

# WINGIN' IT – OCTOBER

*For additional setting resources, read these:*

<https://www.fimfiction.net/story/360956/no-longer-displaced>

<https://www.fimfiction.net/story/484279/no-longer-alone>

*The snippets here are generally considered to be canon to the NL storyline. There are some exceptions as I may have included preliminary takes of the Book 3 epilogue when Book 3 has barely been started.*

## I – EGGHEAD

Wing buried his head into his forehoof and let out an exasperated sigh as he stood at the front of a lecture hall at Canterlot University. The physicist flier tried his best to not butt in as another lavender-colored pony opted to usurp his introductory lecture on the Electrothaumic Equality Theorem, but the more he heard Princess Twilight Sparkle ramble about tensors, spontaneous symmetry breaking, and  $SU(3) \times SU(2) \times U(1)$ , the more he felt compelled to save his actual students from the trauma imposed by an eavesdropping book nerd gone wild.

He finally pulled a hoof through his jet-black mane, set his golden-brown sights on the enthusiastic mare, and unleashed one of the many weapons in his arsenal—sarcasm. “Geez, Twiggles! Why don’t you take a break, pull out a quill, and write a letter to Callie about how you’re owning a bunch of freshies? I’m sure she’ll be stoked to hear this all turned out exactly how I said it would. Come to think of it, didn’t you already learn this lesson with Rainbow? Every creature learns differently, and you’re a couple orders of magnitude ahead of this crew. So pipe down, or I’ll use my professorial powers to make that imaginary letter a very real assignment.”

The alicorn let out a gasp, ruffled her feathers, and profusely blushed as she gazed around the classroom. Creatures of all kinds, wearing diverse displays of disgust and boredom, peered back at her. Their silent spells bore into Twilight’s soul, and the subsequent sheepish impulse made her curl a foreleg and recoil. “Sorry,” she answered in a far more reserved tone, “I got a little carried away at the chance to talk with Wing about his actual work. He tends to avoid talking about science when I’m around.”

“And now they all know why,” Wing retorted before a chuckle emerged from his muzzle. He flicked his namesake to twirl a piece of chalk as a slow-churning wave of laughter rumbled through the rows of seats. “Back to it! Right, as I was saying…”

$$k_1 \nabla \cdot E + k_3 \nabla^2 \alpha = \nabla \cdot M$$

“For hundreds of years, the fork-fed tale was that one alicorn-energy-unit, or AEU, represented by the standardized flux of Princess Celestia’s solar spell output, was the end-all-be-all of magic field strength. To be fair, who could blame that viewpoint given the enormous disparity between even the highest-level mages and the princess? Do not piss Callie off! Do not come between her and her cakes. Do not think that, just because she makes our distinguished egghead guest do everything, that she is useless. You will be destroyed. To also be fair, that pseudoscience was a load of shit.”

Wing grinned as the less mature students in the audience snickered at the sudden use of profanity. “If you think that is bad, take a military history class with Gracious Waters. Stallion is the best kind of psycho. Either way, the Electrothaumic Equality Theorem looks like a bunch of triangular gibberish to you all now

because you haven't taken vector calculus, but it's simple. The strength of the magic field is related to the strength of the electric field and a contribution from a scalar field.

"It wraps everything up in a nice little bow. How do earth ponies and the broad assortment of creatures access magic? Through that little alpha and triangle-squared—yes, Twilight, I know it's a differential operator. What about pegasi? Well"—the stallion lifted his foreleg, yanked whatever water vapor he could from the air-conditioned room, and quickly forged a cloud with his weather magic that ejected little threads of lightning—"last time I checked, we're pretty good at that. Unicorns, you have an appendage on your head that literally fucking radiates. You're ahead of the curve.

"As for those k's, they are constants. Congratulations, you're adults now. Factors of one-half and minus signs have become the banes of your existences. I didn't write them out because I'm lazy—and dimensional analysis is a nightmare, your nightmare in fact. Have fun with your first homework assignment, and see you in a couple days."

## II – NIGHTMARE

Moon Glow panted as she scrambled through corridors that seemed to melt away before her aquamarine eyes. No matter which way she turned, she could not escape the endless labyrinth. The vibrant light at the end of the tunnel goaded the ghost-white filly to race as fast as her little legs could carry her. Tendrils of her bluish-green mane fluttered in the strange breeze generated by her sprint. Her heart kept pounding from the tremendous effort, yet all her exertion was for naught. Salvation always remained out of reach, and a devil dwelled in her shadow.

She could feel *him*, and she didn't dare look back. His cackle loitered around her, slithered into her splayed ears, and spurred shudders of dread. His pearly grin hovered in her wake. Smug, domineering, and vile, he would hurt her again if she stopped. He'd cut her—deeper than the first time—deeper than the one that took her voice. He came back to finish the job. He came back to rip her away from the mom she had just started to truly love.

Tears streaked down the filly's face while she galloped. Her countenance contorted and her muscles strained as she clawed over a tile floor that haunted the young unicorn with a perplexing stickiness. Devouring Moon Glow's speed, the sanctuary betrayed its owner and left a sobbing child fumbling through the darkness. The timbre that the Smiling Stallion stole reverberated through suddenly cracked walls. "Ms. Ambrosia, Platinum, anypony—"

In a blink, her dampened muzzle collided into something soft. Warmth enveloped her body as feathers corralled her in a protective embrace, and the subtle scent of cinnamon soon reached the unicorn's hidden snoot.

"Is it him, Moon Glow?"

The filly scrunched to the sound of Wing's voice. Out of all the ponies who could have come to save her, Ms. Ambrosia's husband was not the one she expected. He was weird, chaotic, and noisy, but whenever Ms. Ambrosia saw him, the baker brightened up; so Moon Glow tolerated him as her male guardian. She just didn't necessarily prefer those who were so chipper—

*Is it him, Moon Glow?* He hadn't sounded chipper at all when he said that. Carefully, Moon Glow repositioned her head so she could stare up through the onslaught of plumage. Mr. Wing looked different here. His normally swept-back mane looked longer, wavy, and wild. His eyes, typically glimmering with

an annoying, playful spark, burned with an amber blaze that Moon Glow had never seen. Eventually, she nodded. Though, she still didn't turn around.

Meanwhile, Wing peered into the heartless, broken soul of a demented adult mage. He etched the ghaſt's sinister smirk into his memories and tightened his hold on the filly. "You don't need to remember this face anymore, Moon Glow. I'll remember it for you. I'll never let it out of my thoughts, and I'll do everything I can to find him. You've gone through enough horrible things, so please let me do this for you. When I find him, I promise there won't be any trace left to ever hurt you again."

Moon Glow didn't see exactly what Wing had done in the moments that followed. She felt the pegasus lift one of his forelegs, and she heard the jingle of something metal as it rattled around his wrist. A blistering wave of heat and light tore through the fabric of her nightmare, and when the blinding rays cleared, the duo stood beneath the sun and moon in a prairie field dotted with ambrosia flowers. For several seconds, she stared in silence at the endless beauty before finally letting go of all the tension that had assailed her mind. She clung to Wing and wept into his coat in the aftermath of that horror, but a dream had managed to come true. She really had a dad.

### III – GRAND GALLOPING GALA

The Lilac & Lavender bakery had closed for the evening of the Grand Galloping Gala. While Amby could have certainly made a killing running some catering for the event, she and Wing had other plans for this year's festivities. It was Trigger and Tea's turn to go to the social gathering unencumbered by the worries that came with having a pair of fillies to look after.

Instead, Wing had usurped the ovens to make his famous triple-crusteD pizzas, and the main seating area had been wholly transformed into a decorated *ballroom* fit for four princesses. Moon Glow, Platinum Blaze, and Star Caliber were dripped out in stylish ensembles that had Rarity's figurative signature all over them.

A peach-colored dress clung to Moon Glow's frame, and its white frilly accents matched her coat and paid homage to a cute server's uniform. Platinum Blaze donned a gown with vibrant metallic tones that wove the unicorn's name into the essence of the fabric, and the oldest of the trio, Star Caliber, secured a punkish outfit that elevated denim to new heights and captured the young mare's rebellious flair.

The rambunctious trio eagerly awaited the arrival of their meal, and they carried on through fits of giddy giggles and dramatic gestures while drawing together at one of the customer tables. Inevitably, Wing emerged from the kitchen once the pizzas had sufficiently cooled. One was promptly surrendered to the fillies after their works of art had been carefully set far away from the onslaught of sauce, cheese, and oil that was upon them.

Wing deposited the other pizza atop a candlelit table fit for two. Already seated and waiting, Ambrosia wore a sultry grin that accompanied the gradient aquamarine dress that hugged her figure. "Don't dig in right away," the pegasus commented, flashing a smirk of his own to counter his wife's play. "I know that look, and I just can't let it go unheeded. Just hang on for a few more minutes. I'll be back, and I'm certain you'll like it."

"Hunny, I'm counting on it," Amby purred in response before she watched Wing wink and walk into the kitchen. The sounds of his hooves striking the stairs followed shortly afterwards, and some faint rummaging could be heard emanating from the home directly above the storefront. It also required little effort for the mare to detect Wing's return to the ground level, but what she had not anticipated was a sudden hijacking of the shop's speaker system.

Ambrosia recognized the song the instant a twangy, subdued chord hit her perked ears. She relived her first dance as a married mare as *Sugar* by Mareoon 5 played. When the intro ended, Wing slid into the parlor, proudly displayed his navy-blue dress uniform, and utterly commanded the baker's attention.

"Milady," he spoke, offering a hoof to his blushing wife, "may I have this dance?"

The lilac-colored earth pony did not hesitate to respond. She grasped his hoof before he could even fashion the teasing smile that graced his muzzle. "Your pizza can most certainly wait, Director. I seem to have been given an early dessert, and"—her voice swiftly fell into a whisper as she stretched her mouth to his ear—"you'll always be my favorite snack."

#### **IV – FAVORITE SNACK**

Wing's L&L Gala efforts had carried him well into the night. He thought the girls had fun. He *knew* his wife had fun, but when he awoke sprawled atop the bed in an unkempt mess, he had to combat a nemesis that was never fun before the first caffeination of the day—morning. The scientist tried keeping his eyes open, but the blinding light of Callie's fusion orb compelled the stallion to close them again. The relentless bombardment of photons careening through the windowpane made the stallion groan. At least it was better than greeting a dreary day that encouraged unending grogginess.

Thankfully, his family proved to be far more capable in the early morning hours, which for Wing meant any time before 10 AM, and those skills saved him on many days. Cinnamon scents stirred his soul this time around—protecting him from pathetic hours of listlessly rolling atop the mattress until he caved. Muffled thumps reverberated from the kitchen, further coaxing the pegasus to sit up and stretch his ruffled namesakes.

The baker and her apprentice had successfully snagged their prey. Wing confronted the lustrous solar rays. His hooves thudded onto the wood floor. He popped his neck, took a deep breath, and extended each of his legs until he believed that his body was sufficiently prepped. As he approached the staircase, the sway of the cinnamon only grew stronger. Soon, hints of chocolate accompanied a melody of giggles and the crinkling of a yellow bag that Wing could clearly picture in his mind.

When he cleared the last step, Ambrosia was already at his side. The smirk plastered across her muzzle told Wing everything he needed to know. The girls had concocted a plan, and his daily routine was walking right into it. His sights drifted towards the mare's extended hoof, which presented a red, freshly opened can of *W.N.S.* We're not sponsored after all, but if you know, you know.

He claimed his joyous caffeination and took a sip of the sweet, bubbly nectar, yet that maneuver represented only the first phase of the operation. Moon Glow booped his side and pulled his focus to his right flank. There, she stood and held a plate of three tiny chocolate cinnamon-swirl muffins.

Wing briefly glanced behind the filly towards the back of the shop. Once upon a time, nothing more than a brick wall had stood there. Moon Glow changed all of that. Amby and he had adopted the child off the streets, and when they saw that she had a love for baking and giving back to those still in need, Wing ripped out the alley wall of the kitchen and installed a take-out window. It was Moon Glow's Alcove—the place where she could give treats to those who needed them. The muffin tray was already half gone.

He collected the dish and munched on the first muffin. Well, he more inhaled it in a single bite, inducing laughter from the culinary pair who knew what was coming. Still, Wing relished the flavors all the same, and an energized smile tugged at the corners of his lips. Their love would always wake him up.

## V – PRANKSTERS

Standing in front of the large gold-plated doors of Celestia and Luna’s private estate, Wing hurled a deadpan stare at the two guards posted at the sides of the entryway. “I need to see Philomena as soon as possible. We need to attend to an urgent—”

“You’re not on the approved access list today, Director. We can’t let you in,” answered a colt on the watch. For a moment, the trio held onto silence as though it were a fermata in an orchestral wonder. The soldiers’ brows lowered as they eyed Wing, and they slightly pitched their heads to ensure that the reach of the sun stopped at their golden helmets.

Meanwhile, Wing’s eye twitched as he peered up at them. The frustration generated by their inaction continued to mount. It was as if they simply expected him to just turn around and walk away when there was work to be done. “Are you two fucking daft?” he finally blurted in a rare display of agitation. “I run the Intelligence Service. I’m on the JCoS. I don’t need to be on the access list to get—”

Suddenly, the pegasus exhaled, lifted his hoof, and waved. “You know what. Just forget about it. I don’t have time for this. I’ll just go in the back. Keep up the magnificent work, gentlecolts. I’m sure Discord or someone will be utterly terrified of you.”

With that, the two stallions watched Wing trot off to walk around the estate. After holding their breaths for a few more seconds, the guards unleashed a sequence of chortles. “Some Intelligence Director, huh?” one quipped in a low, burly voice. “Doesn’t even know that there isn’t a back door. Just a stone wall.”

Within minutes, Wing leaned upon the balcony railing that overlooked the front entryway of the princesses’ home. Philomena stood atop the same fixture next to Wing’s folded forelegs, and her resolute leer zeroed in on the guards. The phoenix made a series of cooing and chirping noises that drove laughter from the depths of Wing’s lungs.

“Dear Princesses, no! Hilarious, but totally beneath your station. Don’t get me wrong. They’d absolutely never live it down, but neither would you, and it’d probably just generate more trouble than it’s worth.” Wing rolled his wrist as he inhaled, and his own keen sights targeted the bothersome bunch. “We don’t need to exert any effort to prank them. In fact, all we have to do is follow proper protocol for our sortie. Are you ready to roll out?”

The immortal firebird nodded and hopped onto Wing’s head. She quickly nestled into his mane, drawing another chuckle from the equine flier before they departed.

A couple of minutes passed before the radiant doors opened in the wake of a harrowing thunk. The two guards jolted at the unexpected intrusion, and they looked over their shoulders as Wing and Philomena emerged from the dark interior.

“Well, hey there,” Wing began after the guards’ jaws noticeably descended. “Please note in the official records that a J.O.S. is in progress. Authorization under the Director of the Equestrian Intelligence Service. Deployed assets are Special Operations Officer Philomena and E.R.A.F. Codename Schada.”

Continuing to trot down the steps, Wing grinned after he observed the sentries’ armor-rattling shudders. He injected a pestering pause of his own. Turnabout was fair play, after all, and there was always a bit of amusement to be found in even minuscule levels of chaos. “I’m not sure how you’ll reconcile the disparity between the exit and entry logs, but then again, I’m not much of a D.I.S., now am I?”

## VI – MAGIC SHOW

Adhering to their sacred duties as a loyal niece and daughter, both Platinum Blaze and Moon Glow took great delight in informing Star Caliber that, despite being a pegasus, Wing was actually a very capable magician. The denim-wearing creature of reverie was a bit skeptical, but if there was any paternal lesson she learned from Trigger—it was to never doubt the random circles of her uncle.

Still, arriving into the Woken World as a teenager made the black-coated mare more than willing to challenge assertions that she had no real reason to push. She caught Wing in the parlor of the bakery, thrust her foreleg in his direction, and enthusiastically asked to see a magic trick.

The sudden request came as a surprise to the stallion, but after a brief excursion to the apartment floor of the building, Wing returned with a lighter, permanent marker, and a deck of cards. He plopped down at one of the tables and waited for his nieces and daughter to take their seats. Star took the middle position and set her purplish gaze on the deck. She dialed in, casting out the impacts of the environment with such palpable focus that Wing chuckled.

“Tell me when to stop,” Wing instructed after picking up the deck and riffling down the cards. When she said stop, the sneaky flier set the top portion of the deck on the table and turned over the top card that remained in his grasp—which happened to be the two of hearts.

Star Caliber huffed at the sight and shifted her attention to Wing’s eyes. “Yeah right, Uncle Wing. We both know you forced that to be my dad’s favorite card. Would it mess up your trick if I asked you to do that again?”

Wing snickered and reassembled the deck. “No problem at all, Star. We haven’t even gotten to the trick yet, so just tell me when to stop.” The process repeated, and this time, Wing didn’t bother to set the top portion of the deck on the table. He held it up with one of his namesakes while his forehooves revealed the new card of choice: the four of diamonds.

This selection seemed more satisfactory to the silver-maned adolescent, so Wing squared the bottom stack with his free namesake and presented the four of diamonds face up upon its pile of friends. “Alright, take the permanent marker and sign your card,” he directed, humming as his niece boldly scribbled her name right on the center of the card.

He repositioned his wings to turn over the signed stock, promptly buried it in the center of the deck, and placed the complete pile on the table. “We’re going to use the power of your imagination to pull your card back to the top of the deck.” Wing set a hoof atop the cards and continued, “I want you to place your hoof over mine and picture your card. Channel that signed four of diamonds up through its companions.”

“Got it!” Wing exclaimed after a few moments. The sudden noise prodded Star to retract her limb, and her uncle swiftly punctuated his statement by flipping over the prize—only to discover a completely blank face. He splayed his ears and shot Star a deadpan stare, who scrunched her muzzle in response. “Star, if you’re going to keep trying to out-trick the trick, we’re never going to get to the finish line. Now I’m going to have to ask you to do more work.”

“What the—” she squeaked in disbelief as Wing lazily pushed the blank card across the table.

“We’ll have to do it a different way now. Draw the four of diamonds yourself. Everything. The pips, the numbers, and your signature. They all have to be there.” While the filly was busy, Wing took the deck and

put it back into its box. The moment Star finished her drawing, he traded the secured pile for her one-of-a-kind work of art.

“As you know, creations are powerful things. They hold sway over reality itself, and while you might not realize it yet, you’ve given me a powerful artifact, a piece of you, your name, and with this I will bend your true card to a new reality that we decide. Your drawing is voodoo, dear niece. Anything I do to this card will also happen to the one that is now in your possession, so what should we do?”

“Rip it!” Platinum Blaze cheered in an exuberant, high-pitched squeal while Moon Glow silently gestured her head to the lighter on the tabletop.

The instant Star Caliber nodded in agreement, Wing tore off one of the corners and dramatically tossed the scrap to the side. He flicked the drawn four of diamonds from his hoof to between two of his feathers, snatched the lighter, and proceeded to singe the torn arc as well as the back of the card. “Hold it face up, right here, just like this,” he instructed, setting the *decorated* masterpiece atop her hoof.

Wing smiled as he took the deck box. He slowly opened it, letting the suspension build as the deck slid out of the box face down. Slowly, he spread the cards out until it became clear that one card had surprisingly switched to the face-up position. The red pips, vibrant four, and flamboyant signature revealed themselves, but the true shock came when Wing showed Star the torn, obviously burned corner of the stock.

She jolted and grabbed it, turning it over to see the exact same singe pattern on the back. She placed the cards over one another, eyed the tears carefully, and found them to be the same. “What in Tartarus, Uncle Wing!?”

## VII – DRAGON

Trigger tended the Phoenix Fire’s no-nonsense bar well into the night. The illuminated bottles that lined the wall behind him had all put in their fair shares, and the Coltston-wearing black stallion couldn’t help but reveal the slightest smile at his soldiers’ rowdy reveries. The guard hotspot continued to bring the battle-tested colonel indefinite amounts of joy, and each night bequeathed another tale that he’d inevitably share with his wife and kids.

Yet, as closing time neared, the crowd thinned out, and an eerie unease settled over the building. Chatter seemed to dwindle, causing the argent-maned officer to slide his amber-hued sights around the establishment. Nothing he saw within his domain should have raised mental alarm bells, but something deep in Trigger’s core told him that someone was coming.

Instinctively, he reached for a glass and placed it on the counter before he let his hoof wander along the row of bottles. Dreams and fates were often intertwined, and the creature of reverie found his limb pulled towards one of the more peculiar beverages in his collection. “Pyre’s Demise, no ice,” he mumbled and unscrewed the cap on the opaque black bottle.

An edgy swirl of dark red and pearly night filled the cup. The brew’s alcoholic bite made the most tolerant ponies crumble, and even Trigger would be hard-pressed to ever find a reason to drink that shitshow in a hypothetical pursuit of inebriation. Then again, he hadn’t poured it for himself. Before the bottle returned to its pedestal, the door flicked open in a feat of strength that nearly popped it off its hinges.

A dark-grey dragon ducked his head as he crossed the threshold. The emerald eye that wasn’t hidden behind a patch bore a stare into Trigger before it drooped to target the unattended glass. “Ya knew I was a-comin’ then?” he asked in a raspy voice that pushed the lower bounds of what most equines considered normal.

“Smoke,” Trigger called the dragon by name. He took a moment to gauge the reactions of his patrons and found that, unsurprisingly, most had already recovered from the initial shock of the violent arrival and only cared about their own business. “If I couldn’t sense your ass, then ya’d have every right to question my competence on the field. What I don’t know is why so many creatures try to break my damn door when they come in.”

“Ain’t my fault your door’s a weak piece of shit,” Smoke countered as he took a seat across from Trigger and wrapped his claws around the glass. The dragon downed the entire drink as though it were a shot, and he replied to the spicy burn with a roar and a slam of the emptied offering.

Still holding the bottle, Trigger studied his guest. Every scar and the memories they told, the emotions Smoke chose to show, and the shifts in his expression that he tried to hide were taken in by the attentive barkeep. “How long?”

Smoke jerked and sighed before one of his liberated palms rubbed the spikes on the top of his head. “Not long enough, but I’ll see my ponies ‘fore the time comes. Lemme tell ya, it was easier to sneak to Las Pegasus to drop in on Barry. That bridget of ‘is is somethin’ special. A blaze in its prime. But you... still hidin’ all that strength under a hat when you’re the only one who could right whip my ass. There’s no one better to be my last stop ‘til the children take me home. Besides, it’s like ya always told me.”

Trigger adjusted his hat, placed a second glass on his side of the counter, and poured two more. “Yeah, Tail is something, and you’re right. Best enjoy it while we can... and dreams never die.”

## **IIX – SLEEPOVER**

Years ago, a young Tail and Amora gathered in the former’s bedroom and giggled the hours away. The freckled, nerdy, faded-lavender pegasus sprawled atop her bed and stared at her friend with teary, chocolate-brown eyes. “Stop that asinine giggling!” she roared, re quoting her mother’s words from when they went out to PizzaBarn for a girls’ night out.

The outrageous phrase spurred another bout from the mischievous duo. The white, brown-maned unicorn nearly toppled over, and she would have if her cobalt-hued aura hadn’t succeeded in yanking in another pillow to keep her upright. “Y-Your mom didn’t get it! That colt was throwing the dumbest tantrum I’ve ever seen.”

Tail struggled to hold back the tears as she remembered the sight of a colt their age utterly melting down in the restaurant when his father refused to buy exactly the pizza he wanted. Even her little brother, Sincy, behaved better than that when they went out, yet it really wasn’t even the outburst that did her in. “My mom made it so much worse,” Tail twittered, her feathers and namesake flicking about in a renewed sense of amusement.

Losing themselves in the moment, the ten-year-olds just kept laughing until a knock at the door caused them both to stop. Tail swiftly sat up, and her braids flopped behind her as she eyed the knob. The knock was far too quiet to have come from her dad, and her mom wouldn’t have even bothered to wait before entering, whether or not Tail acknowledged the noise.

Instead, the fillies intently watched as the knob eventually turned and the door ever-so-slightly creaked open. A frosty-blue unicorn colt poked his head inside. Little aviator shades covered his eyes, and his dirty-blond mane swayed in groomed clumps. “Taillll,” Sincy proclaimed in the loudest whisper he could muster, “Barley and I wrote another song. Could we play it for you? Please. Please. Please.”



“Weren’t you two supposed to be in bed like two hours ago?” Tail asked after her door opened even more, revealing Sincerity’s best friend, Barley Blues. The cream-colored earth pony immediately rolled his teal eyes in Sincy’s direction—betraying that he had anticipated Tail’s reaction.

But Sincerity Chain, future rockstar extraordinaire, came with his own game plan. He held up the SincyStar, a synthesizer his sister had designed for one of his birthdays, and smirked. “You’re not supposed to be up, either. At least Barley and I were being quiet. You two are laughing so loud that we can hear it through the wall. But thanks to our power as best friends and your best-inventor status, we made our next Number-1 hit.”

Amora snorted at the boys and gave a sidelong glance towards her bestie. “Let’s let ‘em play, Tail. We’ve already seen one tantrum today, and I usually like what they come up with anyway.”

Instantly, sparkles danced across the boys’ irides. Tail’s brother even lowered his shades so their champion could see his chocolaty eyes. “Our beautiful angel,” he proclaimed before Amora succumbed to another giggle fit. Tail, on the other hoof, rolled to faceplant her pillow and unleashed an agonized groan.

“I only hope you’re right, Ams,” she mumbled while gesturing to the colts with a waving wing. “Just get in here before we wake up Mom and Dad— Hmm—” Tail’s ear perked, and she snapped her head up from the pillow after the sentence left her mouth. She didn’t hear anything unusual, not anymore, but for the briefest of moments, the young mare was certain that she heard chuckles, chuckles coming from down the hall.

## **IX – POISON JOKE**

Tucked away in the deepest recesses of the castle, beneath layers of stone and within the heart of Mt. Canterhorn, Wing’s hidden laboratory facilitated the stallion’s more *sinister* experiments. His assistant, and right-hoof mare in the E.I.S., Dr. Batsy rummaged around in the background while Wing largely remained unaware of his tiny batpony colleague. Instead, he yielded all of his attention to the set of a dozen blue flowers that happily grew in their excessively luminescent confines.

Poison joke fascinated the physicist-turned-operative for several years—ever since a random dream stoked his imagination. To some, the flower stirred an odd sense of dread even though exposure never produced directly lethal consequences. To be fair, the pegasus could certainly construct chapters in his mind where some unlucky, over-confident equine succumbed to a horrendous fate by disrespecting the frayed threads of chaos.

In that vein, Wing wondered if he could harness this incredible power for something more productive by wholeheartedly immersing himself in the random experience. He pulled one of the potted plants across the workbench and hummed. “You’re up next, Eris,” he spoke to the flowering flora while positioning a mounted glass bell jar above the bloom. A hole had been drilled through the top of the glass, through which a tube was fed, and all of that connected to a metal containment vessel and a pump that whirred up to extract the poison joke pollen.

Wing did not stop there. He swiveled atop his chair and grasped a metal rack loaded with hundreds of test tubes. Each one had been filled with a green-colored solution and capped with a special tool that functioned as both a seal and oil-collection instrument. He plucked one of the vials, promptly unscrewed the lid, and guided the stem through the opening.

“This won’t take too long,” he cooed to his plant. Delicately, he swabbed Eris’s leaves with the tip of the porous rod, and after a few passes over the blue-hued pads, Wing secured the cap and swirled the solution

around with a few flicks of his wrist. “See, that wasn’t too bad, and since you were so kind to me today, I’ll see exactly what fun you have in store!”

A sly smile stretched across Wing’s countenance, and he tenderly brushed the flower with an uncovered hoof. The poison joke responded with a faint silvery glow, and it wasn’t long before Wing felt the strands of incomprehensible magic spiraling around his frame.

In a flash, he was gone, replaced by a sleeping mare who looked like she could be Wing’s twin before she, too, vanished in a blink. The scientist himself appeared to strobe and flicker in and out of existence, and each time he rematerialized, he was dressed in various garbs from around the world. Eventually, the plant anchored its owner to the lab. Snow coated a quarter of his mane. Swimming trunks cascaded over his flanks, and his signature namesakes were nowhere to be seen.

Wing unleashed a hearty laugh, leaned into his office chair, and gazed upon Eris’s shimmering petals. “And to think there are ponies out there who consider themselves the fastest. Thanks for the fun. Though, I’m guessing that me walking home is the punchline…”

## **X – PARASPRITES**

“What the buck are they doing!?” Wing wailed from his command post. He was positioned in the center of a vast space and sat in the middle of a ring-shaped desk that allowed him to swivel and pivot toward any division of the Equestrian Intelligence Service. Papers created carnage atop the mahogany surface, and a few parchments managed to take the leap onto the navy-blue floor in the aftermath of Wing’s outburst.

“Manhattan! Get some rapid comms out to the M.C.G.” He snatched a gigantic tome from his desk, held the page to face a specific aisle of oak desks, and pointed with his wingtip to a peculiar, spherical-shaped pest. “They’re being infested with parasprites! Have them disengage conventional countermeasures immediately!”

He slapped the book down and pressed his hooves against the sides of his head. “Food sources yield exponential reproduction, and those things can eat just about anything. Alright! Manhattan, tell them to deploy the best weatherponies they’ve got. Low-level E-fields on every surface they can tag. It won’t hold them off forever, but it could buy me enough time to summon the one true solution.”

“Orders relayed,” Dr. Batsy responded from her perch adjacent to her partner. The golden-eyed mare brushed her mariner-blue mane and stretched one of her leathery wings as her stare tracked Wing.

The stallion rolled his chair about 45 degrees along the arc of his desk. His gaze briefly drifted down the row assigned to the Ponyville Division, and his namesake moved to grab a piece of stationery marked with the official Crown letterhead.

*Dear Pinkie Pie,* Wing began writing.

*The City of Manhattan would like to cordially invite you to an incredibly special and unexpected party. Ordinarily, ponies might consider this next bit to be rather rude, but I imagine that you’ll enjoy the twist. This party will absolutely require your planning expertise as those who were originally tasked with addressing the sheer size of the crowd did not properly construct the guest list.*

*I will not pretend to be an expert of your caliber, but I will take the opportunity to recommend that you bring a tuba, trombone, banjo, accordion, and your favorite set of cymbals. Perhaps your Pinkie Sense has already been triggered, and you know what’s happening. Suffice it to say that there is no pony more capable of tackling this invasion than you.*

*Counting on you, Physics Breaker. Go out and do your thing!*

*Your friend,*

*Wing*

The pegasus set his pen down and rolled the paper into a scroll. He tossed it toward one of the desks in the Ponyville aisle and smirked. “Get that sent to Sugarcube Corner, A.S.A.P. That’s the best shot of saving the city with minimal damage.”

The Director watched as his office swarmed. The instant his command went out, the entire Ponyville Division got to work securing the comms port and assuring that Pinkie received the request. The massive space rumbled with the clatter of busy operatives.

“So, Bosspon,” Batsy quietly spoke after she trotted over to Wing’s desk, “what’s the contingency plan should Pinkie Pie run into trouble? We both know she won’t, but it is your protocol to always have a Plan B.”

Wing tilted his head in Batsy’s direction, flashed a smug smile, and mischievously rubbed his forehooves together. “I waltz into the throne room and tell Callie that the parasprites raided her dessert fridge. They’d never know what hit ‘em. The problem is that neither would all of Manehattan.”

## **XI – WINTER WRAP-UP**

Autumn Tea, Star Caliber, Platinum Blaze, and Trigger stood outside Twilight’s shimmering friendship castle playset while Equestria’s newest princess paced nervously before the family. The entire crew had appeared in Ponyville on the final day of the Winter Wrap-Up schedule, and they came completely decked out in outdoor gear befitting of the town’s work volunteers.

On top of the unexpected arrival, Tea and Trigger captivated the alicorn’s attention, and the sudden—or, in Trigger’s case, continued—fixation fueled the royal’s neurotic tendencies. Standing out against the white coat, and unable to hide behind a long rosewood-colored mane, a faint blush etched itself on Tea’s countenance below a pair of vibrant, heterochromatic eyes.

Those emerald and gold, *richly*, sights continued to sneak glances of the stallion of her dreams. Trigger did not shy away from them, either. Quite to the contrary, every time he caught one of them, he shared a smile, and Twilight was rather certain that one of the grittiest ponies she had ever met was blushing as well.

“But even more shocking is the scarf!” Twilight rambled aloud as she gestured towards the general area where Trigger stood. The princess hadn’t even realized it. She kept on with her pacing and mumbled a sequence of words that the waiting family found completely incoherent.

Trigger unloaded a weary sigh, flicked the brim of his Coltston, and checked on the dangling ends of his dark-red scarf. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. She’s Twilightin’ again.”

“What do you think’s got her spun up this time?” Tea asked after she sauntered behind her giggling children and nuzzled up to Trigger’s side.

The creature of reverie zeroed his gaze on the meandering alicorn. “The moment she saw us, I’m guessin’ she wanted to start askin’ about dreamshell magic. But that alone wouldn’t cause this nonsense, so I’d wager there’s somethin’ else.”

On cue, Twilight planted her hind legs on the floor and twirled around to address the family. “You can’t use your magic! It’s tradition here to only rely on good-old-fashioned physical work that fits the earth-pony roots of the town.”

Pointing to his hat, Trigger blinked. “Twiggles, I normally keep things concealed unless combat warrants it. Ya know this already. The kids know it too—”

“You don’t understand,” Twilight interrupted, her brow descending to forge an expression teeming with determination and resolve. “Applejack got extremely upset with me during my first Winter Wrap-Up when I used the tiniest amount of magic. Earth-pony history matters a lot to the residents of this town. I really don’t want to jeopardize the feelings of one of my closest friends when it involves a potential misunderstanding that I can easily prevent.”

A piece of pink bubblegum popped, snatching the stares of all those in attendance. Star Caliber quickly re-engulfed the bubble remnants, and the denim-wielding, scarf-wearing teen nodded towards the sky. She targeted Rainbow Dash and the fleet of weatherponies who swooped through the overcast clouds to brighten the landscape with beams of sunlight. “If it matters so much, then why are pegasi on flight duty?”

Pinpricks replaced Twilight’s pupils. Her brow and cheeks practically fled from her eye sockets, and the princess’s ears, wings, and tail twitched sporadically. “B-B-B-B-B-B...”

The consonants spewing from Twiggles failed to find any vowel friends, and in the midst of this spectacle, Trigger sighed again. “Star, have ya been talkin’ with Uncle Wing about cyclic BS loops?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “C’mon, let’s just go to Sweet Apple Acres. She’s gonna need time to weasel her way out of this glarin’ plot hole.”

## **XII – CUTIE MARK**

The largest professional wrestling event in the world took place in the heart of Canterlot on the night of Ground Breaker’s tenth birthday. While Tail and Barrier were certainly loving and caring parents, growing up as the only earth pony in a family of unicorns and pegasi put G.B. in an unusual position. His younger sister was a promising flier who seemed to have a knack for inheriting their mother’s sass, and his younger brother was an absolute genius mage who looked like a glasses-wearing clone of their dad.

Sometimes, the eldest of the bunch just felt out of place going up against *that*, especially when the mellow colt remained a blank flank at his age. His mother was a renowned scientist. His father was a hero of two epochs. His siblings were going places. They loved him immensely. Ember and Rising even looked up to him, and yet...

Ground Breaker lowered his head as those thoughts filled his mind. Snapshots of his parents cluttered his imagination too, stirring guilt, uncertainty, and doubt. This trip was for him. The whole night was for him—to embrace a genre of entertainment rooted in the earth-pony niche. After all, his earth-pony aunt was the one who scored front-row tickets to the Equestrian World Prime Rodeo on his milestone day. Tonight was supposed to be about them bonding. He had convinced his parents to stay in Las Pegasus, but his brother and sister had insisted on coming to see their aunt, uncle, and Platinum Blaze. He didn’t think they’d be interested in the show, yet the memory of his siblings getting teary-eyed from the mere notion of not being together on his birthday hit hard.

“You brood like your mom, Kid,” Aunt Bonecrusher spoke up from her adjacent seat beneath the spectacle of lights and amidst the raucous crowd. “We’re all here, so stop worrying about it and enjoy the show. Take it from a longtime follower, anything can happen.”

For hours, Ground Breaker absorbed the matches. He occasionally snickered at the sight of Uncle Sincy losing his mind at the costumes and music. Platinum Blaze shouting in excitement from high-impact moves also carved a smile onto G.B.'s muzzle. Ember Flair bounced to the stunning displays of earth-pony ring-rope acrobatics, and Rising Wit peered around the massive arena with illuminated, blazing irides that reminded G.B. of Mom.

The owners of the EWGP, a glorified and legendary mixed tag team, were in the center of the squared circle when that wave crashed. The duo mocked the City and Royal Guards, claiming they were bucking useless—just as useless as the roster in the back—a roster that could never challenge them—that would never take the championship belts off their hooves. All Ground Breaker could think about in that moment was that he shouldn't have pushed his parents away—that he wanted them there more than anything—and then, the lights went out.

Uncle Sincy's voice echoed from the speakers raised into the rafters. New challengers would make their debut, and when the lyrics of the rocking entrance music contained the words *Mavericks' Wild*, the guard-packed audience blew the roof off the building. The roar betrayed the surprise. Every single creature in Canterlot, excluding the kids, had some idea of who would fight for the EWGP World Tag Team Championship.

The sibling trio, however, screamed and leaned over the padded barrier only after their father appeared at the top of the ramp. His face was plastered on the giant screen hanging high above the ring, and he wore a black Coltston and jacket that subtly paid homage to Trigger's style. Metal accents provided some extra flash that utterly cemented the stallion as a star.

The kids stretched their necks, trying to see over the crowd and up the sheet-metal ramp to make eye contact with their dad. Magic Barrier wasn't looking in their direction, though. The captain peered towards the entranceway as Tail came through the black curtain and pierced a swirl of developing fog. A cowgirl hat decorated with flowers sat atop her head, and the star-dotted corset she wore hugged the mare's figure.

"You bucked up! You bucked up!" rained down from the pro-guard audience until a stream of heavily built ponies formed a blockade at the bottom of the ramp to separate the two newcomers from the champions.

Ground Breaker blinked, and his mom had suddenly plowed through the line. The largest pony in the pack crumpled around her extended foreleg, and thin strands of lightning radiated from the strike point. G.B.'s heart thumped as he took in how cool his mom was at that moment. The security team didn't bother her one bit. Instead, she glared up at the titleholders, and that scowl carried a bite that the colt had never seen before. His mom looked like a slaughtering machine.

"What even was that?" he mumbled, catching Bonecrusher's attention.

"That's the Bullet Flash, Kiddo," the mare stated after leaning towards her nephew. "I've been on the receiving end of one of those. Not pleasant. She looks kinda pissed, too, which means we're in for a show."

It didn't take long for Barrier to dispatch the rest, and the second the duo stepped between the ropes, the chant shifted to the decibel-churning cry of "We saved the North!"

For the next hour, Ground Breaker watched as his aunt's prediction became a spoiler. His parents hit moves that only a properly trained pony could hit. They rolled and tumbled, all while keeping their magic and

wings stowed away. They were fighting like earth ponies. They were respecting the history of the circle, and they were utterly crushing it. The ten-year-old started standing up when Tail climbed to the top rope. She leapt, twisting and turning on her way down, to hit the most gorgeous wingless shooting star press that G.B. had ever seen. It was his favorite move, and she had done it for him.

Tail had also pulled the maneuver as her finisher, and when the figurative dust cleared, Ground Breaker was gazing upon the new EWGP Tag Team Champions. He finally locked eyes with his sweat-covered, exhausted parents, both of whom were looking at him with dopey smiles.

The colt's senses pushed out the cheer of the crowd, and his focus remained solely on his parents until movement from the back side of the ring caught Ground Breaker's eye. He shouted once he realized that the intruding stallion was not part of the company roster. He briefly peered at the owners of the company, who were clearly in the process of breaking character while they watched this trespasser barrel towards Tail and Barrier.

Before he knew it, Ground Breaker had jumped up onto the barricade. His hind legs compressed, tiny arcs of electricity jumped along his coat, and he bolted across the gap and into the ring while screaming, "Bullet Flash!" The punch connected with the forest-green intruder, and the zapping strike laid out the far bigger pony in a total heap of flesh.

Silence fell over the entire stadium as a glowing light pulsed over G.B.'s flanks. Scribed upon his light-lavender coat, a silver and blue shield—one decorated with a horn and a pair of wings—appeared at the behest of Fate. Detecting something new, Ground Breaker twirled around to get a good look at his freshly minted cutie mark. He was still in this state of shock when he found himself wrapped up in hugs from his parents.

That embrace lasted a minute. His mom's words would live with him for the rest of his life. "They were inside you all along."

### **XIII – COMPETITION**

Students at the University of Las Pegasus poured out onto the mall when the class hour ended. Rumors were already swirling that Professor Tail and the newest Professor of History Magic Barrier had cordoned off an unpaved patch to have one of their fabled duels. Creatures of all kinds stood on the sidewalk perimeter and gawked as the married couple darted around small, shrubby plants in their archaic-style armor kits.

Rings of current swirled around Tail's flanks and shoulders in vibrant electrothaumic bands that buzzed when Barrier teleported close to her. She reacted in time, sidestepping his attack from above and turning to force her hind leg into his plated side.

The bulkier stallion absorbed the strike and allowed his body to slide across the gravelly desert ground. He tossed a jab in response to her kick, targeting the opening at her midsection that her stretching limb had revealed.

Of course, if he could use his spells in the heat of battle, then she could use her wings. Tail pumped her feathery appendages, quickly gaining distance while using the garnered time to yank water vapor out of the air. Two cloud tufts appeared in front of her forehooves, and she used her weather magic to compress the ethereal blobs until they darkened and sparked.

A blue band of magic tore across the rift and pounded into Tail's right leg. The spell ripped apart the seed of the mare's Bullet Flash, but more surprisingly, Barrier had managed to craft a spell that could slip through

the plates of the enchanted kit and cling to Tail's limb. The pegasus recognized the particular cast when her leg went limp, and she promptly eyed the smirking Barrier, who met her resolute gaze with a simple, "If you don't break your limit, you're going to be all mine tonight, Blanket."

"Oh please!" Tail thundered. She sacrificed her other seed and hurled the bolt at her immobilized appendage. She drove the spell into her own body, overrode the paralytic agent that Barrier had spawned, and reawakened her lulled nerves. "I've been telling you since Day 1 that I don't quit, Captain. You're creative as always, but if you think that I'm done already, Magic Bear, I've got another hour until my class starts."

"Wouldn't have it any other way from my better half," Barrier answered before eddies of smoke started circling his figure. The raw magnitude of his magical power made Tail's current rings violently growl, and she immediately jumped back and flashed an excited grin. The smoke coalesced into haunting, inky torrents that wove around the unicorn. Clumps of ground flooded the mystical coil until an earthen snake appeared from the eerie void and lunged at Tail.

The pegasus took the opportunity to hone her speed and endurance. She scurried around their training ground like a madmare and utilized well-timed flicks of her wings to evade the gaping maw of Barrier's attack. She prodded her stallion's defenses, too, periodically taking low-altitude, erratic flight paths to try to get him in close quarters.

Their hearts thumped as they kept giving their all to turn the tide of the battle. Perhaps this one was destined to end in another draw. One thing was certain, though. Dueling was one of the absolute favorite activities of this feisty couple.

## **XIV – DRESS UP**

Warning: Contains A&W saucy.

"What do you mean, 'You won the vote'?" Wing asked moments after he walked through the door of the Lilac & Lavender bakery.

Ambrosia proudly held up a box filled with customer ballots, and an impish grin stretched across her muzzle while she mischievously swished her tail. The lilac-coated mare shook the box to rustle the papers inside. "Honey, you won in a landslide. I put up a poll for which one of us would wear the schoolfilly uniform as part of our Nightmare Night treat sale, and a huge influx of guards seemed quite adamant about making sure that you took the victory."

"Wear the schoolfilly uniform..." Wing parroted, watching as devious signs continued to play with the curvature of his wife's smile.

"We only got a few weeks to put our promotional materials together too, so we'd better see if the costume fits and get some photos while we're at it." Amby repeatedly circled her stallion before she used her indisputable earth-pony strength to scoop up Wing and carry him bridal style up the stairs to their bedroom.

Redness swept over Wing's cheeks while he was subjected to Amby's firm traditions, and that blush rapidly spread to his ears once he spotted the outfit that she had laid out for him. Cream-colored silk stockings, destined to squeeze against his thighs, bid for the flier's attention. However, that piece of apparel wasn't the only contender. An off-white jacket with pink trims and white frills, the black-and-white plaid skirt, and the pink garment that he'd make sure only Amby saw also vied for top billing.

Wing grunted when he was dropped on the mattress. He looked up at the blue-maned mare and squeaked when she swiftly went for the most intimate part of the ensemble and displayed it to him between her outstretched forelegs.

“I’m positive my handsome husband is going to make a pretty promotional pony.” She shot him a half-lidded gaze, allowed a purr to rumble in the depths of her throat, and fed the poor stallion some teasing motivation. “Wing, if you’re a good girl for me, Headmistress Amber Rose will provide some experiential education.”

Instead of eliciting another squeak, Ambrosia’s assault coaxed a flustered wail from Wing’s lungs. He snatched the fabric from the mare’s hooves, showed zero hesitation, and quickly grasped the silk stockings. Inch by inch, he worked the smooth material over his hind legs until the opening snugly pressed against the middle of his thigh. Likewise, after a few limb and body shifts, Wing slipped into the blouse and skirt—and followed the wriggling maneuvers by blowing a kiss towards his special somepony.

Wing shivered at his own perceived vulnerability. Ambrosia had led him here without much effort, and yet, seeing her smile while she shamelessly ogled his figure made the shenanigans more than worth it. Catching a tiny victory also did wonders. The second she received that blown kiss, a firestorm of emotion plastered itself on the earth pony’s muzzle. Her eyes swiveled to face him. Her pupils dilated as she etched his contours into her brain, and her next words made it perfectly clear just how rigged the poll likely was.

“My new student is definitely doing that again... during the photo shoot.”

## **XV – LUCKY DAY**

*Amby, when I sat down to write these vows, I struggled to find a place to begin. It’s hard when there were so many struggles, so many things to overcome, so many moments that collectively brought us here. Then, it hit me right in the face, and I chuckled. Of course, it begins with you...*

*Every little thing you do—from baking special cupcakes to offering a warm embrace, to helping those around you—generates a fire in my chest that no amount of my scientific research will ever explain. But I don’t need to explain it. I don’t have to understand it, either, because that’s what love is. I don’t need to theorize. I can reach out and touch you. I can keep you close when you need a little lavender. I can lift you up when you’re feeling down. I can be there as you make your dreams come true. We can experiment with the world.*

*You’re a lively, vivacious miracle worker who has always picked me up, and for that, and so much more, you deserve that world. When I let the stream of thoughts flow from this point, I reach the conclusion that you are a gift. Getting to know you is a privilege. Getting to share time with you marks the best time in my day. You’re a flower that blooms, a protector, and a giver, and when I sit and reflect on it, I know that I must vow to be the best gift to you that I can be.*

*Once upon a time, I made a promise to be your protector, too. I made a promise to never turn my back on my flower. That is a promise that I intend to keep, always. It doesn’t matter where we go, in what city you open your cute cupcakery, or wherever your travels may take you. I will always be there to ensure that you are allowed to bloom, Ambrosia.*

*When I see you smile because you’ve taken one step closer to making the wildest inklings of your imagination a reality, it is a treasure. Why you decided to share your life with a stallion who introduced himself with the most ridiculous quote of all time I will also never understand, but I am the luckiest pony alive because of it. You’ve put a light in me, so I vow to always shine brighter for you.*



*I will never quit on this, even if the skies look dark and stormy. I will fight for your love and respect, for they are the things that matter most. And I will always be thankful that, in a universe of infinite possibilities, you chose me to share your life with.*

*You are absolutely, without question, the most one-of-a-kind mare there can be. I promise to always be inspired by you. I vow to always keep you close in my thoughts, even if my quirks are, at times, weird, and I will certainly keep myself physically open to your tender embrace and amazing affection. I will cherish our past, live happily in our present, and fondly look towards a future in which we have grown and nurtured our love even more.*

*Ambrosia, you're the one mare who has been a consistent source of happiness in my life. Your sweetness, your love, is even more enthralling than those delicious desserts you bake. I said that you are a gift, and I meant it beyond a shadow of a doubt. I will always be yours. To this, I swear, and I promise that, even in the most serious of moments, such as this, I will always start my feels with your thigh.*

## **XVI – FLIGHT PATH**

Philomena and Wing took off from Canterlot and headed south. The duo looked like it meant serious business. The phoenix peered forward with a fierce scowl plastered on her face, and Wing shed his casual wardrobe and replaced it with the black-bolted version of his dark blue Wonderbolt uniform. The pegasus did not expect to run into any aggressive enemies on this particular sortie, and that gave the stallion time to embrace the zen that came with soaring through the clouds.

In moments like these, Wing often reflected on the more memorable flight paths one could take. A pony's first flight, for example, was usually a very intimate event between father and foal. It bore from a tradition instilled by Commander Hurricane. When the time was right, a proud dad would carry his child into the heavens and simply let go. Of course, a watchful eye would be held in the rare event that the foal wasn't ready to fly, but generally, the ceremony was done after the kid had shown some in-home glide capability.

For the little one, it was an exhilarating ride. Fear could be conquered. A rush could be experienced, and another milestone in life would be crossed. For the parent, the literal act of letting go carried a figurative weight. All pegasi would inevitably leave the nest, and having the confidence to let a child take that first flight without hoofholding taught a hidden lesson in parenting. *Hurricane was kind of a genius.*

The modern flavor of this ritual included pegasus mothers doing the lifting—or even a non-pegasus parent using a charm to hover should the need arise. In Wing's case, his mother did the honors in place of his unicorn father. In Tail's case, her dad insisted on levitating and doing it himself. Either way, when those days came, they were always joyous ones.

At a later point in his life, Wing experienced a rebirth first flight with the Wonderbolts. Though, the showponies had a slightly different ride from what he got. As a combat specialist, Wing had missed out on that particular option, but he wouldn't have traded his DarkOps flight for anything in the world. *OCMC...*

The skies had belonged to just Spits and him. The sun had set over Canterlot before they took off from an emptied academy. It offered a rare chance to see the captain in a casual light, and the pair shat the shit for at least an hour as they wove around the castle spires and through the alleyways. *A chuckle emerged from Wng's throat.*

When they finally touched down on a random street in Canterlot, Spits relentlessly exclaimed that she needed a drink. Ruffled feathers and a scrunched muzzle etched themselves into Wing's memories—as did

her disgust that the bar across the street had devolved into an abandoned building that offered no hope of relief.

Wing made sure to never forget the spot. It would live on in his memories after Trigger emerged into the Woken World, and when his creature of reverie expressed an interest in opening a bar, Wing knew the perfect location to run the Phoenix Fire.

## **XVII – EVERFREE FOREST**

Landing at the outskirts of the Everfree Forest, Wing braced himself for the perching to come. Philomena abruptly deposited herself onto the stallion’s back and fanned her wings before bathing her pony companion in the radiant waves of her powerful, fiery aura. The surge flowed through the Bolt’s veins, and orange tongues rippled inches above Wing’s frame before he took a single step forward.

The chaotic blooms and timeless, towering plants of the untamed wilderness swayed and creaked in response to the Equestrians’ joint presence. From a distance, the sounds of howling timberwolves echoed over the canopy, and the pegasus responded by tilting his head. “Is it here?” he asked the realm that continually defied the order ponies tried to enforce.

A breeze rushed through the gaps between the trees and raked Wing’s mane. He lowered his brow and hummed thoughtfully after Philomena added some additional noises to the conversation. Illuminated runes appeared in a circle around the stallion’s right eye. The auguric seal of Aurora’s lineage and Celestia’s gift fully manifested in a set of hovering concentric rings that basked the landscape in a serene glow. “They want proof that we’re not like the others. So be it.”

As streams of emerald-green magic became visible thanks to the ocular spell, Wing lifted one of his namesakes and retrieved an argent bracelet from beneath the feathery appendage. He slipped it around his forehoof and flicked an ear as his normally brown irides surrendered to an advancing silvery hue. “Thanks in advance, Philomena,” Wing mumbled before he reached toward the Everfree Forest.

Within that forbidden expanse where normal sight held no sway, Aurora’s lens captured a spark of gold that infected the natural ebbs and flows of the forest’s light. It called out to the scientist and operative as more than a curiosity. This was the test, challenge, and solution—a trial of courage laid out by his forebearers in the very penumbra where he first protected his home.

“Dream’s End, IRP††† Ψ†† N††.” Summoned, constructed blades darker than a starless sky suddenly hovered in front of the extended limb. They darted around the trees and disappeared into the depths of the forest. Philomena’s fire burned with a greater intensity while the magic was active, and after a few seconds, loud clanks of shattered metal and pops of splintered wood pierced the veil of chaos.

A gust of air trailed the ancient chest that the recalled weapons yanked through the Everfree. Chips of worn timberwolf bark tumbled to the dirt as Wing manipulated the flight path to avoid anything still living. The corroded metal rims and corner bracers rattled and crumbled to pieces as well, and by the time Wing had retrieved all of his dreamshell creations, the only thing for the pegasus to catch was his target.

Netitus slammed into Wing’s forehoof, and he snatched the strap of the polished, shimmering arrowhead-shaped shield. Though the flier clutched the relic, his sights did not leave the imposing wall of unyielding life. “††Ψ ††††† †††††† †† ††††††. †† ††Ψ ††††††?” he asked in a resolute timbre that defied intuition by traversing the wilderness without any sign of impedance.

Whispers on the wind kissed Wing's ears, and the pony did not need to decipher or translate them. Everfree's currents shifted, and trickles of vibrant green crawled to the unmoving pegasus before another ring appeared etched upon Aurora's Eye. "We won't let you down," he spoke again and bowed. "The only currency in war is life, and I don't plan on dying there."

## **XIIX – TALENT SHOW**

Wearing tiny aviator shades and a vibrant white jacket that stood out against his blue coat, Sincerity Chain toted his special SincyStar synthesizer onto the stage. He set it up on a pre-positioned stand before looking toward the stairs to see if Barley Blues was still following him.

Sure enough, the cream-colored colt made his triumphant trek up the blocky wooden steps. Though, with each segment of the climb, the concerned earth pony kept glancing at his black electric guitar to verify that his beloved Fender-style hadn't struck anything.

Sincy didn't let the wait go unwasted. The seven-year-old cast his sights over the crowd and basked in their growing anticipation. The neighborhood talent show had excited him for as long as he could remember, and considering what his parents had told the young unicorn, he likely enjoyed it before that too. It didn't take long for said colt to spot his family. He waved to his parents, but he stared at his older sister the longest and latched onto her beaming grin.

The trance lingered between the siblings until Barley finally took his position on the stage to Sincy's right. The former jacked into the stage amplifier, plucked a few strings, and made some tuning adjustments; and the latter warmed up his custom synthesizer with some key tapping and quick chord progressions, which he expressed as satisfactory with a nod.

"Introducing the next act!" a mare's voice boomed from the venue's PA. "Another pair of rising stars from right here in our happy community, these boys have rocked our halls before. Please give a warm welcome to the dynamic duo known as Sync & Barley!"

Sincy's magic and hooves started dancing across the keys in G Major, and the colts sang out in perfect harmony. "There's a wild storm a-brewin', but the day will turn out great. Our pegasi will ride to tame the weather. My sister's shed is rockin', and the science comes a-knockin', 'cause pretty soon we'll hit the road together."

Barley joined in with a series of staccato guitar chord spikes that washed over the audience.

"We've got to move ourselves across the country! Looking out for good times shared by all! We're gonna spend another Fall in Fillydelphia!" The boys cranked up the soulful harmony to 11 for the last three lines. Sincy toggled a switch on his black-and-gold synthesizer at the same time, sending a cascade of vibraphonic notes into the crowd while the last line got a well-deserved repetition.

Cutting loose on his guitar, Barley Blues let go of his worries. He closed his teal eyes. His shoulders loosened, and his legs swayed. But the biggest transformation guided the colt's forehooves. Gone were the heavy strums. Instead, fluid motions drove the musician to leap from string to string. He ramped up the overdrive after his partner cut back on SincyStar's volume output, and in that moment, he sparkled beneath the spotlight.

Sincerity adjusted his aviators in the middle of his best friend's solo. The blond-maned colt peered above the rim of the glasses to get a better look at the enthralled attendees, and a beautiful smile stretched across his muzzle.

## **XIX – UNDERGROUND**

Wing spent weeks cleaning out his basement laboratory and moving his poison-joke operations to another site. He knew that another scientist-turned-officer lurked in the system, and it was likely that, in the near future, she would be needing that space more than he did. Still, that left a void that Wing had to fill. His next project would require a laboratory even grander in scale. In fact, it was really going to be less of a lab and more of a runway, but that detail was a problem for Future Wing. Present Wing still needed to find the damn place Callie surrendered to his ambitions.

This time, he descended through castle stairwells until the masonry gave way to the damp rock of Mt. Canterhorn. Even the corridors themselves lost any semblance of sentient construction at this depth. The Princess of the Sun instructed him to go to the end of the C5 Corridor. Though, the inflection in the royal's voice when she uttered the word end led Wing to believe that she was having a bit of fun at his expense again.

The prediction was close enough. Instead of reaching a terminal wall, the passage underwent a noticeable transition. The regular placement of artificial lighting ceased at this threshold, and after maneuvering through a jagged rift in the stone, Wing found himself standing in a sweeping cavern packed with thaumium crystals that radiated a gorgeous Cherenkovian blue.

“Fuck me,” Wing muttered while he mentally gauged the dimensions of the space. With some construction work, it'd likely be big enough to even support the arterial-transformation framework that he had proposed. For a few seconds, he pondered the layout of the castle and the path he had walked. The details of the imagined map poured into his mind, and a smirk formed as Wing gradually lifted his head to follow the trendline of the cavern. “A hyperbolic ramp might actually work.”

With a crisp step, the pegasus turned to his left and marched up to the largest crystal he could see. “I'm going to have to get Batsy down here to help with drawing up the plans, but the more intriguing question is how have you beauties not been mined yet? There are enough deposits down here to fund a small country. Surely, some adventurer would have found you by now. Unless—”

Heavy hoofsteps echoed from the hallway, and Wing snapped around to face the crack that led back to the castle. More rustling accompanied irritated grunts that beckoned the stallion closer to the rift until a long alabaster spire and ethereal mane emerged. “If you tell my sister that I find this to be a tight fit now, I will throw you in the dungeon for a thousand years,” Celestia spoke as she fought to squeeze her alicorn-sized body through the opening.

“Callie,” Wing snickered, offering his foreleg to the regal diarch. He hummed as he stared into the pink eyes of his most trusted benefactor. “I could use this time to make a quip about how you keeping secrets from your sister is a historically horrendous idea, or I could make an offer that involves Ambrosia's cakes, but I think the best option, Your Highness, is to welcome you to the future home of the Armistice.”

## **XX – PHOTOGENIC**

Tail and Barrier silently watched as their three kids hovered around their uncle, Sincerity Chain. The renowned musician and songwriter beamed at his niece and nephews as he levitated a suitcase and opened it for the trio. Inside, an assortment of stylish costumes fit for fillies and colts appeared. Flashy jackets, various hats, and numerous shades coaxed the children to lean in just a little bit closer to their flamboyant relative.

For Ground Breaker, Sincy plucked a studded black leather jacket from the surprisingly packed case and magically deposited the garment onto his nephew. Matching sunglasses with midnight rims followed shortly after, and the accessory paired quite nicely with the colt's dark and blue-striped mane. "Mm, yup, that is perfect!" Sincy shouted excitedly. "A strong look for a strong boy..."

Ember Flair was the next in line, and the yellow-cream, ruby-maned pegasus filly buzzed with excitement. She hopped in place as her uncle turned his attention back to the contents of his luggage carrier. Silver-rimmed, star-shaped shades popped onto her muzzle. A navy-blue beret emerged from the row of hats, and Sincy swiftly accented the right side with a set of star pins that complemented the glasses. The filly's ears wiggled, and she released a melody of giggles once the cap covered her crown. "How do I look, Uncle Sincy?"

The frost-blue unicorn didn't answer right away. Instead, he rummaged around the suitcase until he located a boa scarf with the same color as the beret. He twirled around and draped the fluffy addition over his niece's neck. "Like a star, Kid, which you totally are." Sincy winked before he snuck a glance at his youngest nephew. "And once I get done with your little brother, we'll all be stars forever."

Given Rising Wit's resemblance to his father, Sincy took a minute to ruminate on the possibilities. He had already given the black ensemble to G.B. and Rising had glasses that made deploying sunglasses a challenge. He'd have to give the charcoal-coated unicorn something vibrant. His brown eyes sparkled when the idea hit, and he plunged into the pile to fetch a white fedora with a black band and a white sports jacket. Sincy teleported the apparel onto Rising and peered down at the blue-eyed unicorn. "And this little lad looks like he's ready to step out from behind the books and take the stage—just like his mama."

A blush swept across Rising's cheeks as he returned his uncle's shimmering stare. "But I like my books, Uncle Sincy," the colt replied before Sincerity adjusted the fedora with his forehoof.

"I know you do, Squirt, and take it from me, there is no one on this planet who understands the power of that mind of yours more than I do." He briefly peeked at Tail. "I grew up with your mom, after all, and she was always tinkering with something." Sincy dragged his foreleg across his forehead and sighed before tears started to well at the corners of his eyes. "This beautiful family has changed the world, and my favorite niece and nephews are just so incredible—"

Tail sighed, trotted to her younger brother, and tugged his ear. "Okay, Casanova, you got them all dressed up. Let's just take the picture before you completely lose it."

## **XXI – WESTERN**

"Ya sure ya want me to do this?" Trigger cast a sidelong glance at Tail as the creature of reverie stood at the firing end of the scientist's underground lab range. "Your shit with Barry punched a crack through two alicorn barriers. Now, ya give me a spark of my wife's magic and want to see the form I used in the Crystal Empire? That's a dream with a heavy toll, Flicker. We're gonna need a different range."

Tail smirked in response. Her chocolate-brown irides erupted with her quintessential amber blaze, and she promptly chambered the Tea-type round in her  $\alpha 0$  revolver. The unusually shaped magical-munitions weapon remained corralled in the physicist's embrace, and her grin stretched further until she broke the temporary silence with a blunt decree. "You should know this about me by now. No matter the invention, I always want to see my creations reach their ultimate potential."

The stallion cocked his head. In the wake of Tail's words, a ripple of energy rolled through his black coat, causing it to stand on end as he kept his gaze locked onto his friend. "Hmm, decades of work, from a young

filly who wanted to make her brother happy to a grown mare wantin' to make good on a promise to a princess. I think there's more than enough there."

Argent veils of a glistening aura poured off Trigger's frame like an aurora in the night. His brown hat and vest dissolved away—only to get replaced a blink later by a vibrant white Coltston, vest, and cowcolt boots. Years shed from the stallion as well, leaving behind the form of Sheriff Trigger that Wing had conjured in the depths of his imagination as a colt.

"Let's get goin', Partner. This lab ain't gonna be big enough for the explosion we're gonna make." Trigger swiped the air with his hoof and unloaded a bright scythe of dreamshell spellcasting that sliced the fundamental fabric of reality. On the other side of the rift, a desert landscape to the north of Las Pegasus beckoned the pair. Mountains lined the horizon, and a salt flat extended as far as Tail could see. Trigger didn't dawdle on that matter. He levitated the pegasus and her revolver, and he promptly carted them all through the crafted portal.

"This is much better," the stallion continued before he held out his foreleg towards the lavender-coated pegasus. "Once upon a time, I'd ask ya if ya really want to trust me with that, but I don't think I have to bother with that. Gun me, Doc."

Tail did not need to summon her current rings to feel his overwhelming magical power. Even her family's pathetic sensitivity was thoroughly overridden by Trigger's prime state. Yet, she approached him without reservation and slipped the augurite mesh sleeve of the α0 over Trigger's boot and onto his limb. "You should be able to resonate with the shell by flowing your current through the partitions of the mesh. Just flick out the crescent trig—"

Trigger snapped his raised leg out to the side, whipped the polished crescent trigger into position with a flick of his wrist, and immediately flexed his hoof to fire the revolver once the piece settled beneath his fetlock. A thin streak of dark red burned over the salt flat, melted it, and created a coating of glass on the ground before the shot dissolved the entire mountain range on the horizon into absolute nothingness.

Tail stared at the spectacle in a mesmerized trance while Trigger moved the metal firing mechanism back into its safe position. "Don't look so buckin' surprised, Flicker. This is Tea we're talkin' about. A cowboy knows how to properly flirt with his cowgirl. Her dream is one I know by heart. I'll always break her chain."

## **XXII – SNEAKY**

A sultry smile blossomed on Ambrosia's countenance as she peered into her bedroom mirror. Moon Glow was away for the night thanks to a sleepover with Platinum Blaze, and Wing was busy in the bakery kitchen, tinkering away on the oven he had designed and built for her when the pair bought the property. The sly mare had been primed for this kind of pressure cooker. The window in time was wide open for her to incessantly tease her husband, and Amby planned to do it in style.

Through some secret communication and coordination between Captain Spitfire, Princess Cadance, and herself, Amby had managed to secure an absurdly rare and valuable item. An earth-pony version of Wing's Wonderbolt DarkOps uniform clung to her figure. The darker blue primary hue played nicely with her blue-violet mane, and the black bolts that streaked across the uniform paid homage to her husband's penchant for working in the shadows.

She released a subdued giggle and struck a gallant pose in front of the silvery pane. Special Operative Ambrosia had a target, a blissfully ignorant rendezvous, ready to be perched upon once she struck. She

swished her tail as her preemptive sense of satisfaction flourished, and after staring at the firm contours the uniform accented for another minute, the operation commenced.

With careful steps, the lilac-coated baker gingerly approached the entrance of the bedroom and slowly turned the doorknob. The quiet creaks and pops that trailed her movements made Amby grimace and pause, but the only sounds that travelled from downstairs were the typical percussive strikes and shuffles of a focused Wing.

Finally, Amby opened the door enough to slip into the hallway. Though she knew Wing was in the kitchen, she crept low to the floor, avoiding an imagined spotlight or prying eyes who could catch a glimpse of her through the window at the top of the stairs. She drew a deep breath when she reached it, and her head turned to gaze down the steps that would lead the earth pony to her prize.

Her hoof hit the first stair and unleashed a terrifying squeak that made Amby scrunch her muzzle and totally freeze.

“Ah, shit!” Wing roared seconds after the fermata began. The snaps and rumbles of an opened box and shifting tools alleviated Ambrosia’s concerns. Certainly, her own home had not betrayed her in her mischief! She resumed her descent and briefly waited whenever she believed the groans from the boards might have alerted her pegasus’s attention.

Each time, however, there was no detectable change from the bakery. Her plan was still on the rails! She touched down on the ground level and snuck towards the illuminated kitchen, but when she peeked around the edge of the doorframe, Wing was nowhere to be seen. His tools were still strewn around the floor. Her oven was still open, but he—

Amby yelped when Wing’s namesake swatted her plot with a commanding slap. The feather-marking pegasus pounced upon his wife, guiding her to the counter before he playfully nipped her ear and coaxed a blush with a gritty tenor. “Silly, Amby, you can’t just wear that uniform without learning how to fly. Thank goodness we’ve got all night for me to teach you...”

## **XXIII – FILLIES**

Platinum Blaze rolled atop her bed while Moon Glow cuddled up with one of her friend’s exceptionally cozy and soft fleece blankets. The mute filly stared at the rambunctious daughter of Trigger and Tea while the wiggling redhead succumbed to her brewing giggles. “Hehe, what do you wanna do, Moonie?” the reveric unicorn asked after she halted her spinning motions directly in front of Moon Glow.

Moon Glow lifted her forehooves and replied with a series of gestures that included pointing to her mouth, tapping her chin a couple times, and booping her forehead as well. The ghost-white youngster flashed a contorted smile, scrunched her muzzle, and splayed her ears at various angles while expressing her innermost thoughts.

“I know Aunt Amby is planning a surprise party for Uncle Wing’s birthday. I bet it’ll be super cool, and we’ll all have the best cakes and desserts and treats, and it’ll be before Nightmare Night, too, so we’ll just get even more treats to snack on.” Peebles chirped happily, and her amber irides sparkled in delight at the prospect of her back-to-back candy hauls. “And then, there’s the one you’re making for your dad! Have you decided what it’s going to be yet?”

Moon Glow nodded and promptly made the sign for them to go to sleep. It’d certainly be easier for the unicorn to explain things to Platinum on a dreamshell where they could both actually talk. However, just

having Moon Glow in her room wound the filly up. It took a unique friend to share in a world filled with little guard trinkets given as gifts by Trigger, construction bricks bequeathed by Uncle Wing, and piles of Western apparel happily enabled by her mom.

Yet, eventually, the best friends yielded to Aislynn's sway in the depths of night, and Luna's gentle, *unseen* guidance led the duo to a plane they could both dwell. Suddenly in a scaled-down version of the Lilac & Lavender, Moon Glow shuffled out from the kitchen with a glass platter of baked treats. "This is what I plan to make for Dad," she announced, setting the confectionaries on one of the white metal tables fit for two.

Peebles peered down at the fanning slices of pre-cut wonder. Each piece presented joined spirals of chocolate and butterscotch that danced with chopped nuts and reached an edge coated in extremely fine sugar. Normally, she would be caught up in listening to Moon Glow's incredibly cute voice, but tonight, her foalish brain locked onto those beckoning desserts. Her hoof moved on its own to pluck one of the lopsided, squished ovals, and in an instant, the tasty delight was serenading Platinum's tastebuds.

Watching her bestie's euphoric reaction, Moon Glow confidently smirked and reached for a slice as well. She was about to down it when Peebles finally managed to shift her focus to the baker.

"Do you have a name for them yet?" Platinum asked as her ears excitedly twitched amongst clumps of her brown and burgundy mane.

Moon Glow bobbed her head and took a quick bite before she answered, "They're Pinwheels."

## **XXIV – PETS**

Luna and Celestia peered out from the balcony of their house estate as they watched Wing and Philomena traverse the castle grounds just before sundown. "You've trusted him with quite a lot, Sister. Giving him Aurora's Eye and allowing him to forge a bond with Philomena—some might think our director has acquired a phoenix as a pet."

"You," Celestia began after a quick chortle. Though, the sentence that formed in her mind caused her smile to fade. "You... hadn't returned to us when Wing earned that bond, and if Aislynn hadn't intervened on his behalf, it's likely he wouldn't have lived long enough to forge the friendship they now share. Philomena and I will always be close, but she is her own judge of character."

The Princess of the Night tilted her head to face Celestia, and her blue magical aura cradled a wine glass that offered promising sips to the regal alicorn. "Lady Aislynn was involved? Shouldn't you have told me this before?"

Celestia quietly sighed and momentarily debated how much history she wanted to dig up when the subject was Luna's beloved, omnipotent teacher. "Wing saw his visions from the Temporal Dreht spell while he was primarily active in DarkOps, and the university was still his cover. In his words, the futures in which the Crystal Empire survived had three things in common: a mysterious charcoal-coated stallion at the point, Trigger on the front line, and the relic Netitus. Except, Trigger was still confined to the Sea of Reverie then.

"Philomena and I experienced our callings in the Temporal Dreht when we tried to stop Wing from activating—"



“Come on! Come on!” Wing’s head frantically snapped around as he observed stacks of thaumium crystals arranged in piles on the arc of a large augurite circle. Veins of the metal fanned out across the floor of his basement, and both the magical conductors and valuable gems pulsed in uneven glows. Inside the ring, the cement floor disappeared beneath a bubbling blackish, silvery portal surface that warped space and defied reason. Nicks tore into Wing’s coat, and patches of blood marred the Wonderbolt as his invention toyed with fate. “Which ones are off?”

“Colonel! What in Tartarus are you doing!?” Princess Celestia appeared with her phoenix through swirling streams of golden light that burst through the dull grey wall of the underground level. She whipped her head, casting another ray to sever the augurite traces. “You’ll die if you dive into the Sea—”

Wing planted his bloodstained hind leg and kicked out to spin one of his outstretched namesakes towards the spell. Electricity exploded from his feathers, and garish, buzzing toroids of blinding current captured Celestia’s spell and kept it from damaging Pandora’s Cradle. His fiery glare bore into the stunned princess, and his temper flared in a throaty growl, “And all of Equestria will freeze to death if I don’t get him out right fucking now! Don’t make me break my oath to keep another.”

Celestia had not noticed when the blue bands of Aislynn Caliber’s otherworldly power first sent her spirit through the streams of time, but when she saw flickers of her younger sister happy, well, loved, back—when she saw visions of the Wonderbolt whose home she had just invaded bearing the great mark of Aurora’s Eye—she knew.

“When I returned to the present, Philomena had already recognized Wing’s resolve. She was hovering over him and unloading almost her entire life’s worth of energy just to keep him on his hooves. That’s when I gave it to him, Luna. For a pegasus to align an array with such speed.” She exhaled, remembering the image of Trigger’s black foreleg punching into their world for the first time and Wing grasping his *brother’s* limb like their lives depended on it. “Philomena and I took a small trip to Ponyville after that since a regeneration was in order, and ever since, the two of them have made excellent partners in the field.”

## **XXV – SURPRISE PARTY DISCORD**

*Oh dear! Oh my! Were you expecting someone else? Somepony, you say? Well, that’s quite rude. I guess I’ll let your affront to inclusive language slide this time, but when it comes to what you expected... I just can’t have that. You see, the 28<sup>th</sup> is Wing’s birthday, and while you might find it odd that the Lord of Chaos and distinguished best friend of the Elements of Harmony could make the time to converse with—shudders—another scientist, I’ll have you know that Wing is an exceptional player of Ogres & Oubliettes.*

*Mmmm, just like Rarity, I am too generous. ‘Mid’ is what the angstyo foals call it these days. I am exceptional. Trigger is also decent. Wing is really there because he appreciates—dare I say, enables—a good troll, and what kind of draconequis would I be if I let such opportunities just slip away? Only Cay-Cay does that, and it’s always so—pointlessly—dull.*

*Either way, I’ve taken it upon myself to remove this MidPrem’s insistence on rambling about a surprise party from the 25<sup>th</sup>. You’d think this event would take advantage of the birthday of a second cousin, but I guess that’d just be too clever. Thankfully for you, I know how to improve schedules better than anyone in Equestria, and seeing as how the 28<sup>th</sup> was supposed to be about me anyway, no harm, no foul! Swap away!*

*I am the one who had an exhausting day, though, especially considering the monumental change to my calendar, so enough about those ponies. Let’s talk about me! Twilight decided to attend one of Wing’s classes*

*and didn't even bother to invite me along. Inconceivable, I know! That's what I said. But then, I thought to myself—what better way to show one of my closest friends that I care about her interests than by also attending a physics lecture! Surely, if I could do it better than Twilight, she'd have to recognize my insuperable academic talents. It's also right here, on Page 301 of No Longer Alone, that THE Professor Tail gave me, the Purveyor of Pandemonium, an open invitation to drop in when she's teaching about me.*

“What do you think?” Discord asked, sprawled atop the demonstration table in Tail's packed lecture room. He twisted his neck to look towards one of the chalkboards and the professing physicist. “Are Equestria's vigilant, studious rising stars capable of grasping the significance of such a momentous introduction?”

Murmurs swirled through the rows of seats, but the fluffy pegasus commanding the stage paid the most attention to the teasing inflections that Discord deployed. She placed her piece of chalk in the grooved tray beneath the board and trotted out from behind the table to stand off to the side of this unexpected visitor.

“Sweetie,” she answered in a mischievous tone, “I think I can work with that. Students! The class notes for this session are outdated, and that's fine. We'll be taking a venture into more experiential learning instead. Please stomp your hooves, talons, claws, paws, or whatever you wish because the University of Las Pegasus is delighted to welcome a distinguished guest lecturer—the Duke of Disorder, Maestro of Mischief, and Bane of Bureaucracy—the Lord of Chaos, Discord.”

## **XXVI – BEST NIGHT EVER**

Between his scientific background and service in the shadows, Wing was not one to attend parties all that frequently. Still, one of his engineer friends had managed to coax him to her surprisingly large Canterlot apartment for a random bash in early May, and the calculation was made that he'd get his ear talked off if he even dreamed about bailing out.

Wing's curiosity had also been piqued. For weeks, she had been hyping up another mare every time they crossed paths. *Wing had to meet her. She felt like they'd have a great time. This mare would break his feels in ways that the stallion couldn't imagine.* Wing had zero idea what that actually meant, but it sounded like a challenge. If there was one thing that defined the flier's special talent, it was problem-solving his way through ridiculous and unusual challenges.

When he arrived at the spacious apartment, he immediately spotted his gracious host, but his eyes wandered to the lilac-coated mare standing at her side. A wavy blue-violet mane with laser-lemon highlights snagged his focus, and soon enough, he found aquamarine sights staring back at him. Wing stepped forward, nearly missing the fact that the showrunner, Key, was already waving him over.

The engineer corralled the stallion as soon as he was within reach and guided him to stand beside the other mare. Soon after, Wing felt the lilac-coated earth pony respond to the positioning with a playful nudge.

“Hello, Wing,” she spoke in a frisky voice that carried the tiniest hints of a more rural accent. “Key's told me a lot about you.”

Gears began to turn regarding the identity of this pony, and the pegasus lost himself in thought. Key had neglected to mention that this secret hookup was astoundingly gorgeous—just that she was witty and would—

“Why hello, Ms. Ambrosia,” Wing answered as a mischievous smile swept across his muzzle. “I heard you wanted to break me with feels. How about we start with the thigh?”

“Oh my.” A blush blossomed on Ambrosia’s face before she glanced at her friend. “I’m guessing this is your doing. Well, whatever she said, be careful with it, Wing. Key’s a silly pony.”

Wing chuckled. “I can’t say I believed her at all, but I’m also a silly pony. A challenge got instilled, and I just had to act on the opportunity even if it was ridiculous. Guess it’s that physics crazy in me.”

“I would say I’m right here,” Key commented quietly, “but I got what I wanted so I’m out.”

In the meantime, Ambrosia held her gaze on Wing and fashioned the slightly open-mouthed gape of excitement. “You study physics? Oh wow.”

“More like the things that nopony in Equestria really cares about. I’m also interested in the science behind magic, but that’s a chore I wouldn’t want to burden you with. How about you, Ms. Ambrosia? What is it that you do? I’d rather hear it directly from the mare’s mouth just in case a certain pony’s silly antics are still in play.”

Amby giggled and swished her tail. “That is a good plan. I used to work as a chef on trains travelling all over Equestria, but now I’m looking to settle down in Canterlot to open my own bakery. And... Well, others may not care, but I care.”

## XXVII – GARDEN

Wing peered out from a bridge that bordered one of Canterlot’s numerous parks. In the distance, stems of grass waved, hurling cascades of various greens toward his eyeballs at slightly different energies. His focus wandered from the grass to the trees to the infinite stretch of flowers that dotted the landscaped garden. However, his attention’s destination was the patch of Black Ambrosia daylilies that grew just beyond the shade of the bridge’s arch. They were the flowers for which Ambrosia was named, and this spot held a special place in his heart that made Wing stop whenever he passed it.

Once upon a time and after months of random flirting, he had taken Amby to this spot on a date. The typically unshakable earth pony had displayed a moment of vulnerability by revealing facets of her past that had produced the lowest lows. She, too, was bullied as a filly, albeit for reasons much different from his own, and for a long time, the mare hated her name thanks to the whispers of foolish foals. *Common ragweed to be stepped on, plucked, and thrown away.*

“I knew you were somepony different, Wing.” The echoes of her voice rippled through his thoughts. “Would you be my colt friend?”

Even though it was a memory, Wing still nodded in response. Every promise he had made that night, he had kept. His coat became his beloved’s refuge—a place where those worries could melt away and where she could confide in him. He’d be her ultimate shield, *a shadow as the last line of defense*, and his warmth would always be hers. She was the most important flower in his garden. በተሆ በሆነ ተከላታይ ተጽፎበሆተ. I also love a flower... ተጽ በተሆ በተሰዘሆ? Am I worthy?

Shivers shot up Wing’s hind leg as a long blue-violet tail raked against his thigh. “Lost in your mind on your special day, Hunny?” Ambrosia asked, trailing her maneuver by nuzzling up against Wing’s side. “You always seem to space out here. It’s kind of cute, especially since it involves my stallion with the pretty lavender coat.”

A flustered blush formed on Wing's countenance, and he coughed in embarrassment. "A lot of promises were made on this bridge, Dear. When I'm here, I can't help but reflect on them and wonder if I live up to expectations."

Swiftly transitioning to a blank expression, Amby stared at Wing, absorbed his words, and took the reins. "Never a doubt in my mind. I'm still your flower, after all. Though, this flower does know how to use a rolling pin if she has to and has dibs on this handsome guy who's got a lot of odd habits—especially horrible pick-up lines."

Wing snickered, having been freed from the mental loop, and took the bait. "First, thank you. Second, hot. Third, we can walk through every row of this Canterlot garden, and there still won't be a blossom nearly as brilliant as you."

Amby giggled, ducked beneath her husband's barrel, and jacked him onto her back. "I'm surprised you didn't go with the 'teach me physics if I show you a little chemistry' line. Can't risk having my Wing lose his magic touch, so let's get home. Moon Glow has been itching to give her dad something, and I have my own set of plans for you, Director."

## **XXIIX – SURPRISE PARTY?**

Ambrosia opened the public door to the bakery when she and Wing returned from their garden stroll. The sign dangling behind the glass remained flipped to CLOSED, and all but one of the lights in the parlor remained off. The muffled sounds of Peebles and Moon Glow drifted from the kitchen, and the jingling bell on the entryway's frame alerted the filly duo that *the parents* had returned.

The young unicorns shuffled into the front of the house, and Moon Glow levitated a platter filled to the rim with a ton of chocolate-and-butterscotch treats.

"Mmhh, that's good stuff, Kiddo," Trigger added as Equestria's best babysitter followed his daughter and niece. His amber eyes swiftly snagged the sight of Wing, and he added through a gritty grunt, "She outdid herself with this one, Wing. Ya might even have an heirloom recipe on your hooves."

Wing eyed the squashed, oval-shaped slices and the spirals of sweet goodness each piece contained. The pegasus didn't recall these desserts being part of Amby's repertoire, and he was shocked at the sheer number of treats that Moon Glow produced. While the latter matter certainly generated a question, the former bit was the one worth asking about. Wing knelt before his adopted child and flashed a proud smile. "Did you invent these yourself?"

The ghost-white apprentice nodded, and a blush appeared beneath her aquamarine eyes.

"They're called Pinwheels, Uncle Wing!" Platinum Blaze triumphantly announced. "Moonie's been working on them for a while. We had dreams about them! They're super good, so you should try one quick!"

He did not need a second prodding, and neither did Amby. The pair each picked up a couple of the desserts and proceeded with the culinary investigation. Wing's better half was more methodical in her bites, opting to leave the option open to give professional pointers if they were needed. Wing, on the other hoof, utterly inhaled his delicious selections. His mouth practically watered as he began showering Moon Glow with praise, and he declared the Pinwheels as an invention worthy of pride.

Amby silently responded to Wing's outburst with a mischievous smirk, and he was compelled to affix his stare to her visage. One by one, the sneaky grins spread to Moon Glow, Peebles, and even Trigger—until a

spark of light erupted from the back of the bakery. Whatever illusion spell had been in place dissolved away, and a chorus of “Surprise!” reverberated off every surface in the shop.

The rest of Trigger’s family, Magic Barrier, Tail, the kids, Wing’s parents, and even his best friend surrounded the tables. One of his old partners, Amora, arguably the greatest combat medic of the age, waved from one of the seats while she absentmindedly entertained Tail’s youngsters, and Batsy... rolled around in a giant basket filled with mango muffins.

Emotions bubbled up inside the birthday boy as he scanned the jovial crowd. Warmth filled every fiber of his being, and snapshots of his life flickered about his imagination. When he was at the park with Amby, he wondered if he was worthy. Now, he just felt blessed by fate. After what felt like a minute, the flier turned to face Ambrosia, who immediately took advantage of the situation by planting a passionate kiss on the unsuspecting colt’s muzzle.

“I told you I had plans for you,” she quipped, giggling as whistles of encouragement burst from those in the room who were old enough to appreciate romance.

“Oh my!” Discord wailed. The draconequus had emerged from the ether, and his serpentine form hovered above the lovestruck couple. “Do I get one of those, too? It is supposed to be my day, after all, and amongst friends, shouldn’t I be able to make one, teensy, eensy-weensy request?”

## **XXIX – FRIENDSHIP REPORT**

From his bartending post at the Phoenix Fire, Trigger watched as his patron lamented her recent woes. Her flawless white coat radiated despite her sour mood, and her face was presently planted atop the wood panels that made up the countertop.

“It’s like she’s not even there in the morning. What am I supposed to do? I try to make her breakfast, and she doesn’t care. I try to engage in conversations about her interests, and it’s like she gets upset with me. It’s nice to see that she’s taken the project with Barrier and Professor Tail seriously, but even there, we haven’t seen eye-to-eye on everything.”

The creature of reverie sighed, rummaged around one of the cabinets for a glass, and summoned four bottles with his magic. A few blocks of completely clear ice dropped into the cup seconds later, and Trigger popped the top off a slender, frosted-green container. “Ya’d think, with all your years of experience, that ya’d be a bit more well-versed in this shit,” the gruff stallion spoke while pouring out one part of the melon liqueur. The bottle of Blue Curaçao came next, and an equal partition swirled and mixed in the glass.

Celestia scowled at the bartender and pushed herself into a more upright position. “You know it’s not as simple as that. Taking care of an entire nation eats up almost all of our time. Even when we were fillies, finding moments to slip away and leave our studies and worries behind us was impossible. Luna’s been back for a while, but it still takes effort to overcome a gap left by a thousand years of separation.”

Trigger met the princess’s contorted expression with a nonchalant smirk. He flicked in some Sweet & Sour and filled up the rest of the glass with a bubbly lemon-lime soda. “If ya think she isn’t ponderin’ the same crap, then ya need to get more sleep. Frettin’ too much, Your Highness. Think about all the ponies ya’ve been gatherin’. Think about all the ponies Mes Étoiles has brought into the fold as well. Actin’ too much like Wing with the cyclic bullshit loops and forgettin’ that ya already got the answer sittin’ right in your closest circle.”

The Princess of the Sun collected the drink with her magical aura and pulled it to her mouth to take a sip. “And, pray tell, what do you mean by that, Sir Trigger?” The subtlest hints of a smile coaxed the corners of Celestia’s mouth as she enjoyed the sugary alcoholic beverage.

“Ya spent the better part of years guidin’ your students to follow fulfillin’ paths. Ya spent those same years preparin’ your protégé to take the throne, and ya spent the last few fuckin’ hours contemplatin’ the relationship ya share with your sister. Isn’t it buckin’ obvious?” Trigger’s horn glimmered amidst an amber sheen before a rolled-up scroll snapped into existence, flopped onto Celestia’s mane, and promptly unfurled around her raised head. “Write for some advice and make Twiggles read the damn friendship report for once.”

### **XXX – SISTERHOOVES SOCIAL**

Platinum Blaze burst out of the mud pit situated just after the starting line at Ponyville’s famous Sisterhooves Social racecourse. The event coaxed the young unicorn filly to compete, and this year marked a special first for the sassy reveric mage. Her kind-of-older sister, Star Caliber, had been successfully summoned to the Woken World through Pandora’s Cradle at the insistence of their uncle, and the two girls were able to finally run the gauntlet together as siblings.

The chatelle-hued Peebles darted over the dirt and caught up to Star’s stride right as the black-coated teen popped her first hoof into the Bucket Scramble. The elder sister neatly corralled Platinum’s leg mid-jump and guided the smaller filly into a perfect landing that seamlessly flowed into the next hop. Star leapt next, sending her short argent mane into a dash-driven flurry before she danced through the last bucket.

Star landed directly in front of a looming pyramid of crates that taunted many a competitor. Her sibling, however, seemed quite compelled to not give a damn. A blazing beacon in her own right, Peebles sprinted towards the planted Star Caliber and used the latter’s back as a vault to toss herself over the stack.

The pair thundered down the track toward the table of apple pies, and the expressions of both girls surrendered to the advancing marches of eager, enthused grins. Having grown up with their Aunt Amby and Uncle Wing, Platinum and Star had ample experience conquering desserts, and considering the fact that Wing ate faster than anypony they had ever seen, the duo was ready to utterly inhale the flaky, fruity goodness, quasi-literally.

Opponents were left in the dust by the eating maneuver, but the daughters of Trigger and Tea didn’t rest on their laurels. They charged a block of hay that obstructed their path, and as two mighty roars erupted from their lungs, they drove the bound stack across a checkpoint line drawn in the dirt. A giant tub and mound of grapes came next, and Star Caliber was swift in chucking scoopfuls of grapes over the rim of the wooden vat.

As soon as Star filled the container with the tiny red berries, Platinum jumped into the fray and began repeatedly stomping until the faucet attached to the bottom of the vessel began dripping with juice. The filly laughed heartily as she pounded away, and after several moments, the jar placed beneath the tap got completely filled.

Melodies poured from the smiling sisters as they put their apple-hurling and egg-carrying skills to the test, and the two entered the final stretch of hurdles as an aura unseen by most radiated from their bodies. In unison, Platinum and Star soared over the fences and stretched their limits as they broke out into a full-throttle gallop. They surged across the finish line without showing a hint of slowing down, and it was only

after they fully cleared the course that they tumbled into the grass to ride out the adrenaline-boasted thrill and unload a chorus of twitters, giggles, and elated cheers.

## XXXI – NIGHTMARE NIGHTS!

The streets of Canterlot bustled with families and rambunctious foals ready to collect their fills. Many wore masks and costumes that covered a diverse range of sophistication, but the fun that consumed the city was universal, or so the masses believed. Moon Glow and Platinum Blaze danced around one another as they frolicked. The former opted to stick with her baker's coat as an outfit, and Peebles was decked out in makeshift guard armor. Star Caliber followed a few paces behind and let glow sticks and rings amplify her punkish apparel. Trigger, Tea, Ambrosia, and Wing trailed the trio in a parental front, and the formation held through stop after stop and block after block until one note punctured the jovial score.

Wing's ear flicked to the cry he heard, and his head snapped to the side so he could peer down a darkened alleyway. Though details had succumbed to the shadows, the pegasus could still make out the shape of a small foal being dragged through the air by a spell. Wing took a step toward the brick-bounded corridor as the possibilities formed in his thoughts. Further processing, however, was pointless, for the sight of a *crooked, deranged, piercing pearly* smile coaxed the colonel to charge.

A crack of thunder echoed down the street after Wing rocketed into the alley with a stroke of his namesakes. The links of Dream's End rattled around his right wrist after the flier summoned the bracelet, and before anyone could react, Wing cut through the levitation magic with his midnight blade and scooped the filly with his free foreleg.

Wing twisted his body, planted his hind legs into the brick wall that loomed behind his target, and hurled a hellfire stare at the twitching sand-colored stallion he had just *interrupted*. In the wake of the maneuver, a repressive field surged from the pegasus. Color completely vanished at the behest of this sorcery. Liquid darkness flowed over the cobblestone, and greyscale rain drenched the brick buildings as a dreamshell barrier appeared.

Outside the zone, Trigger examined the shield as a contorted grimace twisted his countenance. A forest-green filly had unexpectedly materialized on his back, and everypony in his immediate company wondered if the spell was his. The pressure of the cast had practically stopped time in the city. Magically sensitive ponies halted mid-stride to gaze upon the construct, and when Celestia and Luna both teleported next to the creature of reverie, Trigger no longer had to answer the question.

Nightmare's Veil draped itself over the alley, and Princess Luna peered with rising interest as she reached out with her powers to try to glimpse inside the powerful barricade. All she saw was a pair of red-ochre eyes glaring back at her from the depths. Gradually, they approached the boundary until an alicorn-like silhouette hovered at the threshold and looked like a murky shadow just beneath the surface of rippling water.

An ethereal argent mane waved in the Canterlot breeze after the source of this imagery, the thestral monarch, crossed into the Woken World. Aislynn Caliber smiled at her former pupil, snickered at her son, and waved to her suddenly bouncing granddaughters. Eventually, the towering, bat-winged alicorn set her sights on the princesses. "It's not your fight. This is a promise between a stallion and his child. He has earned my blessing to use the unbridled will of Dream's End, so do not fret."

“How many did you kill?” Wing asked after he deflected the unicorn’s emerald-hued magical attack with a single pair of hovering current rings. The flier did not wait to close the distance on the ashen-maned predator. He drove his left forehoof into the stallion’s squared muzzle and sent the pony into a staggering retreat that was cut painfully short.

Sparks danced along the mage’s horn, but Wing hooked his right foreleg around in time to pummel the side of the unicorn’s head and spike him into the wall. Blood dripped from the unicorn’s nostrils as he propped himself up, and mutterings began to dribble from his panting muzzle. “I never lose prey. You cost me my prey. Hasn’t happened since—”

Wing planted one of his forelegs, pivoted, and bucked his hind hooves into the same spot he had just punched. “Since my daughter escaped the clutches of a pathetic piece of shit who is not making it to tomorrow.”

In response, cackling laughter bellowed from the green-eyed stallion as he struggled to get upright. The murderer was greeted with rage once Wing twirled around, yanked his mane, and threw the weak fuckwad across the path. “Can’t bring them back! Their last moments are mine! I made them see me smile! I saw their eyes! You can’t bring them back! You cost me my prey, but you can only take one me, and I’ve taken 86! 86! 86 smiles!”

The manifested blade of Dream’s End tore into the criminal’s neck and severed his vocal cords. Agonizing, meaningless gasps replaced the victorious decrees and delirious glee, and the unicorn abruptly pressed a hoof into his bleeding wound.

“You really are a dumbass,” Wing grunted as he repositioned the blade. “And I now have all the info I need. As the 44<sup>th</sup> Executor under Her Majesty’s Crown, by the order of Princess Celestia’s Sword, I sentence you to death... 86 deaths... to be served sequentially.”

With a single stroke, Wing cut through the unicorn’s leg and neck. He dismembered and decapitated the foal-killer, and his unsympathetic glare remained steadfastly locked on the pinprick stare etched onto the mage’s quivering eyes. Though the villain had been cut, and though pain burned through the pony’s neck and limb, the slash wounds had instantly healed.

“One,” Wing huffed. He repositioned his sword and drove the tip into the unicorn’s left eye and straight through the back of the skull. The pegasus knelt while the worthless waste of life spasmed and wailed. “What? You didn’t think you’d ever be forced to reap what you sowed?”

Wing retracted the blade and gave the heaving mage the unenviable experience of seeing the tip of a sword come out of his repaired eye. The murderer felt around his neck and face, unable to comprehend that he was still in one piece. His limbs jerked erratically while his nerves tried to make sense of it all, but that process was irrelevant.

“I guess I’ll just have to explain it to you,” Wing taunted. The blade crafted by Dream’s End melted back into the void from which it came, and at the command of Wing’s imagination, the weapon fashioned two shimmering, slightly curved hoof blades that jutted out from the flier’s right forelimb. He jabbed the underside of the murderer’s muzzle and hooked his catch by uppercutting the unicorn with enough force to have the tips of the daggers scrape against the interior of the killer’s skull.

Propping up the bleeding fool, Wing pulled the caster’s head towards his own as he stood, and a devilish grin stretched across Wing’s muzzle as he felt the dreadful attempts his target made to escape. “I bet you thought you were a genius when you tortured those who didn’t stand a chance, so how does it feel? You



thought you could only die once? My reality says otherwise. The cost of harmony isn't free, and I'm here to collect your debt. I'm going to take your pride. No one will know your name. No record of you will remain. After this generation, no one will remember who you are. Your body will be burned to dust, and I'll extinguish your dreams in this world and every other. You're at your end. You're my victim, and which one of us is smiling now?"