means I’m not foolish enough to tell you what’s going on even if I *am* about to kill you. Now charge me: let’s do this the way we are supposed to.” Said Rarity, using her magic to open up the curtains to illuminate their show-down. Wedge looked from her, to Biggs, to her again. His eye flashed briefly to the window, and then back to her.

“No.”

Rarity looked at him, her head on one side. “I’m sorry?”

“No. Kill me if you will, but no more games: you haven’t been straight with me. Why the lottery? Why did you make the lottery?”

"I didn't." said Rarity. "Charge me."

"Pinkie made it, and then got you to post it to her, to cover her tracks?"

"No. Charge me."

Wedge stared. "Is there some other pony in on this?"

"Charge me."

"Twilight?"

"Charge. Me."

"How could you even find out where government surplus drugs were taken for disposal? You had to have help from somepony inside Canterlot, with access to *all* the records, not just the public ones. Drug disposal times and locations are restricted, That requires library clearance to Celestia's personal library. Only senior guards, Celestia and her favoured student have that kind of access. Did Twilight make the lottery?"

"Oh for heaven's sakes, the lottery was plucked out of the night sky! Out of the heavens themselves! It's a lottery, it's random! Charge me! Attack!"

"Ponies need to find out about this, somepony inside Canterlot needs to find out about this..." he said, eye flicking to the window again, then back to Rarity, hoping she hadn't seen.

"But you and Biggs die tonight, so no such luck. You'll not escape, a Higher Power commands it! Now attack me!"

Wedge charged.

Rarity stood there smiling as he bore down on her. No doubt she had some nasty little plan to kill him as attacked her, but Wedge had seen what looked like the shape of a pony loitering with their back to the window, and if he hit it even if he didn't break through the leaded window he'd alert them to the situation. At the last possible moment he veered away from Rarity and leapt at the window... and his world exploded into pain.

He didn't hear the clang, but across the room Biggs, shivering and in a half-stupor did. It rang out loud. For a moment Wedge fondly imagined it was him hitting the window, but then he managed to open his eyes and found he was on the floor, his helmet slightly bent out of shape, with an iron levitating in front of him. He wasn't letting that stop him, and he leapt up again and smashed into the window with all the force he could muster.

His head burst through, and a single fore-hoof. But that was all. He was well and truly stuck. He hadn't hit the window with enough speed. He stared at the pony he had seen outside, suppressed at who it was. They were hardly un-surprised themselves.

"You?" he said, before realising that this was probably his only chance. He tossed the Dictaphone to them. They took it, looking confused.

"Get it to Canterlot, get it to someone you can trust there. I know you can get it there. Don't ask why, just do it." He hissed, as he felt Rarity try to levitate his backside to drag him back fully into the shop. He whispered to them quickly.

"It's about who helped Pinkie kill all these ponies, it's very important, but be careful the wrong ponies don't see you with that or they'll kill you! Go now, you're not safe here! Go! Fly, you fool!" he hissed. The pony fled and then he was suddenly dragged backwards through the broken glass and onto the floor again.

He was partly stunned as the iron smacked him around the head again as he was pulled back in, and he yelped in pain as the hot iron was run down his chest, toward his belly, not covered by the standard issue armour. It stopped worryingly close to his crotch. He saw Rarity glance out of the broken window, but clearly she could see no pony and hadn't heard him speak, so she turned back to him. He could just about hear Rarity speaking over the sounds of some pony struggling and snorting to hold back screaming. He realised it was him.

"Aww, good try, full marks for effort there, but I'm afraid I can't have you smashing through my windows and escaping to alert the entire town, now can I?" The edge of the iron moved a fraction closer to his crotch, and he snorted and convulsed violently as he tried to get up or move away, but Rarity was holding him far too tight with her magic for that. At least she didn't seem to have noticed the pony outside or him throwing the Dictaphone to them. She edged into his field of vision, staring at his crotch thoughtfully.

"You know, I've not had much experience with stallions. Is it true if you strangle a male they have a tendency to drop?" the iron suddenly moved away and something, possibly a cloth or scarf wrapped around his throat. "I wonder if your wings will pop out like Dashie's did when she got excited?" he heard her say, as the cloth cut into his windpipe, and he began to suffocate. He raised both hooves to it, but it was futile, hooves couldn't grip cloth. He felt himself begin to buck and spasm, and was frightened when he realised he couldn't stop it if he tried. He was losing control of his body. He had always told himself that duty came first and he did not fear death, but he didn't want to die like this. He knew he'd drop, he suspected he'd lose control of his bladder and bowels before the end too. There was no dignity. There was no point. He wasn't fighting to protect Celestia, or to bring down a

dangerous monster like he'd imagined or been trained for. Lights began to flash in front of his eyes. He was just dying, and the fact that it was going to be meaningless he could just about cope with, but being killed by Rarity of all ponies... it was just so embarrassing!

"Seeing as you tried so hard, I'm going to tell you something. I'm going to say if after you black out, of course, but tell you I will." He couldn't see past the lights anymore, but he could feel Rarity's breath on his face. "The secret of the lottery is..."

The lights exploded, and a different colour of light appeared, his lungs burned, and he felt himself breathing in a huge, huge lungful of air with a gasp that, for him at least, drowned out every other noise in the universe. He rolled onto one side, clutching at his throat and finding he was covered down to the chest in a rich beard foam and blood he had apparently produced. There was a dull, repetitive smack sound, and a white, red and gold blur, which after a moment resolved itself into Biggs kicking Rarity repeatedly and yelling.

"If you're gonna kill a pony, get on with it! Don't stand about gloating and making enough noise that a *blind* pony can sneak up on you! See, I'm not going to monolog; I'm just going to keep kicking until I'm sure you're *dead!*"

Wedge struggled to get up, and slipped on his own mix of foam and blood. He felt weak as a foal. Biggs was still kicking Rarity, and making an awful, prolonged job of it; he couldn't turn around to buck her, he'd never find her again, so he'd got close and was using his weight to bare her to the ground and bull her to death, randomly gabbing her with his teeth and tugging her this way and that, aiming a few kicks with his front hooves that weren't powerful or accurate enough to kill her outright, but at least would be sure to hit her somewhere, and were doing the job by degrees.

"Biggs" he tried to say, but only a squeaky little sound came out. "Biggs, don't, we need her alive..."

Biggs nocked her over onto her back, and as she kicked at his face with her front hooves and howled, Biggs planted a hoof on her chest with enough force to break ribs. Wedge heard it clearly as he struggled up and finally found his voice. "Biggs! Come on, we need her alive!"

Biggs reared up over her ready to bring both front hooves down, she sobbed and let her horn flare, levitating her backside of the ground high enough to bring her rear hooves back and-

Wedge yelled "Biggs look out!"

Scrunch

Rarity kicked out, and managed to get a back hoof to make contact with each handle of the pinking shears, driving them then about two inches deeper into Biggs's skull. He dropped like a sack onto Rarity, and she screamed as his armoured mass drove into her already wounded ribs. He began to buck violently, uncontrollably. There was an audible hiss as he lost control of his bladder, and he began to foam at the mouth. Blood spurted from his ruined eyes and his entire flank and backside began to lift up, and such was the violence of the double-hoofed bucking that he tore through the carpeting

with the first few dying kicks and begin to send up sparks and chips of stone and hoof from random kicks into the paving underneath. As Wedge rushed over, there was a loud, sharp crack as the force of the spasm snapped one of his wings, and then it subsided to random twitching. Wedge rushed up, grasped the still warm body, and tried to roll him over, but he was too heavy. Wedge had to settle for leaning over the body, to cradle his head.

The body was only just recognisable as Biggs, and very clearly dead. Wedge hugged the head to him, and realised with horror that Biggs's last two acts were, in order, to save his life from Rarity, and to pee down the side of his leg as he'd tried to turn the body over. He vaguely tried to clean him up for a moment, not wanting anypony to see him like this, and pushed off his armour to see his cutie mark: a magnifying glass.

After a long, long moment where he just cried, and a longer dull time of feeling simply drained, Wedge became aware of some faint sights of life. He moved the body slightly, convinced he'd seen a wing move. He stood up, took a moment to compose himself, and then moved the wing aside.

Rarity was in bad shape, struggling to lift the weight of Brigg's body off her, eyes scrunched up her horn flaring and yet Biggs's body was hardly moving. She was clearly in some considerable pain, and Wedge wondered if there was anything he could do to help her, like shove her skull in. He raised a hoof. She gave up trying to lift Brigg's body with magic with a gasp, and then opened her eyes and looked at him, afraid.

"Where is the dress? Not that one, that only ties you to Fluttershy and Applejack's killing. The one that went missing from the scene earlier? You hid it for some reason. I'm guessing it tells us about your other accomplice."

"No, I can't. "

"Where is it?" Wedge asked.

"If I show you, she'll kill me. It implicates her!"

"Where is it?" he said. She didn't answer. He sighed, and raised the hoof further and took aim.

She flung up one hoof to protect herself.

“No Please don’t!”

Snap.

Rarity screamed as Wedge brought down his hoof on the base of her horn. He’d half suspected the blow to just shatter the frontal bone of her skull, but instead it did what he’d wanted and slammed the horn down into the ground with enough force to snap it into two uneven halves, braking of about a third from the tip. Wedge knew he wasn’t particularly sensitive to magic even by Pegasus standards, but even he felt the whiplash of energy and the horn was broken. Rarity Spasmed and howled in agony, rolling and bucking helplessly under Briggs’s carcass. Wedge watched her rolling in his blood and urine for a moment, felling that she was somehow dirtying his body even more that it was already, before speaking again when her cries had died down to sobs. He knew that damaging unicorn’s horns could kill them, and was usually fatal when done so crudely, so he didn’t waste time.

“That was necessary to disarm you. We both know that if I hadn’t done that you’d embed a pair of scissors in me as soon as you regained enough strength. That makes it legal. And we both know it is killing you, so if you want me to save your life, tell me. Where is the dress?”

“She’ll Ahahah! Arrgg mother this hurts, she’ll kill me. You don’t understand what her magic can do! Death, death is better that crossing her!”

“Death like this?” Wedge asked. He watched her struggling trapped under Biggs for a while, and then went to search the room the dress. It had to be here somewhere. Rarity kept screaming at him, alternately bedding him to kill her, threatening him, and raving about how she was the agent of a higher power. He wished she’d stop screaming. It was staring to make him feel a little faint. After a while, he noticed a chest.

“You... you have to understand, everything I did, I did for the best of reasons.” she yelled, with less and less volume.

Wedge tried to focus. It had been a long day, and he was tired.

“I.. I did my best, you simply must understand that. Pinkie, poor Pinkie was insane her magic turned her insane, and she didn’t know if what she was doing was right wrong anymore but I, I knew... I... I was told that it was right... I was told... I serve A Higher power.”

Wedge leaned over the chest, bucked the lock off, and opened it up.

Inside was a dress.

It was every bit as horrible he had imagined, made entirely of cutie marks, decorated with Pegasus wings and a necklace of unicorn horns. This would be why they'd had so much trouble identifying bodies, if all the cutie marks were removed. With this, he realised, you could identify dozens of victims. He lifted it out to examine the cutie marks. It was a forensic officer's dream, the evidence that would tie it all together... there was a light blue patch with a red lock or locket as the cutie mark, a yellow patch with a tree and at the front dark blue patch with a crescent moon. They were all there, with this he could identify every... with this he could identify every victim....

A cold swept over him as he stared at the cutie mark right at the front, pride of place on the design.

"No... no that's not possible... that can't be! Even with Celestia's student, you'd not have the magical power to overpower her! No it can't be!" he yelled, throwing the dress away from him. His head was a blur. Only one pony could ever have the power to overpower *her*. He realised the room was spinning, then that he was lying down. Things were going dark, and he knew that this wasn't shock or delayed response, this was something more sinister.

"No..." he muttered, struggling to stay conscious. "No, she couldn't, she wouldn't be involved." Just before he passed out, he heard as Rarity coughed, and laughed weakly.

"I... serve... a... Higher... power..."

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Later...

Wedge woke up. He was bound, and everything hurt from the fight with Rarity. He could feel that he was laying on a very, very smooth and very, very cold surface. He knew where he was. He knew

where he was without opening his eyes, even before he heard the sound of metal -shoes ringing on the marble floor. He managed to open both eyes. All he could see was a dark blur, and into that dark blur walked a light, a beautiful, beautiful light. He had always marvelled at that beauty, and even blurred to the point where he couldn't make out a single feature, he could recognise the whole in its radiant glory.

"Pinkie.. .Pinkie Pie was mad" he coughed, and the blur started to swim into focus. "She thought the fact there was a lottery alone somehow made it meaningful. And Rarity, Rarity *knew* she served a Higher Power." He said. "What... what's your excuse?"

The blur sighed, and gently knelt down so she would be at the same eye-level as her faithful guardspony. "A greater good, perhaps." Said Princess Celestia. "I'm sorry this had to involve you and Biggs, truly I am. I think, loyal servant, that you are owed an explanation...."

Part nine: Evidence

"Sleeping spell?" said Wedge, after a while. "Knock out potion, some forbidden curse? Some exotic magical poison on the dress, so when I opened the chest, it knocked me out? Is that what happened?"

"Possibly. I'm not so arrogant I'd discount the possibility, but I rather suspect it's more to do with the slow-release ketamine-capsules hidden in the sandwiches I gave you and Biggs. Gelatine is foul stiff, when you know how it is made, but useful for delaying the entry of a drug into the blood stream. I *had* hoped you'd go back to looking at notes and reviewing the evidence and both loose conciseness and blame it on over-work when you awoke, giving me time to sort out Rarity and remove the evidence. I'd never imagined you'd try to interview witnesses or go after suspects so late in the day. I had hoped you might live, but that's not going to be possible now, and an explanation is the least I can do given your years of service."

"Explanation? You... you killed Princess Luna." Muttered Wedge. "That's why nopony could be allowed to see the dress, that's why every one of the witnesses who saw Pinkie wearing it was shipped off to Canterlot, in case they had recognised the cutie mark. Domestic... political... either way, for whatever reasons, you killed her. Rarity said the lottery numbers were plucked from the heavens, and they were, weren't they? But you control the heavens. You ran the lottery, to kill Luna and disguise it as the act of a serial killer. You provided the drugs, let Rarity find them and made sure the guard was bribe-able, probably helped her with the design of the restraint, and you told her about the properties of consuming unicorn horn for extra power: how would a *dress maker* ever find that sort of information? That's *old* magic. And the investigation. You didn't put the Palace Guard on the case because you wanted it solved, you did it because wanted the evidence to be under our control and Pinkie under our guard so your famous 'no questions until Celestia's personal expert investigator arrives' policy would apply, just so the local law would never get a look at the evidence or talk to the suspect. You sent me and Biggs to investigate only because you knew we'd not miss anything, and when we had it all in one place, you set the cart on fire, probably teleported the rags in when you looked inside; if it burnt up, good, if not, still the perfect excuse to drag all the evidence back to Canterlot that day, where you and only you could control who saw it. You even straight up

told us you had helped her kill after that, and we were supposed to mistake that for remorse! For actual regret!”

“It was.”

“And for what? All those ponies, maybe a hundred and fifty? Practice. That’s all the other victims were, practice, camouflage... to hide the fact Luna was the only real target. A means to an end.” Wedge realised he was crying. “A means to an end.”

Celestia paused, then took a handkerchief and wiped away the tears. He flinched, but didn’t try to stop her. He knew he couldn’t move a muscle unless she willed it.

“Camouflage, Wedge? Practice? I’m not Discord; do you really think I’d kill my own subjects for so poor a reason? Or use such torture and mutilation unless it was a sacrifice I knew to be absolutely, absolutely necessary to serve a greater good? I’m... disappointed in you Wedge. I realise you’re probably justifiably angry with me right now, but you know me better than that.”

“But you did kill Lunar.” He said. Celestia looked away sharply, and then nodded. He couldn’t tell if it was sadness or guilt.

“Yes, but only for the same reasons that I’m killing you: She found out about Pinkie. She found out about Pinkie’s work, and so she had to be removed. I mean, if it was just a political assassination, if I had just needed to remove her for political reasons I could tell Twilight that’s she’d gone mad, was at risk of becoming Nightmare Moon again and have Twilight banish her with the elements of harmony, or turn her to stone, or just kill her. No... Lunar found out about Pinkie’s little hobby very early on, don’t ask me how, Lunar always did have a knack for trouble. But unlike you, she saw straight away who must be behind it, and knowing the old magics she recognised the reasons for it too. She was gathering evidence to show to Twilight what I was up to, and I couldn’t risk that.”

“Why what risk could either of them have posed?” Celesta looked back to him briefly, then looked away, embarrassed.

“I... I can’t wield the elements of harmony any more. Using them to banish my own sister was not... not a harmonious thing to do. They’ve been dead to me since that day. If Luna told Twilight, the two of them working against me with the elements of harmony at their command... no. it was too great a risk. So I used my teleportation to swap the lottery tickets over, and delivered Luna to Pinkie, not that she knew it was me. It was safer, in case Pinkie was caught, to work only through an intermediary.”

“Rarity.” Celestia nodded.

“Rarity. She was reluctant, at first. But, well, magic has a nasty tendency to weaken you, make you more susceptible to mental instabilities, look at my sister, the whole possessed-by-timeless-evil phase... thank goodness I’m still perfectly sane. Anyway, when she refused to get on-board, I just ran a suitably large magic field through her brain to make her more... compliant. Actually, that’s how Pinkie ended up like that as well. I was intrigued by her “Pinkie Sense” and wished to study her abilities. So I had a look around in her mind, and her strange little powers were more interesting than I had first thought: they let her look into my mind too, although I had tried to avoid that. For a fraction of a second we were one, and it nearly killed her. She had no memory of the incident afterwards, she was too damaged, and she started killing not long after. You see, this all started as an accident: Pinkie saw my mind, the mind of an Alicorn, all those years of power and of regret, and it broke her. Then, when the killings started, when she started acting out desires I had pushed deep into my mind and buried there to protect others from them, to protect others from every dark thought or bad memory of all those millennia, I realised she could help me, help me to save Equestria. It was an epiphany: Why shouldn’t the tragedy of her broken mind be harnessed for the Greater Good? She had become a vessel for part of me. A terrible part of me, but still me. Why not use her to save us all?”

“Save us? From what?” Wedge asked. Celeste gave him a blank look.

“Cutie marks.”

“Cutie marks?” repeated wedge, unsure that he had heard her correctly.

Celestia signed and began. “Cutie marks, Wedge. The curse of ruling Equestria. Don’t get me wrong, it’s good that the more able elements of society have a way to distinguish themselves from the dross, and it’s good that ponies are unable to hide their true natures from me, but really, do you see any reason why the bulk of earth-ponies need cutie marks? Unicorns, yes, although many are now so useless they need removing, that ridiculous nephew of mine for a start... but unicorns, yes, Pegasus like you at a push, but really. Why does everypony need to know what their true calling is? It makes it almost imposable to rule! How can you get anypony to do a boring but necessary job when they *know* it’s not their true calling and the entire world can *see* that it’s not their true calling? We have hundreds or great artist, and far too few farmers, Wedge, and that’s the crux of the matter. What were you scheduled to do before this business with Pinkie came up? Accompany me on my annual tour or agricultural productivity. I’ve got colonists sent out to settle buffalo lands and put them under the plough for me, ponies farming rocks in the wasteland just to try and get something, anything, out of it, and I’ve even convinced ponies to not clear the winter away using Magic but to

all chip-in and use ploughs for one in their lives, and it's still not enough. Unless I can convince ponies to go against their own true callings and do something *constructive* for once, we're facing a Malthusian collapse."

"A what?"

"A long time ago... two, three hundred years or so, a simple earth-pony called Malthus Cleverhooves came along with some simple, provable observations that were so dangerous I had to have him banished to the Everfree forest and secretly fed to an Ursa Major, although I regret that now. Basically he pointed out that's so long as there was no food shortage, populations would rise, and that they would do so at a rate faster than food production could be increased by improvements in farming technology, until they created a shortage. Sooner or later, you either need to expand the scope of farming vastly, or face a population collapse in a famine of epic proportions. I told you I'll never let that happen again, Wedge. The things I saw in Discord's reign... never again. So we face the problem of how to force ponies to do a job they hate in order to spare their lives... or control the population and food supply by other means."

Wedge shuddered. "You're using state-sponsored serial killers as a method of *population control*?"

"Wedge! Too crude! Do you really think I'd try that? My first attempt was a long-term strategy: breed a sub-class of earth-pony without cutie marks to farm. Better a small percentage are born into serfdom than all starve... but after several generations of selective breeding for late-developing cutie-marks and a love of farming, the traits plateaued out. I couldn't stop the development of cutie marks, only delay it. Don't get me wrong, I have been very pleased with the results, that's why I've spared the Apple family the secret contraception programs I've been using on the rest of the population... but bromine in the water and a single bloodline devoted to farming just wasn't cutting it; I needed more radical steps.

My next plan was to instigate a disaster that would give me an excuse to bring in draconian laws to force people into farming 'for the duration'. That's why I let my sister return from banishment unopposed, and did nothing when Twilight tried to warn me about it. How was I to know my attempt to keep Twilight out of it would backfire so spectacularly? I mean seriously... finding the elements of harmony and learning to use them through the power of friendship? What the *hay* was that! And insult to injury, she cured my sister in front of her friends. Luna is immortal! I could have kept a war against her going indefinitely, but no... Twilight just had to win. I suspect the part of Luna that wasn't Nightmare Moon was helping her to learn to use the elements... but still. I couldn't just banish Luna again without the elements, and now Twilight has them, I had to work around her. It's not like I could just kill Twilight when she was a curtail component of my superweapon development project."

"Your student isn't part of any superweapon project!" yelled Wedge. Celestia made a face, and looked at Wedge as if he'd gone mad.

“Okay them, Clever-hooves, name three good reasons why I would want to raise a baby dragon to full adulthood inside Canterlot, without using the word “superweapon” in your explanation. No rush.” She said, gesturing to the empty throne-room. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“Continue.” Said Wedge after an uncomfortable pause.

“Well, my attempts to create disasters after that kept getting spoiled by Twilight and her friends. The cockatrice, the basilisks, the dragon, the ursa major... even an attempt to start a war with the Buffalo so we could steal all their land, farm it ourselves and confine them to reservations for orderly disposal got scuppered by my Faithful Student. I even used parasprites, to create an excuse to draft ponies into farming to repair the damage to agriculture, and they got stopped, by Pinkie of all Ponies! By Pinkie! Even when I pulled out the big guns and did something I swore I’d never do and freed Discord, did he have the decency to immediately go on an epic killing spree? No. Mind-games and chocolate milk. *Chocolate milk* Wedge! When Lunar and I fought him he made it rain molten lead for three whole days and the magical battle polluted the land now known as the Everfree forest so badly it’s still unsafe today! Oh don’t look at me like that, I had a plan to trap him in the end, all those letters to give Twilight the get up and go to defeat him... but why couldn’t he have caused a nice big disaster first? No, after that I gave up on trying to create situations that would justify draconian laws.”

“Why not just make the farming law anyway? The Ponies all love you, if you explained the issue...”

“I tried. A couple of hundred years ago when Malthus Cleverhooves first raised the issue, and twice since. Ponies wouldn’t stand for it. You see, the first stage in a major farming improvement means interfering with exiting farming practices, which ups food prices. Food prices and civil disturbance always correlate. I wasn’t just asking them to give up their dreams and work hard for the greater good, I was expecting them to do that and put up with a decade of soaring food prices and falling wages until things settled down into the new order, and I also tried enclosing and putting under the plough common land that they had grazed as a right for generations. My rule barely survived the Enclosure Act, and even then I had to be seen to punish Malthus Cleverhooves and ridicule his completely correct theories for leading me astray so they had a scapegoat to turn on instead of me. No... no that’s just not going to work. Fortunately, Pinkie’s madness opened my eyes to another option. One I had almost forgotten existed.”

“What?” asked Wedge, now as enthralled as he was betrayed and disgusted.

Celestia laughed, and nuzzled his neck gently.

“Oh Wedge, try harder. I had always thought you were the brighter one... Aquilinus worked it out much faster than this. True, he saw the dress briefly, but he at least made the connection then and there had had the good sense to keep his trap shut until I arrived, and to beg for his life immediately when I did. I couldn't have let him live, not with what he'd worked out, but I certainly would have considered sparing him Pinkie's attentions if he hadn't tried to have his cake and eat it too. You, you are brave and moral and just: You'd have tried to show the world my crimes if you found out, but Aquilinus; he was a coward. He wanted to live, but he also couldn't live with the knowledge of what I was doing and so wanted me to face justice, so he tried to play it both ways and he failed: dropping you all those hints, letting you interview the suspect, walking up to you and putting evidence that Fluttershy was a victim and not a collaborator right in your lap? No he *had* to die, and in pain. That's the point; I wouldn't torture them unless it was necessary. They have to die in pain.”

“But why?” wedge asked. Celestia leaned closer and whispered into his ear.

“Magic.” Then she leaned back, and smiled as she saw his face contort.

“Ahh, you get it now? Starting to see, are we? A few grey cells rubbing together? Aquilinus saw right away that if Luna was dead, I must be involved: no other pony has the power to defeat her, and if I was involved in a murder so... drawn out, so elaborate and messy, that it must be ritualistic. Luna... she saw what Pinkie was doing, and observed the body-parts and bodily fluids stored in jars for neat transport, and she recognised the type of magic right away, and so knew that only a pony who had lived through Discords reign could know of it.”

“Sacrifices?”

“Sacrifices? Wedge, if and when sacrifices are needed in magic, it is only the time and the place that matter, not the manner of death. And besides, any spell that you can do with a pony sacrifice can be done just as well with four cc's of mouse blood and three small pieces of wood, or two small pieces of wood and an egg, if the egg is fresh enough. No, What I needed were the fluids and body parts. Pinkie didn't know it, but all she was doing, all she did, was just resource gathering. Do you want to know why I killed them all? I needed the parts, Wedge. Nothing more.”

“What for?” Wedge asked, felling sick.

“Homunculi: Discord knew many secrets, some of which Luna and I learned from him, but for various reasons we never actually decided to use. Some of them he never even used; *Agapêmon* the ability to kill via love alone, for example, is almost useless precisely because to kill the victim you need to genuinely at that moment *love* them. Secrets where the magic is easy... but what you have to do is reprehensible when you think about it. Homunculi were one of those little secrets, and one of the

easier ones. The magic itself is not hard, but the ingredients take some getting: living tissue, removed from a body whilst still alive, conscious and in considerable pain, and facing death. When the host body dies the tissue and fluids collected from the host, if gathered properly, retain all the potential life the host would have had if not cruelly slain. I didn't need the entire body, that's why I let Pinkie do what she pleased with most of it, but Rarity took the jars of samples I needed and delivered them to me. Eyes, lips... things that are difficult to sculpt post-death are best to just transfer whole to the new body. Revenants and golems are easier but well... golems always look like they're made of clay, no matter how hard you try, and they can't follow complex inductions at all well outside of their creators presence, and as for Revenants raising the dead is difficult, time consuming, has the potential to go horribly wrong and is just aesthetical unpleasing! They'll look lifelike at first, but you've worked crime scenes where bodies are found after a month or so, right? It would be very difficult to pass those off as migratory farm-workers to a terrified populous. But Homunculi... you shape them from clay and kneed in the various fluids, then implant the tissue samples and watch as the magic lets them grow and spread through the whole, turning it into living flesh, but living flesh with the durability and incorruptibility of clay. Once complete, they are indistinguishable, or almost indistinguishable, from the Pony that the sample was taken from, or, if you want to create units that won't be spotted by grieving relatives, mixing two or more tissue host will create units with appearances part-way between the hosts. They look, feel, sound and smell real. They maintain a natural body temperature, if you give them food, and you don't have to feed them that's the beauty of it, then they eat, they drink, they sweat, urinate, defecate, if you cut them open they have real organs and blood and bone... they speak and act realistically, they feel pain... they retain the dead hosts memories about how to handle complex social interactions... they are practically indistinguishable from real ponies.

"It's a perfect solution, Wedge; our farming crisis isn't caused by lack of land or poor farming technology, but by a largely urban population who literately won't farm to save their lives. It's at the root of the matter a labour shortage, and the dead make such good workers; they don't need paying, or feeding, they never want time off, and above all they can't complain that this isn't their true calling as shown by their cutie marks. Workers, with no free will. *Loyal* works with no free will that retain all of the memories of the pony they are based on, and so can pass as them, although they seem a little off, and even deflect any suspicious questions or report the questioners. The dregs, the bottom feeders, the useless, the malicious, those who hurt other ponies, or cause problems, or don't pull their weight in society...we can re-build them: we have the magic."

"But Princess! This is insane! Ponies will notice if you replace Ponies with replicas! They'll get suspicious!"

"Really? My sister came back from exile and it was the biggest event in the past thousand years, and yet she then vanished completely from public view, for *a full year*, and when she came back she looked and sounded completely different, and nopony batted an eyelid. Not even when her brain's language-centre malfunctioned in public. Don't tell me ponies will notice Wedge... they haven't yet."

“You may have made it impossible for me to cover up the deaths of Dash and Fluttershy, but Applejack will be seen back in public again in no time at all, and thanks to your helpful decision to snap of her horn, Rarity died in considerable pain and had various bits of tissue ripped off her in the fight, and so is in the process of being remade by my accomplished assistant Pinkie as we speak, although why Pinkie’s using Marshmallow rather than clay is anypony’s guess. Huh, maybe now that I can control her directly, Rarity will be more willing to put-out. That should help control Spike when he hits puberty. Even Biggs suffered enough for the gore we scraped from the shop him to qualify! And I’ll re-process Mr and Ms Cake, and the Mayor and Big Mac and the good doctor to keep them quiet; it’s much more effective than my old method of silencing ponies who saw too much. I mean transorbital lobotomy is effective, but hardly subtle, especially if you accidentally sever one of the muscles that controls the eye on the way in and leave a visible tell-tale: that bimbo should really have known better than to try and unionise the postal service. You see nothing stops, Wedge. The only difference now is Pinkie knows who she’s working for. I’ll have to build her a new government controlled facility, somewhere out of the public eye now she can’t hide in plain sight anymore, so you’ve made this project more expensive than it was before, but nothing else. Good will prevail, Wedge: I always do.”

She noticed Wedge’s horror at this idea, and leaned down to comfort him. Wedge tried to pull away, but her horn flared once, briefly, and he lost all control over his own body.

“Oh shush, shush. Don’t worry Wedge. You’re a big strong stallion, nothing to worry about. Just a brief bit of pain and then I’ll have you up and on your hooves again in no time. You’ll like it as a Homunculus Wedge; you’ll have no choice *but* to like it. Don’t, don’t think of it as dying messily, think of it as a slightly difficult re-birth.” She said nuzzling him “Here, let’s get you out of that armour. Ahh, isn’t that better?” she said, trying not to cry at the sight of how badly scared the fight with Rarity had left him in the areas not covered by the armour. His mane was a real mess and his snow-white hide had a sheen of blood below the armour-line and sweat above it, and although his eyes still looked as brave as ever, and he still made eye contact without turning away, there were tears in his eyes. She laid her head on his shoulder, and started at his cutie mark: the scales of justice.

“It hurts me to see you like this Wedge. I don’t know why I’m telling you thing, but you won’t repeat it so why not? Long ago, once Luna was gone and I became lonely, I took lovers. I couldn’t have children: the immune system that stops me from getting sick or aging also kills off spermatozoa remarkably effectively, but there was some comfort in it. One was a lot like you, strong, proud, intelligent... beautiful: there’s a reason I only pick strapping, pure-white Pegasus for my guard, you know; for a lot of the day I have nothing to look at except you lot, so I might as well enjoy the view. I mean the flying chariot....” Celestia had to fight to keep her wings down at this point.

“Anyway. He was... perfect. And then he aged. And then he weakened. And then he died. And it broke my heart, and he was the last. And I swore never again. But, you in particular Wedge, are so

much like him. Gods, you even smell a little like him. I knew it would never work between us in life, you were always far too professional for that, but now, well, it's not like you'll age, or sicken, or die, or be able to say no. You'll have completion: Since he saw too much I'm having big-Mac killed too, and I want to see if he lives up to the name, but you, I get the feeling that you'll prove special. Unlike Aquilinus, after that little stunt he pulled, he's coming back as a gelding." She took her head of his neck, and looked into his eyes, and to his horror Wedge saw that she was actually crying.

"I'll take very good care of you, of all of you. And we'll be one big happy family, you and Biggs, and Rarity and AJ and Mac and Hooves and Luna and *all* the others, and won't that be nice? We'll be a family! We'll be happy!"

*Oh dear god, she's insane. Wedge thought. She's effectively **god** and she's utterly utterly insane. We're doomed. We're all doomed, and she was first. Please, please somepony stop this...*

Behind Celestia's back, out of her sight, Wedge saw as the door inched open, and a very small face looked though. To his horror the yellow Filly he had given the one-use password to earlier came though, taking in the scene with utter utter amazement. To be fair, it was a strange sight; the guard, bound and unarmoured on the floor, the Princess leaning over him and weeping, and the filly, just standing there.

Run! Shouted Wedge inside his head.

"Princess, please let me go." Wedge said, putting extra emphasis on 'go'. Celestia smiled though her tears.

"Oh Wedge, don't be silly. I'll not let you go. From now on we'll be seeing a *lot* of each other."

Wedge tried not to look at the Filly in case Celestia realised and spotted her too.

"But princess, it's mad. Ponies will realise you've been killing via pinkie and replacing the dead with replicas! Some will find out and *run and tell*. You'll never *get away* with this." The filly cocked her head at 'run and tell' and 'get way', but seemed rooted to the spot. Celestia, still crying, also cocked her head and begun looking at Wedge with an expression of surprise that would have been comic under other circumstances.

"Don't be foolish, Wedge. I know I can't keep this under wraps for ever. I don't need to: a year or two and Spike will be larger, and utterly loyal, the Homunculi will be operating in large enough numbers and the benefits of the increased food production will be starting to show. Even if ponies

do find out, they won't do anything about it. Would you really oppose a system that kept food supplies stable and the economy in good shape, especially when the head of that system had an army of undead servants hidden undetectably in the population, her own pet dragon, and could switch-off the sun if angered? Who could also order Pinkie to re-make you if you caused trouble? Well, you would, but you are that rare brave exception, that's part of what I've always admired in you. But most ponies, if I told them what I was planning to do, they'd rebel. But if I do it and they find out later, after the Homunculi are already present in numbers, they'll realise that the risks are too high and the time when rebelling could have actually achieved anything had already past. They will be understandably uncomfortable and upset, but they'll soon justify it to themselves, and within a generation or two it will be accepted as the natural order of things. Life, death and re-making. And now I'm sorry Wedge, but I think we've said all that needed to be said here." Said Celestia, getting up off her knees and standing up. Her horn begin to glow with internal light, as she charged up a spell.

"We'll talk again soon, once you've been remade: part of you will always remember your old life, so we can pick up right where we left off. Well, after we...yanno? You should be thankful Wedge, this won't take anywhere near as long as it would if Pinkie was doing it, and you mean a great deal to me so I'll do myself. It's the very least I owe you. Goodbye, Wedge, and don't be sad; the new you will be much, much better..."

"NOOO!" screamed the Filly, as she charged across the room and got between Celestia and Wedge. "No no no no NO! he's my friend! Oh please Celestia, don't kill him like this! He's my friend, Celestia please!"

Wedge screamed and shouted and tried to fight his way out of his bounds and yelled for the Filly to just run, but she stood there between him and Celestia, hooves spread, head bowed, eyes screwed up in fierce concentration as the throne room was light up by a flare of light from the Princes horn, and she snarled, lowed her head, aimed the horn directly at the filly's heart and then... suddenly stopped, cocked her head on one side with a sudden expression of recognition, and powered down the horn.

"Apple Bloom?" she said. "It's Apple Bloom, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh ma'am. Oh please don't kill my friend, please don't! He's mine!"

"Is he now?" asked Celestia sounding amused, as Wedge wondered what the hay was going on and yelled at Apple Bloom to just run. "Now then Miss Bloom, I rather think that I was here first, so that makes him mine."

"But Pinkie Pie *promised* miss! Promised that the next time a Stallion came up, I could do him. I've never done a whole stallion before! And besides." Said Apple bloom, in the very serious way children often reprimand adults "You're doing it wrong: even if magic would cause t' necessary pain, you still gotta take the samples the earth-pony way!"

Celestia laughed. "Yes, yes I know, there's a toolbox stashed under the throne. Well, you sure told me, and I do try to teach young fillies always to honour their promises, and the best way to do that is to let them see them promises honoured..." Celestia looked from Apple bloom to Wedge, and then smiled indulgently.

"Well, why not? You don't mind, do you Wedge? But you be careful now young missy: You'll have to clean up thoroughly afterwards, and I want him for a homunculus so don't lose any of the bits." Celestia glanced casually at Wedge's body as he tried to process what the hay was happening. Celestia realised her eyes had strayed to Wedge's crotch, so she blushed, turned and walked away. "Goodbye Wedge. I, I don't want to see you like this, but swing by to my chambers latter, around seven-ish, and we can talk. That's an order, guardspony."

Wedge yelled. "What's happening? Princess, you can't just leave me like this. A.. Apple bloom, where have you gone?" he said, as he realised that the filly had moved out of his field of vision and bound as he was he could not turn to see her. All he could see was Celestia, as beautiful as ever as she walked away, to the accompaniment of a metallic dragging noise and chorus of voices.

"Are... are you sure this is alright, Apple Bloom? I mean, this is pretty scary!" asked a musical voice, scared. Quite high, his internal cop noted, probably a filly.

"Yeah." Said another, little more tomboyish voice, trying to hide its nervousness. "I mean, what if we're caught?"

"By who?" said Apple Bloom, her voice a little muffled, as if she was carrying something in her mouth. "You saw the Prin'ces. You herd what she had to say. This is all official. And besides, if you don't try things, how will you ever get you're cutie marks like me?" the voice said, as Apple Bloom's flank and the faces of two nervous fillies, a Pegasus and a Unicorn came into view. Apple Bloom seemed to be walking backwards dragging something. She paused just in Wedge's view. To his horror she raised a hoof to her flank and wiped of yellow make-up to reveal a mark underneath: a hacksaw.

Darn it, thought Celestia as she walked away. She'd really hoped to finish this project before Pinkie was discovered, and even with Apple Bloom taking over part of that role, she would now have to find somewhere secret for Pinkie to operate from. She sighed. She had really, really hoped to get

through this without resorting to secret depopulation camps on the moon, but she guessed that that was an option now closed to her.

Behind her, Wedge could now see what Apple bloom was carrying. He had just started to scream as the doors swung shut.

Epilogue

“Did, did you hear that?” asked Spike, pausing mid letter.

Grunt. “Hear what Spike?” muttered Twilight, rolling over and screwing her eyes up: she hadn’t got out of bed since she’d heard about Dashie. Oh poor Dashie! Just... how?

“N... nothing. I just thought I heard a noise, is all.” Said Spike nervously walking across Twilight’s room in Canterlot. Twilight was worrying him. He was as sad as anypony to find out about Dashie and Fluttershy, but now that was secondary to his worry about Twilight. She had stopped eating, and just seemed to be shutting out all her other friends. He just stood there for a moment staring at her staring at the ceiling, before rallying and trying again.

“How, how about a nice relaxing bath? It’s a nice morning, why don’t you go in there and soak and stuff and I’ll get some breakfast fixed up and brought to you in the bathroom?” he tried, this being the politest way he could think of saying ‘it’s been three days, and you really need to start eating and bathing again.’

Twilight rolled over and wrapped her pillow over her head. After a moment of staring at her back he turned away to leave her alone. As he did, she shouted again.

“Dashie! I mean Dashie! And Fluttershy, why would anyone ever hurt Fluttershy!?! Pinkie, what happened to you Pinkie? If something was wrong, if you felt yourself going strange, if you were ill or frightened or hurt, why didn’t you come to me? I could have done something, Pinkie! I could have fixed this....” She yelled. “I...I should have fixed this...” She repeated, far more quietly.

“Oh boy, again with the ‘I should have fixed this’” muttered Spike, looking around desperately to try and find something to distract her. The door opened, and to his relief he spotted the mail pony coming in.

“Hey Twilight, would, would you like for me to read you some of the letters ponies have been sending you? There’s so many letters on consolation. Letters, cards flowers...” he said, watching Derpy unload items from a trolley onto Twilights already overflowing in-box.

“No, Spike, I don’t want to read any letters! I don’t want letter, I don’t want to see a doctor or my Brother, I don’t even what to see Celestia!” Twilight yelled. “I want my friends back!” Spike turned to run, and was about to gesture Derpy to leave too when he heard Twilight speak, and looked back.

“I... I’m sorry Spike. I know you’re just trying to cheer me up, to remind me that I still have other friends out there... but I just can’t deal with this at the moment. I... I don’t know how this happened, Spike. I don’t know why. If only there was a way I could find out. A lead, a thread I could research... but there isn’t, and I just feel so useless. All that magic, and what can I do? I’m, sorry I shouted at you Spike. Why don’t you go and see Rarity. I’m sure she need cheering up too.”

“No, Rarity’s been acting weird the last couple of days. I mean, I know she’s been though a shock, but something about her is just not right at the moment. Her smile’s all wrong, and she creeps up on you.”

“She doesn’t creep up on you Spike.” Sighed Twilight, exasperated. Behind them, Derpy finished emptying out the items and letters addressed to Twilight.

“You know what I mean.” Said Spike, as Derpy hesitated, checked nopony was in the corridor behind her, and then reached into her mailbag. Derpy then hesitated, nervously checking neither Spike not Twilight were looking, but they were both too involved into their own problems. Twilight was about to reprimand Spike, when she stopped.

Spike had a point, she had to admit. Although she didn’t sneak up on anypony, in the last day or so Rarity had visited several times to try and cheer Twilight up, and her attempts to do so just seemed a little... off. Twilight had at one point got distracted with her own sadness and, although Rarity had been sitting by her bedside and had been talking non-stop, Twilight had forgotten she was there and suddenly got a scare when Rarity moved. And this had happened several times in the hour Rarity was there. Twilight just kept thinking she was in an empty room and getting a shock whenever Rarity moved. It was exactly like that feeling you got when you knew somepony was staring at you, but the exact opposite: some part of your mind just refused to register Rarity as really being there.

That and something about her smile...

“Well, I suppose Rarity is still in shock.” said Twilight, dismissing the idea. Behind her back, Derpy took a small, heavy oblong package that was not addressed to anypony, and slipped it under some of the letters in the in tray, and then quietly left. Spike turned as he heard the door click shut behind her.

“Okay, but Celestia wanted you to write to her once a day and tell her how you are coping with all this” *you’re not*, Spike thought. “Why don’t you write and tell her about all the letters of consolation you’ve been getting. Use some exerts forms them or something.” Said Spike walking over to the in tray and having a rummage. He stopped when he found a package that was smaller and heavier than the rest.

“Spike, please, just... just leave it, alright? Ugg, I’d forgotten that letter. You’d better write something: you take down all my letters anyway, put something together from that pile and sign my name to it; Celestia will never know.”

“What? Cheat on a project she gave you?” asked Spike genuinely shocked as he opened the package. He turned to look over his shoulder at Twilight, realising that she’d never asked him to help her cheat before. As he did so, he felt something small and heavy fall from the package into the tray.

“Yes Spike, cheat. I.. I just can’t handle all this now, I’m sorry. Cobble something together from all the letters I’ve been sent.” Said Twilight, as Spike picked up the item and turned it over in his claws, curious. “Use anything in the Tray.” Twilight said, as Spike picked up the Dictaphone, saw there was still tape in it and let his claw hover half way between the “play back” and “delete” buttons. It was probably just junk.... but still...

“Use anything in the tray?” he asked. Twilight tutted.

“Yes Spike, anything in the tray. I leave it entirely to your best judgement...”

Coming soon....

"I was there when Luna Killed the Empress..."

Following the death of company captain Cloud Climber, Twilight Sparkle, captain of the tenth company Lunar Ponies Legion, finds herself promoted to the Mane Six. But as she and her new Mane Six allies "Pinkie" Porgaddon Pie, Rarity "Little Luna" Aximand, Rainbow Abaddon Dash, Applejack "The honest" Enquiry to the Warmistress, and Fluttershy "the half heard" continue in their quest to bring the Celestial Truth to all parts of the Equestrian imperium, Twilight begins to see things that shake the foundation of her faith in the cause, and great powers are unleashed that will change the Equestrian Imperium forever.

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