

Heavenly Turmoil

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Chapter 1

There was a thunderous blast of noise, nearly throwing Princess Celestia from her bed. Her heart was pounding and she was in an absolute state of panic. She looked around her bedchamber, trying to find spot anything in the darkness that would have torn her from her sleep. After a few moments, the ruler of Equestria yawned and shook her head, her flowing mane falling into disorder. Blowing a stand of colorful hair out of her face, Celestia began to calm. The pure white alicorn rested her head on her pillow, closed her eyes, and exhaled peacefully as she reflected on the day's events.

In less than a day, Equestria had seen the return of Discord, the malevolent spirit of disharmony and chaos, and was nearly torn apart by the maniac's terrible power as it had many centuries ago. But once again, harmony had prevailed; Discord was imprisoned by the Elements of Harmony, wielded by her very own protégé and her friends. His damage had been undone, and peace returned to the world. Celestia shifted in her bed, stretched her wings once, twice, and wrapped her body in the feathery wings, listening to the sound of her younger sister's beautiful night as she drifted off to serene sleep.

Celestia jumped off of her bed, stomping the floor with her powerful hooves. Calling upon her magic, the princess's horn glowed with light, illuminating the room. She glared at the retreating darkness, shifting her eyes suspiciously.

She had been moved. Her entire bed had been moved across the room. And as the fireplace sparked to life and chased the last shadows from the corners of the room, she saw that there was more to it. The room had been completely changed – the changes were small but not subtle enough to escape Celestia's attention. The patterns of the stained glass windows had been reversed, the crimson flowers in the vase kept in the corner of the room were now a deep blue, and even the carving on the wooden door to the room was different.

"Show yourself!" Celestia commanded, stomping the floor.

“Sister?” a soft voice called from outside the door. Celestia snapped her head up, looking at herself and her room in confusion. Rising to her hooves, Celestia walked out of bed and to the center of the room. Princess Luna, the younger of the two ruling sisters, cautiously opened the door and peered her head in before entering.

“Celestia, is everything alright?” Luna asked, concern clear in her voice.

“Oh, yes, Luna. Everything is fine,” Celestia said, smiling warmly at her sister. Her long banishment had done nothing to change Luna’s kind heart and compassionate nature, and after centuries apart, Celestia could never fully express how happy she was to have her sister and closest friend by her side again. Though she had been initially fearful that her sister might still harbor some resentment after her years alone on the moon, her worries were put to rest nearly immediately. Luna was the model of kindness, acquainting herself with the many ponies that served the royal sisters in their palace and going out of her way to help them in any way she could.

“Are you sure? I was walking by and I heard noises,” Luna asked again, walking closer to her sister and looking around the room in interest.

“Well... Luna, tell me, does anything in the room seem strange to you?” Celestia normally wouldn’t want to worry her sister, but sometimes Luna simply wouldn’t be satisfied until she heard what she wanted to hear.

“Different? No, everything looks the same as it always does,” Luna answered as she walked a lap around the room, looking high and low for anything unusual and finding nothing. Celestia’s vision blurred as she watched her sister investigate, the room seeming to spasm and reset itself as she stepped.

“I must have just been having a nigh- a bad dream,” Celestia corrected herself. Though Equestria had forgiven Luna for her violent return as Nightmare Moon, she still hadn’t forgiven herself and would fall into a depression whenever something brought her mind back to her episode.

“Oh no! Do... do you want me to sleep with you tonight?”

“Thank you, sister, but I’m sure I’ll be fine now,” Celestia said tenderly, putting her head against her sister’s. “I’ll see you first thing in the morning for breakfast.” Luna’s mood immediately brightened, and the princess of the night wished her sister sweet dreams as she trotted out the door, leaving Celestia alone in her room with her thoughts.

And a vase of orange flowers.

Celestia’s eyelids suddenly grew heavy and the princess collapsed to her bed.

Princess Celestia stood proudly on the balcony outside her room as she did every morning, calling the sun to usher in the new day. She had slept well enough after Luna’s visit, but she found her mind going back to her strange visions; she hadn’t had a nightma– bad dream since she was a filly, and there was no great crisis in Equestria that should be worrying her. Hoofington had another rumor of an Ursa Major attack the previous week, but it had turned out to be a false alarm by some traveling magician to raise interest in her show.

She pushed it from her mind as her unicorn guard arrived to escort the princess to the garden, where Luna was waiting eagerly at a table. The sisters had made it a point to see each other every morning for breakfast, and it was a routine that had gone happily uninterrupted for over a year now.

“Good morning, sister!” Luna chirped brightly as Celestia sat down. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I’m glad! I asked Flour to make something special today,” Luna said playfully. Luna knew all of the ponies in the castle well, but she had become close friends with the kitchen staff especially, frequently visiting to chat or try to learn how to prepare some dishes. As for her progress, Celestia was just thankful that Luna hadn’t made their breakfast this morning.

"You know, the garden labyrinth is even harder to get through in the dark," Luna said conversationally.

"I'm surprised you have trouble seeing at night, Luna."

"Oh, I don't. I had to close my eyes before it got really fun."

"Is that so? I may have to try that some time," Celestia said with a laugh.

"Make sure that nopony is around when you try it. Some ponies are going to think there's something wrong with you if they see you bumping into walls with your eyes closed." Celestia and Luna laughed together at the thought of it. Celestia playfully shut her eyes and began to wave a hoof out in front of her, bumping the bottom of the table with her other hoof. The sisters were in tears, and even the arrival of their servers couldn't stop their fun. The two earth pony servers carefully placed the platters on the table in front of the princesses and removed the tray covers. Luna had a sizable stack of pancakes in front of her, topped with banana slices and blueberries. Celestia looked down with a grin at the face smiling at her from her tray. Two eggs sunny-side up and several slices of bacon arranged in a goofy smile.

"Very funny."

"I thought so." Celestia and Luna enjoyed their morning ritual, watching as the pegasi soared through the air above them, pushing the clouds around and simply entertaining themselves. But whenever Celestia looked down from the sky at her sister, she saw Luna's attention focused on the hedge maze and the statue garden. Luna met Celestia's look and swallowed a mouthful of her breakfast before giving her sister a meaningful look.

"So what did we do with the statue?" Luna asked. Celestia sighed, having been waiting for the question all morning as she wiped some egg from the corner of her mouth with her napkin.

"Discord has been moved to a safe place, far away from anypony who could accidentally break the seal on him again."

“Where? Come on, you can tell me, Tia. It’s not like I’m going to go looking to wake up that nut.”

“There’s an abandoned dragon’s lair about a four hour’s flight south. I had a squad of unicorns and pegasi collapse the entrance of the cave, so we won’t need to worry about him ever again.”

After finishing their breakfast, Luna excused herself and trotted off into the gardens. Celestia smiled and watched her walk out of sight before she rose from the table and made her way to her throne room. She had an exciting day ahead of her.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” the well-dressed unicorn praised, bowing his head low to the floor as he backed out of the room. There was a drought in Hayti, and the mayor had traveled all the way to Canterlot to request a rain. Celestia promised the mayor that she would have the top graduates of Cloudsdale’s flight school’s graduating class move to the town to prevent any such trouble from ever hurting them again.

Celestia closed her eyes to think. The mayor was her second appointment for the day, after she had been asked to decide on the color scheme for next year’s Grand Galloping Gala. It was only ten months away, and preparations had to begin. Celestia simply chose whichever theme the pony on the left had presented, the same way she had done for the last century. The ruler of Equestria sighed softly, trying to decide if she should just cancel the event for a year and see what would happen. She wouldn’t. As tired as she was of the whole thing, it was just something that had to happen at this point. It was simply the routine.

“When is the next audience for the day?” Celestia asked the unicorn guard standing watch at the foot of the stairs leading to her throne.

“That is all for the day, Your Majesty.”

Just two today. Two wasn’t bad. At least that meant there weren’t many pressing problems in Equestria. At least none that needed her immediate attention.

Just two today.

Celestia let her mind wander to pass the time as she often did, thinking back to her life as a young filly. Running through the palace with Luna, getting into mischief, flying out on her own for days on end without warning and then sheepishly explaining herself to her mother when she returned. The details had begun to slip away long ago, but Celestia could still remember the feeling of pure exhilaration and freedom, and the joys of her trouble-free youth. Those days were behind her now, but Celestia still took pleasure in her occasional breaks from palace life: traveling to different towns, breakfasts with Luna, and, her favorite, the unannounced visits.

"No, I don't have an appointment, I'm – you know who I am! I used to live here! I was the guest of honor at the ceremony yesterday! Let me in!"

Celestia smiled and gracefully walked down from her throne to the large doors across the room. Opening them, she looked down at her faithful student arguing with the two pegasus guards.

"Twilight Sparkle, what a pleasant surprise." The guards immediately stood aside, allowing the purple unicorn to enter the throne room, smirking victoriously at the somber guards.

"Sorry about dropping in unannounced, Princess Celestia."

"Don't apologize. I always enjoy your visits, and you are always welcome in Canterlot."

"Thank you, Princess. I came by to deliver my letter personally, since Spike still isn't feeling great after you sent all my letters back to me," Twilight explained as she retrieved a small scroll from her pouch, neatly tied in a red ribbon held it in the air. Twilight relinquished the letter to Celestia, letting the princess place it on the arm of her throne.

"I look forward to reading it," Celestia said. The princess looked down at the bowing unicorn and smiled with pride. This young pony and her friends had risked life and limb for each other and for all of Equestria time and time again without ever asking for anything in return. Twilight's letters

about the wonders of friendship and her stories about the friends' adventures were the highlights of her week, and the princess' heart swelled with motherly pride when she thought of how much her student had grown, both as a powerful unicorn and as a happy pony.

"I still can't thank you enough for all that you and your friends have done, Twilight. If there's anything you ever need, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thank you, Princess," Twilight bowed again. "But I should get back home to Ponyville now. I promised Rarity I would help her find gems until Spike gets better."

"Oh yes, of course. Don't let me detain you." Princess Celestia smiled sadly as her student exited the room. Her smile faded as the doors slammed shut and she began the lonely walk back to her throne. She hadn't expected Twilight's stay to be so brief. Celestia always enjoyed spending time with her student when Twilight lived in Canterlot, but perhaps it was better that she was spending more time with her friends. After all, that's why she sent her to Ponyville in the first place. Celestia returned to her throne and let her mind wander, occasionally glancing at the unopened letter.

The rest of the day passed without event. Celestia sat in her throne room until dinner, a mixed salad that Luna had proudly put together herself, which came out surprisingly edible. Celestia walked her lap around the palace and finally retired to her chambers.

Standing in front of her modest door with Twilight's letter tucked under her wing, Celestia pulled open the door, her scream caught in her throat as she was buried under an avalanche of letters. She kicked her legs in panic as she struggled for air, unable to see or move. Celestia shut her eyes and prepared for the end.

"Sweet dreams, Tia!" Luna called from down the hallway.

"Good night, Luna," Celestia responded, waiting for her sister to go out of sight before turning back to her door. Celestia opened the door with

caution and slowly entered her room, finding nothing out of the ordinary. She walked to the center of her room and kneeled on her bed, readying herself to read Twilight's letter.

*Dear Princess Celestia,
Today I learned that being a good friend is more than just being there. A friend should always be ready to help others, and not be afraid to be helped in return. As a certain pink pony once said, "fOR thE lovE oF ALL tHat'S gOOd I cAnt TAkE IT!"*

Celestia stared at the letter in confusion, watching the lines on the paper rearrange themselves before her eyes, Twilight's neat and familiar penmanship becoming something barely legible. As soon as she took her eyes off a word, the letters fell from their place and floated around the bottom of the page.

IS ThiS LiFe reALLy whaT you werE soO DesPeRate TO fiGhT for?

Celestia rose to her hooves and stood defensively as the ink began to leak off the page in a long, continuous string. The ink began to twist around, zagging and curving on the floor as it stretched to form an outline of a slender creature with the tail of a snake, legs of a lizard and a goat, wings of a bat and a bird, with an eagle's talon and a lion's paw. The long neck ended with a pony's head topped with an antler and a horn.

"You are *killing* me, Celestia!"

"Discord!" Celestia stomped her hooves and aimed her glowing horn at the silhouette, daring the creature to try something.

"Oh, don't sound so surprised. You didn't think that I was going to be trapped in that cave forever, did you?" The two foes circled each other, Celestia never letting her guard down for an instant.

"This isn't possible. The Elements of Harmony defeated you! How could you be free again?"

"Nothing's impossible for me. You should know that by now. I simply – oh, would you look at me? I'm not decent," the outline spoke, looking around the room for something. "Gray, gray, gray..." he hummed as he

walked towards the fireplace. Discord stretched his neck in front of the stone, the color filling the outline like a coloring book.

“Whatever you’re up to, it won’t work,” Celestia threatened, glaring at the spirit as he stuck his arms in front of the yellow fire and filling them with color.

“Celestia, I’m hurt. I haven’t done a thing. Do you really think so poorly of me?” Discord backed his body in front of the wood in the fireplace and flapped his bat wing in front of the purple walls. “Hey, could I borrow some blue or green from you? Your mane is just the perfect shade and my leg is getting a little chilly.”

“Enough! You’ve been defeated twice. Harmony will always triumph over chaos, when will you learn that you can never win?”

“Do you even listen to yourself?” Discord yawned as he fell back into Celestia’s bed. “I mean *really* listen to yourself? I’d almost think it was an act if your life wasn’t so dull.” Celestia stood her ground, glaring at the spirit of chaos as Discord examined his nails.

“What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue? Don’t tell me that I struck a nerve there,” Discord taunted before vanishing in a flash of light.

“You’re stalling. You’re afraid,” Celestia shouted to the air, only to hear Discord’s laughter echoing off the walls. A sly smirk crossed the alicorn’s face as a thought struck her. “You’re weak. You simply don’t have the power to be a threat to anypony anymore.”

“Oh, you of all people should know that’s not true,” Discord whispered from behind the princess. Celestia snapped her head around, but found nothing there. Turning back to her room, she shouted in agony. Celestia’s front leg buckled underneath her as she strained to open her eyes, seeing her room seizure and flicker, as if it were trying to fight Discord’s magic itself. Then all at once, it ended, leaving the ruler of Equestria physically and mentally exhausted.

“You’ll never destroy Equestria,” Celestia panted as her vision blurred. Simply keeping her eyes open became a struggle.

“Equestria? Please, I found something much more in need of my attention, my dear Celestia,” Discord breathed. The draconequus clutched his paw around Celestia’s face, forcing her to look at him. “I want to see you, Celestia. I want to watch as you tear your insufferably boring life to pieces. I want to see you backed into a corner by everypony you once held dear to you.” Celestia tried to jerk her head away, unable to break free of Discord’s grip.

“I want to see you weep as you begin to enjoy it all. I want to see you on the edge of ruin, with your kingdom in flames and all of Equestria bearing down on you! I want to see you lost in the world, without a single friend by your side. I want to see you suffer for what you have done to me!” Discord roared, abandoning his playful demeanor. “And when the shining star of Equestria has sunk lower than anyone had thought possible...” Discord released Celestia, and the alicorn collapsed to the ground.

“I want you to whisper my name, and beg me to help you.”

Celestia’s world went black.

Chapter 2

“Your Majesty? Your Majesty, it is time.”

Princess Celestia used a burst of magic to force the door off of its hinges and soared through the new opening. Bringing her hoof down, the alicorn glared at the captain of unicorn guards as he panicked beneath her.

“Learn your place! I am your ruler and I decide when the sun rises!”

“Your Majesty? Your Majesty, it is time.”

“I’ll be there presently!” Celestia called, pulling herself to her hooves and shaking her head to clear her head. This was the second night in a row that she’d had a terrible night’s sleep. She didn’t know how she managed to fall asleep on the bare floor, but Celestia decided that if these troubles persisted she would have to talk to Luna. The night was her specialty, perhaps she’d be able to help.

The princess walked through the palace, smiling faintly at the happy ponies in the hall.

“Good morning, Your Majesty,” a maid bowed.

“Not quite yet,” Celestia replied. Her little joke. She’d been saying it for as long as she could remember, and it still hadn’t gotten old.

“Coming through!”

Celestia watched in amusement as Luna galloped out of a hallway, carrying a mop and a dust pan with a look of worry as she headed for the kitchen.

“Well, breakfast should be interesting, even if nothing else is.”

The sun rising was nothing out of the ordinary, and Celestia marched with her escorts toward the garden for her other morning ritual. More than

once the princess had wondered why her guards were so adamant on being with her every step of the way. She was by far the most powerful pony in Equestria, there wasn't anything lurking in the halls that the ruler of Equestria couldn't handle on her own.

Celestia blinked a few times, recoiling from herself and looking around suspiciously. She needed to clear her head. It was a beautiful morning, perhaps she'd spend it out of the castle. Celestia sat at her place at the table and inhaled deeply. There was a great calm all across Equestria that Celestia could simply feel filling her, swelling up in her heart. She watched as the early rays of sun bathed the gardens with a soft light, and all of nature came to life. Birds sang their morning songs, and a few pastel butterflies rose out of the hedge maze. Some servants were cleaning the statues in the garden as well as nurturing the beautiful flowers that spread far and wide across the castle grounds. All her tranquility came flooding out with a labored exhale as a sharp pain split down her head. Celestia grimaced and shut her eyes tight, fighting the urge to scream as it felt like her horn had been turned inside-out and stabbed into her brain. So boring.

"Are you feeling well this morning, sister?" Luna's soft voice chirped happily as she set down two plates.

"I've never felt better, Luna," Celestia answered warmly. She had a clear head, and she was ready to seize the day. "I've actually been thinking about getting out of the castle today. Maybe explore Canterlot, just to mix things up a bit."

"Could I come along as well?" Luna asked hopefully.

"Luna, I want you to be the only one that comes with me."

"Really? No guards?"

"I don't think we'll need escorts for a trip to town. If there's any trouble, I think the two ruling sisters of Equestria can handle it," Celestia said playfully. "The guards have been extra protective since Discord returned, and I'm just starting to feel tied down."

“Well, let’s eat and then we can start our day,” Luna said excitedly, lifting the tray covers to unveil her newest culinary achievement. “Flour was telling me that ‘the eyes eat first’, so food has to look even better than it tastes. So tell me, first reaction, what do you think?” Luna asked optimistically. Her grin faltered a bit as Celestia inspected the substance with more than some hesitation. Celestia cocked her head to the side, her ears perked in confusion, and the princess wasn’t daring enough to try to take sniff.

“Luna, these...”

“Pancakes.”

“-*pancakes* look delicious!” Celestia said, trying not to look her sister in the eye. “I like the little bits of grass you put on the top in the shape of a heart.”

“Those are chives.”

“Chives on the pancakes.”

“And it’s a flower.”

Celestia thanked her luck when two servants arrived with two fresh plates, exchanged the dishes, and then left without a word.

“I’m sure they would have tasted delicious.”

“Thanks for trying, Tia.”

“Stop it!” Luna laughed as the two sisters walked white bridge toward Canterlot, watching the city come to life

“I think it would be fun! Just think of it: it’s Nigh- Bad Dream Night, and all the ponies of Equestria are lined up at the haunted castle kitchen,” Celestia said, waving her hoof in front of her to add to the whimsy. “Flour leads them in, brings them over to the counter, and takes off the cover of

the plate and there! 'Who among you is brave enough to stomach *the elephant scabs?!'*'"

"You're so mean to me," Luna chuckled, bumping her sister in the ribs with her head. "I worked hard on those! So, did you have anything planned to do today? Celestia?"

Princess Celestia stared in horror with her mouth agape, watching as the beautiful town of Canterlot burned. Fire roared beyond control and thick, dark smoke strangled the air. She heard every pony screaming for salvation, as pegasi frantically tried to escape the inferno, furiously beating their wings before their lungs filled with the poison and they dropped like insects. Celestia wanted to scream.

"I was thinking about seeing if there's anything interesting in the stores. Do a little window shopping," Celestia replied, staring at the peaceful town in a trance.

"That sounds fun. I heard that there's a new toy store that opened up last week," Luna said happily, not noticing her sister's strange expression. Celestia blinked out of her daze and grinned mischievously at her sister.

"Aren't you a little old to be playing with toys?"

"I'm just looking!" Luna pouted. "There's nothing wrong with looking at toys."

"Maybe we'll see if there are any cookbooks for you."

"Ow, too mean. Maybe I won't let you try some of my cupcakes that I have baking in the oven," Luna sniffed, holding her head up indignantly.

"You left them baking?" Celestia asked uncertainly, giving her sister a worried look.

"Yes. Why?"

"Flour is going to forbid you from going in the kitchen if you keep destroying it."

Celestia and Luna nodded casually at the starstruck ponies in the streets of Canterlot, making idle conversation as they waited for their other sister to finish browsing the inside of a store. Celestia was happily watching the crowds look her way and bow as she waited for Luna to finish “researching” the new toy workshop, when a small filly slowly slid up beside the princess.

“So, Your Highness... what’s it like?” the young filly asked hesitantly, staring up at Celestia with enormous ice-blue eyes. The princess smiled down at the caramel earth pony, kneeling low so she could talk to her face-to-face.

“What do you mean, Cream?” Celestia asked. The princess wanted to laugh when she saw the look of pure exhilaration on her face when the princess said her name without introducing herself.

“Everything! Being a princess, having a horn and wings, living in the palace! It must be so much fun! I wish I could be just like you!” the filly chattered at a mile a minute, making Princess Celestia chuckle. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a small crowd of ponies gathering around. Even though the ponies of Canterlot lived so very close to their princess, it was still rare to see Celestia out of the castle and the sight of seeing the ruler of Equestria taking a personal interest in such a young pony was an endearing one.

“Well, being a princess is fine. But you shouldn’t set your sights so low,” Celestia said, making the girl tilt her head in confusion. “You’re still so young, the world is full of opportunities for you. Listen to your heart and follow it.” The crowd seemed to enjoy the response, nodding happily in approval, but Celestia wasn’t concerned about that. It warmed the princess’ heart to pass on wisdom to a younger generation. ‘And I seldom get to see Twilight lately,’ she thought.

“And don’t ever make the mistake that you can’t be special without a horn or wings. Earth ponies are some of the most intelligent, hard-working gifted ponies you’ll ever meet. The grass and ground beneath your hooves are your own special gift, just like a unicorn’s horn and a pegasus’ wings.”

Celestia smiled in satisfaction when she saw the young earth pony look at her hooves in newfound reverence, and silently noting that a few adult ponies in the crowd were looking at their hooves with some pride.

“And as for living in the palace, it can be very miserable at times.”

Luna happily trotted out of the workshop, with a small box partially hidden underneath one of her folded wings. Her eyes widened in surprise at the sudden crowd gathered around her sister.

“Don’t be afraid to put yourself out there, sis,” Luna said as Celestia rose to her hooves and the two sisters moved through the crowd as the ponies parted to let their princesses through. “You’re getting some looks from back there,” Luna observed as she checked over her shoulder to see the lingering crowd give some confused glances and whispering. “What did you say to them?”

“I just said that living in the palace was pleasant enough, but I always treasure the moments when I go out and see all my ponies.” Luna looked at her sister in intrigue and then back at the crowd of confused ponies.

“Hey, is it just me, or does it smell like the kitchen in here?” Luna said, sniffing the air suspiciously. Turning her head around, Luna gasped in terror as she saw a tower of flames twisting to the sky. The heat burned the young princess’ eyes, forcing her to turn away. Celestia stared at the inferno in a trance, feeling a warmth fading from her forehead. The sensation left, and the ruler of Equestria dashed toward the burning building with Luna right at her heels.

It was absolute panic, with screaming ponies stomping in place in indecision, but above all the chatter and screams a single cry echoed out: there was someone still trapped inside. A few bold colts tried to charge the door to rescue the trapped pony, but the overwhelming flames beat them back.

“What happened here?” Princess Celestia called authoritatively. Two frightened ponies that appeared to be a couple ran to the princess, the pressure of the situation having driven them to tears.

“My daughter! Princess, please help!” the purple pony begged, her enormous eyes welling up in tears. “Princess, please save my daughter!” The woman collapsed into grief as her husband tenderly wrapped his brown neck around her.

Not wasting an instant, Celestia charged through the flames, the blaze seeming to part to allow her entry before immediately reforming and stopping Luna from following after. Luna stumbled back, closing her eyes tight to shield them from the searing heat and galloped back to the crowd of ponies watching in alarm. Luna threw the small box she was carrying to the ground and called upon her magic and aimed her horn towards the palace. She sent out a flare of energy that exploded brilliantly in the air into an enormous red cross, the universal distress signal in Equestria, and the pegasus guards immediately took to the sky. In less than a minute, thirty guards were standing at attention before their princess.

“Your Highness!”

“Soldiers, we have an emergency!” Luna barked. The young princess’ posture became rigid, she puffed out her chest and locked her legs as her soft face morphed into a mask of pure focus. “Princess Celestia and a young filly are inside that fire and every second is precious! We can’t permit this fire to spread! Gather as many clouds as you can! I am calling for an emergency unscheduled rain storm for Canterlot! Now move!”

The pegasi snapped a smart salute and launched into the air with enough coordination and focus to shame the Wonderbolts. Not missing a beat, Luna turned to the crowd of trembling earth ponies and unicorns, her resolute expression not wavering for an instant.

“I want all of you to gather water! In buckets, cups, bowls! However you can! There’s a well not far from here! I want you to grab everypony you find and make a bucket brigade! I want all of Canterlot here! On the double!” The ponies scattered, with Luna running in the streets and shouting to the entire town.

Celestia clenched her teeth and held her wing out to shield her eyes from the searing heat. She tried to breathe into her feathery white wing to help filter the poisonous air, coughing violently as the smoke filled her lungs. She lowered her stance, calling out over the roaring fire to find if

anypony was in there. The flames and the smoke clouded her vision, and all the while a soft voice called in the back of her head to flee.

“Hello! Is there anypony in here?”

A shrill scream cut through the air as a support beam burned away and snapped, the wooden block crashing to the floor in front of the princess and vanishing to the fire’s all-consuming power.

“I hear you! Where are you?” Princess Celestia shouted into the flame.

“Please, anypony! Help!”

“I want to help! Tell me where you are! Help me to find you!”

“Princess Celestia, you must escape.”

Celestia coughed violently as the smoke became thicker, clouding her vision. Her thoughts became hazy as her lungs were slowly strangled by the inky black grip of the poisonous cloud.

“Please... Please, I’m scared!” the young pony cried as the fire blazed even larger.

“Princess Celestia, please. You should escape. You must survive. Equestria needs its savior.”

“Hello? Are you there?” Celestia felt a pit in her stomach. She wasn’t a stranger to fear; she was as scared as anyone when Discord returned, and she worried for the fate of Fillydelphia when parasprites began to consume the city. But Celestia was terrified, and it was because for the first time, she was afraid for herself.

“Please! Somepony please!”

There was a loud groan from above as the ceiling began to buckle from the heat. And all at once, time came to a stop. Celestia saw the filly quivering, curled up in a dark corner of the room, her yellow coat tarnished with soot. If she acted fast, she could throw herself over the young pony.

But behind her: daylight. Cutting through the darkness of the building and shining brighter than the hellish inferno that sought to engulf both of them. And from the flames, a hypnotic voice hissed.

“Survive.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Celestia exploded from the doorway, leaping over the flames and hitting the ground just as the house collapsed from the fire eating at it. Gasping for air, Celestia squinted her eyes to readjust to the light and saw a chain of ponies passing buckets back and forth and dumping the water onto the collapsed building. There was a rumble of thunder as the pegasus guards returned with enough clouds to cover all of Canterlot. With several mighty bucks, the storm broke and the rains began. Unicorns scrambled over to the drenched rubble, working together to lift the ruined building. Celestia’s mane matted down on her side, her beautiful flowing hair clinging idly to her neck.

“Sister! Sister, thank goodness you’re alright!” Luna ran to her sister and rubbed her head against her breast, her tears vanishing as the rain drenched the princess. If Celestia had noticed her sister, she didn’t react, staring straight ahead at the destroyed house, the soft patter of the rain belying the tragedy and chaos that had just struck Canterlot.

Watching as the destroyed building was slowly shifted, Celestia felt herself fall backward and become wrapped in a thick cushion, like she was sinking into a cloud. Perhaps it was from breathing the smoke, but her thoughts were hazy and unfocused. She had seen the filly in the corner, that much she was certain of.

A muffled voice called out Princess Celestia’s name.

Had she seen the girl? Of course she would have helped if she did. She wouldn’t really leave one of her little ponies to die. One of her children. She wouldn’t have let Luna die. Or Twilight. Would she really sacrifice her own life to save these common ponies? Of course.

“Sister?” Luna’s faint voice repeated.

Wouldn't she? She couldn't have seen her. There was no way she could have. The heat was too great. The fire burned her eyes. The building collapsed. It was entirely possible that the filly escaped. She could have gotten out on her own. She could have died.

"Princess Celestia!" The voice was sharp and demanding, drawing Celestia back to herself. Celestia looked down, rain slipping off of her nose, staring into the terrified eyes of the father pony that begged her to help. "Please, Princess Celestia. Where is my daughter?"

Celestia's mouth moved silently, trying without success to force herself to speak.

"Where is my daughter!"

There was a rumble of thunder, and the sound of a mother weeping. The crowd gathered around the anguished purple pony, leaving only the brown father to glare at the princess, eyes burning with malice.

"She's dead. My daughter is dead." His voice was hardly more than a hoarse whisper, growing into a growl. "You killed her. The only tragedy to ever strike Canterlot in years. You were here to see it. And you did nothing. My daughter." Celestia was silent. She still could not make the words come, only continue to stare through the brown colt.

"Sister? Are you well?" Luna asked with great concern in her voice, bumping her older sibling in the ribs.

"She prayed to you. Every night. She praised your name in good times and bad, and worshipped you like a goddess. And when she finally needed you, you couldn't help her! Tell me, Celestia, what use are you?" the colt exploded with enough fury to make Celestia tremble. "Where were you when your bitch sister came and tried to take over the world? You let her live in the palace to rule over us!"

"How dare you!" Celestia finally shouted, the attack on her kin pushing her too far. But the mourning father's fury was too powerful to be extinguished.

"Sister?"

“Didn’t think to help us common ponies? Are we just not worth it to you, O Immortal One? What does it matter to you if we die now or later?”

“That’s not --” Celestia choked on her words, a blinding pain in her head silencing her.

“Sister!”

“Were you powerless against Discord when he came back to rip our world apart? Or did you just not care enough to try?”

Celestia clenched her eyes and turned her head away, her tears stinging her eyes and mixing with the rain.

“You can’t even save a little filly from a fire! My daughter! My beautiful, darling daughter is dead! And you didn’t even try to save her! Damn you, Celestia. Damn you!”

Celestia took a fearful step back, disturbing a puddle. She looked from the spiteful pony, to the ruined house, and to the sobbing mother. She felt a prodding at her ribs, and looked into the wide eyes of her sister. She backed away even further, her breathing growing faster and shallower, and broke into a run, escaping to the palace as fast as her hooves could carry her.

“Sister!” Celestia stopped her flight, and turned over her shoulder to see Luna galloping after her. Luna looked up at her sister in grave concern, the older alicorn’s legs were trembling and she looked as if she were on the verge of a total meltdown. “Celestia, what is wrong with you?”

That was all it took. Celestia fell to her knees, sobbing weakly. Luna was terrified. Celestia was always a pillar of strength for all of Equestria, full of pride and confidence. Luna had never seen her older sister look so vulnerable.

“Celestia, please talk to me!” Celestia wrapped her sister in her wings and wept.

“He’s right... Everything he said is true,” Celestia croaked between sobs. “Luna, what use am I?”

“He? Celestia, who’s he?”

“The father!” Celestia blurted. “The father of that filly that I let die in that fire!”

“Celestia, what father!”

Celestia reeled her head back and stared into her sister’s eyes. The pegasus guards cleared the sky, and Celestia became calm.

“Look, Luna, the rain is finally clearing. I think I’ll take a walk in the garden, I haven’t done that in a while,” Celestia said happily, rising to her hooves and walking casually toward the castle. Luna followed at a distance, watching on in trepidation as her sister marveled at the pleasant weather. “I had so much fun with you today, Luna! I’m so glad we got to spend time together.”

Another turn, another turn, another turn in the maze. Celestia breathed the fresh air as she trekked through. The sun was already well on the second half of its voyage across the sky, peeking through the dissipating clouds. A few butterflies fluttered in front of her, and the sunny princess felt it would be fun to try to follow the creatures.

‘Why not?’ she thought as she kept pace behind the the butterflies floating idly through the air. ‘Today’s the day I throw caution to the wind and finally live a little!’ And it was a gorgeous day. It was a crisp mid-summer afternoon, and the birds were singing.

“Stack some tomatoes, add the cheese, a little bit of lettuce and you’re sure to please...”

Celestia stopped in her tracks and turned her ear to the sky. It sounded like there was someone else in the maze with her. And he was singing. Figuring walking the maze would be more fun with company, Celestia set off to find the other person.

“Bacon, bacon, bacon, bacon... Bacon, bacon, bacon... bacon... hm... bacon... ah, my heart is going to explode if I don’t remember the rest of the song.”

Celestia rounded the corner and froze in shock. There, in the middle of the hedge maze not five hundred feet away from her palace, was the only draconequus the world has ever known. Happily floating in the air and preparing a sandwich.

“Discord!” Celestia shouted, stomping her foot and widening her stance. Discord calmly turned his head and his content grin instantly soured.

“Really? *Now?* I wait for you all day, I had this whole cavern of inner regret all ready to go, and now that I decide to take a break for lunch, you come trotting in like you own the place and ruin the whole thing!” Discord pouted, walking in the air over to Celestia and leaving his sandwich to drift along, the ingredients floating off on their own planes.

“This isn’t possible. The Elements of Harmony defeated you! How could you be free again?”

“Ugh, Celestia you sound like a broken record,” Discord groaned, snapping up a slice of stray tomato in a single bite. “Don’t tell me that last night didn’t mean anything to you. I thought we really connected on an emotional level. Something really *special*,” the draconequus said as he floated upside-down, hovering just a few inches away from Celestia’s face.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’m warning you, Discord,” Celestia spat every syllable, drenching every word with as much hate as she could muster, “you won’t win! Harmony will always triumph over chaos -- ” Celestia stopped talking and glared at Discord as the spirit was mimicking her, flapping his eagle claw as he made a whining noise.

“*Hermony will eweys triemph ever cheos weh weh weh.*” Discord frowned, opening his mouth wide enough to let a slice of salami slide down his throat.

“What do you want, Discord?” Celestia growled, the princess’ defensive facade beginning to slip and show signs of doubt.

“Well, let’s look over the notes from last night,” Discord said as he conjured up a notepad and reading glasses. “Revenge, revenge, revenge, blah blah blah, aaand I think your life is boring. That about sums it up. But you certainly showed me wrong today!” Before Celestia could react, Discord flicked the tip of her horn, triggering a surge of pain to coarse through her head. Flashes from the last two days bombarded the princess’ mind; drowning in Twilight’s letters, an explosion of sound throwing her from her bed, Discord toying with her in her room, stomping down on her captain’s neck, weeping in the rain, breakfast with Luna, the home in Canterlot catching fire before her very eyes, Twilight leaving her, that colt shouting at her, and strangely, after it all, it was the memory of her sitting on her throne, alone, just wishing for excitement, that lingered.

“This game is over, Discord,” Celestia threatened, trying to shake the haunting memories out of her head.

“Celestia, you let a filly *die* today,” Discord said with a grave look, sounding almost upset with the princess. “I mean, *only one*! Oh no, the game has just begun.”

Celestia pulsed a blast of magic through her horn, ignoring the unfamiliar pain that it brought, sending up a shimmering red cross. Near-instantly, several unicorn and pegasus guards had charged through or over the hedges in the maze and took defensive positions around their ruler, staring at the empty air with the same suspicion as any criminal.

“You called, Your Majesty?” the unicorn guard captain said respectfully, stating it as more of a fact than a question. Celestia looked at her captain perplexedly before turning back to face Discord, the draconequus giving the alicorn a friendly wave. At least three guards were staring directly at him; there was no way they would be just waiting for her to give the order to attack the greatest danger Equestria had ever known. So why were they?

“Your Majesty, how may we serve you?”

Celestia stared at Discord with her mouth hanging open, trying to make sense of what was happening.

"You... you can't see him?" Celestia asked, fear clear in her voice.

"See who, Your Majesty?" the guard asked curtly. Celestia's face finally reflected her worry, and the princess looked ready to break down.

"This doesn't make sense," Celestia whispered. Discord roared with cruel laughter before snapping his fingers and vanishing with in flash of light.

"Your Majesty, forgive me for asking, but are you feeling well?"

"I think that I need to rest," Celestia conceded. She let her body go lax and allowed her guards to escort her back to her room. It was still mid-afternoon, but Celestia's mind and body were aching. She needed rest. She needed sleep. She needed to think. She needed help. Calling her ink, quill, and a scroll from the mantle of her fireplace, Celestia took a letter. If anyone could help her against Discord, Twilight and her friends could. After tying the letter in a red ribbon, Celestia sent the scroll into her fireplace and closed her eyes, ignoring the burning vase of flowers as she fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 3

It all happened so strangely. One instant, she was a phoenix, flying high and free toward the sun. And in an instant, the moon crossed the sky and eclipsed the life-bringing celestial body, blanketing the world in darkness. Blackness as far as the eye could see. Celestia slowly twirled as she silently tumbled into the empty abyss. She had no magic to save herself -- her horn was gone. Her wings were stone. Fear swelled inside of her. Celestia kicked her legs, grabbing at anything in the darkness that could rescue her. She couldn't die like this.

And then he was there. Discord fluttered just above, smiling cruelly at her. He stretched his arm in front of her, offering his paw to the princess. Celestia snorted and swung her hoof, hitting his paw away. She would rather die.

"Sister! Wake up! I can't keep the moon in the sky all day!" Celestia slowly lifted her head, her vision blurry and her mind fuzzy from the lingering nightmare. She had no idea why she hadn't asked Luna for help yet; perhaps it was simply too embarrassing for the ruler of Equestria to crawl to her little sister over some nightmares.

"Ugh, just give me five more minutes."

In an instant, Celestia was wide awake. The princess stumbled out of bed, confused and outraged at the sight of that horrible beast messily curled in her sheets.

"Discord, I--"

The spirit of chaos silenced her with a tired groan and a dismissive wave of his claw, grabbing an armful of fabric and vanishing beneath the blankets. Though Celestia would have loved nothing better than to kick the malformed creature out of her bed and stomp him to a bloody mess beneath her, she noticed something that gave her pause. The flowers in the vase were crimson. Not blue, or orange, or even flaming. Celestia tried to remember, it felt so long ago now, but she was certain that this was right.

Shifting her attention back to the sleeping Discord, Celestia made a connection.

Stepping as gingerly as she could, Princess Celestia opened her door without so much as the faintest creak escaping, and silently slipped into the hallway. Celestia breathed deeply, enjoying the crisp bite of an early morning's air. She felt better than she had in days and she was going to share it with everypony she could.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," a maid nodded respectfully. Celestia stopped and smiled warmly at the mare, joy radiating from her like the warmth of the sun.

"It is, isn't it?" Celestia replied and continued to make her way down the hall with a spring in her step, humming a little tune as she marveled at how clear and gorgeous everything seemed to be in the dwindling moments of the night. The only thing that could make it better was watching it shimmer the light of her marvelous sun.

"I can't believe you."

Celestia stopped in her tracks as a sharp pain shot from her horn to her stomach and vomit rose in her throat. She threw her head down and forced herself to swallow the disgusting bile, the acidic taste lingering in her mouth. Gasping for fresh air and cringing at the awful feeling in her throat, she glared up at Discord who seemed to be just as angry with her.

"Don't tell me you're trying to run off on me," the draconequus said, feigning insult.

Celestia did her best to ignore the spirit as he followed her every step. She couldn't make a scene there, not in front of all her servants.

"Oh, you ponies are all the same," Discord wailed melodramatically. "You take me home, have a one night stand of terrible nightmares and mental torment and then you just try to run out the very next morning without even the courtesy of making breakfast."

"Speaking of breakfast," Celestia muttered under her breath as an angry clucking could be heard down the hallway. She heard Luna and

some other kitchen staff shouting, arguing and apologizing for this and that, as the buck-caws of a very upset chicken cut over them.

“Celestia, I’m sorry to leave you, but I just *have* to see this,” Discord said, his eyes wide in anticipation as he slithered down the hallway. Celestia frowned as she didn’t feel the congestion in her head fade away. Smacking her lips to try to coerce the terrible taste out of her mouth, she trudged to Canterlot Tower.

Celestia mentally kicked herself as she exerted her power to raise the sun. On most days, she would have been able to just raise the sun from the balcony outside her room. But because of her tardiness, she needed to get a better vantage point. It was an interesting thing, raising the sun. Like yin and yang, the sun and the moon worked together as opposing and complementary forces. The motion of one affected the other, they pulled on each other. When one was just hanging above the horizon, it was the perfect time to raise the other and use the momentum to make it run smoothly and evenly. But if one fell too low without help, raising the other became much more difficult.

All this was on Princess Celestia’s mind as she strained herself, her horn glowing with energy as the sun’s first rays shone through the retreating night sky. Celestia took a deep breath to herald in another morning, but rather than the refreshing rush of air she had enjoyed just a few moments earlier, she began to cough violently as though her lungs were full of smoke.

“I need to get this taste out of my mouth,” Celestia groaned. “Even Luna’s cooking would taste better than this.”

“Oh, you *are* getting nasty lately. And she was really giving it her best this time, too.”

“Sorry I’m late, Luna,” Celestia said sheepishly as she took her usual seat at the table. “I was...” the words quickly died in the princesses’ throat, still too proud or ashamed to tell her own sister the truth. Luna smiled slightly and put down the fork she had been idly shifting the fruit on her plate with.

“Celestia, I think that we should talk,” Luna said seriously, making no attempt to hide her concern.

“Oh! Oh oh oh! Wait!” Celestia looked straight ahead at Luna, not reacting to the draconequus running toward the table with a tall box of popcorn. “I have to see this.”

“It’s a little early to be so serious, don’t you think, Luna?” Celestia said with a small laugh, looking up at the morning sky above and watching the black clouds of smoke fill the air. “I heard noises coming from the kitchen, that sounds like a fun story, tell me about that.”

“You haven’t been yourself lately, sister,” Luna said as she stared intently at her older sister. Celestia hated it when she looked at her like that; her mouth was folded pensively, and her head was hanging down low so she could stare up with her enormous teal eyes. Those eyes, boring into her mind and reading her every thought.

“Are you just going to sit there and let her judge you?” a voice hissed in her ear. She glared at Discord who was lurking over Luna and breathing into a paper bag.

“Luna, I think that you’re worrying about nothing,” Celestia said quickly before yelping in shock as a loud pop exploded behind her. By the look on her sister’s face, Luna wasn’t convinced.

“Wait, where’s the bag with the sandwich I brought?” Discord mumbled to himself as he discarded the ruined bag. He unfolded Luna’s wings without the young princess seeming to notice as he investigated, crawling around the table. Taking her eyes off the distracting creature, she saw that Luna’s worry had grown. Following her gaze, she saw that her own brilliant white wings were spread to her sides. Celestia took a moment to marvel at them -- how long had it been since she’d flown? Really, truly flown, and felt the wind wrap around her as she dove through clouds.

“Never mind, I’ll just have some steak and eggs. Extra steak!”

The air currents caressing her from horn to hoof, her hair waving like the gentle tide of the ocean. The wind in her hair -- cliché as it may sound --

was like nothing else she ever felt in her long, long life. It was the reason she enchanted her mane to sway in the air.

“Hey, is anyone even paying attention to me?”

She had to fly again. She had to. She slowly lifted her wings up in anticipation, ready to leave the world below her.

“That’s it! Stop ignoring me!”

A cry of pain derailed Celestia’s fantasy and she looked down at her sister in shock. Luna was on her side with a pained expression. She looked at her ribs, where a small patch of blood was matting her dark fur. Celestia ran and knelt beside her, wrapping her wings around the pair and trying to control her panic. Discord swung his hoof experimentally a few times, seeming dissatisfied with the results of his kick.

“Luna! Oh, Luna, no! Luna, are you hurt?”

Luna rose to her hooves, her narrow legs quivering. The princess fearfully backed away from her sister, breaking out of her grip. Celestia tried to pursue her, but Luna stumbled back from her approach, flinching with every motion.

“I... I’m going to fix this, Luna,” Celestia assured, her voice trembling. “Twilight and her friends are coming soon, and we are going to get to the bottom of this.” Without another word, Celestia galloped to the castle. Luna was left alone in the garden with her tears.

Princess Celestia nervously paced around the grand chamber on the highest floor of Canterlot Tower. Immediately after leaving Luna, she had sent a squadron of pegasus guards to escort Twilight Sparkle and her five friends to Canterlot. She had written a letter to Twilight the the previous evening calling for her to return to Canterlot, but she hadn’t informed her of the reason.

She inspected the decorated case waiting in the center of the room again. All six Elements of Harmony were accounted for, and there had

been no sign of Discord since he attacked Luna but she wasn't going lower her guard and allow him to steal the elements a second time. Twilight and the others would arrive and the seven of them would stop Discord once and for all.

"Princess Celestia!" She turned to see her saviors running through the doors to the hall. The six ponies bowed respectfully and Twilight stepped forward.

"We came as fast as we could."

"Thank you all for coming. I'm afraid that I must once again ask too much of you."

"We'll do anything to help," the cyan pegasus spoke up, rising into the air and saluting. Rainbow Dash, bearer of the element of loyalty. Celestia secretly envied the pony, soaring through life without a care in the world. She saw much of herself at that age in the young mare. Celestia forced herself to keep her mind at the matter at hand. She lifted the Elements of Harmony from their case and placed them ceremoniously on the six ponies.

"I don't suppose you have heard news of the fire in Canterlot yesterday?" Celestia asked grimly, despising herself for her uselessness.

"Oh no," the soft voice of Fluttershy gasped.

"I hope nopony was hurt," the sophisticated Rarity added.

"I'm afraid so," the princess replied. She couldn't bring herself to look at the six. "A young filly that was trapped in the house, Dew Drop, couldn't be rescued in time." The air grew heavy as each of the ponies took in the information. Applejack respectfully removed her hat, the perpetually cheerful Pinkie Pie had an unfamiliar moment of solemnity, and the others took to comforting Twilight. The filly had always enjoyed Twilight's company while she lived in Canterlot, and was one of the few ponies in the capitol that Twilight was friendly with.

"I have reason to believe that the fire was no accident," Celestia continued, "and that it was magical in origin." She heard a sinister laugh

echo across the room. She kept her eyes trained on the girls -- they didn't react to the sound.

"Who could have done this?" Twilight asked.

"It is difficult for me to say... But I believe that Discord is responsible." The six were shocked and immediately proceeded to bombard the princess with questions. Every word pounded against Celestia's head, every shrieking voice threatening to split her head in half. She silenced them by holding her hoof out and motioned for Twilight to come to her side.

"But Princess, I don't understand. We defeated Discord. The Elements of Harmony trapped him again," the purple unicorn spoke quickly as she always did when faced with a conundrum. "How can he be free again? Why hasn't he made any real attack on Equestria yet? What--"

"Twilight, I need to ask you something." Twilight looked up at her mentor respectfully, noticing the concern in her eyes. "Can you sense anything strange in the room?" Twilight looked around at the walls suspiciously before closing her eyes. She calmed her mind, letting her magical intuition spread around the room and search for any kind of magical interference. After a minute, Twilight opened her eyes and saw the princess staring daggers at Rainbow Dash.

"Come on, Celestia, don't you want to fly?" the pegasus taunted cruelly, flying in small loops and patterns around the room.

"I couldn't feel anything, Princess," Twilight said softly, calling Celestia's attention back to her.

"Thank you, Twilight. We leave immediately."

The ponies that were unable to fly were carried in a chariot pulled by Celestia's most trusted pegasus guards; they were among the few ponies in all of Equestria that knew the location of Discord's prison.

But Celestia couldn't care less about any of that. Her mind was on more important things, like pulling out of the nose dive that was sending her

racing to the ground. With just the slightest shift of her wings, Princess Celestia snapped up into the air just inches before crashing, leaving a burst of ethereal light to spread across the ground. She rejoined the six young ponies, who greeted her with generous applause.

“Wow, Princess! I didn’t know you could fly like that!” Rainbow Dash cheered. The others were simply flabbergasted; they never really thought of Princess Celestia flying before, and when she had told them that she would be flying alongside the chariot, they presumed she’d be very regal and dignified in her flight. Instead, she soared through the skies with a daredevil attitude and enough enthusiasm to shame the finest fliers in Cloudsdale. And it felt amazing.

“Isn’t it fun to just break off and cut loose?”

“I have to say it is,” Princess Celestia agreed.

“Beg pardon?” Applejack asked confusedly. None of the ponies were quite sure who Celestia was replying to, but shrugged it off without much thought.

“Man, we are high up!” Pinkie Pie shouted in amazement, leaning so most of her body was over the side of the chariot. “I can’t remember the last time I was so high up! I mean, except when we were going after Rainbow Dash a few days ago because she was being all stubborn about helping us, or that other time when we went to Cloudsdale in the balloon, or when I was commentating on the Running of the Leafs, or --”

Celestia decided that the loud, pink earth pony was her least favorite of Twilight’s friends. She didn’t care for her arrogance. But now it was her turn to fly.

“Is that the place?”

Celestia frowned as she turned to see an orange mountain range in the distance. They couldn’t have gotten there so soon, could they? It had only been a few hours. There was a sealed cave in the tallest mountain that a dragon had once called its lair, though many ponies still believed the beast to lurk within. This suited Celestia just fine -- with the reputation the

mountains had already, there was even less of a chance for anypony to accidentally discover the greater threat.

“Yes, that is it.”

“It looks... scary...”

“Don’t fret, Fluttershy, it’s unbecoming.”

“Girls, I have to ask. Was there anything strange you noticed about Discord when you confronted him?”

“Ya mean besides the exploding chocolate milk rain, cotton candy clouds, ten-foot tall bunnies, floating pie, dancing buffalo, and checkerboard grass?”

“I understand it’s a redundant question, but yes. Was there anything happening that might have hinted toward some greater plan? Something Discord said or did that was suspicious?”

“Well,” Twilight replied after a moment’s thought. Of course she’d have the answer. Her faithful student. “He kept inviting us to use the Elements on him. He just sat there and took it. It didn’t look like he was even trying to escape.”

“Hm. Perhaps not. Discord’s overconfidence was his undoing when I first confronted him,” Celestia said. “At least he was quiet when he gave you the opening. He insisted on singing through my entire battle with him.”

The carriage landed on a large ledge extending from the side of the mountain, and the ponies disembarked the carriage and walked to the wall of rocks that had sealed off the cave.

“It’s going to take forever to move all these,” Twilight cried, exasperated. Celestia gave a few short laughs and strode forward.

“You know, there is some truth when ponies say that I’m the most powerful being in Equestria,” the princess said with more than a bit of pride. With the slightest effort, the rocks rolled away, laying the entrance bare.

“We don’t all have to go in there... do we?” Fluttershy whimpered.

“Well, yes, that was my intention. It was part of why I called for all of you to be here,” Celestia said. “Is there a problem?”

“Oh, no... It’s just that... it’s very... um... dark...” the yellow pegasus said meekly, inching away from the cave. Celestia hid her displeasure well.

“Well, maybe the princess and I can just go in ahead and look around and you all stay could here and keep Fluttershy company?” Twilight offered with a hopeful grin, looking at Princess Celestia for confirmation. Celestia nodded in approval; she really didn’t want to spend any much more time with Twilight’s companions than she had to.

“Well, alright, Sugarcube,” Applejack drawled in that insipid accent of hers. “Y’all be careful in there.”

Twilight nodded thankfully, and teacher and pupil entered the mountain. There was not much light in the cave - it was high noon and the sun was directly above them. Celestia called upon her magic to move the sun forward by a few hours; it was a period of unrest in her kingdom, she had to break a few rules to solve it. And what was the point of having control over the sun’s orbit if she didn’t use it? The falling sun poured light directly through the mouth of the cave, cutting a line of light down the middle of the chamber. Twilight had to hand it to whatever dragon had lived in lair, it had excellent taste; there’d always be a marvelous view of the sunset.

Celestia was stunned by what the sunlight revealed. It was impossible. She wanted to believe it was just another of Discord’s tricks, but she couldn’t trust her own senses anymore. Everything she had hoped, all of her most optimistic thoughts were nothing but naïve wishing, and her worst fears were coming true. She was so certain. It didn’t make sense.

“It’s still here?” Twilight asked flatly, sounding almost disappointed.

“No, it can’t be,” Celestia snorted, stomping over to the fossilized draconequus, tapping it apprehensively with her hoof. Solid stone. She closed her eyes and focused her magical energies, searching through the cave for any sort of magical residue, any small disturbance in the balance of nature that should not have been. She found something! There, at the mouth of the cave! It was a spell to remove the boulders blocking the entrance -- hers. Not so much as a wisp of unfamiliar magical energy lurked in the corners of the darkness.

Discord was securely imprisoned in stone.

Celestia’s mind was racing as she trying to make sense of this unbelievable turn. Could he have somehow leaked out of the stone? Through a crack, or a thin layer? Perhaps he had escaped and made a replica to throw them off the trail? No, she would have sensed some traces of magic surrounding it. Was the statue the effect of some mass hysteria? Did Discord have some unknown accomplice that could have assisted him? Were his mind and magic still free though his body was trapped? No, the power of the Elements was too great to allow such a flaw in the seal. Then what?

“Hey, girls!” an annoying voice echoed across the walls of the cave. Celestia watched the intruding pink earth pony bounce in out of the corner of her eye, hoping Twilight would deal with her. “Didja find anything?”

“Not yet, Pinkie. Discord’s still here. I don’t have any idea how he’s been harassing Canterlot,” Twilight whispered, able to recognize that the princess was deep in thought.

“Maybe it wasn’t him,” Pinkie suggested helpfully. Celestia’s eyes flared and clenched her teeth tightly, unseen by the other two girls. How dare this common pony question her!

“This spastic, dirt pony clod, this mere *child*, thinks she knows better than the ruler of all Equestria?”

Celestia spun to condemn the girl, but her rage subsided when she witnessed a peculiar sight. This Pinkie Pie was twitching furiously, bouncing on the ground, and shaking from nose to tail; it looked as if each

segment of her body was trying to tear away from the others, or at least having a violent seizure.

“Is she going to be well?” Celestia asked Twilight as she slowly made her way over. All at once, the spasms ended, with the pony looking surprised at herself.

“I’ve never felt anything like *that* before!” Pinkie exclaimed.

“What in the world is going on in there?” Rarity called. She and the other three ponies entered the cave and crowded around their friend, all looking at her expectantly.

“I think Pinkie Sense just kicked in,” Twilight answered. “And it looks like it’s a doozy.”

Pinkie-what?

“So what’s up, Pinkie?” Rainbow Dash asked as she hovered above the other girls, her interest piqued.

“I don’t know what this was. Usually my Pinkie Sense is more twitchy-twitch twitchy tail and flip flop ears!”

Celestia had enough of this foolishness. “What is she talking about?”

“Please, Princess, this could be important,” Twilight hushed her. Princess Celestia was surprised by her loyal student’s tone, and even more so that she was holding stock in what was most likely due to some drop in blood sugar.

“But I’ve never felt anything like that. This was more like shaky bone, headache... cold.” Pinkie said the last word nervously, losing her never-ending enthusiasm for a moment.

“Cold? Ya mean cold hooves?”

“I brought a scarf if you’re feeling a draft.”

“No, you guys. Cold insides.”

Princess Celestia gave the petrified Discord one last glance before drawing herself up tall. "I think that we've learned everything that we can here." She led the six girls out of the cave and stacked the boulders in front of the cave's entrance. As the six ponies began to shuffle back to the carriage, Celestia held her leg out, making Pinkie Pie stay behind.

"So, this... sense of yours," Celestia asked, still not convinced by the whole thing. "Does it happen often?"

"Well, not all the time," the party pony said conversationally. "Usually when things are about to happen."

"Things?" Celestia was intrigued. In her many years, she'd never heard of an earth pony with clairvoyant abilities. "What kinds of things?"

"All sorts of things. Like if something's about to fall, my tail starts twitching. Or if I can't find Gummy, and my shoulder aches, then I should check the bathtub!" Celestia sighed. She should have known that the pony would be no help. "But the last time I had something big like that, the girls and I almost got gobbled up by a hydra in the swamp!" Perhaps she spoke too soon.

"So, what does this mean?"

"I don't know. I've never ever ever had anything this big before."

"Please, please try to think," Celestia asked her, allowing Pinkie Pie to rejoin her friends and leaving herself alone to mull this information over.

"I'm surprised she didn't tell you to try to laugh at me," a snide voice mocked. Celestia snapped her head around as saw Discord gliding away down a narrow rocky ledge. She took off after him, her hooves scattering dirt and rocks in her charge. She wanted answers, and she would not be denied. She pursued the taunting spirit around winding corners and through the air, from mountain top to mountain top, sliding down rocky cliffs and dashing around falling rocks. Debris slammed into the ground around her, but the princess could hardly notice - nothing would distract her from the real priority.

Her chase finally ended on a long, smooth expanse of stone. Celestia's wings were spread wide and her horn radiated with barely contained power.

"Enough games, Discord!"

"Oh, we're so serious! I thought you were enjoying your day out," Discord said playfully as he jogged in place. "I'm certainly enjoying the exercise."

"How are you here? I saw you imprisoned in the cave where we left you - I felt it with my own hooves! How are you here?"

"You know, a more immature draconequus might have found something provocative about that," Discord purred, winking at the indignant princess. "Alright, fine, I'll give you a chance." Discord's waist separated from his upper torso and walked behind Celestia, and both halves sprouted the missing part of their bodies.

"The answer you seek is right at your side, but hearing it will make you run and hide." Celestia's anger intensified. It was irritating enough when there was just one of him speaking in his riddles. "Face the music and let your lesson be learned, and then back to my cave is where you'll return. One choice will return you to your life so sweet, the other one leads to ruin complete."

The two creatures fled and Celestia immediately ran after the Discord in front of her. She ran with even greater determination than before, pushing herself harder as she tripped on the rocky surface and harrowing trails. The draconequus vanished around a corner on the side of a mountain, but when Celestia skidded around the sharp turn, the princess was greeted by a large rock thundering down the side of the mountain. The stone cracked the alicorn in the head, rendering her unconscious. Princess Celestia leaned to the side and fell off the path, falling helplessly toward her impending doom.

Celestia weakly opened her eyes and felt several hooves pressing against her side, carrying her higher. She tilted her head and saw her pegasus guards holding her, joined by Rainbow Dash. Feeling another wave of pain, Celestia shut her eyes and fell into restless sleep.

Princess Celestia awoke, unsure of how much time had passed. She tried to stand, only for her guards to softly urge her to lay down again. She complied; it hurt too much to stand, anyway. She looked up in misery as she saw Twilight Sparkle and her five friends surrounding her, watching her in concern. In pity.

“How... how did you know to find me?” Celestia moaned, her head pounding from what was most likely a concussion.

“Twitchy tail.”

Of course. “I’m sorry to have worried you all. I thought... I thought I saw someone,” Celestia muttered.

“Don’t worry, Princess!” Pinkie Pie said happily as she hopped back and forth. “Sometimes I see stuff that isn’t there, too.”

Celestia was taken back to Canterlot alone; another carriage had been called for the six waiting back at the mountain. She had asked them to hold onto the Elements of Harmony themselves so they’d be prepared when Discord made his move.

Luna was nervously hovering around her sister all through their dinner, constantly checking if she was comfortable, if the food was prepared correctly, if she needed anything, if there was anything she could do to help, how did this happen; Celestia mumbled softly at every interrogation. She just wanted to be left alone.

“Well, you have your birthday to look forward to,” Luna said as she returned to her seat, sitting with her haunches posed to spring her to her hooves at a moment’s notice. “I think it’s only four days now. Oh n--I dropped your gift yesterday during the... Sister, are you sure that you don’t need anything?”

“I’m fine,” Celestia said darkly as she rose from the table, her food mostly untouched. Celestia wordlessly exited the hall and returned to her chamber, determined to figure out what Discord was planning. She called

her quill and paper and began to make a list of everything that came to her mind.

- headaches
- false visions
- nightmares and sleep troubles
- fire and smoke
- setting fire to the home in Canterlot---why that house? connection to Twilight?
- no unnatural weather or chaotic disturbances
- invisible to everyone else but can still attack Luna
- *appears* to still be in stone---how can he still be free? outside help, weakening in the E.o.H, some plan he prepared before, another illusion

Celestia grunted in frustration. What was she missing? There were missing links that put these all together. She began to doubt herself. Was she even moving in the right direction? This was Discord - was it foolish to try to make any sort of sense of all this?

A scratching noise from the corner of the room broke her concentration, and two horns protruded from the flames dancing from the mouth of her vase.

"You know, I'm great at puzzles," Discord called as he pulled his torso out from the pot, leaning his head on his hand. "Just say the magic word."

Chapter 4

The energy in the room was tangible as the protector of the peace and the spirit of chaos locked eyes. Celestia had never felt such a burning hatred for anything in her entire life. In ancient times, less powerful beings had dueled to the bitter end over mere insults; political leaders had sent hundreds of ponies to their deaths in bloody wars over territory; brother would cut down brother for a meager inheritance. Now, Princess Celestia, a relic from those barbaric times in Equestrian history, stared down with the creature responsible for countless suffering and hardship across time, whose calamitous powers had left no corner of the world unscarred. There he was, an intruder in her castle, in her private chamber, brimming with malicious excitement, grinning at her, his serpentine body stretching out from her vase.

“Hah! You blinked, I win!” Discord cheered, causing the vase to wobble as he threw up his arms in celebration. “Alright, now before I help you with your little issues, I actually need your help with something.” Before Celestia could say a word, Discord appeared in a flash in front of her, laying on his belly and looking intently at a scroll he was holding in one paw and tapping a pen against his fang with the other claw.

“So, I’ve been thinking about making my own Elements of Harmony. Only, you know, not so much harmonious. Harmonic? Harmonized?” Discord lost himself in thought for a moment before snapping his paw at the silent princess. “Anyway, I’m just going to bounce some ideas off of you. Feel free to jump in at any time,” Discord added sarcastically when he saw her expression hadn’t shifted. “I’m thinking Grumpiness, Half-Truths, Greed, Avarice, Miserliness, and Spoon. Any thoughts?”

“Spoon?” Celestia scoffed. “And three of those mean the same thing.”

“I knew you’d want to help me,” Discord said with satisfied smile, elbowing Celestia playfully and curling up his scroll before tossing it over his shoulder into the blazing vase. “Okay, so that’s my business, what’s going on with you?”

“Discord,” Celestia growled like a wolf as she paced around the nonchalant creature, “I am sick and tired of your games.”

“You’ve *got* to get some new lines, Celestia,” Discord sighed and sprawled himself across the carpet. “It’s always ‘enough of your games,’ and ‘this game is over.’ I mix it up every time I walk through a *door*, but it’s always the same conversation with you. Mix it up a little bit!”

“Enough!” Celestia shouted. The princess was at the limits of her patience and was beginning to lose focus and control over her magic -- a crack had etched along the length of the burning vase. “I have seen you dance around my kingdom, planting your seeds of chaos in my mind and watching them grow! I warn you, monster, slither back to whatever pit you dragged yourself from now, because by night’s end I will have figured out your tricks and I will have found a way to destroy you!”

“Your Majesty, is everything well?” a nervous voice called from the hall, one of those peevish guards.

“I’m fine!”

“You’re silly,” Discord said dryly. He was resting his chin on his paw and twirling his beard between his talons, making no attempt to hide his pleasure at Celestia’s whirlwind of emotions. The princess stomped around the room, muttering to herself and occasionally kicking kicking and stabbing the walls of her room with her horn. She spat acid and snorted fire, bled hatred and wept smoke.

Discord watched with interest as Celestia curled into a corner of her room and whimpered. After several minutes of listening to the terrified princess’ soft crying, he concluded that he was probably going to need to give her a gentle push in the right direction. He softly stepped over to her side, sat down next to Celestia, looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, and then began to flick her ear until her attitude changed. Celestia pushed him away, her tears dried and gone, and resumed her tantrum around the room.

“You are a vile, twisted creature, do you know that?” Celestia snarled.

“It comes up now and again,” the spirit replied matter-of-factly. “But can you blame me? It’s just what I am.”

“You toy with with ponies’ minds and emotions and then expect to be forgiven for it simply because that’s ‘what you are?’ What kind of demented being are you?”

“I guess I’m just stir-crazy.”

“You’re despicable.” Celestia turned her head away from the lounging draconequus and sat down to return her attention to the list she had been compiling. If she wasn’t going to get any sleep tonight, she could at least be productive.

“Is this about the riddle? Because if you want a straight answer about the riddle, just say you want my help,” Discord offered.

Celestia laughed sharply before her face contorted back to revulsion, ignoring the gathering smoke in the corner of the room. “Never. I don’t need to beg anypony for help, especially not you!”

“Oh, that’s right,” Discord clucked as he lurched over her. Celestia tried her hardest to keep her focus on her paper, but she kept finding her eyes drawn to the draconequus. “The proud, wise ruler of Equestria doesn’t need anypony’s help. Why would you? You’re obviously so much more capable than anypony else, am I right? What could they tell you that you don’t already know?”

“Stop it.”

“You’ve ruled Equestria for thousands of years, and handled the last thousand without any help. But I bet it’s easier when there’s no family members trying to go behind your back and steal it all from you, right?”

“I said stop it.”

“But it gets lonely, doesn’t it? Who in all Equestria could equal you? Me? Well, I’ll admit my social skills aren’t what they could be. There’s not much time to practice the little things like personal space when you’re a statue.” Discord demonstrated his point by dropping down to his side, just a

few inches away from Celestia's nose and staring into her eyes with unnerving purpose. "Your sister? Maybe, though she's been a little bit stunted by her whole 'eternal banishment'."

"Stop it!" Celestia shouted, shutting her eyes tight and wishing like a child that the monsters would just go away.

"But that's right, you *do* have somepony! Twilight Sparkle," Discord purred. Celestia hated herself for shivering at the sound of his voice; she was the great Princess Celestia! So why was she trembling like a frightened filly?

"*Twilight Sparkle*. Oh, such a pretty name. What drew you to that particular unicorn in the first place? Was it her profound magical talents? Or was it nepotism?"

"What?" Celestia opened her eyes and was startled to find herself standing in Twilight's old home in Canterlot. And there she was: the bookish unicorn was surrounded by tomes of all sizes and colors, scattered around her in tall stacks, staring intently at the open pages in front of her. She called out to her student, but Twilight didn't respond.

"Twilight Sparkle, all alone in her tower in Canterlot, learning and reflecting on the wisdom of the past," Discord's voice echoed from inside her head, "but never taking an interest in the modern world. Never giving the time of day to other ponies."

There was another flash and Celestia was watching Twilight talk to three other smiling ponies her own age.

"Oh, sorry, girls, I've got a lot of studying to catch up on," Twilight replied to some unheard question. She smiled nervously and then dashed past the trio with her book securely in her pack. Another flash, and they were back at Twilight's tower. The purple unicorn was chastising her dragon assistant Spike for buying a present for somepony's party.

"She has her little servant, but everypony else is just a distraction. Unnecessary. You don't see any sort of connection between you two?" Discord asked as he appeared out of thin air.

“That’s not true in the slightest!” Celestia shouted, shaking her head resolutely.

“Well, not anymore. Not after her friends.” Another flash, and Celestia watched with nervous interest as images of Twilight’s adventures around Ponyville flashed before her eyes. A slumber party, climbing a mountain, Winter Wrap Up, Fluttershy and Rarity confiding in her, group hugs, and much more, appearing and vanishing faster than she could process them. Celestia blinked and she was back on her bed.

“Those friends that take her away from you, that fill her head with all their nonsense.” Discord snapped his fingers and Twilight’s latest letter, the one Celestia never finished reading, flew from its place by the fireplace to his hand. With a loud honk, the draconequus blew his nose in the paper, leaving it a soggy, dripping mess before discarding it in the fire. A smokey image of Twilight Sparkle trotted out from the flames and headed for Princess Celestia.

“Those friends that are undoing all your work to make a perfect little Celestia clone. The one pony in all of Equestria that you could feel some connection with, and you were the one who set her adrift.” Twilight passed through Celestia like a ghost, walked into a wall, and was gone.

“The lonely princess, left alone again,” Discord mused. Celestia was speechless. She didn’t want to believe it. She didn’t want to believe a word of those lies. But it was true. It was all so true. She had met ponies that she found disagreeable in her life, but she had never found herself ever hating any of her little ponies... until she met those five miscreants Twilight had begun to associate with. That fat-tongued bumpkin, that yellow milquetoast, the arrogant diva who insolently tried to imitate a mere shred of her majesty, that braggart with her meager excuse for “flying”, and, worst of them all, *the noise*.

And yet, Twilight cared for them with all her heart, writing to her weekly of their invaluable friendship. They had saved Equestria when she couldn’t harness the power of the Elements of Harmony. And yet she hated them. The smoke from the vase was spreading around the ceiling. She was the oldest, wisest, most powerful being in all of Equestria, the most knowledgeable pony history had ever known, and she hated them. There *had* to be a reason why. They were taking her Twilight away.

“Not that you’re wrong to think that way.” Celestia had forgotten there was someone else in the room. Still grief-stricken at this realization, Princess Celestia looked up in misery at the relaxed draconequus floating in the air.

“You didn’t hear it from me, but the problem’s not limited to your number one student. Even your little sister isn’t the most trustworthy of confidants,” Discord whispered into her ear without even moving his mouth. “She and I were good friends, you know. Well, as good of friends as two immortals who once battled each other and then were ultimately banished from their own kingdoms and bore burning resentment against a single pony could be.”

“You’re a liar,” Celestia said weakly. She hadn’t the energy to put any more passion into her voice. “Do you really expect me to believe that you were able to communicate with her after being sealed in stone by the Elements of Harmony? Or that you could convince me that Luna would ever want anything to do with you?”

“Me? Celestia, I *wish* I was able to decide when we’d have our... chats,” Discord grimaced at the memory. “While I at least could watch when ponies walked in the garden and do some pony-watching, your *poor* sister was up there all on her own. Sometimes, it’d just get too much for her, and then who does she decide to bother?” Discord jabbed his thumbs into his chest. “This guy.”

Discord snapped his fingers, and after the light faded away, Celestia saw that he was made of stone and standing on his old pedestal, frozen in the same position he had been in when he was first defeated by Celestia and Luna, belting out the last note of that obnoxious song he had kept up through the entire battle. An alien ringing noise filled the air, and the fossilized Discord dropped his arms in frustration and pulled out a strange object from behind his back. It looked like a red box, with a banana-shaped appendage vibrating on the top. Discord put the appendage to his ear and winced away from whatever was inside of it.

“She’d wake me up in the middle of the night, and I mean *the middle of the night*, just to whine, whine, whine!” the draconequus roared, throwing

his arms up in the air in frustration. "*I don't know why I feel this way!* What am I supposed to say? I don't know why she feels this way!"

Discord shook himself like a wet dog, and the gray stone coating him flew around the room, splattering and coating the walls like paint. Celestia looked up and saw Equestria revolving gracefully in space -- she was on the moon. Having figured out the illusion by now, she made no effort to communicate with Luna as her younger sister stomped around the barren satellite, kicking rocks and shrieking at the sky. Her fur was black as night, her mane was a dark purple cloud filled with stars that shone menacingly, her wings were like a bat's, her eyes like a snake's. She was cursing the world, cursing the world, cursing the ponies, and above all else, cursing her sister. Celestia could barely stand to see her sister in such a furious state.

"I complain, but talking about you was always fun," Discord said as he grabbed a moon rock and bit a large chunk off before offering it to the princess, who passively refused. "Huh. Cheesy. That reminds me, has she tried to poison you yet? She said that she'd love to watch you twitch."

Celestia wouldn't allow another word against her sister. "You're lying! That was Nightmare Moon! Luna would never hurt me."

"Now you're just deluding yourself," Discord said acrimoniously. "Makes sense, though. You have to protect yourself from reality *somehow*. Because," the draconequus struggled to stop himself from laughing, "if you ponies really had *any* idea of what was going on in your brains..." Discord couldn't hold it in any longer, and he exploded in laughter. His voice became many, and ponies crawled out of the moon's crust, howling with vicious laughter. Twilight's horrible friends, her most trusted guards, even the burned and marred corpse of the filly from Canterlot and her father; but the worst was her faithful student's cruel betrayal and Nightmare Moon's maniacal cackling.

Then all at once it ended. Discord twirled his furry finger next to his temple and then mimeographed an explosion, spitting a bit on the princess. "Hohohoooh, wow. I would be out of a job."

"Luna would never want to hurt me!" Celestia repeated, widening her stance and aiming her horn threateningly at the spirit of chaos.

"It's not as funny the second time," Discord growled without any hint of humor in his voice. "Look, I'm just going to lay flat what you already know -- ready for this? There is no Nightmare Moon! There never was!" And as he spoke, her sister changed before Celestia's eyes. Her pitch black fur grew lighter, and her starry mane was now light blue hair. Her entire body had shrunk; the raging Nightmare Moon had regressed to the younger, innocent Luna she knew and loved. Resting on her curled legs, she stared at her beloved home floating in the night sky and cried out in anguish.

"Sure, she looks more like jailbait now after your favorite little ponies were finished with her, but she's the same pony she was when you stuck her on the moon a thousand years ago," Discord said, bringing Celestia back to reality. "And all because she wanted a little attention."

"It would have meant the end of all life in Equestria if Luna had her way!" Discord couldn't hide his grin.

"Well, Celestia knows best. But I'm just going to say this: 'Nightmare Moon' spent a thousand years alone on the moon as punishment for wanting to be appreciated, and then she was smacked down again during her shot at revenge. Maybe you should keep an eye on her." Discord's expression hardened, the draconequus looking frighteningly serious. His nostril flared and he turned his nose up. "But I'll be honest, you probably shouldn't stay here, what with all the smoke in the air."

Celestia's eyes teared at the burning cloud that stung at them. She coughed violently as the poisonous fumes filled her lungs and dropped her head low to the ground. Discord was gone. Good riddance. She kept her head low to the ground even as she walked through the dark hallways as the eerie hush of night stalked her every step. She didn't have the concentration to stay quiet and simply resorted to magic, casting a spell on herself that would stifle her every sound. She scratched around the empty hallways, not finding a single soul in the castle. Did she not have guards? Did she not have servants? Had the ruler of Equestria truly been left completely alone in her palace?

"L-luna?" Celestia called in a hushed voice and was met with disappointment. She should have known Luna well enough to know that her sister would be outside, enjoying her night. Celestia slowly stepped through her castle, walking alone for what felt like hours, until she saw a

trace of light at the end of the hall. She approached cautiously -- there wouldn't be anyone awake at this time of night, not while the rest of the castle was empty. Not in Luna's own room. Waiting for another of Discord's tricks, Princess Celestia slowly extended her neck to open the door when a noise gave her pause. Two voices. Two nervous, hushed, terrible voices that Celestia could never mistake. She brought her ear to the door and spied on her sister and her student.

"...attacked me in the gardens this morning."

"What? There's no way!"

"I have the scar to prove it. Twilight, I know that your loyalty lies first and foremost with Celestia, but I ask you to consider the fate of Equestria."

"I... I don't know. Couldn't we try to talk before we--"

"I've been trying to talk, and you can see where it's gotten me. I don't want to resort to this, but I'm afraid if things don't change soon, there may be no other way."

"But shouldn't we at least... I mean, are you sure that... I just... I just don't know..."

Celestia heard her sister sigh sympathetically and wanted nothing more than to charge in the room and confront the two. But she was stunned still. Even Luna was working against her. She was taking her Twilight away. Her only friend was leaving her.

"I know you're scared. I am too. But I wouldn't even suggest this if I didn't think it was right."

"...I'll have to think about this... and talk to the others, see what they think."

"We have to be brave, Twilight Sparkle. For Equestria."

Celestia returned to her room, coughing as she walked through the smoke, dropped ungracefully to her bed, and fell asleep. And for the first time in her life, she was truly loathing the idea of morning.

Morning came early. Celestia trudged to her balcony and lifted the sun, and slammed the door as she entered the hall. She kept her head low under the smoke. Curiously, all of the ponies in the palace were doing the same, covering their mouths with their hoofs and joking with each other about “the princess’ latest culinary accomplishment.”

Her face lacking the usual smile she wore in the morning, Celestia stomped to the kitchen. Throwing open the doors, she could hardly believe her eyes. Two different ovens were filled with flames, smoke was blanketing the air, bowls and plates were smashed on the ground, every shelf was a mess, ingredients were strewn left and right. Luna and Flour were working their hardest to put out the flames, laughing like fools the whole time. Celestia cleared her throat purposefully, and the two ponies were startled by the sight of her. Celestia’s horn flashed and the fires dwindled and died. Luna greeted her sister warmly, and Flour bowed respectfully, allowing Celestia to examine her.

The slightly plump unicorn was shorter than average, and her vanilla fur contrasted with her chocolate mane. Her coat was stained with so many white splotches of baking powder that Celestia wasn’t sure if Luna was really such a disaster in the kitchen or if the chef’s cutie mark was actually a shapeless blob of white powder. Was this really the mare who was allowing Luna to run wild with her food?

“Good morning, sister!”

“Good morning, your highness. We were just having a bit of early morning excitement, nothing to worry about,” Flour said, nodding submissively.

“Luna,” Celestia spoke sternly, “perhaps you should try a different hobby.” Without another word, Celestia turned out the door, leaving Luna and Flour to stare at each other speechlessly. Perhaps she had been harsher than she intended, Celestia thought to herself as she walked to the garden, but she wouldn’t let herself be bothered by it. She had put off her royal duties two days in a row now and she wasn’t looking forward to the rush of meetings she’d see today.

“Minister, who shall I honor with my audience today?” Princess Celestia asked the well-dressed unicorn keeping pace behind her.

“The mayor-elect of Hoofington would like to speak to you about possibly making a public appearance in the near future,” he replied.

“Yes? And what else?” Celestia asked expectantly.

“That’s... all for today, Princess Celestia,” the minister replied, biting his lip nervously when he saw the princess stand stone still. Thoughts buzzed around her head like an angry swarm as she tried to decide if she should be grateful or insulted -- she was the princess. Was it not her duty to oversee her land? Did they not think she was capable of helping them? What was she going to do with her day?

“So, Ms. Suffolk,” Celestia began conversationally as she stirred some cream into her coffee -- she typically couldn’t stand the drink, but she typically wasn’t haunted by her greatest enemy and in the process of uncovering a grand conspiracy arranged by the two ponies in the world she had complete trust in. “I am told you want me to make an appearance in Hoofington.”

“Yes, your highness,” the mayor-elect of Hoofington answered nervously. She had never held any sort of high office before, and she still wasn’t the true mayor of Hoofington yet. And yet, here she was, drinking coffee with the princess. “With all that noise about Ursa Majors resting in the immediate area spread by Hoofington’s own prodigal daughter, the citizens are starting to fear that there could be some truth to it. I’ve tried to assure them that there is nothing to fear, I’ve had several hunting parties investigate the forests surrounding the town, and I’ve reminded them time and time again that Trixie gives truth to her name in more than one way, but nothing seems to be getting through to them. But perhaps if they heard it from you, they’d put all that silly business behind them.”

Suffolk suddenly felt very uncomfortable as she realized Princess Celestia had been staring intently at her for their entire visit. She cleared

her throat, hoping that the princess would change her expression. She didn't.

"Here comes breakfast!" Suffolk thanked the stars as Princess Luna came trotting out of the castle with two servers at her side. Her smile faded when she saw the new face at the table, but she kept a pleasant expression as she greeted the young politician. "I'm sorry, I didn't make enough. I wasn't expecting a guest this morning. Oh, not that there's any problem!"

"Here, she can have mine," Celestia offered, sliding her plate in front of the mare. She was only being accommodating. It had nothing to do with Luna.

"So, you're the mayor from Hoofington, aren't you?" Luna asked with interest. "Suffolk, isn't it? Are you excited for your first term?" Celestia was surprised with her sister. Luna seemed to have a greater understanding of political goings-on in Equestria than she gave her credit for. Celestia rose to her hooves, ignoring the uncertain looks of the two ponies as she returned to the castle.

Celestia hated her throne room. She hated the emptiness, the isolation, the boredom. But she loved closing her eyes and dreaming. And that's just what she did. She was tired; she knew she hadn't been sleeping well. But could she be blamed? No, no one could blame her, she thought to herself as she curled on her bed. The day had gone by without event. She had eaten lunch and dinner alone when she knew Luna was occupied by her hobbies, and spent the day catching up on some much-needed rest.

She delighted in the sensation as her eyelids grew heavier and the world around her felt fuzzier. She yawned peacefully, anxious to sleep. Not even the billowing smoke above her would keep her from her reward. Her eyes closed and the night took her.

There was a thunderous blast of noise that nearly threw Princess Celestia from her bed.

Chapter 5

“Happy birthday to you!” Discord bellowed, stomping in place and blowing on a harmonica. A bass drum was strapped to his back that rung like a gong with every step; an accordion hanging from his arms made a sad slide-whistle sound as he brought the two cymbals in his hands together and apart with what sounded like a duck call. “Happy birthday, dear Celestia!”

“It’s not my birthday,” Celestia moaned, too exhausted to work up any genuine anger.

“Happy birthday tooo yooouuu!” he finished the song operatically and the instruments vanished.

“It’s not my birthday for another three days,” Celestia moaned again.

“Really? Your birthday’s coming up?” Discord asked, truly surprised. “I was just having some fun. I should get you something nice.” A catalogue appeared in front of the draconequus and he buried his face in the paper. Celestia curled her wings over her head, trying to drown out the cretin’s “oohs” and “aahs” and return to sleep. She heard paper rustling in the wind and felt something drop on her.

“Well, I see plenty of things that I’d like for *my* birthday,” Discord said as he conspicuously tapped on a circled item in the magazine, an alicorn’s skeleton labeled “Wet Blanket Princess.” “But I don’t see anything in here for *you*. What do you get for the two thousand, five hundred twenty-five year old alicorn sun princess who has everything?”

As Discord invested himself in thought, Celestia was feeling the onset of a crisis. Two thousand years. Over two thousand years. She had lived for two and a half thousand years, and ruled Equestria for fifteen hundred years. It wasn’t that she was unaware of her age, she simply never put much thought to it. She was beyond old -- she was ancient. A relic of generations and histories long since forgotten. A living myth. While wide-

eyed ponies might have seen her age as something to be adored and revered, she saw it for the reality of it.

She was old. But worse than that, her youth was behind her, and she would move farther and father away from that blessed time in her life until the end of time.

“I give up. You’re impossible to shop for,” Discord surrendered, grabbing the magazine off the floor and flipping through the pages, whistling “The Old Gray Mare” as he busied himself. He looked at the princess out of the corner of his eye and frowned. “Quit the pity party, you’re starting to bum me out. I was going to just get you a gift card, but if you’re really so upset about being an old hag...”

Before Celestia could rage about Discord’s seeming intrusion on her thoughts, she cried out in pain as the draconequus grabbed her horn and began to crush it in his grip. Wave after wave of blinding pain flooded her body, causing her legs to kick wildly and her body to violently jerk back and forth as she struggled to escape from the pain. She opened her mouth to scream again, but the smoke that coiled around her ceiling struck out like a serpent and dove down her throat, filling her body with the black haze, as saliva foamed from her mouth. Ultimately, the excruciating torture was too much, and Princess Celestia went limp.

Celestia opened her eyes and found herself falling toward a thick forest at an extreme speed. But rather than shouting in fear, she was laughing. She tried to pull up out of the dive, but her wings did not respond. She passed through the brush and braced for the end.

Celestia nearly choked as her body snapped up just before colliding with the ground, leaving a blast of ethereal light to spread around the forest. The healthy green leaves released their grip on the trees, and in one fell swoop Princess Celestia had stripped four acres of forest of its lush green.

“I love forest-clearing. It’s just another opportunity for me to kick your butt, little sister!” Celestia’s words were not her own. She had to find out what Discord had done to her; she had to get back to Canterlot.

“Nice try, but I think that I can top it.” Celestia watched with a smug grin as Luna flew up into the night sky and disappeared behind a cloud. Her expression finally broke, and Celestia had control of her body again. “What is happening?”

“Happy birthday tooo yooouuu...” Celestia’s magic flared and she turned with a hideous expression toward the draconequus behind all of this lunacy.

“What have you done, Discord?”

“Oh, hey, Discord, thanks for the present, I really love it. You’re welcome,” Discord said with an insulted sniff, folding his arms and turning his body away from the princess.

“What are you talking about?”

“Look at the stars, Celestia,” Discord said as he appeared behind her, pointing her nose up toward the night sky and delighting when he saw her eyes widen. This was not one of Luna’s nights. To an average pony, there would be no discernible difference. But Celestia had an astute eye and could recognize the subtleties. This was not her sister’s night. It was something that she thought she would never see again.

It was her mother’s.

“And the last horse crosses the finish line,” Discord congratulated mockingly with a slow clap, though each clap made a random noise. “Welcome to your memories! Now, I wasn’t really paying attention, so I don’t really know or care where you are.”

Luna swirled around a cloud, painted blue by the dark of night, built up speed, and fired toward a section of forest in the distance.

“So, enjoy the next three days,” Discord continued.

“What’s happening to your legs?” Celestia asked, watching as the spirit was beginning to rapidly fade away.

“Oh, that. Well, I’m not exactly part of your memories, am I?”

“You aren’t going to be tormenting me?” Celestia asked suspiciously, ready to disbelieve whatever answer she received.

“These are your memories, Celestia,” Discord said with a suddenly grave tone. “Nothing can hurt you here. So, three days to relive your youth. And there... I... go!” Discord’s voice echoed as he vanished just in time for Luna to blast the leafs off of every tree in a five acre radius and curve back up to her, flapping her wings proudly.

“Sorry, Tia, looks like I win this time.”

Celestia took a moment to let the reality of the situation sink in. It was everything she wanted. The wind in her wings, the breeze in her hair, her mother’s night wrapping around her like a blanket; all the freedom she’d been craving all this time was laid out in front of her. She was Princess Celestia again -- the *real* Princess Celestia.

“Let’s go best two out of three.”

After Celestia had just narrowly trounced her sister in their competition, though Luna was convinced that Celestia had used magic to cheat, the two sisters soared back to Canterlot. These were the moments she had been missing; sneaking out in the middle of the night with her little sister, getting into mischief. It was remarkable how many details that had been lost over time were flooding back to her. The comfortable coolness of a mid-summer night, the way the soft starlight glimmered even through the gentle clouds sleepily drifting through the dark blue sky, as all of Equestria seemed to radiate with magic.

It was remarkable that Luna now appeared to be just barely younger than she did in the present. Not that she could say the same about herself. Celestia marveled at her reflection in the water of the lake below her as she flew above -- she was only a few hands taller than Twilight, and her mane was a solid pink curling waterfall of hair that rolled down her shoulders. She could barely remember when her mane had become so colorful, or when she started enchanting it to flow in the air.

The most surprising thing was that she didn't have her cutie mark yet, the symbol of her control over the sun, though there was good reason. The royal alicorn family passed down their cutie marks when they stepped down from power. Her father bore the mark of the sun, and her mother wore Luna's crescent moon painted against a night sky. Celestia always thought the marks looked better on the two sisters than on their parents, mainly due to the clashing appearance of the brilliant yellow sun on the pitch black flank of her father and the dark stain on her mother's vanilla coat.

Celestia closed her eyes and basked in the light as the sun rose over the horizon. The princess was taken aback by the harshness of the sun's glow. More memories rushed back to her of her father's bellicose nature. He was a gruff, stocky stallion whose hair-trigger temper was kept in line only by his queen's assuaging personality. Whereas Celestia ruled Equestria with benevolence and tolerance, her father demanded total obedience and ruled with an iron hoof. King Equinox, the Black Sun of Equestria, was a fearsome ruler, and Celestia thanked the stars above that it was her mother that discovered the two sisters as they tried to sneak back into the castle.

"Girls, don't you think you are too old for this sort of behavior?" Queen Cressida asked with a sigh as she looked down at her two ashamed daughters from her throne. Her creamy white hair was speckled with black dots and rolled elegantly down her back. Her mother was a demure woman and didn't care for many of the theatrics of royal life, such as that obnoxious bellowing voice or enchanted mane, but it was that plainness and approachability that had endeared her to her followers.

"It does not do the balance of nature any favors when you start stripping the trees this far away from autumn." Celestia and Luna kept their heads down as their mother descended the stairs.

"We were just having a little fun. Maybe we could call it an early birthday present?" Celestia asked hopefully, but deflated when she met her mother's unhappy gaze. "I get restless being cooped up in the castle day in and day out. It feels so long since we've been allowed to leave."

“And with good reason,” Cressida said firmly. “Equestria is in turmoil, Celestia, you know that.” Her tone became soft again as she wrapped her head tenderly around her daughter’s neck. “I worry for your safety. It’s just so dangerous. There are many out there who would try to threaten your life to strike at your father.”

“When is Father going to return, Mother?” Luna asked respectfully. “It has been so very long since he left for war.”

The war. How could she forget? The terrible, bloody war that history forgot. Celestia couldn’t remember precisely how it was started. There was a dispute over territory, and it had come to violence, though no one was sure who made the first strike. As the battle raged on, other provinces began to feel threatened and sent confused and angry volunteer soldiers to aid different sides in response, with earth ponies, pegasi, and unicorns alike entering the fray. Opportunistic beasts sought to feast upon the dying carcass of civility, with dragons and wolves offering their allegiance for treasures and jewels. It was complete chaos. The armies began to attack buffalo and griffin lands for materials, forcing the peaceful species to war. The battle raged for years until the madness grew so great that no soldier was sure what they were fighting, killing, and dying for. Unable to restrain himself any longer, Equinox rode off into battle with the royal army, determined to cripple both forces and restore peace to his kingdom through force.

Celestia could feel a pressure building in her head; there was something important she had to remember. Some detail like rising waters pounding against a flood gate, threatening to break through and overwhelm her. There was some significance, she knew it. She had to remember what happened.

No she didn’t. She had to enjoy herself. This was a gift for her, and she would make the most of it.

“Sorry, Mother,” Celestia apologized insincerely.

“I am sure you are,” Cressida sighed. “I do not want to see you two sleeping through the day because you stayed up all night. And you know that you can go to town whenever you like, as long as Captain Ratch and the guards are with you.”

"Must they always be with us, Mother? Even Luna could hold her ground without help from Uncle Sourpuss," Celestia groaned, receiving a stern look from her mother in response. She supposed that she never really did like having babysitters that were centuries younger than her. Though she didn't particularly dislike Clayton Ratch; in fact, she loved him like family. But his strict dedication to protocol while on duty had earned him the loving nickname. And she knew that she could always count on him -- he was a tough old stallion, unlike the mere colts who led her guards. Ratch's family had a long history as part of the royal guard, something that his descendants were incredibly proud of, but she was certain that he would have whipped them all raw if he could see the shoddy excuses for soldiers that guarded the palace.

Oh heavens above, she had forgotten so much! But now it was all coming back as clear as crystal. Celestia could hardly contain her excitement for the day ahead.

"Fine, fine. Come on, Luna, I'll race you to the garden!"

Princess Celestia let her mind wander as she ran through the halls on familiar route to the gardens. It wasn't of dire importance to her, but she was curious about exactly how far back in her memories she had been sent. She couldn't simply ask how old she was turning, both because at times she felt that her body moved of its own volition to stay true to the original memory, and because it would simply seem silly. So Celestia let it be and resigned herself to the pure pleasure of it all.

"Come on, little sister, it's supposed to be a race," Celestia taunted between pants and gave her sister a playful push.

"Oh sure. I'll bet it's easy to run when you've got those freakishly long legs," Luna retorted.

"Sounds like somepony's a sore loser," the older sister said in a sing-song voice.

Celestia missed these games with Luna. It wouldn't be inaccurate to say that the princesses were competitive, but they saw it more as simply finding ways to fight off boredom. They were centuries older than most creatures in Equestria, and while they could act their age whenever they liked, deep down they were about as mature as ten-year-old fillies. The two sisters only had each other when it came to genuine companionship, and as she looked into the smiling face and shimmering eyes of her little sister, Celestia felt a warmth in her heart.

"Alright then, fine. Let's get cerebral then," Luna challenged. "First one through the labyrinth?"

"You're on."

Luna must have been memorizing the maze in her spare time, Celestia surmised as the younger princess did her usual victory dance, throwing her legs out to the side at a time and shaking her tail in her sister's face. She gave her little sister a half-hearted congratulation and went off on her own to explore the castle grounds, starting with the gardens. Celestia had always loved the vibrant flowers and lush plants arranged so beautifully when she was younger, and it saddened her to think that many of those gorgeous plants would not be waiting for her when she left. Either through extinction, evolution, or magical alterations to the foliage, most of the species were long gone.

The statues in her garden were nothing but restored replicas of the original articles. Time took its toll on everything, Celestia was well aware of that. Out with the old, in with the new. But standing there, in the home her dreams were made of, in the world that lived only in her memories, with the delicious aroma of forgotten flowers wafting around her and birds serenading her with the sweetest music, she wished that moment could last forever.

"Ah!" Celestia cried as she felt several cold claws wrap around her rear hooves and pull her downward. She instinctively bucked and kicked her legs, fighting valiantly against the cowardly wolves trying to abduct her. Before she could call upon her magic, or even open her mouth to shout again, there was a violent crash above her. A large figure landed over her,

standing tall and protecting the princess from the raining glass shards. The diamond wolves immediately released their grips and retreated down their tunnel, howling in fear. Celestia's savior stepped around her and dove down the hole after the beasts in an orange blur, though Celestia could just make out the image of a blue and gold shield cutie mark with a heavy scar across it on the haunch of the guardian before he vanished.

Princess Celestia sighed as Captain Clayton Ratch's rather colorful and creative obscenities and death vows emanated from underground. Sometimes she wondered if the old stallion was really that gung-ho, or if he simply enjoyed showing off.

The Sun King Equinox looked down at the ravaged landscape in dissatisfaction, a snarl contorting his frightening features. His orange eyes narrowed and his flaming red mane ran wild down his back. His black coat was covered with once-glorious golden armor; though the metal had become tarnished from the long fighting, it still served its purpose well and protected the king from even the most ferocious of enemies. His powerful muscles tensed in anger, his curved black horn glowed a bloody red, his sharp wings were spread wide. Frightened ponies who had the poor fortune to see the King of Equestria fly into battle had often described him as the manifestation of war itself.

"Major Dash," the king boomed and the pegasus snapped to attention. **"We find it disturbing that it we had rode off to war three years ago. And yet, here we are. We had to slay a dragon earlier out of necessity, rather than sport. We have not seen our darling queen or our beautiful daughters in three years. These foals have shunned our divine authority and our generous attempts to save their wretched lives for three years."** Major Dash swallowed nervously and froze in self-preservation when the king turned his thick neck to glower at the soldier.

"Do you understand our frustration?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"We hope that this situation brought under control soon. We desire to return to Canterlot for our eldest daughter's celebration."

“Yes, Your Highness. Do not concern yourself. Their wills are weakened, and our forces are still emboldened by your magnificent presence. The end is in sight.”

“We have heard similar promises in the past. Do not disappoint us.”

It was shapeless. It was mindless. It was unstable, unliving, and unstoppable. It hovered over the land like an invisible mist, filling the minds of the ponies fighting against brothers and neighbors and becoming ever larger. It watched. It was a force of nature, but for the first time It knew that. It had never felt stronger. It had never felt before. The madness and the bloodshed had given It consciousness. It watched.

Clayton Ratch, Captain of the Royal Guard, was quite possibly the finest specimen ponykind had ever known. Solid as a mountain and built like a buffalo, he was often mistaken by uneducated ponies for the King himself, despite being an earth pony. He was nearly as tall as Equinox, and his orange coat had been thinned and grayed by age, laying clear his sinewy muscles and the many scars he earned through his loyalty to the kingdom. He could pin a dragon to the ground, inspire fear in any living creature with a deathly glare, kill a parasprite with a swat of his enormous mustache, even outrun a flying griffin; it was said he could crush boulders with a kick, divert a stampede with just the ferocity of his battle cry, and had lived to be over a hundred years old through sheer will power. And even Clayton Ratch, the most decorated and heralded hero Equestria had ever known, could hardly control two alicorn princesses when they had their minds set on leaving the palace.

“You two girls need to learn yourselves some respect!” Ratch’s perpetually hoarse voice shouted at the two sisters running in circles around him.

“Is that any way to talk to your princesses?” Celestia asked with feigned shock. “Maybe we should have Father teach *you* some respect!”

"I'm well within my authority to talk down to you two," Ratch said in his usual growl, though the corners of his mouth curved up almost imperceptibly as he said it. "And I'm not sure if His Majesty would want to pick a fight with me. He limped for a month the last time he wanted to spar."

"Then at least respect your elders," Luna joined in.

"Don't give me that, you're practically fillies next to me."

"I'm at least one-hundred and fifty years older than you, Captain," the younger sister said with a coy smile.

"You know who else was older than me?" Ratch spoke louder than what was probably necessary.

"The dragon," the two sisters answered simultaneously with a bored tone.

"That coltdamn dragon that tried to snatch your mother!" Ratch ignored the two girls. "I chased that flying snake around Equestria -- twice! And when I finally caught up to him, the coward was ready to pack it in, but I was still raring to go..." Celestia rolled her eyes and smiled as the captain went on his rant. The story was more and more fantastic every time, and even their eternally grateful mother found some of his creative amendments to the story to be ridiculous. But the old earth pony had his pride, and Celestia loved a good pony-tale, so she never dared interrupt him.

"...entire village ate like kings for a month!" Ratch finished. He looked down at the two princesses and his mustache bristled when he saw that they were intentionally ignoring him. "Harrumph! I'm surprised that you're so willing to put yourself in the open after those wolves tried to take you yesterday. There could have been trouble if I wasn't around to keep an eye on you!"

"Well then, it's a good thing we have you around," Celestia said as Luna gave the old stallion a playful kiss on the cheek. The sisters laughed at their guardian as he forcibly shook the blush off of his face and turned

around to glare at the stone faced guards following them, daring them to smile.

“You girls will be the death of me,” Ratch grunted as the guards continued to escort the sisters to Canterlot Commons.

The hamlet seemed so small, Celestia thought as she walked into the city. Well, maybe not small, but unsophisticated. The buildings were made of humble yellow stone rather than the brilliant marble of the castle, with some of the thatch roofs on the buildings supported by tree branches. Ponies bowed as they saw the royals, stopping whatever they were doing to show their respect.

“So, which way are you going?” Luna asked just quiet enough for Celestia to hear.

“I was thinking right.”

“Then I’ll go left.”

“See you back at the palace.”

In the blink of an eye, the two princesses dashed off in opposite directions, their hoofs pounding against the dirt road as they galloped with all their speed away from the shouting guards.

“You little brats! After them, you hoof-biting misfits!” Ratch’s voice shouted behind them. Celestia cheered as she ran through crowds of confused ponies, taking cover inside of buildings, hiding behind carts pulled down the roads, and doing everything in her power to slip away from the guards. After a chase that spread across all of Canterlot, Celestia breathed easy, confident she had lost them. She slowed her pace to a casual saunter and took in the sights of Old Canterlot.

Something that had confused Princess Celestia for a moment was how casual the ponies treated her. They weren’t disrespectful, but she wasn’t precisely greeted with “the royal treatment,” for lack of a better word. She wanted to say something, remind them who they were addressing and how honored they should be just to lay their unworthy eyes on her.

“Hello, Princess,” a smiling unicorn greeted as she walked past.

“Good morning, Lavender,” Celestia answered with a friendly smile. She loved being able to break away from the regimented nature of palace life. Celestia felt dizzy, like the entire world was tilted to the side. She staggered to her side, colliding with a pony before the ground righted itself.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Celestia apologized, looking very flustered.

“It’s going to be alright, Princess,” the pony, a purple unicorn, replied before walking off briskly. Celestia gave her a lingering look as she walked around a corner, and for the first time in two days, Celestia’s mind drifted to thoughts about Twilight Sparkle. It was just like her to concern herself with such small problems when she was taking a well-deserved reprieve.

She walked in and out of stores, peeking at what new trinkets the merchant ponies had for sale but always keeping an eye out for Ratch’s goons. She eventually found herself in front of Canterlot’s infirmary. She normally wouldn’t have stopped, but she kept hearing crowds of ponies whispering about some important pony that had taken a bad turn and decided to see if there was anything she could do to aid the sick creature.

Princess Celestia strode forward to push through the swinging door, but the wooden frame wouldn’t budge. She took a step back and examined the door quizzically. There weren’t any locks on it, and it wasn’t as if a swinging door could be jammed. She took a few steps back and narrowed her eyes when she saw a pink earth pony with several balloons tied to her tail and a pegasus with a basket of flowers brush past her without even paying her any notice and enter the building without any issue.

The door swung on its hinges a few times and went still. Princess Celestia padded the ground a few times and hunched her body, ready for a charge. She dove at the door, horn glowing with power, and pierced through. She stumbled into the building and felt a chill. She opened her eyes to find a nurse to complain to, but when she tried to see, her vision was blurred by pain. She fought to stand her ground and stay strong to see through the pain at the building’s flickering interior. Utter blackness flashed between a myriad of colors and blank, featureless pony faces.

She had seen enough and backed out of the infirmary, finding that exiting the building was much easier than entering it. The pain immediately subsided, allowing Celestia to think clearly. She guessed that was a case of what happened when she forced herself to go against her memories and gave it no further thought. After all, there was still one stop she simply had to make.

Celestia eyed the mouthwatering assortment of pastries and treats laid in front of her with utter desire. The Sweetness was possibly the finest catering service in Equestria -- or at least it was the closest to the palace, so the easy accessibility definitely earned it points in Celestia's mind.

"See something you like, Your Highness?" the grinning chef asked helpfully as he leaned over the counter, with frosting staining his apron. Churnie was a pudgy, jolly old green unicorn with a wonderful sense of humor and a tender heart. He was among the most generous folks a pony could ever hope to meet, routinely giving free sweets to children and ponies that had fallen on hard times. He was a guy that ponies just loved to open up to, and it warmed his heart to help ponies in any way he could.

"Nothing looks better than frosting, Churnie!" What a sweet tooth she had! She could hardly believe that she put such heavy restrictions on sweets in her diet when she ascended to the throne.

"Ha harr! When you're right, you're right! I'm making something special for the big day tomorrow," Churnie said with an excited smile, wiggling his bushy eyebrows and making Celestia giggle. "I can't believe it's here so soon! It feels like it was just yesterday I was busting my flank to get that ten foot monster of a cake ready! It's been twenty-five years, and I *still* have nightmares about that thing! I just pray to the sun and the stars that I don't live to see your sister turn five hundred! Haarr har har!"

"Well, if you decide to stick around for another two hundred years, I'll be happy to help out in the kitchen," Celestia teased.

"Oh no you don't! Your sister tried to help me when it was time to make *your* cake, to give it some 'personal flair.' Place looked even more

like a disaster zone than usual!" Celestia fell to the floor and laughed until her sides hurt.

"Wow. In that case, I'll have to keep her out of the kitchen," Celestia said, struggling to keep a straight face.

"Harr! Go easy on the little screwball. Maybe when *she* turns five hundred and twenty-five, she'll have learned how to turn on an oven without burning half the building."

Ponies screamed all around Celestia as the body crashed onto a table, cracking it in half. Her mother wailed and charged at the smoke, her eyes burning with an intensity that no one could have ever imagined from the tranquil alicorn. With a swift swat, the cloud smacked the alicorn into a wall. Shards of glass from the broken window rained down on her, cutting her white coat and staining it with blood. She looked up into the eyes of her terrified daughter and shouted with all of her strength.

"Celestia! Run!"

"Your Highness? You okay, sweetie?" Celestia bit her lip, not entirely sure of the answer. What was she seeing? What had she forgotten?

"I'm... fine, Churnie. Don't you worry about me," Celestia assured the baker with a wink. The unicorn wasn't fooled, but he knew better than to try to force someone to talk when they weren't in the mood to share.

"Well, I've got to put the finishing touches on," he said with a bow and headed back to the kitchen into the rear. "Help yourself to a few cookies! And keep your sister away from any bags of flour! Harr haaar!"

Celestia helped herself to a sugar cookie and happily licked the bits of pink frosting off the corner of her mouth as she walked out the door into Canterlot Square. She stumbled a bit when she bumped into another pony.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I'm just so clumsy today."

"I'd say 'bratty' fits better," a scratchy voice spat. Celestia looked up at the imposing frame of Clayton Ratch, his orange face burning red. She was going to need some careful wording to get off relatively easy on this

one, but the look her quivering sister standing behind the captain sent her told her that there was plenty to fear.

“I tracked five diamond wolves that were escaping down that tunnel yesterday without any tracks or trace to follow. How long did you think it would take me to find you two?”

“Heh heh... Um... I think that I’m ready to go back to the palace,” Celestia said meekly. Ratch lowered his head and stared her dead in the eyes, and she immediately wished he hadn’t. Her entire body felt cold; that glare could pacify dragons and turn small animals to stone. She was certain that the old captain’s fury would be eternal. It would be passed down for eons through his bloodline, a bottomless well of power for his children’s children to draw upon and petrify pony and beast alike.

“Glad to hear it,” he spoke almost inaudibly, packing as much anger as possible into every staccato syllable. “Let’s go.”

The rest of the day was just as entertaining as the time in Canterlot Commons, and the two princesses were exhausted come nightfall. Dinner was mostly pleasant; Cressida raised an eyebrow at her daughters’ guilty grins when she asked them about their trip but said nothing about it. She delivered the unhappy news that the battle Equinox would likely be unable to return to Canterlot in time for Celestia’s celebration which was met with premeditated disappointment. Not a soul with any idea of the magnitude of the warfare harbored any ideas of seeing the king, but that didn’t make it any less upsetting for Princess Celestia.

Celestia sulked around her room, a smaller chamber than she presently lived in that was decorated with rich purples and whites, feeling sorry for herself, but mostly mourning the chaos gripping Equestria. How many lives had been claimed in that horrible war? It didn’t matter; even one was too many. Celestia had snuck off on her own one night to see the battle with her own eyes, and the horrors she saw would never leave her.

She stepped out on her balcony to get some fresh air to clear her head, but it did nothing to help. Celestia couldn’t keep her mind off of the

blood and the tears spilled over lost brothers, the destruction, the absolute abandonment of decency; precious, irreplaceable lives extinguished by the hundreds.

It was then that Celestia had a silly thought. Perhaps she could be the one who reminded them; ponies were dying for a cause they didn't understand or believe in, so it was time for them to see why life was worth living.

It was possibly the most unrealistic and fanciful thing she ever attempted, she'd admit, but she had to try to make a difference somehow. She wouldn't be a princess forever; one day she'd have to rule Equestria and learn to be responsible. Princess Celestia inwardly cringed at her childish sentiments, but found herself unable to control her body or her mind and resigned herself to allowing the memory play out. Celestia aimed her horn at the night sky, closed her eyes, called upon her magic, and released the spell. The green light twirled through the air, curling and dancing around her and vanishing out of sight.

A glorious olive tree would bloom in the center of the warring forces. With any luck the spectacle might give them a moment of reflection. Celestia smiled at the thought; it would be a beautifully poetic scene. Celestia nestled into her bed and sighed happily as she imagined it.

"The Peace of the Olive Tree," Celestia purred. Before sleep could take her, she heard the sound of hooves gingerly stepping closer to her. She opened her eyes and saw her sister smiling sadly down at her. Celestia hadn't heard her come in.

Luna walked to her side and tenderly wrapped her head around Celestia's neck. She caressed her sister lovingly for a moment before stepping back and watching her sister lie tranquilly on her bed. Celestia felt a great sense of unease, not daring to move a muscle as she watched her sister in confusion. It wasn't like Luna to act like this; her eyes were red and raw from freshly-dried tears and her lip trembled if she dared to look at her for too long.

"Luna, is something the matter?"

“It’s going to be alright, Tia,” Luna said quietly and quickly, sounding on the verge of breaking into tears. “I’ll be here for you.” The younger princess glided soundlessly out of the room, and Celestia fell into a peaceful sleep.

The day had finally arrived. Celestia sprung from her bed and ran down the halls, where happy ponies were in the middle of hanging tasteful streamers and decorations of all kinds and colors. Ratch was bickering with a flustered coordinator about the lack of easy-to-access escape routes in the ballroom. Celestia kept an eye out for anyone watching her as she trotted to the ballroom doors. Seeing that the coast was clear, she slowly pushed on the doors and nearly jumped out of her skin when a loud “Haar!” called from behind her.

“Sorry, toots,” Churnie said with a cheeky smile, “orders from the boss lady herself. She doesn’t want you getting in there before everything is ready for you.”

“Come on, Churnie, just a little peek?” Celestia asked, putting on her most pathetic puppy eyes.

“My hooves are tied. And I don’t want anypony to see my arrangement before it’s ready. In the culinary world, the magic is all in the presentation,” Churnie said with a wink. “Go outside and enjoy the weather for a few hours, why don’t you? Your mother had the weather team plan the entire month’s weather ahead of time so that it’d be beautiful out today, so make the most of it.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll go see if Luna wants to step outside for a bit,” Celestia called over her shoulder, defeated.

“The curtains are all closed.” Churnie chuckled and shook his head as Celestia kicked the air dejectedly before he slipped back into the ballroom.

Celestia couldn't keep her eyes off the windows of the ballroom as she and her sister enjoyed a breakfast salad.

"The curtains aren't going to open if you stare at them long enough, Celestia," Luna said after swallowing a mouthful.

"I know *that*. I've been trying to use magic." The sisters laughed with each other for a short while and Celestia returned to her salad. So many important things were on her mind: what should she wear? What would it all look like? Who would be there? Would it be boring? How much could she eat before it became unseemly? Whatever became of her *vivens venerat* spell? What was Luna doing now?

Celestia looked at her sister and saw that her glass was floating expectantly in the air halfway across the table.

"You know something, Celestia? This is really nice. We should do this more often."

"I completely agree." The princess returned the gesture and clinked her glass lightly against Luna's and the two sisters drank.

It had feelings now. It did not understand how It understood, but It did. It did. The chaos was greater now than it had ever been before. It wanted more. It saw the dying breaths of ponies, green clouds of shimmering light invisible to all others, float up to the sky and fade away. These were their lives. They. They were They, but what was It? It could think, It could feel, It could desire. But It was not like Them.

A green light rose over the horizon, just a narrow mass of energy. It had found what It wanted. It felt itself drawn to the light and the fog receded from the minds of the confused soldiers. All of It had to be there. To be. It would be like Them.

It would have life.

It was late afternoon and Celestia proudly strode down the hall, wearing a light and elegant gown decorated with dazzling gems. She wore a thin golden tiara around her horn and wrapped gleaming silver bands around her hooves. Well-dressed ponies signaled her approach with a proud trumpeting of the Equestrian anthem. The doors opened wide to greet the princess with a spectacular sight. Due to the sheer magnitude of the royal family's celebrations and the longevity of the alicorns, the family only celebrated a birthday every quarter of a century after the first hundred years. And however grand her five hundredth birthday was, this was greater by far.

The first thing that Celestia notice was the massive cookie Churnie had brought that was suspended in the air at the end of the room, standing thirty feet in diameter and decorated in her likeness with frosting. A choir of happy birds sang through the air in perfect unity and harmony, moving from nest to nest among the wreaths of all her favorite flowers hung on the walls. Her entrance was received with an enthusiastic cheer, and Celestia walked forward to meet her mother and sister, who was guiltily licking some frosting off of her nose.

"Happy birthday, Celestia," Cressida said warmly.

"Thank you, Mother."

Standing there, surrounded by her mother and sister, with the birds above and the smell of flowers and sweets filling the air, with a crowd of ponies who genuinely loved the young princess, Celestia truly knew happiness.

Nothing could ruin this moment.

It stood at the center of the warring bodies, marveling at itself. Paws! It had *paws* -- no, one paw, and the other was a claw! But It's leg wasn't a claw or a paw, and neither was the other one. And neither leg was like each other at all! It felt long and tall, and It laughed in pure ecstasy. It felt. It *felt!* It felt its bottom swish back and forth and laughed again.

“What in Equestria is that abomination?” It heard a voice shout. It was interested to see this abomination. It looked around, staring emptily at the horrified faces of ponies looking directly its way. It looked down.

“Brown! It has brown fur!” It shouted spontaneously, patting and rubbing its legs and arms and face, delighting in the feel of hair brushing against skin. “And these! And that! And -- what’s this?” It stopped and scratched its head, feeling its paw bumping against two hard things on his head. Touching them with infinite wonder, It stretched its arms as far as they could go to understand itself.

“It has... horns! Yes! Horns! Horns like you!” It cheered, pointing at the unicorns. It had watched. It had witnessed the unicorns’ power. They used magic. They changed the world around them by wanting to. Perhaps It could do the same. But they seemed angry with It.

It couldn’t be bothered to think about that, It felt a strange sensation on its... back. Yes, between its arms. It felt like a mild burning. It clumsily reached around with its claw and scratched. It felt amazing. It noticed that it had two things curled on its back. Stretching, It was able to make the things unfurl. It flapped them. It rose off the ground without any effort and was thrilled by the experience.

“Wings!” The word came to It. “Wings like you!” This was amazing. It wanted life, and life was amazing. Amazing. Having life was a wonderful, wonderful thing. But the pegasi seemed angry too.

“You are nothing like us, monster!” a bold soldier shouted.

“You?” It puzzled, bringing a paw to its mouth and poking it on something. “It... is a You! I’m a You!” It’s entire body trembled with each new realization. This was life! This was being! “I’m an I! I am a Me!”

“What is this... creature?” a voice thundered. It knew who was talking; It had heard him talk as the battle raged, telling his ponies to kill more. He was an important thing. He was a powerful thing.

“I’m a Me,” the creature intruded. “And you are a--”

“We are the Sun King Equinox! Ruler of all Equestria!” The battlefield was silent at the booming announcement.

“You’re a Me, too!” It shouted happily, clapping in enthusiasm. “You have horns! You have wings! You’re just like me!” It was confused why they started laughing when he spoke.

“Thou art nothing like us!” the black stallion declared, cutting his cruel laughter short. **“We are Lord of All, and thou be a monstrosity!”**

It felt something deep inside. It knew what it was, it could feel the sensation coming from the creatures as they watched each other die.

Anger. It had life just like them. What gave them the right to laugh? But it would stop their laughing. It had magic. It had power. It knew it. It had spent all of existence being nothing, knowing nothing, doing nothing.

But now... It could do whatever It wanted.

“Happy birthday, Princess!” Celestia smiled and thanked a party-goer once again. Everything was absolutely wonderful. She could even tolerate the Grand Galloping Gala every year if it could capture a fraction of this celebration’s magnificence.

“Lighten up a little, Uncle Sourpuss! It’s a party!” Celestia teased Captain Ratch as she waved one of Churnie’s famous cupcakes in front of his face. The grizzled veteran didn’t react as he continued to watch the party from a corner of the room.

“I’m on duty, Princess. After those wolves couldn’t get you, I wouldn’t be surprised if those bastards sent a dragon to snatch you,” Ratch said with his usual growl, keeping his eyes peeled on the window.

“Looking to get another dragon-slaying story, Captain?” Luna butted in, carrying a glass of wine. Celestia and Luna smiled at each other. He didn’t stand a chance against the two of them.

“He’s already going down in history for the first one, I think he deserves a break,” Celestia said.

“I agree. Being so tense all the time isn’t good for his health, anyways. He should drink some wine to loosen up a little. It’s good for the heart.”

“Are you suggesting I *drink on duty*? The King would have my head!”

“We wouldn’t tell him.”

“Nopony’s going to take you less seriously if you get some frosting on your mustache, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Girls,” the three turned to see Queen Cressida elegantly walking toward them. Ratch saluted smartly and the two girls put on their best innocent faces. “The captain is enjoying himself well enough.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Ratch said respectfully.

“Come along, girls. There are plenty of other guests you can bother, and there are a few ponies I would like you to meet,” Cressida said as she led the two girls away. Ratch looked around the room in suspicion before bringing his eyes back to the cookie floating in front of him covered in Cressida’s white glow. Certain he wasn’t being watched, the captain surreptitiously grabbed the cookie out of the air, swallowed it in a single bite, and checked his mustache for crumbs.

Celestia went from crowd to crowd, greeting and talking with several lords and ladies of Equestria, though she mostly enjoyed when she was able to talk to the guests without high pedigree or the ego that came with it. Talking to those ordinary ponies was such a pleasure; there was something honest about them. The highlight of her night was getting to talk to Churnie and listen to the proud unicorn excitedly explain the painstaking measures he took for every pastry.

“I think that might be a new Equestrian record,” Celestia said as the two walked past the enormous cookie.

“That cake definitely has competition in my nightmares. Haaahr har!” Churnie laughed. “The whole thing was cookie dough baked into different pieces. Then I had to glue it into one big shibang with frosting. I was actually in the middle of it yesterday when you walked in.”

A nervous-looking pegasus fluttered over the crowd and hovered over the squat unicorn, whispering into his ear.

“Hey, boss? We’ve got an issue with a... guest.”

“Oh for crying out loud...” Churnie sighed. “Isn’t there somepony else who can handle it?”

“Well, he’s asking about the food, but he’s starting to get rowdy.”

“I’m sorry, Princess, I’ll be back in a jiffy.” He bowed low to the ground and followed the pegasus to the opposite side of the ballroom to where some of the guests were whispering and talking nervously.

“So where is the... fell...ah... ah,” Churnie’s words died in his throat when he bumped into who--or what--he presumed was the cause of the problem. He had never seen anything like it in his entire life. It didn’t look like any pony he had ever seen -- it hardly looked anything like a pony.

“You! You made this, right?” the creature asked with wide, uneven eyes as he held a slice of pie in the baker’s face.

“Yeah. You like it?” Churnie asked with uncertain pride.

“It’s the best thing I’ve ever eaten! What is it?”

“That’s pie, pally. If you like it, there’s plenty more where that came... from?” Churnie was shocked when he looked at the banquet and saw that nearly everything had a bite taken out of it or had been thrown against the wall. Even the tablecloth looked as if a mantichore had gotten its claws on it. The creature ran over to the table and retrieved a plate with a half-eaten slice of cake sitting on it.

“Ooh! It likes--I like this! What is this?”

“That’s chocolate ribbon cake...”

“Oh, this is better!” the thing said after taking a large bite out of the cake and the plate. “What is this? This is better! Tell me!”

“That’s... the plate.”

“It crunches, and then it’s... goopy,” the thing said thoughtfully. “And it sorta tastes like... oh, where did I leave him?” The thing snapped his claw and was gone. However startled the baker had been by the sudden disappearance of the monster, nothing could have prepared him for its return.

“It tastes like him!” the thing said excitedly as he held up a limp figure. He was dangling the large thing by its wild red hair; the blood trickling across it would have been invisible against the black fur if it weren’t for the chunk of flesh that had been torn from its neck. Terrified ponies cried out at the sight of their great king dangling around like a limp puppet.

Celestia flew over the frightened guests when she heard the scream and saw that Luna was right beside her while Ratch fought through the crowd. She found the source of the chaos and screamed. More and more ponies began to panic as the news spread, and many mobbed the door.

“I never should have brought you!” the monster shouted at the barely-alive king. “You ruined everything!” Equinox weakly spat on its face, earning him a violent toss against the room. The king crashed against a support column, and there was a sickening crack of bones snapping. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Ponies screamed all around Celestia as the body crashed onto a table, cracking it in half. Her mother wailed and charged the monster, her eyes burning with an intensity that no one could have ever imagined from the tranquil alicorn. With a swift swat, the beast smacked the alicorn into a wall. Shards of glass from the broken window rained down on her, cutting her white coat and staining it with blood.

“Celestia! Luna! Run!”

She couldn't move a muscle. Celestia was frozen in horror, watching helplessly as Ratch and the other guards torpedoed through the crowd and tackled the thing to the ground. It squirmed and struggled as the guards pinned it down while Ratch stomped down on its face again and again, aiming to crush the assassin's skull into a pulp. His fury intensified as the thing laughed off every kick as if it was simply being tickled. The thing snapped its fingers and the guards were thrown into the walls.

"Sister, we have to do something!" Luna pleaded, pulling on her wings.

Celestia couldn't wait another second. With a shout, she charged forward with her horn aimed to pierce the terror's heart. Before she could get close, something tackled her to the ground. She looked up and saw Captain Ratch standing over her, his eyes trained on the beast as Cressida flung spell after spell at it only for each to be harmlessly deflected.

"Get out of here! Now! We can handle this on our own! Take your sister to safety!" Ratch barked as Celestia rose to her hooves.

"But I can--"

"I will not fail my king twice!!" Ratch roared. Celestia looked into the eyes of her faithful protector and for the very first time, rather than anger, she saw a pleading desperation. "Now go!" Ratch bucked Celestia in the side and sent her rolling toward the broken window. She couldn't stand to watch as Ratch was thrown into another wall after his charge and shouted for her sister. With one last fearful glance, Princess Celestia fled from Canterlot.

After flying for hours with no sense of destination, Celestia and Luna finally descended upon a thick forest. The girls found a large cave and took cover for the night, curled silently in the darkness. Neither one said a word to the other, but Celestia could hear her sister's soft crying and was sure Luna could hear hers. She couldn't have known then, but she knew now what was waiting for her when she woke up. She and Luna would spend the next five hundred years in hiding, moving from place to place as Discord wreaked chaos across Equestria. She would never see her mother

again, or Ratch, or Churnie, or any of the ponies she had known and loved, or know whatever became of those who stayed behind to fight Discord, though she knew her parents had been murdered -- the appearance of the sister's cutie marks left no doubt of their fates. They would do their best to help ponies in however little way they could through deeds that would later inspire the sisters to create the Elements of Harmony and rise up against the creature.

But that was all ancient history, Celestia thought as she blinked her eyes open, looking in confusion at her surroundings. She was in a small bed with white sheets, and there was a long tube leading out of her arm into a plastic bag with clear liquid that was hanging on a hook over her. Ponies shuffled back and forth, talking to each other about treating patients for this and that.

"Where am I?" Celestia asked weakly. The ponies all stared at her, some dropping whatever they were carrying. Some ponies began to aggressively probe her, asking her about how she was feeling, if she was experiencing any dizziness or nausea, if she could understand them, could she feel it when they did this?

"Where am I?" she repeated, trying to rise out of the bed only for the ponies to hold her down firmly.

"Princess, please stay still until we can be sure you're well," one of the ponies begged.

It did not take Celestia long to deduce that she was in the Canterlot Infirmary. Word had been sent to Luna the minute she was awake, and the younger princess was at her sister's side as soon as she was able.

"Celestia! Thank heavens, Celestia, you're awake!" Luna cried into her sister's chest.

"Luna, please, what has happened? Why am I here?" Celestia asked concernedly.

“The doctors aren’t sure,” Luna said slowly to avoid shocking her sister, “but they think that you had some sort of seizure. You fell into a coma and you’ve been unresponsive for the last three days. Oh, Celestia, it’s been horrible! It’s been solid night for three days! All of Equestria has been in absolute chaos!”

“What happened to you?” Celestia asked as she finally noticed her sister’s changed appearance. She was taller, and despite her exhaustion, seemed stronger. Her coat was darker and her mane and tail were starry clouds of deep violet.

“I tried to raise the sun on my own, but... I didn’t have the strength. I had to force my magic to return to me, but it still wasn’t enough... I wasn’t strong enough...” Luna’s mood fell again and the princess looked on the verge of tears.

Celestia saw several semi-deflated balloons buoying at the foot of her bed, and the smell of flowers drew her attention to a basket of dying daisies next to her.

“Who brought these?”

“T-Twilight and her friends came to check on you yesterday. Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy thought that they would c-cheer you up when you woke up.”

“It would make me happier to see them gone.”

Princess Celestia was returned back to her castle later, assuring Luna she would raise the sun as soon as she woke up. The alicorn was short-tempered with the ponies in the palace that greeted her return and snapped at them without provocation. Luna was astonished by her sister’s hostility, and thoughts of Celestia’s unnerving attitude prior to her hospitalization pushed their way to the front of her mind. Perhaps a visit from Twilight would remedy her mood, but until then the princess of the night would keep a closer eye on her.

Celestia examined herself in a mirror and snorted in displeasure. She obviously received inadequate care while in the infirmary, clearly evident by how pale she appeared; even her glorious mane looked gray. Other ponies might tolerate that sort of shoddy treatment, but she was a princess, and it didn't seem outrageous to ask to be treated as such. A small voice in the back of her head suggested that things would be better in the morning, and Celestia retired to her room.

They all must have been terrified for her, Celestia considered as she lied down to sleep. Without any warning, Equestria had been left without its ruler and the vital sunlight she brought them. Crops wouldn't grow correctly, nocturnal animals were most likely disturbed by the strange night, and it wouldn't surprise her if she was told that ponies had accused Luna of trying to stage another coup.

But when she thought back to her own experiences over the last three days, reliving the best, worst, and most exciting days of her life. All things considered, Celestia thought, she had no regrets.

Chapter 6

As the days passed, Princess Luna's concern for her sister grew. She had hoped that Celestia would be feeling like herself again after a few days of much-needed rest, but since her return from Canterlot Infirmary, the energy and color that once radiated from the princess had turned to a lifeless gray. She seldom spoke and seemed to always be lost in thought, but would never say what was on her mind. She ate very little during breakfasts and slept through the other meals of the day. If a pony did manage to coerce Celestia to speak to them, they only received succinct, emotionless responses. This was not the sister she knew.

"Celestia, please tell me what's troubling you," Luna pleaded.

"I'm fine," Celestia said quietly, rearranging her untouched breakfast salad with her fork.

"Sister, you can talk to me. Please, please, Celestia. I've waited a thousand years just to be with you again, but this is not you. This is not who you are." Luna looked up at her sister with watery eyes, wishing she would at least look at her. The sun princess said nothing. Luna inhaled and drew herself up to speak.

"Sister?" she asked with a much brighter tone. "If you are feeling well, I would like you to hold court today. There have been several visitors to the palace who have refused to let anypony but you settle their matters, and are eagerly awaiting your presence. A representative from Cloudsdale is hoping you would be a judge at this year's Best Young Flyer competition again." Luna had anticipated her silence. "Twilight Sparkle had asked me when you would be feeling well enough for a visit, and I promised her you would see her today." Luna's face lit up when she saw her sister's fork hold in place. "Please, Celestia? For me?"

Celestia softly murmured, "Fine," and left her sister at the table. The princess of the night prayed to the stars and the moon and the sun above that this would work.

Princess Celestia sat silently in her throne, waiting for her next visitor to be ushered in. She had already listened to several ponies speak about their problems, though she had difficulty mustering any empathy or concern for them. She could not understand why these ponies could barely manage to function on their own, or what had always excited her about this tedious chore of listening to them drone about themselves.

She decided she had enough. Celestia descended from her throne and turned to face one of the many impressive windows that lined the hall. Calling on her magic, she pushed the window open and stepped into the open frame. Breathing deeply, Celestia lifted her brilliant wings and flew gracefully into the clear blue sky. Celestia hadn't felt so incredible in days, and her exhilaration built with every flap of her feathery wings. Her colorful mane flew wildly around her as she soared and danced on the wind.

After hours of unrestrained flight, Celestia felt that she should rest her wings. She looked beneath her and was immediately drawn to a tall cliff overlooking a beautiful field. The princess stood proudly, watching the tall grass and healthy flowers sway in the light breeze, like silent waves rolling across an endless ocean of green.

"It's the perfect day for a picnic!" a deep voice crooned behind her. Out of the corner of her eye, Celestia saw a familiar face busily smoothing out a stitched-up mess of a quilt on the ground and carrying a straw basket on his tail. "Won't you keep me company?" Celestia stepped onto the blanket and delicately sat down. Discord placed the basket between them and opened the lid to offer her the first sandwich.

"Come on, you like bacon," the draconequus teased.

"I'm not in the mood for it right now."

"Suit yourself," he mumbled through a mouthful of bread and meat.

"I haven't seen you in a while," Celestia spoke as Discord reached into the basket for another sandwich. "You had me hoping that I would never have to see you again."

“Just admit it, you missed me,” Discord said slyly.

“Don’t hold your breath.”

“Speaking of breath,” he said as he waved his sandwich around for emphasis, “your trip down memory lane was actually enlightening for me, too. Now I know why my breath always smells like olives.” Discord wheezed and exhaled a pungent green cloud with a foul odor. “So I was supposed to be a tree. Crazy. I still haven’t heard a ‘thank you’ yet, by the way.”

“You *did* kill my parents,” Celestia countered playfully.

“In my defense, I had the mentality of a child when they attacked me.”

“So nothing has changed.”

“Ouch! Harsh words, harsh words,” the draconequus laughed mightily, and Celestia couldn’t help but chuckle in spite of herself.

“You know, Celestia, I always felt like we had a bond. Like there was some special connection between us,” Discord said mystically. “Turns out it was something more like a magical umbilical chord.” Celestia nearly choked at the words. She had been trying to ignore the significance behind her visions of the war while reliving her memories, but the idea had crossed her mind at least once since then. What had really surprised her was how little the knowledge seemed to affect her. She would have thought that the discovery that her greatest and oldest enemy was, in some bizarre and twisted way that befitted the creature, like a son would have shocked her to her core, but she found herself able to accept it with little difficulty.

“I don’t really know if I’d say you’re my son,” Celestia hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe ‘creation’ would fit better.”

“Wow, you sure know how to make a guy feel loved, Mommy,” Discord said and twisted his enormous eyebrows in thought. “Yeah, you’re right, it feels a little too weird for me.”

“What I want to know is how, despite drawing life from the most beautiful creature in all of Equestria, you managed to turn out looking like... that,” Celestia settled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Discord challenged defensively.

“Discord, look at yourself,” Celestia said as she rolled her eyes. “I’m not even convinced you have the head of a pony. I always thought you looked more like a goat.”

The draconequus roared with laughter. “That’s too funny! Somepony said the very same thing to me around the beginning of my rule. I wound up spending the first century tearing up Equestria just trying to *find* one of the blasted things to see what he was talking about--come to think of it, I’m not sure if I ever found one,” he added thoughtfully.

Celestia couldn’t believe herself. She would barely say two words to Luna, and yet she had no issue opening up and talking to Discord. Just talking! No riddles, no visions, no smoke clouding her mind; just the princess of Equestria and the spirit of chaos having a friendly picnic. She must have gone mad. Against her better judgment, she took a sandwich from the basket and took a bite, pleasantly surprised by the taste.

“This isn’t half-bad,” she admitted.

“Better than little Luna?” Discord asked mischievously.

“Well, there’s no such thing as being *worse* than her...”

“Presenting: Miss Twilight Sparkle!”

The sudden announcement started Princess Celestia and immediately tore her from her thoughts. The grand doors swung open and the young unicorn entered with a relieved smile on her face.

“Princess Celestia, I can’t tell you how wonderful it is to hear you’re feeling well,” Twilight said with a respectful bow. Celestia walked down the steps from her throne to meet her student, fighting to ignore the fears and suspicions that had been plaguing her faith in the unicorn. But she knew

this might be her last opportunity to cement Twilight's loyalty, and Celestia could not allow herself to lose her.

"I am happy to see you as well, Twilight Sparkle," Celestia greeted Twilight as she met her in the center of the room. "It means a great deal to me to see that you've come all this way by yourself."

"Oh..." Twilight hesitated. "Actually, Princess, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, and Fluttershy came to Canterlot with me." Those horrible little ponies.

"Where are they?" Twilight flinched from the urgency in the princess' voice, but forced herself to smile as pleasantly as she could.

"They're off exploring," the unicorn answered.

"I see. Well, I hope they enjoy themselves," Celestia said conversationally, her voice immediately losing its harsh edge. "How have you been, Twilight? I haven't had the opportunity to speak with you alone for some time."

"Things have been a bit chaotic around Ponyville without... the sun," Twilight hazarded, "but we've all been pulling together, Princess." Celestia twisted her mouth in thought when an idea struck her.

"Twilight, how long have we known one another?"

"Ah, you made me your student sixteen years ago next month," Twilight said, caught momentarily off-guard by the odd question.

"Well, Twilight, if that's so, I find it silly that we are still so formal around each other," Celestia began with a large grin. "I would like it if you addressed me by my name."

Twilight's eyes stretched wide. Luna had warned her that the princess hadn't been herself lately, but she was not prepared for this. "I don't really think that's my place."

"You call Luna by her name. Why is it different for me?" Celestia asked darkly, memories of late-night conspiracies returning to her.

"I-I'm sorry, P-Celestia, I didn't mean to offend you..."

"Don't concern yourself, Twilight. All is forgiven," Celestia forced a smile, though her grin faltered as Twilight recoiled from her. Something was not right. "Have you been keeping with your studies?"

"I *did* find a snipe, though," Discord spoke up between bites of his sandwich. "I thought it was going to be a bird or something. Turns out they're indistinguishable from frogs."

"Are you sure you didn't just find a frog?" Celestia asked skeptically, leering victoriously as the draconequus' expression changed from confidence to uncertainty to worry to frustration.

"There's another hundred years I wasted! Celestia, you've got to let me out again!" Discord pleaded. "I'm going to lose my mind if I have to wait another thousand years before I find a snipe. Or a goat while I'm at it."

"You know that's not going to happen," Celestia refused. "As long as I protect Equestria, I won't allow you to run amok." Discord pouted and spat an ember over the cliff, which gently drifted to the grassy field below.

"You haven't done a great job of it so far. But fine. I can wait. In six hundred, seven hundred years tops, I'll be back," he said ominously, reclining on the patchwork quilt. The alicorn narrowed her eyes at the creature and allowed herself to walk into his trap.

"What are you trying to say? The Elements of Harmony have proven themselves to be more than a match for you. Twice," she added proudly.

"Right, sure... Like how I was trapped in stone forever the first time?" Discord mocked. Celestia ignored the smell of burning grass wafting up from below her.

"Tell me what you know," she demanded.

"And why would I do that? It doesn't seem like it would benefit *me* much," he asked as he lazily inspected his talons.

“Because helping your enemy to defeat you is precisely the sort of nonsensical thing you delight in.” Celestia masked her smirk. Now it was time for Discord to stumble into *her* trap.

“Hmm... True,” the draconequus mused as he ran his paws through his beard. “But doing the exact *opposite* of what you’d expect me to do is also my style, so I’m afraid the answer is a great, big no.”

“But I was expecting you to be contrary and stubborn, so you’re actually being predictable by doing the unpredictable,” Celestia said definitively, truly hoping that the anti-logic wouldn’t need to become any more convoluted. Her gambit appeared to have worked, as Discord had pulled himself off of the blanket and spat into the field again before summoning a quill and scroll and scratching away intently.

“...times the square root... carry the infinity... Bah!” he shouted, tearing the scroll in half and dropping the two halves into the growing fire below them. “I’m still not going to do it.”

“Thank you for my birthday present, Discord. I truly enjoyed it.”

“So the thing about the Elements,” Discord began as he summoned a projector screen to float in front of the two, “is that they work just like any other form of magic. You need concentration to make them work the way you want. And these six...” he snapped his paw and an image of Twilight and her friends harnessing the power of the Elements of Harmony appeared on the screen. “Have the laser-focus of a tub of gelatin. But the biggest thing they were missing...”

The image changed again, showing an image of Luna and Celestia pacing around Discord in their final confrontation, their bodies surrounded by the awesome power of the Elements. “...was the **hate**. Nothing drives you to put down somepony for good quite like pure loathing.”

“Celestia?” The alicorn blinked a few times and looked around the throne room.

“I’m sorry. I’ve still been feeling a little light-headed lately. What were you saying?”

"I said that I've been reading up on ways that Discord might be able to use his powers, if you'd like to hear them," Twilight offered helpfully. The princess looked into her faithful student's rich purple eyes and found something there she had prayed she would never see: guilt. Twilight Sparkle was hiding something from her. This would not stand.

"Never mind that now, Twilight. I'd like to ask you a few things. To help get my thoughts in order," Celestia spoke.

"Of course, Pri-Celestia," Twilight corrected herself. "I'm happy to help however I can."

"I'm glad. When we went to investigate Discord's cave those days ago, you and your friends had to stay behind for the carriage to take you home, correct?" she asked.

"That's right."

"It must have been late when you finally made it back to Canterlot."

"Yeah, it was already pretty dark out," Twilight answered. Celestia silently acknowledged the confession -- Twilight admitted to being taken to the palace when she was meant to be returned to Ponyville.

"I am sorry for leaving you there, Twilight," Celestia apologized, though her voice was devoid of any regret. "Tell me, has Luna been staying in touch with you? I know that she trusts you nearly as much as I do, and she tells me she sees you as a role model for reintegrating with pony society."

"Oh, yes, of course!" Twilight said hurriedly.

"What sort of things do you discuss with her?" Celestia's tone was earnest, but the cold stare the alicorn gave her caused Twilight to realize the princess was beginning to distrust her.

"You know, like what I write to you. The magic of friendship, lessons I've learned from the ponies in Ponyville... Sometimes she asks me questions about... things like how to speak to ponies without intimidating them."

Princess Celestia's ancient heart was breaking.

"Those girls had to deal with soap roads and chocolate rain for less than a day. They simply didn't have any reason to harbor any real hatred toward me," Discord continued, the projector showing corresponding images. "The cute little pink one actually *liked* it." Princess Celestia burned a hole through the projected image of Pinkie Pie's laughing face.

"Not a fan, are we?"

"The Elements symbolize order and peace among all ponies," Celestia said angrily, ignoring rapidly-growing blaze below her. "The idea that they could be strengthened by negative emotion is absurd."

"Let's just stick to what we know. The girls didn't hate me, and here we are enjoying a picnic together."

"So then why didn't the seal last forever the first time? I hated you. I hated you with every ounce of my being for all that you did to Equestria and what you took from me," the princess said dismally.

"Trust me, I know. But what about your sister?" The word always sounded filthy whenever it slithered out of his mouth. "She didn't hate me with all her heart, and just a few centuries later it was my time to shine again. And what about Nightmare Moon?" Discord added.

"Luna?"

"So, we agree they're one and the same now! That's good! That's *progress*," the draconequus cheered as he clapped his paws together. "You just couldn't find it in you to hate her. You were too **weak**, and now she's back to take everything away from you again."

Celestia was silent. She didn't want to believe it, but she couldn't find anything in what he said that she hadn't seen to be true with her own eyes. Luna was weak and it nearly doomed Equestria, and then Celestia had been weak and now her own sister was plotting against her.

"How do I know I can trust you?"

The inferno below stretched as far as she could see.

“Oh, Celestia. You can’t trust anypony...”

“Well, Celestia, I’m glad that you’re feeling healthy again,” Twilight said with an uneasy grin as she inched toward the doors. “But I should go check on the others. I’m sure they’ve gotten into *some* situation by now.”

“Very well, Twilight Sparkle. I also have other duties to attend to. Thank you for speaking with me. This has been very enlightening.”

Princess Celestia could hardly concentrate on the rest of her visits, not that any of them mattered anyway. “There aren’t enough pegasi in reserve, your town will have to endure a drought for a while longer. If that traveling magician from Hoofington continues to spread lies of Ursa Majors, have her arrested for disturbing the peace and conspiring to instigate a riot. Yes, I will be present in Cloudsdale tomorrow for the competition.”

The very instant she was freed of those common ponies, she retreated to her bedchamber and slammed the lock tight. She collapsed onto her bed and fell fast asleep, eager for the dreams that awaited her.

She remembered her nightmares. She was rising through the air toward the sun, until the moon betrayed her and eclipsed the life-giving celestial body. And she fell into the blackness, unable to move or save herself--she didn’t bother to try. And yet, the fear remained. She refused to die.

On cue, he appeared in front of her, his homely but comforting face twisted into an inviting grin. He offered his paw and time stood still. It was only a dream. It didn’t really matter what she did. And perhaps if she didn’t hit the ground, she wouldn’t wake up, and she could continue to dream. Celestia took his paw and dreamed of wonderful things.

She raised the sun and returned to her room. Celestia would not have anything to do with her sister this morning, or her poisonous cooking. She clenched her eyes tight in attempt to force herself to sleep. She was disturbed by a clamorous knocking on her door and prayed to be left alone.

“Sister?” Luna. “Celestia, did you fall back asleep? We have to be in Cloudsdale soon to judge the Best Young Flyer competition, remember?” Celestia remained silent in hopes that Luna would give up, until the handle on her door slowly turned open. She was certain she had locked that door.

“Rise and shine, sister. You’ll feel better once we get you out of the palace.”

There was no way out of it now, Celestia knew. She slowly climbed to her hooves and let her sheets slide off of her. Luna nearly screamed when she saw her sister.

“Oh, heavens, Celestia! What happened?” Celestia refused to speak to her scheming little sister; she had spent enough time with Discord to recognize when somepony was trying to make a fool of her. But the princess of the night would not relent.

“Sister, you look like death warmed over! We have to get you to the infirmary right away!”

“I’m fine,” Celestia hissed. “Let’s just go.”

“Sister, you’re sick! Stars above, Celestia, you’re *gray*!”

“I said I’m fine!”

Celestia remained mute in the face of Luna’s endless interrogation; she couldn’t show any weakness, lest the duplicitous mare seized the opportunity to overthrow her before Celestia was prepared to deal with her.

“Once and for all,” Celestia murmured absentmindedly as she climbed onto her personal chariot beside Luna’s.

“Did you say something, sister?” Luna asked hopefully only to withdraw after receiving only silence in response. The two set off for

Cloudsdale, and though Luna tried her best to reach out to her sister, all Celestia could do was think. Think of how she'd rather be flying rather than being ferried around by those overbearing guards. Think of how disappointing each performance was sure to be in comparison to her own grace and talent. Think of how soft and helpless the entire pony race had become as a result of her naive compassion and personal weakness. Think of how far Equestria seemed to have fallen, from an exciting world full of wonders and new discoveries to such an uninteresting mess. Think of how right that father in Canterlot had been when he said it was foolish to allow Luna to live in the palace. Think of how the two ponies she had held closest had betrayed her. Think of those wretched ponies that poisoned Twilight's mind.

"Hey, it is! Princess Celestia! Princess Luna! Over here!" The two royal alicorns turned their head to see a purple hot air balloon drifting a few hundred feet away. And *still* Celestia could hear that pink ones' awful, grating, squeaky voice.

"Look, Celestia, it's Twilight and her friends," the younger princess motioned, hoping the surprise would prompt any sort of reaction. Celestia stomped twice on the floor of her chariot, and the pegasus guards increased their speed, leaving the others far behind.

As planned, Celestia arrived at Cloudsdale well before the heretics to allow herself time to alert her guards to a possible conspiracy, and instructed them to keep a close watch on Luna, Twilight Sparkle, and the others for any suspicious behavior. She fought the urge to scream as that horns-on-a-chalkboard sound of the pink thing's voice alerted her of their approach well before the top of the purple balloon came into sight. Without wasting another second, Celestia pushed through the crowd of chattering pegasi, ignoring their greetings and concerned whispers, until she reached the famous Cloudsdale Cloudiseum. Some flank-kissing pegasus ushered her to her private box, where he guaranteed her she would have the best view of the performers, as if it really mattered to her.

The only thing that Celestia was concerned with was how she would expose Luna for the traitor she was.

"This is going to be a *fantastic* show," Discord chuckled from his seat beside her. "I can already tell. Popcorn?"

Chapter 7

Twilight Sparkle could barely concentrate on the competition. She would cheer for Rainbow Dash when she came on, of course, and so would all of her other friends; but until then, all that was on her mind was the grim letter Princess Luna had sent her before they departed for Cloudsdale, concerning Princess Celestia's disintegrating condition. The younger princess' report gave Twilight's recent discoveries even graver weight, as she had spent most of the previous night searching for an answer for Celestia concerning Discord; what she found were stories of powerful spirits lingering in places that had been important to them during life or drawing power from objects or ponies they shared a special bond with, though sometimes the poltergeists would simply strike out at whatever they could find.

She didn't want to believe what she read. She had truly wished that Celestia was wrong about Discord, just this once. But when she looked up above at the princess, her white coat and colorful mane turned to a dismal gray, she knew something terrible had befallen her. Twilight looked to her friends to see that they all, save Pinkie Pie of course, shared the same expression of dread. The Elements of Harmony wrapped around their necks strangled them, and the promise they swore to Princess Luna haunted them all.

"We have to be brave, girls. For Equestria."

"Look at this!" Discord laughed from his seat between the two princesses between fistfuls of popcorn. "We have the stupid and nice judge, the cool judge--that's me, by the way--and the cranky, mean judge. Oooh! It's just like Equestrian Idol!" Celestia would have ordered Discord to be silent, but the truth of the matter was that the draconequus' drivel was the most amusing form of entertainment available. Speaking with Luna was simply out of the question, and while it may have been called the "*Best Young Flyer*" competition, the participants were a far cry from talented.

'I mean, for all that's good, look at that one's eyes!' Celestia thought to herself in disgust. 'Are they really letting the *deformed* into these

performances? Or is this meant to be a joke?' The pegasus' routine consisted almost entirely of wobbly spirals and figure 8s, but she wouldn't have been surprised if she was told that the pony had been trying to fly straight.

"She looks so happy to be here," Luna said warmly as she made a few checks on her ballot page.

"That makes one of us," Celestia scoffed under her breath.

"You're not having fun, Celestia?" Discord asked, looking upset. "But look who's next! It's your favorite show-off."

"Please welcome our final pony, competitor number sixteen!" the announcer shouted to a chorus of cheers. Out came the cyan pony, waving to the crowd.

"Isn't this the one who pulled off a sonic rainboom last year?" Luna asked her sister. "I would love to see one. I can't remember the last time I've seen somepony pull one off."

"Watch your head," the sun princess grunted, catching the younger sister by surprise. "She's also the one who kicked a cloud at me in the middle of her performance." Luna was disquieted by the comment, but she chose to remain silent as the loud rock music that Rainbow Dash had chosen to accompany her performance began.

The pegasus dove down to the floor of the stadium and nimbly swerved around the cloud pillars as she rapidly gained speed. Once she had crossed the last one, she immediately doubled back and flew around them again, moving faster and faster and faster each time, leaving a rainbow trail shining around each column. The clouds spun around in place and converged on the center of the arena to come together into a single cluster of clouds. Rainbow Dash was a blur of colors as she spiraled around the clouds, shaping it into a single pillar that extended far above the top of the Cloudiseum. The pegasus soared high into the sky and hovered in the air as the music calmed and a hush fell over the crowd. The sound of a guitar returned, starting soft and quick but growing louder and stronger as the pegasus flew in a wide clover pattern over the stadium. The music reached its climax, and Rainbow Dash dove down into the pillar. She split

straight through it and the cloud exploded into a rain of rainbow-colored tufts of fluff that gracefully showered the stadium.

Celestia couldn't believe how easily impressed those ponies were. They were screaming like fools, but then again, what more did she expect? She looked to see if Luna was able to retain some dignity, but that childish squealing that escaped her mouth like a deflating balloon gave her her answer. It was amazing that even after her growth spurt, she hadn't become any more mature.

"I actually liked this one," Discord said as he grabbed a fistful of clouds and packed them on top of a cardboard cone. "I haven't had a good snow cone in ages. What do you think, Luna?" The draconequus nudged Luna in the ribs, but the midnight princess continued to watch the clouds float down in amazement. "Luna, I will not hesitate to kick you again."

Among the wave of voices all shouting in unison, Celestia could pick out the voices of Twilight and her associates. Looking around the stadium seats, she found the five ponies cheering for their friend. A spark of sunlight caught the girls and something reflected off of them. Celestia squinted to see what was causing the glimmer before six trails of gray storm clouds erupted from beneath her.

"Fillies and gentlecolts!" the announcer called enthusiastically. "While our judges render their final decisions, please join me in welcoming the Wonderbolts!"

"The Wonderbolts!" Luna and Discord gasped. The ponies took the stage in a heroic crash of thunder, their matching blue and yellow uniforms accentuating their dominating presence against the sky. Celestia felt a fire building in her as she observed the six pegasus superstars flying around the stadium in an intricate and perfectly synchronized routine that outclassed every other pegasus the princess had seen that day, yet they still managed to underwhelm her. When she already knew that she was the greatest flyer in her entire kingdom, there wasn't anything that could truly capture her interest. When those amateurs had performed, they at least had some awareness of their inadequacies. But these "Wonderbolts" were different. They were so *proud*, so intoxicated on their undeserved fame they had claimed with their meager abilities. How *dare* they.

“You know, sometimes it’s lonely being the only draconequus,” Discord sighed in a moment of spontaneous sentimentality. “I actually tried to make myself some companionship when I was younger. It did *not* work out the way I hoped,” he said with a grimace at the memory before turning to Celestia. “Do you think we could get another big war going so you can make me another me? A *girl*, if you could. ‘Caprice’ is a pretty name. What do you think?” The spirit of chaos noticed the princess’ dark expression and followed her eyes to the six ponies flying magnificently through the air.

“Ah, I see. Not enjoying the show, are we?” Discord asked insidiously, his hypnotic red eyes gleaming with malevolence. Celestia said nothing but subtly raised an eyebrow. The draconequus’ long face curled into a twisted grin. “I get it... They aren’t respecting you, are they?” The sun princess turned her head ever so slightly to look at her pseudo son. The world around her began to blur and the cheers and blasting music became muffled.

“Sweet, sweet Princess Celestia,” the words poured from his crooked mouth and filled her mind. “Let me put them in their place.” The princess let her mind drift into a supernal dream-scape, to times when life was simple. To times when the world was filled with the smell of the sweetest flowers, when the purest creatures fluttered through the air to serenade Equestria with their songs. When everything was so *real*.

A wave of high-pitched shouts rose above the sound of bird-songs, and a palpable sense of fear flooded her nostrils. Celestia’s serenity was completely shattered and her mind was returned to the unhappy present. All around her, ponies were in a panic; screams filled the air and pegasi looked between the coliseum floor below. Many were fleeing the scene. A cold feeling gripped the princess’ heart -- many of the ponies were looking toward her. The sun princess looked to Discord for an answer but only found her terrified sister staring at her with fearful eyes.

“Sister... Celestia, what have you done?!” Luna cried.

“I...” Celestia was at a loss for words. Her pegasus guards were surrounding her, looking cautious but at the ready. She looked back to the stands and saw a cyan pony slowly rising up from the cloud floor, carrying the broken form of an earth pony with a fiery red mane in her hooves. Five other pegasi soon followed after, each holding a motionless earth pony.

Each of the deceased were wearing a blue and yellow uniform. “I... I didn’t...”

A deep and familiar laughter resounded in Celestia’s ears. “I’ll see you soon, Celestia...” Her horror grew as the guards drew closer, tentatively reaching out to grab her.

“Celestia, what have you done!” Luna shouted angrily. Her eyes darted all around her, looking for a way to escape. She had to escape. She had to be anywhere but here. She had to survive.

“Stay back...” Celestia ordered quietly, her voice choking as she felt her world unravel. The guards came closer and even Luna was stepping toward her. “Stay back...!” It was all really happening. Her own kingdom had turned against her. Let them try to take her.

The sun princess dove off of her platform with her wings tucked at her side. The wind whipped against her face and she tore through the cloud floor of the stadium, vanishing from sight in a silent ‘whump’. She looked over her shoulder and found that the guards were close behind her, but she had nothing to fear. No living creature in Equestria could match her speed in the air. But she felt weak. She was so very hungry; she couldn’t risk eating any of Luna’s poisoned meals, and now she couldn’t muster the speed to stay ahead of her captors. Celestia’s nostrils flared as she realized that her treacherous sister must have planned for all of this. How long? How long had she harbored this traitor? How long had she loved and cared for her greatest enemy? After all she had done, Luna still aimed to destroy her.

There could be no mercy for her.

Princess Celestia had strength enough to tap into her magic and left her captors miles behind, vanishing in a flash of yellow. The sun fell from the sky, and a dreadful night descended on Equestria.

Faster. Celestia pushed through the labyrinth as quickly as she could, fighting against her aching muscles that screamed for rest. She had to keep moving. Her heart was pounding and her lungs were burning. Her

wings demanded to be set free, but she could not make the risk -- guards still passed above her, searching all of Equestria for the princess. The night's darkness hid her, but the fact remained that she was being hunted. Faster. She heard hoofsteps and voices coming closer. Faster.

She tripped over her own hooves and stumbled down the path, snapping her neck around when she heard a loud clattering. One of her golden horseshoes had come loose, but she couldn't stop for that now. She couldn't stop. She couldn't keep going. She couldn't breathe. Celestia leaned her body against the hedge walls, trying to fight the exhaustion that was wearing away at her. She was so tired, and the night tempted her with promises of sweet dreams. But she could not sleep -- it was no doubt another of her sister's traps. She had been fleeing for hours through this confounding maze from her invisible pursuers, and her body cried for relief. Tears dripped down her cheeks. How could she have ever been so foolish? How could she ever have trusted her?

"Celestia?"

No. No, not here. She found her. Around the corner came a large form as black as midnight; the only light that could be seen on the creature were its eyes, cold as ice and glinting with terrible purpose. Between those horrible globes stood a long, black horn, sharp enough to pierce through to a pony's heart. A miasma of deep purple flowed around its head and down its back to meet those wicked wings it hid at its sides.

Nightmare Moon had returned. The two alicorns spoke not a word to each other, choosing instead to lock eyes; one stood tall and patiently and the other crouched low on all fours like a wolf ready to pounce.

"So it's all come back to this?" Celestia hissed. "I forgave you, and you try to steal Equestria away from me again?"

"Sister, your mind is not your own," Princess Luna spoke gravely, forcing any excess of emotion from her voice. "We only wish to help you."

"We?" Celestia questioned, ignoring the voice in the back of her mind shouting at her to escape, to survive. All as one, six ponies came around the corner and stood behind the traitor, letting themselves fall under Celestia's scrutiny. None of them dared to lift their heads up to look at their

princess, the guilt of bearing the Elements of Harmony against her too heavy for them to shoulder.

Applejack was stone-faced, finding the strength to carry on with this dark task by doing her best to avoid thinking about it. Rarity made no effort to hide her vexation, completely abandoning her ladylike composure to show her true fear. Fluttershy was barely visible behind the others, curled into a quivering ball of whimpering yellow; Celestia would have almost pitied her if she didn't despise the creature. Pinkie Pie looked uncharacteristically somber, having finally been challenged with a situation she could not put a positive twist on. The usually dynamic Rainbow Dash was lifeless and silent; not only had she witnessed the deaths of her heroes, but her lifelong dream to join their ranks would forever remain an impossible fantasy. Twilight Sparkle stood at the head of the group, but her eyes were red from tears and her courageous spirit was completely extinguished. The unicorn would have given anything to be anywhere else.

Princess Celestia sensed her student's turmoil and she immediately knew that the girl's loyalty still belonged to her. The alicorn's pallid face slipped into the motherly facade she so often adopted when speaking with the unicorn and reached out to her.

"Twilight Sparkle, my most trusted student and friend..." Celestia cooed. The girl slowly raised her eyes to meet her mentor as she blinked away gathering tears. "Come. Stand by my side again, and it can all be like it was before." Twilight shut her eyes tight and turned her head down to hide her weakness. She turned to the five mares behind her, looking to her friends for support, but none of them could bring themselves look the unicorn in the eye. Twilight inhaled deeply and took a step forward. And then another. And another.

The gray alicorn's face glowed with eagerness as she watched the girl walk toward her, abandoning those ponies that had tainted her thoughts and corrupted her mind. But now she was back where she belonged: standing faithfully beside the true ruler of Equestria. She wanted to savor this moment: where she proved to Nightmare Moon that she would always be second in the hearts of their subjects. The princess closed her eyes and stretched her neck down to nuzzle her faithful student.

Celestia cried out in pain when a flash of white exploded inside her head. She saw herself racing against Luna down the halls of the palace. The colors bled away to a vision of herself, happily reading a letter from Twilight before lying down to sleep. Luna, freshly purified of her evil power, rushing to embrace her after their centuries apart.

Her muscles began to burn and twitch and the alicorn thrashed about like a wild beast as more images assaulted her mind. Watching from a distance as Twilight matured in Ponyville. Discord climbing out of the vase and dragging himself across the floor. Attacking Luna at breakfast on a whim. Discord's voice hissing, "...backed into a corner by everypony you once held dear to you." A memory of herself sitting alone on her throne for centuries. Sending the first sparks of flame to that home in Canterlot. The pure ecstasy of soaring free in the air on her way to Discord's cave.

Celestia shouted again and kicked Twilight in the ribs, sending the unicorn rolling on the ground toward the others, hitting every stray rock and throwing up dirt. More came still. Standing outside the door as Twilight and Luna whispered their treacheries in the dead of night. *A friend should always be ready to help others, and not be afraid to be helped in return.* Watching the Wonderbolts' wings vanish from their backs and plummet to the ground. Finally, looking down on the beautiful field below her with only Discord to keep her company.

She scrambled backwards in a panic. Her heart was pounding and she was gasping for breath. Her mind was still swimming from the sudden seizure but she still had the sense to know what had happened. She tried to take hold of her mind but her thoughts were pouring out, slipping through her hoofs and vanishing forever. Celestia was trembling in anger, her feral eyes centered on the timorous unicorn retreating behind Nightmare Moon. She crouched low to the ground, her eyes were bloodshot, and her mouth hung open in a vicious snarl.

"Traitor!" Celestia howled. "I take you on as my student, and this is how you repay me? By siding with *her*? By *destroying Equestria*?" The princess shrieked at the mare, and even the other girls couldn't help but recoil. Fluttershy's lower lip trembled as she let out a soft whimper, and despite her best efforts, she still couldn't hold back a sob. "I should have known better than to trust you, you wicked little girl!"

"I don't understand! Why didn't the memory spell work?" Twilight was devastated -- after she had used that same spell to save her friends from Discord's influence, she was certain this would work. She would have done anything if it meant they could avoid resorting to using the Elements of Harmony. And possessed or not, hearing those words from her teacher was almost enough to destroy her.

Princess Celestia began to chuckle deviously, her voice cracking and breaking at times as her laughter became louder and more maniacal. The princess eventually disintegrated into absolute hysterics, her laughter transforming into a wild screeching cackle.

"You *truly* believed that you could defeat me with such a rudimentary illusion? I am Princess Celestia! I control the sun and the moon! I will not be vanquished by your pathetic attempts to deceive me, you little foals!"

Beneath her expressionless surface, a storm of shame and terror raged within Luna as she recalled saying something not so different when she crowned herself Nightmare Moon. She would not allow her sister to become that same monster. She gathered her resolve and took a step toward Celestia -- whatever came next was for her own good.

"Celestia. That is enough. Something has happened to you, sister," the princess said, her voice strong and demanding. "Some awful evil has taken hold of you, and we have come to expel this dark power and save you." The gray alicorn's howling stopped in an instant and she turned to sneer at her sister.

"You cannot stop me with those little baubles! You pathetic children are too weak to ever harness their *true* power!" Her eyes fell on the six ponies and she felt her rage renew, more vicious than ever before. "Traitors! Traitors all of you! I brought you together to stop Nightmare Moon, and now you dare to oppose me? You all did this! You've all been plotting against me!" Celestia was hysterical, her voice was sharp and strained as she took a threatening step forward. "You five foals took my Twilight away! You wretched little monstrosities! Well, you can have her! She's nothing but a disappointment to me!"

Luna kept her eyes focused on the encroaching Celestia while the five ponies comforted Twilight Sparkle. The unicorn was trying with all her

might to stay strong, but she could still feel her extinguished tears creeping up on her once again, even as her friends showed their support. Deep down, Luna knew that Twilight was hurting as much she was, and having her mother figure and idol condemn her was visibly destroying the girl. She couldn't allow this to continue for much longer, she thought as her horn took on a faint glow.

"You are *dead* to me, Twilight Sparkle!" Celestia screeched as her horn glowed a violent red. "You are all *dead*!" Before the girls could react, the raging princess snapped her head forward and sent a blast of magic blazing at them like a comet. Twilight pushed her friends back to face the attack on her own, but Princess Luna jumped between them and deflected the spell, grunting from the effort.

"Girls, you must act now! Use the Elements!"

"Get out of my sight!" Celestia slung another curse at her sister and rolled to the side to avoid the counterattack. Before she could recover, Luna was on top of her, stomping her down and pinning her to the ground as the older sister fought with all her strength to break free.

"Celestia, please believe me, this is for your own good!" Luna said firmly as she felt her hold weakening.

"No! I've known all about your scheming and plotting all along, you little snake!" Celestia spat at her sister's face, making the dark alicorn turn her head away. "You're trying to destroy Equestria and take my kingdom away from me! You haven't changed! You're just as jealous and despicable as you were when I banished you to your sad little moon one thousand years ago, Nightmare Moon!" Celestia concentrated a blast of magic to erupt from her horn and strike Luna in the chest, causing the younger sister to fly back and free the feral princess.

There was war when her father ruled. There was chaos when Discord ruled. There was misery when Nightmare Moon made her bid to power. Celestia knew that she was the only one who could ever rule Equestria.

"Celestia, we only want to help you!"

"I don't need anypony's help!" she cried, and the two clashed.

Twilight was paralyzed. Try as she might, she could not force herself to move. As she watched the two alicorns battle for Celestia's soul, all she could think of was what would happen to their beloved princess if they used the Elements of Harmony. And as she looked to her friends, hoping one of them would be the first to take a stand, she could see they had the very same fears. When they had confronted Nightmare Moon and Discord, the magic of the Elements simply flowed through them on their own accord -- they had never held any control over the artifacts, the power of harmony seemed to simply act how it saw fit. So what would happen to her? Would it purge the evil from Celestia and leave her as pure as she once was like with Luna? Or would they imprison Celestia, alone, for centuries to plot and spite the world until she returned to take her revenge? Would the Elements sense Discord's influence within her and imprison her in stone to join the wicked spirit?

Could they kill her?

None of the girls dared say a word, each too fearful to bear the blame for the fate of Princess Celestia. But as the two warring sisters battle became more ferocious, someone had to give.

"We have to do it," came a voice that was hardly more than a whisper. Each of the ponies silently gasped and turned to their friend. Rainbow Dash had broken the silence she had carried since the tragic end of the Best Young Flyers competition, but the cloud of gloom that hovered over the pegasus had not dispelled, and though she had finally raised her head, she didn't dare to look her friends in the eye for more than a second at a time.

"When Twilight came back to us that night... And told us what Princess Luna said... We all agreed to use them if... If it came down to this." Twilight Sparkle swallowed nervously -- she wanted to believe that the pegasus' legendary loyalty was allied with the Princess, as opposed to her fallen heroes.

"We have to do what's right for Equestria, no matter what happens to her." Rainbow Dash's voice was still drained of emotion, save for the light, angry emphasis she placed on the last word. The others exchanged somber glances and one by one turned to Twilight Sparkle expectantly.

They would never force her to do something against her will, she knew, but as she thought of all the ponies she knew and loved with all her heart while Celestia's bitter, alien words resounded in her mind, she understood there could be no other option.

"Twilight!" Luna shouted urgently as a blast of magic tearing open the scar her sister had left her in the gardens. Celestia grinned wildly as she watched her enemy spasm in pain.

"Don't waste your breath, Nightmare Moon. You shouldn't use your final words to beg for *help*." Celestia's crown cracked and fell to her sides as the midnight princess struck her sister between the eyes and split the golden ornament. "There's no helping some ponies."

Luna roared and dove at Celestia, knocking her sister back. Seizing the opportunity, Luna swept her sister's legs out from under her and held her to the ground. Celestia thrashed and screamed with all her fury, damning the ponies.

Twilight closed her eyes and took a deep breath; until the day she died, she would always remember it as the foulest taste she would ever know.

"We have to be brave," the faithful student recited. "For Equestria."

"I! Am! Equestria!" Celestia thundered, accentuating each cry with a failed stab at Nightmare Moon's throat. Her eyes grew wide as she craned her neck around to see the six ponies standing in a formation and moving closer. In one desperate act, Princess Celestia bit down on Luna's leg. Shocked by the savage attack, the princess recoiled and gave her sister the opening she needed.

Celestia forced herself out from the trap and fled down the twisting walls of the labyrinth, deaf to the cries of the ponies falling behind her. Unfurling her majestic wings, the sun princess brought her feathery extensions down in a powerful flap, reveling in the feeling of the updraft as she took to the air.

A red cross exploded in the air above the labyrinth and shimmered defiantly against the unlit sky. Several winged shapes heeded the call and

gave swarmed after the renegade alicorn as she spiraled and dove through the air, howling and whooping like a fool. She swam through the serene clouds and dropped downward to catch an air current and slip into the wind. Celestia cut through the air like a shooting star, shining through the sky and raining light on her adoring flock below her.

She would have to hide, she understood. She would have to take her revenge on Nightmare Moon eventually. Those five, awful ponies and even Twilight would suffer. But for now, she was weak. She was hungry. She was hunted...

...but she was free.

Chapter 8

All of Equestria wept as news of the catastrophe at Cloudsdale spread. There had been no news of their beloved Princess Celestia in three days, and the sun had refused to rise. Equestria had been in a panic when the princess and the sun had vanished not a week prior, but now the world was in absolute chaos, for the ponies knew that their ruler had forsaken them.

Princess Luna sadly trudged through the halls of the palace on her way to Canterlot Tower. She had spent the first half of the day personally seeing to it that Twilight and her friends would be protected inside of the walls of Canterlot should her sister try to strike at them when she could not help them in Ponyville. The rest of her day was spent in the company of several terrified diplomats. She had narrowly managed to calm them and ensured the ponies that they had found Princess Celestia and she would be returned to them soon. She never liked lying, though she often found she was quite adept at it, but for the sake of Equestria's sanity she could not confess the truth.

She realized she was making a mistake -- it was her refusal to face the truth that allowed her sister to fall so far. But what else could she do? Tell them that not a soul had seen their ruler since her attempt to murder her own sister and the six bearers of the Elements of Harmony? That it was likely that Celestia may never be found until she decided to be found, and that the squads she had sent to search Equestria were purely facetious covers to comfort the citizens? That Luna had tried without success to raise the sun on her own for the last two days, and may be too weak to bring its life-bringing rays until long after Equestria had perished in an eternal night? She felt a coldness creep over her, and heard a voice whispering in her ear telling her that lies were easier to take than painful truths.

No. It wasn't right, she scolded herself. She was not ashamed to be afraid, but she would not let her fear destroy Equestria. She continued her march with renewed vigor, her searing determination burning away the doubt that had hovered over her. She would try again to raise the sun. And whether she met failure or success, she would confess it all. Celestia's

sudden paranoia and declining health, how the possible threat of Discord's power was never released to the public, but most of all, she would tell them of her own failure to act to save Equestria from this disaster. If her ponies had ever intended to forgive her for her sins as Nightmare Moon, they certainly would never accept her now. But if that was how it was meant to be, so be it. She would endure the hate and the whispers and the burden of ruling. Luna would be the ruler that Equestria needed, at any cost to herself.

She stood before the doors of Canterlot Tower and looked up at the ivory building glowing faintly in the dark night sky, with the moon on the western horizon at the end of its orbit waiting for the sun to rise and relieve its sister. Luna's mother always spoke of the balance between the two heavenly bodies and it was something that always fascinated the princesses; it was difficult for one to rise without the help of the other, and this would certainly be true for Luna. The midnight princess turned to the east, her teal eyes hopefully scanning the horizon for any trace of light. Finding none, she solemnly began her solitary journey up the tower steps. She prayed that her ponies would have their sun again soon, and she prayed for her sister.

"No matter what you've done, or what you've become," Luna whispered to the wind, "I will always know you as you were, as you truly are." For the very first time, the younger princess understood her sister's anguish after banishing her away, and the crushing guilt of knowing the monster history would make her become. "Please, Celestia, please come home."

Her legs were shaking and her breathing was labored. Her ragged coat was stained with sharp cuts and bruises and her once-colorful mane was made sordid by the dirt and grime that clung to it and pinned the hair to her side. She had no time to care for vanity now that Luna had sent squadrons of pegasi to hunt her. The alicorn had spent the last few days hiding from the soldiers in the concealing darkness of the unlit sky and in every hole and wedge in the forest she could tuck herself into. She couldn't let them find her, or it would be the end of her. She had tried to snap down into the trees to escape her pursuers that fateful night, but something went wrong. A branch had deeply cut her wing and she fell to the ground, the immense pain that moving it brought telling the renegade princess that it

was broken. Celestia would have used her magic to mend it, but she hardly had the strength to stay moving, let alone muster even the weakest spell. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten anything substantial, as her diet during her time in hiding had consisted only of whatever meager bits of grass and fungus she could lower herself to force down.

She was completely alone, abandoned. Forsaken by everyone she knew and chased out from her own home like some beast. Even Discord had not appeared to keep her company as he used to. But she would not go quietly into the darkness. She would have her revenge on Nightmare Moon, and her plan was already underway. She would hide the sun away for as long as necessary; soon, the susceptible ponies of Equestria would blame Nightmare Moon for everything and accuse her of trying to create another eternal night. And leading the charge against this treacherous usurper would be Princess Celestia, the one true ruler of the land, looking down at the cowards that dared to oppose her as they squirmed and shriveled in the all-revealing light of day. It would be glorious.

Discord had to congratulate himself on yet another victory. The spirit of chaos laughed in his throat as he hovered unseen over the gray alicorn. Even those little ponies hadn't self-destructed as marvelously as Celestia had, and those were some of the funniest little spats he had ever seen! Oh, poor, poor Princess Celestia. The destruction of Equestria would only be the *world's* punishment for his imprisonment. But his creator needed special attention after the shameful way she treated her own child.

'No, that still feels weird,' Discord thought, shuddering at the mental image. How could ponies even *stand* to give birth? With all the screaming and the pushing and the, the *ick*. There was a difference between chaos and being disgusting, and he drew the line at the "miracle" of life. The heavy beating of wings let him know that things were about to get exciting again and he held on tight to the magical tether extending from his stomach that tied him to the princess.

Celestia panicked and scrambled into a prickly bush, wincing as the thorns added more cuts and scrapes across her body. But anything was better than being discovered by the pegasus guards that were scanning the forest. She kept silent, cringing at every snap from the branches under her hooves; it was becoming increasingly difficult to remain standing.

"Anything?" one of the patrollers asked.

“Nothing, sir.”

“For the love of Cele... For goodness sake,” the pony corrected himself, “why would the princess even send us out this way? Nothing this way but that old dragon’s lair.” Celestia’s ears perked at the mention and an idea struck her. Of course! If he wouldn’t come to her to help, then she’d go to him. The mountain was just on the edge of the forest; she could be there in just a few hours.

The draconequus frowned. He wanted the mountain to be a surprise. He would have loved to grab onto Celestia’s horn and coax out some magic to remove those meddlesome guards’ wings, but it appeared that the alicorn was all out of juice. He idly floated around as he waited for the princess to feel safe enough to crawl out of the thorns and continue her trek to his new lair. It wasn’t fair. She couldn’t even see how pathetic she looked, stumbling around in the darkness, tripping over every rock and branch in her way, and he couldn’t appear to her to bring it to her attention when he was so close to his final victory.

Well, the first of his final victories. The spirit of chaos snorted in disappointment as he thought back to how Luna foiled his first crack at getting under her skin, which he found to be incredibly inconsiderate. First she sealed him in stone, and then she pestered him for a thousand years after she gets herself stuck on the moon, but once he tried to follow that telepathic channel she opened between them, *then* she didn’t want to have anything to do with him. He supposed that she must have been made of sterner stuff than her big sister, but he would get to her eventually. But for now, one out of two wasn’t bad. That was a solid F. Maybe even an F+.

Celestia closed her eyes and cursed Discord as a wave of painful images bombarded her. Warmly greeting Twilight was truly an unsuitable student if she couldn’t even manage to put an end to the spells she casted. But the draconequus had lied to her—he told her that nothing could hurt her in her memories, and yet as she was forced to recall memory after memory, she couldn’t think of a time when she was in greater misery. She didn’t deserve this hell that Twilight and Nightmare Moon had cursed her with, but she would personally see to it that they felt her suffering ten times over.

She stopped in her tracks when a ferocious growl rumbled from behind her. Turning over her shoulder, she could see solid pure yellow eyes glowing from the blackness of the forest. A faint blue glow was visible around them, and Celestia lowered her stance. Lupus Minors were no real threat to any capable pony, and she had made a game of hunting the wolves with her father when she was young; Lupus Minors were cowardly creatures of the night, as all things nocturnal were, and would often flee in terror from the fiery glow of the Sun King. When she was older, living in hiding, she could simply flash a beacon of light and blind the hounds and take them down at her leisure. But now the long night had given the worshippers of darkness foolish courage and one stupid dog thought it was powerful enough to prey upon *her*.

She padded her hoof against the ground once or twice and charged into the thicket with her horn aimed to pierce through the beast. She felt a slight resistance, but no creature's hide was too thick for an alicorn to puncture. A sad howl was cut short and the princess realized with some satisfaction that she must have stabbed through the beast's throat. She cried out when she felt a sharp pain on her side and her flank and saw that two more of the creatures had ambushed her. Throwing the dead Lupus off of her horn, Celestia bucked weakly to scare the creatures away, but to no effect. The wolves easily leapt back and pounced again, tearing savagely into the alicorn's flesh. Letting out a fearful whinny, the princess fled from her attackers. Her hooves pounded against the dirt, kicking up grass and dying leafs as she dashed and maneuvered around each tree. A chorus of howls echoed around her as more Lupus Minors joined the hunt.

Even in the dark of night she could see their starry, blue forms savagely racing over the hills by the trees of the forest and realized with growing anxiety that they were closing the distance between them. What she would give to be able to turn them all to dust in the glow of her glorious sun, or better yet, leave the slobbering mutts to snap at the air as she took flight to leave all her earthly concerns behind. She could see herself rising higher and higher with each flap of her wings, able to look down and see her entire kingdom bathed in her radiance. Another howl came like a blade, cutting through Celestia's dreaming and clipping her wings to let her fall back to the dark earth. The howl persisted and the princess turned to her side to see her sister running eagerly at her side.

“Luna?” Celestia whispered in uncertainty. For it was Luna. Back when her sister was not filled with jealousy and hatred, if there ever was a time. She was taken back to a time when the two laughed and loved, back to those blissful days of youth.

“You’re going to have to try harder than that, Tia!” Luna teased playfully before taking a turn and vanishing behind a hedge. The alicorn found herself dashing through the palace’s garden labyrinth. Her father’s sun was shining brightly above in the clear blue sky, and some curious birds were flitting happily above her, singing words of encouragement.

“You won’t beat me this time, Luna!” Celestia laughed back. She took in the bliss of it all, praising her guardian angel for saving her from Twilight’s failed spell with these heavenly memories. Discord happily accepted; Celestia’s mind was a sublimely turbulent place now, a decided improvement from how he found her just two weeks ago.

The lush green blended into brown stones as she mischievously scurried down an alley. She could hear Captain Ratch’s angry voice howling at the guards chasing after her and couldn’t help but laugh at how worked up the old stallion got at everything. It was amazing he managed to live so long when he was always so stressed. Letting responsibility overwhelm you was no way to go through life, Celestia decided. But it was time to pick up the pace—if she didn’t fly quicker, she wouldn’t be able to produce a large enough blast to blow away the leaves.

Celestia’s wings beat faster and faster, fighting against the updraft as she dove toward the earth. The forest was coming closer and closer, and she could barely make out what looked like some poor pony being chased by a pack of Lupus Minors. She didn’t feel much like helping the fool, but she always enjoyed reinforcing her authority. Tucking her wings around her body, Celestia prepared to break through the trees and tackle one of the animals at the front of the pack. A sudden surge of agony tore through her wings, as if they had burst into flames. The alicorn kicked her legs in a panic, unable to pull out of the drop.

Princess Celestia crashed through the edge of the forest, her broken wing bent grotesquely at her side. She tumbled for a few feet and landed on her side, moaning weakly. The alicorn forced an eye to open, the cuts

on her face stinging from the tears washing over them, and saw the Lupus Minors stalking closer, preparing to finish her.

She shut her eyes tight and fought with whatever paltry strength she still had to move. She could only force herself to her knees, and by then it was too late. The Lupus Minor at the head of the pack released a howl and lunged at the defenseless princess. Celestia was in disbelief. It couldn't really end like this... not like *this*...

Another howl filled the air, though this time it was accompanied by frightened whimpers and frantic scurrying. The alicorn opened her eyes again and saw the Lupus Minors retreating back into the cover of the forest with their smoking tails tucked between their legs. Celestia twisted her head this way and that, trying to find her savior. Nothing could have matched her rapture when she looked to the east and saw the sun climbing over the horizon. Her wonderful, golden-yellow sphere had sensed its master's peril and rose to aid the princess. She closed her eyes and let the heavenly warmth wash over her, delighting in the familiar sensation of her sunrise.

But it was wrong. Something about it was terribly wrong. Celestia opened her eyes again and stared at the rising sun in a glazed befuddlement, trying to understand how this could be happening. This wasn't her sunrise. Just as she could sense the difference between her father's harsh and powerful day and her own glorious and revealing light, and her mother's comforting and tranquil night and her sister's mysterious and uneasy darkness, she could tell that this was something new.

It was shy and yet excited with itself. On the surface it appeared uncertain, but a deep well of strength was hiding just beneath. It was a light of salvation to all of Equestria, but in Celestia's eyes it was the most wrathful act of vengeance she could have ever imagined.

Nightmare Moon had raised the sun.

Princess Celestia turned her head to the sky and screamed with all her heart and soul. She screamed for her betrayal, she screamed for her people, she screamed for the end of her kingdom, but above all else, she screamed for her end. It was all over now. Her plans were dashed now that Nightmare Moon controlled the sun and the moon – they would revere the traitor as they once revered her. She could never convince Equestria to

side with her now; they'd all turn against her and side with their new princess. Celestia screamed at the sunrise again and again with all the fury and anguish she could muster and screamed until her lungs caught fire.

"You are just so *adorable* when you get angry," Discord giggled to himself as he floated around the miserable alicorn. He watched the flame in Celestia's eye reignite and the princess turned to the mountain. She strained herself as she started her arduous climb up the dangerous and craggy mountain, her muscles screaming for a peace that the Celestia's fury would not allow.

The draconequus was curious as to what Celestia thought she would find when she finally reached him. Sure, he could just invade her mind and take his answers, but where was the fun in that? The spirit of chaos loved a little surprise now and then, and he'd like to have something to look forward to while he waited for the alicorn to finally climb to the top. In the meantime, all he could do was reflect on things—not much else to do when you're nothing but target practice for pigeons, anyway.

He really wished folks would appreciate the effort he put into everything. Underneath his puckish and dashing exterior lived the mind of a genius—sure, sometimes it's more fun to just play one move at a time, but with someone like Celestia, he had to give her the honor of ensnaring her in one of his perfect traps. What was that little rhyme he gave her to give them a sporting chance of figuring out?

The answer you seek is right at your side, but hearing it will make you run and hide. Face the music and let your lesson be learned, and then back to my cave is where you'll return. One choice will return you to your life so sweet, the other one leads to ruin complete.

Or something to that effect. He wondered if his riddles were too complicated for the crowd he was dealing with. No one ever seemed to get them right until after he had already won. The worst was when it looked like Celestia just stopped trying and he had to hint her in the right direction.

"No, Celestia, of course I just like talking about magical umbilical chords, isn't that a normal conversation piece?" he snorted. It was just like her to try to ruin his victory by letting him win. And she was taking *forever to climb this mountain*. Come on, she had energy to run from those wolves—

did he have to find some childhood memory of her climbing something to make this go faster? That seemed to be the only way he could get her off her flank and do anything anymore.

He wished Celestia could have had some magic left for him to steal. It was so restricting, having to channel such limited power. He would have loved to be able to make her call down another rock slide like the last time she came to visit his statue – *WHAM!* Right on the noggin! Just hard enough to crack her skull and give him a good laugh. He didn't want to kill her—well, not yet, anyway. What's the fun in winning if the loser didn't know the score?

He snickered a bit when he saw her lose her grip on a crumbling edge and land on a sharp rock and calmed down a bit. So, the riddle. He was certain that once Celestia had learned about her role in his creation, she would have gone into hiding or some sort of self-imposed exile; but it's hard to be right *all* the time, especially when you're talking in riddles. But hey, that's just the sort of thing that comes with being the spirit of disharmony.

Celestia knew the lesson all along—heck, he slithered out of it! Of course he had to cut Sparkle-Butt's "friendship report" short, but he really could not stomach another word of it. The independent princess just never learned to ask for help, even before he started taking a more hands-on approach to the situation. If she had focused more on issues with ruling her country rather than having her head in some La-La Land about a picnic, Twilight would have told her what she needed to know. *Sure*, Celestia was under his influence by that point, but nobody ever accused Discord of playing fair.

But none of that mattered now -- he had won this little game, and he was reaping his prize.

The alicorn's body screamed in defiance as she forced herself to continue up the rocky face. Her wings were broken, her magic was gone, her body was weak, and her world had betrayed her. But she was laughing. She was laughing through her bitter tears, through her misery, through her pain. Because she knew that she would always triumph. The two of them together would be unstoppable. After several hours of struggling, Celestia

finally dragged herself to the summit of the mountain where a pile of boulders separated her from victory.

Staggering to the top of the rock pile, Celestia began to push the stones away with whatever life was left in her. Her lungs and heart cried for air, screaming for a peace that would never come; she was not about to let weakness overtake her now. The alicorn's rabid determination drove her to heave every stone from its place and a manic shudder of glee rippled from her with every rock that tumbled away from the blockade. She was so close now...

She was so close now...

With her last ounce of strength, the starved and prostrated Celestia finally removed the last boulder, laying bare the calm lair. Another memory spontaneously struck her: a thought of her previous journey to the cave with her former protégé. The unicorn had observed that the cave would always have a marvelous view of the sunset. Celestia turned back around at the horizon and glared viciously at the imposter sun in the last stage of its flight through the sky. She didn't see anything impressive in the sunset. She wouldn't hesitate to call it amateur, especially considering the architect; the blue sky hadn't even changed to some soothing, deep red glow, or even a blend of rich purple and white clouds. The sky was simply growing darker to allow the moon to replace the shameful display.

She was glad to know that it would be the last time she would ever have to see the deceitful globe.

All at once, Celestia's body failed her and the princess collapsed to the ground. Putting her mind back at the task at hand, she turned her body around and crawled through the mouth of the cave. The setting sun cast a beam of light that stretched to the center of the tomb that illuminated the sole occupant: a petrified draconequus eternally locked in an exaggerated expression of terror. Even in the face of absolute defeat, the creature still had a taste for the melodramatic.

The princess' bemused contemplations were cut short by a dull pain in her chest. Celestia pulled herself toward the imprisoned beast as quickly as she could; she would be unable to keep her exhaustion and pain at bay for much longer. When she was half way to the statue, the ray of light had

shortened noticeably and no longer reached the center of the cave. She stared miserably up at Discord with watery magenta eyes.

“Please... You’re the only one left... The only one who hasn’t turned on me...” she whispered, shocked at how hoarse and raw her voice had become. Discord internally chuckled at the delicious irony: after looking down at all those ponies who turned to others for support, *now* the alicorn wanted someone else’s help.

‘No, that’s not ironic,’ he corrected himself, ‘that’s *genius*.’

“Please... I’m begging you...” she whimpered as she squirmed closer. Her body grew heavier with each passing second as the sunlight continued to retreat from the cave.

“You said I would... I didn’t believe I would...” Her pleas were punctuated by pained grunts as she struggled on. “But now... I’m begging... Discord, please... help me.”

A deathly silence echoed through the cave. Celestia wasn’t sure what to expect. She thought something would have happened when she finally came to him for help. He’d break free? He’d give her new power? The cave continued to dim and the heavy quiet began to weigh down on the desperate princess.

“Why aren’t you here... You were always there...” The solid statue began to blear away and grow soft through the darkness and the tears. Terror began to seize her as the pain in her chest grew too strong to be ignored.

“I know it was real...” Celestia dropped her head and let the tears trickle down her cheeks and splash to the stone floor. The last traces of sunlight vanished under the horizon, and Equestria was dominated by an obtrusive night. The stars and the moon shone brighter and more brilliantly than they ever had.

“Help me... Take me back... Take me away from this... Let me be free again... Let me do it all again...” She hated herself. How could she let herself be so weak now? She was stronger than this. She was stronger than any other pony in Equestria

Well, that was the end of that, then. Discord hummed as he felt his curse weaken and his hold over Celestia fade away. Just as well, it was always more satisfying when they worked it all out on their own. This was going to be *hilarious*.

She was stronger than this. She was stronger than any other pony in Equestria. She didn't need any help, or someone to tell her how to act. Unlike those miserable traitors that couldn't accomplish anything without five other ponies waiting to catch them when they inevitably fell, she was her strongest on her own. She controlled the sun and the moon, day and night; she was her own balance, her own best friend. She had no need for someone who would only drag her down into confusion and peril.

A burning in her chest jostled her from her thoughts as she let out an agonized moan.

Twilight Sparkle, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie. Whatever did she see in them? How easily they succumbed to evil; first Discord, and now Nightmare Moon. But Celestia had conquered them both before. She had fearlessly faced down Discord and forced the draconequus to submit to her. His mind games had failed him and he confessed all he knew to her.

And she listened...

And she believed him...

Celestia's head began to throb in synchronization with the pain in her chest, now pounding as if her heart was trying to escape.

She believed him. The monster that murdered her parents. The beast that attacked her and her sister and her kingdom. The creature that delighted in turning friend against friend for his amusement. The villain that swore his undying hatred to her and then extended his friendship.

She listened to him. And she let him in. And she let him win.

As horrible understanding dawned upon her, Celestia felt a long lost warmth return to her, only to be washed away by a wave of fatigue that

immediately stole the life from her. The pain was receding now, but all other feeling vanished with it.

Heavens above, no... What had she done? What had she done? She had sold her soul to the devil. She had attacked her loyal student and loving sister. She had abandoned her kingdom for selfish indulgences. She had killed. No, not killed, stars above, no, she had *murdered*.

Celestia wanted more than anything to run away. To run from this tomb, to run from her failure, to run back to Luna and beg for forgiveness she did not deserve. But she could not move—she could only writhe in sorrow beneath her enemy. This was all her fault. She let him do this to her. She had listened to his mendacious words and let herself be convinced to attack, to fear, to betray. She had done it all to herself.

Princess Celestia accepted with numb dolor that there was no peace in the end. The walls rattled and shook with a vicious, howling laughter, mocking her and shredding her apart. This was all that was left for her. Kind Churney's generosity couldn't help her now. There was no Captain Ratch to protect her from harm. Her father's fearsome strength was long since extinguished. Her mother's soothing love was lost to the ages. There was no Twilight to find inspiration from. She had no Luna to cry on.

Try as she might, she couldn't smell her flowers. There were no songbirds chirping around her. The air was stale and damp as she took her final breath.

Celestia's world went black.