

The Natural Order

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Chapter 1

Princess Celestia awoke with a gasp. The sheets that surrounded her were damp with perspiration, and her heart was pounding in her chest. It took her a moment to realize she had been dreaming. She sighed and untangled the sheets from her body with a flick of her horn. She shivered in the cool night air, her damp coat chilling her as she trotted out onto the balcony attached to her Royal chamber. The Palace always felt so empty at night. For a thousand years she had missed the warmth that Luna's night would spread over Equestria. The moon had offered her comfort in the times before Nightmare Moon had corrupted her little sister. In those days, she had always felt safe and comforted at night. It had always seemed to her that Luna watched over her as she slept, guiding and guarding her dreams.

Unfortunately, things had changed since then. For a thousand years all that she had felt in the moonlight was guilt and sadness. Regret for what Luna had become, and for what she had done to stop her. For centuries she had tried to think of something she could have done, *should* have done. Could she have freed Luna from the moon earlier? Maybe she could have separated her from Nightmare Moon instead of banishing them both to the moon. Maybe she could have even done something to head off the resentment that led to Luna's fall in the first place. But she had done nothing then, and she had continued her inaction as Luna suffered alone for so long. She had hoped her feelings of guilt would pass when Luna returned, that they could reconcile their past dispute and return to the relationship they had before, but if anything she felt worse.

Celestia blinked away the tears that had begun to form in the corners of her eyes. This wasn't how things were supposed to be. Luna was supposed to come back, and they were supposed to forgive each other and go back to the way things were before. But nothing was the same anymore. She could see the effect the centuries of isolation had had on her sister. Her eyes were far older than her childlike appearance let on. That was another thing that had bothered Celestia. She had been initially surprised to see that Luna had returned to such a youthful appearance. She had assumed, and hoped, that it was symbolic of Luna's return to innocence, but now it only

served as a reminder to them both of the years they had spent apart, of the mistakes that had been made.

Celestia gazed at the moon, shining brightly in the sky. Luna's moon, her canvas.

'And her prison.' A sinister voice said from the back of her mind.

Princess Celestia's eyes narrowed, her gaze locked on the moon. She knew that voice all too well. For centuries she had tried to forget it, and now it was back, haunting her dreams.

'Surely you didn't think things would be so simple did you?' The smug, cold voice of Nightmare Moon gloated in her head. 'Both of you, both of US know it isn't that easy. You might have forgiven her for what happened, but how could she ever forgive you? All she wanted was to be loved, to know that somepony appreciated her work, her heart and soul, and you ignored her pain. You are the reason I exist in the first place, not her. But she was the one who was punished for it. How could she ever forgive your selfishness?'

Celestia tore her gaze away from the moon, shutting them tightly and turning away, willing the voice to be silent. 'All I wanted was for everypony to be safe.' She thought as she headed back inside and closed the curtains. 'I never wanted to hurt her, but I had no choice. She had lost herself to Nightmare Moon. I had to do it!' The argument had been playing itself out inside her head ever since Luna had returned. The relief she had felt at the defeat of Nightmare Moon by her student, Twilight Sparkle and the other bearers of the Elements of Harmony, and during the Summer Sun Celebration had given way to guilt and unease as Canterlot settled back into its routine. She had even handed the night back to Luna after she had readjusted to life in Equestria, but something still felt wrong.

'Ah but you know what the problem is don't you?' Nightmare Moon's voice whispered in her mind. 'You have tried so hard to pretend that nothing happened. Maybe it's easy for you, but she spent so long alone and isolated; with only me for company. You really have no idea what that felt like, what it did to her. And then to come back to her perfect elder sister acting as if everything was going to be the same as it used to be.' Celestia could hear the dark mare's chuckling echoing inside her head, and the

sound set her teeth on edge. *‘You really have no idea at all do you Princess?’*

“Enough!” She shouted, tears streaming from her eyes. “I will not tolerate your presence any more. Luna doesn’t need you anymore and I don’t need to hear anything you have to say! Now begone!” Her horn flashed brightly and she panted, startling herself with her outburst. Her heavy breathing was the only sound in the silent bed chamber. She shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. This was the second time this month she had found herself shouting at the voice of Nightmare Moon that plagued her sleep. It was foolish, she knew. Nightmare Moon was gone, for good this time; there was no way the evil night spirit could be speaking to her. No, more likely it was just her mind playing tricks on her. Her guilt over Luna’s imprisonment was getting worse, and she didn’t know how to fix it. Every time she attempted to speak with Luna about it her voice would leave her, or Luna would shy away from her, making some excuse to avoid Celestia’s company. But those were just excuses. She would have to try harder if she wanted to mend things between them.

She was startled out of her reverie by a sudden knock on her door.

“I beg your pardon your Highness, but it is nearly time to raise the sun. Princess Luna will be lowering the moon shortly.” A voice Celestia recognized as that of her chief assistant, a unicorn stallion by the name of Leary Skychaser. Celestia turned to look back out of the window, noticing the fading moonlight. Was it really that time already? How long had she been wrapped up in her thoughts of Luna and Nightmare Moon? It was disturbing to think that this phantom of Nightmare Moon could rattle her enough that she would lose track of time, especially when she needed to raise the sun.

“Thank you Leary.” She said, summoning her crown and other accessories from their resting place on the nightstand. “I will be on the Eastern balcony to raise the sun momentarily.”

“As you say your Highness. I will prepare an itinerary for the day for you while you raise the sun. There are several matters that require your immediate attention.” Leary said before taking his leave. Celestia listened as the sound of his hooves on the marble floor of the corridor grew fainter

and fainter before disappearing. She let out a breath, settling her crown into place. It was going to be a long day.

The moon dipped below the horizon and the sky took on a grey-blue hue as the first rays of sunshine filled the sky. Princess Luna could feel the threads of her sister's magic weaving through what had moments ago been her night sky. She had faint memories of what this time of day used to be like, before she had succumbed to the poison of Nightmare Moon. There was a brief moment, between day and night, when the sky did not belong to only her or Celestia, but to them both. The threads of their magic would interweave and they could feel each other's very essence. One thousand years ago the transitions had been her favorite parts of governing the lunar cycle. She felt closer to Celestia at those times than at any other, and she could feel her sister's love filling her. Now though, she shied away from such intimacy. She wasn't deserving of that kind of affection anymore.

Her horn shimmered, a dark glow in the cool morning air. Finally, Luna felt the last threads of her own magic leave the sky, the day fully under Celestia's guiding hand. She couldn't help but smile a little. It seemed that in the thousand years she had spent on the moon, her sister had learned a thing or two about the subtle art that governed the night, and it showed in the peace the morning still held. Luna could remember what it was like when Celestia had first learned how to guide the sun all those centuries ago. Each morning the sun would rise over the horizon in a blaze of glory, heralding the beginning of another new day. It was funny in a way, and very much a reflection of Celestia's personality. Always bright and eager, ready to face any challenge.

'Not like me,' Luna thought, her eyes downcast as she left the castle's West balcony and walked down the corridors of the castle, the newly risen ponies ignoring her as they attended to their duties. 'Sister was always the bright one, so eager to guide and nurture the other ponies. All I ever wanted was their attention, but I never really tried to help them.'

She wanted so badly to be more like Celestia, to be looked up to and loved. She shook her head, trying to clear the thoughts that were swirling in her head. Dwelling on that would do no good. The last time she had allowed herself to be consumed by jealousy she had turned into a monster, and the

end result had been her betrayal of her beloved sister and subsequent banishment to the moon. And even after all that Celestia had proven herself the better sibling and taken her back, forgiving her and loving her as if she had never done wrong. Luna couldn't understand how she could do such a thing.

The events surrounding her return were still vivid in her memory, even so many months after the fact. She had done exactly as she had set out to do one thousand years ago and imprisoned her sister and brought eternal night to Equestria. If it hadn't been for Twilight Sparkle and her friends, she would have succeeded. Even after that Celestia had forgiven her. Not only that, but the ponies she had attacked had forgiven her as well, even welcomed her home.

'It doesn't make sense! Everypony but me is able to forgive and accept others! Why am I so selfish? I'm supposed to be the Princess of the Moon, so why is it that I'm consumed by such pettiness?' Luna thought as tears welled up in her eyes. She blinked them away, navigating the corridors back to her room. She needed to sleep. Governing the night sky was no easy task, particularly when she was still weak after being stripped of Nightmare Moon's powers. But lately she had come to fear sleep. Nightmare Moon's voice would taunt her, scream at her, threaten her. Even in the warmth of Celestia's days she would wake up freezing, the chill of the moon still penetrating her to her bones.

She rounded a bend and froze. Celestia was walking towards her, talking with one of her advisors, a pony Luna didn't recognize. Luna was tempted to run, or hide, do something to avoid talking to her sister, but the thought of doing so filled her with shame. After a moment, Celestia stopped, having noticed Luna standing awkwardly in the hall.

"My darling sister!" Celestia said, trotting up to Luna and nuzzling against her. "It's good to see you doing well. I was up early this morning and was admiring your night sky. I must say you really are an artist when it comes to the night. You certainly handle it much more brilliantly than I was ever able to." She gave a warm chuckle, smiling down at Luna. "But I suppose that's only to be expected."

"Thank you...sister." Luna said softly, cringing at her sister's warmth and praise. How could Celestia care so much about her after everything she

had done? 'I'm not worth it.' She thought, her eyes glued to Celestia's hooves.

'That's right. You're not. Not at all.' A voice sneered at her from inside her head. Luna trembled at the voice of Nightmare Moon. Recently, it didn't matter if she was asleep or not. Nightmare Moon could invade her mind awake or asleep.

'Look at the way she looks at you. Her gaze is so full of love and forgiveness. Such a wonderful and glorious leader isn't she?' Luna could feel the hate in the voice, the cold malice that had twisted her foalish jealousy into rage and hatred. 'But what have you ever done to deserve her love Luna? What have you ever done to deserve any love or adoration at all? We became what we were because of your pettiness. You never did anything to deserve what you sought. You answered her unconditional love with anger and violence. And even after we were beaten by those miserable little children she took you back. You're nothing compared to her. That's why you need me, and that's why soon enough you'll become me again.'

Luna gasped and stumbled, looking up into the concerned eyes of Celestia.

"Luna? Are you alright sister?" She asked, taking a step towards her.

"I'm fine!" Luna said as she steadied herself, tears returning to her eyes. "I just...I'm so sorry!" She cried, and dashed away from Celestia.

"Luna wait! Please!" Celestia shouted, but Luna had disappeared around the corner and down the hall.

Celestia let out a sigh. This had been happening more and more often, and it was starting to wear on her. She just wanted Luna to be happy again.

"Your Highness I beg your pardon but these matters really must be attended to." The pony beside her spoke up.

"Yes...yes of course." She sighed and turned back down the hall, the pony next to her babbling about border treaties with the new dragon leadership. Once again, Luna would have to wait.

“Breathe in”

The young unicorn mare took a deep breath, careful to keep her body still as the frigid air filled her lungs. She could feel the moisture on her snow-white coat and pale blue mane condense and freeze, covering her in a bright sheen of frost. A six-pronged snowflake glittered on her flank and her horn glowed with a pale light, shimmering in the poorly lit chamber.

“Breathe out”

She exhaled and felt the snow around her hooves swirl, dancing into the air and encircling her. She opened her eyes and marveled as it floated around her, glittering in the pale light of her horn.

“Good. You are progressing much faster than I had hoped you would.”

The unicorn stood and smiled at the taller pony next to her. Her mane and tail flowed as if they were made of snow, contrasting with the cold blue hue of her coat. Her flank was adorned with geometric patterns of spreading frost, and her horn and wings glimmered as though they were made of ice. Frigid air seemed to radiate from her body. The unicorn grinned and knelt before the alicorn, the frost falling from her body as she did.

“Thank you, Lady Winter Chill. I am honored to receive your instruction.” She said, a chatter betraying the chill that had spread through her body.

Winter Chill chuckled and beckoned the unicorn to rise. “Come now my loyal student Snow Drift. There is no need to be so formal with your teacher. You have performed well, far better than I would have imagined when I first found you lost in the forest outside my castle.” Her horn began to glow and the snow in the chamber settled, drifts parting to reveal a door coated in ice. “Your control is impeccable, but as always you are still submitting to the cold. Remember my student, that although you are not an alicorn as I am, the cold is still your element. The cold is harsh and unforgiving. It will not allow itself to be guided like many other forms of magic will. You must dominate it with your will. It must truly become yours if

you are to master winter. You may not be able to guide its cycle but you must be able to command the elements that compose it.”

Snow Drift nodded as she followed her teacher. “I understand, and I am trying, but it’s hard. I mean I’ve lived here with you for as long as I can remember and it doesn’t bother me. But when I channel the magic I can feel the cold seeping into me, as if it’s freezing me from the inside out. The cold flows through me and it’s all I can do to control it without freezing my hooves off.”

“That is your next step my student.” Winter Chill said, “You have a firm grasp on the technical aspects of the magic you wield, but you still lack the necessary instinct for harnessing the true potential of our element.”

“Yes teacher.” Snow sighed, her eyes downcast. She had heard this all before, but she had no idea how she was supposed to develop the instinct her teacher spoke of. The technical aspect of magic had always come easily to her. She could dissect a spell and find all of its core elements as easily as pegasus ponies could fly, but she had never had a natural knack for the application of magic if she wasn’t able to understand it.

“Cheer up my loyal student.” Winter Chill chuckled. “I know you have always struggled with the parts of magic that rely on faith, but I’ve watched you grow these many years. I know that once you grasp this concept you will be a wielder of winter both wise and powerful. But that is a lesson for another day. For now, I must meet with one of my advisers. You may accompany me to the throne if you wish.”

The ice covering the door cracked and Snow Drift followed her teacher out into a grand hallway with high ceilings supported by ornate pillars, sculptures of ice lining the corridor. Even though she had lived in the castle since she was a filly, Snow always marveled at the castle’s Grand Hall. Each sculpture held its own story, holding the image of some great pony. She had learned all of them long before she had even earned her cutie mark, but her favorite was still the sculpture of her mentor, Lady Winter. Sometimes she would simply sit before it and marvel at the incredible likeness, at the grace and power hidden in her frozen gaze.

They reached the end of the hall, a great throne of ice set atop a large staircase was surrounded by four alicorn sculptures, one being that of her

teacher. Snow always loved looking at them. They looked so...regal, powerful, with the pale light glinting off their frozen visages. Her gaze wandered to the foot of the stairs, where two pedestals sat empty save for the hooves of whatever likenesses had stood there before.

"Snow Drift? Are you listening to me?"

Snow blinked and almost walked into the back of her teacher, a pink blush standing out against the white of her coat.

"Oh, I'm sorry teacher! I was just thinking about the Grand Hall again. When are you going to tell me why these two are broken?" She questioned, gesturing at the broken sculptures.

Winter Chill's face darkened and she glared at Snow Drift. Snow cringed under her teacher's glare. She really should have known better than to ask again. Whoever they were, it was clear that there was a good reason they no longer stood in the company of her mentor.

After a moment Winter Chill let out a sigh. "Perhaps the time will soon come when it is necessary for me to tell you that tale, but for now, leave it be my student. Now, as I was saying, I have an important meeting to see to, and I need you to attend to your own affairs for awhile as I take care of this."

"Of course teacher." Snow said, smiling and bowing her head. "I'm going to go practice what I learned today. Thank you for the lesson."

Snow Drift knelt briefly before her teacher, rising and stepping forward to nuzzle her briefly before trotting off down the hall and out of sight. Lady Winter Chill let out a breath and turned back to her throne.

"You can come out now. My student has left for the moment."

A dusty brown earth pony trotted out from behind the throne and gave Winter Chill a leering smile. His mane was grey and dirty, and on his flank was an image of a pile of decaying leaves.

“Such a remarkable young unicorn you have there My Lady.” He chuckled, his voice raspy and dry. “I can see why you chose her as your student. She has a very similar aura to yourself doesn’t she?”

Winter Chill glared at the earth pony. “I am forced to tolerate your presence at the request of my ailing sister, Dead Leaves, but that does not mean I will allow your lack of respect or permit you to get anywhere near my student. You said you had news for me and I will hear it. If this is all you came here for then I suggest you leave while I still allow you to.”

“Of course, of course!” Dead Leaves laughed. “I merely wanted to see your protégé for myself. You understand. I wanted to know if she would be useful in the days to come.”

Winter Chill’s eyes narrowed, examining Dead Leaves carefully. “Then things are moving along as Autumn Gale said they would?”

“Oh yes. My Lady may not have all of her mental faculties intact anymore, but she is more than capable of handling a task such as this.” Dead Leaves said, grinning. “Your sister has always had a talent for getting others to do what she wants, and even the most powerful of ponies can be deceived when blinded by their own guilt and regret.”

A small smile crept onto Winter Chill’s face. “Good. Tell my sister I will be ready to act when the time comes. How much longer do you expect it will take?”

“It shouldn’t be long now. A matter of weeks perhaps. My Lady has expressed the belief that with a little more tension and one final push, the connection between the sisters of the sun and moon can be broken for good.” Dead Leaves bowed before Winter Chill before turning to take his leave.

“Oh, and there’s one more thing.” He said, turning back. “It seems Celestia has taken a student of her own. A unicorn of similar age to your own Snow Drift. From what I’ve been told, her talents truly are remarkable. She’s living in a small village not far from Canterlot, but far enough that she is outside of the watchful gaze of her teacher.”

Winter Chill's eyes gleamed fiercely and her mouth turned upward in a wicked smile.

"Well. That *is* interesting."

Chapter 2

Dawn broke over the quiet village of Ponyville. Birds chirped, ponies began to stir in their beds, and the morning dew glistened in the early morning light. In a tree on the edge of town, a dragon groaned.

"Twilight the sun's hardly even up yet." Spike grumbled, pulling his blanket over his eyes. "Go back to sleep already. Or at least be quiet. I'm a growing dragon and that means I need my sleep."

This had been the pattern for the past week. The sun would rise and Twilight Sparkle would be wide awake, preparing a list of tasks to be accomplished that day. Spike might not have minded so much except that the purple unicorn insisted that he be up to help her get organized and run errands.

"Spike this is no time to be sleeping!" Twilight said, Spike's blanket glowing as it was ripped from his clutches. "The Summer Sun Celebration is exactly one month away and if we want to be ready we need to use all the time we have to the fullest. Princess Celestia and the Mayor are trusting me to organize everything so we need to be prepared! Everything needs to be just right, and I don't want any surprises."

Spike sat up and yawned loudly in Twilight's face. Twilight wrinkled her nose and waved a hoof in front her face.

"Spike go brush your teeth before you start breathing in my face please. Now, the first thing we need to do today is drop by Rarity's boutique and review the designs for the sun dancer's dresses." She said as she loaded up her saddlebags.

Immediately the young dragon perked up. "Why didn't you say we were going to visit Rarity? Hold on I'll be ready in just a minute!" He said, rushing down to the library's foyer.

Twilight sighed, a small smile creeping onto her face as she shook her head in amusement. Spike may have been lazy sometimes but overall he

was a great assistant, and given the right prodding motivating him was easy enough.

“Alright how do I look? Are my scales shiny enough? What about my teeth do they look good?” Spike asked, looking himself over in the mirror.

“Oh Spike.” Twilight laughed, watching as the infant dragon attempted to smooth his green scales down. “You look fine. I’m sure Rarity will be impressed. Now come on we need to get going. Rarity’s place is only the first on a long list of errands we need to run so I need you to get a move on.”

“Alright already I get it geez.” Spike grumbled as he hopped onto Twilight’s back. “Let’s get going then. The sooner we get there the sooner I can see Rarity.” His eyes glazed and he let out a long sigh. Twilight rolled her eyes and walked out of the library into the cool morning air. She locked the library behind them; it wasn’t scheduled to open for a few more hours anyway, and hopefully they would be done with their errands by then.

“Okay Spike, let’s go.” Twilight said with a smile, but her only response was a light snore.

“Gah! Geez Rarity will you watch it with those pins? I’m not a pincushion you know!”

“Well I am sorry Rainbow Dash, and I do appreciate you helping me so early in the morning but if you’re going to model the designs for me then I need you to not be falling asleep.” Rarity said, shooting the prismatic mare a meaningful glance. Working with Rainbow Dash could be a trying experience, even for a pony with Rarity’s composure and patience, but it was nice that she had been willing to help and Rarity was grateful. Twilight had asked her to design the Sun Dancer’s dresses for the Summer Sun Celebration, and Rarity had no intention of disappointing her friend. Especially not when she had entrusted her with such a high honor. The Sun Dancer’s dresses were usually designed by the most well known of Cantelrot’s fashion stars. Her designs would be worn in celebrations all across Equestria, and they would be worn when the dancers performed in

front of the Princesses! If she made a good impression it could be a bigger career booster than when Hoity Toity had promoted her.

Still, all that really depended on whether or not Rainbow Dash could keep her eyes open and let Rarity work.

“You know, when I agreed to help you I didn’t think it would mean getting up at the crack of dawn and being stuck full of pins while you mumble to yourself.” Rainbow said, fidgeting in the half-sewn dress Rarity had put on her. Her mane and tail were in curlers, and she was glad she wasn’t within sight of a mirror. She wasn’t sure she would have been able to take the sight of how ridiculous she must look. “And besides, I don’t understand why you needed me to be the one to help anyway. I mean, wouldn’t Fluttershy have been a better choice? You two spend all that time at the spa and she knows a lot more about fashion than I do.”

“Oh I could never do that.” Rarity said, levitating an orange strip of fabric and pinning it into position behind Rainbow’s wings. “After all she went through with Photo Finish. I practically forced the poor dear into a modeling career she didn’t want. I simply couldn’t ask her to do it again, even if she does possess so much natural grace.”

“Yeah I guess.” Rainbow said, fidgeting. “I just wish you could do this a little later in the day. I hate getting up early.”

“Well it can’t be helped dear. After all, we could have done this last night but somepony insisted that they were much too busy practicing to help a friend in need.”

“Hey don’t try to make this my fault! I have to keep up my practicing if I want to keep in tip top shape you know.” Rainbow Dash said with a hint of indignation.

“Yes, well Twilight said she would be dropping by early this morning to check on my progress. I know she trusts me to do a good job but sometimes I fear her desire for organization can lead her to be a bit of a control freak.” Rarity said, removing the curlers from Rainbow Dash’s tail and styling it into elegant loops.

Rarity stepped back to examine her progress. The design was still in its infancy but she was determined to get the color scheme down before she committed to anything. Light yellows and oranges accentuated by light blues and purples gave the impression of the dawn sky. The colors cascaded down from the collar, rays of yellow flowing over the back from the wings.

She was interrupted by the sound of a knock at the front door.

“Ah! That must be Twilight.” Rarity said, making her way to the door. “You stay still Rainbow Dash. I’m not finished pinning that fabric yet.”

“Yeah yeah I got it.” Rainbow said, flexing her wings in annoyance.

Rarity opened the door and Twilight walked into the boutique, Spike hopping off her back as she did.

“Good morning Rarity.” Twilight said. “Sorry to bother you so early, but I’ve got a busy docket today and need to make sure everything is going well. I still need to go to Sweet Apple Acres before lunch to meet with Applejack.”

“Oh it’s no trouble at all!” Rarity said, ushering Twilight and Spike into the back where Rainbow was busy trying to keep herself from fidgeting too much. “I’m usually up early when I have a design on my mind. I just can’t seem to rest until I get it just right. Rainbow Dash here was kind enough to volunteer her services as a model, seeing as all the Sun Dancers are pegasi.” Rarity smiled sweetly at Rainbow Dash, who rolled her eyes and grumbled a greeting to Twilight.

“It’s good to see you too Rainbow Dash.” Twilight chuckled, noticing her friend’s sour expression. Spike couldn’t help but let out a laugh at the sight of Rainbow Dash with a styled tail, curlers in her mane, and bits of fabric pinned to her.

“You look like one of Sweetie Belle’s dolls!” He laughed, rolling on the floor.

Rainbow Dash growled but stayed still. “Just you wait until I get out of this stuff Spike. Then we’ll see how well a baby dragon can fly.”

Spike continued to laugh, ignoring Rainbow Dash’s threats. “Haha! Whatever you say!”

Rarity shook her head and smiled at the antics of her two friends. "So will Applejack be in charge of managing the food again this year?" She asked, turning back to Twilight.

"For the most part. This year the celebration in Ponyville is going to be a lot bigger than in the past." Twilight said, watching as Spike continued to tease Rainbow Dash. "Princess Celestia said she wanted the one year anniversary of Princess Luna's return to be special, so we're doing a much bigger production. Ponyville will be playing host to a large number of out of town visitors so we'll be needing a lot more food than just Applejack will be able to provide. She said she'd take me around to meet some of the other farmers in the area to see about hiring their services for the Celebration."

"Oh My!" I had no idea it was going to be such a big event. And to think Princess Celestia has entrusted you with organizing the whole thing! She really must have a great deal of faith in you."

Twilight felt a light blush grace her cheeks at the praise. "I suppose so. I just want to do the best that I can, both for Celestia and Luna. I know Celestia really wants it to be a special event, and to be as much about Princess Luna as herself." A troubled look crossed Twilight's face, remembering back to the wording of the request Celestia had sent her when she had asked Twilight to be in charge of organizing the Summer Sun Celebration. There had been a note of...pleading...or desperation that was disconcerting coming from her teacher. It was clear that this event was incredibly important to Celestia, and Twilight was pretty sure she knew why.

"Twilight? Is there something wrong?" Rarity asked, concern in her voice.

Twilight blinked, returning her attention to her unicorn friend. "Oh. No. No I don't think so." She said, looking down. "It's just...I'm sort of worried I guess...about Princess Celestia."

Rarity tilted her head in confusion. "Worried? Why whatever for?"

"I don't know, it's just a feeling I guess. I've known her for most of my life, and she's always seemed so in control. But lately in the letters I get from her she sounds tense, worried even. I'm not sure things are going so well with Princess Luna."

Spike had stopped teasing Rainbow Dash, who looked with concern at Twilight.

“Don’t worry Twilight.” Spike said, hopping onto her back. “I’m sure Princess Celestia would have told you if Princess Luna was getting out of hand again. I mean, you guys were the ones to beat Nightmare Moon in the first place.”

Twilight shook her head. “No, that’s not what I meant. I think they might be having a hard time getting used to being around each other again. A thousand years is a long time, even for goddesses. I’m just worried that they might not get over what happened.”

Rarity placed a comforting hoof on Twilight’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t worry too much about it darling. Princess Luna seemed like such a dear during last year’s Summer Sun Celebration. I can’t imagine any issues between them could last for long. I’m sure that given time everything will work out fine.”

“Yeah.” Rainbow Dash said with a grin. “And if those two need some sense knocked into them well then that’s what you’re for right?”

Twilight smiled. Trust her friends to put things in a positive light. “I’m sure you’re right. Now then, Rarity why don’t you show me what you’re planning for the rest of these outfits? I love the color so far!”

Rarity’s eyes gleamed and Rainbow Dash let out a groan as the white unicorn launched into a long and detailed description of her plans.

Snow Drift walked down the winding stairs of the castle, into the underground chambers that served to house her living quarters, as well as the library and personal quarters of Lady Winter Chill’s many servants. The walls glowed with a pale light reminiscent of moonlight, enchanted to provide light in the absence of torches. Most of the nobility lived in Wintersmane, the city that surrounded the castle. The city was constantly covered in snow, but at least there ponies were able to build fires to keep their homes warm. The ponies that lived in the castle had to settle for

blankets. Lady Winter Chill detested fire, and refused to allow it in her castle.

Down here, the castle was constructed of stone and mortar, a more fitting environment for ponies that were not terribly comfortable living in a construction of snow and ice. Even for Snow Drift, who had spent her entire life studying and mastering the cold, it wasn't terribly comfortable to sleep on ice. She also like living close to the library. Her teacher had teased her on occasion that if she hadn't such a talent for cold magic her cutie mark would have been of a dusty old tome. It wasn't a sentiment that Snow Drift found to be all that funny, although it was probably true.

Lady Winter Chill had once told her that the whole castle had been made this way originally but that a battle had left all but the foundation destroyed. After that, Winter Chill had raised the castle as it stood now, massive towers of gleaming ice stretching high into the sky. It was interesting to think about, but Snow Drift found it hard to imagine the castle having ever been much different than it was now.

She made her way to large pair of doors and pushed them open, revealing the library. It was situated in a massive cavern that must have at one point in time been a cave. It was hard to conceive that the whole thing could have been excavated; even with the magically glowing walls it was hard to see the ceiling. The library ascended in rings, getting larger and larger the higher up it went. Getting to the highest part of the library where the oldest books were kept could be a chore.

The air in the underground sections of the castle was moist and stagnant, and in the library it tended to condense near the ceiling, creating a haze that could on occasion hide the upper levels from sight. Fortunately, the books were enchanted to prevent mold, but the ponies themselves were less lucky. Snow Drift didn't mind though, she had always loved the library and found its minor atmospheric effects added a sense of wonder and mystery to the place.

Snow Drift smiled at the silver-maned colt that served as the library's caretaker as she entered. He was ancient, the oldest pony that Snow had ever met by a large margin with the exception of her teacher, and had been in charge of the library for as long as she could remember. He had always

been kind and helpful, encouraging her bookwormish habits and helping her with her studies from time to time.

“Ah, Snow Drift.” He said with a smile, glancing up from the book he had been reading. “And what brings you here today? On another assignment from her Majesty?”

“No not today.” Snow Drift replied with a smile. “I’m here for me today. I wanted to try to find some documents from before the castle was destroyed and rebuilt.”

The librarian nodded, scratching his chin. “Well I’m not sure we have anything like that. Most of what you’d want would have been destroyed during the fighting, even all the way down here. The fighting raised most of the city as I’m sure you know. But anything we do have would be up at the top.”

“Thanks.” Snow Drift said, glancing towards the high parts of the library. “I figured as much, but thought I’d ask before starting the walk up there.”

“Well good luck to you. I hope you find what you’re looking for.” The librarian said before returning his attention to his book.

Snow Drift nodded and began the long trek up the stairs. She knew the odds of her finding anything predating the destruction of the castle were slim. At that time, much of Equiiria had been in turmoil, although the details were fuzzy. The only ones who were alive now that still knew what had happened were Lady Winter Chill and her sisters. Snow didn’t know about the others, but her teacher was reluctant to mention anything about the conflict, not even to confirm or deny the theories Snow Drift had found.

However on occasion, Winter Chill would talk about the times before the war. It was always interesting to watch her normally stoic teacher’s face soften and her eyes grow distant when she talked of the paradise their land had once been. She had ruled in harmony with her sisters, each of them governing one of the four seasons. This was a concept Snow had always found hard to grasp. For as long as she could remember the land had been covered in snow, frigid and grey even on the sunniest of days. It was hard to envision the world that her teacher had told her about, a world where

winter only took up one quarter of the year and other seasons, seasons of green and warmth had as much sway as the cold of winter.

Snow Drift finally reached the highest ring and stopped to catch her breath. It always took a lot out of her, coming all the way up here. The ceiling was close enough that if she jumped she could touch it, and looking down she could barely see the librarian near the entrance. Scanning the books, leaves of parchment, and dusty scrolls, she began to feel her spirits drop. It looked like the librarian had been right. Even up here where all the oldest records were kept there was hardly any mention of the conflict that had led to the end of Equiiria's rule by the four sisters. Most of what she found didn't even go back far enough, stopping just under a thousand years ago.

'Maybe this was a silly idea.' Snow thought, pulling down a particularly old and hefty tome. 'I'm sure if it was important then Lady Winter Chill would have told me about it. Probably.' Of course, if she had been willing to talk about it in the first place Snow wouldn't have been making this trip to the upper reaches of the library hunting for books she wasn't even sure existed. Her teacher had always been kind and generous with her, but in those rare times she had tried to ask about whatever had led to Equiiria's change something in her would change and the air would make even Snow Drift shiver. It was frightening. It was sometimes easy to forget that Winter Chill was more than just her teacher. She was an immortal that had lived for generations and her power was beyond measure.

Still, just because her teacher didn't want to talk about it didn't mean she had forbidden Snow Drift from trying to learn about it. She just wished that finding the information was a little easier. The archives, which housed the recorded publications going back as far as there were copies had been of little help, and none of the other residents of the castle knew anything either. So the library it was.

She flipped through the book, scanning it for any reference to Lady Winter Chill that referred to her as anything other than the sole ruler of Equiiria, something that might mention the era when she ruled with her sisters. Information of the monarch and her sisters was not hard to come by, but there were few, if any, references that indicated that things had ever been different than they were now. She was about to put the book away when something caught her eye. It was an ornate drawing of the sun and moon,

framed by two alicorns that Snow had never seen before. Intrigued, she turned the page.

“Sun and Moon: Speculation on the sister’s dispute and the fracturing of Equestria.” Snow read aloud, confused. She had never heard of Equestria before, not even in any of the world maps she had studied as a filly. To the north was Pogona, the dragon lands, and to the west was the Great Sea, but the lands to the east and south were still unknown as far as she had been able to figure. It was possible of course that it was somewhere in that region, but it was equally likely that it no longer existed, or had never existed at all.

Curious, she continued, the musty pages tickling her nose. The words were faded and some passages were written in an older form of the language, but she was able to read sections.

“An accurate account of the lead up to the Princess of the Moon’s rebellion and subsequent banishment is hard to come by, and the Princess of the Sun herself is unwilling to confirm any speculation, although she has at times come forth to deny the harsher accusations leveled at her sister. Theories range from political espionage to assassination attempts, but the only element of the affair that has seen any consensus is that the Princess of the Moon had begun to resent her sister, leading to her transformation into the Nightmare. The root of this resentment is unknown but was perhaps rooted in the relative ambiguity in which the Princess of the Moon lived. Unlike her sister, who received daily praise for her work with the sun, she had little acknowledgement from the population of Equestria.”

Snow Drift paused in her reading, trying to understand the implications of that passage. She had never heard of the two princesses mentioned in the book, and as far as she knew the only royalty outside of Lady Winter Chill herself were her sisters, but none of them had ever gone by those titles as far as she knew. She turned her attention back to the book, hoping for some answers.

“With the Princess of the Moon banished, the Princess of the Sun reigned over the entirety of the magic cycle of the sun and moon, granting her power far greater than any alicorn had ever possessed, although it has been speculated that having to internalize the balance of the Cycle put a great deal of strain on her. Whatever the case, the banishment of the

Princess of the Moon did not sit well with the Princess of Winter and the Princess of Summer, of the Sisters of Seasons."

Snow Drift could make out little beyond that, but if she was reading this book right, and years of reading dense old books led her to believe that she was, then her homeland of Equiria and this Equestria that was referred to in the book had once been one in the same. The Sisters of Seasons had been the ancient title used to refer to Lady Winter Chill and her sisters when they ruled together. Could the Princesses in the book have something to do with them? And what could have led to a confrontation between them? Suddenly, Snow Drift thought she had a good idea of whose images the shattered sculptures in the throne room had once held.

"Thought I would find you here." A voice from behind Snow said, breaking her concentration and causing her to let out a yelp of surprise.

She turned around to glare at the pegasus floating in the air behind her. "Geez Aurora, why do you always have to sneak up on me when I'm reading?" She said.

Aurora chuckled and flipped her pink and green mane out of her eyes. "Well a couple reasons. One, you're *always* reading so it would be impossible to sneak up on you at any other time and two, it's just so easy." She said, landing next to her friend. Her teal coat causing her to blend in with the soft glow of the library's lighting, a thin ribbon of blue and green light adorning her flank.

Snow rolled her eyes and playfully shoved her friend. "Oh ha ha. That's very funny. And what about you? Have you *ever* read a book or do you just hope some of my intelligence will rub off on you?"

"Hey! I'm plenty smart, I just don't get all my smarts from books. I happen to think there are plenty of ways to get smart without burying one's nose in a musty old book." Aurora said.

"Yeah yeah, that's what you always tell me, but I think I'll stick with my books thank you very much." Snow said, teasing. "So Aurora, how's the life of a palace guard been treating you? I know you always used to talk about getting this post. Is it everything you ever dreamed?"

“Well it is and it isn’t.” Aurora said, her hoof touching the icicle-shaped gold pendant hanging from her neck. “I mean, I just got assigned to the castle, and so I get the uniform and everything, but at the moment I’m really just a messenger. Speaking of which, our most esteemed Lady has requested your presence quick like, so I’d get a move on if you don’t want to get your flank frost bitten.”

Snow Drift grimaced. “Oh no, I must have lost track of the time! I’m late for my lesson! Oh she’s going to turn me into an ice sculpture for this!” She took off at a gallop down the stairs. “Thanks Aurora! I’ll owe you dinner or something, bye!”

Aurora couldn’t help but laugh at her friends antics. Snow Drift had always been such an eager pony. Always in a rush when it came to pursuing knowledge. She looked down and noticed the book Snow had left behind in her haste.

“Huh, never heard that story before.” She said. She skimmed it before shrugging and placing it back on the shelf.

Chapter 3

The moonlight glittered off of the icy walls of Lady Winter Chill's throne room, casting a pale glimmer over all present. Winter Chill herself stood at the top of the staircase leading to her throne, flanked by four guards, two of them pegasi and the other two unicorns. They were dressed in the silver-blue armor of the Royal Guard. The armor covered their flanks, hiding their cutie marks and replacing them with the symbol of their Lady, an icicle set against the hexagonal outline of frost that was Winter Chill's own cutie mark.

The doors at the far end of the hall opened, and Winter Chill scowled, the temperature around her dropping. Her guards shivered, holding their positions despite the plummeting temperature. Their armor was enchanted to keep them warm, containing their body heat so that they didn't freeze while in such close proximity to the Lady, but even still crystals of frost began to creep along the armor of the two ponies nearest Winter Chill.

"When I summon you Dead Leaves, I expect you to respond punctually. I do not know how my sister allows you to behave when you are in her home but I will not tolerate your insubordination or your disrespect, do I make myself clear?" She said as the dusty earth pony approached the foot of the stairs.

"Of course My Lady, I meant no disrespect." He said, inclining his head in the slightest of bows. The ever-present smirk on his face clearly indicated that he was anything but sorry.

Winter Chill grit her teeth, her eyes narrowing as she glared at the pony. She wanted nothing more than to freeze him in place and shatter him into a thousand pieces for his rudeness. It took all of her self control to keep herself from doing just that. Something about the pony set her on edge. He was crafty and manipulative, and something else, something unsettling that she could never quite put her hoof on. Even before she had met him she had an intense dislike for him based on what little she had heard of him from her own emissaries to her sister's court. She couldn't shake the feeling that he was using Autumn Gale for his own purposes. Autumn Gale had always been the smartest of her sisters, even smarter than Winter

Chill, but things had been different ever since Spring Rain had been lost. Winter Chill knew her sister was still clever, but she had never been quite the same. She hated to think that a pony as loathsome as Dead Leaves might be taking advantage of Autumn Gale in her weakened state.

"I'm not interested in your empty apologies Dead Leaves, just make sure it doesn't happen again." She said, dismissing her guards with a gesture of her wing. The guards bowed in unison before descending the stairs, one of them shooting Dead Leaves a dirty look as he passed, and taking positions near the hall's main door opposite the throne.

"I trust you've kept in contact with my sister?" Winter Chill asked.

"Of course. We simply await your command and the trap will be sprung."

Winter Chill allowed herself a small smile at that. "Excellent. If your intelligence is correct then the timing will be perfect. The Summer Sun Celebration has been Equestria's greatest holiday for centuries and the preparations will be keeping Celestia busy. We'll use that to our advantage. With any luck, she'll be too busy to do anything about Luna's condition, and the Moon Princess' own insecurity will be enough drive the two apart."

Dead Leaves' grin grew wider, a glint in his normally dull eyes. "A truly cunning plan My Lady, certainly worthy of one as brilliant as yourself. You have nothing to fear. Everything will proceed smoothly on our end. The plan is foolproof."

"We can only hope." Winter Chill said, regarding the earth pony coolly. "However, I did not call you simply to chat. I have every faith that Autumn Gale will perform her part to perfection. She always does. I simply wanted you to inform her that in light of her latest report I have decided to make a slight...addition to the plan."

For the first time since he had entered the throne room Dead Leaves' grin faltered. "A change in plans? My Lady I know I do not need to remind you of how delicate this plan is. If any changes are made this late it could—"

"Do not lecture me! I am more than aware of the fine line we are walking here. If we draw Celestia's attention before we are ready everything will fall

apart. However, you may rest assured that any addition I make to our plan will only serve to strengthen our position in the long run.”

Winter Chill’s eyes glowed ghostly silver, her wispy mane glittering in the moonlight. “I will be sending Snow Drift to Equestria several weeks prior to the Summer Sun Celebration, to Ponyville. She will be my eyes and ears on the ground, and she will be there to take advantage of any...weaknesses the sisters may present.”

Dead Leaves’ eyes lit up in understanding and he let out a raspy cackle. “Oh ho! Truly devious my lady! Wonderful even! I’m sure Snow Drift will be a most useful asset to have in place. This is truly a marvelous plan, and coincidental even. It just so happens that your sister has commanded me to travel to Equestria as well. It seems she wants me near the Princesses for the final...push, as it were. I would be more than happy to accompany your dear student on her trip.”

Winter Chill’s eyes narrowed and she glided silently down the stairs, landing in front of Dead Leaves. “I have warned you already; you are to stay away from Snow Drift. My sister trusts you but I find you foul and repulsive. Remember, Snow Drift may be an asset in the coming struggle but she is still my precious student. If I find out you have done anything to put her in danger I will bury you under so much snow and ice not even my sister will be able to get you out, do you understand me?”

“Of course My Lady, I would never do anything to harm your beloved student.” He said, bowing deeply before the alicorn. “I merely wished to offer my services as an escort.”

Winter Chill regarded the earth pony for several moments before turning and making her way back up the stairs. “You will travel with Snow Drift, but you will be under constant supervision. Six of my best guards will be accompanying the two of you, so I expect you to be on your best behavior. Now if there is nothing else I would appreciate it if you got out of my sight.”

“Very well My Lady. It will be as you say. I wish you a...pleasant evening.” Dead Leaves bowed once more before taking his leave, the guards glaring at him as he exited.

Winter Chill let out a sigh once Dead Leaves had gone. That pony truly was intolerable. She would never understand what her sister saw in him.

“Captain!”

At her call one of the pegasus ponies guarding the door snapped to attention, flying forward and landing with a bow in front of Winter Chill.

“Yes My Lady, how may I be of service?”

“I want you to prepare six of your best to accompany my student to Ponyville, in Equestria. I will arrange for you to be provided with a map. Arrange for whatever provisions you deem necessary for the trip. Also, I want you to find Aurora. She is to accompany your men and my student. For the purposes of this assignment she will be given the rank of Captain. Make sure your men understand that they are to follow her orders for the duration of this assignment.”

The pegasus captain rose from his bow, his head tilted in confusion. “Of course My Lady, it will be done. But...if I may ask, why Aurora? She was only recently inducted into the Royal Guard.”

Winter Chill smiled, placing a hoof on the Captain’s shoulder. “Now Captain, don’t go selling your soldiers short. Aurora may be young, but she has shown a remarkable amount of skill. She has also shown a great deal of leadership capability. Think of this as a test of her abilities. Also, as I’m sure you know, she and Snow Drift have been friends since they were fillies. If anyone is going to be motivated to protect my student it will be her.”

“Of course.” The Captain said, returning her smile. “My men will do whatever is necessary to protect your student, but the motivation that comes with a personal attachment cannot be manufactured through training. I’m sure your student will be in the best of hooves.”

“Very good Captain. Now, go begin preparations. You will leave first thing tomorrow and it is already late. When you find Aurora, tell her to send Snow Drift to me. I’m sure she’ll know where to find her and I still need to explain to her what her new assignment is.”

With a salute, the Captain took off, leaving Winter Chill to ponder the best way to explain to her student what she expected her to

“Ugh! This doesn’t make sense! Why can’t I find anything!”

Snow Drift sat on the floor in the uppermost levels of the library, surrounded by stacks of books. Ever since she had found that book mentioning the Sun and Moon Princesses, she had been determined to learn more about them. She was almost sure they were real, or at least had been. It would certainly explain the two broken statues in the throne room. What she couldn’t explain, and what she had been hoping to find somewhere in the library’s records, was an explanation for why their statues had been broken. What could have happened between them and her teacher to make her do something like that?

The sculptures that lined the hall were meant to be more than mere decoration. Each pony depicted there had earned Winter Chill’s respect, and she had crafted each statue herself, as a memorial of who they were and what they had done. For her to shatter a pony’s memorial must mean that they had had a severe falling out.

Snow Drift growled in frustration, slamming another book closed. She was getting nowhere. She had spent most of her free time for the last several days holed up in the library looking for clues, but had so far had little success. She had only been able to find snippets here and there that mentioned Equestria, and most of those were in passing. The only solid piece of information she had been able to put together was that Equiiria had at one point been part of Equestria, and that after some sort of confrontation between the leadership the nation had been split. Of course, this was something she had suspected from the passages she had read in the first book, but it had come up often enough in texts that she was fairly certain it was true.

Her teacher rarely talked about her past, and Snow Drift rarely asked, so it stood to reason that she had never mentioned it before. However, it was curious that none of the more recent text books she had read during her education mentioned anything about it. In fact, now that she thought about it none of the history books she had read growing up had mentioned anything concrete about Equiiria’s origins at all. It was as if it had simply always been, and that was that.

She stood up, stretching in an attempt to get the numbness in her legs to go away. Looking down into the main foyer of the library, she saw a teal pegasus walk in, scanning the library. Snow waved down at her for a moment before the pegasus looked up and returned her wave before flying up to her.

“Hey.” Aurora said, landing next to her friend. “All the way up here again? What are you looking for in all these old things?” She poked at a stack of books with her hoof and winced when the whole thing collapsed, sending up a cloud of dust.

“I don’t know, a wild goose chase I guess.” She said with a sigh, her horn shimmering as she restacked the books. “I read something a few days ago, a story about a pair of alicorns that raised and lowered the sun and moon. There wasn’t much there, but from what I gathered they’re from someplace called ‘Equestria’ and they somehow knew Lady Winter Chill and her sisters.”

“Really? I’ve never heard of anything like that before.” Aurora said, looking curious as she peeked at the titles of some of the books Snow Drift had been reading. “Are you sure it’s not just an old mare’s tale? I mean, I know alicorns are super powerful, and Lady Winter Chill and her sisters are supposed to be in charge of the seasons, but moving the sun and moon? That sounds a little far-fetched don’t you think?”

“Maybe, I don’t know to be honest. I’ve seen Lady Winter do such extraordinary things with her magic that I wouldn’t doubt that it’s possible. Besides, she told me once that there is magical power inherent to these sorts of natural systems, and that accessing them lets an alicorn wield the power of those systems, at least for a time. I think the principles might be similar to the way I use my magic, but on a bigger scale. I’m not sure though, alicorn magic works on a level high above what we unicorns are capable of.” Snow Drift said, remembering a lesson Winter Chill had given her back when she had just begun to study under her, a lesson about the nature of elemental magic and the importance of being able to feel the system you were trying to control.

“I guess.” Aurora said with a shrug. As a pegasus, she had never had much interest in magic. “But I don’t see why you’re spending so much time in the library looking for answers. Wouldn’t it just be easier to ask Lady Winter

Chill yourself? I mean, she is your teacher after all. I'm sure she'd be willing to tell you what you want to know, and who better to explain it than a pony that was there when all this stuff was happening?"

Snow Drift looked down at her hooves, biting her lip. "...I don't know if that's a good idea. You know those two statues in the throne room? The broken ones?"

"Yeah...?"

"Well I'm almost certain those were the sculptures of the Sun and Moon Princesses. Every time I've asked about those sculptures in the past it's made Lady Winter angry. I don't think she'd want to talk about it, and I really don't want to get her mad at me by asking if it's something she didn't want me to know."

"Hmm, I guess that makes sense. And I know there's no stopping you once you've got it in your head to find something out. Anyway, I didn't actually come here to ask you about your studies. Apparently I've got an important new assignment!" Aurora said, her chest puffing up with pride.

Snow Drift smiled at her friend. "Really? That's great! Your first major assignment as a member of the Royal Guard! Do you know what it is yet?"

"Not yet, the Captain just told me that he was putting a team together for an assignment requested by Lady Winter Chill herself! I'm sooo excited! I can't wait to show them what a great soldier I can be!"

"Well I'm happy for you." Snow Drift said with a chuckle. No pony she had ever known had a work ethic like Aurora, not even herself. It was nice to see the hardworking pegasus getting some recognition for her efforts.

"Oh, he also told me to find you and have you report to her Majesty at once. I guess she has something urgent to discuss with you."

"Really?" Snow Drift asked, concern evident on her face. "But it's so late, what could be so important at this hour?"

Aurora shrugged. "Dunno, but we better get a move on, you don't want to be late. Again."

Snow Drift blushed, remembering the scolding she had received the last time she was late for a meeting with her teacher. "Alright, let's go. Why don't we meet later after you find out what your new assignment is? I'd love to hear about it!"

"Sounds good. I'm gonna go and meet my captain and get my briefing, I'll meet you in your room later. See ya!" Aurora said, hopping off and gliding back down to the libraries entrance.

Snow Drift watched her friend go before taking a moment to straighten up her study area, sliding the books she had collected away in a corner. A small frown formed on her face. It wasn't like her teacher to call for her so late at night. She could only hope it was nothing serious.

Snow Drift entered the throne room, wincing at the sound the door made as she closed it, disturbing the unearthly silence. She hated to admit it, but she was feeling a touch apprehensive. She didn't know what she had been called for, and it made her nervous to be left in the dark. Spotting her teacher at the other end of the hall, she couldn't help but take a moment to admire the alicorn. In the moonlight, she looked every bit the deity she was. Her mane sparkled like freshly fallen snow and the light passed through her wings, casting a shimmering light against the walls.

She made her way down the hall, her steps the only sound in the chamber. As she approached, she noticed that her teacher was standing before the broken statues Snow Drift had been investigating. She felt a lump in her throat and the butterflies in her stomach increased in intensity. She was confident that she hadn't done anything wrong, but that didn't mean Winter Chill wouldn't be angry with her.

"You called for me teacher?" She said, coming to a stop and bowing before the alicorn. Winter Chill had yet to take her eyes off of the statues' shattered remains. It was several moments before she turned and answered her student.

"Snow Drift, thank you for coming, I know it's late but I have something important I would like to discuss with you. Please, come stand next to me." Winter Chill said, gesturing with her wing for Snow Drift to approach.

Slowly, Snow Drift complied, stepping forward until she too was facing the broken statues. Her teacher didn't seem angry, but still she was having a hard time relaxing.

"I know what you've been researching lately, my student." Winter Chill said, watching Snow Drift out of the corner of her eye. The young unicorn tensed up and Winter Chill couldn't quite suppress a soft smile as Snow Drift's face was touched with pink.

"I'm sorry!" Snow Drift cried, immediately bowing before her teacher. She wasn't quite sure what she was apologizing for but it was clear that she had somehow upset Winter Chill by investigating something she shouldn't have. "I should have just left it alone. I was just so curious and you always seemed so upset when I asked about it so I didn't want to disturb you with it and—"

"Shh, there is nothing to be concerned with Snow Drift, you have done nothing wrong." Winter Chill said gently, placing her hoof on her student's shoulder, bidding her to rise. "I never said I was upset with you. As a matter of fact your research is timely. However, I am curious. What have you managed to find? Most of what you would be looking for was lost long ago."

Snow Drift slowly rose to her feet, her face still red, though now from embarrassment rather than shame. She had overreacted and assumed the worst. Of course her teacher wasn't mad at her! Why would she be? All she had been doing was a little harmless research into something that had happened hundreds of years ago. She couldn't help but let out a chuckle at her own foalishness before turning her attention back to the statue, trying to remember what she had been able to learn.

"Um, well, not really all that much honestly. I mean, it was only in the oldest records that I was able to find anything, and most of that was just legend." She said, scraping at the ground in frustration. She hated it when she failed to find something, and hated even more when she had to report on those failures. "All I was really able to piece together was that our country used to be a part of another, called Equestria, and that it was ruled by the Princesses of the Sun and Moon. It mentioned some kind of conflict between them, and you and your sisters, but I couldn't find anything

specific. I...I thought about asking you again but...every time I have before it seemed to upset you.”

Winter Chill nodded, a thoughtful look on her face. “Yes, most of what was written about the events that took place then was lost, and I must admit I have been...reluctant, to talk about it. It is a sensitive topic for me. However, things are happening now that might serve to right the wrongs that were made so long ago. As such, I feel it is time for me to tell you what happened.”

Snow Drift’s ears perked up. “Really?! You mean you’ll tell me?” She practically shouted, unable to contain her excitement.

Winter Chill nodded, her expression serious. “Tell me Snow Drift, what do you know about alicorns?”

Snow Drift blinked, the question catching her off guard. “Only what everypony knows really. Alicorns are exceptionally powerful magical ponies, growing larger than any regular pony and possessing both a horn and wings. They also are nearly immortal, living for thousands of years, if not longer, and are very resilient. I’ve never really studied alicorns before though, I’m sure there are loads of things I don’t know.”

“Well your answer is correct, although you are right to think that there is much you don’t know.” Winter Chill said. “In truth, no alicorn has ever been extensively studied. We never felt like submitting ourselves to the scrutiny of others. And there are so few of us. To the best of my knowledge, only six alicorns have ever existed, although I cannot be sure of that.”

“So the Princesses of the Sun and Moon really are alicorns? They do exist?” Snow Drift asked, her expression thoughtful.

“Indeed they do. They are the oldest of the alicorns, and the most powerful. Centuries ago my sisters and I ruled together with them, maintaining balance in the world.” Winter Chill said a little wistfully. “The Princesses, Celestia who ruled the sun and Luna, who governed the moon, were our closest friends. While they ruled over the sky we maintained the earth, changing and guiding the seasons in the same way they did the night and day.”

“So does that mean you aren’t related to these other alicorns like you are to your sisters?”

Winter Chill shook her head. “No, we are not related by blood, though I have no doubt that we share a connection. My sisters and I were born of the earth, and were destined to rule over the changing of its cycles. Spring Rain, Summer Growth, Autumn Gale, Winter Chill, thus were we named and each of us bore the responsibility for one quarter of the seasonal cycle. However, as our power is that of the earth the power of Celestia and Luna is that of the cosmos itself. They were born of the stars and thus Celestia governs the sun and the day while Luna does the same for the moon and the night.”

She smiled, remembering the times when they all ruled together. “For ages we ruled as equals, understanding the importance of the balance we held. We were happy, and the ponies we watched over were happy too. Back then, ponykind was still a simple species, nothing like the grand civilization we have today, but it was enough for us. Well, for most of us.”

“What happened?” Snow Drift asked, her concern evident.

“Things changed. After awhile, our subjects began to play favorites, looking down on the gifts they had been given. Luna was the victim of most of their scorn, while Celestia basked in their praise. Luna began to become...jealous, bitter even.” Winter Chill sighed, an expression of sorrow making its way onto her face. “I must admit, I was probably the first to notice the changes in Luna. She and I had long been close friends, and I felt some of her pain. Ponies have never appreciated the winter in the way they do the other seasons. They only see the death and not the beauty.”

Snow Drift opened her mouth to protest but Winter Chill raised a hoof to silence her.

“I know you understand the beauty of winter my loyal student, but you have lived in it your whole life. It is as much a part of you as your magic. But most ponies only see cold, famine, and darkness. So when Luna began to grow bitter about the ponies ignoring her night I sympathized. I understood what she felt but rather than help her I encouraged her bitterness and rage. I suppose I simply didn’t want to feel alone either, and it was comforting to know she understood.”

"I thought things would stay the way they were. But I underestimated Luna's bitterness and rage. Eventually she pushed everypony else away and let her feelings of jealousy consume her." Winter Chill hesitated, looking at her student's attentive eyes. "There is something you must understand about alicorn magic Snow Drift. At the heart of our power is balance. It is how we govern the changes in the world. However, within each of us is the capacity to break that balance, to destroy everything about ourselves in order to fully access our magic. When that happens, we become a new pony altogether, born of our own desires with no concern for anything else."

"Then Luna...she let her magic turn her into somepony else?"

Winter Chill nodded. "Yes. She ceased to be Luna and became Nightmare Moon, a pony determined to bring everlasting night to Equestria, to force everypony to accept her and her night. At the time, I was shocked. I couldn't believe my sweet friend had turned into something so fierce and cruel. But my sisters and I thought she could be saved. We thought that with our power, and Celestia's, we would be able to turn her back."

Winter Chill's expression darkened and she growled, and she stomped on the ground causing shards of ice to clatter on the floor. Snow Drift let out a startled cry and took a step back. "But we were betrayed! Celestia told us she wanted nothing more than to free Luna from her anger, but when the time came to confront Nightmare Moon, Celestia used the most powerful magic in existence, the Elements of Harmony, not to save her sister, but to banish her to the moon!"

Snow Drift gulped. It was frightening to see her teacher this angry. The temperature in the room had dropped and the snow in the corners had begun to swirl, creating small vortexes. Still, she thought she could understand her teacher's anger to some degree. She remembered reading that part in the book she found, but it seemed hard to believe that anypony could do such a thing to their sister, no matter how misguided she might be.

"It was then that I realized that Celestia had always meant for that to be the outcome. She just wanted Luna out of the way so that she could take control of both the sun and the moon, and become the supreme ruler of

Equestria's sky. We knew that it was only a matter of time before Celestia turned her greed to our domain as well, so my sister's and I decided to split the kingdom. We would let Celestia rule her lands if she would leave us be."

The snow in the room calmed somewhat and Snow Drift decided to venture a question. "So...is that why Equestria and Equiiria are separate now? When you and your sisters decided to rule separately from Celestia?"

"Unfortunately, it wasn't that simple." Winter Chill sighed. "Celestia was unwilling to hear us out. She said she wanted to avoid any more drastic changes in the leadership. She said she didn't want to put any more stress on our subjects than necessary." She let out a humorless laugh. "Nothing more than another attempt to grab power. In the end, words were not enough, and we came to blows. We fought her, all of us except Spring Rain. She was always so gentle...but we were no match against her, not with the power of the sun and the moon behind her."

"What happened?" Snow Drift asked, her concern for her teacher greater than her fear.

"I...I would have died." Winter Chill whispered after a moment of silence. "I don't think even Celestia knew how powerful she had become. But Spring knew. She could feel it somehow. We fought for days, weeks even. But in the end I was the only one of my sisters left standing and Celestia decided to put a stop to our fight. I could tell as soon as she launched the attack. There was too much magic behind it for me to survive, and I was too injured to get out of the way in time. But Spring...she...shielded me. It took all of her magic, but I was left unscathed. However, the exertion was too much for her. She died."

Snow Drift couldn't help but gasp. Winter Chill had never spoken about Spring Rain to her before. She had always wondered why, but now she knew. "I'm so sorry teacher..."

"Stop."

Snow Drift stopped, her breath caught in her throat. It was several moments before Winter Chill continued.

“When Spring died the battle ended. None of us, not even Celestia, had the heart to keep going after that. The country was separated, and we retreated to the western lands and founded Equiria. It was supposed to be our paradise, but without Spring Rain it was never to be. The cycle of the seasons became locked with me, unable to progress to the next with nopony to guide its progress.”

Both ponies were silent for a long time, staring at the shattered statues of Celestia and Luna. Finally, Snow Drift broke the silence.

“But...if Celestia was able to take control of the moon in Luna’s absence then...then why couldn’t you or one of your sisters do the same with the seasons?”

“We tried, once.” Winter Chill replied, her voice bitter. “Remember that alicorn magic is balance. Celestia was able to govern the wheel of sun and moon because she took control of the entire cycle. With the seasons, only one of us was gone. But three ponies cannot achieve balance in a system with four parts. Autumn Gale tried. We thought that since she was Spring’s counterpart, she would be able to do it but...she couldn’t. She held both seasons for but a moment and the strain of the broken balance drove her mad. She hasn’t been the same since then.”

Snow Drift stood in silence. She had been so eager to hear this story, but now that she had she felt drained. She couldn’t imagine how much her teacher had been through. She felt a sudden anger at Celestia and Luna. How could they put her beloved teacher through so much? It was unthinkable.

“Why did you tell me this?” Snow Drift asked. “Why did you think I deserved to know?”

“Well, you are my most precious and loyal student, I knew I could trust you.” Winter Chill said, giving her a small smile. “But there is more to it than that. Celestia took my sister from me. It’s her fault Spring is dead, and it’s her fault Autumn Gale lost her mind. She broke the balance of our world. But now, the time has come when that balance can be restored, at Celestia’s cost. She will pay for what happened, and in doing so the balance will be restored.”

She turned away from the statues, looking Snow Drift in the eyes. "But I can't do it without you."

Snow Drift blinked. "Me? What can I do?"

"Luna has returned. After one thousand years of imprisonment she is back and with her return Celestia will be forced to acknowledge the mistakes she has made. However, if she does not other steps will need to be taken. I am sending you to Equestria."

Snow Drift gasped again, almost falling over. "To Equestria!? Really!? Why? What good would I be all the way out there?"

"You will be taking up residency in a town called Ponyville. Celestia's own student lives there. I want you to get to know her, learn what you can about both her and the Princesses. I will tell you more when it becomes necessary. However, for now I ask that you accept my instructions and act with the same loyalty you have always shown me."

Snow Drift could hardly believe her ears. Not an hour ago she was sitting comfortably in the library and now she was being sent on what sounded like an espionage mission.

"Of course teacher." She said, bowing once she had caught her breath. "I am honored that you have enough faith in me to entrust me with this task."

"Of course, my loyal student. This is something only you can do for me."

Chapter 4

Princess Celestia sat upon her throne, listening halfheartedly as a representative of the Farmer Pony Union of Equestria presented a petition by its members requesting that the length of the day be increased in the months of August and September. The argument was that the harvest season was far too short already, and the economic strain placed on farmers who were forced to hire additional help in order to get the job done in the limited amount of daylight was harmful not only to the farmers themselves, but also to the rest of Equestria, whose ever-growing population depended on the food stores provided for the winter months. It was an old argument, and one that Celestia had heard every summer for decades.

She sometimes wondered if the ponies that came to her with these requests really believed she would grant them, or if they simply wanted to be seen by their peers as having tried. It was frustrating though, to have to say no, knowing that they wouldn't understand the reason why. Being seen as a goddess did have its disadvantages after all, and it was sometimes hard to explain to her subjects that there were some things even she couldn't do, and even some things that she *could* do, but wouldn't.

Being an alicorn did not simply mean being a deity with incredible power, it also entailed bearing the responsibility of the system she was connected to. She could extend the length of the day if she wished, Nightmare Moon had proven that less than a year ago, but the fact remained that there was a reason that the night and day were balanced as they were. A pull in one direction required an equal pull in the other at some point. That was part of the reason Nightmare Moon's goal of eternal night was so dangerous; eventually it would unbalance the cycle of the sun and moon to the point that the whole thing would collapse. She would be surprised if anypony had noticed it, but for the last year the days had been five minutes longer in order to make up for the disturbance on last year's Summer Sun Celebration.

She blinked for a moment, realizing that the earth pony that had been speaking, as well as the dozen or so other ponies present, were all looking

at her expectantly. It seemed that while she had been letting her mind wander, the representative had finished speaking and was awaiting a response.

Celestia coughed, holding a hoof to her mouth to hide her embarrassment. "Yes, well. Thank you for taking the time to bring your request to my attention, but I'm afraid I cannot grant it. I understand that it is an inconvenience for you but you will simply have to make do. The balance of night and day is delicate and cannot be disturbed lightly. I ask that you trust my judgment on this matter and leave it at that."

The pony, a forest green mare, with a potato cutie mark and chocolate colored mane opened her mouth as though to argue but quickly closed it, bowing deeply before the throne. "Thank you, your Majesty." She said, sounding disappointed. "I will relay your answer back to the Union. I'm sure everypony will understand."

After she had departed, Celestia let out a sigh. "Please tell me that's the last one for the day Leary." She said, rubbing her temples with her hooves.

Her assistant, Leary Stargazer, gave her an apologetic look, his horn glowing as he flipped through the pages of his itinerary. "Sorry Princess, but it looks like you still have a couple meetings scheduled for this afternoon. More of the same it looks like, a couple requests for government aid in some of the frontier towns, and a request to reduce the taxes in New Hoovesworth."

"Not again." Celestia said, exasperated. "I've told them a thousand times, tax rates are standard for all of Equestria and are managed by the treasury. It's not my place to simply lower their taxes because they ask nicely."

Normally she was eager to hear from her subjects but today her heart simply wasn't in it. It didn't help that every request she had received today had been the equivalent of whining in a dignified manner. Of course, she doubted that even if their problems were serious she would have been able to muster much enthusiasm. Ever since Luna had run away from her in the hallway the week before, she had been trying to find a time to meet with her, but every time she did Luna was either sleeping or busy. She was beginning to suspect Luna was intentionally avoiding her.

*“That’s because she is, you foal.” Nightmare Moon’s voice sneered.
“You’ve tried so hard to get her back and now all she wants to do is get away from you, ha! It’s almost too funny.”*

Celestia narrowed her eyes, trying to ignore the voice. It had been getting worse over the last few days. She was beginning to wonder whether it was really all in her head or not, having gone so far as to check the vaults below the castle where she stored some of the more dangerous magical artifacts she had acquired over the centuries. After Nightmare Moon’s defeat she had had her armor brought there and sealed by her best unicorn mages. She had been careful not to handle them herself. Though not exactly the containers of Nightmare Moon’s power, they were nonetheless powerful and dark magical objects that held traces of Nightmare Moon’s magic. If she did indeed return, Celestia had little doubt the magic present in her armor would respond, trying to return to its master.

But of course there were no signs of anything of the like when she had checked the armor. There was no sign that anything out of the ordinary was happening at all, except for the voice in her head.

“But what did you expect? I’ve told you over and over again what the problem is but you have done nothing to change it. Every day Luna’s pain grows, and every day you try to soothe her with empty words and emptier actions. I’m honestly surprised it’s taken this long for her to start avoiding you. It must be so hard on her, the poor thing. Maybe I should...lend her a hoof?”

Celestia could almost hear the grin in those words, and she couldn’t keep the snarl of her face.

“Um...Princess?”

Celestia started, shaking her head to dissipate the cold fog that had clouded her mind. Leary was looking at her, concern written on his face.

“Are...are you alright your Majesty?”

Celestia sighed, standing from her throne. “Yes. Yes I am fine Leary, I apologize for worrying you. I’m afraid I’m not myself today.” She said wearily. “I suppose I’m just worried about Luna. She’s been avoiding me

and I'm afraid I don't know how to approach her without making things worse."

Leary nodded in understanding. "Ah, well I'm sure she'll come around. It's been almost a year but I admit sometimes I forget just how long she was away. It must be hard on her, everything must be so different from what she remembers. But I'm sure she just needs some more time to adjust Princess. Once she does she'll be the little sister you've told me so much about."

"I hope you're right Leary." Celestia said with a small smile. "I miss her, even though she's right here I miss her. I just wish I could let her know how sorry I am."

"Well I'm sure when she's ready to hear you out, she'll listen." He said, giving Celestia a reassuring smile.

"There are a few more meetings scheduled for the afternoon." He said, rechecking his list. "But it's nothing pressing, as you already noted. Simple bureaucratic nonsense really. If you'd like I could handle these meetings for you. To be totally honest Princess you don't look well today. I'd recommend getting some rest before evening."

"Yes, I think that sounds like a good idea Leary, and you're right." Celestia said, nodding. "I'm afraid my mind is elsewhere today. I'll leave these matters to you, my trusted assistant." Giving him another smile, she trotted out of the throne room and into the halls of Canterlot castle.

She briefly considered looking for Luna, but thought better of it. She would most likely still be asleep, it was only mid-afternoon, and Celestia didn't want to wake her. Even if she was awake, she didn't feel confident enough to approach her after her little chat with Nightmare Moon.

'Luna...I'm so sorry my dear sister.' She thought as she made her way to her chambers. 'I only wish I knew how to help you now.'

In the back of her mind, Nightmare Moon laughed.

“I tell ya Snow,” A teal pegasus said, wiping sweat from her brow as she took a seat next to a white unicorn. “This forest is really freaky.” Snow Drift nodded in agreement, trying to ignore the distant cries of unidentifiable animals. It had been days since they had left the castle, and initially they had made good time. The sleds they had taken allowed for quick movement over the frozen landscape, even through the dead forest. However, after a couple days of swift travel they had made it to the border of their country, and the landscape began to change.

Little by little the snow had begun to disappear and the air had begun to warm up. The whole company had stopped to gape when they reached the border of the forest they were now travelling through. Snow had never seen anything like it before except in old storybooks. The trees were alive, covered in foliage and casting a dark shadow over everything below. There were other plants too, things she couldn't identify, and the breadth of life that flourished was astounding. There were, of course, animals that inhabited the forests back home, but in nowhere near the numbers that seemed to live in this place. It was astounding.

A slight buzzing sound and a stinging sensation caused Snow to slap her hoof to her cheek. It certainly wasn't without its annoyances though. She would not be sad to get away from these flying, buzzing, stinging creatures.

Still, despite all of the physical differences between this place and her home, the clearest indication that they were no longer in Equirria was the temperature. It was hot. Really hot. Snow was grimy and covered in sweat, a condition shared by Aurora and the other members of the Guard. The only one who didn't seem affected was the strange old earth pony that had accompanied them, Dead Leaves.

To ponies that had lived their entire lives in the freezing cold, the temperature difference was taking a great deal of getting used to, and more than the thick brush of the terrain, it was this that had caused them to stop early for the night. Pushing forward was becoming too much of a hassle and while Snow would have liked to keep a better pace, she was relieved to be able to rest. If she had to keep going she was afraid her cutie mark would melt right off her flank.

The sun was beginning to dip below the tree line, turning the hazy sky an eerie orange. Snow watched it as it disappeared behind the twisted trees of

the Everfree forest. She wondered if, right at this moment, the Princess of the Sun was guiding it. Was she somewhere in this strange new land, guiding the sun across the sky? It was a strange thought.

A shuffling at her side pulled her out of her reverie, and she turned as Aurora spread out a map on the ground in front of her. The Guard members were setting up camp a short distance away per Aurora's orders. Looking over, she noticed that some of them looked decidedly less than amused at having to take orders from a rookie. But no one ever questioned Lady Winter Chill's orders, even this far from home.

Snow Drift had to admit she had been surprised to find out that this had been the assignment her friend had been so excited about. Shortly after her meeting with Lady Winter Chill she had returned to her room to pack, only to be tackled by the teal pegasus.

"Can you believe it Snow!?" She had practically shouted, her whole body vibrating with excitement. "I was made a Captain! And I have to protect you on a journey into the unknown, it's gonna be just like an adventure story! I can't wait!"

Snow Drift couldn't help but giggle at the memory. Aurora was certainly capable of acting professional when the situation called for it, but when she was excited about something she reverted to her normal foalish demeanor. Not that Snow minded, she thought it was cute. Besides, Aurora had always been a fun-loving pegasus, and Snow would have hated to see her become as stuffy as some of the other members of the Royal Guard.

Leaning over, she took a look at what Aurora was doing. She had spread the map out on the ground, tracing their course from Lady Winter's castle in Equiiria, across the border into the forest, and towards Ponyville. The farther the map got from the castle the fewer the details that were available. It appeared that this forest had never really been explored, as no landmarks were indicated aside from the sketches that Aurora had added herself in an attempt to give them a sense of what path they had taken. Snow had been impressed with the level of foresight her friend had put into this assignment. As far as Snow Drift was concerned, she was proving herself to be a fine leader.

“So do you know where we are?” She said, watching Aurora plot different courses through the unmapped forest.

“Well...more or less I guess.” Aurora said, a frown of concentration on her face. “I mean, it’s not like we have much to go by here. This map isn’t really all that useful once you get out of Equiiria. I guess not many ponies have come out this way for a while.” She shrugged, rolling up the map and putting it away in her saddlebag. “I sent Lieutenant Weatherlight on ahead awhile ago, but she hasn’t come back yet and until she does I can’t really plot a course. Though I can’t imagine we’re far. If I’ve read this map right, and there’s a good chance I haven’t, but if I have then we should be able to reach the edge of this place sometime tomorrow. It all depends on Weatherlight’s report though. I just hope we’re not lost, I’d really hate to screw up my first major assignment, especially with you here.”

Snow Drift smiled and opened her mouth to say something but was interrupted by the arrival of one of the soldier ponies.

“Captain, we’ve finished setting up camp. I’ll be taking first watch with Firestarter after dinner.”

Snow couldn’t help but frown at the stallion’s words. They were spoken professionally enough, but they lacked the respect she had heard in the voices of the members of the Guard addressing their superiors back at the castle.

Aurora nodded, seeming either to not notice or ignore the other pony’s disrespectful tone. “Thank you, Lieutenant Fleethoof.” She said. “The sun is setting fast so you and the others get some food in you and then get to bed. We need to be up bright and early tomorrow if we’re going to make it to Ponyville on schedule.” She looked around, seeming to notice something for the first time. “Hold on...damn it! Where’s that creeper Dead Leaves gone off too?”

“As far as I know he was simply going for a walk.” Fleethoof said with a shrug. “Said something about wanting to see the trees in the twilight. Didn’t seem worth the trouble to say no so we let him wander off. If you ask me the longer he’s out there the better. That pony gives me the creeps.”

Aurora growled in frustration, stamping a hoof into the ground. "That's exactly why we were supposed to be keeping an eye on him in the first place! Lady Winter Chill doesn't trust him, so we're supposed to make sure he doesn't do anything suspicious. I thought I had made that clear before we left Fleethoof."

Aurora looked at the sky, which had turned from orange to a dark purple, the first stars beginning to poke out. "Well it's too late to send anyone out looking for him now, they'll only get lost in the dark. We'll just have to hope he turns up at some point. If not, well...we still have a job to do and I'm sure he can take care of himself." She threw an angry glare at Fleethoof, who just shrugged in response, and walked back to the fire that had been set up by the camp.

Aurora let out an angry growl, kicking the dirt. Snow Drift bit her lip, watching the other ponies by the fire. She knew that some of them didn't like taking orders from Aurora...but that had been just plain rude.

"They don't respect me." Aurora said with a sigh. "I suppose I can't blame them really, they've all been in the Royal Guard a lot longer than I have, and having to follow a rookie's orders is probably a blow to their pride. But they don't have to be so thickheaded about it, not to mention unprofessional. They all know we're not supposed to let Dead Leaves out of our sight. They did it on purpose to make me look bad and that creep is off doing who knows what."

"They probably just need time." Snow said, placing a reassuring hoof on her friends shoulder. "I'm sure once they see how great of a leader you can be they'll fall in line behind you. I know I would."

Aurora smiled, some of the worry leaving her face. "Thanks Snow, you always know how to cheer me up. Now, how about some grub? I'm famished!"

"Sure. I'm starving too, all this walking is doing a number on me. I'm starting to think I should have exercised more back at the castle." Snow said, giggling as Aurora's stomach rumbled. Their attention was drawn by a rustling in the bushes. After a moment, a pale pink pegasus with a frosty blue-white mane, a wisp of cloud on her

flank and clad in the armor of Winter Chill's Royal Guard emerged, looking tired and dirty.

"Lieutenant Weatherlight, reporting back from scouting duty Captain." She said, a tired smile on her face.

Aurora grinned back at the mare. Weatherlight had joined the Guard only shortly before Aurora had, and as such was the second youngest member of the escort, and the one she got along with the best. She also seemed to be the only one of the group, other than Snow Drift, that had any confidence in Aurora's ability to lead.

"Hey Weatherlight, anything interesting out there? I hope we're getting close, I'd hate to think I've been reading this map wrong and leading us around in circles out here."

"Nope! Good news actually." she said, taking a seat next to Snow Drift and Aurora. "I cut through the forest for about ten miles, heading east, until I came to another clearing like this one. I surveyed the area from the sky and it looks like Ponyville is just through this last batch of forest. Looks like there's some kind of farm or something once you get out of the woods, and then just past that is the town. There's nothing too strenuous, although we might have to work through a bog and over a couple ravines. Should be able to get there sometime tomorrow evening though if all goes well."

"Good." Aurora said, letting out a sigh of relief. "Glad to hear we've been heading the right way. I would have hated to have led us all into the middle of this forest with no way out."

"Naw Aurora you wouldn't do that." Weatherlight said with a smile. "I knew you'd get us there lickity split!"

Aurora chuckled. "Thanks for the vote of confidence Weatherlight. I'm glad that at least you two appreciate all my hard work, even if those guys over there don't." She said, jerking her head in the direction of the fire.

"Oh stop being so dramatic." Snow Drift said with a grin. "I already told you they'll come around eventually. You're a Captain now, you're supposed to be tough and rugged. So stop being such a big baby about it and let's go eat dinner."

“Hey now.” Aurora said. “You may be Lady Winter Chill’s student, but that doesn’t mean I won’t lock you up for insubordination!”

Snow Drift rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “You’re hopeless you know that? Come on,” She said, pushing the pegasus towards the fire with her head. “Food food food!”

The three sat down by the fire, digging into their provisions. As they did, the last rays of the sun died out, leaving the sky black save for the pale glow of the moon and stars.

Snow Drift woke to the sounds of the forest at night. The buzzing of insects, frogs and toads croaking, and the distant cries of other nocturnal creatures. She groaned, rolling over in the tent she shared with Aurora. Her pegasus friend was sprawled out against the opposite end of the tent, her hooves in the air and her mane a mess. The only light in the tent was the pale silver light of the moon.

Initially upon leaving the cold climate of Equiria they had tried sleeping without the tents, they were all so hot and uncomfortable inside them that it seemed better not to use them at all. However, after one night of trying to sleep in the open they had all ended up swarmed by small biting insects. After that, they decided to stick with the tents. Being a little hot was better than being eaten alive while they slept after all.

She lay there for what felt like ages, watching Aurora twitch and mumble in her sleep. She didn’t want to admit it, but now that they were almost to Ponyville she was a little nervous. What would the ponies there be like? How did they live? What would a pony society that didn’t evolve in a world of snow and ice even look like? Her mind was full of these thoughts as she opened the tent flap and walked out into the night air. It was cooler than during the day, but it was still uncomfortably sticky. Her horn glowed briefly and the moisture in the air condensed on her coat, freezing into tiny ice crystals. Snow Drift let out a contented sigh, her breath visible in the cold air that surrounded her. ‘Much better.’ She thought.

Snow took a look around the campsite, noticing that the fire was little more than embers and the two ponies on watch had fallen asleep beside it. She shook her head. She’d have to let Aurora know her soldiers were sleeping

on the job in the morning. Looking up at the moon, she was seized by a sense of awe similar to what she had felt earlier, when she had watched the sun go down. It was so bizarre to think there was somepony out there guiding it, leading it in its slow path across the night sky. Winter Chill had once told her that it was not only the duty of an alicorn to guide their cycle, but also to give it life, to make it special. Looking up at the vastness of the night sky, the pale moon with its scarred face and the countless stars glimmering in the void, she wondered just how much of it the Princess of the Moon had created herself.

It didn't seem as though Dead Leaves had ever returned from his walk. Of all of them, he was the only one that slept outside. The insects didn't seem to bother him, and honestly Snow Drift didn't blame them for staying away. He gave her chills, which was quite a feat given her affinity for the cold. She had caught him looking at her several times during their trip, always with that same half-smile, the same pale shine in his eyes. There was something so very unsettling about him, something she could never quite put her hoof on but was just under the surface. Whenever he was nearby she could feel an overwhelming sense of wrongness, that there was something that didn't belong and it unnerved her.

She spent a while longer watching the moon, thin wisps of cloud passing over it and casting a halo of silver light over the camp. Still, sleep was no nearer than when she had woken up. Just as she was contemplating waking the guards so she'd have somepony to talk to she heard a rustling in the bushes. She tensed, adrenaline pumping into her veins at the sudden disturbance. Her horn began to glow and she turned towards the forest, watching carefully for whatever might have made the noise.

Another rustle and a figure stepped out of the brush. She could barely make out what it was in the darkness, but as it approached she realized it was a pony.

"Who's there?" She asked, her voice trembling as she tensed up, preparing to act should the need arise.

"Oh my." A raspy voice chuckled. "Such hostility. I hope I didn't frighten you, young frostling."

Snow Drift let out an aggravated sigh. "Oh. It's you." She said, relaxing a bit as Dead Leaves entered the clearing. In her moment of fear she had forgotten he could arrive back at any moment. She was relieved that she hadn't had to face down some sort of monster, but honestly she didn't think the disturbing earth pony was much better. She certainly wouldn't sleep any better with him around. "And just where did you get off to? Aurora was beginning to consider sending someone to look for you. I told her not to bother."

Dead Leaves grinned at that, the moonlight glinting off his yellow teeth. "I suppose I'll take that as meaning you had the utmost confidence in my abilities. I thank you for the compliment." He said, ignoring Snow Drift's aggravated look. "As to your question, I have merely been admiring the forest. This place is quite remarkable really. So much life, and so much death. Every living thing fighting to ensure its own survival. Eat or be eaten, kill or be killed, the natural world at its purest and most unrestrained. Truly beautiful."

Snow Drift shivered. She was certain of it now, there was something very wrong with that pony. She would have to let Winter Chill know just how unstable she suspected Dead Leaves really was. Snow Drift had no idea what his role was supposed to be, but she was sure that if they weren't careful, he could end up being more of a danger than an asset.

"What a characteristically morbid outlook. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised." She said, eyeing his saddle bags. They looked quite a bit heavier than they had when she had seen him wear them earlier in their journey. "And I suppose you brought those along for souvenirs?"

"Oh these old things?" Dead Leaves said, patting one of the bags. "You never know what you'll find in a place like this, especially at night. I wouldn't want to miss the opportunity to collect some rare and valuable specimens. Surely a mare of such academic achievement as yourself can understand my...curiosity."

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't make that comparison." Snow said, her face twisted in disgust. "I don't want to know what would garner the curiosity of a pony like you."

Dead Leaves laughed softly, stepping closer to Snow Drift. "So much like you're teacher aren't you my young unicorn? It seems you've learned more than just magic from your benevolent leader."

Snow Drift wanted to back away, but found she was rooted to the spot. As he approached she nearly gagged, having to fight to keep from covering her nose. The sickly sweet smell of decay coming off of the earth pony was almost overwhelming. She briefly wondered how she could have missed it before now. She hadn't spent much time in his company, but there was no way she wouldn't have noticed such an overpowering odor.

"You're both such strong and confident ponies." He said, stopping mere inches in front of her. "She doesn't think much of me, but she could hardly refuse to let me go on this little trip, not when her dear sister places such trust in me." He paused, running a hoof through Snow Drift's mane, causing her to let out a yelp and stumble back.

Dead Leaves chuckled as Snow Drift backed away. "You share her beauty as well, but you have so much more vitality, the vitality of youth." He whispered, taking another step towards her. Snow Drift's eyes were wide with fear, her mouth open as she tried to find a reply. Finally, her body seemed to become hers again, and she leapt to her hooves, dashing off into the forest.

Dead Leaves watched her flee, an amused twinkle in his eye. It might have been...ill-advised, to push her so far, but he couldn't help himself. There was just something so irresistible about a frightened young mare. He retreated to a corner of the campsite and lay down, still chuckling to himself.

Snow Drift panted, leaning heavily against the gnarled trunk of the tree she had crashed into after running blindly through the forest. She tenderly touched a hoof to the side of her face, wincing as it made contact with a newly formed bruise.

"Ooh, I'm not looking forward to trying to explain this to Aurora." She groaned, taking a moment to get her bearings before surveying her surroundings. Now that she was away from Dead Leaves she no longer felt the intense sense of panic she had when he had touched her and she felt

foalish for having fled in the first place. As unpleasant a pony as he was, that didn't mean that running off into the woods had been an appropriate reaction, especially in the middle of the night.

Here among the trees, the canopy of leaves was thick enough that trying to find her way by moonlight wasn't going to be an option. She could barely see her hoof in front of her face. Concentrating, her horn lit up, casting a hollow blue light over her surroundings. Her face fell, and she felt a new kind of panic beginning to well up within her. She was lost, and had no idea which way she had come from.

"Aurora!" She called, her voice sounding tiny to her ears in the inky blackness just beyond her horn's light. "Can you hear me?! Weatherlight, anyone! I'm lost!"

She waited for what felt like hours, but was only answered by the soft chirping of insects, and her own heartbeat as it pounded in her ears. She could taste the bittersweet taste of fear in the back of her throat, and she began to seriously consider her situation. If she was really lost in the forest...then there was little chance of Aurora or any of the guards finding her. Her only hope was to head east and hope she hit Ponyville.

She began walking, keeping her eyes trained above her, looking for a break in the canopy. If she could get a clear view of the sky, then she could figure out which direction to go. However, the trees were not forgiving, and the foliage only seemed to get thicker the further she walked.

After a few hours she was beginning to worry that she was heading deeper into the forest rather than out of it when a faint glow in the distance, not unlike the light cast by a unicorn's horn, caught her attention. As she got closer, the light grew until she was almost positive she had stumbled upon another unicorn. 'Thank goodness!' She thought, relief washing over her like a cool breeze. 'That must mean Ponyville is nearby!'

"Excuse me!" She called out, struggling to make her way through the thick brush, ignoring the scrapes being left by some of the thornier bushes. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm lost! I got separated from my friends, and I can't find them! Are you from Ponyville? Can you show me how to get there? Please, I don't know where to go."

She broke through the bushes and saw the glow moving away through the trees. "Wait! Please I need your help!"

Rushing after the light she crashed through bushes and over streams. Several times she tripped on large tree roots, reaching out of the ground as if to snare her. No matter how hard she tried or how long she followed the light stayed the same distance away, always just far enough away that she couldn't identify who or what she was following.

Finally, the light stopped and Snow Drift paused, panting. Her coat was a mess, streaked with mud, sap, and blood from her various scrapes and scratches. She was exhausted, and didn't know if she could follow anymore.

"Please...stop running." She panted. "I just...need to get out...of this forest."

She was startled by the soft sound of foalish giggling. *'Silly pony shouldn't be running around the forest at night. Now pony is lost!'* A voice seemed to whisper in her ear, causing her to jump in fright. Too late she noticed she was standing on the edge of a ravine. She cried out as the ground beneath her hooves crumbled. Another giggle and the light vanished. Snow scrambled to try to regain her footing but the ground gave out, sending her tumbling with a scream into the ravine.

Chapter 5

Snow Drift woke slowly, her whole body aching terribly. She tried to open her eyes but one of them was swollen shut, and the other opened only after a concerted effort on her part. She reached a hoof to it and winced, the skin puffy and raw. Carefully, she touched her hoof to her other eye, massaging it lightly to clear the blurriness. Her head throbbed and she could feel the stinging air probing at several small cuts and larger gashes.

She was having a hard time focusing her thoughts, and her vision was still blurry but after a moment she realized that wherever she was it was certainly not dead at the bottom of a gorge. Obviously, she had managed to survive the fall, and it seemed like somepony had found her. Shifting slightly, she realized for the first time that she was lying in a bed, and that somepony had taken the time to bandage some of her more painful areas. She blinked her good eye, willing it to focus on her dimly lit surroundings. She was inside at least, she could tell that. The room she was in was small, no larger than her bedroom back at the castle, and lit only by the soft glow of a fire that was burning somewhere nearby.

Slowly, she sat up. It was a painful process, and she was out of breath by the time she had managed to sit upright. Her vision swam at the sudden shift and she whimpered, shutting her eyes in an attempt to stop the room from spinning. After a moment, the spinning sensation went away and she opened her eyes, looking around to get a better sense of her surroundings. The fire burned brightly in the center of the room underneath a kettle that was being used to cook what smelled like soup. The walls were decorated with bizarre masks, the likes of which Snow had never seen before, and there were shelves holding bottles of all sizes and colors. There were windows but no light, which meant she had either been unconscious for a very long time, or it was still night.

There was no sign of her savior, though Snow doubted that she had been alone long. Most ponies wouldn't be comfortable leaving a stranger alone in their home, not even an injured one. On top of that, it would be dangerous to leave a fire burning unattended for very long. Looking around, Snow noticed for the first time the state that much of the room was in. While some

of the shelves were neat and orderly, others were in disarray, and the floor was littered with books and broken bottles. Whoever lived here was either very messy or had been in a big hurry to find something.

Snow Drift briefly considered trying to get up, but the throbbing in her head dissuaded her. She hoped she hadn't been unconscious too long. Aurora would probably be hysterical if she had. At the thought of her friend a cold lump formed in Snow's stomach. She was going to be so worried. Not to mention the fact that it had been Aurora's job to protect her. She would blame herself, regardless of the fact that it had been Snow's fault for running off in the first place. Of course, she wouldn't have done that if it wasn't for that freak Dead Leaves. She growled, her anger returning as she remembered their earlier conversation. Who did he think he was anyway, treating her like that? She was going to let him have it the next time she saw him, advisor to one of the sisters or no.

She was broken out of her thoughts by the sound of the door opening. Standing in the doorway was a pair of ponies; a strange black and white striped pony wearing a cloak, and a purple mare with a pink striped mane.

"Zecora, what happened to your house? It's a disa—oh! Zecora look! She's awake!"

The purple pony rushed over to the bed, laying her hoof on Snow's shoulder and easing her back onto the bed. "You need to lie down, Zecora told me she found you at the bottom of a ravine and you don't look like you're in any condition to be up and about right now." She checked Snow's bandages, her brow furrowing as she examined some of her nastier looking wounds.

"She's in worse condition than I thought," she said, digging around in her saddlebags, "I'm flattered you came to me Zecora but she really needs a doctor. I don't have any medical training. Her injuries don't look life threatening, but they need better attention than we can give them here. These wounds could get infected if they aren't closed soon. We need to get her to Ponyville as soon as it's light out, I don't want to try to move her through the forest in the dark. Why didn't you try to get Nurse Redheart to come? She knows a lot more about medicine than I do."

“To many I am still something to fear, most simply flee when I draw near. At this hour a doctor would be hard to find so I rely on you, a pony most kind,” Zecora said, checking the pot before joining the purple pony at the side of the bed.

She was certainly unusual, and unlike any pony Snow had ever seen before. Could she be from outside of Equestria as well? It would make sense, but then again Snow had never seen any ponies from Equestria, save for the purple mare next to her. Suddenly, her brain caught up to the conversation.

“W-wait.” Her voice was shaky and she felt weak as she tried to speak. “You’re from Ponyville? Is it...is it far from here?”

“Yes I’m from Ponyville. Zecora found you and brought you here. This is her house in the Everfree Forest. It’s not far to Ponyville,” The purple pony said gently, “But if you’re not from Ponyville, then where are you from? And what were you doing wandering around the Everfree Forest this late at night?”

“Oh...I...,” Snow Drift bit her lip, glancing away from the mare. It wouldn’t be safe to tell her too much, but she was trying to help. Chances were good that even if she told them where she was from they wouldn’t know where it was or who ruled, and it was also likely that the strange pony, Zecora, had saved her life. From the look of some of her bandages, there was a very good chance she would have bled to death before being able to find help if she had been left in the forest. She owed them a little bit of honesty at least. “I was travelling with some friends. We come from a city on the far side of the forest and were trying to get to Ponyville through it but...I got separated last night. I was lost in the dark, in the middle of the forest. I thought I would never find my way out but then there was this light. I followed it for hours, thinking it was another pony but I...I don’t know what it was. It tricked me, led me to the edge of that cliff and then the light went out. I fell. I thought I was going to die.” Her voice shook as she recalled feeling of the crumbling ground under her hooves. The rise of panic and the sickly sweet taste of fear as she had plunged into the dark. She had never been more afraid in her life.

The purple mare came closer, wrapping a hoof around her shoulders. “It’s okay, you’ll be alright now, we just need to get those injuries looked at and

you'll be as good as new, I promise." She glanced over at Zecora. "Zecora, you know the forest better than anypony, even Fluttershy. What kind of creature would do that?"

"Ponies lost in the dark are not always spared, often they wander, alone and scared. Even in death they wander and wait, leading other ponies to a similar fate. The light that you saw was a trap for the lost, doom dressed as salvation at a terrible cost," Zecora replied gravely.

"I had no idea there were such things in the forest," Snow said with a shiver, "If I had I would have never left the campsite."

"Well lucky for you Zecora was able to find you," the purple pony said, "Speaking of which, what were you doing so far out in the Everfree Forest at this hour Zecora? And what happened to your house?"

Zecora huffed, an angry look crossing her face. Snow Drift thought it made her look almost frightening. "I was gathering the last ingredients for my stew, and arrived home just as the sun disappeared from view. I found my door open and my home in this mess, and immediately was in a state of distress. A book of terrible zebra rituals had been given to me to guard, but I found it stolen and my honor marred. I left to track the thief through the dark, but the trail was difficult, they left hardly a mark. After hours of searching I lost the trail, but then moment our new friend let out a wail. I found her battered and bruised so abandoned my chase. Her recovery now is the task we must face."

"Does...does she always talk like that?" Snow asked the purple pony in a whisper.

"Oh you get used to it after awhile. More importantly, Zecora why would someone want to steal your book? Was anything else missing?"

"Only the book was taken from here, but in the wrong hands the future I fear. The magics recorded should never be used. I fear with this thief they will be abused," Zecora replied.

Gently, Zecora removed the blanket, and Snow Drift gasped at the sight of herself. She was covered in cuts and bruises, and in places where she had been bandaged blood had begun to soak through. She turned her head

away, letting out a whimper. It hurt more now that she had seen the full extent of her injuries.

“Shh, it’s alright,” the purple pony soothed. “Try not to worry about it right now. Why don’t you tell us your name? We haven’t been properly introduced yet.”

Snow Drift took a deep breath and held it, letting herself calm down before exhaling a puff of frigid air. “Oh you’re right, sorry. My name is Snow Drift.” She turned to Zecora and offered the zebra a smile. “You’re Zecora right? Thank you so much for taking care of me. I owe you my life.”

“Think nothing of it my little friend, soon you will be on the mend,” Zecora said, returning the smile.

Snow Drift turned her attention back to the unicorn. “So what’s your name?”

“I’m Twilight, Twilight Sparkle. It’s a pleasure to meet you Snow Drift,” Twilight said, “I just wish it could have been under better circumstances.

Snow Drift froze, the cogs of her brain turning slowly as they attempted to process this new development. This unicorn, a pony she had met purely by coincidence, that was now helping to care for her in her injured state, was Twilight Sparkle. The very pony she had been sent to Ponyville to find in the first place and she stumbles across her in the most unlikely of circumstances. But could this kind, helpful pony really be the Twilight Sparkle she had been sent to spy on? Lady Winter Chill had not given her much information on Twilight outside of the fact that she was the personal student of the Princess of the Sun. But still, she was having a hard time imagining someone so caring and kind could be the student of someone as ruthless as Celestia.

“Snow Drift? Are you all right?” Twilight asked, concern written on her face.

“Yes...sorry, yes I’m fine. Just...thinking about my friends. I hope they’re doing okay.” The lie felt bitter in her mouth but she wasn’t sure what she should do. She had envisioned Twilight Sparkle as arrogant and cruel, the prodigy student of a power-hungry goddess. This Twilight couldn’t be further from what she had imagined. She would have to wait until she had recovered a little more before doing anything.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure they’re fine. Although I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re worried about you.” Zecora finished reapplying Snow’s bandages and Twilight covered her with the blanket. “We’ll head to Ponyville in the morning. Hopefully they’ll make it to town and be able to find you, but you’re in no condition to go searching the Everfree Forest. It will be light soon, but you should try to get some sleep before we need to leave.”

“Yes...you’re right,” Snow Drift whispered, giving in to her exhaustion. It felt odd to sleep with a potential enemy in the room, but if Twilight had wanted to hurt her, there was little she could have done in her condition. Besides that, she felt oddly...safe, in the care of the purple unicorn.

“I’ll just...sleep for a bit then.” She closed her eyes, forgetting for awhile the events of the night and the questions left unanswered.

“Damn it!”

It was just past dawn in the Everfree Forest, and Aurora was not happy. She had woken up with the sun, expecting to find Snow Drift sleeping beside her, but was greeted by an empty tent instead. This in itself was alarming. Snow Drift was many things, but an early riser was not one of them. Upon finding Snow Drift missing and the guards asleep by the dead fire she had nearly panicked, opting instead to wake the rest of their group with a combination of shouts and smacks. At the moment, the members of the Royal Guard were spread out in the Forest around the campsite, searching for any sign of Snow.

“How could I have missed this? Where did she go? Gaah!” Aurora kicked the fire pit, sending the coals scattering. “I bet this is your doing!”

Behind her, Dead Leaves sat on his haunches, Weatherlight standing careful guard over him. The normally cheery pegasus wearing a very serious expression that looked out of place on her foal-like face.

“Me? What could I have possibly done? Why, I’m just an old earth pony. I could never hope to overpower such a strong young unicorn as miss Snow Drift, especially not without waking the rest of the camp,” Dead Leaves said, looking far more amused with the situation than was appropriate.

Aurora growled, pushing her face forward until it was mere inches from his. "Don't give me that frail old pony crap. Lady Winter Chill doesn't trust you and if that's the case then there's a reason for it. She didn't want Snow Drift left alone with you, and now she's missing. You disappear, reappear in the middle of the night when nopony is watching, and in that same window of time Snow goes missing. That's too much coincidence for me to believe so you better start talking before I make you!"

"Oh my!" he chuckled, and Aurora recoiled as his rancid breath washed over her. "Such fierce devotion to your friend! But tell me Captain, you were sleeping in the same tent with young Snow Drift. So shouldn't you have done something to prevent all this?"

Aurora's cheeks burned red, "You...you...!" She let out a cry and before she realized what she was doing her hoof collided with the side of Dead Leaves' jaw, sending him to the ground. Weatherlight gasped and jumped back, her eyes wide.

Dead Leaves spit on the ground, his saliva pink with blood. He glared at Aurora, a flash of anger in his normally gleeful eyes. "Listen to me you little creeper. I don't know what you did, but I know you had something to do with this and if I find out Snow got hurt because of you you'll never make it home do you understand me?"

A silent moment passed between the three ponies before Dead Leaves got back to his hooves. "No need to get violent, Captain," he said, his customary grin back in place, "I would never harm Snow Drift. I'm sure she merely wandered off somewhere at night and got lost. I'm sure you'll find her soon enough."

Aurora regarded the earth pony, a dark look in her eyes. Every word he spoke was like the hiss of a venomous snake; chilling, and warning of danger. "Maybe. But I still think you had a hoof in this whether you hurt her or not. Let me make this very clear Dead Leaves. None. Of. Us. Trust. You. At all. So here's what's going to happen. Under the authority granted me by Lady Winter Chill, Goddess of the Frozen Kingdom, I'm placing you under arrest. You will be monitored at all times by either myself or another member of the Guard. If...*when* we find Snow Drift, if she confirms that you had nothing to do with her disappearance, you will be released. Is that understood?"

"You...you don't have that authority," Dead Leaves growled, his normal smile replaced with a frightening grimace. "I do not serve Winter Chill, I am here under the command of *my* mistress, Autumn Gale. And you? You're nothing but a greenhorn given the rank of Captain to satisfy your Lady's whim. You are nothing but a foal, and you will not interfere with my task."

Weatherlight jumped forward, her eyes fierce. "Hey! Don't talk about Aurora like that! She's twice the pony you are you--"

"That's enough, Lieutenant." Aurora stepped forward, looking Dead Leaves in the eye. "Maybe you're right and my promotion was a joke. But I *am* a Captain now, and Lady Winter Chill is the highest power in our country, higher even than your master. If you have a problem with my methods, then I suggest you take it up with Lady Winter Chill. I'll be eager to see just how much sympathy you get. Weatherlight, restrain him. I don't want him trying to run away again."

"Oh...of course Captain. Right away."

Dead Leaves glared at the pair as Weatherlight tied his hooves and muzzle, ensuring he could neither move nor speak. Aurora ignored him. She should have monitored him more closely. It had been a mistake not to search for him yesterday, though she doubted they could have found him. She had been excited by the prospect of being rid of the disgusting creature, but it was her responsibility to keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't do anything suspicious. And now, because of her carelessness, Snow Drift was missing. She could be hurt or worse somewhere in the forest and there was nothing she could do about it. Of course, she thought angrily, if her guards had been doing their job instead of sleeping, none of this would have happened in the first place. She intended to see to it that the pair of them were severely disciplined for their negligence.

She was broken out of her thoughts by the return of the search party. She flew over to greet them as soon as they were out of the forest.

"Fleethoof! Any luck?"

"I'm sorry Captain," he said with a sigh, his eyes downcast and the disrespect he had shown before gone, "But we were unable to determine where Snow Drift might have disappeared to. There was a trail leading

away from the camp, but we lost it after a mile or so. We searched the area for signs, but found nothing.”

“Damn it! Where could she have gone? She has to be around her somewhere, she has to!” Aurora began pacing, her heart pounding in her chest as she imagined all of the horrible things that could have happened to her friend.

“Captain, please try to calm down, you won’t be able to help her if you’re not thinking straight,” said Fleethoof.

Aurora’s head snapped up, her mouth open to retort and her eyes blazing. After a moment she let out a sigh, her anger evaporating. “You’re right Fleethoof. We need to be organized if we’re going to find her. Which direction did the trail lead before you lost it?”

“It looks like she was headed east, at least initially, there’s no telling where she went from there though, It’s really easy to get turned around in there. Firestarter got lost once while we were searching, and it’s light out now. I can’t imagine trying to find your way through there in the middle of the night,” he said with a shudder.

Aurora took a moment to think, a plan forming in her mind. “Weatherlight! Get over here we have things to discuss!”

“Yes Captain!” Weatherlight called, before taking flight and landing nimbly next to Aurora. “Any news on Snow Drift?”

“Unfortunately no. But Lieutenant Fleethoof has reported that there was a trail heading east, which is the direction you said Ponyville was in right?”

“Yeah, it’s not far. If you went in a straight line it wouldn’t take that long to get there, even going through the forest. A day at most.”

“Alright here’s what we’re going to do. Currently, there are six of us, plus that creep Dead Leaves. I’ve placed him under arrest at the moment for suspected involvement in Snow’s disappearance. We’re going to split into two groups. Weatherlight and I will head to Ponyville. Hopefully, Snow managed to make it there and we’ll be able to proceed as planned. If not, I’ll ask around and see if anyone has seen her. Worst case scenario maybe

they can help us search for her more thoroughly, the citizens of Ponyville probably know this forest a lot better than we do. Fleethoof, you and the others will search the forest surrounding the camp and guard Dead Leaves. I want someone here in case Snow comes back, and it will take more effort to search the forest than the town.”

“How will we know if you find her? Communication will be difficult between the two groups if we’re so far away,” Fleethoof pointed out.

“Good point. Weatherlight, how fast can you make the flight from here to Ponyville?”

“Ummm...lemme think,” Weatherlight said, tapping her chin, “I suppose I could probably do it in a couple of hours if I fly fast. I’m not sure exactly how far away Ponyville is though, so maybe a little longer.”

“Okay, you’ll be our link between the groups. Fleethoof, if there’s an emergency have the unicorns send up flares. We’ll be pretty far away so I can’t guarantee we’ll be able to see it but it’s better than nothing. Weatherlight will be keeping an eye in your direction when she’s not running messages. Go inform your team. I’m counting on you Lieutenant.”

“Yes Captain and...I’m sorry about how I spoke to you yesterday. It was an unacceptable and unprofessional way to address a superior officer,” he said, his eyes glued to his hooves, “I promise it won’t happen again. We’ll all be doing everything we can to find Snow Drift.”

“Thank you Lieutenant, I appreciate it,” Aurora said, “Now get the others ready to expand the search. Weatherlight and I are heading to Ponyville. Are you ready Weatherlight”

“Of course Captain!”

“Alright! Then lead the way!” And with that the pair took off, flying towards Ponyville.

Chapter 6

Snow Drift winced. The antiseptic the nurse was applying to her cheek stung as it disinfected her wound.

"I know it hurts dear but I need you to hold still," Nurse Redheart said. She was being as gentle as she could but honestly, a cut on the cheek was the least of the unicorn's problems, "I must say you are a very lucky pony. You could have very easily died or broken your back. It's a miracle you came away as intact as you did."

Twilight had, true to her word, woke Snow mere moments after dawn and the trio had left Zecora's hut to make the trek to Ponyville. Standing had been a struggle, and she had collapsed as soon as she had gotten out of bed. The ankle of her right forelimb was swollen and Snow worried it was broken. Twilight and Zecora had carried her into town, ignoring her protests and waving off her apologies. The clinic hadn't even opened by the time they had arrived but a bleary-eyed Nurse Redheart had been more than willing to see to her.

"Yeah, guess I am pretty lucky," Snow replied with a smile before twitching back from the cloth. She'd never really been hurt before, at least not like this, and the whole experience was not what she would have called pleasant. "It's a good thing Zecora found me or I'd probably be dead by now."

"She really is a good friend," Twilight said from her position behind Nurse Redheart, "I can't believe the first time I met her I let my friends convince me she was evil."

"Well it's not terribly surprising. She spends most of her time alone in the forest and she is quite unique," Nurse Redheart said as she finished applying the bandage to Snow's cheek. "There, that should do for now. You'll have to come back for a follow-up visit in a few days, and then again in a couple of weeks to get the stitches removed. Also, put as little strain on that forelimb as you can. There's no permanent damage but it was sprained quite badly. Is it your dominant hoof?"

Snow shook her head. "No, I'm left-hoofed so it should be fine. Besides, I'm a unicorn so it isn't so bad. I'll just have to use my horn a little more often for awhile."

"That would be best." Nurse Redheart nodded in agreement, "Well then that should be everything. None of your injuries are life-threatening but you'll need to be sure to change your bandages regularly and apply the antiseptic each time. The stitches will hold as long as you don't do anything too strenuous but there is still infection to worry about. I want you to make sure to get plenty of rest. Do you have somepony that can look after you until you're able to get around on your own?"

"Um, well, as soon as I can find my friends I'm sure they'll be able to look after me," Snow said, looking down. She hadn't really considered what she was going to do when she got to Ponyville. She had assumed she'd have some time to plan with Aurora before trying to find Twilight, but things had taken a bizarre turn and now she wasn't sure what to do. "We didn't really have any place in particular that we were going to stay; we've never been to Ponyville before. I think we were just going to look for an inn or something when we got here. This whole mess wasn't really part of the plan."

"So you don't even know where you're staying?" Twilight asked with a frown.

"Well, no, not really," Snow said sheepishly. It was a bit embarrassing to be caught so unprepared.

"Hmm, well I suppose you could stay with me at the library for a couple days," Twilight said thoughtfully, "I do have a spare bed, and with Spike around taking care of you wouldn't be a problem while we look for your friends."

"What?!" Snow exclaimed, nearly tumbling out of bed, "Oh! No I couldn't make you do that, not after everything you've done already! I'll find somewhere to stay until I can find my friends, you don't need to take care of me. Really, I'll be fine!" Snow's face burned with embarrassment.

Objectively, she knew that this was the perfect opportunity. She had found an easy way to meet Twilight Sparkle, and not only that had now been invited into her home. It was the perfect chance to fulfill her promise to her teacher. But she found herself reluctant to take the offer, hoping Twilight would change her mind. Maybe it was because she had saved her life, or maybe it just how incredibly nice she seemed, but Snow found it difficult to be so dishonest with Twilight.

“Don’t be silly,” Twilight said with a shake of her hoof, “You’re in no condition to be living alone and I have plenty of space. Once you recover a little we can go looking for your friends, and I’ll talk to the mayor. She’ll be able to keep an eye out for any new ponies in town so we’ll know if they’re looking for you.”

“But-“

“No buts, you need somepony to take care of you and I’m perfectly happy to do it.”

Snow Drift opened her mouth to argue but stopped, letting out a defeated sigh. She didn’t really know why she was fighting this so hard anyway. It made perfect sense, really. Still, it didn’t sit well with her.

“Alright fine, you win Twilight Sparkle,” Snow offered her a smile, “And thank you, for everything you’ve done.”

“You’re more than welcome,” Twilight said, returning the smile. “I’m just glad you’re okay. When I first saw you I was worried you might not recover.”

Snow shuddered. The thought of dying was far from pleasant, especially so far from home.

“Well it sounds like you girls have everything worked out then,” Nurse Redheart said, “You should be just fine so long as you take it easy, but please don’t hesitate to come back if you feel something isn’t healing right, even a little. You unicorns may heal quickly but that doesn’t mean you can go and be reckless. The last thing we want at this point is for you to get an infection or to rip open your stitches.”

Snow nodded. "I'll be careful. Thank you again for seeing me Nurse Redheart."

"It's my job dear, really no need to thank me. But if you'll excuse me, it is just about time for me to officially open the clinic so I need to be going. Will you be alright getting her home Twilight?"

"It should be fine," Twilight said, helping Snow Drift to her hooves, "We'll take it slow, and I can always use my magic if need be."

Snow wobbled as she stood, careful not to put too much pressure on her sprained ankle. After a moment she managed to stabilize and was able to walk, although not without leaning against Twilight.

Together, they left the clinic and headed towards the library. It was still early, but the summer sun was already beating down fiercely. Snow squinted in the bright light, her injured eye throbbing as she squeezed it shut. It wasn't as bad as it had been in the forest. At least here the air wasn't so muggy and she wasn't constantly being swarmed by insects, but the heat was still hard to deal with.

"Is it always this hot?" she asked, looking around as they walked.

Ponyville was different than any town she had ever seen in Equiiria. Everything was bright and colorful, and everypony seemed to walk around without a care in the world. It made sense, she supposed. She loved her home, but she was not so naïve that she would fail to realize how difficult a place it could be to live. To her, the harshness of the climate only enhanced its beauty, but she had lived a privileged and sheltered life. For others, things weren't always so easy.

"Well it is summer," Twilight replied, smiling brightly and waving at a pair of ponies sitting on a nearby bench, "It gets pretty hot, but it's not that bad. Besides, it cools down come fall and then gets pretty cold during winter. I had to ask my friend Rarity to get me boots and a scarf so I could participate in winter wrap-up. I'm not sure what happened to those though, I think I might have lost them."

"Winter wrap-up? What's that?"

Twilight blinked in confusion. "Winter wrap-up, it's the celebration where all the ponies work together to change the season from winter to spring. Don't they do that where you're from too? I read that every city and town in Equestria has a winter-wrap up celebration, although some places do it a little differently than others. In Canterlot we would use magic to clean up winter, but here in Ponyville its tradition to do it without magic. Do you call it something different where you're from?"

"Oh, um yeah we call it...", Snow fumbled for an answer, "Winter...clean-up," she finished lamely. She smiled at Twilight, sweating from more than just the heat.

Twilight looked at her blankly for a moment before returning the smile. "Well it sounds like the same thing. Are you allowed to use magic? I had a lot of trouble trying to help without using my magic last winter, in the end I had to use my organizational skills to help everypony."

"Oh, no we can use magic," Snow said, relieved that Twilight had bought her lie, "Actually it's mostly unicorns that do winter clean-up; it's just a lot easier that way. Actually, that's how I earned my cutie mark. I have a special gift for that kind of magic and the first year I was old enough to help I got my cutie mark."

"So your special talent is magic!" Twilight gasped, smiling in delight, "I haven't met another unicorn whose special talent is related to magic since I left Canterlot! You have to show me some spells! And we can study together too! Oooh I can't wait!"

Snow Drift couldn't help but smile at Twilight's enthusiasm. She was almost exactly the opposite of what she had imagined. Kind, generous, trusting, and even a little naïve. It was bizarre, and a little troubling. How could somepony so kind be the student of a tyrant like Celestia? It just didn't make any sense.

"Hey Twilight! Over here sugarcube!"

Snow looked up to see an orange earth pony waving at them from a stall on the opposite side of the square. She was wearing a hat unlike anything Snow had ever seen before. It certainly didn't look like it would do

her much good in the cold, and was selling the biggest, shiniest apples she had ever seen.

“Oh, hey Applejack!” Twilight replied, leading Snow over to the stall, “How are sales today?”

“Been a bit slow, Ah only just opened up shop though. Had a bit of trouble convincin’ Apple Bloom that Apple sellin’ just ain’t her special talent. Girl said she had a new sales strategy all planned out, but if I know them crusaders there ain’t no way I’m lettin’ one of their plans anywhere near mah apple cart,” Applejack said with a shudder. It had been bad enough the first time Apple Bloom had tried her hoof at apple sales, she wasn’t about to invite that kind of trouble again. “Who’s this? Ah don’t think I’ve ever seen ya ‘round town before. You’re lookin’ a little the worse for wear if you don’t mind mah sayin’.”

“This is Snow Drift,” Twilight said, letting Snow ease off of her shoulder, “Zecora found her, she had gotten injured in the Everfree Forest and so we needed to get her to Nurse Redheart this morning. She’ll be staying with me for awhile while she recovers.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Snow said, holding out a bandaged hoof.

“Well it’s a pleasure to meet you too Snow Drift, the name’s Applejack.” Applejack reached to shake her hoof before thinking better of it, “Sorry to hear about your accident. Looks like you took quite the tumble.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna be a bit sore for awhile, but I should manage.”

“Sore nothin’,” Applejack said with a chuckle, “I remember when my brother Big Macintosh got injured awhile back. he was out of commission for the better part of the season, and he didn’t look half as banged up as you do sugarcube. Here, have an apple on the house. You better eat right if you wanna get any better.”

Snow Drift accepted the apple graciously, taking a tentative bite. Her eyes widened and the apple disappeared in spray of pulp and juice.

“Woah there girl, you’re gonna make yourself sick eatin’ like that.”

Snow licked her lips, savoring the sweet taste of apple. "Sorry, I guess I didn't realize how hungry I was," she said sheepishly, "But I've never tasted an apple like that before! It was amazing! The most delicious apple I've ever had!"

"Well Ah'm glad ya think so Snow Drift," Applejack replied, a note of pride in her voice, "We Apples have always prided ourselves on providin' the best apples in all of Equestria. We work ourselves to the bone to get the best apples around."

"Of course, sometimes members of the Apple family can be a little too stubborn to realize when they're working themselves *too* hard," Twilight said, smiling at Applejack.

Applejack's cheeks tinged pink. "Hehe, yeah I reckon you're right. Only sometimes though. So Snow Drift where ya from? We don't get too many ponies visitin' that come through the Everfree Forest. Most folks steer clear of that place. It's got a bad reputation and it deserves every bit of it if ya ask me. Nasty place."

"Oh, I'm from, uh, Maresburg. It's not much bigger than Ponyville, and it's on the other side of the Everfree Forest. We don't usually come this way. It's a pretty closed community." Snow gulped. She had known she'd have to have a back story of course, but she hadn't prepared one yet. She had intended to go over it with Aurora before they arrived, but circumstances hadn't allowed for that.

It didn't help that she hated lying. Ever since she was a filly she had been a terrible liar. She would stutter and blush, the blood in her cheeks clear against her snow-white coat. She could feel her cheeks burning already and lowered her gaze, trying to hide the tell-tale signs of her dishonesty

"Maresburg huh," Applejack replied, a little less enthusiastic, "Well you sure have come a long way then. Shoot, I didn't even know there was an 'other side' of the Everfree Forest. Here, have another apple. You sure look like you could use it."

“Thanks!” Snow replied. She was beginning to feel a bit of her energy return to her. She was still in pain, but the sugars in the apple were doing wonders for her otherwise.

“Oh, Applejack, did you manage to talk to Carrot Top about helping out with the Summer Sun Celebration?” Twilight asked, leaving Snow to her apple.

“Yeah I did as a matter of fact,” Applejack said, beckoning Twilight over. “Why don’t we talk business for a minute. Snow Drift me an’ Twilight gotta take care of some things quick. Borin’ stuff really, but it’s for the Princess so we need to keep it between us for the moment. You just help yourself to those apples ‘til you feel better. Think of it as mah welcomin’ present to ya.”

“Oh, um, sure,” Snow replied, hesitant, “I’ll just be here then. And thanks for the apples.”

Applejack just smiled and tipped her hat, leading Twilight around the corner and out of sight.

“What’s the matter Applejack?” Twilight asked, “I know the preparations for the Summer Sun Celebration are for the Princess, but it’s hardly a matter of secrecy. I mean, no offense but the status of the food preparation is hardly a matter of utmost importance.”

“Ah know that,” Applejack said, her voice low, “Ah just needed a moment away from your new friend.”

“What’s this about Applejack?” Twilight asked, confused.

Applejack sighed, fidgeting with her hat. “You remember how many ponies were at the Apple family reunion when you first came to Ponyville?”

Twilight thought for a moment before shrugging. “I can’t honestly say I do really. There were a lot of ponies there, and I was in a bit of a hurry.”

“Exactly. The Apple family is one of the biggest families in all Equestria. Hay, even Ah sometimes worry Ah’m forgettin’ somepony.” Applejack paused, peering around the corner. Snow Drift was standing by the apple cart, looking awkward and uncomfortable. “Point is, Ah got family

all over Equestria, in just about every city or town you can think of, an' there ain't no such place as Maresburg, least of all on the other side of the Everfree Forest."

"So you think she's lying?"

Applejack shrugged. "Well Ah ain't sayin' she don't got a reason. Could be a lot of reasons she didn't want to tell us where's she's from. Ah can't rightly say it's any of mah business, but Ah know she ain't bein' truthful, an' that makes me nervous."

Twilight considered this. It was true she had never heard of a town called Maresburg. On top of that, she had never heard of *any* Equestrian settlements on the other side of the Everfree Forest. Looking back on it, Snow Drift had seemed a little reluctant to talk about where she was from, but she had just dismissed it as nerves. She had just been through a traumatic experience after all. Still, it was disconcerting to know that she had been lying the whole time. She didn't seem like a dishonest pony, but Twilight trusted Applejack, particularly on matters of honesty. If she said Snow Drift was lying then Twilight was inclined to agree.

"But why would she lie about something like that?" Twilight said, thinking aloud, "I mean, it's not like Ponyville has any feuds with neighboring villages, and I'm sure that even if it did everypony would be understanding enough to help a mare in need."

"That's part of why it bothers me," Applejack said, "If she ain't worried about how we'd treat her, then what's she lyin' for?" She sighed, kicking a stray pebble, "Shoot. Ah might just be overthinkin' this. Like Ah said, there's all sorts of reasons somepony might want to keep things secret. Ain't no question she needs help right now though. She sure ain't makin' up those injuries. You just be careful 'round her Twilight, I can't rightly trust a pony that lies to folk tryin' to help 'em."

"I will. I'm sure it's nothing, but thank you Applejack, I appreciate you looking out for me."

"Shucks girl, you know Ah'd never leave you in the dark. We're practically family. Now come on, we kept her waitin' long enough," Applejack said, trotting back over to her apple cart and patting Snow Drift

heartily on the back, causing the unicorn to wince and choke on a bite of apple.

Twilight followed behind slowly, watching the antics of her old and new friends. She couldn't understand why she would lie to her. What possible reason could she have for wanting to keep her in the dark? What, exactly, was she trying to hide?

Ponyville was not what Aurora had been expecting at all. She wasn't sure what exactly she had been expecting, but she supposed she had imagined it would follow the same basic layout as the towns back in Equiiria. In retrospect, she wasn't sure why she had thought that. There was no real reason it would, but she supposed she had been so busy worrying about Snow Drift and the other aspects of their mission that she hadn't put much thought into what Ponyville actually looked like.

The picturesque little houses scattered seemingly at random amongst an assortment of odd shops and carts didn't follow any logical pattern that she could see, aside from a main street that led directly to what she assumed was the town hall. It was like something out of a ponytale. All the houses made of wood and straw instead of the stone most structures in Equiiria were made of. Wood was a scarce commodity, and most of it was used for heating. Stone structures had the added advantage of being less likely to burn down as well.

She soared high above the town, savoring the feeling of flying freely for the first time since she had left the castle. She had left her armor back at their campsite on the edge of the Everfree Forest. Technically, she was supposed to remain in uniform while on duty, but she was fairly certain something like that would arouse suspicion. Besides, as much as she loved wearing it, it did sometimes make flying a little more difficult. It was nice to be able to fly naturally again.

Aurora dipped low, ducking below the clouds to get a better look. She wanted to stay out of sight if she could, but it wasn't easy looking for Snow Drift among all the other ponies wandering the town. She didn't even know whether or not Snow had made it to Ponyville, but if there was a chance she had then she wasn't going to let any lead pass her by. After a minute,

she pulled back up with a grumble, the white pony she had spotted being another dead end. She had already made three laps around Ponyville with no success. It was going to be evening soon, and she had little to show for her efforts. At this rate she was going to have to give up the silent reconnaissance and start asking around.

She circled back, preparing to take one more lap around the town before calling it for the day. Hopefully, Fleethoof and the others had had a little more luck in their search, although Aurora doubted they had. Trying to find a lost pony in that forest would be nigh impossible, even in the best of circumstances.

She ducked low over the edge of town, trying to stay below a growing patch of stormy grey clouds.

“Hey, watch out!”

Aurora twisted her head around just in time to see a rainbow-colored streak hurtling out of the clouds towards her. She flared her wings, shaving speed and twisting her body, trying to roll out of the way of the oncoming pegasus. She managed to move just in time, the other pegasus streaking by mere inches away. Aurora turned, her heart pounding in her chest as the adrenaline pumped through her system.

The rainbow streak slowed to reveal a cyan pegasus banking back towards her. Aurora tried to collect herself, taking a few deep breaths.

“Hey!” the mare called, coming to a stop in front of Aurora, “Are you alright? I almost didn’t see you in time!”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Aurora replied, beginning to calm down, “You should be more careful though, it’s not safe to come flying out of clouds like that with such poor visibility. You could really hurt somepony.”

“Hey, I’m just trying to do my job,” the pegasus said with a shrug, wiping the condensation from her goggles, “We’re scheduled for a storm tonight so I gotta whip something up. Most pegasi stay away from storm clouds when the weather patrol is working on them.”

Aurora blinked. Weather patrol? “So you’re actually making a storm?”

“Yep, gonna be a big one too. They always know to send me when they want the best!”

“Oh. Well, sorry I guess,” Aurora said blankly, unsure of what else to say.

“No problem, it’s cool. It’s a good thing you’re so quick though, most pegasi wouldn’t have gotten out of the way in time. You’ve got some pretty good moves, do you practice a lot?”

“Yeah,” replied Aurora, “I have to keep in good condition or I wouldn’t be able to do my job very well.”

“Cool, me too. Working with the Ponyville weather patrol means I get a lot of flying in, plus I practice whenever I get some spare time. I’m Rainbow Dash by the way, what’s your name?”

“Aurora, nice to meet you Rainbow Dash,” Aurora said, shaking Rainbow’s offered hoof.

“Aurora huh,” Rainbow Dash said, looking her over, “You new to Ponyville? Don’t think I’ve seen you around before.”

“Oh, I just got into to town. I was coming for a visit with some of my friends.”

A crack of thunder sounded, startling the two pegasi. Aurora looked up, noticing the darkening clouds. From the looks of it, it wasn’t going to be safe to stay in the air for much longer. Her heart fell. It was getting late, and with a storm starting she wouldn’t be able to keep looking for Snow Drift. She could only hope that she had managed to find shelter somewhere. If the storm continued to grow it was going to be a nasty one, and Aurora hated to think about Snow lost and helpless in the forest somewhere in the midst of such a tempest.

“Woah, looks like the storm’s starting, we better get inside before it starts. I’m gonna head home, it was good meeting you Aurora, maybe I’ll see you around,” Rainbow Dash said, turning to leave.

“Wait!” Aurora called after her, flying to catch up.

Rainbow Dash stopped. “What’s up?” she asked.

Raindrops started to sprinkle and the two looked up at the clouds again. Aurora noted with some concern that they were starting to spread out over the rest of Ponyville and towards the forest. Hopefully, Weatherlight had made it back to camp already and wouldn’t be caught on her way back.

“Well, um, you see....” Aurora trailed off. She really didn’t want to involve any of the local ponies in her search for Snow Drift if she could help it, but it was starting to look like her search was going to be delayed, and she didn’t want to waste any time finding her friend.

“Actually, I was hoping you might be able to help me,” she said, trying to sound casual.

“Uh, sure, what’s up?” Rainbow Dash asked.

“Well me and my friends just got into town, but one of my friends got lost in the forest before we got here. I was actually looking for her when I ran into you. I don’t know if she made it to Ponyville or not, but I didn’t even know where to start looking in the forest.”

“Well I can’t help you look for her right now; this isn’t flying weather, even for me,” Rainbow Dash said, tapping her chin thoughtfully, “Hmm, I guess I could ask around town though. If someone new showed up in town I’m sure somepony will know.”

“Thank you,” Aurora said, “I’m really grateful. I just hope she isn’t hurt or still lost in the forest.”

“No problem, I’m sure she’ll turn up alright. Oh yeah, what does she look like?”

“She’s a unicorn, about my size, maybe a little smaller,” Aurora said, “White coat with a bluish mane and a snowflake cutie mark. Her name’s Snow Drift. She shouldn’t be too hard to spot, she doesn’t really blend in with the crowd.”

“Yeah there aren’t a ton of unicorns in Ponyville anyway, and I’m friends with the only white unicorn in town so I’ll know her if I see her I guess.”

A flash of lightning and another crack of thunder drew their attention.

“Yikes, time to get outta here. So yeah, no problem. I’ll ask around and keep an eye out for your friend.” Rainbow Dash started to fly away but stopped, calling back to Aurora, “Oh, where are you staying? I’ll come find you if you if I hear anything about her.”

“Me and another one of my friends camped out on the edge of the forest so we could keep looking for her,” Aurora said, hoping it didn’t seem too strange that she would be visit a town without staying in it, “We’re sort of close to that big orchard, I’ll put something up so you can find us.”

“Camping in the forest huh?” Rainbow Dash said, “You’re gonna have a rough night in this.”

“We’ll manage. I want to be close in case Snow Drift is still in the forest.”

“Sure, makes sense. Well good luck with the storm and looking for your friend. I’ll keep my eyes peeled for ya,” Rainbow Dash said before taking off.

Aurora watched the rainbow streak depart before taking off back in the direction of her camp. She really hadn’t wanted to ask for help, and to make matters worse she had told the rainbow-maned pegasus where to find her and Weatherlight. She tried to shake off the uneasy feeling the encounter had left her with. Their mission was on hold for as long as it took to find Snow Drift and make sure she was alright. Until then, she would just have to do whatever it took to find her.

Besides, she thought, landing back at her campsite, it was just one pegasus and she had seemed nice enough. It wasn’t like she was going to raise the alarm on the whole kingdom for them. No, most likely she was just being paranoid and Rainbow Dash was sincere in helping her. There was

almost no way that asking the pegasus for help could turn around and bite her. At least, she hoped not.