

# Composure

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# Chapter 1

“The night looks wonderful, Luna,” Celestia smiled, gazing in wonder at the depth and brilliance of the night sky her sister had so lovingly brought forth. It was unlike any she had seen before, ethereal and magnificent, impossible and wondrous.

“Do you really mean that, Celestia?” Luna asked quietly, doubt and hope in equal parts evident in her voice. “Ever since we reunited, all those years ago, I was working towards this, the perfect night.”

“Well, I believe you’ve more than accomplished it, sister,” the sun princess praised her younger sibling. “Why, the sky is simply mesmerizing tonight; I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Luna gave a small smile at the praise. “D-do you think the ponies will like it?”

“Luna, they will love it,” Celestia assured her sister, lowering her head to nuzzle the shy princess. “They will absolutely adore this night, I know it.”

Luna smiled. “I’m so glad. But, Celestia, you haven’t seen the best part. There’s a surprise in that sky, just for you. Can you see it?”

“A surprise?” the sun princess asked, excited. She never got surprises!

“Yes; it’s to thank you, and to show you how much I love you,” the darker alicorn beckoned with her hoof. “It’s at the centre of the sky, directly upwards.”

Celestia craned her head up, searching the heavens for the surprise Luna promised. Her entire field of vision was filled with the rolling eternity of the constellations, and she soon lost herself amidst their splendour. “Luna...” she murmured, tears building in her eyes from the sheer beauty. “Luna, I –”

“I’m so glad you love it, sister,” Luna whispered in her ear. “At the very least, you deserve something this beautiful to be your last sight.”

Celestia didn’t register the words until it was too late. A bolt of lightning cut through the sun princess, robbing her breath and racking her entire body with pain. Celestia didn’t even get a chance to scream as she collapsed,

while at her side Luna's horn was writhing with a dark indigo aura. Eyes wide with panic, Celestia stared up at her sister, her coat darkened pitch black, her mane and tail turned into a starry abyss, and worst of all, her mouth still holding that gentle smile Celestia cherished so.

"I'm so relieved the ponies will love this night," Luna said sweetly, her mane sweeping over Celestia, plucking the helpless princess from the ground and lifting her into the air. "Because I put everything I had into it. I worked so hard to make it perfect." The mane cradled Celestia like a newborn foal, and she could only look in horror at Luna's loving eyes and smiling face as the aura bound her paralyzed form completely. "And now it is, and they will love it forever, because it's never going to vanish. This night, this beautiful night, will last *forever*."

And the starry mane *squeezed*, Celestia screamed –

~{C}~

– And she woke up, a cold sweat drenching her white coat.

Disorientated and breathing heavily, she darted her eyes around the room.

She was safe in her bedchamber. Philomena dozed on her perch, undisturbed. Moonlight poured in from the balcony window where Celestia could glimpse a patch of stars –

*- filling her vision as the thunderbolt struck, wiping away the wonder, leaving only pain and confusion -*

It had only been a dream.

Everything was fine at the palace. It had been for years. Luna had once again started Night Court and established her Night Guard, bringing peace to the streets. She cherished her role, and in turn the ponies of Equestria loved her –

*- the mane of stars ghosting over her, Luna so heartbreakingly happy that she was loved, loved enough to replace a sister, to replace the sun –*

It had only been a dream.

Luna loved her. She would never -

*- smile so softly and lovingly as the abyss of stars formed a vice grip over her ribs –*

Celestia sobbed, driving her head into her pillows. It had only been a dream! That's all! A dream!

So why couldn't she stop having it?

~{C}~

The Sandmare, arrogant fool that it was, refused to answer the princess' call in the wake of the nightmare. Unable to sleep, Celestia reluctantly rose from her bed and ran through the motions in preparation for the day. By the time she was almost finished, gargling her tea-tree mouthwash, the moon was low in the sky and dawn was less than an hour away. Celestia felt a traitorous flutter of relief at the thought and hated herself for it.

She refused to give those thoughts quarter in her mind, and strode out onto the balcony to observe the moon. Sure enough, a familiar voice soon called out to her.

"Sister!" Luna said happily, alighting on the balcony and smiling at her sister. "How long have you been awake?"

"Awhile now, Luna," Celestia replied. "I... had some trouble sleeping."

"Excited about Twilight's visit?" Luna asked, her voice carrying a knowing tone.

Celestia blinked, then broke into a radiant smile. "Why yes, as a matter of fact I am." Now she was glad to have walked out onto the balcony – Luna had reminded her of her precious student's visit to the castle, one they had been planning for months.

"What is it she's up to, anyway?" Luna inquired, curious.

"Well," Celestia began in earnest, pride in her voice. "Twilight has been conducting studies into magical energy sources. We're going to attempt to imbue a gemstone with a particular magical energy source and attempt to convert it into another. It's all very theoretical, but today is one of the first large-scale practical experiments."

"You seem very excited," Luna smiled.

Celestia nodded eagerly. "Oh yes, certainly. There are just so many applications for this sort of magical technology. Imagine the possibilities – what if one could drop a talisman into a lightning cloud, absorb the energy

within, and convert that vicious power into a gentle, slow releasing heat? It could provide warmth to a city the size of Hoofington for weeks!”

Luna blinked. “Oh. That sounds important.”

Celestia’s wings fluttered bashfully. “I like to take an interest in the technological arts now and then...”

“Well, it’s important for us to have the lives of our ponies at the front of our minds, is it not?” the moon princess said lightly. Celestia nodded in agreement, and they turned to gaze into the dwindling night sky.

“I have a surprise for you...” Luna’s voice broke the silence after a moment. She smiled at Celestia and, to her credit, the sun princess only hesitated for a split-second. Not nearly enough for Luna to catch as anything more than her usual caution. The sisters were both pranksters at heart in one way or another, after all.

“Oh?” Celestia asked, executing her best *‘now just what are you up to?’* grin.

“I was working on something for the sky tonight...” Luna continued as Celestia’s stomach twisted in growing irrational fear. “But I need your help.”

“Beg pardon?” Celestia asked, now genuinely curious.

Luna turned her gaze to the moon, watching keenly as it began to slip below the horizon. “Alright... raise the sun, please.”

“Now? The moon is still –”

“Trust me!” Luna replied with a smile. “I won’t stand in the way, I promise. Raise the sun.”

Celestia raised a curious eyebrow, but decided to play along. Drawing a breath, she grounded her stance – anchoring herself to the earth, drawing on the plants and animals that cherished her life-giving sun. Her wings extended – feeling the breeze flow through them, invoking the air which sheltered and nurtured the land with rainclouds and softened the sun’s harsh light into warm, balmy rays. Her horn glowed with the magic – magic that flowed like ocean currents through her world and the wonders and mysteries it brought with it thanks to the sun saturating it with the root of life, light.

She felt it all, the power of the Unicorns, the Pegusi and the Earth Ponies, all embodied in her Alicorn soul, all giving her the strength to reach out... and touch the sun.

Light spilled over the horizon.

But Luna's moon still clung there, hanging in the sun's path. Of course, they did not collide, the sun being much further away, but it was still enough to slow the dawn by a few minutes. The sunrise spread soft gold and orange across the clouds of the sky, but that began to fade as it began to pass behind the low moon. Celestia was confused at Luna's strategy, until it happened.

The sun rose high enough to be totally eclipsed by the moon, and light emerged from behind it – a solar corona. Only, because both of the heavenly orbs were so low in the sky, the light of the corona spread out into the clouds, tinting them into a veritable rainbow of hues – golds and silvers and pastel greens and blues and reds and oranges and yellows, all spreading for miles and miles across Equestria, radiating from the eclipse. Celestia stared in wonder, unable to speak. Luna wore a satisfied smile, glancing between her sister and her creation in the sky.

After a minute had passed, the sun began to climb once more, and Luna allowed the moon to descend. The colours in the sky drew back without a whisper, the sky turning blue and the clouds fading to white, ushering in the new day.

Celestia was still speechless. Few ponies would be up at this hour. Luna had created this especially for Celestia. Gratitude and happiness welled up inside her, and the sun princess found tears threatening to pour from her eyes. "Oh... oh, Luna, it's beautiful."

Luna smiled softly. "Thank you. I was so worried it wouldn't work right, so I... well, I spent the night tweaking the air flows so it'd refract the light just right."

"W-why... what's the occasion?" Celestia inquired, beginning to get a handle on her emotions.

Luna paid very specific attention to a patch of clouds in the distance. "You just seem stressed lately, but you've also been looking forward to today since your student is visiting. She's bound to cheer you up, but I guess I wanted to do my part as well."

“Well, you’ve succeeded wonderfully,” Celestia laughed, moving forward to embrace her sister with a tight hug. They both relished the contact before breaking apart, gazing out into their kingdom.

“Looking forward to seeing Twilight?” Luna asked, breaking the silence.

“Yes, definitely,” Celestia nodded happily. Though their correspondence hadn’t wavered over the years, it had been too long since she and Twilight Sparkle had spoken in person. “And I must say, I feel like it is going to be a good day, not in the least because of that magnificent eclipse of yours.”

“I knew you’d like it,” Luna said smugly. “I thought I’d do something special to mark the occasion. I noticed since my return you’ve been quite taken with Twilight.”

Celestia smiled. “Yes, while the entire sky is a tapestry during your night, I only get those brief moments at the beginning and end of my day to play the artist. I suppose it...” The princess trailed off as she noticed Luna barely holding in a bout of giggling. Celestia regarded her with confusion, before realising the joke. “Ah. You were making implications.”

Luna giggled, and glanced over at Celestia. “By the way, your mane is untidy.”

Celestia raised a dangerous eyebrow at her sister. “My mane billows in the solar wind. It doesn’t do ‘*untidy*’.”

“Wow, is that what you’ve told yourself all these years?” Luna said innocently, trotting past her sister and into the bedroom. “And I thought you were making a fashion statement. I suppose I’m going to have to brush it for you. You know what a brush is, don’t you?”

Celestia was honestly puzzled by Luna’s attitude this morning. Something was up with her – either something was bothering her or she had an ulterior motive. Dream or no dream, however, Celestia knew it was nothing sinister, so she decided follow her and indulge her sister in whatever game she was playing.

~{C}~

Forty minutes of chatting and playful teasing later, and Celestia’s nightmare was all but forgotten. She was lying on her bed with her sister, idly humming along to a record of Luna’s choosing as she ran a brush through her sister’s fine blue mane, bringing a beautiful lustre out into the strands.



“Court will begin soon,” Celestia thought aloud. “It’s a short session today so I could make time for Twilight, but I’d still best get ready.”

Luna craned her head around to look at her sister, a smile on her face. “In that case I’ll inform them you are taking the day off and that, sadly, they’ll have to be satisfied with the Moon Princess for today’s court.”

Celestia’s eyes widened in pleasant surprise. “Sister, you don’t need to do this for me.”

The younger alicorn rose, hopping off the bed. “Celestia, you’re tired. Get some rest, and be fresh and attentive once Twilight arrives. I’ll handle the administration; you just take the day off, alright?” Luna’s horn glowed and Celestia’s duvet rose, tucking Celestia in gently.

– *stars, wrapping around her lovingly* – Celestia banished the memory, then locked it in a dungeon in the place she banished it. Sighing dramatically, she looked up at her sister and smiled gratefully. “If you insist, I’ll – ” She paused as a sudden urge to yawn overcame her. “Excuse me, I suppose I am rather tired,” she admitted sheepishly, grinning at Luna’s amused expression. “Very well, I’ll take a nap.”

Luna nodded, satisfied, and soared out the balcony window. “When Twilight arrives, I’ll send her straight to your chambers, sister!”

Celestia was half-dozing by that point. “Yes, that sounds wonderful...” She jolted up and levelled a fierce glare out the window, which was ruined by the embarrassed blush on her face. “*LUNA!*”

But her sister was already gone, laughter trailing in the wind. Celestia merely chuckled and sighed, resting her head on her pillow. Before she knew it, she was fast asleep once more.

~{C}~

*Celestia dreamed.*

*She saw...*

*Luna. Glaring, incredulous.*

*She smelled...*

*Fire. Burning hair.*

*She heard...*

*Twilight's voice. Begging, frightened.*

*She felt...*

*Lightning. Hot, savage forks.*

*She tasted...*

*Blood.*

~{C}~

Celestia's eyes fluttered open as the princess emerged from her troubled dream.

Almost instantly, she seized up in panic. *'Where am I?'*

Her head bolted up, and she immediately regretted the swift action as an intense ache flooded her skull. She pressed her hoof gingerly to her forehead and found it sore to the touch. Even the slightest bob of her head seemed to worsen the headache that was building as she became more and more alert. As she mentally pushed past it, she also became aware of other aches and pains all across her body – it was almost as if the wounds had planned a surprised party for her while she was unconscious.

A quick glance revealed her surroundings as a white, sparsely furnished room. It smelled strongly of disinfectant. The only light was streaming in from a window on a far wall, and aside from the bed she found herself resting on, only a cushioned seat and a strange, beeping machine could be seen.

Thanking small blessings, Celestia noted that none of her injuries were too severe. As far as she could tell, her wings were fine, though she couldn't factor clipping or other feather damage out of the equation just yet. Her ribs were tight as she took a deep breath, implying they were bruised in some way, which was supported by the tell-tale splotches of purples and yellows faintly noticeable beneath her white coat.

*'Was I assaulted?'* she thought, trying to stay rational in the face of her rising fears. *'Who could have done such a thing?'* Alicorns were sturdier than the hardiest Earth pony – the knowledge that somepony or *something*

had been capable of beating her to the point of unconsciousness worried her more than the injuries themselves.

*'Why can't I recall what happened?'* Celestia thought, straining to remember something, *anything*. All she got for her effort was a throb of pain from her headache, and a sinking feeling in her gut as she began to assume the worst. *'T-there must be a logical explanation,'* she told herself. Pushing the thought aside, she took stock of her surroundings.

She was in a sterile white room, one which was dimly lit and carried a heavy scent of disinfectant. The only furnishings were the bed she found herself resting on, a white cushioned seat and an odd machine which emitted a continuous beeping, the only sound present in the room. Never having been unfortunate enough to be familiar with the medical arts, it took her a moment to realise it was a device for measuring a pony's heart-rate. Glancing at the machine, she followed several wires connected to it to confirm that, yes, she was indeed hooked up to the monitor. She frowned disapprovingly at the spots of her coat which had been shaved to allow the cups to press directly to her skin.

She then noticed the tube of a drip which similarly led to her right fore-cannon. Her horn lit up and she winced as her headache flared. Ignoring it, she used a quick flick of magic to pluck the drip's needle out.

*'A hospital then,'* she decided blearily, her headache making it difficult to concentrate. Whatever painkillers the hospital had provided her were clearly unable to overcome her high toxin tolerance, the secret downside to being a nigh-immortal, resilient pony. She nickered at the irony, and winced as her headache punished her for it.

Sighing, she lay back down in the hospital bed and rolled on her side. Wincing once more at a new pain, she pushed herself back up and craned her head to investigate herself a second time. *'Wonderful, another addition to my laundry list of owies and boo-boos,'* she thought dryly, but her expression fell when she saw her side. A long pink splotch of bare, shiny skin was stretching up her shoulder to her withers and down almost to her cutie mark – the largest burn she had ever suffered. It was also the strangest burn, jagged and frayed like she had been scraped by a magical claw. Some of her feathers were burnt off as well, none of the vital primaries but enough to make flying inadvisable for the foreseeable future. She prodded the skin softly with her muzzle and was relieved to note it was

not too painful – it would heal fast. *‘Still, this burn is not natural,’* she noted morosely. *‘Who knows what it’s done to my insides...’*

She frowned at the burn, wondering how she had received it. Its mark seemed strangely familiar. However, she drew a blank and sighed, glancing around the dim room. *‘A hospital room, not one I’m familiar with,’* she noted, taking stock of her surroundings. *‘Which only begged the question why was I am at a hospital at all – there is dedicated medical ponyel at the castle. Did something happen at the castle?’*

The realisation hit her like a lightning bolt.

*Twilight was at the castle.*

What happened?! Was she in danger?

A surge of fear blossomed within Celestia. Was her student safe? Did she see the attack and run for help? Was she caught in the attack? Was she hurt? Was she here, in this hospital, clinging to life as her assailants, the ponies who hurt her, now lorded in her castle, smug in their victory? Was it a revolution? Were ponies sick of her rule? Why today? Why did they hurt Twilight? Would Twilight wake up, could she be saved?

A beeping noise in the background began to speed to a frantic pace. Alarmed, Celestia frantically searched for the source of the sound, her eyes resting on a strange machine beside her bed. It took her a moment to realise it was one of those heart rate monitors that had been invented in the past few decades. She glances at her foreleg and realised the pattern on the device’s screen was reading her own heart rate. A drip hung beside it, its tube hanging uselessly to the side, letting fluid drip onto the sterile floor. She frowned in confusion, wondering why somepony would waste hospital supplies so carelessly, but pushed the thought away. Twilight was in danger.

*‘Calm down, Celestia. Composure is what separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom,’* the princess chided herself. *‘Think. I’m in a hospital. Whoever did this to me must have driven me from the castle. Or perhaps... perhaps they have captured me? Do they believe they put me in a coma? They’ve underestimated me then, underestimated the strength of an alicorn, of their Princess.’* Her expression became grave. This attack, it may have placed her student in danger, and Celestia was not sure she was so kind as to be able to let that pass. *‘I can forgive this assault on my person.’*

*But if Twilight is harmed, there will be a reckoning, as surely as the sun will rise.'*

Her thoughts, so focused and full of determination, suddenly came to a swift halt as she realised something so fundamentally wrong, she hadn't even realised what was amiss until that moment.

*'The sun...'*

The room was dark. There was only a pale shimmer of light illuminating it from the window... but far, far too little to be sunlight.

*'But I... I never lowered the sun...'*

Ignoring her migraine, ignoring the way the room spun as she stood, and above all else ignoring the voice insider her that begged for her to look, Celestia stepped forward towards the window.

And looked up at the pale moon that hung in the night sky.

*'Oh no no no no please sweet heavens no,'* Celestia silently prayed to the sky. *'Luna isn't... she couldn't have...'*

Just as she was unable to raise the sun in the morning until Luna lowered the moon, Celestia knew that without her consent Luna could never summon the night... unless, of course, the sun princess was unconscious and unable to protest. Unless she waited until her guard was down and struck, during the day when none could accuse her of becoming the Nightmare once more.

She realised why her burn was familiar now – it was the scald of a thunderbolt. Nightmare Moon's weapon of choice.

She could not let this pass. She refused to let Equestria suffer a single moment more of eternal night. Letting the power inherit in her soul as an alicorn flow through her, she reached out to her sun, hidden beneath the shroud of darkness, and willed it to move, just as she did every morning of every day of every month of every year for more than a millennium. The magic was in her bones, it was in her breath, her blood. She could do this in her sleep, if that became necessary, and no mere trip to a hospital was going to stop her from –

Burning, scalding pain shot through her mind like a lance. It felt like her horn was being forcibly wrenched off as a white-hot vice squeezed and

twisted her brain. She yelped, cutting off her magic and collapsing to the ground. As the haze of pain dispelled enough to allow coherent thought, the princess realised what had happened. Her injuries were far, far more severe than she had given them credit. The heart-rate monitor sped into a frenzy of beeping.

*'They've crippled me, oh heavens they've crippled me,'* Celestia's thoughts screamed as she began to hyperventilate. *'I can't touch the sun, it's too hot, my connection is broken-'*

And without a princess to raise the day, Luna stood unrivalled in power. This wasn't a revolution, this was a usurping. But why? *'We rule together now, Luna! Didn't we forgive each other? Haven't we both suffered enough? You can't have fallen again, you just can't!'*

But if she did, now was the perfect time. Celestia's guard was down, and Twilight was at the castle, meaning the Elements of Harmony were separated. Luna could pass it all off as an accident too, a tragic and senseless assault that crippled Equestria's beloved day-bringer and left only the younger capable of rule. And the Elements of Harmony would never know the truth of what happened to their bookish, clever little scholar.

She needed to escape. Flying was impossible, and her headache made it difficult to focus on any particularly strong or complex spell. But she had to try – she had ruled through over a thousand years and conquered every trial thrown at her. A *migrane* wasn't going to stop her from finding her student!

Determined, she rose to her hooves. The room spun slightly, but Celestia gritted her teeth in concentration and her balance became as steady as an Earth pony's. She grinned with the little success and stepped forward.

The wires taped to her foreleg were pulled off, and the heart-monitor, devoid of a heart-rate, positively *screeched* in alarm. Celestia stared behind her at the machine in shock, panicked, and shattered it with a single buck. The machine gave a spluttered, confused groan and went silent, which meant Celestia could pick up the sound of hooves galloping in her direction.

*'Oh now you've done it,'* Celestia groaned internally. *'They know you're awake. They're going to catch you now.'* Quickly, she weighed her options.

*'What should I do? Fight? No, I cannot, I might be wrong; they might be trying to help me. And even if they aren't, I can't... I can't hurt my little ponies. Until I find Twilight and figure out what is going on, I need to hide.'* Glancing between the door and the window, Celestia's horn glowed as she decided on a course of action. *'Oh, this is going to haunt me in the morning,'* she sighed internally, bracing herself for the ensuing headache.

She cast the spell.

~{C}~

A dark blonde unicorn mare wearing white scrubs embossed with a red cross burst into the room, followed quickly by another two similarly dressed medical ponies and a blue-grey unicorn guard. "Alright, nurse Cherry, I want-" the doctor began, before the sight of the empty room cut her off mid-sentence. The guard behind her immediately charged forward, her eyes widening with shock at the princess' absence.

"Doctor River Reed! Officer Bright Shield! She's gone!" gasped one of the ponies behind her, a pastel green Pegasus buck whose special talent must have involved stating the obvious.

Doctor Reed's eye twitched. *'Interns,'* she growled mentally. "I am aware of that, Laurel," she replied, flicking the light switch to ignite the magical lamp on the ceiling and scanning the room. The monitor was demolished, the window was open... something was very off about the room, but she couldn't place a hoof on it.

"W-what happened?" Laurel asked, his eyes wide.

"Dammit, Laurel, I'm a doctor, not a detective!" Reed snapped, before sighing and giving him an apologetic look. "Sorry, I'm just... This doesn't look good..." She realised something and glared at the intern. "Hold on, Laurel, Officer Shield, weren't you supposed to be watching her?"

The intern and the guardspony glanced at each other worriedly. *'We're so getting fired,'* they both groaned in mental unison. Bright Shield, her silver armour marking her as one of the Night Guard, Canterlot's police force, cleared her throat. "I, ah, was speaking to him in the corridor, in order to get a better appraisal of the Princess' condition." The Pegasus intern nodded quickly in agreement – a bit too quickly.

“Riiight...” Reed drawled, unconvinced. “Well, we’ll point hooves after we’ve dealt with this situation. If I had to put a bit on what happened here, I’d say that Princess Celestia woke up, got panicked and flew out the window,” she said, gesturing with a hoof for emphasis at the open window.

“I’ll alert the rest of the Guard, she can’t have gotten far,” Bright Shield said, her tone serious. Her horn shone as she left the room and took off at a quick canter.

“She flew? So soon?” Nurse Cherry Balm asked in shock. “But her injuries...”

“Which is exactly why we need to find her,” Reed said firmly. “Laurel, fly out the window, try and talk to her and calm her down if you can. She’ll be disorientated, so be gentle and don’t spook her. Cherry Balm, inform the staff to be on the lookout, she shouldn’t be moving around in her condition.” Reed sighed. “I’ll... ugh, I’ll inform Doctor Coleslaw that the Princess has vanished.”

The two ponies winced in sympathy before they left. Laurel nodded and leaped out the small window, taking flight, and Cherry Balm dashed back from where they came. Reed Rivers gave the hospital room one last worried glance before she turned and cantered towards the Chief of Medicine’s office.

There was a shimmer of magic in the air above the bed around a minute later, and with an audible pop Celestia reappeared. ‘*Well that worked well,*’ she mused with relief as she got out of the bed, before frowning. ‘*Too well.*’ She had mustered a small barrier spell, one Twilight, in fact, had pointed out to her several years ago, designed not to block physical objects, but vibrations – including *light*. With it, she had rendered herself invisible and inaudible to the ponies who had barged in, but on the other hoof she had neither been able to see nor hear them – she only knew they were gone when their scents had faded away from the room. She couldn’t escape the hospital with a spell that rendered her deaf and blind.

‘*Still, now I have some time to do something a bit more complex,*’ she decided. ‘*And I believe I know just the thing.*’ Focusing on the spell in mind, she reached out with her magic and filled it into a bubble around her. She floated from the ground the outer edge of the bubble mingled with the light. Her headache pressed down on her, making her falter. The bubble burst, and she fell to the ground with a cry.



*'Focus...' she told herself, rising to her hooves, pushing past the pain. 'Breathe and focus. I can do this.'* Her horn shimmered once more, her Unicorn magic once more tapping into the mystic tides of the world. *'For over a millennium I have brought light to the world, guiding the sun along its circuit in the sky. I have sent light cascading through the clouds, as an artist and as an architect.'*

Her wings extended, proud and regal as they shone, the magic of a Pegasus begging the favour of the air. *'I have used it to paint the morning and evening in pastel symphonies of green and orange. I have kissed the rays of Sol and danced in the photon tide, and it has danced with me, and loved me dearly.'*

Her bones ached and her pelt shimmered with the magic of an Earth Pony, pleading to nature and the root of all warmth. *'Light... remember who brought you to this soft and gentle world, that you might illuminate beauty and joy. I am Celestia. Hear my plea.'*

Celestia opened her eyes, and saw nothing. Only darkness was present before her eyes. She focused her attention, and the darkness gave way to the hospital room. Then, she dropped her focus and the darkness snapped protectively back over her.

She smiled. Her spell was a success. Now, the very light of Equestria itself was willing to aid her, cloaking her from anypony's sight. *'A fine ally for whatever trial that is in store for me,'* she thought, thanking the light. Anypony else would have dismissed the warmth that descended over her in return as a coincidence, but Celestia knew better. *'Now then, light, I fear for my most faithful student, Twilight Sparkle. If...'* An image of Twilight, beaten and unmoving, flashed past Celestia's imagination, and she had to force the fear down. The comforting warmth surrounded her once more, making her coat gleam in the light. Calmed slightly, Celestia continued the request. *'If she is within your reach, please show me where she may be.'*

The dark shroud around her split and a patch of light lit up on the white hospital wall, an image projected upon it. Celestia's heart soared and tears of relief welled up in her eyes because there, looking absolutely miserable but mercifully, miraculously unharmed was her most precious student Twilight. Celestia's body shook as she let out a deep breath, the tension in her body uncoiling all at once.

“Bless you,” she thanked the light, before looking more attentively back at the projection of Twilight. She was sitting down in a white room, reading a book – a rather sizable volume, by the look of things. She wanted to believe that was proof that everything was alright, but Celestia knew if disaster struck Twilight’s first action would be to start pulling books off shelves. Celestia squinted to get a bit more detail of the room from the image. In response, the image expanded and rotated, the viewpoint changing to allow Celestia to see her student’s surrounding. ‘*Ah, thank you,*’ she smiled sheepishly. Another wash of warmth assured her it was no problem. ‘*Tell me; is she in this very hospital?*’ The image zoomed into a plaque on the wall, reading ‘Waiting Room, Canterlot General Medicinal Centre’. ‘*I’ll take that as a yes. How do I reach her? Time is of the essence.*’ The image turned back to look at Twilight, and then rapidly moved away as if walking backwards. Celestia paid close attention as the image twisted through various white corridors, past patients and doctors and, worryingly, several members of Luna’s silver-clad Night Guard on patrol, before it settled on a door which Celestia presumed was her own.

Thanking the light once more, Celestia excitedly made for the door. After her first few steps, however, she realised a problem. The clatter of her hooves on the hard floor was going to give her presence away to anyone attentive enough to listen. She considered a spell, and her headache returned full force – she knew she couldn’t handle anything extravagant like the vibration-dampening bubble from before. She needed something simple... what would Twilight do?

She glanced over at her bed, recalled Twilight’s fashion designer friend, Rarity, and grinned. ‘*Ideee~aaa!*’

~{C}~

Sitting in one of the hospital’s private waiting rooms, the unicorn Twilight Sparkle was pouring herself over the medical textbook she had borrowed from one of the doctors when small hand shook her out of her concentration. “Hey Twi, there’s the doctor!” Spike said, pointing towards the doorway where a familiar blonde unicorn mare was speaking in hushed tones to another doctor pony.

“Excuse me, Dr. Reed?” Twilight called, rising and trotting over to them. She didn’t miss the wince that passed over the doctor’s face before she turned and smiled rigidly at Twilight.

“Hello Miss... Twilight Sparkle, was it?” she enquired sweetly.

“Yes...” the lavender mare nodded, worried about the doctor’s strange attitude. “I was just wondering, when will I be able to visit the Princess?”

The two doctors shared a glance. “Um, in the morning,” Reed said hesitantly. “Visiting hours are over...”

“She’s not...” Twilight’s voice was horrified. “She’s not dying, is she?”

Doctor Reed balked. “What? No! She just needs rest! I...” The other doctor glared at Reed, but the unicorn mare sent one right back at him. “Oh knock it off, Coleslaw! Saying a patient is ‘Not dead’ isn’t a breach of doctor-patient confidentiality!”

“Regardless, nopony can see her at the moment,” Doctor Coleslaw stressed. His words were deliberately deceptive, considering he knew the truth of Celestia’s disappearance, but he didn’t realise just how ironic his choice of words were.

“But I’m her personal student!” Twilight insisted. “These are exceptional circumstances!”

Reed’s ears fell flat against her head in apology. “I’m sorry, but, um, direct family only; we can’t bend the rules...”

“What’s the real reason?” Twilight demanded, her frayed nerves reducing her patience to ash.

Reed paled at the lavender unicorn’s furious expression, and glanced pleadingly at Coleslaw. Coughing, the other doctor began to imitate a beeping noise under his breath, then took on a look of fake shock. “Dr Reed, did you hear that?”

“What? Oh! Yes! A code, uh, blueberry!” Reed said stiffly. “Sorry Miss Sparkle, duty calls! Just wait there and we’ll get back to you real soon!”

“What’s a code blue?” Twilight frowned.

“A pegasus is, uh, exploding!”

“What.”

“Twice!” Coleslaw said. “Gotta go!”

Twilight frowned as the two doctors turned on their hooves and raced away from the private waiting room. *'Well that was suspicious. Not to mention unprofessional.'* "Ugh, Spike, can you believe that?"

"I know!" Spike replied, eyes wide with wonder. "Double explosion... Pinkie was right!"

It shouldn't have surprised her. "No! Not that! They're refusing to let me see her!" Twilight yelled, making her assistant jump. "And I know why, too! Because I'm the one who put her there!" Her voice hitched and she fell to her haunches, her anger being replaced with guilt.

Spike just sighed. "Aw c'mon, Twilight, you heard the doctor! The Princess is fine. Heck, remember that time you were trailing Pinkie Pie and a piano fell on you? You bounced right back from that!"

The unicorn was unconvinced. "If my spell hadn't screwed up she wouldn't have to bounce back from anything in the first place!"

Spike gave her a sceptical look. "Twilight, I was there too, y'know. You weren't the one who screwed up."

Twilight was adamant in her self-condemnation. "It was my spell, my experiment, my responsibility..." She hung her head. "My fault."

"Whatever," Spike rolled his eyes. "I spotted two other unicorns helping you with that spell there, and I really doubt they had even a handful of your talent. Don't blame yourself for an accident, okay?"

Twilight smiled weakly, feeling a bit better. "Thanks Spike," she said to the dragon, who grinned and shrugged. She returned to her seat in the empty waiting room and picked her book back up, finding where she had left off.

Spike's voice interrupted her studies. "Twilight, I was wondering..."

She looked up from her book. "Yes Spike?"

"Well..." he chuckled, and Twilight knew instantly he was trying to bargain something from her. "On the way over here there were some vending machines that had those geodes I like, the ones with the inlaid ruby filling..."

The lavender unicorn sighed. "You know those aren't good for you, Spike..."

Spike put on his best puppy eyes. "Please?"

Twilight sighed and shook her head with a weary grin, and levitated several bits from her saddlebag into Spike's eager hands. "Just be careful not to get a stomach ache," she warned him.

"Gotcha, thanks!" he grinned, scurrying out the door.

Twilight rolled her eyes but smiled despite herself as she returned to her reading, glad some things, like sweet-toothed assistants, remained constant.

~{C}~

If it weren't for the circumstances, navigating the corridors of the hospital without sight would have been fascinating. Celestia made a mental note to try it once this she had located Twilight and solved this crisis on Equestria's head. Perhaps she would even teach Twilight how it was done. Would the light listen to her? She wasn't an alicorn but if Celestia asked nicely it might comply. At any rate, it would be nice to have something new to show her student, instead of vice versa. Twilight was becoming quite the magical scientist in recent days, and though she hadn't said anything to her yet, Celestia was considering her for a position as a consultant and research position in the Royal Magical Research Foundation that was going to open up in a few months time.

She hoped her student would accept. Not only would it be wonderful for her career, it would mean Twilight would be spending more time in Canterlot. In the recent months Celestia found herself becoming less of a teacher to the young lavender unicorn and more of a... she wasn't sure. Mentor, perhaps? There was a subtle difference between the two - mentors could be friends as well, equals. Their relationship certainly was changing, as Twilight's research had begun to make developments in the field of magic, making some exiting discoveries that made Celestia's mind spin with the possible applications to –

There were two blurs of bright yellow and red in her vision, and Celestia had to press herself flat against a wall to avoid colliding with two ponies cantering down the corridor. She frowned, annoyed with herself. *'Stay focused! If They catch you Twilight will be in danger!'* The thought didn't exactly make sense, far too paranoid for the Princess any other day, but

considering the night she was having she figured it was best to be paranoid and cautious until she had some cards to play in this dire game of theirs.

The blurs of red avoided, Celestia paused to take stock of her surroundings – or at least, what little of it she could see. The light had curved itself around Celestia, leaving her in a protective cloak of shadows and making her perfectly invisible to anypony who might spot her – even Luna, should things come to that. The downside was, of course, that though she was invisible she was also nearly blind. Celestia had been worried about this until her latent magic tingled in her eyes and brought the world into focus - splotches of reds and oranges radiated from heat sources, letting her spot wherever ponies would be. The corridors, doors and other flat surfaces were also laid out in bright bluish light, almost blinding in their intensity.

Celestia had been shocked for a moment before she realised what the light was doing – it was hiding visible light, but allowing infrared and ultraviolet to pass through. The infrared let her see the heat emitted from ponies nearby, and the ultraviolet rays bounced off the heavily bleached and disinfected floors and surfaces to give shape to her surroundings.

Celestia wondered what aspect of her nature allowed her to detect those spectrums. Earth Pony, with their connection to nature? Or was it an aspect of air, something a Pegasus pony could develop with practice? Maybe it was to do with the magical nature of Unicorns... Celestia made a note to ask Twilight about it, surely she would know –

*'Focus, Celestia!'* she screamed internally, her mission brought back into sharp focus at the thought of her most faithful student. She checked her surroundings again, looking around a corner. In the distance there was a large number of heat sources milling around – the hospital lobby, no doubt. She was close.

A door swept open and a short figure strode out, the size of a foal. But his heat signature was a bright yellow, bordering on white, though his outline was a cool blue. Celestia didn't need to guess that it was a baby dragon, and would bet her cutie mark that she knew who it was.

She'd need to save Spike too, she realised, but first things first. Before the doorway could shut, Celestia slipped in.

~{C}~

Twilight was flicking through the instructions to a burn-healing spell that looked promising when she heard a muffled hoofstep. She blinked and looked up, but saw nopony. "Hello?" she called. "Is somepony there?"

There was a shimmer before her and to her utter shock, Celestia appeared from thin air in a flash of light. For a long moment the teacher and student simply stared at one another – Twilight, for one, was struck by a pang of relief mixed with sorrow to see her mentor in such a state. Wrapped around her head, just to the right of her horn was a thick bandage, and her once pristine coat was marred with bruises and burns. However, two things hadn't changed: her pastel mane and tail that floated in the solar winds, and the joy that danced in her eyes upon seeing her student.

"Twilight..." she said, tears brimming in her eyes.

"P-princess!" Twilight exclaimed, jumping to her hooves and running towards her. Celestia met her halfway, crouching down to her knees to wrap her neck around Twilight's in a warm embrace.

"Oh Twilight... oh, thank heavens you're alright," the princess whispered in the unicorn's ear, her voice hitching. "When I woke up, I-I feared the worst."

Twilight's heart melted at those words. "Oh Princess, I'm so sorry," she replied. "I wanted to be there, I told them to let me stay in your room, but they kept deflecting the question."

"It's okay, Twilight, I understand. I know their game, but I'm here now anyway."

Twilight relished the hug a moment longer before pulling away, taking a good look at Celestia. "About that, why *are* you here? Shouldn't you be in bed? You look –" *Beautiful, even with the wounds.* "- terrible. I mean, You're still pretty, but..."

"Oh yes, I daresay battle wounds are not quite in vogue this season," chuckled Celestia, glancing ruefully at her ruined coat. She gave her singed wings a weak flutter. "Imagine greeting guests at the Gala like this! 'My wings are so pretty!' Think it'll be a hit?"

"Mmm, a bit *too* avant-garde, as Rarity would put it," Twilight giggled, more out of relief than anything else.

"Yes, well..." Celestia chuckled, rising to her feet. Her head spun at the sudden movement and she lost balance, her legs failing beneath her. She

didn't hit the ground, though. Twilight's horn shone with magic, halting the princess' fall. She beamed with gratitude. "Thank you, Twilight. I seem to have trouble balancing lately."

"Not a problem, in that case we'll sit," she replied in a matter-of-fact tone, levitating Celestia towards the chairs. Celestia watched in amusement as Twilight quickly pulled cushions from chairs to create a comfy spot for her.

The princess coughed politely when Twilight began to frown, scrutinizing the pile with an unsatisfied expression. Blinking, Twilight blushed and lowered Celestia onto the pile. "Ah, much better," the princess said wryly, causing the unicorn to look away sheepishly.

"I got you something," Twilight said suddenly. "For when you woke up... well, you're awake now, so here." Her horn glowed and a beautiful bouquet of flowers floated towards Celestia from behind the chairs. Celestia's eyes softened as she saw it, and she leaned in to smell them as Twilight continued to babble. "I mean, they're just from the gift shop, but when I said it was for the princess they took about three of the flower bundles and just went crazy. D-do you like it?"

Celestia smiled. "Twilight, they're beautiful." She leaned forward and plucked one of the poppies from the arrangement, chewing it. "Mmm, fresh too."

Twilight gave her a relieved smile. "Oh good. I figured, hey, hospital food isn't exactly fit for a princess so..." Twilight paused, noticing something. "Celestia, why are you wearing socks?"

Celestia looked at her in confusion. "Hmm?" she murmured vacantly, chewing on a mouthful of bouquet. She swallowed, blinked, and went back to the bouquet.

"Um, Princess?" Twilight asked cautiously, raising an eyebrow. When the alicorn looked back up, Twilight waved a hoof towards Celestia's own. "Socks?"

The princess blinked and looked down to her legs, noting the garments in question. "Ah yes, I forgot about those. I needed to muffle my hoofsteps, while I was invisible." She raised her forehoof and showed them off to Twilight. "I made them from the bedsheets, and though I'm no fashionista like your friend Rarity I must say I'm growing fond of them." She gave her student a teasing smile. "How do they look?"



“They’re, um...” Twilight coughed, looking flushed under her lavender coat. “They’re nice, yes. Very nice.”

Celestia grinned and was about to make another comment when suddenly she was overtaken by a powerful urge to yawn. “Oh, I apologise,” she said through it, covering her mouth. “I’m just so tired, and my headache...”

“You’d best get back to bed,” Twilight smiled.

Celestia nodded idly for a moment, biting back another yawn, but then she froze. “No, I cannot. We need to escape.”

Twilight was startled by her sudden serious tone. “W-what? From who?”

“I... I don’t know,” Celestia admitted, her expression worried. “But it’s not safe here. Be casual and get Spike, and then we’re leaving. Don’t let the guards see you. We’ll have to hide out somewhere. Don’t worry, I may be hurt but They won’t get us.”

Twilight frowned anxiously. “Princess, you’re not making any sense. Is somepony after us?”

“You don’t know?” Celestia’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Oh, of course you don’t know, otherwise you would have fetched me sooner...” She sighed, relief in her voice. “Oh thank heavens, you haven’t been caught up in it yet. They don’t know I’ve found you. This gives us time, time enough to reach Ponyville perhaps, gather the other Elements...”

“Princess, slow down!” the unicorn begged, becoming increasingly worried. “What are you talking about?”

“You mean it hasn’t occurred to you yet?” Celestia was honestly surprised. “Twilight, whoever assaulted me was obviously powerful and obviously had an agenda.”

Twilight’s eyes widened in shock. “Princess, that’s not-”

“We can’t afford to wait,” Celestia said, not registering Twilight’s words. “Their agents could be moving at this very moment.”

“What-?” the unicorn asked again.

“The Elements worked twice before, they’ll work again. The fate of Equestria could depend on—!”

“Princess!” Twilight practically shouted.

Celestia recoiled, wincing. “Twilight, please, speak softly! I have a headache, it was hard enough finding you with it.”

“I’ll bet,” the unicorn remarked, looking up at the gauzed bandage at side of Celestia’s skull. “Princess, do you trust me?”

The princess stared incredulously at her student. “Of course I do! Are you not my most faithful student?” She lowered her head and nuzzled the unicorn’s cheek. “I trust you implicitly, Twilight, for your character and capabilities both. You know I do.”

Twilight blushed, savouring the praise for a moment, before pulling away and looking Celestia in the eye. “Then, if I tell you that you’re safe here, that nopony is after us, will you calm down?”

Celestia hesitated. “A-are you... there isn’t-?”

“Trust me, Celestia,” the lavender pony said soothingly. “You’re safe here. We both are.”

“T-then Luna...?”

“Luna?” Twilight asked, before smiling again. “She’s fine, she was worried and wanted to visit, but she had to stay at the castle and calm everypony at the Court down.”

“So didn’t she – I...” Celestia couldn’t articulate her fears, that *this was exactly what she was afraid of. Luna had crippled her, and was playing innocent.* But Twilight would be able to tell, wouldn’t she? “But I don’t... I don’t understand why... the sun...”

“Celestia, calm down, please...” Twilight begged. “Please, just look at me.”

Celestia complied, looking into her student’s eyes as they searched for something. “I thought so...” Twilight muttered. “Princess, your eyes are dilated.” When the alicorn frowned in confusion, she elaborated. “One of the pupils is larger than the other. Your eyes aren’t focusing well either. You said you have a headache?” Celestia nodded, beginning to understand, though Twilight’s diagnosis made it clear.

“Princess, I believe you have a concussion, a rather bad one,” The unicorn said with no small certainty. She levitated her medical book towards them

and flicked through the pages. "Let's see, 'concussion', 'concussion'... aha, here we go." She cleared her throat. "Physical symptoms of a concussion include: dizziness, loss of balance, loss of motor control, nausea, et cetera, et cetera... mental symptoms: confusion, disorientation, lack of focus and post-traumatic amnesia."

Celestia blinked. "A concussion? Are you certain?"

"Fairly certain," Twilight nodded. "You said yourself earlier you've been dizzy, right? Trouble with balance. And you've definitely got some signs of confusion. You've trailed off a few times while we were talking..." Twilight paused, noticing Celestia's unfocused gaze. "... like that."

Celestia blinked and looked back at Twilight. "A concussion?"

The unicorn didn't know whether to laugh or sob. "U-um, yes, definitely," she said neutrally, glancing back at the book. "I also suspect you're suffering from a touch of trauma related amnesia, it was a nasty bump on the head..." She glanced between the book and Celestia's head wound before continuing. "But the book says your memory should return sooner or later. Tell me, what is the last thing you remember?"

Celestia thought back. "It was just after dawn. You had yet to arrive in Canterlot. Luna said she wanted to give me the day off to spend with you so she promised to handle Court, and since I hadn't slept well, I took a nap. When I woke up, I was here, covered in bruises. I..." Celestia's voice hitched, and tears welled unbidden at her eyes. "I can't touch the sun. It burnt me when I tried."

Twilight's eyes softened with sympathy, realising how frightened Celestia must have been. She leaned forward and pressed her neck to her mentor's in a comforting hug, helping to calm her down. "So, you don't remember me arriving at the castle?" Twilight felt Celestia shake her head. "What about the experiment we had scheduled in the evening?" she said, so quiet it was almost a whisper. "Do you remember that?" Again, a shake of her head. "You don't remember setting the sun?"

Celestia jolted upright. "I set the sun?"

"You tried to, but..." Twilight hesitated, fear in her expression. Still, she gritted her teeth and forced the words out. "Celestia, this is all my fault. The experiment, it went badly, catastrophically bad. You stayed there to try and calm it down while the rest of us evacuated the lab, but..." The unicorn

glanced at Celestia's burns, looking as if she were about to cry. "But, you got up, straight away almost, and you said you were fine, but when you tried to lower the sun, y-you..." Twilight's lips quivered, and she began blubbing, her dam of guilt bursting inside of her. "Luna had to grab the sun before you hurt yourself further, and, and I panicked and teleported us both, and I went to the hospital instead of the medical ward of the castle because I wasn't thinking straight and m-my mommy, I mean, mom and dad always took me here when I was a little filly whenever I needed some stitches or something and I was really scared and please don't hate me..."

"Shh, shh, Twilight, I don't hate you, I love you so, you know that," Celestia assured the crying unicorn, extending her wings to wrap her in a feathery embrace. Twilight pressed her head into the alicorn's side, sobbing harder as she unloaded the stress of the past day, dampening her mentor's white coat with tears. "It's not your fault, Twilight, I believe you. It was an accident, I'm sure, n-nopony has done anything w-wrong..." Celestia choked, her throat suddenly constricted and hot tears pouring from her own eyes.

Twilight felt the tears land on her pelt and looked up at her teacher. "A-are you crying? Why?"

"I'm just..." Celestia hesitated. *'So ashamed I doubted my sister,'* said her thoughts. *'I don't deserve the love she had given me.'* "... so relieved everypony is alright," she finished, smiling at Twilight. The unicorn smiled back, her anxiety visibly fading away. Celestia raised a hoof to wipe her eyes, realised what was still there and grinned with amusement. "Aha, socks!" she declared, drying her eyes with ease. "So many uses! I should commemorate their inventor!"

Twilight giggled, letting the princess' sock-clad hoof dry her eyes as well. "A national sock appreciation day?"

"Why not?" Celestia joked. "A thousand years of rule, I deserve to pass at least a few eccentric laws now and then!"

The lavender mare gave her a wry look. "And if ponies find it strange, you can say Luna thought of it?"

Celestia tried and failed not to laugh. "Oh Twilight, we'll make a politician out of you yet!"

The sound of hooves and hushed arguing outside the waiting room drew their attention to the door. The tone of the voices became decisive and one set of hooves walked away. Immediately after that, the door opened suddenly and Dr Reed strode in. "Miss Sparkle, I'm afraid we haven't been completely frank with you. You see..." She froze, only now noticing the very Princess they had been combing the hospital for, curled up on the pile of cushions beside the lavender unicorn, who was giving the doctor a very flat look.

"I take it somepony or other has been looking for me?" Celestia asked, amused by the doctor's surprised expression.

"You know, all this could have been avoided if you had let me visit her," Twilight said pointedly.

"Right!" squeaked Reed. "Well! I'll tell everypony to call off the search. Your majesty, um... stay put. Doctor's orders."

"I'll do my best," Celestia smiled. "Thank you all for worrying so much about my welfare."

River Reed nodded, opened her mouth to say something else, then shut it. Nodding rigidly once more, she made an about face and dashed away, mortified.

*'This has been a learning experience,'* Celestia decided, amused. And she had heard hospitals were boring.

The door opened again and a familiar baby dragon sauntered in. "Hey Twi, I got you a caramel carrot..." Spike began, but he paused when he saw Celestia. "Oh, hey Princess! I told Twilight you'd be up soon. I, uh, I only got one caramel carrot, so..."

"Oh you needn't worry, Spike," Celestia smiled gratefully, levitating her flowers in front of her. "I have a bouquet."

"Oh, cool. Heh, you know that was my idea?" Spike began on one of his rambling tales. "Yeah, Twilight was all stressed out, so I says to her, I says..."

As Spike's embellished tale began to grow in earnest, Celestia relaxed for the first time since she woke, and found her eyes closing. At ease once more, Celestia fell sound asleep.

~{C}~

*Celestia dreamed.*

*She saw...*

*A peaceful, moonlit sky.*

*She smelled...*

*Disinfectant, and her beloved student's scent.*

*She heard...*

*Spike, spinning a tall tale.*

*She felt...*

*Twilight, tucked protectively under her wing, pressed close to her side.*

*She tasted...*

*Flowers.*

~{C}~

# Chapter 2

Emerging from the haze of sleep, Celestia blearily opened her eyes. Yawning, she lifted her head from her pillow before tensing up. *'Where am I?'*

"Princess Celestia? Are you awake?" a blessedly familiar voice asked hesitantly. The princess looked in the direction of the voice to see her student, Twilight Sparkle, standing at the doorway, giving her a concerned look.

"T-Twilight, where –?" Celestia began, before flinching as a headache unexpectedly throbbed beneath her skull.

Twilight noticed the flinch immediately. "Ah, right! Hold on a second, Princess!" Her horn glowed and a small bag of water floated into the air. She concentrated and the water froze instantly. One last push of magic crushed the ice into slush, contained within the waterproof bag. Pleased, she levitated the bag over to Celestia, resting it on her forehead.

Relief from the throbbing pain came instantly in cooling waves. The princess sighed blissfully. "Oh, that is much better..."

"I thought it would be," said Twilight, smiling and trotting over to Celestia's bedside. She hopped up slightly, resting her forehooves on the rail of the hospital bed, and fixed her mentor with a concerned look. "So, how do you feel? Are you still disorientated?"

Celestia pulled her mind away from basking in the ice bag's soothing coolness. She cast her mind back, piecing together what had happened. *'I'm in a hospital... I woke up here yesterday, didn't I? And... and I thought that...'* "I remember waking up here, and finding you, yes," she nodded, and smiled apologetically. "Nothing before that, I'm afraid. How long was I asleep?"

"Most of the night, which is good," said Twilight. "Best way to cure a concussion is to just sleep it off. I was worried you were going to wake up disorientated after an hour like earlier."

"I was only asleep an hour last time?" Celestia asked, surprised.

The unicorn shook her head. "Not even." Her eyes glanced at a clock on the wall as she figured out the timeframe. "Let's see, sunset was at seven, then y-you..." Pausing, she swallowed a lump in her throat. Celestia said nothing, letting the unicorn silently push past the memory. "I teleported us to the hospital then. You, Spike and I. You actually got up after about five minutes and asked for a place to rest, so they took you to a bed, but you only slept for about forty minutes before, well..." She chuckled ruefully. "It's stupid, because logically I knew you were probably disorientated, but after I teleported us here, it was like you didn't even see me. I thought you hated-"

Celestia didn't even give her student a chance to finish the thought. "Twilight, I woke up battered and disorientated, and the first thing I did was seek you out." She placed a hoof over Twilight's. "You needn't fear that my love is conditional."

Twilight smiled widely, though something sad was glimmering at the back of her eyes. "I know. Logically, I do know, I've just been... I've b-been a bit of a wreck since the accident. You really scared me for a second, and you were acting so off afterwards..." She pulled her hooves from the bed and trotted over to her saddlebags. They opened magically and a hefty medical tome floated from it. "I mean, the book says that irritability is one of the symptoms of a concussion, so that explains *that*, aha..."

Celestia frowned, concerned. "I didn't say something harsh, did I? If I did, I apologise."

"Why, is there something you're not telling me?" Twilight said, laughing a little nervously. Celestia wasn't sure how much of it was meant as a joke. Her laughter limply petered out regardless as she rested the book back into her saddlebag. "Don't worry about it. You didn't do anything wrong, except for trying to raise the sun even when the castle medics told you to rest. Nothing worth remembering..."

Celestia nodded, resting her head back down onto the pillow, being careful not to dislodge the icepack resting behind her horn. Shutting her eyes, she focused on that coolness and eased her breathing in order to sooth her mind, entering a state of peace. It was an old piece of Unicorn meditation that she could call up at any moment, so well versed she was in using it. Taking care to simply bask in its warmth rather than reach out and grasp it, she searched for her connection to the sun. To her immense relief, it greeted her like an old friend.



"It is... three in the morning?" Celestia hazarded a guess based on the sun's position on the other side of the globe. She saw a clock on the wall which read two-thirty, causing her to frown. '*This headache must be putting me off,*' she grumbled internally. She paused, and suddenly felt foolish. '*Why didn't I just check the clock in the first place...?*'

She heard Twilight mumble something. "Okay, I definitely think I screwed things up here..."

Celestia looked over from her hospital bed, seeing her student peeking out of the small window, tugging the binds aside with her magic. "Why do you say that?" she asked.

Twilight let the blinds snap back in place. "There's a crowd of reporters outside the hospital. I'm guessing news spread fast that you were hospitalized, which wouldn't have happened if I hadn't panicked and teleported you here in the first place."

"I for one find it commendable you acted so quickly to aid a loved one," the princess smiled.

Twilight blushed and scuffed at the floor sheepishly. "Still, I should have known to trust the castle's medical staff." The lavender mare dropped her head slightly. "Magic needs a cool head, I could have made things worse when I teleported..."

"Then that's the next lesson you should learn." Celestia suddenly had to stifle a yawn. She was still so tired! "But you can't blame yourself for this, Twilight," she continued after a moment. "When something happens to the royalty, things become sensationalised. When something involves an alicorn, things become escalated." She paused once more, deep in thought. "If word has gotten out, we should be candid and reassure the populace. Can you see which reporters are there?"

"I don't know one reporter from another, Princess," the unicorn said, glancing back through the blinds.

"Well, do you spot an Earth pony with a blonde mane –" Celestia began, before pausing as a thought struck her. '*Light?*' she asked silently. A wave of warmth spread over her like a blanket and she smiled. "Twilight, come here, I want to show you something.

She trotted towards her bed once again, looking curious as to why Celestia was smiling so secretively. "What is it?"

"Well..." Celestia began. "Yesterday, I discovered something. We've known for a long time the magical properties of sunlight, yes?"

Twilight nodded. "Light is the source of magic, because it feeds all life," she said, as if reciting from a textbook. She probably was, Celestia mused. "It soaks into Equestria's soil and saturates the land with magical power, which all ponies tap into in different ways. For Unicorns, sunlight is a boon to all magic, particularly growing, transformation and transmigration magic, while moonlight is subtle and lends itself towards illusional, emotional and dream magic."

"Precisely, Twilight," her mentor said with a nod, pleased and a little amused by the unicorn's thorough answer. "The sun is the root of magic, but the moon's closer proximity allows it to affect the tides of mysticism in subtle ways, much like it affects the tides of the ocean each day." She tapped her hoof to her chin in thought. "In fact, I suspect a renaissance of dream and illusion magic is approaching now that Luna has returned to her duties." She chuckled and shook her head. "But that's neither here nor there. Observe."

The wall lit up as a circle of light fell against it. "Princess, no magic!" Twilight said sternly.

Celestia grinned. "I'm not doing anything." Turning to the patch of light on the wall, she politely asked, "Could you show me what the crowd outside looks like?"

The light quickly shifted to an image of a small crowd of reporters milling around just outside the hospital. She recognised a few, such as the Earth pony she had asked of earlier, a grey Earth pony mare with a blue-tinted mane, and a white Pegasus with a rose mane and a scroll as a cutie mark. "Dime Dozen, Snazzy Scoop... and somepony from the Equestria Daily," Celestia remarked. "My, word *has* spread."

Twilight was more interested in the projection itself rather than the ponies it displayed. "Is this some sort of scrying spell?" She glanced at Celestia's horn, confused. "B-but you're not using magic, so how are you doing this?"

"I'm not!" the princess replied playfully. "Last night, when I woke up and discovered I was cut off from the sun, I became somewhat desperate. So,

with the same powers I've used every day to move the sun, I reached out and asked the light I had shepherded to Equestria for help... and it answered."

"Sentient light?" an awestruck Twilight asked.

Celestia thought about it. "Hmm... no, I wouldn't quite say sentient. But it has memory, certainly. It remembered me and helped me find you. Now, it seems to recognise my voice..."

The lavender unicorn raised an eyebrow. "And you just discovered it yesterday?"

"I never had cause to discover it before yesterday," Celestia admitted, smiling at her student warmly. "Wonders never cease, it seems."

The moment was broken by a knock on the door, which opened without waiting for a reply. Both mares were a little surprised to see Spike poke his head in, since they had been expecting a much taller doctor or guard pony. "Oh hey, Princess, you're up!" he grinned, and then glanced back out the door. "Uh, there's one of the Palace Guards here for ya, he's been here a while now."

Celestia nodded. "Alright, could you be a dear and send him in for me?" she asked politely. She glanced over to the wall projection, willing it to vanish.

The baby dragon grinned, not noticing the light blip out. "Sure thing!"

Celestia adjusted herself in her bed, settling just as the gold-clad guard walked into the hospital room, followed by a silver-clad Night Guard. "Your Majesty? It's good to see you awake and well. Are you up to moving?" the palace guard asked.

"I believe so, Captain Steel Wing," the princess smiled, recognising her trustworthy guard.

Steel Wing nodded. "Princess Luna will be relieved. We've arranged a chariot to bring you back to the castle."

"In the middle of the night?" Twilight frowned.

"It's best if we keep this incident relatively quiet, to avoid alarming the populace," the Palace Guard replied. The Night Guard rolled her eyes but said nothing.

"Excuse me, officer," Celestia addressed the silver-clad unicorn, having caught her expression. "What is your name?"

The guard started, nervous. "Oh! Officer Bright Shield, your majesty! I apologise for..."

"Expressing an opinion?" Celestia said wryly. Bright Shield bit her lip, sheepish at the princess' knowing look as she continued. "So then, Officer Bright Shield. I would like to hear your voice on that opinion. It is clearly a powerful one."

Bright Shield glanced nervously at the princess, then, surprisingly, at Twilight. It took the lavender mare a second before she realised the guard was looking to her for some sort of affirmation. Did she think the princess was playing a game here? Since when did Twilight become some sort of royal liaison? Feeling somewhat strange at the thought, the lavender mare nodded encouragingly.

"Well, Princess," Bright Shield began carefully. "Word has already gotten out. Not many were in the hospital foyer when you and Miss Sparkle appeared, but there were enough. Now, the Night Guard has remained vigilant and tight-lipped about everything, but paparazzi have shown up regardless. I strongly recommend having a few words with the ones out there, unless you want the front page on every newspaper in Equestria to be speculating how long it will be until the horn rot sets in completely or how soon it will be before the dragon ninjas that attacked you will wait before striking Luna as well." Pausing, the Night Guard mare caught the Palace Guard's sceptical look. "Hey, don't look at me like that. Those are *actually* the going theories."

"It would be best to reassure the populace then." Celestia nodded in understanding. "Still, although my injuries weren't very severe I've been having concentration problems, so something tells me an interview wouldn't be wise..."

"Not to mention we still don't know *how* the experiment went wrong..." Twilight mentioned.

The princess cleared her throat, coming to a decision. "Steel Wing, bring the chariot out in front of the hospital so the ponies can see me as I leave. Bright Shield, please announce that I won't be taking questions or making any statements." She smiled, amused. "Instead, tell them that we'll be having a press conference at a more *reasonable* hour."

Both guards snapped a salute and exited the room. Once the door closed, the princess began to rise from the bed, pushing the covers off and gingerly stepping off. Twilight stood ready to catch her should her legs fail, but mercifully Celestia found she was able to stand steadily. She took a few experimental steps forward, her hooves gently clicking on the floor as she moved.

"Don't push yourself too hard..." Twilight warned in a worried tone.

Celestia smiled. "I need to do this, at least," she explained, walking carefully towards a chair where her regalia were neatly stacked. "I've given the ponies a scare, they need to see me walk out of this hospital under my own power."

The unicorn frowned. "And how are you going to hide your burn? It's not exactly inconspicuous."

Celestia glanced at her side once more and regarded the jagged strips of bare skin with a note of sadness. She could tell the burn had already started to heal, but it such a shame to see her coat in such a state. She wasn't a vain being but nopony could deny she had pride... but more so than that, how could she let her ponies see such an obvious crack in the icon they placed so much faith in?

The solution to the problem was obvious, of course. "Oh, I have an idea or two..." Celestia answered Twilight playfully. Seeing her questioning look, the princess leaned conspiratorially towards her student. "Would you like to know one of the greatest benefits I have as Princess of Equestria?"

She had to struggle to keep herself from giggling when Twilight's eyes went wide with wonder. "It would be an honour, Princess!" the lavender mare gushed.

Celestia smiled sweetly. "I find the greatest benefit is the *privilege* of having the most powerful and talented unicorn in the history of Equestria as my personal protégé."

Twilight's brows furrowed, and Celestia could practically hear her about to ask 'who?' before comprehension dawned across her features. "O-oh," she muttered, failing to suppress a wide, bashful smile at the praise.

Celestia smiled teasingly and lifted her wing so Twilight could better see the burn. "Why, I daresay it would be well within her abilities to hide a blemish such as this, don't you think?"

The unicorn's expression shifted, and by the look of her eyes, Celestia knew Twilight had seen the unspoken challenge laid down in front of her. "Well..." the unicorn said thoughtfully, examining the jagged patch of red skin closely. "If it doesn't have to stand to close scrutiny, then maybe I..." She paused, internally debating something, before glancing back up at her mentor. "I-I think I have an idea, but the illusion will be more convincing if I can layer more than just one sense onto it." She hesitated, giving her mentor a quick glance, before tenderly nuzzling the white coat of her shoulder.

Celestia was a bit surprised by the not-unwelcome show of affection, but as the unicorn's horn lit with magic it dawned on her what her student was attempting. Twilight inhaled deeply, and her horn surged with the magical light. A glittering aura spread over Celestia, little motes of light that quickly began to dance over her battered body. Twilight then exhaled, and the spell surged into the princess, enveloping her completely.

Celestia closed her eyes for a moment as the spell washed over her, opening her eyes just as Twilight did the same. "How do I look?" the princess asked teasingly. Twilight only gaped, her expression a mix of wide-eyed wonder and silent horror. Now feeling genuinely nervous about the spell's results, Celestia glanced around for a nonexistent mirror before instead reaching out for the light. '*If it's not too trivial, may I...*' She didn't even get a chance to finish the thought as her image appeared on the adjacent wall.

For a moment, she too was stunned, but then her eyes lit up with joy. "Oh... oh, Twilight... this is *marvellous*..."

~{C}~

Outside the hospitals, the reporters refused to budge, much to Officer Bright Shield's frustration. The grey mare recited her announcement for the umpteenth time through gritted teeth, that *neigh*, there would be no

interviews, and *neigh*, the princess was not going to leave a comment. Her eye twitched as Dime Dozen began to needle her for details, and as loyal as she was to the princesses, she knew that the sooner Celestia hopped on her chariot and went home, the better.

Her relief was nearly palpable, then, when she heard clinking of the Palace Guard's armour as they marched through the hospital doors. Ignoring the reporters' excited chatter, she turned with the rest of her Night Guard colleagues to pay respect to their ruler's presence – and promptly found their jaws hanging limp in awe.

The word had been used to describe her many times before, but never was the word more appropriate than this moment. Celestia was *radiant*. Her coat was pristine and white as a dove, soft and bright as if emitting a subtle glow. Her wings were open, wide and welcoming without a single feather so much as crooked, let alone singed. Her gait was slow and easy, and her head was held high and proud, smiling softly at her assembled subjects as her dawn-hued mane billowed majestically in the ethereal breeze. Like a dream, she crossed the short distance to the chariot and stepped lightly aboard, followed practically unseen by a lavender unicorn carrying a baby dragon on her back.

Princess Celestia gave the crowd a wave as the chariot lurched forward. Flanked by the Palace Guardsmen and lead by Captain Steel Wing, they soared into the night sky. In the wake of her absence, the trance Celestia's vision-like appearance had set over the crowd slowly faded. There was a moment of stunned silence before the reporters collectively groaned – they had failed to take so much as a single photograph.

Bright Shield chuckled. *'Well played, your Majesty.'*

~{C}~

Canterlot under the clear night sky was a wonder to behold, even more so after Luna's return to her duties.

Twilight, however, found her hooves to be of far more interest.

*'A Perception Projection spell? Of all things, you cast a Perception Projection spell?!'* She groaned, refusing to look up lest the princess see the blush blazing across her features. *'What exactly were you thinking when you cast a spell that makes others perceive what you perceive?!'*

It was a simple spell that did exactly what its name implied – it projected the spellcaster's perception of an object or pony onto the object or pony itself. It was a parlour trick, taught to young unicorns everywhere as a thought exercise. Imagine that the blue ball is green, that sort of thing. It was simple to pull off, but hard to make look realistic, for obvious reasons – both powerful imagination, attention to detail and familiarity with the subject were needed.

Being Princess Celestia's most faithful student, Twilight was obviously very familiar with the alicorn in question. It should have been elementary for her to just brush against her to familiarize herself with the texture of her mentor's coat, and to simply layer the illusion over the burn.

Instead, Twilight wasn't sure what had happened. She had brushed her muzzle against Celestia's shoulder...

... feeling the rustle of her soft, pristine pelt, smelling of spiced soap and sandalwood, over strong, supple muscle, radiating a gentle power, a bastion of warmth and sleepy bliss...

... and the spell had slipped from her horn like a song, an ode to the princess, the mare she...

Twilight didn't like the direction her thoughts were leading her. She really, *really* did not like it.

Because she already knew the only possible outcome.

*'I thought I left this behind me...' she scolded herself, schooling her expression in an effort to prevent the princess beside her from catching wind of her stormy emotions. 'But to be proven wrong by my own illusion... stupid. When other unicorns' spells go wrong they fail horribly. But noooo, for me they go wrong by working even better than I ever needed... or wanted.'*

~{C}~

In contrast to Twilight, Celestia could barely contain her mirth. *'Oh, I really shouldn't have done that...'* she thought guiltily, her hoof pressing against her mouth to smother an onset of giggles. It had been a sneaky trick, but in her defence she hadn't exactly planned it, she had merely taken advantage of Twilight's magnificent illusion and played it to its maximum potential. *'Then again, I don't plan most things I do,'* she reminded herself, still



grinning. She had learned long ago that the best way to rule was to observe all possible variables in a situation and then to simply guide those myriad factors into the outcome she desired. When somepony – namely, herself – tried to directly control everything, things got... messy, for lack of a better word.

*‘No, it is best to encourage mutual trust and loyalty in one’s subjects, so that everypony can live a prosperous life.’* Celestia finished her thought with a satisfied smile, before pausing. *‘Wait, what was I thinking about...?’* For the life of her she couldn’t remember how her train of thought had derailed into leadership philosophy. *‘This concussion is... very frustrating,’* she groaned internally. As she probed her mind, her eyes wandered to her student, whose eyes were fixed firmly on her own hooves.

“Are you afraid of heights?” Celestia asked playfully. “Don’t worry, if you fall, I’ll catch you.”

“You’re in no condition to fly and you know it, Princess,” Twilight reminded her, not playing along with the game. “Those feathers are just an illusion...”

*‘Ah, right! The illusion!’* Her memory jogged, Celestia’s grin widened. “And what an illusion it is!” she said, admiring her pristine wings. *‘You know what? My wings are so pretty.’* In her opinion, since it was also complimenting her student’s skills, it was alright to indulge in a moment of vanity. “Spike, your verdict?”

“Lookin’ great, Princess,” the baby dragon agreed. “Twilight really outdid herself on this one!” The unicorn only shrank further down, studying the floor of the chariot with as much zeal as she would a brand new encyclopaedia.

“Are you embarrassed?” Celestia teased her student, dusting her wing along Twilight’s side. The lavender unicorn jolted in shock at the touch, and the princess found herself having to suppress another bout of giggles. “My, tonight you’re as jumpy as you are modest.”

Twilight bit her lip. “S-sorry, I just didn’t expect you to parade in front of everypony like that,” she explained.

“They expected a cripple. Best to defy prediction, I find,” Celestia said sagely, before once again admiring the shimmer of the illusion across her coat. “But really, Twilight, you’ve outdone yourself here. Elegant yet complex... is it an Inner Bloom spell?” She thought about it a moment,

before dismissing the guess. "No, it's only skin deep... a Duplicated Image from my coat, weaved with a Radiance spell? No, no, it only appears to radiate light, it's all in my mind... hmm, not my mind per say... my, this is tough..."

As she continued to rattle off guesses as to the nature of the illusion, her student slowly lifted her head in disbelief. Unseen, her face was painted a mix of expressions, as if her heart was being painfully torn between relief and disappointment. "I'm not telling," she said softly, looking straight ahead. If Celestia hadn't been standing right beside her she might not have caught it.

"Pardon?" the princess asked.

"I'm not going to tell you about the spell," the lavender mare said a little louder. "But maybe you'll figure it out, eventually."

Celestia frowned slightly. Not out of disappointment, but concern – it wasn't like Twilight to act so down. On the unicorn's back, Spike leaned forward. "Twilight?" he asked, worried about her tone. "Are you alright?"

She glanced back at him and gave him a reassuring smile. "I'm pretty tired, and the wind is hurting my eyes a little." Sure enough, the young dragon could see a faint dampness around them.

The chariot began to descend over the lights of Canterlot, and Celestia looked up from her student to see the familiar sight of her castle below. "You've had a long day," she said, enveloping both Twilight and Spike in a feathery embrace. Raising her head, she caught Captain Steel Wing's attention. "Captain, despite my rest at the hospital I am still quite exhausted. Is there any pressing issue I must attend to upon my return?"

"Not at all," the Pegasus guard replied, keeping up with the chariot easily. "I believe Princess Luna is attending court, so will I send for her when we arrive?"

Celestia smiled. "Please do. Although, would it be too much trouble to drop us off directly at my tower?"

"No trouble at all, your Majesty," Steel Wings nodded, accelerating to the front and directing the movement of the chariot towards the tower in question. The castle loomed before them, and quick as a sparrow the Pegasus charioteers weaved through the golden towers and domes of

building before alighting atop the bridge that joined the tallest tower, Celestia's private quarters, to the rest of the castle.

Celestia, caught on a giddy whim, jumped playfully off the chariot. Her wings shot open to slow her decent, though it was shaky – her wings really were just for show at the moment. She landed before the tower doors, wobbling slightly as she fought for balance. Finding purchase on the rough marble, she turned back to the guardsmen - and stifled a bout of laughter when she saw the identical aghast expressions painted on everypony's faces, including Steel Wing and Twilight. Her student in particular looked like she wanted to put her right back into the hospital, which Celestia could only think of as adorably hilarious. *'If anypony asks, I can blame the head wound.'* In a heartbeat her mischievous smile shifted smoothly into a genuinely appreciative one. "Thank you so much for your concern and dedication, gentlecolts," she thanked her guards.

As her student hopped down from the chariot with Spike in tow, Steel Wing gave her a cautious look, being the only pony besides Twilight to catch the princess' playful, and thus for him troublesome, expression. "Will you require an escort?" he asked, eying her as she swayed slightly from side to side.

"I have one," she smiled, extending a wing to frame Twilight. "But thank you, all of you. You are all a credit to the crown." She gave them a grateful bow, and the guards responded with a deep bow of their own. Rising, she smiled. "That will be all for tonight on my part, take care."

The captain nodded and, together with the charioteers, took off into the night sky, heading for the castle barracks. Celestia smiled at her student. "Could you get the door?" Twilight glanced at the tower doorway – the heavy stone doorway. Smiling, she nodded and, horn glowing, opened it with ease.

"I'm guessing I'm going to be relying on you quite a bit for the next few days," Celestia said appreciatively to the lavender mare. To that, Twilight only smiled shyly.

~{C}~

As they walked through the tower towards her chambers, Celestia and Twilight chatted lightly, with Spike silently trying to stay awake. The princess was pleased to note she had successfully drawn her protégé from

the shell she had fallen under on the chariot ride, and chalked it up to stress and fatigue. It had been a trying day for all of them, after all.

"I can't believe how tired I am," Celestia chuckled as she and Twilight walked past the final set of guards stationed outside the hall leading to her chambers. They snapped a salute, and she made a point of giving them an appreciative smile. "Thank you sirs."

The two stallions stood a little prouder at the acknowledgement.

Twilight gave them a smile too as they passed, before glancing up with a wry smile at her mentor. "*You're* tired? Princess, you just woke up barely twenty minutes ago!"

"I am an invalid, I am allowed to be however tired I wish in however much amounts I please," Celestia said in a mock-haughty tone, turning her nose into the air. "And as Princess, I decree that it is bedtime. I can't wait to get back to sleep..."

Twilight suddenly let out a surprised yelp. Celestia gave her a half-concerned, half-amused look, which was returned with a sheepish smile on the part of the unicorn. She glanced onto her back where Spike was slumped, snoozing soundly. "I guess he couldn't wait either. The day finally caught up with him, I suppose," Twilight chuckled affectionately.

"Has he been up all this time?" Celestia asked.

"Well, he was worried about you," Twilight replied. "And... and about me too. He's been really great today."

Celestia smiled at the sleeping dragon, touched by his concern. "You'd best get him to bed."

Twilight nodded, turning. "I'll just go get him settled in my room, then I'll be back up, okay?"

"Your room?" the alicorn frowned, confused. "In the castle?"

Twilight paused, unsure of how to reply. "Um, yes, I-?"

"Sorry, right, you've been here a whole day," Celestia sighed, rubbing her temple with a hoof. "Head injury. Amnesia. It seems it really does get the best of us."

"You forgot that you forgot?" Twilight giggled teasingly.

Celestia chuckled, rolling her eyes. "Alright, alright, make fun of the invalid. I can see I've taught you well. You go on and tuck Spike in. I'll be inside."

Her student nodded and turned, quickly trotting back out towards the castle proper. Celestia watched her go until she turned a corner and disappeared from sight. Smiling to herself, she pushed the doors to her chambers open and strode inside.

Unbidden, the doors clicked shut behind her, too quickly and surely to merely be the wind. Somepony had closed it magically.

She wasn't alone.

"Who's there?" Celestia called into the shadows. Her horn glowed in preparation for a spell, but it fizzled as her migraine surged forward, unforgiving. Wincing, she paused and forced her panic to subside, just as the moon emerged from behind a cloud, letting light spill into her chambers.

Her sister was resting on her bed. Celestia released a relieved breath, before the memories of her nightmares rose within her mind, taunting her, warning her. Her mouth was suddenly very dry, but she forced her relentless panic back down once more. She had no reason to fear her sister. No reason at all.

Luna's dark expression said otherwise, however. She rose and stepped down off the bed, fixing Celestia with her expressionless gaze. Her teal eyes scanned the white alicorn's form, narrowing at Celestia's pristine appearance. With a starlit glow of magic, Luna swept her sister's radiant illusion aside like mist, revealing the true extent of her injuries.

Even though it was a mere mirage, without Twilight's illusion Celestia suddenly felt very, very exposed. She opened her mouth to speak, but was silenced by a shake of her sister's head. "You have your orders," Luna said in a low voice.

Celestia's eyes widened fearfully. "Orders?"

From the shadows, a dozen uniformed ponies emerged. The princess of the sun stiffened at the sight of them, their expressions solemn, the tools of their trade ready, and their purpose clear.

Like a wave crashing down on the rocks of the pier, the doctors descended upon Celestia.

The startled alicorn had to suppress a very inelegant squawk as she was surrounded on all fronts by the tapping, prodding, investigating ponyel. “Luna, what is –” She flinched as the cold head of a stethoscope was pressed against her. “What is all –” She winced as three doctors prodded her burnt side experimentally. “Did you gather the *entire* medical staff to –” Her head was jerked to the side as one of the doctors snatched an ear for examination. “I just got back from a hospital, why –” She paused, disturbed slightly as a flash of magic briefly darkened her body but illuminated her skeleton. “Luna, isn’t Court still –” She saw the thermometer float in front of her, and she gave the doctor before her a flat look. “My temperature? Really? I have a head injury, not a virus.”

Luna spoke for the doctor. “Celestia, I have ordered them to give you a thorough check-up, and that includes taking your temperature. Now, we can do it the easy way...” Luna’s gaze moved pointedly onto her sister’s flank. “Or we can do this the hard way.”

Faced with those options, Celestia instantly snatched the thermometer into her mouth and fixed her sister with an indignant glower. Luna paid it no mind, instead turning to the head of the medical team, an aged, grey-maned stallion. “Doctor Ramheart?” the moon princess asked. “Your diagnosis?”

The old Earth pony rifled through the notes the medical team had made before, nodding. “It seems her little excursion hasn’t had a negative effect on her. She simply needs bed rest and somepony to monitor her.”

“And her burn?”

Ramheart cleared his throat loudly, and one of the medical unicorns levitated over an opaque glass jar. “This salve should quicken healing and prevent a potential scar. Simply work it into the skin by hoof or, preferably, with a bit of magic.”

Luna nodded. “Excellent, thank you for taking the time to do this,” she said appreciatively, picking up the jar of salve with her own magic. “You are dismissed, go get some sleep.”

The ponies nodded and filed out of the room, save for old Ramheart. “She still needs to be monitored,” he reminded Luna.

She nodded. "I have somepony in mind. If anything comes up I'll seek your counsel." The aged doctor grumbled in acquiescence and followed his staff out.

With a push of magic the door clicked softly shut, and Luna turned to face her sister. The glass jar of burn salve floated beside her. "On the bed, sister. Let me see that burn."

Celestia scowled slightly. The doctors had done nothing but make her headache worse, but rather than kick up a foalish fuss she simply trotted obediently to the bed and lied down on her relatively good side. "That was a mean prank, Luna."

"I disagree," her sister replied flatly, drawing some of the salve out of the jar. It was a pale beige goop that strangely seemed to melt into the aura of Luna's levitation spell, becoming a dark grey cloud that the younger alicorn pressed against Celestia's side. The sun princess jumped slightly, worsening her headache – the cloud was *freezing*, and left tingles like pins and needles wherever it passed.

"That's cold!" Celestia protested.

"*Hush*," Luna half-hissed.

It was petulant, she knew, but Celestia couldn't help it. She was stressed, tired, her good mood had been ruined, and so she began to sulk. "That check-up was far too fast to come to any real diagnosis," the princess grumbled, her migraine pulsing angrily. "As a prank, I suppose getting me to 'take my medicine' is all well and good, but what were you thinking when you got the staff involved?"

The salve jar landed forcefully on the side table with a solid thud as the moon princess' hackles rose. "Well, maybe I was worried about you, have you considered that!?" Luna snapped, the dam holding back her emotions fracturing. "Did you consider that when you sauntered back in here like a cat full of cream? D-did you consider that maybe you weren't the only one having a bad day!?"

The darker alicorn stood quickly from the bed. Celestia's eyes were wide as she watched her sister storm a few paces away. "L-Luna?"

Her sister wheeled around and fixed her with a baleful gaze. Her eyes softened as she took in Celestia's injuries, but hardened once again when

she focused on her lost expression. "Sunset... what were you thinking, Celestia?" she said, her voice hoarse.

"I-I don't know," confessed the elder sister.

Luna groaned, shaking her head. "Oh don't *even* –!"

"Genuinely, Luna, I don't know!" Celestia insisted. "I can't remember anything about today after you left for the court this morning! I just woke up in the hospital..." Celestia shut her eyes tightly, forcing back the rising emotions from the memory. '*And I was in such a good mood too...*' she sighed, and fluttered her wings weakly. "I woke up like this, and I had no idea what happened. Twilight has assured me it's not unusual to suffer amnesia like this."

"Is that right? Well, if she read it in a book it might be reliable..." Luna said beneath her breath, releasing an annoyed huff.

Celestia took offense on her student's behalf, but let it go, knowing it was her sister's anger talking for her. "Luna? Luna, speak to me."

"Sister, I..." Luna began haltingly, before sighing, frustrated. She began again, the anger gone from her tone. "I'm upset with Twilight, a little bit, for panicking and snatching you away before I could help." She chuckled, resigned. "I think you've rubbed off on her in that respect, only Twilight seems to favour taking matters into her own hooves immediately, as opposed you and your... machinations."

Celestia said nothing to that – if anypony had earned the right to speak about her so harshly, it was Luna.

"But I'll admit, not all of my grievances with your student is entirely deserved," Luna confessed. "I... I know I can't use her as a scapegoat for my frustrations, it's just..." A pained look flashed briefly across her face. "Celestia, when Twilight vanished with you, the guards burst in. You had been screaming in pain, after all, you gave both Twilight and I an awful scare." Luna's gaze was somewhere far away and troubled, sending a rush of guilt through Celestia's heart as the younger sister continued. "The guards did their duty and followed orders, but I could see it in their eyes, there was a definite... suspicion. Especially since it was dusk, and night had fallen. And then some of the nobles got wind of the situation during Court as we were trying to locate where Twilight had disappeared to. There were... allegations."



Celestia's blood went cold. "Who?" she asked gravely, a thousand years of authority in the tone.

Luna fixed her sister with an equally solemn expression. "What would you do if I told you, sister? *Make* them change their opinions? Are you prepared to cross that line? It all begins with the best of intentions, believe me." The midnight-blue alicorn shook her head. "It was the murmurs of frightened foals, nothing more. Nothing more."

Celestia's face remained grave for a moment longer, before a throb of her familiar headache forced her to let the matter drop. "At least tell me our 'nephew' Blueblood didn't add to the fuss," she sighed.

"Actually, he seemed to be on my side," Luna said, earning a surprised look from her sister. "Well, the side of least resistance, I suppose," she clarified, sighing. "Still, the 'these matters are not befitting of a royal, shall we not simply have a late tea' angle was better than the rest of them quietly implying that I-I was..."

"Come here," Celestia said softly, leaning forward to nuzzle her sister comfortingly.

Luna jumped back from the contact, and Celestia felt a sliver of her heart break. "Y-you don't get to 'make it better', sister, not tonight," the midnight-blue mare said, fixing her sister with a watery glare. "I told you, I *told* you I could handle the sun for the day, but you just..." She flicked a wing in a deliberately haughty gesture. "Just batted me away like a foal. Just like old times."

"L-Luna, I-I-"

"And then you made your wounds even worse, made Twilight panic and all the little ponies in the castle begin to fear the dawn would never arrive," Luna pressed on, stomping her hoof. "O-once again, the night became something to fear, because. You. Wouldn't. *Listen!*"

Celestia rose in a blur of white and wrapped her wings and forelegs around her sister in a tight, desperate embrace. "I'm sorry, Luna, I am so, so sorry!"

Luna batted her wings ineffectually against her sister, trying to pull away. "Liar!" she yelled, her composure crumbling. "Y-you don't even remember what for!"

"It doesn't matter," the sun princess whispered. "You're in pain, and it's my fault. Please, please forgive me."

The last vestiges of her emotional dam broke, and Luna burst into tears, sobbing into her sister's coat. Celestia shed a few tears of remorse as well in sympathy as they held each other, dropping to their knees onto the ground.

As upset as she was, Luna quickly got a hold of herself, wiping her tears away with a foreleg. "I... I'm sorry for shouting at you," she said quietly. "It's not... I should have insisted that I lower the sun. Y-you weren't yourself..."

"That's the second time I've heard that," Celestia sighed, resting her head in her sister's vibrant blue mane. "I'm beginning to dread hearing about it."

"Who told you about this?" the moon princess asked. "Twilight?" Celestia nodded absently, murmuring in assent. Luna just chuckled, amused by something, before sighing mournfully into her sister's coat. "Everypony... everypony thought I had become N-Nightmare Moon again... maybe it's too soon to hope they would have forgotten. Sometimes I wonder if you're the only one who wholeheartedly trusts me, but tonight you..."

"I trust you Luna, never doubt that," Celestia swore, firm yet comforting. "Please, let me make this up to you. I acted like a foal today, I wasn't myself and I cannot begin to express the remorse I feel for hurting you." *'For suspecting you, my darling sister,'* her mind whispered. *'For being afraid of you when all you ever wanted was to be loved.'* "Whatever it is you need or desire, tell me and I will make it so."

"Do you mean that?" Luna asked quietly.

"Yes," the sun princess replied, resolute. "I can't make it better tonight, but I can make it *right*."

The sisters were silent for a moment longer, remaining in their tight embrace. Finally, the younger spoke. "Give me the sun."

Celestia had expected this – what else could her sister possibly ask of her, after all? Regardless, she still stiffened involuntarily at the request. "Alright," she nodded carefully. "What will you do with it?"

"The same as you do," Luna replied. "Raise it in the morn, set it in the eve. I would do so publicly, every day in Canterlot's central square, so that all

might see me usher in both dawn and dusk, so our ponies might see the night as sister of the day, just as fair, just as faithful.”

“And how long will you continue to guide it? Indefinitely?”

Luna balked. “Oh, no, I couldn’t, I...”

“How long, Luna?” Celestia pressed the question softly. “How long do you need?”

Luna’s face was hesitant, as if she was considering rescinding her request. “I suppose until you’re finished your convalescence? Perhaps a bit longer?”

“I see...” Celestia said in a measured voice. “How about until the solstice?”

Luna pulled away from her sister to give her a surprised look. “That long? The Winter Moon Celebration is still months off, are you sure?”

Celestia smiled. “I was actually talking about the Summer Sun Celebration.”

The younger alicorn shot straight up to her feet in shock, staring wide-eyed at Celestia. “No, I can’t! Not for that long, I physically can’t!” she said in a panicked voice, shaking her head rapidly. “The nights are getting longer now, so the sun’s burden will lighten as time goes on, b-but I can’t, I’m not strong enough too...” She paused, and sighed despondently. “Besides, that’s your day, not mine.”

“You deserve more days,” Celestia insisted. “And nights, for that matter.”

“No,” Luna said firmly. “Until the Winter Solstice, I’ll guide the sun and no longer. I’m sorry, but I just can’t do it for any longer, it wouldn’t be right even if I could...” She caught herself and sighed again, this time frustrated, giving her sister a weak glare. “And now I’m apologising, when nothing is my fault. Did you intend this?”

Celestia’s face fell, sadness welling up inside her from her sister’s suspicions. “Sister, we can either guess and second guess each other until we both spiral into madness, or we can trust one another. That’s our fate,” she said softly.

“Is that a yes or no?” Luna asked half-heartedly.

“It’s an I love you,” Celestia replied, bringing a hoof to her sister’s cheek.

Luna bit her lip and screwed her eyelids tightly shut. "Okay..." she said, her voice small. "Okay. I love you too, sister." She drew a sharp breath and opened her eyes, locking her gaze with her sister's. "You need to rest. I'll be back here for sunrise in a few hours, alright?"

"Alright," Celestia nodded. "Good night, Luna, I'll see you in the morning." She nudged her sister and smiled. "*Your* morning."

Sharing her a small smile of her own, Luna made her way towards the door. "Sleep well, Celestia."

As the door shut behind the midnight-blue alicorn, the sun princess let out a long, weary sigh. Her nightmare fears and her worthless paranoia told her this was a mistake, that this was where Luna's betrayal began, this moment of weakness was the sowing of the seeds... and Celestia did her best to ignore it. Trust or madness, those words weren't solely for Luna's benefit. "Sleep well?" she asked the empty room. "I hope to, Luna, I do..."

~{C}~

Having quickly put Spike to bed, Twilight made her way back to Celestia's tower with a brisk trot.

*'Oh, who am I kidding, it's a canter,'* the lavender mare sighed internally. She rushed out a familiar archway and found herself in the cool night air once more, traversing the marble and gold bridge the chariot had left them on earlier.

Her hoofsteps slowed when she saw a familiar face emerge from the tower doors. Princess Luna's expression betrayed a note of surprise upon seeing the unicorn, but it was quickly schooled into a mask of solemn authority.

"Twilight Sparkle," she said, approaching her.

Twilight shrank under her gaze; beyond their first technical 'meeting', she had never known Luna to be so intimidating. "Princess, I-"

"Celestia needs somepony to monitor her and make sure she doesn't use magic," Luna stated, interrupting the unicorn. "Now, obviously, it's been a long time since she's been unwell and if she's going to act anything like she did in the past then I wouldn't wish that nightmare onto Discord, let alone a member of staff. Fortunately, you've already nominated yourself."

“Huh?” Twilight cocked her head, confused. She got the distinct impression she was being punished, but with something she was more than willing to do regardless. At first glance it was redundant but, of course, Luna was Celestia’s sister in more than just blood. There was gravity to her words that implied something bigger at play, yet close to heart.

“Twilight. You’re not the only pony who cares about Celestia,” Luna said evenly, walking past the unicorn. Twilight sensed it wasn’t a change of subject. “I appreciate you acting so quickly to help her, but don’t...” The moon princess swallowed a lump in her throat. “Don’t steal her from me,” she said in a low whisper. “You, at least, have your friends in Ponyville. She is all I have.”

At that, Twilight quickly turned, full of concern for the midnight-blue alicorn. “Princess-?” she began, but stopped when she only saw an empty bridge.

Luna had teleported away, vanishing into the night and depriving Twilight of the chance to help the princess. The irony was lost to the unicorn, so she pushed her concerns away to deal with in the morning and chose instead to trot into the tower where the alicorn she knew she could help waited.

~{C}~

As Twilight pushed the doors to Celestia’s chamber open, she saw the princess sitting before the window of the balcony. Her burnt side was facing away from the unicorn and without the blemish she appeared to glow under the moonlight. The unicorn’s voice hitched in her throat, and the alicorn’s head turned quickly at the noise, relaxing once she saw who it was.

“Oh, Twilight, you’re back,” she said, moving towards her. The glow faded as she stepped out of the light, but Twilight didn’t care. She had noticed something that made her gut wrench.

“Princess, were you crying?” Sure enough, damp streaks running down the white pelt of her face shone in the dim light.

“Hmm? Oh! I... yes.” Celestia bit her lip almost bashfully, as if she had been caught preparing a prank. “A little bit, yes. The day is just... it’s catching up on me. I just...” She paused, unable to quite find the right words. “It’s strange. I don’t know. It’s strange to hear from you and Luna what happened today, it’s strange to see both of you hurt, and I can’t find the one responsible because she *is* me. It’s strange. A-and I can’t even get undressed, since my magic hurts to use.” Her hoof tapped at the torc

encircling her neck, the rest of her regalia piled up on the bedside table. Twilight noticed that without the gilt shoes, Celestia's hoof was a pure, stark white. She knew that already, but it was such a rare sight it caught her off-guard every time.

"Let me get that for you," Twilight offered. Celestia smiled weakly and trotted over to the bed, resting on it. After a moment of deliberation, Twilight followed. Silently, she reached out with her magic and unhooked the torc, floating it to rest nearby. "Do you need anything before you go to sleep, Princess?"

Celestia settled into her bed, her head sinking into her lush pillows. "I..."

Twilight leaned forward to hear her next words, but they never came. Celestia seemed lost.

"I'm letting Luna handle both day and night until the solstice," the alicorn said suddenly. "To make it up to her for... everything."

Twilight blinked, surprised. "Wow, that's... that's big."

"Yes..." Celestia agreed, her voice still lost. "I hope it's enough."

There was another uncertain silence, which was once again broken suddenly by the princess' anxious voice. "Twilight, stay a little longer, please..." she said, placing a hoof on her student's. "I don't want to wake up and be afraid for you again..."

"You were afraid for me?" Twilight asked, touched. "Silly... you were the one with the injuries..."

Celestia smiled weakly. "Which is why I was worried. Can you imagine what the same thing would have done to anypony else?"

Twilight's eyes became haunted. "Yes..."

Celestia jolted up. "Oh heavens, don't tell me that-!"

"No pony else was hurt, Princess, really," the unicorn quickly reassured her. Celestia visibly sagged with relief, sinking back into her pillow as Twilight tried to find the words to explain. "It's just..." The unicorn paused, and sighed with a chuckle. "I'll show you in the morning," Twilight promised. "But long story short, you need a new magical science laboratory."

"I'll name it after you," Celestia said, unperturbed. "Just please stay here."

Nodding silently, Twilight knelt down to rest beside her. For the longest time they simply shared each other's gaze, violet eyes locked with magenta in a quiet reassurance of each other's presence that they both sorely needed.

After an indiscernible amount of time passed, Celestia seemed ready to speak. "When I woke up, I believed some very foolish things..." she confessed, her expression troubled. "But when you're hurt and frightened and confused, it becomes less and less foolish and more and more frightening the more you dwell on it. I didn't know how I got hurt. I thought the castle had been attacked, and I was afraid... because you were supposed to be visiting. I couldn't bear the thought that you were..." She suddenly cut herself off, breaking their shared gaze. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be dropping this on you..." she whispered in apology.

Twilight's heart stirred, refusing to be silenced. She felt like she was running on embers. If she slowed down to think she would be burned horribly, so... so instead, she took a risk. She channelled Pinkie, and Applejack, and Rarity, and she danced upon the embers. She let her long-abandoned feelings for her mentor dance, if only for a moment.

"I'm here for you, Celestia." Twilight felt a strange thrill speaking directly to the princess without titles. But this moment was too open, too vulnerable, too *intimate* to let anything remind either mare of the distance in caste between them.

"Thank you..." Celestia murmured, looking back into Twilight's eyes. "Can you please stay a little longer? Until the morning?" The unicorn's heart danced triumphantly. "I'm afraid I'll wake up disorientated again," Celestia admitted, fretting the sheets with a bare white hoof. "I don't want to... to feel fear like that if I can help it. That isn't selfish to ask of you, is it?"

"No, of course not," Twilight replied honestly. "Why would it be?"

"Because of Spike," the princess said. "He shouldn't have to wake up alone because of me."

Twilight paused. Truthfully, she hadn't been expecting a legitimate argument against what she saw as a rhetorical question. "Oh... well... well, don't worry. You'll wake up at dawn anyway, won't you?" Celestia nodded, and Twilight grinned. "Then there's no problem! I'll be back before he's

even close to waking up. And even if he does wake up, he knows the castle, so he'll be fine." Her eyes softened. "Right now, you need me."

Celestia considered this, and chuckled ruefully. "A baby dragon can be better trusted to wake unsupervised than an ageless alicorn. Heavens, I feel useless."

"Don't..." Twilight said sadly, stroking her dawn-hued mane in an attempt to comfort her.

Somehow, it seemed to work. The princess smiled as her eyelids grew heavy as she began to fall into sleep's embrace. "This is nice..." she murmured. "Thank you for staying..."

A few replies flashed through Twilight's mind. *'You're welcome'. 'Always'. 'I love you'.*

What she settled on surprised her. "How long has it been since somepony did this for you?"

Celestia's ear flicked, at first the only sign that she registered the question, before her lips parted. "An eternity..." she breathed, and faded asleep.

Twilight remained stock still, for fear moving might break some sort of spell. She watched Celestia sleep for several long moments, hypnotised by her mane that still gently billowed from intangible solar winds.

*'You can do this. It's just like a sleepover,'* Twilight told herself. *'Applejack and Rarity shared a bed when we had a sleepover, right? This is the same thing.'* Momentarily satisfied with her personal white lie, she lifted the duvet over herself and Celestia, covering them both. She turned and put her back to Celestia before going to sleep – she couldn't maintain any illusions about her feelings beyond her pithy rationalization, not when looking at the sleeping face of her mentor.

It was a large bed, but Twilight knew the only place on it she could sleep was at Celestia's side. Her heart still danced, and she prayed she wouldn't stumble. She almost didn't survive last time.

~{C}~

Though her eyes did not open, Celestia was awoken by Twilight's warm weight slightly pressing into her. She remained silent; both of body and



mind, drifting in the haze between dream and reality as she idly felt her student settle down for the night.

She listened to the rise and fall of the unicorn's breath, building into a peaceful pattern of deep sleep. She smiled as she smelled an almost heady must laced with something... lavender and jasmine, no doubt Twilight's soap.

As she slipped into a peaceful slumber, Celestia curled a little closer to her beloved student. It felt right.

~{C}~

# Chapter 3

“The night looks wonderful, Luna,” Celestia said with a smile, gazing in wonder at the depth and brilliance of the night sky her sister had so lovingly brought forth. It was unlike any she had seen before, ethereal and magnificent, impossible and wondrous.

And yet... familiar? Celestia paused, reeling in an unsettling sense of déjà-vu.

“Do you really mean that, Celestia?” Luna asked quietly, interrupting the elder alicorn’s moment of confusion. “Ever since we reunited, all those years ago, I was working towards this, the perfect night.”

Celestia dismissed the confusion and smiled at her sister. “Well, I believe you’ve more than accomplished it, sister,” the sun princess assured her younger sibling. “Why, the sky is simply mesmerizing tonight; I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Luna gave a small smile at the praise. “D-do you think the ponies will like it?”

“Luna, they will love it,” Celestia assured her sister, lowering her head to nuzzle the shy princess. “They will absolutely adore this night, I know it.”

Luna smiled. “I’m so glad. But, Celestia, you haven’t seen the best part. There’s a surprise in that sky, just for you. Can you see it?”

“A surprise?” the sun princess asked, excited.

“Yes, it’s to thank you, and to show you how much I love you.” The darker alicorn beckoned with her hoof. “It’s at the centre of the sky, directly up.”

Celestia craned her head up, searching the heavens for the surprise Luna promised. Her entire field of vision was filled with the rolling eternity of the constellations, and she soon lost herself amidst their splendour. “Luna...” she murmured, tears building in her eyes from the sheer beauty. “Luna, I -”

The bolt of lightning cut through her once more, but the pain was numb, distant. But her body felt like lead, and she fell regardless. “This isn’t real...”

it can't be..." she protested weakly as she lay on the ground, staring wide-eyed up at her sister.

"Is this really how you see me?" Luna asked in turn, her coat turned pitch-black, her mane surging with cold stars. They brushed against Celestia's coat like frozen branding irons, drawing her up into the air.

"It's not... Luna, I trust you," Celestia swore desperately. The stars were like a thousand pinpricks, like thorns pressing hard against her skin.

Her words fell on deaf ears as her sister stared, uncaring, down on her. "A thousand years," she whispered, "and you still can't see me as anything other than a monster."

Celestia closed her eyes before desperate tears could fill them. "I gave you the sun," she whispered. "Wasn't that enough?"

"No, not enough," Luna replied, shaking her head with a sad smile on her face. "It'll never be enough for you."

Celestia's eyes shot open in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Luna only continued to smile pityingly as the star-filled mane closed around her.

The starry mane *squeezed* – but Celestia didn't scream.

She surrendered.

~{C}~

In the chambers of the night princess, Luna paced distractedly, her bed empty and unkempt. Occasionally she would flop down on it and flick through a book, only to rise seconds later. Other times she would spend a few minutes quietly jotting at her desk, before her restlessness forced her to rise once more. She could feel the moon wane – dawn was merely a few hours away, and she wasn't sure she was ready for it.

Almost idly, Luna reached for an abacus and ran through a calculation of the possible centrifugal force she'd need to compensate for when she raised the sun. Beads clattered loudly in the quiet room for a few moments, before the archaic device went still and was tossed on the bed. Luna gave a glance at the few sheets of parchment scattered around her desk and,

with a touch of magic, sorted them into neat piles. Her desk tidy, she strode out of the room.

*'It's pointless to calculate when I don't have a frame of reference...'* Luna reasoned, the sound of her hooves echoing loudly in the quiet corridor. Several guards moved forward from the shadows to accompany her. Luna merely shook her head, dismissing them with a look, and they returned to their posts.

*'Celestia... where did yesterday's anger come from?'* she mused as she roamed the castle halls aimlessly. She remembered her sister's eyes. Unfocused, confused... Ramheart had explained that Celestia had merely been irrationally irritated due to her head wound, that her sharper than normal words weren't really her own... but Luna couldn't help but question his diagnosis. Celestia's eyes... they had been, dare she think it, *insulted*, appalled by the idea that the sun might be raised by another.

*'Was that how she really feels? Was her concussion just preventing her from hiding her true feelings?'*

"... No," she said aloud, taking a stand against her own thoughts. "Celestia loves me. I won't let a moment of irrationality poison the years of kindness and love we've shared."

She felt a cool breeze on her skin, and looked to her right to see the sleeping land of Equestria laid out before her. She smiled, realising where she was – the Passage of Eastern Radiance. The eastern wall of the corridor was merely a long colonnade which opened out onto a wide balcony that followed the Passage's length. She looked up, and her sharp eyes picked out the vivid fresco painted on the vaulted ceiling. Apparently it had been painted by a single Earth pony, which Luna found difficult to believe.

She turned to her left, to the western wall, and saw what gave the Passage its namesake – a mirror, or rather, series of tinted mirrors that ran the length of the open corridor. At dawn it would reflect the light of the sun back out onto Equestria in a beautiful display of shimmering colours.

At this moment, however, it reflected the light of the moon. Luna found the effect pleasing most mornings, as the muted colours of the reflected moonbeams had a certain elegance and subtlety about them.

But tonight, a cloud passed over the moon and all she could see in that mirror was an alicorn wrapped in shadows, trailing an ethereal mane. Without the moonlight, she seemed almost sinister – her mind playing tricks on her, she knew, but she also understood the fear others might hold in their hearts.

She touched her reflection lightly with her hoof, and thought back to her first Nightmare Night, before she had even adjusted to the social etiquette of the time. She learned that the children were quick to forgive, quick to play and show affection, but the adults? The longer the memory a pony possessed... *'And who can remember more than Celestia?'* she thought, staring down into her own deep turquoise eyes *'But... even if she is, deep down, doubtful of me...'* She shut her eyes tight, and when she reopened them, the clouds over the moon had passed, and she saw her true self looking back through the mirror. *'Even if that is the case, I can forgive too.'*

She smiled, and for the first time since the accident, she felt strong again. *'Still, she's been off for a while now,'* she mused, continuing her train of thoughts. *'Something's bothering her, and she doesn't want me to know.'* Luna didn't think it was anything world-changing, but it still ached for her to be unable to help her sister. *'Perhaps now that Twilight is here...'*

Speaking of twilight, the moon was inching towards the horizon. Soon, it would be time for her to herald the dawn. *'My dawn,'* Luna reminded herself with a growing giddy smile. *'My day.'*

She stepped out onto her balcony and turned to face the horizon in the east. Just before she began to focus her power, however, she hesitated. *'Celestia should be here...'*

Her mind made up, she took to the air and flew in a curving arc around the castle, arriving at her sister's tower in mere moments.

Landing on the balcony, she poked her head through the glass doors leading to Celestia's room. She paused, however, as she saw the bed – and the two mares within. Twilight was pressed snugly against the white alicorn, blissfully unaware of the world, while Celestia herself had her hooves wrapped around the unicorn in a tight embrace.

Luna raised an eyebrow. Sure, she had teased Celestia about her affection for the unicorn, but... *'Well now... oh, surely this can't be what it looks like.'*

The grin rising on her face was wiped away when Celestia jolted slightly in her sleep. Moving closer for a better look, Luna realised her sister's expression was scrunched up in fear – she was having a nightmare, a terrible one if it was enough to so visibly trouble the sun princess, a mare whose composure never cracked, even in her sleep.

“Sister...” Luna whispered sadly, her horn glowing with a gentle blue aura. “Fear not, I am here.” She was the princess of the night, immortal master of the moon and the magic it governed. The subtle flow of dreams was a river in which she was the ferrymare, but Celestia owed her no copper bit.

“For you, the night should be something of peace,” she said, placing a soft kiss on Celestia’s bandaged brow. “Sleep easy.”

Stars glittered over Celestia’s head, and her expression slowly slipped into one of calm and serenity. Part of Luna wanted to peer into her sister’s subconscious and see the dream directly, but she squashed it down. She would not intrude on another pony’s privacy, especially not her sister’s.

She glanced at Twilight, noting that she was sleeping soundly. ‘*At least somepony is having a good night...*’ the night princess thought, but she couldn’t muster the resentment she had felt earlier. That was good, as Luna didn’t *want* to be angry with her, the first pony to truly reach out to her. But all it took was the memory of the accusing eyes...

Luna strode back out onto the balcony, contemplative. She stared into the descending moon for a few moments, before glancing back through the windows into Celestia’s room. Her sister wrapped around Twilight in her sleep, a gesture that danced the knife-edge between platonic and... suggestive of something more.

Safe in the shadows of the night, Luna allowed her jaw to clench momentarily before she turned away from the scene. She had relieved her sister of her nightmares, and that was all the comfort she could give. She didn’t have a place there. All she could do was watch the moon, waiting for her advent as the year’s new solar guide.

~{C}~

The starry mane *squeezed* – and became thorns, thick, black, dagger-like thorns surrounding Celestia, blotting out the sky. The stench of a predator hung in the air, invading Celestia’s nostrils. The hissing of invisible snakes echoed in her ears. She tried to struggle, but the vines were curled around

her legs, their claws digging into her, dragging her further into the black briar patch.

Suddenly, she was pulled forcefully backwards. She gasped in pain as the thorns dug into her and left deep gashes in her skin, but it quickly faded as the plants' grip broke, freeing her. She continued to be dragged backwards by the scruff of her neck, wincing as she nicked herself on the thorns here and there as she passed.

After an age of her forced retreat, the shadows of the briars eventually thinned, showing splotches of an orange sky strewn with pastel purple clouds. Then the briars stopped entirely, and Celestia found herself dragged out of a chasm and into a vast and lonely plain of verdant grasses. She was so startled by the sudden shift in scenery that she was caught unaware as her rescuing force dropped her unceremoniously on the ground. Wincing as sharp pain radiated from her many cuts, Celestia rose to her hooves, turning to see who, or what, had snatched her up.

She was startled to see it was a tall and stout Earth pony stallion. Both his coat and mane were green, his mane being several shades darker, and his eyes were serious as he stared down at her.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The stallion smiled, his serious gaze softening slightly. "Oh good, you forgot me. And here you thought you never would." His voice was familiar, but Celestia couldn't place it.

"What do you mean?" she asked. She stepped forward and winced, glancing down at her torn legs. "I'm hurt..." she said, her voice wavering slightly.

"Because you dived into the thorns. Don't do that again," he said seriously. "You'll only get hurt."

"I have to go back," Celestia protested, the confusion she felt slipping away as a terrible sureness dawned on her. "I think... I think somepony is still in there."

"Go back?" the stallion asked sceptically. Seeing Celestia's determined expression, he sighed. "Alright. Do you have a horn seeped in mystic power, to sweep aside the thorns with a mere thought?"

Celestia looked up at her forehead, but no white horn adorned it. "I do not."

The green stallion nodded solemnly. “Do you have strong wings to fly above the thicket and quickly find what it is that you look for?”

Celestia glanced at her back, but saw no great wings, only a coat of soft white hair marred with wet crimson stains. “I do not.”

The stallion was aghast. “Then at the very least, do you have hooves strong enough to crush the vines and clear a path?”

Celestia looked at his hooves – they were stout and mighty, as strong as the heart of the Earth. She then glanced at her own hooves, weak and dainty things. They looked like they might split should she so much as tread on a pebble, whereas the fern-green pony’s could have shattered a mountain with ease. “I... I do not.”

He lowered his head sadly. “Then I’m sorry. It’s beyond you to return to that briar patch safely.”

Celestia whinnied urgently, but she couldn’t deny the truth in his words. She paced the clearing, her mind racing. “Then...” She paused, and looked at the Earth pony with hope in her eyes. “Then... can you go in my stead?” she asked tentatively.

He shook his head sadly. “No, I can’t. I already got hurt pulling you out once.” He turned to show the side of his body to Celestia. The white mare gasped in horror at the sight – the stallion’s side was torn up with cuts and burns. Before her eyes, the gashes warped and joined into a single circular wound, and instead of dripping off, the blood began to radiate out from it.

It looked like a sun – like her cutie mark.

She would likely have stared at the horrible wound forever had the stallion not broken her gaze as he trotted away. “Wait!” she called after him. “Where are you going?”

He motioned his head towards the horizon, where the verdant plain met the pastel orange sky. “I can’t do anything else for you, Celestia. It’s time for me to go.”

“Don’t leave me alone here!”

The stallion gave her a bemused look. “You mean you can’t see them? They were the ones who told me you had fallen in the briar patch.”



“Who-?” Celestia began to ask, but was silenced as hundreds of ponies came into view. They were laughing and chattering and frolicking amongst one another, and their sudden appearance both confused and captivated Celestia.

An ice blue Earth pony cantered up to her and nuzzled her lovingly. “There you are!” she giggled.

“Where did you all come from?” Celestia asked.

“Where does anypony come from?” the blue mare replied brightly. “What we want to know is, where did you go?”

Celestia glanced back to the chasm filled with black thorns. “Into the briar patch.”

The ponies gasped in horror and rushed towards her, fussing over her with worried whispers. “Come, let’s get you cleaned up...” a sandy-brown, cyan-maned pony murmured, guiding Celestia away from the chasm.

“A moment,” Celestia said, resisting the urge to follow the kind ponies. She turned her head to speak with the green Earth stallion. “I still need to...”

But the stallion was gone. She could see him in the distance, galloping towards the horizon, a green speck almost invisible against the grasses of the plain. Celestia bowed her head, dejected - she hadn’t even gotten the chance to thank him.

*‘I couldn’t even remember his name...’* she thought mournfully. The land shifted, and for a moment she felt as if she might topple over and fall into the briars again, but she stomped her strong hooves once and found her bearing. *‘But a name is just a name. I can remember the lessons they show me.’* She looked at her mane, her curling waterfall of hair, pink as the dawn sky. She thought of the green stallion, dragging her to safety despite the pain it caused him and, like drop of ink in a pool of water, a stripe of lush green ran through her hair beside the pink. Turning to the mares attending her, she smiled. “Alright, let us go then.”

The ponies brought her to a glade of clovers and sat her down. The blue mare sat behind her, humming a soothing song as she groomed Celestia’s pink mane with her tongue, carefully untangling burrs and thorns knotted in the flowing hair. The sandy mare circled her, her deep brown eyes taking stock of Celestia’s cuts and scrapes. Where she stepped, the clovers

bloomed into tiny white and lilac flowers. Celestia was entranced by them, and so almost didn't notice it when the sandy pony rested beside her and began to clean her wounds with her tongue.

Comforted by their soothing presence and the care they gave her, Celestia looked out on the plain. There were hundreds of ponies galloping across it. Some veered close to the glade of clovers, close enough to smile and wave. Others danced with one another, savouring the dying light of the sky. Still others raced each other, moving so fast Celestia knew she could never catch up. Each and every pony was subtly different from the next, but they all had two things in common.

First, wherever a pony walked, plants would spring into life. Flowers bloomed at the hooves of some as they galloped. Spindly saplings rose in the wake of others, forests in their infancy. Some left only trails of weeds, but even they bloomed into pretty flowers that stretched for the sun. Each pony treated the vegetation differently. Some ignored them, too busy chasing butterflies or each other. Others showed love and care to their plants, bringing them water and tending to them lovingly. Celestia could see several ponies in particular dance in excitement as a sapling grew to become a tall and proud apple tree. Some trampled flowers underhoof unthinkingly, others rolled around and played, still others simply grazed, content with their lot.

The second thing they had in common was, eventually, be it with a smile and a wave to Celestia or with a furrowed brow or with a determined expression, each and every last one of them would turn and gallop towards the horizon.

Leaving her behind.

"Where are they going?" Celestia asked, watching as several fillies raced each other into the distant light of the setting sun, never to return.

"Where does anypony go?" the blue mare replied. Daisies grew at her hooves, and she placed a crown of them atop Celestia's now-groomed head.

"Are you going there too?" Celestia asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes, but you'll be alright," the sandy mare assured her, rising to her hooves. "Your cuts are clean, and they are healing well." She turned and started to trot away, clovers blossoming at her hoofsteps. The blue Earth

pony followed, giving Celestia one last happy wave before heading for the horizon beside the sandy mare, trailing daisies.

Celestia waved them goodbye, suppressing a sigh. Her mane, now clean of thorns and tangles, caught her attention. Looking at the dark turquoise stripe running through it, she resolved to remember the kindness of the mares who had cleaned her wounds and groomed her coat. Their memory in her heart, she allowed her mane to be dyed once more, this time by a streak of cyan. At a loss for what else to do after that resolution, she simply sat alone and watched the ponies roam the grassland. Occasionally a pony would wander up to her to share a flower or ask a question, but they quickly left once they were satisfied, galloping towards the horizon.

Feeling lonely, Celestia approached a group of dancing ponies, who looked overjoyed to see her. As one herd she and the ponies danced and laughed, and for a while, Celestia could forget the ache of her wounds. For a while, she forgot about the briar patch.

But the sky grew dark, and night fell. The ponies yawned and fell asleep, and the world was quiet. Celestia was left alone with her thoughts, so she roamed among the sleeping ponies searching for a companion. Before she realised, she found herself staring once more into the black briar patch that had caught her before. Her heart trembled to look at it, but she steeled herself and looked down at her hooves. They were strong, carved from marble and resolve.

She was as strong as the earth. She could crush the thorns, trample them underfoot.

"What are you doing?" asked a voice, startling her. She glanced in the direction of the voice, spotting its owner. It was a blue Pegasus mare with a fluffy mane, pastel yellow like a cloud at dawn.

"I'm going into the briar patch!" Celestia called in response. "My hooves are strong now, I can crush the thorns before they can cut me!"

"But it's so dark! You'll get lost!" protested the pegasus. She glided towards Celestia and nuzzled her, worried and needful. "What would we do if we lost you?"

"The ponies don't need me. They'll always have the horizon," Celestia reassured the little pony.

“Can I help you then, at least?” the blue mare asked hesitantly.

Celestia considered it. She glanced at the green stripe flowing through her hair, and then at the mare’s blue wings. “Are your wings strong?”

“The strongest!” the pegasus said enthusiastically, though her words were undermined slightly as she shot her wings a quick, apprehensive glance.

Celestia only smiled. “Then can you fly above the black briar patch and see if you can spot what I’m looking for?”

The pegasus nodded eagerly and took off into the air. Celestia watched as she spent several minutes circling in the sky above the vast clutch of thorns, only to return with a dejected expression. “I thought I saw something,” she said as she landed beside Celestia. “But it was too dark. I’m sorry I couldn’t help.”

“You’ve been of great help,” Celestia assured the mare. She gave her a smile before growing solemn, looking out over the dark briars. “If it’s too dark to see anything from the outside, I won’t be able to see anything if I wander in. You were right, I’ll only get lost...”

Both mares were silent, until the pegasus suddenly perked up. “Oh, I have an idea!” she exclaimed. With a beat of her wings she soared into the sky and snatched a star from the lingering patch of night sky far above the plain.

“Strong wings indeed!” Celestia laughed, stomping her hooves in applause as the pegasus soared back down, the glimmering prize tightly gripped between her jaws. She landed beside Celestia and began to scrape in the dirt. Realising her intentions, Celestia dragged her hoof across the ground, digging a modest trench for her. The pegasus dropped the star, the bright little seed, into the trench, and together they covered it back up with soil.

The fruit of their labour quickly and literally became apparent as a sapling sprung from the ground. Cheering, the pegasus danced around it until it grew into a tall, slender tree adorned with tiny silver leaves. Four flowers sat nestled inside the cushion of those leaves, and they shone like the star that grew it. Celestia basked in the gentle light it radiated, and found it magnificent - soft as moonlight, but strong and clear.

"This is beautiful..." she murmured, running her white muzzle among the leaves of a low hanging branch. At her touch they clattered together with a musical sound, like a wind chime.

"Explorers of old have used the stars to navigate since the sky itself was born," the pegasus explained. "Now, the pony in that briar patch will be able to find her way out!"

"I'm worried it seems too shallow..."

"Let's find out!" the blue pegasus said, spreading her wings. She launched herself high in the air and landed on a wayward cloud, her eyes focused on the vast briar patch below. "Yes! It's working! Come see for yourself!"

"I-!" Celestia began, before halting. She glanced at her back and gave her white wings an experimental flap. "Alright! I'm coming up then!" It only took a single beat of her wings for her to soar high above the plains and the thorny chasm, and after a brief glide to savour the sensation of flying, she joined the blue pegasus atop her fluffy perch. Smiling at her, Celestia then looked downwards and marvelled at the endless green land below.

"Amazing... it goes on forever..." she gasped.

The blue mare nodded, and nestled into Celestia's side. "Mmm hmm," she murmured idly. "That briar patch seems small in comparison, doesn't it?" Celestia had to agree – from her vantage point on the cloud, the thorny chasm seemed little more than a black smudge on the endless expanse of the plain, unable to compete in size or colour with the forests and gardens the sleeping ponies below had grown all across the landscape.

Still, the briar patch was the reason she had flown this high in the first place, so she turned her attention back to it, noting the light of the four star-trees. Combined, they shed enough light to illuminate all but the deepest, darkest tangle of dagger-like thorns. Celestia squinted hard, looking deep into that clutch of thorns – and something looked back. She jumped back, startled, as two turquoise, serpentine eyes glowered up at her from the shadows. "Something is in there!" she whispered urgently to the pegasus. "It can see us! It can find its way out of there now!"

The blue mare looked up at her sleepily. "Are you worried that this was all a big mistake?" she asked knowingly. Celestia bit her lip, and the pegasus nuzzled her comfortingly. "Don't worry. It's scary, but no pony deserves to

be trapped in those briars. She's jealous now, but once the stars guide her home, she'll see how wonderful your garden is, and will love you again."

"A-are you sure?"

The pegasus kissed her on the tip of her muzzle. "How could she not?" she asked lovingly. Celestia found herself smiling shyly as the pegasus yawned once again and settled down to rest on the cloud.

The darkness of the sky gave way to soft yellows and pinks as the sun rose quietly from the horizon. "It's dawn... but you've been up all night..." Celestia mused, looking at the pegasus nestled in beside her. "Are you tired?"

"So tired..." the sleepy mare replied. "But I wanted to help you more than I wanted to sleep."

Celestia smiled, a hint of sadness in her eyes. "Well, you can rest now. You've earned it." The pegasus merely mumbled softly before drifting off into a deep and peaceful sleep. Carefully, Celestia rose and hopped off the cloud, and with one well-placed beat of her wings, sent the cloud drifting off towards the rising sun.

Celestia didn't wave or call goodbye, but as she watched the mare float off into the horizon, her mane flared with a deep blue streak the same hue as the kindly pegasus' coat.

So, winged and strong-hoofed, Celestia soared across the plains, watching with happiness as the ponies began to rise from their slumber and roam the land. She flew from cloud to cloud amongst pegasi who were trailed by fluffy dandelion seeds, before descending to earth. There, she trotted along rows of trees, greeting their caretakers, and ambled through patches of flowers, smiling at the foals playing within.

She roamed for what felt like years, but always remained within sight of the briar patch and the star-tree watching over it. Soon, the sun began to crawl low in the sky and Celestia began to make her way back towards the foreboding chasm.

On her way there, she was pleasantly surprised as a little unicorn, barely more than a filly, wandered up to her. Lavender was the colour of her coat, and lavender was the plant that bloomed in her wake.

"You know about these plants, don't you?" the filly asked.

Celestia considered the question. “I must, considering anypony who knows more has left long ago. What are you curious about?”

The filly paused. Her horn glowed, and she placed her little hoof firmly to the ground. “See?” she said, lifting her hoof to reveal the flower underneath. It was a daisy – not a lavender blossom, but a happy white and yellow daisy.

“Can you show me again?” Celestia asked after a moment of surprised silence. The filly nodded eagerly and, horn glowing, she pressed her hoof into the earth several more times, each little hoofstep growing a different flower – a scraggly dandelion, a bright daffodil, a somewhat distressing buttercup, a delicate orchid, a fragrant clump of thyme and a vibrant red poppy.

“Why, you have a very special gift!” Celestia praised the unicorn. She leaned down to smell the poppy. Finding it pleasantly fragrant, she glanced over at the filly for permission. When she nodded, Celestia carefully plucked the poppy’s bloom from the stem and chewed it thoughtfully. It was smooth and velvety, quite palpable. Swallowing the flower, she smiled at the lavender filly. “It is wonderful... I’ve never met a pony with your raw ability. Would you like to walk with me a while?”

The unicorn broke out into a beaming smile and happily joined Celestia in her journey through the final stretch of the garden. Together they talked of many things – Celestia told her about the different plants she had seen and the dance circles she had joined in with, the filly hanging onto her every word. They discussed how Celestia had seen the ponies put their plants to use, which flowers had the nicest scents and appearances. Celestia warned her about buttercups and nightshade and other poisonous plants, which to avoid and which to be wary of.

“And the briars?” the lavender unicorn asked eventually, as the chasm loomed into their vision. Celestia looked at the unicorn appraisingly, and found she wasn’t a mere filly anymore – she was a grown mare, at the cusp of adulthood, looking out at the world with a pair of bright eyes and a confident bearing.

“The briars are something I had to deal with long ago,” Celestia said, feeling her long-closed wounds begin to ache. “There is somepony in those briars, furious and hurting. I want to help, but I can’t.” She sighed. “I have hooves strong enough to crush the vines once I get them underhoof, and

wings strong enough to soar above them and find whoever is trapped, but I lack a horn to sweep aside the thorns and stop myself from being hurt and tangled inside.”

“I have a horn,” the unicorn said.

Celestia froze as the realisation washed over her. “Yes... you could sweep them aside easily...” she said slowly, before shaking her head. “But it’s not enough... you can’t go alone. We need more than a horn, we need –”

She didn’t even need to finish. “Strong hooves and swift wings, right?” the unicorn asked quickly, more of a reminder than anything else, before she turned and ran. For a horrible moment Celestia thought she was running towards the horizon, but her heart calmed when the mare simply began to wind her way through the groves and trees of the lush landscape.

Celestia hung back, observing the unicorn. Already, the little mare was speaking with an orange Earth pony underneath an apple tree. It didn’t take long for the strong-hoofed mare to smile and nod, following the purple pony in her quest.

Next, to Celestia’s surprise, was another unicorn – a prim and proper mare with a lush white coat, who was scrutinising several gemstones. However, a few words from Celestia’s little unicorn had the prim mare tossing the jewels aside and joining their crusade.

Next was a pink Earth pony, who found the group rather than the other way around. She introduced herself by leaping at the clever unicorn and chattering excitedly, pleading for an invite to whatever party was being planned.

Meanwhile, a cyan pegasus with a rainbow mane descended from a cloud to watch the commotion. Amused, she bantered with the two Earth ponies for a while and, hearing their troubles, joined without a second thought.

Last was a butter-yellow pegasus resting in a glade filled with butterflies. The colourful insects flew off as the group approached her, startling the timid girl, who shrank away from the clever unicorn as she tried to explain the situation. Saddened as the pegasus shook her head fearfully, the group turned and left. But Celestia, watching from afar, saw the conflicted look on the shy pegasus’ face, and was pleased to see her muster up her courage and flutter after the group before they got too far away.



Night had set around them, and it was only by the light of the star trees that they could see the twisted thorn patch, where... *it* was lurking. Celestia realised the group of six ponies were right at the edge of the foreboding briars, and she quickened her pace to catch up. But she was too far away – the ponies had begun without her.

The two pegasi flew high over the brambles and with the aid of the star-tree's luminance spotted the figure lurking within. They called out a direction to the two unicorns, who turned their attention to the briars. Her clever unicorn's horn glowed, and in response the thorny vines were uprooted and cast aside. The knowledge of plants Celestia had shared let her know precisely where to tug and precisely where to instruct the prim unicorn beside her to snip and cut at the thorns. The Earth ponies joined in, stomping on the briars that the lavender mare brushed aside, grinding them to dust and preventing them from ever growing again.

Soon, a path was clear – far sooner than Celestia expected. She hadn't caught up to them yet! She raced full-gallop towards them, just as the deepest darkness of the briar patch swelled forward – a darkness with two wrath-filled turquoise eyes at its head. A monster emerged, inky black and studded with cruel thorns. Everything about it shrieked sharp and sinister, from the talons running up its legs to the misshapen, shredded wings that dripped with tar to a curving horn atop its head.

Celestia felt panic in her chest and bile in her throat. Part of her wanted to scream out to the ponies, to her clever unicorn, to run, to flee this terror. An even larger part of her wanted to leap between the ponies and the beast, to drive it back into the thorns where it could rot for the rest of eternity, unable to hurt anypony ever again.

But the smallest, most unsure sliver of her heart told her '*Wait. Look at your little ponies*'. And for some reason, she did.

They hadn't moved an inch. They stood in a semi-circle mere paces from the monstrosity but hadn't budged, though the shy pegasus clearly shrank in its presence. Celestia slowed in her mad dash, confused, until she stopped entirely, just outside the boundary of the new path. She watched as the monster slowly turned to look at each of the ponies, one by one, before finally looking up and locking eyes with Celestia.

It took a step forward, and the light of the stars above died. It took another step, and the star-trees were snuffed out, sinking the world into utter

darkness. One final step echoed through the silence, and for a moment Celestia believed all was lost.

Then, she heard a soft sound, that of a light hoof pressing down into the earth firmly. Celestia knew it was her clever lavender unicorn, she could feel it in her heart.

A pinprick of light emerged from the darkness. It drew itself up, quickly growing into a wispy silver sapling. But it didn't stop growing – before Celestia's eyes, it became a tall, stout willow with wide, far-reaching branches that hung over the six mares and the monster like a canopy. Leaves began to unfurl, weighing down the boughs of the tree until a thick curtain of silvery-white leaves enveloped the ponies in its embrace.

In the sky, the stars began to emerge once more, and for the first time Celestia saw the moon rise in the sky over the plain. It hung in the air, a priceless jewel radiating ethereal light, to which the willow responded, radiating its own glow, bright and clear.

Celestia took a moment longer to drink in the sight, before stepping through the radiant curtain of leaves. She saw the six mares surrounding the nightmare, which stood defeated, silent and trembling. But by the light of the willow tree, the shadows sticking to the beast were banished, and everything became clear.

It was just a pony.

The dark coat was tar and ichor, staining a deep blue coat. It hung in clumps on her feathered wings.

The talons running up her legs were tangles of thin, evil briars, running up and entwining her body, claws digging in.

Even her horn was tangled, with one massive claw-like thorn eclipsing it atop her forehead and weighing heavily down upon her.

Just a pony.

She looked at Celestia with watery eyes. Cracked and wavering, her voice nevertheless was heard clearly by all under the willow tree. "Sister..."

"Luna..." Celestia's stomach turned as that realisation set in. All along, all that the "monster" had ever been was a pony, her own *sister*, snared tight by the cruel thorns. But she had known that all along, hadn't she?

*'When did I begin to fear you?' she asked silently, not daring to break her sister's gaze. 'Or is it the thorns I fear, and you were just a mask to distance myself from them with? In many ways, you reflect me, and if the thorns could hurt you so...'*

Her sister stumbled, her strength giving out. Celestia rushed forward to close the distance, but the six mares were faster. Her lavender unicorn cradled Luna in a magical cushion, while the white unicorn carefully snipped and unwound the briars studded into her mane and coat. The pink Earth pony and the shy yellow pegasus carefully began to pluck the thorns from her side, taking care not to worsen her injuries as they eased the evil little hooks out of her skin, while the orange Earth pony and the rainbow-maned pegasus stomped down on the thorns that were cast aside, crushing them over and over until not even splinters remained.

Slowly, cautiously, almost afraid of rejection, Celestia approached her sister. The darker alicorn shrank under her gaze, eyes wide and trembling, but she was surrounded by the ponies grooming her, so couldn't flee even if she had the strength. Slow and careful still, Celestia lowered herself to the ground, resting beside her sister, uncaring of the black ichor now oozing onto her coat. She knew it could be cleaned, so wordlessly she began to groom her sister's mane, just as was done for her so long ago.

They worked in silence, Luna trembling as thorns were plucked from her hair and skin, but never crying, never weeping. On the contrary, as Celestia, the clever unicorn and the five other mares slowly cleaned her wounds and coat of the black stain, Luna grew still and sure, her posture straightening and her ears beginning to perk up.

Soon, Luna gathered her strength and rose onto shaky legs. She was silent, at a loss for what to say. Words, however, weren't necessary. Celestia rested on the grass to her left, the lavender unicorn at her right and the other five mares in a loose circle around her, silently assuring the darker alicorn that she wasn't alone in the dark anymore, that she had a herd once more.

"What now?" Luna finally asked.

"Go explore," Celestia said. "Meet with others. I'll be here if you need me."

Luna smiled and hugged Celestia. Then, with hesitant steps growing in confidence, she set out on her own into the garden.

For a while Celestia watched her sister roam, until her attention was caught by the ponies who had helped tend to her. They bowed respectfully before turning together and trotting off... towards the horizon. *'Ah...'* Celestia noted with a pang of sadness. *'It's time already. And I had barely even gotten the chance to thank them properly...'* But everypony left eventually. Though a part of her was saddened, it warmed her heart to see them leave together, as friends.

The lavender unicorn rose to follow, but Celestia saw her pause, conflicted. The others stopped as well, looking back at her, curiosity and concern written across their faces. She looked at Celestia hesitantly. "I..."

"Go, my dear," Celestia replied with a smile. She leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, just beside her horn. "I won't hold you back."

The unicorn's features lit up with a smile as she hugged Celestia goodbye. She rose and galloped towards her friends, and together they set out on their journey. Celestia's eyes never strayed from them as they galloped far away, leaving six trails of flowers in their wake that tapered into one, fading into the distance.

Celestia closed her eyes as a feeling of completeness washed over her. She felt her mane ripple and knew a lavender streak now ran through it. She felt a wash of magic settle on her like a crown and knew a proud white horn was atop her head. When she opened her eyes again, the horizon glimmered with the imminent dawn, a beacon to guide the six friends on their journey.

She noticed, now, that instead of a new highlight the remaining part of her mane that was pink had blended with the lavender to create a soft purple, though the tips still seemed pink in the light in comparison to the cooler colours running beside it. She studied it a while, curious as to its meaning. If it seemed pink still, was it that she only appeared to be the mare she once was? Was it that the briars had rubbed off on her, that she was now that much darker? Or... was it that she was now that much deeper? Darkness wasn't something to fear, so long as it was deep – the brightest of gems hid in the deepest of caves, after all. In the end, Celestia found the darker purple appropriate – the pink-haired mare pulled from the briar patch so long ago wasn't gone, only changed, matured.

So then, with lavender, cyan, turquoise and azure highlights in her hair, with strong hooves on her feet, with great white wings at her back and

proud white horn atop her head, Celestia strode forth to survey her garden. For though she could not follow the ponies in their quest for the horizon, it didn't mean she remained static. Just as the garden grew with each pony that passed through it, so too did her heart.

These fleeting interactions were what made her the mare she was – the caretaker of the plain, tending to the garden so the legacy of the ponies would still be seen even long after they had departed.

Even if she did sometimes glance towards the horizon and wonder...

"Celestia?" a voice called, freezing the white mare in her tracks.

The dawn broke over the horizon, and Celestia turned to face it disbelievingly. There, she saw the lavender unicorn, framed by the rising sun, return. Celestia's mind was blank, unable to process anything besides this impossible sight, that somepony had returned. Celestia's heart rose hopefully, but in the same instant her gut sank into a pit of trepidation. *'Why has she returned? Has something happened?'*

The lavender unicorn was trotting towards her, her head scanning the surroundings in search of something. She was taller now, her legs lithe and slender, her hooves small yet sure. Her coat gleamed in the morning sun, and behind her trailed not only mere flowers, but shrubs and trees of all kinds and brambles, yes, brambles that grew heavy with plump, juicy blackberries.

She was so beautiful. Celestia surprised herself with that thought, but she couldn't deny it. She was so beautiful, and she had returned.

She strode slowly through the plain, trailing her forest behind, and smiled at Celestia. Celestia was still so stunned by the sight that she almost didn't realise the unicorn wasn't slowing to stop. The lavender mare instead walked on, brushing lightly against the feathers of Celestia's extended wing. That hint of a touch brought her back to reality, and she turned quickly to walk with the unicorn. She couldn't let this chance, this never before felt opportunity slip away, she couldn't!

And yet, she had to know. "Why?" she asked the unicorn. "Why are you here? Why did you return? What about the horizon? Everypony goes!" *'Please don't say you stayed for me,'* was her silent plea. *'Please don't say you sacrificed the horizon for me. There's a world out there, I know there is, please tell me you saw it! Please tell me I didn't steal it!'*

And though Celestia hadn't voiced her fears, the unicorn's expression showed she had heard them loud and clear. "But I did go, Celestia," she assured her, and the garden's keeper felt the vice loosen from around her heart. "I chased the horizon, and it lead me here. I'm looking for something, you see." She hopped forward a step, and a multitude of shrubs began to grow behind her. She regarded them somewhat sadly before looking up at Celestia, her eyes lost. "What do you see when you look at me?"

"I see a beautiful unicorn with heart and talent like no other," Celestia replied, her heart beating fast.

"Do you know what I see?" the lavender mare asked, looking back along her trail to the forest in their wake. "A pony with no flower of her own. I watched the other ponies, and I listened to your tales of ponies long passed, and I grew their flowers. But where's mine?"

"But what about your magnificent willow?"

"That was your sister's tree, not mine. All I did was remind her of it."

Celestia found herself at a loss for how to reply, but as the unicorn continued to walk on, she found her heart longing to follow. She glanced over at her sister in the distance, who was happily roaming the gardens with a veritable herd of ponies around her. The briars were gone, her sister was safe... Celestia had neither reason nor desire not to join the lavender mare.

"Shall I walk with you?" she asked, quickening her pace to catch up. "I know these plains well. We might find rich soil where your flower could grow."

The unicorn's face lit up in a smile, and she jumped in step beside Celestia. "That's just what I was hoping you'd say!" Celestia returned the smile, her heart fluttering as a new hope began to awaken inside her. Could this... could this finally be her chance to chase the horizon?

They set out together, side by side in search of good earth, but before long the unicorn sprinted a few paces ahead. Celestia picked up speed to follow, but when the unicorn shot her a teasing grin what started as a casual trot quickly became a full on gallop. They raced each other through the gardens, laughing like fillies all the while as they dashed ahead of one another, neither really trying to win. They darted between trees and leaped

over shrubs and bushes, calling out apologies to any pony they startled in their race but never slowing down for an instant.

A dense thicket of trees and whitethorn bushes suddenly appeared before them, blocking their way. The unicorn faltered, alarmed by their sudden appearance, no doubt apprehensive of the thorns. Celestia only grinned – they were nothing compared to the black briars, in fact they seemed positively friendly and protective in contrast! Her horn lit as she reached out with her power, and the thorns graciously parted to allow them to pass. Together, she and the unicorn broke through the thicket –

And the endless plain opened up to them once more, taking the unicorn's breath away. She quickly came to a stop, staring in wonder at the flat grasslands before her. "This is..."

"Unexplored ground..." Celestia finished for her by way of explanation. "That's right, you've lived your entire life in the garden, haven't you?"

She nodded. "When I went exploring with my friends, I saw bits and pieces of the plains, but nothing so vast! It goes on forever!"

Celestia grinned mischievously. "Let's test that theory," she said, right before galloping off, resuming the race. She laughed as the unicorn squawked indignantly at being left behind, and casually glanced back mid-run to see her pounding her legs against the springy grass in an effort to catch up. She wasn't trailed by flowers or trees anymore – clearly, the mare was only focused on finding her own flower right now, not spreading the growth of others.

Celestia's grin inched that much wider. It suited her just fine – it made things special, even. It was just the two of them and the open plain, no briars or chasms to hem them in and distract them anymore, no path of vegetation that others could follow and find them with. The wind caressed her mane with its cooling touch and carried the lavender mare's laughter to her ears, and Celestia felt free.

And when she wasn't looking... when neither of them really were, while they were savouring only the run through the plain and nothing else...

Something small blossomed between them.

Something so small that it almost went unnoticed. It was only the unicorn's sudden cry of joy that stopped Celestia from running past it completely.

She ground to a stop and turned to see her circling a spot in the earth excitedly, practically prancing with joy. “I-I did it!” she cried. “I found it! We found it! This is mine!”

“Oh?” Celestia trotted quickly over and leaned down beside where the mare was hopping about, quickly spotting the source of her joy - a tiny shoot with red leaves poking out of the thick carpet of grass.

Her unicorn finally settled down, resting beside Celestia. “What kind of plant do you think it’s going to be?” she asked, half-whispering.

“That’s up to you,” Celestia replied. She truthfully couldn’t tell. “Tend to it now, or it’ll wither.”

The unicorn nodded and closed her eyes. Her horn glowed, and the little red shoot responded, twitching and standing a little straighter. She cracked one eyelid open to sneak a peek at her progress, and giddily shut it once more, focusing her magic harder.

The little shoot began to grow, slowly but surely. Under the unicorn’s steady efforts and a few words of advice or guidance from Celestia, the shoot became a spindly sapling, which in turn grew into a slender tree adorned with red-leaves. It should have fascinated Celestia, but it didn’t. She couldn’t quite grasp the shape of the leaves nor the height of its branches nor the exact colour of its luscious fruit, growing plump and ripe. She couldn’t quite see the tree, but for a very simple reason. She was too occupied with watching the unicorn laugh and dance in joy, too busy smiling.

She was doing a lot of that lately – smiling. How could she not? Goodness, she felt so *free!*

“Yesyesyesyesyesyesyesyesyesyes!” The unicorn scampered around the trunk of the tree, frantically studying it as if it might disappear in an instant.

“Okay, so it’s clearly deciduous and flowering, it seems to bear fruit – fruit! Oh!” She turned to Celestia. “It’s grown fruit, do you see? How do we get it?” she asked, panting slightly from her exuberant display.

Celestia stood and smiled knowingly. “Like this!” she said suddenly, and in one swift movement she planted her forehooves in the ground, swung her body around and gave the trunk a sharp buck with her strong hind legs.



One single piece of fruit fell before the unicorn's hooves, who blinked and snapped out of the slight surprise Celestia's sudden action had left her in. She lay down on the grass and began to study the bright crimson fruit. Celestia lay down beside her, and the unicorn shifted in response, resting slightly against the white mare. "Tough outer husk..." she was muttering to herself, peering critically at her prize. "Is it ripe?"

"Only one way to find out," Celestia reminded her.

She nodded and, with a flash of magic, neatly bisected the crimson fruit. Carefully, she prodded the pink flesh inside. "I'm not sure it's fully ripe yet..." she said, her voice hesitant.

"Why not try it and see?" Celestia urged her.

The lavender mare looked longingly at the fruit, but pulled her gaze away. "You first," she said seriously, staring Celestia directly in the eye. "It has to be you."

The alicorn didn't protest. It made sense, in that moment. The fruit was the culmination of their journey together, so she understood how significant this was for the both of them. Celestia needed to be sure that the fruit the tree bore was palatable... no, sweet! Succulent! Wholesome! She needed to be sure it was perfect, her clever unicorn deserved no less!

She needed to be sure...

Tough husk shucked, half of the fruit was levitated before her. She carefully bit down on it and chewed slowly, savouring the flavour.

It was... ambrosia. It had to be. What else could taste so perfect, such a subtle blend of a thousand flavours and emotions? What else could match the way it made her heart flutter and her breath hitch, or how it blended velvety sweetness and sharp tartness and echoes of bitterness? The flavour almost overwhelmed her, but she knew she would crave more before long. She couldn't go back.

"Well? How is it?" the unicorn asked, her voice hopeful, yet almost pleading.

Celestia only smiled and nuzzled her tenderly. "Absolutely perfect, my love," she murmured. "Absolutely perfect."

The mare smiled and nuzzled Celestia below her jaw, resting her lavender head softly on her neck. "Good..." she whispered, and for a while, they simply sat in silence, relishing the tingles and sensations they felt merely by being in contact with one another.

So, resting below the swaying red leaves, they fed each other sliced fruit and watched the sunset, together.

~{C}~

# Chapter 4

As the moon approached the horizon, the land of Equestria waited in quiet anticipation for the dawn. Feeling the tug of the sun, Celestia woke.

Her first impulse was to rise and begin her morning ritual, but the sleepy haze that followed waking pressed down on her mind heavier than normal. Her muscles were sore and tired, and there was a warm little bundle pressing against her. She reflexively curled into it, relishing the snug warmth of her bed for a few moments more. The sun's call was distant; the dawn could wait a little longer.

Slowly, her mind began to connect the images flashing through her memory. Her first thoughts were of the grassy plain, of swaying red branches, and she struggled to hold onto them. Rarely had she ever experienced so vivid a dream, and she knew every last image was significant.

She remembered... she had dreamed of Twilight.

She had... Celestia's heart thudded hard against her ribs as her mind finally snapped to attention. *'Oh heavens... did I really say...?'*

Gradually, she became aware that the warmth she had curled herself around was another body. She remained still, perfectly still, as she carefully opened one eye and looked down into the purple mane of the pony sharing her bed.

"Twilight?" she murmured, confused. The unicorn made no response, still sound asleep.

Celestia made no movement to disturb Twilight's slumber. None whatsoever. Instead, she cast her mind back, trying to recall what had happened the previous day. Nothing came to mind – her memory was a blank void, only serving to stoke her slowly rising panic.

Whatever had occurred the previous day, whatever reason there was for Twilight to be sleeping in her embrace, Celestia couldn't remember.

However, she remembered the dream as clear as day. She remembered running free with that radiant unicorn, she remembered the luscious fruit springing from the red tree, the taste of...

Celestia looked back over at the sleeping mare beside her, still entwined between her forelegs. Her heart, sore in her chest, posed a question she couldn't rebel against, for even denying it would give away the truth.

*'Have I... fallen for her?'*

Instantly, she regretted the thought.

*'Stupid.'* It was a stupid thought, she told herself over and over, trying to take it back. *'Stupid, stupid, stupid. It can't be true!'*

She jolted in the bed, her instincts urging her to get away, but she quashed them down, closing her eyes and focusing on her breathing. Habit kicked in, and she quickly entered a state of meditative peace, mind and body relaxing.

*'Alright, be logical about this...'* she told herself. *'Dreams can mean many things. I didn't say 'I love you', I said 'my love'. That's not necessarily romantic, right? I have heard parents use it to address their children, after all.'* Celestia didn't particularly like the association, but was willing to accept it for the time being.

*'And the fruit. Fruit from a tree we both searched for. Clearly, that was referring to the research Twilight has been doing, that we both have been working on. Clearly.'* Yes, that seemed satisfying.

*'Of course, the fruit could also have been referring to...'* A lump rose in her throat and her gut tightened as she again fought the urge to flee. *'Don't panic!'* she reminded herself. *'Be rational! Investigate!'*

She breathed deeply through her nose, inhaling the scents of the room. She noted her own scent mingling with Twilight's, as well as a fading aroma of lavender and a hint of sweat. However, there no scents implying "exertion" lingering in the air, no trace of alcohol or food to imply anything special had occurred, and certainly no alluring fruit. Celestia released the breath with a feeling of relief – as far as she could tell, she and her protégé had merely shared a bed, nothing else.

She suddenly felt foolish for imagining otherwise, and that was quickly compounded by a wave of shame for reacting so badly.

She knew Twilight thought the world of her, that even after so long she still put so much weight in her mentor's opinion. If she had been awake to see Celestia's reaction, she would have been devastated. She would have thought Celestia found the idea of them together revolting, and from that might have then begun to think that *everypony* would find the idea of being with her revolting. Celestia knew Twilight like a second shadow – she was smart and sharp and perceptive, but if she got an idea inside her head, it'd run round and round and round until it ran circles around her and everypony else unfortunate enough to be in her vicinity, driving everything into the muck.

She had almost hurt her dear unicorn deeply, and for what reason? Because she was afraid she might be in love?

*'Why are you panicking?'* she asked herself, tightening her still unbroken hold on the unicorn. In her sleep, Twilight sighed in response, and Celestia found a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. *'This is not so terrible.'*

Softly, she placed a kiss on the top of Twilight's head. *'I'm sorry.'*

Dawn was coming soon – she could feel it. Carefully, so as not to wake Twilight, Celestia wriggled out from underneath the duvet. A jolt of pain in her side alarmed her, so she abandoned subtlety and snatched the covers in her mouth, casting them off the bed with one yank.

She looked over at her side and saw the wicked burn. Suddenly, the events of the previous evening all came flooding back to her – waking up in the hospital, panicking, finding Twilight, returning to the castle, her argument and offer to Luna...

Twilight, calling her by name and promising not to leave her...

And, unfortunately, the headache. She groaned, but it was much weaker now that she had gotten some rest.

She glanced out the balcony window to check the skyline and stiffened in shock as she spotted a dark figure waiting just beyond the glass doors. Luna was waiting there watching the horizon. Her mane glowed softly in

magical starlight and her body left a stark silhouette against the brightening sky of near dawn, making her already dark coat appear near-black in contrast.

For an instant, Celestia had seen – but she ignored that jolt of irrational trepidation, and softly walked out onto the balcony to join her sister. “Hello, Luna,” she said in a hushed voice, drawing close to the midnight-blue alicorn and nuzzling her cheek.

Luna leaned slightly into the touch, but otherwise didn’t react. “Good morning, sister,” she replied simply.

“Is it?” Celestia asked warmly. “I suppose that’s up to you.”

That got Luna’s attention. “You remembered...”

Celestia nodded. “Dawn is approaching. Are you ready?”

“I believe so. I have been reaching out to the sun for a little while now, trying to familiarize myself with it. Do you... have any advice for me?”

“For now, simply use a light touch and only give the sun a gentle push to maintain its momentum along the arc of the sky,” Celestia provided. “The sun *wants* to illuminate the world, so for this morning at least simply encourage it. You may have to adjust its orbit around noon, but it’s better to take it slow and learn how it moves before taking hold of it directly.”

“Just ‘let’ it spin around the planet?” Luna asked somewhat sceptically.

“For now,” Celestia replied reassuringly. “The sun is very different from the moon. The moon needs to be carefully and subtly guided, since it is closer to Equestria and has a direct affect on the land –”

“Through tides, gravitational stability and the psychological effect it has on ponies and other creatures,” the night princess finished. She smiled knowingly at her sister, before turning her mind to her moon’s solar counterpart. “So then, the sun’s greater distance from the planet means it need not be so strictly controlled?”

“That is what I’ve found, yes,” Celestia said. “Light, heat and magic are the most direct effects Equestria feels, but there are so many factors affecting them in their journey here that even if the orbit is a little off, nopony will notice anything beyond a slight change in temperature.”

"I see... simply cradle the sun..." Luna muttered half to herself. She straightened slightly, and looked to the horizon where the moon sat obediently, waiting to be put to sleep. "It's time."

Celestia could feel the sun call to her from far away. Her headache swelled slightly, discouraging her from answering its song. "Yes, it is."

Luna strode forward, her horn glowing with magic. Her wings extended, she bent her knees and bowed her head in a courteous gesture. The moon responded in kind, slipping smoothly down the horizon. The midnight-blue alicorn held her prone position for a moment longer, before crouching lower an inch and springing into the air. Celestia watched in approval as Luna beat her wings once, propelling herself higher as her forehooves reached out to the sky. Her horn surged with light and suddenly the night princess' form was framed by the light of the dawn as the sun answered her call.

Celestia watched the new dawn with mixed feelings: wonderment and pride in her sister's ability were foremost in her heart, but there was a vein of apprehension as well. Since the beginning of her duties, the sun was hers alone to guide. Up until this point, Celestia hadn't quite realised the full extent of what she had just relinquished for her sister's sake.

Luna turned in mid-air to look down at her sister, hesitantly gauging her reaction. Celestia smiled, partly proud, partly understanding. *'It seems neither of us fully grasped the significance of this moment until now. If she can guide the sun just as I can guide the moon... then our dualism is rendered somewhat moot, isn't it?'*

The night princess' hooves clattered on the stone balcony as she descended back down beside Celestia. "I... I did it," Luna said breathlessly, staring into the pale dawn sky. "It listened to me..."

"Well done," Celestia praised. "How do you feel?"

"I... a bit drained," she admitted, tearing her eyes from the rising sun to look at her sister. "The sun really is quite different, even if the fundamentals are the same."

She was silent for a moment, before looking at Celestia with an unwavering gaze. "This changes matters, doesn't it? Last night, I was only concerned with proving myself to our subjects, but now..."

"The night shall always be yours, dear sister, even if I needed to borrow it for a time," Celestia replied reassuringly. "This is the same. You shall still be the princess of the night, and I of the day. It'll just be a little less literal from now on."

"And to that, you have no objections?" Luna asked carefully.

Celestia looked out at the dawn as she considered the question. "No. There's no reason to object to it," she said softly. "This may well be a natural evolution of our roles. After all, our cutie marks represent far more than bringing forth sun and moon, do they not?" She smiled knowingly at her sister, whose hesitant expression warmed slightly in response.

Luna's mouth opened a fraction and for a moment she seemed to want to speak, but evidently thought better of it. Instead, she looked back out onto the dawn, as if to assure her it existed. "What is your plan for the day?" Celestia asked, breaking the silence.

"Well, I..." Luna paused, visibly stifling a yawn. "Excuse me. I believe sleep would be most prudent. I admit, I haven't slept in some time, and the dawn has taken quite a bit out of me."

"I should do the same," Celestia said. She tilted her head slightly as she tried to recall if Twilight had mentioned anything about her concussion. "Apparently, if I get enough bed rest, my headache will be cured?"

"So Ramheart says," Luna confirmed with a nod. "He also advised that somepony monitor you, which is why I nominated Twilight. I didn't expect her to monitor you so closely, however..."

"What?" Celestia's brow furrowed in confusion, but when her sister glanced over at the bedroom door, she realised it was an implication. She shook her head lightly, embarrassed. "Oh, that wasn't what it seemed."

Luna's lips quirked up into a slight smirk. "Oh, so she *wasn't* monitoring you? How scandalous..."

Celestia's features began to grow flushed. "Luna!"

"What?" she asked innocently.

"You make it sound so..." Celestia trailed off, leaving the words hanging in the air.



Luna hummed contemplatively. "So then, why was she sleeping in your bed?"

The white alicorn stopped herself from rolling her eyes mid-roll and found herself up looking up at the sky. "Is there a reason why two friends cannot share a bed now and again?"

"Is there a reason why you're dodging the question?" her sister pressed.

"Of course not," Celestia replied flatly, knowing she was cornered. Her ear flicked as she took a moment to organise her thoughts before explaining. "I've just... been sleeping poorly lately. I've also been disorientated upon waking thanks to this concussion. I had a very bad shock as a result when I woke in the hospital and didn't care to repeat it. So I asked her to stay with me a while."

Luna's ears drooped slightly. "You could have asked me..."

"I..." Celestia froze momentarily. "I could have," she agreed. "But we had just had a fight, and we both needed some space. I only began to fret about it after Twilight had come to check up on me."

"You still should have told me about your sleeping problem," the younger alicorn said sadly. "At the very least, I could have eased your nightmares..."

Celestia bowed her head sadly. "I'm sorry, I hadn't realised..." She paused, looking back at Luna with a surprised expression. "You knew I was having nightmares? For how long?"

"I checked up on you not an hour ago, and it was written across your expression," replied Luna, though she cocked her head and gazed intently at her sister. "Only now, I gather that you've been having them for some time?"

Caught out, Celestia hesitated in her reply, and Luna's disappointed face told her that the night princess now knew everything she needed to know.

Well, almost everything. "The nightmares are of Discord, aren't they?" Luna asked sadly. "Oh Celestia..."

Celestia felt her gut twist. Here was the perfect opportunity to end this without hurting Luna, to let her believe the chaotic draconequus was behind everything, the perfect scapegoat.

"Luna, I –" But how could she say yes, to confirm Luna's incorrect suspicions? It would be just what that fiend Discord would want, an utter lack of Harmony between them. Luna was her equal! Hiding things from her would debase the love they felt for one another, and Celestia knew that despite what she wanted, the truth would come out eventually. What would hurt Luna today would shatter her tomorrow.

Her throat was a vice-grip. "It's not Discord, sister."

Her sister frowned. "T-then..."

Now was the time to come clean. "I..." And in the moment of truth, Celestia wavered. "I dreamed of thorns, Luna," she said. A technical truth, yes, but deceptive and dishonest. Hardly a truth at all. "Thorns everywhere. But tonight I found a way out of them." She turned her head away, looking back out at the sunrise. "We'll talk about this later, when I am healed."

Luna nodded lightly, and that was that. She had swallowed a small lie holding a genuine promise for the truth. Celestia hated indulging in the deception Luna's assumptions had offered, but she wasn't ready to air out her demons, not yet.

"So, did the dream end happily at least?" asked the darker alicorn.

"Yes, it did," replied Celestia. "It was all very different than usual." A realization occurred to her, and she smiled gratefully at the midnight-blue mare. "I take it I have you to thank for the dream?"

Luna puffed up slightly, proud. "You are quite welcome. It was an old charm I am adept at, meant to grant sweet dreams."

"So you..." It was like a coil suddenly unwound in her chest, all the tension she had felt upon waking beside Twilight vanishing. It had just been a spell! It wasn't her mind trying to tell her she was falling for somepony, it had just been a spell trying to give her a sweet image to savour.

More than that, Celestia felt her heart swell with the realisation that her terrible reoccurring nightmare had been overturned by her sister's kindness. She had dreamed of freeing Luna from the thorns, but it had really been the other way around all along, hadn't it? She didn't deserve Luna as a sister. The elder alicorn found herself laughing softly, and, on

seeing Luna's curious look, she simply smiled. "I think that dream might have been just what I needed."

Luna smiled back, pleased. "If you don't mind my asking, what was it you dreamed of? After the thorns, I mean."

Celestia thought about it a moment. The vast empty plain, filled with life by the ponies who passed through it. "I dreamed of Equestria," the princess replied.

"Of course you did," Luna said with a chuckle. "And... I suppose you dreamed of Twilight as well?" Her smile was just short of sly.

"Yes, we - " *'We ate fruit below a tree I've never seen before, and when she offered me a taste I...'* Except that was just part of the spell, Celestia firmly reminded herself. She coughed, and continued speaking. "We were growing plants. Oh, and running through a wide grassland. Oh, but it wasn't just Twilight, you were there too."

Luna balked slightly. "Not at the same time, I hope."

"Not really, no," she shook her head carefully, Luna's reaction giving her a slightly foreboding sensation. "Why would that matter?" A thought occurred to her, and she narrowed her eyes playfully. "Aha... did you have something to do with what I saw?"

"Pardon?" Luna frowned.

"It was your spell," Celestia pointed out. "Were you teasing me, perhaps?"

The dark alicorn blinked, hesitating as she almost visibly grappled with an explanation. "You are not overly familiar with dream magic, are you?" she hazarded.

It wasn't the response she had been looking for, and Celestia hesitated for a moment. "I'm afraid those spells are almost entirely beyond me," she confessed. She glanced back at her flank to contemplate the sun cutie mark emblazoned upon it. "After all, the day is the time to act out dreams, not contemplate them." *'With the exception of daydreams and meditation, of course'*, she added mentally. *'And possibly mirages, but those are mostly illusion and misdirection.'* Celestia might not be able to guide dreams but she could still craft illusions with the best of them.

Her sister's voice snapped her from her thoughts. "Now, now," she said, mistaking Celestia's silence for melancholy. "The moon merely reflects the sun's glow. Not only that, you also guided the moon admirably for over a thousand years."

"Which is why I said *almost*," Celestia said, allowing herself a moment to grin proudly. "But dreams are more than the night, the moon's influence is more than acting as the sun's reflection, and —" She paused, catching Luna's amused look. "And I suppose you're the last pony I should lecture to about the moon's magical significance," she finished somewhat sheepishly.

Luna nodded. "Quite." They then both broke out into quiet giggles. "Well, at any rate, you should probably ask Twilight to find you a book on dream magic."

"I'll do that," Celestia agreed.

"As for me, I'm going to rest." Luna stepped forward and hugged her sister tight.

"There's probably going to be a lot of hubbub in the court today," Celestia murmured into the hug. As they separated, she smiled reassuringly. "I know you'll be able to handle it, but if you need anything, even just an official statement, you'll know where to find me."

Luna nodded in understanding. "And you!" she said firmly, but with a grin that amused Celestia. "Make sure to rest well, listen to the doctors and behave yourself!"

Celestia let out a mock-sigh. "Very well! If the princess insists, what place does an invalid like me have in contradicting her?"

"Hmm, so she can be taught..." Luna said with a grin, earning a rise of an eyebrow from her sister. Luna took no heed, instead spreading her wings and hopping onto the balcony. Celestia stood beside her as they gazed for one last moment out at Luna's dawn, before the younger turned her head to the other and smiled. "I'll see you later," she said. Celestia nodded, and with a beat of dark wings Luna was gone.

Watching her sister soar into the dawn-lit sky, Celestia let out a deep sigh of relief, smiling at her silhouette. It was good to see Luna happy, especially in the wake of their argument the previous night. *'And her dream*

*spell helped to ease the nightmare as well. Perhaps they will fade in time...*' Celestia couldn't help but hope. She was tired of extravagant shows of trust that only made her feel guilty for their necessity, but it was a new day, with new opportunities to fix these broken little issues.

Still smiling to herself, Celestia made her way back into her room. Twilight was still fast asleep; bless her, obviously exhausted from the previous day's trying events. The image of the dream Twilight surfaced in the princess' mind, but she dismissed it easily now that her head was clear. Carefully, so as not to wake her, Celestia eased herself back into the bed, once more finding her favourite cozy spot in the centre of the bed.

However, since Celestia's momentary departure from the bed, Twilight had moved in her sleep, turning over and occupying a sizable portion of her favoured spot. Celestia mulled it over in her mind. On the one hoof, this was a problem; her favourite spot was occupied. On the other hoof, it was no problem at all; it was occupied by Twilight, and she was more than welcome to share it. Free cuddles was one bargain Celestia never seemed to find offered to her often enough, so she snuggled in beside her student without deliberating any further.

As quickly as they had closed, Celestia's eyes snapped open. *'Oh, I almost forgot about Spike. The poor dear is still alone.'* Which meant, of course... her eyes wandered to the deep purple mane occupying most of her vision. Celestia wished she could have let Twilight continue to sleep. She was such a sweet thing, taking care of her so diligently. But Spike needed to be taken care of too, and Twilight had promised to leave at dawn to check up on him. Celestia felt a bout of weariness and longing. *'When was the last time I simply slept in bed and cuddled with somepony?'* she mused internally, almost melancholic.

But, noblesse oblige.

She nudged Twilight softly. The lavender mare turned over in her sleep and, now facing Celestia, mumbled something incoherent. Celestia suppressed a snort of amusement. *'Adorable, but not my intention.'*

Celestia lightly poked the unicorn in her belly with a white hoof. *That* got a reaction, with Twilight squirming under the touch. "Ugh- huh?" she grunted in protest, her eyes opening

"Good morning, Twilight." Celestia smiled warmly down at her.

The unicorn blinked, her eyelids drooping as she emerged from the haze of sleep. "Hello Celestia..." she murmured, smiling absently up at the alicorn.

"You seem to have slept well," Celestia said, suppressing a light giggle. "Did you have sweet dreams?"

"Hmm, maybe..." Twilight replied drowsily. She closed her eyes and, with a contented sigh, snuggled closer to Celestia.

"Twilight," the alicorn teased in a sing-song tone. "Are you still dreaming?"

The unicorn smiled. "I must be..." she murmured.

Celestia chuckled. "No, really Twilight, you need to get up. You promised."

For half a second, Twilight went utterly still, before her eyes shot open. She looked up at Celestia's face hovering above hers, and the princess could practically see the wheels in her mind turning as they struggled for traction. Finally, the pieces came together for her, and Twilight jolted upright with a yelp. "I-I didn't just-?" she stammered, before covering her face with her hooves. "Oh dear."

"Good morning to you too, Twilight," Celestia said, amused by her reaction.

"I, um, good morning Celes- um, Princess. H-how did you sleep?"

"Back to titles?" Celestia asked in a disappointed voice. She was teasing Twilight and they both knew it, but the alicorn found herself surprised by how genuine the disappointment really was. Acting on that feeling, her teasing grin returned. "You know, if you slip up now and again and simply call me Celestia, I won't correct you."

Twilight's jaw hung slack for a moment, before it was claimed by a bashful grin she tried to hide with a hoof. She mumbled something beneath her breath.

Celestia's ear flicked deliberately. "I apologise, you'll have to speak up."

Twilight squirmed, embarrassed, and the alicorn marvelled at how red her protégé's face was getting. Heavens forgive her, but Celestia couldn't help it, the need to tease her was stronger than the call of the sun each morning. A panicking Twilight was adorable when she wasn't inciting riots over stuffed animals.

“As for your question, I slept quite well,” she informed the unicorn with an even expression. “Even though *somepony* occupied my favourite spot in the bed.” She punctuated her remark with a light tap of her hoof against Twilight’s side.

Celestia could almost see the wires fry in the lavender mare’s brain. “Oh, I’m so sorry!” She hopped aside instantly and, horn glowing, went about fluffing up pillows and straightening the duvet. As the unicorn half-danced around in a mad panic, Celestia crawled back into the spot Twilight had been resting in. It was still warm, and she found no trouble with getting cozy once more, even with the skittish unicorn flitting about the bed.

It suddenly dawned on Celestia that Twilight was flustered about waking up beside her – that is, she was panicking about the very same notion Celestia herself had panicked about not a half-hour before. Realising she was being rather unfair to the poor mare, she spoke up. “Twilight.” Celestia smiled, and the panicking unicorn froze. “I’m only teasing you.” She leaned in and nuzzled the side of her head, feeling the unicorn tangibly relax and lean into the touch. “Thank you for staying with me, I appreciated it very much.”

Twilight turned and slid her neck around Celestia’s, moving into a tight hug. “Y-you’re welcome, Celestia. I... I just want to make things up to you.”

“For what, the accident?” Celestia asked. She felt Twilight nod against her shoulder. ‘*Ever responsible...*’ the princess mused. If she was to relieve her of this irrational guilt, mere reassurances wouldn’t do. Twilight would have to see with her own eyes and come to her own conclusions about matters. “All right then. Later on today contact the rest of the team working on the experiment and start investigating what went wrong.”

Twilight pulled away and nodded. “Okay. We should figure out something. After all, we managed to preserve most of the data before evacuating.”

“And you’re sure nopony else was hurt?”

The unicorn nodded again. “I’m sure, we were just... shaken. We had just made it out of the building, and I was expecting you to follow, but...” She frowned, a stricken expression descending over her face. “Celestia, I just don’t understand how it created an explosion that big – it blew half the roof off of the facility! And you were in the middle of it...”

"It's a pity I can't remember what happened," the princess sighed, frustration at her headache rising slightly. "At the very least, I'd be able to tell you what happened in the lead up to it all." Celestia rested her chin atop her hoof. "Hmm... you said my amnesia was only temporary?"

Twilight went still for a fraction of a second. "Y...yes... it should. I'll read up a bit on it?" she offered. Her eyes scanned over Celestia, from her bandaged brow to her burn, already fading from sore red to a soft and healthy pink. "Um, how *are* you feeling?"

"Better. Certainly a lot better," she said. "I think I'll wait for Doctor Ramheart's opinion before I say anything else though."

Twilight nodded absently, her eyes moving over Celestia. A silence hung over them, a comfortable blanket of idle peace the princess was loath to cast off. But, ever-mindful of pressing concerns, Celestia cast it off anyway, prodding Twilight lightly in the side with her forehoof. "You should go check up on Spike," she reminded her. Twilight nodded and hopped off the bed without argument.

Celestia brushed a lock of her mane out of her eyes. "Something wrong, Twilight?" she asked, noticing the unicorn had paused again, staring at her. "I'm fine now, really, you needn't worry," she assured her.

Twilight rapidly shook her head, a rising blush spreading from her cheeks. "Oh! No, no, it's okay, I'll just... uh... I, um, yeah." She coughed in her hoof, unsuccessfully hiding a mortified expression. She turned and made her way to the door of the chambers, still looking at Celestia from over her shoulder. "Gonna check up on Spike now!" she said, finally looking at where she was going in order to open the doors to the chamber. She lingered by the door for a moment, before looking back and flashing Celestia a quick smile.

She was gone before the alicorn had the chance to return it.

~{C}~

Twilight practically skipped down the halls of the castle – how could she not? It was a bright new day, the birds were singing in the gardens, the world was full of endless possibilities and she absolutely, most certainly was not in love with Celestia.



The unicorn stumbled mid-step and barely caught herself from winding up sprawled on the ground. A nearby guard gave her a concerned look. "Are you alright miss?"

Twilight rigidly turned her head and forced a smile. "Perfectly alright, thanks."

She continued on her way at a more controlled pace afterward, growling at herself. '*Get yourself together, Twilight!*' She hoped she could at least make it back to her chambers before she made a fool of herself in front of somepony again.

Fortunately, her room wasn't too far a journey, and her good humour had returned by the time she reached it. She opened the double doors with a push of magic and strode inside. "Good morning Spike!" she practically sang.

The baby dragon in question just groaned from his basket at the foot of Twilight's bed. Celestia had offered him a bed of his own, but he claimed to be unable to sleep without the same arrangements he and Twilight had in Ponyville. The princess had met him half-way with a luxury-sized basket, in which he was now burrowing deeper into in order to escape the unicorn who had *far* too much cheer for so early in the morning.

Twilight merely grinned and flopped on her bed, heart racing. '*Okay, come on girl, get back together,*' she told herself. '*It was just a sleepover at the most.*' There was no need for her mind to drift off, to bask in the memory and sensation of being nestled into the alicorn's side, of watching her sleep, so unguarded, in the night and of her lidded, loving eyes meant only for her in the morning... '*And she wants me to call her by name...*' Twilight giggled softly, having soundly lost her mental battle against her desires.

But how could she have ever won in the first place? It was too much for her to take. Even the slightest reminder of Celestia seemed enough to split her in two. Turning over in her bed, lost in thoughts of her mentor, Twilight's hoof nudged one of her pillows. It was fluffy and cloud-white, so she snatched it up immediately with a touch of magic and brought it within her grip. She clutched it tightly and nuzzled it, thoughts of Celestia running uncontrollably through her mind.

'*Oh heavens, she's so beautiful... oh... and she held me...*' In her mind's eye, Twilight could practically see Celestia's face, practically feel Celestia's

forelegs around her once more. She *had* felt them, it had been real, it had to be.

Absently, Twilight noted with disappointment that the pillow was a poor substitute for her radiant princess. All it had was the colour of her coat, nothing else. It had none of her warmth, none of her reassuring firmness. The fine silk of the pillowcase was a burlap sack compared to her texture, her white coat of fine hair and soft wings of sleek feathers. For a split second Twilight imagined what her horn might feel like – probably ivory – before she blushed deeper and pushed the guilty thought aside, instead burying her face deeper into her poor-mare substitute for Celestia. *'It's not the same... it's just not the same as being there...'* the unicorn bemoaned internally. *'Oh, why did I panic? Why didn't I just stay there a little longer?'*

The guilt began to creep in on her euphoria, and she ducked her head between her forearms in an attempt to escape. *'I shouldn't be having these thoughts,'* she said to herself admonishingly. *'I shouldn't. But if I close my eyes, I can almost feel her... I can almost catch her scent...'* She sighed breathily, before halting her laments as she caught a trace of something on the air.

Twilight raised her nose and began to test the air. She hadn't imagined it – she *had* caught a faint trace of her mentor's scent, the same reassuring spice and sandalwood blend, though faded, giving way to something much more naturally equine. Twilight sniffed at the pillow and her sheets, wondering what Celestia had been doing in these chambers, until the bit dropped.

It was Twilight herself. She had spent the night acting out an impossible dream, and yet mingled with her own scent was invisible evidence of last night's reality, caressed into her very skin.

With that realisation, Twilight's already frazzled, overheated mind approached the consistency of boiling applesauce. Her heart thundered against her ribs at a furious staccato beat, her forelegs became a vice around her pillow. The same scent that set her off before, that made her overcompensate Celestia's illusion, that scent which nearly gave her away completely... *'And it's all over me. It's mingling with my own, it's... oh!'*

Twilight was lost again, deeper than ever. She tossed and turned in her bed, rocking back and forth with her pillow in her grip, revelling in Celestia's

scent, revelling in her memories and her fantasies. Thoughts of Celestia, hovering over her, nuzzling her, whispering, promising...

"Twilight? What're you doing?"

Twilight was snapped unceremoniously from her fantasies by a bleary-eyed Spike, looking at her from the foot of her bed. Her already blushing face deepened to a near-red as she stumbled through dawning comprehension of what had just occurred. "I... wha—?"

"You've been giggling to yourself and rolling around for ten minutes," he told her. "It's getting creepy."

"S-sorry, Spike, I..." She cleared her throat and sat up self-consciously. "Sorry."

The greatest, most awkward of silences prevailed, lord and master of the air between the two. Glancing over at the door of their en suite bathroom, Twilight finally ended its reign of tyranny with a simple, "I'm going to go take a bath."

"Uh, okay..." Spike replied, scratching the back of his head with his claws self-consciously.

With all the calmness and composure she could muster, Twilight hopped off the bed, trotted past the baby dragon and into the bathroom, set the water running into the marble bath, added some salts and bubblebath to the mix and, gritting her teeth hard, leaped inside.

*Freezing!*

Twilight stifled a shriek as she plunged into the ice cold water. '*Why did I think this was a good idea!?*' Her jaw, still tightly shut, began to flex, trying to clatter as the cold sent pangs through her body. Quickly, she reached out with her magic and turned the hot faucet on.

She had never really needed a cold shower before, but in certain fiction books she had perused the concept had been presented as a means of focus on cleaner thoughts. She regretted not investigating further and assuming a cold bath was an equitable alternative – clearly, the "system shock" was what was desired, and while she had certainly attained that with the bath, she had also been left sitting up to her withers in freezing

cold water. *'Perhaps I should investigate this further for future reference?'* Twilight contemplated, stirring the water with a levitated scrub-brush in order to better spread the hot water now pouring into the tub. *'No,'* she decided. *'No, this doesn't warrant any further research. This is stupid. This whole thing is stupid.'*

Her mind clear now, she quickly grew more and more annoyed with herself. She was acting like a little filly with a schoolyard crush – but that was the root of the problem, wasn't it?

Yet, unbidden, her heart continued to call up that image of Celestia, not the one she had seen in her eyes for all her life, the icon of perfection, but of the Celestia she had woken up beside – her coat singed, her feathers blackened, her head bandaged, and yet somehow more beautiful than she had ever seen. A Celestia close enough to touch, to –

*'Stop it.'* Twilight frowned, sinking to her chin in the water.

*But she looked at you,* that part of her argued, *and you know it was different. There had to be something there.*

*'Enough. That's just hormones talking.'*

*You love her.*

*'I do, but not in that way. Yesterday was stressful, and the psychological shock and endorphins have simply... kicked up a few things better left buried. Enough is enough.'*

*You can't deny what your heart feels. Mind and body work as one. You know, logically and emotionally, that you are not some cold, calculating machine. You can't deny your feelings, you can't put them in a box and hide it under your bed.*

*'I'm not denying how I feel. But I can let it run its course. I can let it go. This isn't how I want to feel... this much is enough, so just let it go.'*

Her heart was silent to that, conceding the round to her head, but Twilight knew neither was fully satisfied. Ignoring it, she focused on her bath, shutting off the hot faucet now that the temperature was acceptable. She scrubbed extra hard, cleaning off every last scrap of ash still clinging to her

body and making doubly sure her coat smelled of nothing but her favourite lavender soap.

Emerging quickly from the bath, she dried herself off with a quick, precise blast of a wind spell, before marching back into her room and plopping down in front of her dressing table. Three Twilights looked back at her from the expensive vanity mirror, but she refused to meet their gaze until her mane was thoroughly brushed and even. ‘*Should my highlight go on the left or the right side of my horn?*’ she debated briefly, before shrugging and leaving it as it always was.

Finally, she looked, really *looked* at her reflection. She saw those three Twilight Sparkles looking confidently back at her, and felt equine again.

“Alright, Spike!” she announced brightly. “We’ve got a lot to do today. Are you ready?”

Spike, already determined to resume his dozing, merely grunted in reply.

She turned and looked at him disapprovingly. “Spike, come on, it’s time to get up.”

“What time is it, even?” the dragon groaned from his basket.

Twilight glanced at the clock. “It’s a quarter to seven.”

Spike moaned and pulled his blankets over his head. “Why do I have to get up so early?”

“Because I need to take care of Celestia today, but neither of us want you to have to wake up in the castle alone,” she replied earnestly.

Spike’s muffled voice rose from the blankets. “I was up all night yesterday. Trust me, I’ve got no plans to wake up at *all* today.”

Twilight opened her mouth to protest, but then paused to consider it. Spike did know the castle well, and he *had* been up far later than his usual bedtime... “Alright, how about a compromise?” she offered him.

A sleepy yet curious green eye peered up at her from a gap in his blankets. “Yeah?”

“You come down to the kitchens with me and we’ll get some breakfast,” she said. “Then, you can nap the day away, okay?”

The blankets twitched, and the baby dragon emerged from their folds. “Alright, you make a convincing argument,” he said, stretching his tired limbs.

“Great!” Twilight smiled and levitated him onto her back, where he quickly found the usual spot. His spines dug slightly into her coat for grip, a little deeper than she had gotten used to over the years. It had been that way for a few months, and coupled with a little weight gain, Twilight was forced to admit it – he was growing up. Properly, this time. “Could you just do one teensy favour for me?” she asked him.

Spike flourished a quill and parchment, already prepared. “Checklist?” he asked with a grin.

Twilight chuckled with the dragon. “And that’s why you’re my number one assistant,” she said appreciatively as they walked out into the castle hallways. “Alright then, checklist for today. Item one –”

“What, no need for extra ink?”

“Ha ha. No, this is a short list.” Twilight rolled her eyes – she was never going to live that down. “Anyway, item one: take care of Celestia. Mark that high priority and importance, Spike.”

“Gotcha.” The scritch-scratch of the quill on parchment drifted in her ear. She didn’t even have to turn to check if his clawwriting was legible – Spike had long ago mastered the art of transcription on horseback.

“Item two: speak with fellow researchers. We need to figure out what happened with that explosion to see if we’ve got any hope of salvaging my research.” Her ears perked up. “Who knows, if the data looked promising and we resolve the source of the catastrophe, we might even be able to repeat it successfully!”

“Too bad about the princess’ amnesia, huh?” Spike asked. “She would’ve been able to tell us exactly what happened, wouldn’t she?”

Twilight’s pace slowed for a moment as she went somewhat silent, but her assistant’s voice snapped her out of the daze. “Uh, Twilight?”

“Hm? I... yes, you’re right Spike. Princess Celestia was saying the same thing earlier.” Twilight bit her lip. *‘If she remembers, then...’* “Spike, item three: Find some medical books in the library on post-traumatic amnesia.”

“Good call.”

“Thank you, Spike,” Twilight replied primly. “And finally, item four: Speak with Princess Luna.”

“Huh?” Spike’s brow raised in confusion.

“She seemed upset last night,” she explained. “I want to make sure she’s okay.”

Her stomach grumbled. “Oops.” She chuckled, embarrassed. “Item five: hurry up and get to the kitchen!”

Spike jotted that note down with gusto. “I like the sound of that!”

Picking her pace up to a light canter, she quickly made her way through the castle’s wide corridors until she arrived at the minor hall which served as the crossroads between the true dining hall and the palace kitchen. Debating briefly on where to go, she spotted an earth pony mare in a black blouse and an apron emerge from the kitchen route.

“Um, excuse me?” she called to the servant. The mauve earth pony maid looked over at her, and a flash of recognition in her eyes showed she knew who Twilight was.

“Ah, Miss Sparkle, good morning,” she greeted pleasantly. “I take it you’re here for breakfast?”

“Yes, actually.” Twilight nodded. “Princess Celestia is going to be resting today, so we were hoping something could be sent up to her?”

“Of course, of course. It’s just...” The maid paused. “Let me get the steward,” she said with a smile.

Twilight watched with a slight note of confusion as the maid trotted over to the doors of the dining hall, briskly tapping her hoof against it. The doors opened under a green glow of magic and a teal unicorn emerged. After the two quickly traded a few whispered words, the unicorn nodded in

understanding and approached Twilight, smiling pleasantly. “Good morning, Miss Sparkle.”

“Good morning. Is...” Twilight paused. “Is something the matter?”

“Not at all; in fact, it’s fortunate you’re here,” the steward replied. “We have a slight surplus in food this morning, you see, and we fear it is rather perishable. Tell me, do you think the Princess would object to a more simple breakfast than usual?”

“I can’t say that she would, but why...?” Twilight began, before the unicorn’s horn glowed. The double doors leading to the main dining hall opened wide under the steward’s push of magic, revealing to Twilight the exact nature of the ‘*foodstuff surplus*’.

Spike’s jaw dropped. “Are these all for...?”

“The princess, yes,” the steward said with a nod.

“Oh...” the lavender mare murmured in dawning comprehension. Grinning, she turned to the steward. “I don’t think this will be a problem at all.”

~{C}~

After Twilight left, Celestia had tried to get a spot more rest. She found, however, that a strange frustration held her efforts at bay. She idly observed the emotion through the corner of her mind’s eye, trying to identify its source. It didn’t elude her for long – she was sweaty, and her skin felt almost slimy against the sheets. ‘*When was the last time I had a bath?*’ she wondered. She realised it had to have been before the accident, which meant... her expression twisted in distaste – she had slept all night marinating in soot!

She rose from her bed, pushing the duvet off and looking down at where she had slept. A streaky circle of grey marked her spot, standing in stark contrast to the pure white of the rest of the silk sheet. ‘*I hope that can be cleaned...*’ she thought ruefully, thinking of the unfortunate servant who would be stuck with the duty of bleaching it out.

She walked out of her bedroom and into her adjacent washroom with the intention of freshening up – she didn’t want to spend the time between now



and her next bath feeling like she was wallowing in sweaty grime, and besides, what would her servants think to see her like that?

She filled a clay bowl with warm water from a silver faucet and gingerly lifted it with her teeth. While scanning the room for a suitable place to sit for the unusual task, her attention was drawn to the mirror that dominated the blank wall. Her reflection was obscured by a thin silk veil, transforming her reflection into a pink dapple against the orange and red of the fabric screen. It was a curious effect, which is why she had it installed in the first place, but instead of admiring it she found herself dreading what lay beyond.

*'Well, nothing else for it but to look,'* she figured, trotting purposefully towards it.

Setting the bowl of warm water on the ground, she reached forward, tugged the silk away from the face of the mirror, and was struck by the sight of herself, for the first time since the accident.

It wasn't the burn stretching across the right of her body that stunned her into silence, nor was it the bandages wrapped around her head in place of her crown. She had expected those. What she hadn't expected was how *grey* she looked.

*'Goodness, I look like Discord got a hold of me,'* she thought, her mouth twisting in distaste at the morbid thought.

To anypony else, she was sure her coat would *seem* white, but the streaks of grey where ash still clung to her hair and was rubbed into her skin were plain as day to her eyes. Noting the splotchiness of the stains, it occurred to her that somepony had attempted to clean her up after the accident. Probably a unicorn, considering she only had a few pegasus attendants. She extended her wings to check, and concluded that whoever had washed her most certainly was not a pegasus – the ash and soot was much more pronounced in her wings, entrenched between her feathers too deep for a mere wipe of a washcloth to reach. Wingless ponies just didn't understand how to maintain wings.

There was no way a simple freshening up would be enough to restore her complexion to her normally pristine sheen. A bath, as soon as possible, was paramount.

She scrubbed her face and neck until they were free of all soot, then let the washcloth fall into the water. Gripping it with her teeth, she carefully lifted the now redundant bowl and dropped it back into the sink, then left the washroom, contemplating her options. Though what she really wanted was a good, hot bath – and perhaps a massage – there was one thing she could do to clean up and relax.

Back in her room, she tugged the door to her closet open with her teeth. Mercifully, it glided open without even the faintest of whispers. Thanking the diligence of her servants for keeping it well-oiled, she walked in and quickly spotted her quarry – a full-length mirror mounted on a wheeled frame, normally reserved for use when she was being fitted for ball gowns. ‘*This will do nicely,*’ she thought, pleased, as she rolled it towards her bed.

Celestia perched herself at the end of the bed and snatched a few cushions for support with a nudge of magic. Her headache protested weakly, but it was nothing she couldn’t simply ignore. With one eye on her reflection in the mirror to guide her muzzle, Celestia reared her head back and began to preen her wings.

The act of preening was extremely relaxing for a pegasus, and Celestia was no exception. At the base of the primaries in particular were clusters of nerve endings enabling a pony to instinctively sense shifts in wind direction, humidity, temperature, and all sorts of other minute details mid-flight. Of course, like all things, some were naturally better at using this enhanced sense of touch than others. Some even trained themselves at it in order to improve their instincts, becoming weather-ponies or racers. Celestia knew she had particular skill in sensing shifts in the weather, but couldn’t claim any great innate talent. Centuries of practice and hard work were what had honed her skills with that sense, particularly when it came to humidity and temperature – creating the perfect summer’s day wasn’t a matter of simply raising the sun and hoping for the best, after all.

Preening stimulated those nerves as part-massage, part-acupuncture, relaxing the body, loosening joints and ligaments and triggering endorphins to keep the muscles limber. Rather than use her teeth, which would run the risk of outright plucking healthy feathers, Celestia carefully clamped down on each individual feather with her lips and tested it with a light tug. Several of the burnt ones came out without protest, carrying with them a disconcerting sensation, comparable to what the Earth must feel when a carrot is plucked from its soil. ‘*I’m moulting...*’ she realised as she

continued to preen. *'It must be because I'm healing. These feathers will replace themselves soon.'*

There was a musical call in the air accompanied by a rustle of wings belonging to another, and a hot bundle of feathers and claws alighted on her back. In the mirror, Celestia could see Philomena perched atop her white frame, eyeing her with curiosity. "Why good morning, my dear Philomena," she said with a bright smile.

Philomena cried out in greeting, cocking her head at her master, who chuckled. "Yes, yes, I am aware my wings are positively filthy."

Philomena warbled in disagreement, nuzzling Celestia's dirty feathers. Celestia's smile shifted into one of appreciation. "Hmm, of course," she chuckled. "I should have known you wouldn't have a problem with a touch of ash between the feathers."

The phoenix crowed again, and Celestia laughed. "Oh, you think it's a good look for me?" She studied her reflection again. Stretching her wings wide in a display of intimidation, she leered at the scuffed alicorn before her and tried to imagine a warrior. "Hmm, no," she chuckled, and her reflection turned softer once more. "These are not turbulent times, it's more appropriate to be clean. Why, we even have running water now!"

Philomena crowed wearily. "Oh shush, let me indulge myself," she said, returning her attention to her wings.

After a few more burnt feathers had been plucked, she noticed her phoenix was still studying her.

"Are you taking notes?" she asked, fixing her with a playful glare. "If you preened yourself more often, your rejuvenation would go along much faster."

Philomena scoffed and began to scratch under her wing with her beak, clearly bored of watching her master tidy herself. Celestia merely rolled her eyes and, horn lit with a golden aura, sent the blackened, plucked feathers around her towards a wastebasket beneath her dressing table.

Suddenly, the base of her horn spurted bright sparks, lighting up the room like the flash of a dozen cameras. Celestia cut her magic immediately, but

was too late. What felt like a hot spike of ice plunged into her skull right underneath her horn, robbing her breath as her migraine surged over her.

*'It was only feathers!'* She groaned and scrunched up her face in concentration, trying to suppress the pain in her forehead. The room spun, and Celestia carefully placed a hoof down, relying on her earth pony nature to steady herself. Rather than stone or wood, however, her hoof pressed down into her mattress. Without a connection to the earth, the spinning room overwhelmed Celestia and she tumbled over into her bedcovers.

Head buried in her sheets, she simply lay there, waiting for the spinning and throbbing in her skull to abate. As it passed, she pushed herself back up and took a breath to collect herself before fixing Philomena with a stern look. "Not one word."

The phoenix threw her head back and let out a loud, warbling laugh. An embarrassed blush rose across her cheeks. "Oh, you horrible thing, laughing at an invalid," she groused, but a sheepish smile was growing at the corner of her mouth despite her words. "Didn't I raise you better than that?"

Philomena paused, then warbled even louder, fluttering into the air to land at the bed's headboard. Celestia chuckled and rested her head on the bed, without even worrying about pillows. *'Nothing to do today except rest... how curious.'* Her hoof idly traced circles in her sheets, and when she looked up a neglected bookcase on the far wall caught her eye. "Philomena, dear, could you get me something to read?" she asked.

Philomena nodded and took to the air with a fiery beat of her wings, clearly trying to squeeze every last drop of drama from the daring feat of flying to the bookcase. Celestia sat up and stomped her hooves on her bed frame in applause to humour her vain pet as the bird landed on the top shelf and chirped. The phoenix's chest feathers puffed in pride, savouring the moment a while before deciding to get to business.

Hopping around the shelf and tilting her head to look at the titles, she seemed to spot something. Tapping a heavy tome with her talon, she chirped questioningly.

*"Tax Policies through the Ages?"* Celestia chuckled. "No thank you, something lighter, please."

Philomena peered around the shelf, and then looked down over the edge to the shelf below her. Spotting something, she dived to the lower shelf and pulled a dusty scroll out from behind a few books.

“No, I didn’t mean literally lighter.” Celestia paused and peered in growing worry at the faded scroll in the bird's grip. “Is that... Oh dear, that's the missing Dead Sea Scroll, isn't it?” She bit her lip, mortified, only now remembering how she had temporarily borrowed it from the museum on a whim for some late-night reading... over nine years ago. “Philomena, stick it in my ‘out’ tray and remind me to mix it up into some of the unsorted Royal Archive documents later. We'll pretend the Illunanati hid it.”

Philomena squawked sceptically, but did as she was told – after all, it wasn't her first time sorting out the treasure trove of forgotten literature that was Celestia's personal, “light-reading” bookcase. Setting it aside, she lifted up another scroll.

Celestia shook her head. “No, I’d prefer a book, if it's not much trouble.” Books were made for use with hooves, and scrolls were a little tougher to manipulate without magic, since they had a tendency to roll back up when not fixed in place with magic or a paperweight.

Philomena picked up a small volume and brought it over to the alicorn, who looked at it curiously. “*Fire and Rain: Collected Essays on the Interpretation of Dreams*, by Sigmund Ears?” Celestia raised a thoughtful eyebrow at the book. ‘*Now when did I get this... ah, yes, I remember, it was a gift from Twilight a while ago.*’ She flicked it open with her hoof, flipping through the pages to find the index. ‘*Perhaps it has some information about dream magic...*’ Finding only a lone reference, she flicked over to the page in question and began to read.

... which must remain absolutely clear.  
However, magically-induced dreaming is less open to interpretation than regular REM-related dreams, as they generally invoke deliberate mental imagery with a clear structural flow of events. There is debate on how effective the insertion of artificial imagery into the subconscious mind through magic affect dreams, and even further debate on whether or not such acts fall under the garden of dream magic or in the much broader telepathy magic garden.

Her Majesty Princess Luna has gone on record clarifying that it is not the act, but the *implementation* that affects which garden a spell should reside in, explaining that while in “telepathic dreams” all dreamers will experience the same induced image, with dream magic the image is subject to the dreamer’s subconscious interpretation, meaning no two ponies would dream the same thing even if they are induced with the same image.

However, magically-induced dreaming is less open to interpretation than regular REM-related dreams, as they generally invoke deliberate mental imagery with a clear structural flow of events. There is debate on how effective the insertion of artificial imagery into the subconscious mind through magic affect dreams, and even further debate on whether or not such acts fall under the garden of dream magic or in the much broader telepathy magic garden.  
Princess Luna

Celestia blinked at the second mention of her sister’s name and paused in her reading. ‘*I read that paragraph twice...*’ she realised, frowning. Massaging her temple, she continued to search for hints.

Increasingly, these spells are used for therapeutic treatment of stress-related mental illnesses. The “Sweet Dreams” spell is one such example, which guides the sleeping mind away from negative thoughts and into a more positive “zone” which, in time, can be reached by simple meditation. In theory, this is reported to alleviate the symptoms of stress and depression, and findings do support these claims. As a result, there is a tendency in the public mind to believe such a spell is a cure-all for mental illnesses, but it must be stressed many disorders are chemically based also – a imbalance or deficiency of endorphins, adrenalin or certain hormones in the brain all impact on these illnesses, and must be treated with medicine the same as any other illness...

Celestia haltingly read on for several more pages, but the book seemed more interested in the topic of the interpretation of regular dreams and the psychology of ponies suffering from stress-related illnesses than dream

spells, which made sense – the author's portrait on the dust jacket of the volume showed an earth pony. It was all very interesting, to be sure, but not what Celestia was looking for, and besides that, she constantly found herself rereading words she had already read. Closing the book, she set it on her bedside table to read once she had healed completely so she could give it due focus.

"Philomena, I think I need something I've read before, so I don't need to focus as hard," Celestia said, looking over to the phoenix. "Any thoughts?"

She warbled and tugged a large, glossy red book off the shelf. Celestia watched as her pet flew up and landed in front of her, offering her the tome. The princess smiled knowingly as she read the title aloud.

*"The Magic of Friendship: Studies on the connection between harmonious interpersonal relationships and the application of practical and theoretical magic..."* Celestia's smile widened. "By Twilight Sparkle. My faithful student's thesis, hmm?" She turned her smile towards her phoenix. "A very thoughtful choice, Philomena, I –"

She paused, a feather of déjà vu stoking its way down her spine. She glanced down at Twilight's thesis before her before closing her eyes, dropping into her meditative state. *'This is significant,'* she told herself, knowing that a piece of her missing memory was related to the book. *'Remain calm and allow the memory to come in due time,'* she instructed herself, and sure enough...

Sensations began to poke at the edge of her mind. The sensation of... nostalgia? *'I was reading... something... the thesis?'* Celestia's gut told her that was wrong, and she trusted it – it was more reliable than her head right now, at the very least. *'No, not the thesis, but it was to do with Twilight...'*

*'What else has Twilight written?'* she asked herself. *'Well, her friendship reports...'* Like a sunrise over the mountains, a feeling of recollection began to overtake the amnesia plaguing her. Excitedly, Celestia thought of the friendship reports, but the harder she thought of them, the more fleeting her absent memories became.

*'Wait. Stop.'* She breathed deeply, reasserting her meditative calm. *'Simply allow it to arrive. Something... reading. Reading reports.'* That was it, certainly, but there was more. At the edge of her mind, something was calling out for attention. Her eyes opened and she looked down at the

thesis before her. *'That's what it was. You were thinking of Twilight, when she had graduated... and competed her thesis... and so was somepony else!'*

She silently cheered for her small victory against her memory. There had been somepony, somepony talking about it...

Things clicked into place. The mountains obscuring her memory dissolved into mist, and suddenly her disembodied thoughts and subconscious cues made sense.

A smile spread across Celestia's face. *'Yes. Yesterday...'*

She remembered!

~{C}~

Celestia had been in her study, lounging on her plush cushions and flicking through several memos relating to Court matters when a knocking at the door caught her attention.

"Enter," she bid the visitor inside, recognizing the knock as one of her guards' codes. In this case, "all's well; somepony seeks counsel".

Sure enough, the door opened to reveal a guard. "Your majesty, Lady Twilight Sparkle has arrived. Shall I direct her here?"

"Please do, thank you," Celestia replied with a smile. The guard nodded curtly and, as soon as he left, Celestia set about tidying the notes and documents strewn about her. Picking them up with a touch of magic, she rose and moved to her desk, sending the memos flying into whichever pigeonhole they belonged. As usual, a shelf stacked full of rolls of parchment bound with red ribbon drew her attention and, as usual, she plucked up several and floated them towards her as she settled back down on her lounge cushion.

*'I have time to read a few...'* she told herself as the scrolls opened before her. When she had fallen into the habit of re-reading Twilight's friendship reports, she wasn't certain. She knew, however, this was more an act of nostalgia than anything else – Twilight had matured so much over the years out of her mentor's mindful eye, the friendship reports often seemed to be the only map Celestia had to link the



studious but reclusive student she remembered to the sharp and confident mare of today, just on the cusp of her career.

They still exchanged letters, increasingly often in the past months as Twilight's research had begun taking several exciting turns, but it had been a long time since she had received a friendship report. That chapter in their lives was over, but Celestia wouldn't mourn it.

She'd always have the letters.

She looked over them with a smile. Twilight had written this one the first time they had met the zebra sage, Zecora. This one was at a birthday party thrown for Pinkie, the Element of Laughter. She pulled another one towards her - *this* one was a personal favourite of the princess', written after Twilight had discovered she and her friends' cutie marks had all appeared due to the same event, Rainbow Dash's first Sonic Rainboom. Celestia had, of course, investigated the Rainboom and learned about Rainbow Dash soon after Twilight entered her tutelage, but never had any idea all six of them earned their marks at the same time. Had it been the Elements at work? Or something greater?

Celestia couldn't possibly tell. It had actually sparked a long conversation between Luna and herself about inevitability and the nature of destiny which went on into the long hours of the night. In the end, they had simply agreed that if destiny had truly united Twilight and her friends, then it followed that the universe desired harmony. Of course, Celestia had laughed and cautioned Luna that they were both somewhat biased towards Harmony, but they enjoyed the sentiment regardless.

Another scroll opened before her. This one was...

Celestia stared at the scroll for a moment, before smiling. She remembered this one...

This one was the one that had assured Celestia that her student was able to live her life out from under her teacher's wing.

She had received it a few months after Twilight had begun living in Ponyville, and it stood out from the other letters mainly because her student's correspondence had been extremely quiet in the preceding

weeks. So, having begun to worry slightly for her welfare, Celestia had sent a casual letter to check up on her. This report was the reply, one that filled her with pride and assured her of her student's growth. It was written in Twilight's own writing rather than Spike's, appropriate for how personal the contents were.

She sent the other scrolls back to their prized place on her shelf and settled down to read the report in her magic grip.

*Dearest Princess Celestia,*

*I sincerely apologise for taking so long to send you my latest report. My mind had been preoccupied with doubts unlike what I am used to grappling with, and my studies suffered as a result. But, I'm happy to say those doubts are banished now, and because of that I learned an important lesson about friendship – a true friend is one who always watches out for you, and will be there for you even if you don't realise you need them.*

*You must be wondering what these doubts were about, so I'm just going to outright say it.*

*I was in love with somepony, but she doesn't love me back.*

*Though such a situation might be a minor tragedy to others, this was my first time experiencing heartbreak, and it devastated me. It led me to doubt myself, and to doubt my friends, to doubt the worth of my research. There were days I'd flat out refuse to get up, shutting the curtains and wallowing in the darkness.*

*But without even asking, my friends sensed my sadness and were there for me. They cheered me up and made me laugh and feel loved and, when I finally explained what I was going through to them, they were there to cry with me and reassure me.*

*I am very blessed to have such wonderful friends, and that includes you, Princess, because when I received your beautiful letter I knew that I would always have a place in the hearts of the ponies I love.*

*Friendship really can cure anything!*

*Ever your faithful student (and friend),*

*Twilight Sparkle*

Celestia had been afraid something like that would have happened – out in the wider world, away from her fortress of books, Twilight was inevitably going to be vulnerable to emotional trials. Celestia had feared the mission and assignment she had given her student would prove to eventually be too much of a culture shock for the young mare to adjust to. Twilight was a passionate soul who would put her whole heart into whatever task she set her mind to, but because of that she was prone to overreaction, especially if there was a risk she would fail to live up to the standards she perceived others setting for her.

All her life she had foregone friendship in order to prove herself in her teacher's eyes, something that had saddened Celestia behind all the pride she felt at her student's accomplishments. She was well trained in etiquette and prided her persona as the princess' star student, using these in lieu of actual social skills whenever she interacted with somepony new. She had unshakable confidence in her abilities, but that was because she knew Celestia was proud of her. Always measuring herself with another pony's yardstick, she never truly built up confidence in her own worth, only confidence that *others* saw worth in her.

She went to desperate lengths to keep her friends and family's approval. The thought of losing it shook her young heart to its core. How much worse would it be, how terribly would she be affected if somepony broke that heart?

"Devastating" was, no doubt, too light a word.

But...

Although she had cloistered herself away, although she hadn't spoken a word to her mentor, and although Celestia hadn't been there to help her... she got through it. Her friends had refused to abandon her to her own despair. Celestia smiled fondly to herself. It was from that point on that Twilight truly began to grow.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. "Enter!" she called.

The door was opened by her guard, and Celestia could see Twilight waiting right behind him. She smiled at the unicorn, who smiled back as the guard bowed respectfully. "Your majesty, announcing Lady Twilight Sparkle."

"Thank you, sir," Twilight said smartly, walking into the study.

Celestia rose to greet her student. "Twilight Sparkle! How lovely to see you." She looked over at the guard and nodded in thanks. "That will be all for now, thank you." The guard bowed again and closed the doors behind him, giving the alicorn and her protégé their privacy. "Twilight, I'm so glad you could make it. It's simply been far too long."

"It's wonderful to see you too, Princess," Twilight said. Her eyes moved to the scroll hovering before her mentor. "Oh, are you busy?"

"Not at all." Celestia smiled, floating the report over to her. "Just doing some light reading of an old favourite."

Twilight studied it for a second, before her eyes widened in recognition. She smiled warmly. "Oh, haha, wow," she said, her eyes misting with reminiscence. "I remember writing this. Seems like it was a lifetime ago."

"Yes, it really was, in a sense." The scroll rolled up and was sent back to its place beside the others on the shelf. "I was just remembering how well you handled the situation, that's all."

Twilight gave her a flat look. "I stopped talking to everyone and locked myself in the library for nearly a month."

Celestia chuckled. "Yes, and in the wake of it all you learned an important lesson about friendship and went on to be more outgoing in your social life and more diligent in your research than ever before, correct?" Her eyes narrowed as a sly grin crept up her face. "Perhaps a bit *too* diligent, hmm?"

Memories floated in the air between them, of Ponyville erupting into chaos – again – over an enchanted doll. Twilight chuckled self-consciously. "Not one of my finer moments..."

Celestia scoffed lightly. "I wouldn't worry. You're hardly short of those, my dear." A yellow glow enveloped the cushions beside her and they arranged themselves into a comfortable spot large enough for a normal pony. She patted it with a hoof, inviting the unicorn over. "Now come, sit down and let's catch up. There's only so much our letters can convey, after all."

They spent the next hour simply sharing the latest stories of each other's lives. Twilight did most of the talking – of her research, of all the organisation and correspondence she had done to gather other researchers to help her work, of the breakthroughs they had made and her excitement about the day's experiment. However, she still had plenty of stories of her friends in Ponyville, little moments and humorous recollections about Pinkie Pie's latest antic, Rainbow Dash's latest trick, or Rarity's latest saddle design.

On her part, Celestia gave her thoughts on certain aspects of Twilight's research, offering tidbits of knowledge and insight into magical rituals of times long past. The unicorn listened, nearly reverent in attention, jotting down in the corner of a scrap of parchment words of wisdom forgotten by time itself, saved only by one beyond time's touch.

Then, reminded by Twilight's story of an impromptu orchestra Pinkie had formed, Celestia switched the subject to an opera she had seen the past week. Twilight set the parchment aside and followed along, having read all about it in at least four books and a dozen classical music publications.

The conversation darted from there to art and art history to history, back to magic and then onto a dozen other topics as they simply spoke to one another, relishing the time spent together and soaking up each other's presence.

Tea was delivered by a servant, conveniently filling up a lull in the conversation. Stirring her tea, a thought occurred to Celestia. "You know..." She looked at her protégé. "You never said who it was."

"Who who was?" Twilight cocked her head to the side, somewhat perplexed. Celestia bobbed her head towards the scrolls in the

bookcase, and the unicorn's eyes widened in understanding. "Who she was? Well..."

"If it's very private, I won't intrude," the princess clarified quickly. "I'm just a bit curious, but... well, sometimes the world can do with a little mystery here and there."

Twilight hummed in agreement, contemplating what to say. "I was going to, actually," she confessed. "But as I was writing the letter I realised it didn't matter. What mattered was how it changed me – it was a crush, but there was a reason for it. I..." She turned her eyes downward, then brought them up to regard Celestia, a bittersweet smile on her face.

"I feel like I wasn't in love with her because I loved her, but because I wanted somepony to be with. I wanted her to sweep me off my hooves, but in the end, what I actually needed was my friends. It took me a while to realise it, but I already had everything I needed." Twilight smiled and shrugged. "It probably would have been the same no matter who I had fallen for. Maybe."

"Are you still in contact with her?" the princess inquired. "I imagine it's difficult to avoid someone in a small town like Ponyville."

Twilight scratched her hoof. "Heh, yeah..."

Sensing she was avoiding the topic, Celestia settled on the most appropriate course of action.

She began to tease her.

"Hmm..." she hummed, exaggerating her musing. "Was it Applejack?"

Twilight shrank back. "W-why would you think it was her?" she spluttered.

"Well, you two spend a lot of time together..." Celestia said innocently.

"Well, I spend a lot of time with Rarity too!" the unicorn protested.

Celestia brought her gold-clad hoof down on the ground with a thump. "Aha, so it was Rarity!"

Twilight forced a laugh. "Okay, I'm changing the subject now."

"Oh, no, this is interesting. Far more interesting than *my* love life, at any rate."

"I can count on my hooves the number of ponies I've dated in my life, Princess," Twilight protested. "I think you have me beat. I mean, what would *you* use to count? Your wings?"

"A lover per feather?" Celestia gasped in mock-exclamation. "I shudder to imagine what your perception of me is, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight grinned, now clearly enjoying the banter. "Well. I have heard the stories..."

Celestia hesitated a moment, her face blank, before she let out a musical laugh. "Oh, stories. Oh my, someponies can just be so *silly*. I hope you're not listening."

"Oh, of course not," Twilight assured her. "They don't bother me anymore, but I do get kinda angry when ponies insist it's true, as if I just hadn't noticed or anything as your student."

"I don't know, Twilight..." The princess propped her chin up with her forearm and smiled all too innocently. "My guards *are* known for being discreet..."

"... Wha...?" Twilight clearly found it difficult to articulate her thoughts while her jaw was hanging so loose. "I... no." She shook her head, laughing. "No, no, sorry, that's too much of a stretch. Guards are for guarding."

Celestia's smile remained persistent and unwavering. Her tail flicked.

"Guards are for guarding!" Twilight insisted desperately, stomping her hooves frantically into her cushion.

Celestia held the smile a moment longer before dropping the facade and laughing musically once more. "Yes, you and I know that, but try telling that to the public! Here's a hint – it'll be counter-productive. Oh, some of the things I've read..."

"You've *read* stories about... that?" Twilight gasped in disbelief.

“Of course,” Celestia said breezily. “I don’t really mind them doing it. It’s a harmless hobby, really, but some take it a bit too far. For instance, this one young lady wrote *quite* the tale of an alleged ‘Duchess Heavenly’...” She paused and looked around. “Hmm, I don’t have it here. Anyway, I found it rather funny but a few of the faculty found it offensive. There was some minor scandal and she exiled herself from Canterlot for a fresh start.” She tapped a hoof to her chin, considering something. “Oh, by the way, as ruler of Equestria, I decree that you are forbidden from reading the publication in question.”

Twilight scratched her neck, looking anywhere but Celestia. “Actually, now that you mention it... a Duchess, was it?”

Celestia blinked. “You’ve... ah.”

“Yeah...”

They both looked at their empty teacups for several agonising moments, before the princess ventured to break the silence. “Guards are for guarding,” she said firmly.

Twilight stifled a bout of laughter, and began to pour them both a fresh cup of tea. “So, about my old letter, do you really want to know who ‘she’ was, or were you just teasing me?” she asked, willingly pulling the conversation back on topic.

“A little of both,” Celestia admitted.

Twilight smirked, flashing an amused glance at her as she set the teapot back in its place. “It’s ancient history, really. I’m over it.”

“If it really isn’t important, then you don’t have to tell me,” Celestia advised her. “But, at the same time, if it isn’t important anymore, it shouldn’t be a problem for you to tell me.”

“Bit of a conundrum...” Twilight chuckled, swirling her tea with her magic and watching the sugarcube inside the dark tide spin and dissolve. “I guess I should, probably...” she began, but trailed off in contemplation.



A knock on the door made them pause in their conversation. Celestia's ear flicked as the 'all's well' code registered in her mind. "It seems we have a guest. Enter!"

The door opened and a green unicorn with a yellow-streaked mane walked stiffly into the room. He was young – almost as young as Twilight had been when she moved to Ponyville, and from his posture he was clearly out of his element. His eyes widened and darted between Celestia and Twilight. "Hoo boy.." he muttered under his breath, almost too low for Celestia to hear, before he bowed awkwardly.

"Y-your highness, I wasn't expecting to meet you as well today," he said nervously. "I was, um, just supposed to be dropping off a memo..."

Twilight stood up. "Ah, Peppermint, it's so good to see you! Princess, allow me to introduce you two." Beckoning to the new unicorn, she said, "This is Peppermint Yam-"

"Jam..." the stallion corrected her quietly.

Twilight flashed him a mortified and apologetic look. "I'm so sorry. This is Peppermint *Jam*, he's a grad student assisting the team." Celestia nodded in understanding. Knowing Twilight, he probably *actually* did research and information gathering rather than just fetch coffee. Twilight continued, beckoning to the alicorn. "And this, Peppermint, is my teacher, mentor and dear friend, Her Majesty Princess Celestia."

Peppermint performed the standard reaction. He dropped right down onto the floor in petrified genuflection. "Rise, Peppermint," Celestia said smoothly. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"L-likewise," he stuttered. Celestia could tell that he was looking not at her face but at a spot just above her crown and twelve degrees clockwise from her horn. Briefly, she wondered why it was that everypony she knew that was nervous in her presence always, without fail, seemed to look at that same exact spot.

"Peppermint, are you looking forward to our first test run today?" Twilight said, prompting him to speak.

He blinked vacantly, before snapping to attention. "Oh, um, yes! I am! Also, I just want to say again that it's really an honour to be working with you, Miss Sparkle," the green unicorn practically gushed. "Your thesis on the viability of magical resonance through harmonic factors such as interpersonal relationships is nothing short of revolutionary."

Twilight smiled self-consciously. "Oh, it wasn't all... that's a bit of an exaggeration, isn't it?"

"No way!" he protested. "Heck, it's opened up the applied arcane sciences to earth and pegasus ponies! I've got several friends in theoretical arcanics who are finally able to directly test their theories through Sparkle's Law. Everypony's really excited about it."

Celestia chuckled in the background as Twilight's eyebrow rose sceptically. "Is... that what they're calling it? You know it's not actually a 'law', right?"

The unicorn chuckled self-consciously. "Well, 'Twilight Sparkle's Co-dependent Clause of Harmony' is a bit of a mouthful in casual conversation..." He coughed into his hoof. "Right. Anyway, I apologize, I'm babbling. Um, regarding that memo, we're all set up and ready whenever you are in Laboratory One at the Academy. You can spend as long as you need examining the set-up, adjusting it as you see fit. If everything is in order, we'll begin the experiment as scheduled at four o'clock."

An idea struck Celestia, and she smiled benevolently. "Thank you very much for your efforts, Peppermint. I take it you have high hopes for the experiment?"

"Um, yes, your majesty, very high hopes!" the unicorn squeaked, having trouble speaking when directly addressed by the princess – a rather common ailment among ponies, Celestia found.

"Well now, it sounds so exciting," she said, bringing a hoof to her mouth to suppress a non-existent gasp of amazement. "I simply must attend as well."

"That's a great idea, Princess!" Twilight exclaimed, not noticing Peppermint's pupils shrink in horror at the prospect. "I can finally show you the ethereal harmonics ritual matrix we've developed first-hoof, I

*know* you're going to love it, it's the fruit of my studies to this point... Oh!" She snatched the scrap of parchment from the ground and scanned her eyes over the ancient formulae. "Maybe we could even improve it! You've given me plenty of ideas on how to make the system more energy-efficient..." Her voice trailed off into excited mumbles as she began to make more notations on the page.

Peppermint stared wide-eyed at her, at a loss for words. Celestia quietly lowered her head until her mouth was level with his ear and whispered, "Quite the sight, isn't she?"

Peppermint jolted in shock. "I, no! I mean, yes, I, uh!" He covered his face with a hoof. "Oh jeez..."

Celestia decided to take mercy on the poor stallion. "I thank you for your concern, Peppermint, but really, you needn't worry about offending me," she said knowingly. "A thousand years as ruler of Equestria tends to give a lady rather thick skin. I appreciate it all the same, you are indeed a gentlecolt."

"Y-yes your majesty, it's just..."

"Is something bothering you, Peppermint?" Celestia asked, her face that of kindly concern.

The green unicorn bowed his head. "Sorry, it's just... um, Lady Sparkle is, like, the pony everyone has their eye on in the Arcane Science community. I mean, look at her." They shared a look at the mare in question, whose short note was now reaching its third page of excited scribbling. She was beginning to pick apart Celestia's desk for more parchment.

Peppermint sighed. "That's just some light notes to her, I bet, but if I were to present those as my thesis I'd be set for life. And plus, she's the prin- I mean, she's your protégé. That's big, I know plenty of ponies who'd do anything to work with her. But I'm still just a grad student. Even though I'm not even qualified she accepted me and a bunch of other students' applications to work with her. I dunno why she did it, but whatever the reason, this could make my career. I don't want to flub it by offending either of you."

Celestia smiled warmly. '*Such a silly pony.*' "I have seen a great number of things and been called a great number of names in my lifetime," she chided him lightly. "If you manage to offend me, I'll consider it an accomplishment, alright?"

Peppermint stared with wide eyes for a moment. "O-okay," he managed to force out, bowing his head respectfully. "Thank you, your majesty."

Celestia nodded, acknowledging the thanks. "So, I shall be accompanying Twilight today during the experiments," she said, bringing things back on topic. "I trust that's all right?"

Twilight looked up, having only just now come back to reality with a stack of densely packed papers in her magical grip. "Oh! It's alright if the princess attends, isn't it?"

Peppermint's expression was exactly that of a pony shoved suddenly out of the curtains and onto the stage, with a big, bright spotlight illuminating him for everyone to see. "W-why are you asking me?" he said to Twilight. "You're the boss here."

Twilight smiled. "I like to consult with the people I work with," she said, and Celestia recognised her tone as her 'lecture voice'. "An important part of being a good friend is listening to the opinions of others. Do you have any objections to the princess' attendance?"

"Oh, of course not, of course not," Peppermint said quickly. "I'll just, ah, inform the rest of the team of our esteemed guest, will I?"

Celestia nodded in thanks. "That would be excellent, thank you."

The stallion quickly swivelled on his own axis and rushed back towards out of the room, his legs trotting stiffly. Celestia shared a glance with the guard at her door, who broke his stoicism for a second to give a bemused shrug before shutting the chamber door once more.

"Looks like you have an admirer," the princess chuckled, nudging Twilight softly in the side with a hoof.

"Yes, everyone in the team seemed to be like that," Twilight said, not seeing Celestia pout slightly as her teasing went right over the unicorn's head. "Not everyone seemed to be quite as... starstruck as him, but still..."

Celestia frowned at the tone of her voice. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no! Nothing," Twilight quickly assured her. "It's just... I don't really get it. My thesis wasn't anything original, it was just stringing together existing theories into one. It wasn't new, anypony who studied the Elements of Harmony would have been able to figure it out."

"Twilight." Celestia fixed her with a firm but kind look, one perfected over the years spent as Twilight's teacher. "I studied the Elements of Harmony for lifetimes, and eventually I conceded defeat. You, on the other hoof, were able to track down an unrealized yet fundamental aspect of magic. Gravity was always there, but it took an apple falling on Ishock Newton for him to realise just how prevalent it was, did it not?"

"But that's *because* I had your lifetimes of research to build on," Twilight insisted with a sigh. "Plus, for you the Elements were inert, and you didn't have access to the Element of Magic. The only reason you hadn't already written my thesis for me a dozen times over is because the theories of magic I supplemented my research with were mostly developed within the past four hundred years at the *oldest*, which is nearly half a millennium after the point where you ceased studies into the Elements."

She shrugged and looked off to the side. "I'm not doing this for the fame, but even so... Let's be honest, Princess. I'm getting recognition for being in the right place at the right time rather than any real advancements I made."

The alicorn closed her eyes and shook her head. "I respectfully disagree, Twilight," she said, bringing her hoof up in an arched motion to demonstrate around them. "Look around you, do you see this room? Do you see the sky, the glass, the stone? " Celestia firmly stomped her hoof on the ground, three times, to emphasize them. "They are all composed of the same basic building blocks that comprise the rest of the world. What is the difference between the air

and water? When you get down to it, very little - both contain oxygen and hydrogen, but it is their interaction each other that defines how they affect us. Two hydrogen and one oxygen together give us water, but with the addition of one more oxygen molecule into the mix, we have air."

"Rather volatile air..." Twilight mumbled.

Celestia allowed a small grin to grace her mouth for a second before nodding solemnly. "Indeed. This has always been so, a fundamental aspect of the universe that precedes even Luna and I, but it took many, many years for us to discover it, and even more to utilise it." She lowered her head to be at the same level as Twilight, staring deep into her wavering purple eyes. "And I'll remind you, dear, that it was not I who did either. It was ponies like you, who watched how the world behaved and learned from the ponies who came before them before eventually teasing out a little piece of the puzzle around them. Twilight, this *is* an achievement. Don't ever question that.

"Besides." Celestia closed the distance between them and nuzzled her clever pony's cheek. "I daresay you're not finished yet."

"I'm overreacting again, aren't I?" Twilight chuckled, blushing at the touch. Celestia pulled back and gave her a knowing grin, prompting the unicorn's laughter. "Thanks. Thanks for being there for me."

"Always, Twilight," Celestia promised lovingly, before rising to her full height. "Now, how about you introduce me to your research team?"

Twilight giggled. "Okay, okay. It's about time you met them anyway. Shall we?"

~{C}~

Celestia slowly drew herself out of the memory. After that point all she could recall was walking down some corridors with Twilight, some slight images of Spike greeting them in a courtyard, and then... not much. Some sensations – the gleam of polished copper, the wet heat of something boiling, the taste of watercress sandwiches... just scattered almost-memories of an idle peace.

Philomena, settled back onto her gilded perch, regarded her with a concerned red eye. She crooned softly to get her master's attention, and was calmed as Celestia regarded her with a smile.

Rather than get frustrated over what was lost, she relished what she had regained. Falling back into her plush pillows, she watched Philomena begin to doze and softly smiled to herself, thoughts on her protégé. *'She still needs me.'* Her heart fluttered as if floating on air at the thought. It was a different kind of need than that of an acolyte training with a master, and Celestia relished it almost greedily.

Something else occurred to her – the memory of Twilight dismissing her achievements, juxtaposed with the image of a unicorn trailing flowers in her wake, searching for her own. *'Of course,'* she thought to herself, connecting the dots. *'That's what the dream meant! The fruit was simply the fruit of their research, the research was the pursuit of the flower unique to her, because all the other plants she grew merely represented her thesis, which she was unsatisfied with.'* She quietly laughed to herself again. *'And she returned... because she wants me to be a part of it all. She still needs me.'*

The dream rose to the forefront of her mind, bringing with it a surge of relief. *'Reassuring her, running with her, guiding her out into the open plains...'* Celestia began to giggle at her own foolishness. *'In summary, being her mentor.'* She had been getting so worked up over one interpretation of the dream, she had failed to so much as consider another possibility. It was obvious – her memories weren't gone, they were just difficult to access. Her mind was obviously trying to help her remember, and the book on dreams *had* said that dream spells are guided by one's subconscious.

*'Could the entire dream have simply been a metaphor for... yesterday?'* She frowned, the idea seemed unlikely. *'No, no, it's simpler. It was to do with Twilight. And I. And Luna.'*

*'It was my subconscious... my perception of them. Yes.'* She chewed on the inside of her cheek. She had been so frightened of the beast in the thorns, yet her heart had broken to see her hurt. *'Is it shame I feel? Guilt? There's a clue in that dream, I'm sure of it.'* Celestia resolved to get a book on dream magic as soon as she could.

There was a quick, rapid knock on her chamber's door, which gave her pause. She didn't recognise the pattern. She sat up in bed and locked her gaze firmly on the door; wings loose at her sides, ready to spring into action. However, her precautions proved unnecessary as another knock resounded, properly coded this time, followed by the muffled sound of embarrassed laughter. "Enter!" she called, curious.

The door opened, and for a moment Celestia was back inside the dream.

Twilight strode into the room, a smile on her face, and behind her were flowers, dozens and dozens of them, of all kinds and colours. They hovered around her in a rose-tinted haze of magic, flowing into the room in what seemed like a never-ending march, filling her chambers with their fragrance.

Celestia barely noticed them. They merely graced her peripherals as she stared at Twilight, her heart thudding in her chest. "My goodness..." she breathed. She could almost see the mare from her dream imposed on her protégé.

No. That was the paradox, wasn't it? Celestia realised she was looking at the mare in her dream.

"They're pretty, aren't they?" Twilight asked, smiling proudly as she began to decorate the room with the flowers.

The spell on Celestia, though not broken, loosened somewhat. "Where did all these come from?" she asked, staring in wonder at the sheer number of them.

"They're Get-Well-Soon bouquets from well wishers," another voice said, and only now did Celestia notice several unicorn attendants had followed Twilight in, each bearing a sizable amount of flowers in their own magical grips. "They began arriving late last night, and simply haven't stopped arriving. The Morning Hall is already full to the brim – we've started moving them to the ballroom."

Celestia's eyes widened in surprise. "It's full? How many bouquets are there?"

"Probably one from every pony in Canterlot," Twilight supplied.



The princess took a moment to wrap her head around that. How many ponies had she worried? Still, it warmed her heart that so many were concerned for her wellbeing. That being said, it presented a new problem. “We are long out of vases to put them in water, aren’t we?” she asked one of the servants.

She chuckled, brushing a pink lock of her mane behind her ear. “I’m afraid so, your majesty. But, it *is* about time for breakfast, so with your permission...”

“Of course, of course,” Celestia said with a laugh. “Be sure to tell everyone to help themselves. And if somepony can bring some of them around to the guards, they would greatly appreciate it.”

The servants bowed in thanks and left the room, closing the door behind them. Twilight was still darting around, trying to arrange the flowers in some order – probably by family, or possibly nutritional value. Celestia felt something tugging at the covers of her bed and looked to the side to see Spike clambering onto it, his arm looped in the handle of a basket full of gemstones. She gave him a smile and nudged a cushion in his direction. “Not going to help us eat all these flowers?” she asked, amused.

“Nah,” he replied, settling appreciatively down on the offered cushion. He snatched up a ruby from the basket, tossed it up and caught it mid-air with his tongue, snapping it into his mouth in a blink of an eye. “I fwah jush going to go to shleep,” he explained as he crunched the jewel. “Buf Twihilgfh shaid –” He paused and swallowed the gem. “Twilight said we should get breakfast first, then I could sleep. Were you worried about me?”

“A little,” Celestia said.

He scratched his ear-scales with a claw. “Why? You’re the one that got hurt.”

Celestia smiled. “Even with this bump on my head, I’m still the princess. It’s my duty to worry about my subjects’ happiness.”

“Who’s worried about who?” Twilight asked, just now joining the conversation. She climbed onto the bed as well and sat between the alicorn and the baby dragon, so that they formed a more or less equal triangle.

“Everyone’s worried about everyone!” Spike said. “Princess Celestia is worried about me, you’re worried about Princess Celestia, and I’m worried about you.”

Twilight’s eyes softened. “Aw, Spike. Why are worried about me?”

He regarded her with a stern, slit eye. “Because you’ve been acting weird...” he said, his hand reaching for another gemstone. “I dunno what’s going on with you lately.”

Twilight paled as Celestia looked over at her. “Oh?” the alicorn asked. “Are you alright?”

The unicorn laughed nervously. “It’s nothing, really. I’m just... I was a bit shaken yesterday, so now I’m just overreacting. As usual.” She stared down at her hooves and focused her attentions on the daffodil bouquet she had selected for herself.

Celestia smiled. She was such a sweet thing, to have worried about her so. She bit a few of the flowers from the bouquet that had found its way before her, and realised it was of poppies – her favourite. Warmth flowed into Celestia’s heart and she savoured it, savoured it along with the taste of the flowers on her tongue and the comforting presence of her dragon and her unicorn.

Circumstances considered, it wasn’t what she would have chosen. Regardless, she had to admit it was not so terrible, to have the attentions of a beautiful mare like Twilight.

The alicorn closed her eyes calmly. *‘Dangerous thoughts, Celestia.’*

Still, there was no denying it. She had grown very beautiful. It wasn’t that she looked any different from before – she had grown a little taller, yes, but nothing game-changing, and her mane was cut the same as ever.

However, her every movement echoed her late nights of study, the life-or-death trials she had overcome, her simple joy accrued from the love of her friends... she wore her years as she wore her coat, at long last sure in her step. She didn’t need Celestia anymore. And yet, she still did.

Dream spells... the book said they didn’t force somepony to dream an image. With that in mind, a realisation began to dawn on Celestia. The

Twilight she had seen in her dream... the novice, the magician, the pioneer... they were tinted reflections of her perception of Twilight, hoofprints in the sand of her time with the mare. They were, in a single glance, everything the alicorn knew of her, everything she... everything she felt for her.

*‘And she was breathtaking...’* she finally confessed to herself. *‘All said and done, I can’t deny that so much of that dream was...’*

Celestia opened her eyes and looked out of her window, admiring the play of light through the distant clouds. She could feel something changing, or perhaps she was realizing something had already changed. Today, her sister, Princess of the Moon, had guided the sun. This was a time of revolution, yet not of chaos. Harmony prevailed, though the song of the world seemed to be changing. That was fine – a thousand years of rule had let her see a great many changes in harmony, and she had learned to embrace them, to bask in the melody of change.

With that in mind, it no longer surprised Celestia that Twilight was at the centre of it all. She just hadn’t expected to have the prized seat beside her. She hadn’t expected to want it.

*‘This is...’*

Something different.

Nothing she needed to act upon, yet nothing she needed to deny either.

*‘This is.’*

Twilight’s voice drew her attention. “Celestia?” The princess slowly turned her head to see her unicorn surrounded by flowers and looking up at her with a concerned expression on her face. “I think you zoned out again. How do you feel?”

Celestia was still a moment, before smiling, leaning over to nuzzle the unicorn. “Absolutely perfect, my dear,” she murmured. “Absolutely perfect.”