

Seven Ponies



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Prologue

Dirt shook as the rumbling approached. Overcast skies cast shadows across the land. Surrounded by treacherous, grassy foothills, a smattering of hovels and farmhouses sat in an unnamed valley. Far above, the roving bandits came to a halt. The rumbling ceased. Standing on a rocky outcropping they looked down upon their quarry.

“We will take this place next!”

An enormous black stallion, suited in thick plate armor and sporting a vicious scar through his neck, turned to his fellow ponies as he barked the words.

“It was plundered last autumn. They won’t have anything for us to take. We shall wait until later, *captain*.”

The second stallion, shorter but much stockier than the former and dressed in similar attire, spat the last words with clear disdain, signifying his ultimate authority. The black pony bowed his head in the direction of the dominant steed.

“My apologies, sir.” He offered through gritted teeth.

“This village shall be our primary target come the barley harvest. Until then we wait.” With that, the brown coated chieftain galloped back into the hills. The captain followed after, and with him the rest of the forty brigands. As quickly as they had arrived, they departed. The cool mid-morning sun was beginning to cut through the silver clouds.

Soon after, a bush just below the vantage point stirred. A pony, with a twisted face of absolute shock and fear, emerged from the underbrush surrounding the stone bluff. The farmer stumbled his way back down to the village, a large bundle of kindling on his back.

* * *

The villagers gathered in the central plaza. News had a tendency to spread quickly, and this was no exception. An impromptu public meeting was organized to determine what they could do.

Said organization did not last long.

“...Taxes, forced labor, war, drought – and now the bandits!” one mare screamed in tears.

“We should kill them. Kill them all!” an older farmer shouted, “They wouldn’t mess with us again after that!”

“Do you really think a rabble like us could stand up to their steel armor and muskets? You’re out of your mind! What we really need to do...”

Near the edges of the mass of ponies, a young stallion sat quietly. A decoration of two crossed pieces of bamboo adorned his flanks. The black and white pony, Pan Bare, was lost in thought. Or at least, he made a desperate attempt to be. The shouting was not in any way helping.

Pan had always been a thinker. A problem solver. He never thought himself to be particularly adept at farm work or even simple social matters, but for what he lacked in brawn and charm he made up for in clever thinking and immaculate diplomacy. At least, that’s what he liked to believe. Regardless of his constant inner insecurity, he believed he had reached yet another solution. Now came the hard part: making himself heard.

“The elder...” he murmured. It was less of a murmur and more a hopeless bleat, and he found himself cringing at the sound of his own frail voice. Still, it must have been loud enough to catch the attention of the some nearby ponies, because they started to stare at him. Pan blushed, the red shining through his coat.

He stood up and started walking off. It wasn’t until he was halfway to the bridge that the first ponies to hear him finally comprehended what he said. They rose as well and took off after him. From there the rest of the ponies, seeing where so many of their friends were going, hung their heads and followed.

* * *

The village proper was a collection of twenty or so buildings flanked by a stream on two sides, a dense forest on another and open dirt road on the last. The elder lived in a large structure outside of the village center, along the banks of the stream. Pan Bare crossed a bridge over the silent snake of water and walked down a path to the elders abode.

Inside, the farmers filed in and sat down. It was a tight squeeze. The elder sat on a reed mat near a fireplace, a respectable amount of distance between him and the field workers trickling in.

The elder opened his weathered eyes and drank the sight in front of him. "What do you want?" he said, quite pointedly. His raspy voice grated against everyponies ears. The farmer who had seen the bandits explained the situation to him.

A look of consideration emerged on the elders face as he closed his eyes. The room was quiet for some time. He then reopened his eyes and spoke:

"Warriors. Seek out warriors."

Confusion swelled in the minds of the farmers. Who, where and how were the three words that stuck out the most. The obvious implication of the elders advice was to hire mercenaries, but that was no simple task.

Where were they to get warriors? The provincial governor would only loan out his private army to those with the resources to pay. Local mercenaries had a reputation for murdering and pillaging those they were hired by, especially if they were weak. The only ones who they could even hope to get assistance from would be the samarei, the legendary female warrior aristocrats, but they were all but extinct. What few were left tended to act as personal bodyguards for those of noble descent.

Then, of course, came payment. Pieces of silver were a sight rarely beheld by the farmers, and what little they had would not be nearly enough to finance a full-blown military contingent. If they were to find outside help, it would need to be from a different source. A source more compassionate towards their plight.

The elder, as if reading their thoughts, coughed out some more words. "Head north, to the land of the Sun and the Moon. Go to the city of pearly streets, and you will find what you need."

The ponies were silent, processing his words. Though he wasn't aware of the fact, Pan Bare was the only one out of the villagers who knew what the elder was referring to, and the knowledge chilled him to the bones. The land of the Sun and Moon. The land of the Princesses. Equestria.

Chapter 1

The Land of the Sun and Moon

A sliver of the moon shone light down on the quiet town, the residents long since retired to bed. Nestled in the heart of the picturesque river valley, Ponyville sat, surrounded on all sides by soaring mountains, rolling fields and luscious forests. It was here in the local library that a small dragon slept.

The bed sheets rose and collapsed in tune with Spike's breaths, his scaly form clearly defined under the linen. He dreamt of the typical things. Gemstone pies, acts of heroism preformed by him, romantic fulfilment with a certain white unicorn, and letters from Princess Celestia.

Wait, what?

Spike awoke with a start, instantly recognizing the familiar rumbling in his stomach. He didn't have time to think as he suddenly burped and a letter materialized out of the flames he exhaled.

"A letter from the princess? But it's..." he glanced at the clock near his bed, "...Two in the morning."

The dragon let out a sigh and concluded that whatever the letter was must be extremely important. He walked across to the door, scales and tiny claws clacking against the wooden floor, that led to Twilight Sparkle's room. Raising a reptilian hand, he rapped on the door six times. It wasn't long until he heard her get up. He also noted that he could hear her groans quite clearly. The doorknob started to turn, and the door swung open.

"Please don't tell me you had a nightmare, Spike." The lavender unicorn said, quite spitefully.

Spike held up the letter. Twilight's eyes widened and she instantly levitated the letter out of his hands. She carried it over to a table and sat down. Unraveling the letter, she started to read.

"My faithful student,

Something has come up in Canterlot. It would be best to tell you in person what it is, and so this letter is more of a formality than anything. A chariot will arrive in Ponyville within an hour. I am sorry to interrupt your sleep, but your presence is urgently needed.

Your mentor,

Princess Celestia."

It was Spike who broke the silence. "That doesn't sound good."

The unicorn sighed as she glanced at the clock. She had just an hour before she would leave.

"No point getting any sleep now." She said with a dour tone. A thousand questions raced through her mind, but she knew she would not find any answers until she got to Canterlot. For now, all she could do was brush her purple mane, wash her face, and get back to reading that book she had been studying a mere three hours earlier before crawling in bed.

* * *

The chariot ride to Canterlot was uneventful. The cold wind rushing by her face did a superb job at waking her up. She glanced back towards Ponyville, a jumble of lights growing smaller in the distance. Spike had gone back to sleep as soon as he heard the letter. She was a tad jealous, but reminded herself that service to the crown took precedence over a few extra hours of rest.

Twilight looked up at the sky. A brilliant panorama of pale blue orbs littered the sky. Had she not spent the entire night studying, she likely would have taken advantage of the perfect meteorological conditions to brush up on her astronomy. *No doubt courtesy of Princess Luna*, she thought with a smile. The unicorn made a mental note to personally thank the Princess whenever she next saw her.

They gracefully descended onto the street outside of the Royal Palace. Twilight stepped out and made her way up the steps and into the white castle. She breathed in the scent. The expertly crafted rugs, the stale, marble support pillars, the wooden railings made from Everfree mahogany. A wave of nostalgia swept over her, and she realized it had been quite

some time since she had last been in the Equestrian capital. *Not since the Gala*, she noted with a small chuckle.

She found herself in front of a massive archway adequately filled by and equally massive slab beautifully decorated iron. The metal doors were open, and the throne room was sufficient illuminated by some unseen light source. She stepped inside.

At the end of the room, sitting on a marvelous golden throne, sat a white alicorn. Twilight approached and, upon reaching her, genuflected then rose. She looked around and saw four Earth ponies standing off to the side.

Celestia smiled. "Twilight, I'm so sorry for bringing you here on such short notice and with so little information as to why."

"It was no trouble at all." Twilight responded with a warm smile.

Celestia stood up and walked over to the four Earth ponies. "These four ponies are the reason you are here. It would be best for them to explain why." She gestured to one of them, a black and white colt with two crossed sticks of some sort for a cutie mark.

"Thank you, your majesty." He said. His accent was strange and unfamiliar. There was a looming grimness to it. Celestia stepped off to the side as the colt started to recount his tale, clearly having had some practice telling it to many people by the way he started.

"We come from a land far to the south. You may know it as Umala. Us four are but lowly farmers from a village deep in the heart of Umala. I am Pan Bare," he pointed at himself, and then went on to introduce the others.

The dark green stallion he identified as Mane Tis. Twilight looked at his cutie mark. It was the barbed appendage of some frightening insect. Merely looking at it made her shiver. Pan Bare then gestured towards the towering orange and white stallion.

"That is Koi." The stallion was certainly intimidating. He was almost as large as Celestia herself. His cutie mark was of a fish with similar coloration to his own coat. Pan then focused on the last one, a white mare.

“...and this is Rise.” Her cutie mark was of a stalk of a plant. Twilight recognized the stalk, but could not remember the name. Rise was giving Twilight a once over.

There is a definite... fire in her eyes. Twilight thought as she felt Rise’s gaze pierce right through her. Pan continued with their tale.

* * *

The silence was broken by Pan. The land of the Sun and Moon that lay far to the north. It would no doubt be a dangerous journey, likely filled with strange ponies and places. It sounded strangely appealing to the ever so curious stallion.. He stood up and declared, with surprising conviction, “I shall go.”

He felt the gaze of the villagers settle on him for the second time that day. The elder cracked a smile.

“By yourself, boy? Of course not. Some of you other young’ns better go with him.” He said with a notable amusement creeping into his speech.

Another stallion stood up. “I’ll go with him.” Mane Tis stated, very solemnly. He nodded at Pan, and Pan nodded back. Mane walked over to stand next to Pan, who had taken position next to the elder.

Without saying a word, the massive orange and white stallion in back made his way through the crowd and took a place by the other two ponies. His face was unreadable, a mask of stone. Koi was the definition of a living mountain. No one else stood up after that.

“Three of you? Gonna need more than that.” The elder cackled.

Towards the side of the room, another figure stood. Pan’s heart skipped a beat and he tried his best to keep his composure. Rise made her way next to the trio.

The best-looking mare in the village spending several weeks on the road with me? Yes, please.

Pan thought with an internal smile. He glanced at Mane and Koi. With horror he noticed an ever so faint smirk had crept onto both of their faces.

...Dammit.

“Four? Yes. Four will work.”

* * *

A few hours later, the quartet stepped out onto the dirt road on the north side of the village. The early afternoon sun slowly warmed the air that had been cooled by the clouds that morning. Pan glanced at his companions, and for the first time since the meeting in the elder's home began to consider them. Mane Tis was roughly the same age as Pan, though they had never been close. From the few times he had talked to Mane, it struck Pan that he was a massive pessimist. Bad harvests, mudslides, irrigation failures and general peasant life had a tendency to make a pony frown, but it seemed to affect the green colt more so than others. Still, he was known as a reliable figure around the village, and Pan was glad to have him with them, if only because he could relate to how Mane felt.

Not much was to be said about Koi. He was big. He was strong. He could drag an entire tree by himself. From what he had seen of him around the village, though, Pan knew him to not be the brightest pony in the herd. Perhaps he was so quiet out of fear of embarrassing himself. Or, more likely, he didn't have anything to say, Pan thought with a grin.

His gaze settled on Rise. His heart started pounding again. Her perfectly groomed hair fluttered in the breeze. The beautiful orbs that her eyes were gazed up towards the sky, the beautiful blue reflecting off of the whites. Her rice stalk cutie mark was perfect. Simple. Not overly flashy. It wasn't until Pan was staring at her flanks that he realized he had fallen behind the group. Blushing, he trotted back up towards them and resumed his place between Koi and Mane.

Pan recollected their route in his head. The only map of use that the elder had only went out as far as the borders of their province. This being the case, they planned to follow this road to the provincial capital. There they hoped to acquire some more specific directions to the northern lands.

As the four of them began to settle into a steady traveling pace, he asked himself why he had bothered with doing this. A handful of farmers, from an insignificant village in the middle of nowhere, trying to reach a destination they know nothing about. They had no money, only a few crates of white rice with which to barter.

He didn't even believe they had any chance at succeeding. From the moment he volunteered to go, he knew it was more likely he would get

gored with a sword by a highwayman than reach the borders of Umala. So why was he here?

Fame and glory. he thought morosely. It was, in a sense, true. The life of a farmer was not one that appealed to him. His worst fear was to pass on without having made any significant accomplishments. Pan shook his head, banishing the thought. These were dangerous ideas he was toying with. *No sense trying to be a hero. I have a village to save.*

Again, Pan looked at his new found friends and realized with a grin that they were likely having the same internal conversations he was having. They had spoken few words since they had departed. Pan resolved to break the silence sometime in the near future. It was a tad unnerving.

This left Pan alone with his mind once again. The only thing that he could think of was the overarching question of this entire journey.

Why?

Why were a bunch of farmers leaving their ancestral home to seek help from a place they knew literally nothing about? A place they would likely die before reaching?

Being simple farmers, they knew very little of politics. What they did know, however, was that there was some sort of power struggle occurring for total control of Umala between the Jade Lotus clan and the Red Dragon clan, and the resulting chaos is what allowed Umala to sink to such levels of corruptness. In these fragmented states bands of raiders sprung up all over the nation, taking advantage of the non-existent militias to raid farming communities for all their needs.

Oddly enough, despite Pan's worries, the foursome made it to the provincial capital of Huang Hoof in a matter of days without any problems. In fact, their first problems came *in* the capital. And all that caused it was simply asking for a map.

* * *

"What do you mean you don't sell world maps?" Mane demanded. The storekeeper, Papyrus, was taken aback. "This is a fucking map store. You're telling me you don't have a single world map?" Pan was taken aback by Mane Tis' sudden outbreak. He recollected his senses and put a hoof on Mane's shoulder.

“Just calm down, Mane. I’m sure there’s a reason.” Over the past few days of travel Mane had proven he was quite hot tempered; a fact of which Pan had not been aware of starting off from the village.

“Jade Lotus clan doctrine.” The merchant said, regaining his composure. “The only maps I’m permitted to sell are maps of Jade Lotus clan territory, which at this point in time is most of the southeastern half of Umala. And before you ask, no. I have no idea why they decreed this. If you want, you could ask one of them yourself.” He gestured out the window towards a large stone structure in the middle of the town. “The provincial governor is paid off by the Jade Lotus to keep things the way they want it around here.”

“Maybe I will! I’ll go there right now!” Mane declared with an indignant huff.

“Go ahead. Just don’t blame me when they cut off your head.” Papyrus said.

Mane stopped in his tracks. He sighed, and walked back over to his friends by the counter.

The merchant continued. “The gov’ doesn’t allow anyone near him he doesn’t already know. Unless you’re a representative from the Jade Lotus or a local magistrate, his samarei assistant will flay your neck right open with one flick of her hoof-blades.” The merchant made a frisking motion near his neck to add emphasis.

“A samarei? Really?”

Pan looked at Koi. Those were among the few words he had spoken the entire trip thus far.

“Eeyup. And a crazy bitch of a one, at that, if you don’t mind me saying so. She makes a habit of making life for us merchants a living hell. Stealing stuff and stabbing people who call her out on her crimes, things like that. We here learn to just let her do as she please and everyone will end up much happier.”

There was a lull in the conversation that was soon broken by Rise.

“So about those maps...”

“Ah, yes. I can’t legally sell you one.”

Pan's head drooped.

"But..."

His head popped back up.

"The Jade Lotus clan never made any statute against *showing* a non-local map to anyone." Papyrus ushered towards a sliding door leading to a back room. The four of them went in, followed by the merchant.

Many racks surrounded them, in which sat hundreds of rolled up scrolls of paper. The air was very dry. The merchant walked over to a corner, where a wooden chest sat with a heavy lock on it. Pulling a hidden key out of his mane, he unlocked the chest and opened it up. Reaching inside, his hand emerged holding an incredibly massive parchment. He set it down on the bamboo floor and rolled it out; a map of the world. The four of them gasped as the merchant smirked. It was a beautiful mosaic of many colors. It was the first time the four of them had seen anything like it.

"Impressive, isn't it. You don't really get a grip on just how small you are until you see this."

Mane stammered, "and just how small are we?"

Papyrus leaned over the paper and pointed with a hoof. "Well, this purple splotch right here is Umala. This star in the purple splotch is the imperial capital city of our once great nation. This smaller dot is the town in which you are now standing, and, according to what you told me..." the merchant was tracing the map with his hoof. "Here. Your village is right around here."

The spot he pointed to was close to the southern border of Umala. Pan gulped. It had taken them two days to cover about a fourth of Umala. That means the earliest they could get through the country and into the north lands would be in six days, assuming they kept up the same pace they had before.

They had three weeks to get to Equestria, three weeks there to gather whatever help they could muster, and another three weeks to get back. From then, hopefully, the warriors would have a month to prepare for the impending attack following the barley harvest. If everything went to plan.

“Now, I believe I should have the right to know why you need to see this map so badly.”

Pan looked at the others. Their expressions were unreadable. *I suppose there's no harm in telling him...* he thought.

“Equestria. Were heading to Equestria. To the city of pearly streets.” Pan said.

If the merchant had anything in his mouth at that time, he would have spit it out. Instead, he started dry heaving.

“Are you insane?! EQUESTRIA?” He shouted.

Pan shrank back. “Um... yes?”

The merchant let his panting cease before he continued. “You’re lucky I’m no friend of the Jade Lotus, because I could turn you in right now and pocket myself quite a bit of silver. You’re farmers, you don’t know much, I get that. But let me make this clear:

“Neither the Jade Lotus clan nor the Red Dragon clan make a habit of being friendly with Equestrians or anything related to them. Don’t ask me why, because I don’t know. That’s just how it is. If that is where you are trying to get, then I regretfully must inform you that there is no way.”

The farmers looked at each other, then back at the map. Pan glanced over the region labeled ‘Umala’ again. He looked at the dot that represented the town they were currently in. A thin black line snaked its way through the dot, into northern Umala and out of the borders of the country itself. Though Pan couldn’t read, next to it were some letters that read ‘Yangtze’.

He still understood what it was. A river. Slowly, a smile crept up on Pan’s face.

“Tell me, Papyrus, sir. What do you know about the local smuggling business?”

The storeowner looked at Pan, and then at where he was staring. A second grin joined Pan’s, followed by a laugh.

* * *

Crouched on the roof of a store, her ears flattened against a hole carved in the tiling, a dark grey mare provided a third smile.

“Oh, he is going to love this.” She said to no one in particular. With that, she leaped off the roof without a sound and briskly trotted in the direction of the looming stone building in the middle of town.

* * *

It was a short while later that Pan Bare, Koi, Rise and Mane Tis found themselves lying under a large sheet, in the dark, in an ages old riverboat.

There was no love for the Jade Lotus in this region of Umala; that much was clear. Papyrus the map seller had said that assisting them was a reward in itself if it meant defying the clan, and the smugglers themselves were surprisingly sympathetic towards their cause, as well as sharing the same anti-clan sentiments.

Still, that didn't change the fact that they were sitting in a dark, cramped, stuffy, noisy cargo hold. Smuggling was smuggling after all.

Besides, I can feel Rise's breath on my neck.

* * *

The journey in the riverboat had been uneventful, if uncomfortable. Over the course of two days, they had been let up for fresh air and food only a handful of times, and only when it had been dark. Thus, it came as a welcome surprise when a smuggler ripped the cloth off of the farmers. They covered their eyes as the morning sun shined on them through the cargo hold door.

“End of the line.”

They got to their feet with a notable amount of groaning and started to make their way to the doorway.

“Unfortunately, we can't take you out of Umala proper. A flotilla of boats is sitting up river that will fire bomb any vessel that comes near without clearance. Vessels like ours.”

“Where are we?” Mane asked.

“A small fishing village just south of the border. Walk north through the woods about an hour and you'll be in no-pony's land.”

“No-pony’s land?” Pan asked.

“I guess you’d call it a buffer area,” the smuggler said, his mouth tripping over the words. “Technically belongs to Equestria, but them princesses up north don’t make any attempt to manage what goes on in there.”

“Any idea how long it will take to get from this no-pony’s land to Equestria?”

The smuggler looked at them quizzically. “Sheeeyyut, I don’t know. When’s the last time anypony ever seen a map that go past this here border? Just head up north, and with any luck you’ll slip by the border patrol unnoticed.”

The four farmers took the opportunity to thank the riverponies. They declined any attempts to repay them. As they departed, the skipper offered a few last words.

“Best of luck to ya. You’ll need it.”

* * *

It wasn’t until later that night that Pan Bare realized just how lucky they had been so far. They had gotten through Umala in just over five days, mostly in part thanks to a friendly shop keeper. *Papyrus*. Pan repeated the name in his head. To maintain their schedule of three weeks, they had 16 days to get through the no-pony’s lands and to the pearly city. Pan tried to visualize the map in his head. His best guess was a week and a half to get to Equestria.

He thought back to earlier. A raised dirt road sat in the middle of the forest, carving it’s way through the foliage. The border. They sat in the bushes for an hour gathering their wits as they watched the patrols of Red Dragon soldiers trot along every few minutes. They had to time this perfectly, or the quite intimidating pole arms mounted on the soldier’s backs would probably skewer them.

A patrol passed out of sight, and they darted out onto the road, sprinting to the other side as fast as they could.

“STOP RIGHT THERE, CRIMINAL SCUM.”

It wasn't fast enough. Pan managed to spur his legs to go faster. The three others evidently felt similar urges. Though they were on the other side, they weren't safe. The soldiers pounded their way through the flora, hot on their heels.

Pan still didn't know how they escaped unscathed. They certainly hadn't outrun them. They just turned around. Went back to the border. At the time, Pan didn't stop to consider it. Even later, he still didn't get it. Perhaps the four farmers weren't worth chasing after.

They didn't stop running until they found themselves standing on a grassy knoll. It was on this hill that they first saw it. The world. Their first steps out of Umala were greeted by a spectacular sunset over golden grasslands. In the distance they could see the faint outline of mountains. Exhausted from the days excursions, Mane and Koi set up camp while Pan gathered firewood.

Now, completely dark save for the fire, Pan again considered their situation. Dirt poor farmers, now branded fugitives, in a foreign land, still with only a vague sense of where they were headed. About the same as when they had departed, he noted.

"It is what it is," he said out loud in a very sarcastic fashion.

The others glanced at him, their expressions indicating that they were having the same thoughts.

* * *

"The next few days consisted of travelling through your southernmost lands until we eventually reached the real Equestria. I won't bore you with praise for a land you are so familiar with, but to put it simply we were impressed. We practically galloped all the way to the white city we saw in the distance, where we now stand. It was nearly midnight when we arrived, and we have spent the last couple of hours trying to gain in audience with Princess Celestia. I must admit we had to pose as foreign dignitaries to be taken seriously, especially at such a late hour, and even that was a stretch based on our appearances. Fortunately, she was most compassionate, and has agreed to give us audience. And that is why and how we are here, and at this hour."

Pan Bare emphasized the last words with a long exhale. His tale had taken nearly an hour, and Twilight Sparkle could tell that he had omitted quite a few details.

The six of them, Twilight, Celestia, Pan Bare, Mane Tis, Rise and Koi had moved into a spacious meeting room with comfortable sofas to sit on while Pan went on with their story. Twilight stood from her seat and walked over to a window. The stars hung above, a reminder of just how diminutive they were in the grand scheme of things. It was just past five. She was fully alert right now, and right now gears were turning in her head.

“Teacher, may I speak to you in private?”

* * *

Princess Celestia shut the door to her personal office behind her.

“Why am I here?”

“Twilight, you know we have to help these ponies.”

“Yes, and I want to. But why am I here? These ponies need military assistance, not some filly unicorn that sits in a library studying all day.”

Celestia closed her eyes for a moment and turned away from Twilight.

“Military assistance is not something I can provide.” She said softly.

Twilight was silent. Celestia turned back to her and opened her eyes.

“Equestria’s diplomatic relationship with Umala has been... rough, as of late.” She walked over to her desk and sat in the velvet chair behind it. “I won’t go into details, but let’s just say that following some failed political moves Umala cut off all contact with us.”

Twilight was familiar enough with her teacher to read her face, and right now she knew Celestia wanted to tell her more. Twilight pulled a chair up to the desk and sat.

“Tell me.”

The alicorn sighed.

“You know your history, Twilight. You should know that 253 years ago, Umala was engulfed in a horrific civil war.”

Twilight nodded.

“It was a massive peasant rebellion; tens of millions of villagers and common townsponies rising against the then emperor and his government.”

This Twilight knew as well.

“The war went on for many years before the emperor was finally abdicated. Even if you have the power, you have nothing if you don’t have the people. His forces were starved out of both food and resources. The emperor fled the country and came to me. He requested I honor our alliance and assist him in forcefully retaking his throne.”

Twilight raised her eyebrows. “He wanted attack his own subjects?”

Celestia sighed, “Yes. Yes he did. Twilight, I know you know basic politics. And I know you understand why I agreed to help him.”

The unicorn, for the second time that day, went wide-eyed. “What!?”

The alicorn continued, unphased. “To dishonor an alliance is to show every other nation on Earth that we are unreliable. That we cannot be trusted. Surely you know this?”

“I... yes. I don’t like it, but I do.” she conceded.

Celestia stood once again and stared out her window.

“Please understand that I have no pride in my actions. The game of saving face requires sacrifices that no pony should have to make. But, as the leader of the most important country on this planet, I must let go of my morals if the situation demands it, for my country and my populace. In that case, the situation involved the assassination of several rebel leaders. I complied, much to the emperors satisfaction.”

Twilight gaped at her teacher. She stammered out a few words. Though she wanted to voice her utter disgust at the turn of events, her rationality took the better of her.

“B-b-but HOW? We don’t have any sort of active military!”

Another silent pause.

“A good leader knows that knowledge is power. Without knowledge they are weak. Worthless. Nothing.” She emphasized the last words. “I am not lacking in knowledge, Twilight. Not with the help of certain... government ministries I have created over the past few years.”

Twilight wasn't sure she wanted to hear the rest of this.

“Research and development, espionage, homeland security, surveillance...”

Now she really knew she didn't.

“...sabotage, extraction, and, if need be, *assassination*.” She practically spat the last words out. “Twilight, without the Ministry of Intelligence *I am Nothing*. Even with the power of the sun in my hooves, I am nothing without intelligence.”

Twilight was visibly shaking. Celestia either didn't notice or didn't care, because she continued.

“The emperor requested I act upon our alliance. I had the resources and systems in place to do so. And thus I did. And that, Twilight, is how I was able to satisfy the emperor without a standing military.”

Twilight was glued to her seat, trying to resist the urge to cower in fear. The Princess was not as perfect as anyone thought. Barely whispering, she forced out another question.

“How could you?”

The Princess whipped around and faced Twilight with sudden ferocity.

“Do you think I took pleasure in it? Do you think I am at peace with what I have done? What I have caused? I gave the order. I may not have lit the fuse, but I loaded the muzzle. Six shots. That's all it took for those two madponies Jade Lotus and Red Dragon the opportunity seize control. They rallied hundreds of thousands of innocent ponies under their banners in a futile power struggle. A struggle still going on. TO. THIS. DAY. A struggle that is the reason why those four ponies are sitting in our castle, so much farther from home than they should be! THEY ARE HERE BECAUSE OF ME.

“So, Twilight. You ask WHY you’re here? It is because YOU are the most powerful spell caster in Equestria. It is because YOU pose no liability to the integrity of my Ministry. I ask you, Twilight Sparkle, for my own sake, please help these ponies, because you’re the only one that can!”

With that, Celestia collapsed back into her chair, breathing heavily. Twilight could barely think as she tried to wrap her distressed mind around the new vision of the world she was provided.

“Okay.”

Celestia looked at her.

“I will protect these ponies.” Twilight said, nearly choking as she did.

“Twilight. Do you know what you are getting into?”

She nodded her head.

“I ask again, Twilight. Do you know what I am asking of you?”

Twilight stared at Celestia, then sighed.

“No, Princess. I don’t. I really don’t.” she admitted.

Celestia stood, her horn flaring with white light as she straightened out some stray hairs.

“Know this, Twilight Sparkle: You will be heading off into battle. There will be no negotiating with those bandits. They will be nothing like Equestrian ponies. They are crude. Hateful.” She paused. “Violent.

“My faithful student, you are heading down a path I fear you will not return from. When the blood, the mood, the horror of true violence rushes at you, that. That is the moment of no return. I have no doubts for your safety. Umala is a land of Earth ponies, and your magic will protect you. What I fear it won’t protect, however, is your soul.” Celestia looked down at her student. “You don’t have to do this. I’m not expecting you to. In fact, I hope you don’t. The pain this could cause you would be too terrible for me to live with.”

The sun was climbing up the sky. It was seven in the morning.

“My teacher, Princess Celestia,” The lavender unicorn said with a soft tone, “I will do this, no matter what the price, be that my body, my soul or

my life. I will this for Equestria. For Umala. For those four farmers sitting in this palace. But most of all, I will do this for you, Princess.”

The pure white, regal pony smiled down at her student, tears reforming in her eyes.

“But, I can’t do this alone.” Twilight finished.

With a half-hearted grin, Celestia opened a drawer in her desk. She pulled out a thick folder and hoofed it to Twilight. Stamped on the front, in bold, black letters, read:

DOSSIER

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

DOSSIER

Name: Iron Shod

Age: 57

Male

Earth

Current Residence:

n/a

Current Occupation: n/a

Military Experience: n/a

Education:

3 Years, Equestria Military
Academy, Unknown department,

Accolades:

(1) Equestrian Consular Medal,
(2) Distinguished Service Apple, (2) Purple Hoof,

Specializations:

CQC, Field Tactics

Psychiatric Evaluation:

Signs of PTSD; he is otherwise stable.



Name: Break

Age: 36

Male

Pegasus

Current Residence:

Hoofall, Equestrian Commonwealth

Current Occupation:

Military Services

Military Experience:

9 years Ministry of Intelligence

Surveillance Division, Highest rank:

First Air Master

2 years Hammer Hoof mercenary



Education:

4 Years, Canterlot Royal University, Surveillance Technology

4 Years, Equestria Military Academy, unknown division

Accolades:

(1) Distinguished Service Apple

Specializations:

Surveillance, Harness Combat,

Psychiatric Evaluation:

This guy has some serious pride issues. Five minutes in that room with him and he's already screaming about how he should have gotten that "fucking medal." Otherwise, he is stable.

Name: Wood Wey

Age: 29

Male

Unicorn

Current Residence: Hoofall,
Equestrian Commonwealth

Current Occupation: n/a

Military Experience:

1 Year, Canterlot Palace Guard

6 Years, Ministry of Intelligence

Ground Operations Division

Education:

2 Years, Equestria National College,

Applied Magic

6 Months, Ministry of Intelligence, Unknown department

Accolades:

(1) Silver Moon, (1) Purple Hoof,

Specialization:

Infiltration, Sabotage, Marksmanship

Psychiatric Evaluation:

Signs of a troubled past, reflected by his quiet demeanor. Overly cautious, indicating hesitancy towards new situations. Stable, but keep an eye on him.



Name: Raw Apple

Age: 22

Female

Earth

Current Residence:

Yearling Mountain, Equestrian
Commonwealth

Current Occupation:

n/a

Military Experience:

6 years, Hammer Hoof Private
Military Corporation

Education:

10 years, Hammer Hoof School, unknown department(s)

Accolades:

n/a

Specializations:

Demolition, Structural Engineering, Vibrational Spectroscopy, Applied
Chemistry

Psychiatric Evaluation:

Overly theatrical. Prone to over embellishment and inefficiency for the sake
of showmareship. Stable.



Name: Jutsu

Age: n/a

Female

Earth

Current Residence:

Equestrian Commonwealth, Last
observed near Umalian border.

Current Occupation:

n/a

Military Experience:

Unknown, some time spent as solo
mercenary.

Education:

n/a

Accolades:

n/a

Specializations:

n/a

Psychiatric Evaluation:

n/a



Chapter 2

Canterlot

“You can’t be serious.”

“Is something wrong?”

Twilight closed the pale yellow folder. There were hundreds of pages, full of medical records, criminal records, family records, personal journal entries, audio and video recording transcriptions, activities both in the past and recent; there were even detailed accounts of how they had obtained their cutie marks. She felt as if she was prying into a world that shouldn’t be hers. In normal circumstances, that would be true.

“These are mercenaries. They aren’t like me. They’ve stolen, destroyed, and,” she swallowed, “*murdered*.”

During the time Twilight had spent skimming over the documents, Celestia had allowed herself to return to her ever graceful composure. Devoid of emotion, she replied. “Your point?”

A slight pause.

“Can I trust them?” As Twilight spoke the words, she could feel another long-winded explanation brewing within the Princess.

“I assume that you noticed none of these ponies reside within Equestria Proper; that they all live in the southern borderlands?”

Twilight nodded.

“These lands are scarcely, if ever, mentioned in the schools of our nation. Intentionally. I’m sure you’ve come across why this is in your personal research, however.”

“I’m assuming you are referring to the Grand Schism.”

“Correct. Five centuries ago, a large political faction, ‘The Liberty Trotters,’ emerged that wanted to revoke numerous laws that they considered as ‘dangerous to pony civil rights and freedoms.’ They were, at the time, extremely popular amongst the ponyfolk. Rather than risk massive

political hysteria, I simply gave them most of the southern portion of Equestria. While politically independant, these borderlands are economically, socially and culturally tied to us, even to this day.”

“So why is this subject avoided in our education? Any pony that agreed with The Liberty Trotters could just go down south and join them, so it can’t be because you think it might be a negative influence.” Twilight's expression implied confusion.

“It is not what they believe that worries me. It is what they do.” She paused for a moment, taking a breath. “Freedom comes at a price. Here in Equestria, we are, thanks to many legislations and government services, safe from scam, scandal, battery and violence. Our laws are, compared to other nations, extremely restrictive. The price for our safety and happiness is our much of our liberty.

“The borderlands are not like this. Blood is no stranger to the ponies of those lands. If they see an opportunity to leap forward, they take it, regardless of the pony that may stand in the way. The strong dominate the weak.

“It is not my place to condemn how other ponies live, but I cannot allow this wicked lifestyle seep into my beautiful country. You’ve heard the expression, ‘ignorance is bliss?’ Here is a prime example.”

Twilight considered this for a moment. “That still doesn’t answer my original question, though.”

Celestia was quick to respond. “This isn’t the first time the Ministry of Intelligence or I have required outside help. When the risk of an operation being traced to us is too great, we hire mercenaries. Of course, by nature of their trade most military contractors aren’t readily available. However, due to some fortunate circumstances regarding a certain vassal state directly to the south of us, we have been able to develop an informal corps of ponies that we can rely on for various odd jobs. They have experience, discipline, and, most importantly, they don’t exist. Most of the ponies you saw in those dossiers were, at some point, *non-citizen government employees*.” The last words were spoken with great emphasis.

“These ponies are, outside of our own Ministry ponies, the best in their respective fields. I have had personal communications with most of

them. They have worked for me before, and they will again. The question, Twilight, is not can you trust them, but *should* you trust them.”

Without missing a beat, Twilight asked the obvious question: “Should I trust them?”

The Princess gave a dry laugh. “I’m not sure, to be honest.”

* * *

Following the Equestrian ponies departures, a prolonged silence invaded the conference room in which the farmers now sat. To say their minds were a jumbled mess would be an understatement. In a matter of days they had gone from a dirt poor farming village to a conference room in the royal palace of the most powerful nation in the world. That was to say nothing of their previous excursions regarding a river boat and a border crossing.

The luxurious velvet couches felt alien against their skin. Transitioning from reed mats to a sofa worth more than what they would likely make in a single lifetime was, in simple terms, very uncomfortable. The four farmers found themselves squirming and readjusting every few minutes.

A feeling resurfaced in Pan’s chest. One that had been coming up quite frequently during their travels. Small, insignificant, nothing special; Pan couldn’t shake the idea that he was just a lowly pawn in a far grander game that he couldn’t understand. The aesthetic splendor of Canterlot, as well as the presence of Celestia herself, did nothing to quell these parasitic thoughts.

Mane, ever the practical pessimist, was already planning on what they would do if the princess refused to help them. He had no intention of going back to the village if they could not find warriors. No point hiking across dangerous lands for three weeks only to starve to death a few months later or be butchered by the bandits. Assuming he couldn’t acquire an Equestrian citizenship, the borderlands seemed very appealing. That was, in fact, the reason he came along on this excursion: a lack of hope. To him, the only agreeable option was to leave, and this provided him the perfect opportunity to do so.

The white pony was, in a word, ecstatic. Though they could not clearly see the city in the darkness of the night, running through the streets

Rise caught glimpses of hundreds of shops and boutiques, all displaying the latest fashions and trends. She knew her mission took precedence over personal matters, but she made herself a vow that she would explore every inch of this city and discover all of the delightful secrets it held. Among the many reasons she came along, her intrinsic desire to help the people of her village being one, the chance to be a part of high culture was one. Mere pretty dresses were not her highest priority, however.

Koi, wearing his usual stoic expression, seemed utterly passive about the recent occurrences.

It was then that the two magical ponies re-entered the room. The looks on their faces betrayed just how serious their conversations were. The farmers rose from the couches to face them. Celestia, in her typical cheery voice, was the first to speak.

“Twilight Sparkle, my student, has agreed to help you with your cause.”

The farmers flashed a hesitant smile, then stared at her with quizzical looks. Twilight nervously shuffled her feet.

“If you don’t mind me saying, your majesty, she don’t look much like a warrior.” Koi said, voicing all their thoughts..

It was Twilight who responded. “Well, I’ll have help! We’ll go back to the borderlands and hire some--”

Celestia waved her hoof in Twilight’s face. “I... uh. Yeah.” she trailed off, dipping her head.

The Princess picked up where Twilight was interrupted. “Fear not, you will have additional help, but this is not the appropriate time to discuss that. For now, allow me to treat you to a free stay here in the palace. You will be able to leave once you have rested and are ready to depart.”

The farmers jaws dropped. “We... we could never repay you for your hospitality!” Pan stuttered.

“There is no need. Nor will you have to worry about paying those whom I have sent to help you.”

“I... thank you, your majesty.” They bowed.

“And now I must depart. The sun must rise soon, and my attention is needed elsewhere. I thank you for your presence, and I shall take my leave. Twilight?”

“Yes?”

“Please show our guests to the east wing. They are welcome to take any ambassadorial suite they desire for their stay.”

With that, Princess Celestia walked out and silence once again invaded the room. Forcing her best smile, Twilight complied with the Princess’ request.

“So, if you would just follow me, I’ll show you to the east wing of the palace.”

With that, Twilight wheeled around and exited the room, the four farmers in close behind.

* * *

The ambassadorial suite was... nice. That was the best fitting word that Pan could come up with.

Goose down bedding and pillows, linen woven from the silk of Everfree dangerfang spiders, wool carpeting imported from Pferdland, and wood panel walls made from breezewood mahogany; a special variety that only came from mahogany trees that had been struck by enchanted lightning. This, in addition to a personal bath, walk-in closet, magic-powered air conditioning and a sixty-inch *Arcanium* television (though he had no idea what the strange black rectangle was). And that was just the bedroom. Or, just one of the bedrooms.

The suite was a collection of five bedrooms connected to a communal living and conference room, which then led out to one of the major annexes of the east wing.

Pan’s thoughts were interrupted by a decidedly feminine scream from one of the other bedrooms. Rise. He burst out of his room and into the living room. He saw two other doors fling open as Koi and Mane did the same thing. Together, the three of them ran over to the door that was the source of the screaming. Pan was the first one to push through.

“Rise! What’s wrong!?”

The white pony standing in the middle of the room, looking very not-endangered. Twilight Sparkle was next to her, shoving her hooves in her ears.

“Huh? Oh, nothing! Nothing at all! Everything is great!” Rise responded, turning around to face them. “It’s just that... well... this is so exciting I had to SCREAM!”

Twilight seemed to wince at the word. She somehow managed to drill her hooves into her skull even deeper. As Rise continued to babble on about how amazing the suite was, Twilight slowly made her way to the edge of the room.

“Well, I’ll let you guys settle in to the rooms. Around sunrise I’ll come back to check on how you’re doing.”

The three stallions were completely engrossed with Rise’s blathering.

“Riiight. Well, see you later.”

She made her way out and booked it as quickly as she could to Pony Joe’s for some coffee and a doughnut. Something told her it was going to be a long day.

* * *

The glowing orb was minutes away from peeking over the horizon. Twilight knocked on the door and then let herself into the room. The farmers were sitting patiently in the living room, their gazes fixed on the unicorn now entering.

“Would you like me to show you around Canterlot?”

The stallions were quiet, but Rise answered with a forceful “Yes!”

Half an hour hours later the farmers were following Twilight around the many corridors of the palace. They had briefly explored the the four wings, east, south, west and north, and Twilight was just now taking them to the throne room where they had first met via a service hallway. She had told them that the main thoroughfares were a mess of hoof traffic during the raising and setting of the sun.

The pony was so engrossed in explaining the history of the palace that she failed to notice the midnight blue alicorn walking the opposite direction in front of her. They promptly collided.

“Oh, I am so sorry! I really need to watch where I’m going!” her tongue caught in her throat. “Princess Luna! My apologies, your majesty.” She bowed.

The farmers, surmising the importance of the tall, strange breed of pony, bowed as well.

“I... oh, please, there’s no need.” Luna said in a surprisingly frail voice. “I was too distracted to watch where I was going. I should apologize to you!”

There was an exceedingly awkward silence.

“Might I ask why you are here, Twilight? And who are these friends of yours?”

“Oh, did your sister not tell you?”

“Tell me about what?”

Twilight quickly shut her mouth. It occurred to her that Celestia may not want Luna to know about her little mission for whatever reason. If Luna didn’t know already, then the older sister clearly wanted to keep the affair as private as possible.

“...ah, nothing. I’m just showing these ponies around the palace, and then the city a bit later.”

Luna’s arched brows said that she was not convinced by the dodge, but thankfully did not pursue. “Unfortunately, I am in a major rush to get to the palace archives so I can double check some tax records, so I can not offer you and your guests a formal welcome at the moment. But, if it means anything, I hope you all have a pleasant day in Canterlot!”

With that, she flicked her mane, flashed a smile continued down the corridor at a brisk trot.

“Old friend of yours?” Koi surmised.

“I suppose you could say that.”

* * *

You don't know how bad you are at something until you try to do it.

Twilight learned this the hard way as she tried to give the farmers an impromptu tour of Canterlot. Once they had left the immediate area around the palace, she realized just how poorly she knew the streets of her hometown.

"...and just around this corner is the- oh, nevermind. Must be the next one down."

The farmers had been respectfully patient, but they were clearly weary of how slow things were going. She'd have to figure out something for them to do; something that they'd all enjoy. The sudden rumbling in her stomach gave an answer. They started to walk in the direction of a place she *did* know how to get to.

The Lounge

A simple enough name. The restaurant was, by all means, exceedingly ordinary. They served a wide variety of quality dishes for a reasonable price. The perfect place for a handful of foreigners to grab some breakfast.

The Lounge was not overly crowded, and they were quickly seated by a friendly waiter colt, who then distributed thick menus to all of them. Twilight immediately set about perusing the contents of hers. The farmers, unsure of what to do, opened the booklets as well. A strange jumble of symbols and pictures greeted Mane Tis.

"Uh..."

"Can't decide?" Twilight asked without looking up.

"Can't read." Mane responded.

That distinct feeling of awkwardness once again popped up.

"What is this?" Pan asked, gesturing at the menu in his hooves.

With a sigh, Twilight explained what a menu was. She then went on to explain the basic premise of the various dishes presented, namely soups, sandwiches, salads, pastries, and a variety of vegetable and fruit platters.

“Yeah, I’ve never heard of any of those things.” Mane commented.

“Just point at a picture of something in the menu that looks good and I’ll order it for you.” Twilight said. A hint of resignation permeated her voice.

They did just that.

* * *

Canterlot, while in function the political capital, was also the cultural capital of Equestria. This was no better reflected than by Solar Boardwalk, or ‘The Board’ as the locals referred to it. Here a pony could find a hub of artists and thinkers exchanging and demonstrating their works. From the lowly lyre playing busker to the fashion boutique owning businesspony, The Board was the summation of all of Equestria’s creative output.

It was also the perfect place to bring a tourist. Or four, as the case was.

The farmers moods were starting to lighten, particularly after the humorous event involving a spilled mushroom soup and the mess created by it a mere half an hour earlier. Mane kept insisting it hadn’t been his fault. Regardless, they were kicked out.

The midday sun warmed their faces as they trotted along the wooden walkway. It was too early for the afternoon and evening crowds to arrive, so they enjoyed the relative quiet as the many vendors lining the streets sent them friendly waves.

“So, Rise, you like fashion?” Twilight asked.

The earth pony seemed to have a burst of energy. “I suppose. There’s never any chance to indulge in it back at the village, though.”

“Well, how about I take you to a dress shop? You could indulge as much as you want.”

“Oh, YES!”

Pan, Mane and Koi collectively sighed, but did not protest. They turned into a back alley. Twilight said it was a shortcut to one of the best designer houses in Canterlot. Their hooves clattered against the cobblestone as they made their way through the grimy passage.

A group of six earth ponies started to approach them. Though they didn't notice it, another group of eight closed in on them from behind. A perfect ambush.

"Hello there." the leading stallion said. An Umalian tinge was detectable under the poorly forced Equestrian accent. He and his five companions had fanned out to block the exit to the alley.

"Oh, hello!" Twilight responded, obviously cheery. "Would you mind moving so we can get past you?"

"I'm afraid there is no escape for you, or your new friends." he responded.

Twilight looked behind and was surprised to see eight more ponies blocking the way they came from. She then saw that the stallion talking to her had a hoof blade mounted to his front right leg. With a flick of his leg, the blade ejected from its mount, sunlight glaring off of the silver tool.

"You are to leave these ponies with us immediately. Go now, and no harm shall come to you. They are fugitive subjects of the Jade Lotus clan, and must be dealt with to the fullest extent of the law. As for your attempts to interfere with Umalian matters..." He waved it menacingly. "Don't even think about it."

"And if I refuse?" Twilight asked indignantly.

The stallion smiled. He lunged with the blade, closing in on her rapidly.

Koi was faster.

Inches away from her throat, the blade was yanked away as the he deflected the stallions leg just above the hoof. With astounding agility, Koi slammed his free limb into the underside of the ensnared pony's appendage.

CRACK

Twilight nearly threw up. Mane flinched. Rise hugged Pan as she cowered behind him. Pan stared in awe, oblivious to the mare.

Despite his massive size, Koi was dancing circles around the perpetrators. Another one reached for him. He used the opportunity to yank

the exposed leg and throw the smaller stallion to the ground. A third tried to jump onto his exposed backside, but Koi reacted with a thunderous buck to the face. There was an opening between the remaining three ponies.

“GET OUT OF HERE!” Koi yelled to the others. They eagerly complied and sprinted through the gap just as the other eight ponies were comprehending what was happening before them. Koi used the opportunity to clear a space around him. The fourteen hostile ponies reclosed the circle, giving him with a wide berth.

The leader pony with the broken leg scrambled to the sides, panting. “What are you waiting for? ATTACK HIM!” After a moments hesitation, the thirteen other ponies swarmed on him.

The orange stallion, rather than wait, charged at a random pony, knowing that he would need to break apart this circle. The mare, not expecting such ferocity, went wide eyed as Koi lept into the air and slammed his hooves into her chest. She went sprawling back, three separate ribs fractured.

He then swung a hoof to the right and pummeled a grey pony in the back of the head. Kicking out his back legs, he was satisfied to feel them connect with the gut of another stallion. With the circle now sufficiently broken, he began to back away, from the mass. None of them seemed particularly intent on attacking him again.

“What the hell are you waiting for!?” the leader demanded. “He isn’t a fucking Tae Kwon Hoof grand master, KILL HIM!”

“I, uh... sir, I think he is.” one of the ponies said in a muffled voice.

The leader looked at Koi again, studying. His eyes turned as wide as dinner plates. Koi just smiled.

“Grand Master Koi? Hooo-lee shit. LET’S GO! No point getting ourselves killed over some damn farmers!” With that, the group fled in a matter of seconds, the wounded leader and the crippled mare being carried over the shoulders of them. They had never been there.

Koi emerged on the other side of the alley and saw Twilight and the rest of his companions standing some distance away. He walked over to them.

“I suppose were not going to the dress shop anymore, are we.”

* * *

The other ponies, having ran away, did not catch wind of Koi's secret. He preferred to keep it that way.

Twilight was in shock. Her breathing was ragged and uneven. The other three, while faring much better than the unicorn, were in no shape to continue carelessly exploring the city; not while there could still be ponies out there trying to hurt them. Though the day was just barely peeking into the afternoon, Pan made the decision for them to head back to the palace.

Koi lifted Twilight onto his back and they started to quickly walk in the general direction of the palace. They went without a word. The giant white structure wasn't hard to find, and they made their way up the steps of the main entrance.

They were about to turn into the the east wing when a voice broke out.

"Oh my goodness!"

It was Princess Luna. The farmers stopped where they were as the dark blue alicorn nearly sprinted over to them.

"We need to get her to a bed! Where are you staying?"

Pan led her back to their suite. The six of them, the farmers, Twilight and Luna entered the fifth unused bedroom and lay Twilight down. She was unconscious.

"What happened?"

Pan explained the incident at the alleyway, unaware of the implied information he was supplying Princess Luna with.

After hearing the tale, she spoke. "It seems I have something to discuss with my dearest sister." She seemed slightly angered.

With that, Luna turned to leave the room.

"Though it is not my place to order sanctions upon you, I shall request that you do not leave palace grounds for the remainder of your stay. It seems neither I nor Celestia can guarantee your safety in our own lands."

She exited, leaving the farmers completely bewildered by the encounter. All hopes to explore Canterlot had been quashed; not as if they wanted to, at this point. The very least they could do at this point was to see what the royal kitchen was offering for a late lunch.

* * *

Pan was lying in his bedroom. He had no idea what time it was. *Late*, he concluded. The room was cold. He tried to wrap his sheets around himself even tighter, but it didn't do much. It had been a strange day. He had too much to think about. Relaxing was impossible.

A knock on the door nearly made him jump. It had been soft; he wasn't even sure he heard it. He lay still for a while. The knock came again. Groaning, he got up and walked over to the source of the noise. He gently turned the knob and pulled the door open. It was Rise.

"Can I come in?" she whispered.

Pan stared at her.

She stared back.

"I... oh, yeah. Of course."

The mare quietly shuffled in as Pan closed the door behind her. She sat on the edge of the bed. Pan sat next to her.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

She sighed. "It's just... I can't sleep."

Pan chuckled. "Neither can I."

"It's just... all this stuff has happened to us..." she said, looking away.

"I know. It's impossible to sleep with so much on our minds."

She looked back at him, straight in the eyes.

"But..." he continued, "We don't have to sleep."

Rise flashed a smile. She leaned in. Got closer. Pan leaned in as well, almost touching.

He woke up.

A muffled “FUCK!” was all that escaped through the bedsheets covering his mouth.

* * *

She was not nauseous anymore. That was good. Prior to that day, the worst harm she had ever seen a pony inflict on another was a small bruise. Seeing a leg shatter in half like a twig was quite a step up. Still, she preferred it to having her throat cut out. At the very least, the broken leg hadn’t resulted in copious amounts of blood loss. She could only imagine how much of the thick, red liquid a slit neck would spew.

The sickening dizziness came back.

Twilight didn’t rouse until five in the evening, and even then she couldn’t stand and walk for another hour. Six thirty rolled in, and Twilight forced open the bedroom door. The farmers were sitting in the living room, the empty plates and bowls indicating that room service had provided them with dinner.

“Hey! Feeling better?” Mane asked.

Not really. Twilight thought. She said nothing, but looked at the floor with the darkest face she could muster.

“Hungry?” he said as he pointed at a still full bowl of soup.

Twilight remained silent.

“...oookay. Well, Princess Celestia said she wanted to talk to you when you were feeling better. Just so you know.”

The unicorns head perked up at that.

‘Thanks.’ she said as she walked out the door.

* * *

It was odd to think that, just half a day ago, in this very room, Twilight’s whole world had changed, for better or for worse. Now, Celestia’s office was just another office. Nothing special.

“So.” she began.

“Feeling better?” Celestia asked.

Twilight snorted. The princess smiled.

"I'll take that as a yes."

The unicorn continued to passively stare at her teacher.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about."

"You were almost killed and saw something that most Equestrian ponies would consider traumatizing. I'd say that's something to talk about."

"I almost died, but didn't. That's that." Twilight said with a tone implying that that would be all Celestia could get out of her.

The princess returned a sigh. "It's obviously bothering you."

Twilight continued to stare at her. "So what if it is?"

"If you can't do this, I won't hold it against you."

This broke Twilight's gaze. She shifted her focus to the floor.

Celestia continued. "Consider today's event a test of your mettle. You were out for nearly five hours from seeing a broken leg. I would imagine your reaction to far more..." she searched for the right words, "...previous injuries would be even more debilitating."

"*You* seem to take the news of a ponies broken leg quite easily."

"Twilight, I've been around for far longer than you can imagine. Trust me when I say that a broken leg is nothing compared to what I have seen."

It almost sounded as if the Princess was mocking her. Goading her to toughen up. Regardless of Celestia's intended message, Twilight received it as a challenge.

"Fine."

"What?"

"I won't be such a little filly about a bit of blood."

Celestia shook her head. That was easier than expected. She was lying, but there was no point arguing about it.

“So why did you *really* want to speak with me?” Twilight asked, seemingly snapped out of her mood.

Celestia cleared her throat. “Luna told me about what happened in the alleyway. While I am a bit perturbed that someone would actually attempt a murder in the middle of Canterlot, what concerns me even more is the fact that Jade Lotus agents could get into Equestria, and what that means for the mission.”

“Wait, hold on a second...” Twilight started. “Luna told you?”

The princess let out a heavy breath then filled Twilight in on the details of what had happened since she passed out.

“Luna approached me about this. I was... compelled to tell her the truth of our situation. My sister is a bit of a social butterfly, but unintelligent she is not.”

Another question formed in Twilight’s mind. “When I saw her earlier this morning she seemed unaware of the mission. Were you trying to hide this from her?”

“Umala was my mistake, and mine to deal with. If she needed to know, I would have told her, not as if it matters at this point. I didn’t tell her everything, though. She only has a vague idea of why you are doing this.”

Celestia’s face suggested that this would be all she had to say on the matter.

Twilight picked up the conversation. “Those ponies who attacked us; what did you mean about them impacting the mission?”

“They knew the farmers came here. They knew about you. Most importantly, they knew about the mission, though of the details I am not certain.” Celestia paused. “My point is, I’m not sure how much time we have. Those agents were expected to take the farmers and return them to Umala within a specific time frame..”

“I’m not sure where you’re going with this.”

“Twilight, they know who the farmers are. They know where they came from. I do not know what the punishment for fugitives in Umala is, but I can assure you that, if those agents do not return with the farmers in tow

on schedule like they are supposed to, there will be dire consequences for the village.”

That made sense to Twilight, though she was in a far too melancholy mood to have a strong reaction.

“The five of you need to leave tomorrow morning. Head to the borderlands, locate and pick up the mercenaries, and get to the village. Those ponies that attacked you are no doubt already on their way home to report their findings. I can drop you off via chariot at the edge of the borderlands, but from there you’ll be on your own. ”

Twilight’s mouth went dry. She had not been expecting that. The farmers made it sound as if they had about a week to relax and recuperate. Tomorrow? She sighed. Tomorrow it is, then.

“I... alright.” she said.

“I’m sensing you have some questions you need to ask me.” Celestia said.

“A few, yeah. Where will I find the mercenaries, and will they know I’m coming?”

Celestia pushed a folder that had been sitting on her desk towards Twilight.

MercCont 2963 UMA.|OPERATIONS

“You will find all of the information you will need in here.”

Twilight flipped it open. Conveniently enough, the first leaflet was a list of rendezvous points to meet the five mercenaries. The other pages consisted of various things of military nature. The unicorn only vaguely understood the terminology as she flipped through various blueprints and information on who, what and where they would be fighting. Towards the back were aerial photographs taken by spy pegasi. The first one, simply labeled ‘Site 1 A,’ was that of a small village. The village they she was headed to, she surmised.

“I’ve already sent out messengers. They’ll be expecting you.” Celestia tacked on.

She closed the folder, deciding to read it and the dossier folder later in privacy. "Will I have time to head back to Ponyville?"

Celestia chuckled. "Oh, yes, don't worry about that. You're not in THAT much of a rush. Besides, you need to pack, don't you?"

Twilight realized she was being a tad naïve. Packing. Of course.

"I'd imagine you'd want to say farewell to her friends, as well."

With a cringe, the unicorn realized she had almost forgotten about that. Wordlessly, she grabbed the folder and walked to the door.

"Yes... of course. I'll need to say goodbye. Now, if you don't mind, I believe I have some studying I must do. Goodnight, Princess."

"Goodnight, my faithful student."

* * *

"You know, despite the fact that we came all this way together, we hardly know anything about each other."

The farmers were sitting in the living room. Pan was trying to stir some conversation out of them.

"What of it?" Koi asked.

"Well... why did you guys come on this adventure?"

"I don't know. Why did you?" Mane asked. He seemed to want to avoid the question.

To this Pan realized he had no good answer. He searched for the right words to explain his thoughts. "... I guess I wanted to help the village."

"Bullshit." Mane replied in the most monotone way one could possibly speak.

Pan sighed. "The world. I wanted to see the world. I don't want to be stuck on a farm for my entire life when there is so much I could do; so much I could be."

The others were silent.

"Well come on. I said mine. You guys tell me yours."

Koi started. "Protection."

The other three nodded at him. The stallions impressive physicality had helped them numerous times. His presence was quite welcome, especially after the transpiring in the alley.

"I... I was scared." Mane answered. "I wanted to leave the village; I was afraid of what would happen if we failed to get warriors."

This took Pan aback. "You wanted to abandon the village?"

"Yes. I figured we had no chance of succeeding, so I came with the intention of striking out on my own if we failed."

Under his breath, Pan muttered, "Coward."

Mane either didn't hear or ignored him.

Turning his attention, Pan asked Rise the same question. "So why'd you come along, Rise?"

She looked as if she hadn't been expecting the question; that Pan would skip her. "Oh! I... uh... I have my reasons!" she stammered.

"Obviously. Mind elaborating?"

"I really can't tell you..."

Pan sighed, then with a malicious grin, teased her. "You didn't come for the dresses, did you?"

"What? No!" she retorted. "I came here because of y--" She shoved her hoof in her mouth.

Koi snorted. "Mares. Never in control of their mouths."

* * *

Twilight had fallen asleep studying. This she determined when she awoke to the sun glaring through the window and saw the open folder inches away from her head. It was open to a page describing Umalian firearms; essentially a shoulder mounted steel tube that explosively propelled whatever object had been rammed down the barrel. She hadn't read enough to see exactly how it worked, but she guessed it had

something to do with the rapidly expanding gas forcing whatever was in the barrel out, and at lethal speeds.

She closed the folder and walked over to the living room. Unsurprisingly, the four farmers were waiting on the couches, all of their supplies bundled up and ready to go. Twilight had told them they were leaving in the morning. She guessed they likely woke up with the sun anyways. Their presence told her that wasn't an inaccurate assumption.

As if on cue, a heavy hoof knocked on the door. Twilight opened the door. One of the royal guardsponies was standing there.

"I'm here to escort you to the throne room, when you are ready. Celestia waits for you." His voice was gruff and weathered. Twilight had nothing to take save for the dossier and intel folders. The farmers nodded their heads. They were ready to go. And so they went.

The last of the sunlight ceremony crowds were slipping away. Princess Celestia, regal as ever, sat on the throne as the five of them approached.

"Are you ready to depart?"

Twilight took one last look around the throne room, drinking in the sight. This could very well be the last time she ever sees it. A knot formed in her gut.

"As ready as we'll ever be."

Celestia rose and walked down to the main entryway. The farmers, Twilight and the guards followed. Standing before the archway that formed the main gatehouse, Celestia turned and faced her followers.

"I've never been much for inspirational speeches. But if ever a moment demanded one, this would be it." A smile flickered on her face. "Considering the audience, however, I think I can forgo that."

She leaned in close to Twilight, and spoke softly so only she could hear.

"Never forget who you are. Never forget that, here, back home, there will be people that love you and care for you. Most importantly, never forget the Elements of Harmony. They may serve you well in the trials ahead."

She pulled away from her ear and addressed them all again.

“I, Princess Celestia, Ruler of Equestria and its subjects, hereby release you, Twilight Sparkle, Pan Bare, Mane Tis, Rise, and Koi to your quest. I wish upon you a blessing of my magic, and I shall watch you from above as the sun rises.”

She then placed her muzzle on each of the five individuals. A symbolic sending off by the Sun Princess. When she came to Twilight, the unicorn threw her forelegs around Celestia’s neck in a tight embrace. The alicorn obliged, and returned the hug.

“You’re coming back, Twilight.”

“Promise?” she whispered.

“I promise.”

Chapter 3

Ponyville

Had it not been for the wind drying her eyes to a spongy blob, Twilight would have been bawling. The hour long ride home to Ponyville had been uncomfortably long. Pan and Mane were being exceptionally solemn, and Rise's playful demeanor had been replaced by the piercing eyes Twilight had seen the first time they met. Koi was being Koi. She half suspected that their unusual quietness was due to having never flown before. It had that sort of effect on ponies.

Home. I've started to think of Ponyville as home. Twilight realized as they started to descend into the town square, just starting to fill with the usual day traffic. Seeing the chariot approaching, the ponies cleared out from the center of the plaza.

Twilight hopped out, and the farmers followed. They shot straight to the library, ignoring the stares she was getting from the early morning crowd. She had only been gone a day, but it felt like years. It was a nice surprise, then, to see Spike standing in the doorway waving to her.

Inside, the library was perfectly clean. Spike had not slacked on his chores while Twilight was gone. The door closed behind them as the dragon walked back over to them.

"So what's going on, Twi? Why'd Celestia need you?" he asked.

'Twi' sighed. "I'm going to have to go away for a while."

He looked up at her inquisitively. "What do you mean? You just got back."

"I'm just here for however long it takes to pack and say my goodbyes. We really need to leave as soon as possible."

"Oh, 'we?' I'll pack our stuff right now!"

"Not you, Spike. Just these ponies and me. You need to stay here."

Spike froze in his spot. "And just why not?" he asked with a bitter tone.

"I can't say, Spike. I really can't. I'm sorry, but you can't come with me. Not this time."

He stared at her for some time. With a huff, he went up to Twilight's room to pack whatever she would need. Twilight suspected he was angry and just trying to distract himself rather than actually try to be helpful. He wouldn't even know what she needed, after all. She walked up the stairs to the room. Spike was sitting at the floor, looking at her expectantly.

"Something on your mind?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing." he said sarcastically. "Just wondering why I'm always left behind while you go on these grand adventures. It's a bit boring being left behind all the time." There was an apparent spite in his voice. This had been brewing in him for some time, evidently.

Twilight walked over, sat next to him, and pulled him close with a hoof.

"Next time. I promise."

"The least you could do is tell me why I can't go with you *this* time."

"I can't tell you. I already told you. It's a personal matter, and the less the ponies around town hear that I'm heading off, the better."

"You're lying to me, Twi."

That stung a bit. She relented.

"I just don't want you to worry. This isn't some care-free adventure I'm going on. It will be dangerous."

"A little danger won't stop me!" Spike protested.

"*I mean it*, Spike."

The dragon stopped talking.

"I don't want you coming, because of how dangerous this will be." With all of the graveness she could muster, she continued. "There's a chance I will not be coming back, Spike. I promise to you it will not happen, but there is a chance. I cannot take you with me."

“What do you mean, ‘not be coming back’?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“You know exactly what I mean.”

“You’re saying you could...” he never finished the word before he started his eyes widened. His jaw went slack.

“Oh.” was all he could manage as he desperately fought back tears.

Wordlessly, Twilight comforted the quivering baby dragon with her hoof. She already cried all the tears she had an hour ago.

“I need you to grow up. For yourself. For me. If I don’t make it back, I need to know you can take care of yourself.”

Sniffling, the dragon pulled away from Twilight and nodded his head.

“Consider it your most important chore for the next few months. That is all I ask of you while I am gone.”

With magic, Twilight levitated Spike over to his bed and set him in. He was far too stressed to help her pack, and she had a lot of stuff to do and ponies to see.

* * *

Twilight decided to abandon her normal saddlebags. She had to be practical, and a colorful, lavender garment would not be the best option if it came to being in a fight. Rummaging around the library closet, she found what she needed. They were massive and consisted of a uniformly light brown canvas material. These were the sort of saddlebags she would need. They could fit nearly five times as much supplies than her other ones. It just came at the price of being unfashionable.

The farmers stared at her as she paced around the library, searching every nook and cranny for anything that might be useful. Twenty minutes later, with the assistance of some magic, the saddlebags were filled about halfway. She turned to the farmers.

“Sorry, but you’ll have to wait here. The townsfolk here are annoyingly curious, and if they saw you, well, I’m not sure what will happen.”

They nodded their heads in agreement.

“And where are you going?” Pan asked.

Twilight hung at the words. “Uh... getting some more supplies.”

With that she walked out the door and headed off towards Sweet Apple Acres.

* * *

“It ain’t no problem, Twi’, but if’n ya don’t mind me askin’, why d’ya need so much food?”

The orange mares reaction was not entirely unexpected. The amount of apples and apple-based baked goods she had requested was enough to feed a single pony for three weeks. Even more if they were small eaters like Twilight.

The unicorn glanced around, looking to see if anypony was within earshot. The barn was empty save for the two of them.

“I... I’m going to be gone for a while. I need supplies.”

“Yer gun be gone fer ah month? Because thats how much food yer askin fer.” Applejack responded.

“I’ll be gone for much more than a month, I’m afraid.”

“An’ you jus’ need some apples to hold you ov’r until ye’ can resupplah at yer destination, ah presume.”

“I guess so.”

“Well, alrighty. Ah can’t turn down ah friend. Take ahs much ahs ya need out of the cellar. But I need ta ask ya, just where are ya goin that ya need so much?”

For the second time, Twilight needed to skirt the subject. “South. Outside of Equestria. I can’t really talk about it.”

Applejack gave her a blank stare. “Thar’s more to it, ain’t there.”

Twilight’s face gave that away.

“But ye can’t tell me. Fair enough. Weyull, I suppose I’m supposed to say goodbah, then. So, goodbah!” she said as she gave her best smile.

"I... yeah." She didn't have to know. If she knew where she was going, Applejack would ask to come with her. It was better this way. "I'll see you later!" Twilight sounded less than enthusiastic.

AJ, sensing her friends distress, gave her the tightest squeeze she could.

"See ya round, sugarcube."

* * *

"You can't talk about it, huh? Are you a spy?!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed.

Twilight had floated up to the pegasus' floating mansion in the town hot air balloon and cast the cloud walking spell on herself. She didn't actually need anything from the eccentric hot shot, other than to say goodbye. Hopefully not a last goodbye.

"I... what?"

"On a secret mission from Princess Celestia herself?" Dash asked again, zipping around the room in kung-fu poses.

"Rainbow."

"HIYAAAA!"

"Rainbow!"

"HEYOOOOOOO!!!!"

"RAINBOW!"

The winged pony stopped in mid-air and offered a hushed apology.

"This is serious. I'm going to be gone for a while. I just wanted to say farewell."

"Oh. Okay. Well... bye." the pegasus said.

There was an awkward silence.

"Aw, Twilight, you should know I'm not good at this sort of thing. Come here." With that, Rainbow Dash flew over and hugged Twilight. She hugged back.

“Don’t you dare try to follow me.” she whispered in the rainbow maned ponies ear.

* * *

Fluttershy’s cottage was as peaceful as it ever was. The yellow pegasus herself had been outside, tending to the chickens, when Twilight showed up at her home.

“Hey Fluttershy.”

“Oh... hi! Um... Spike told us you were gone... so... uh... welcome back! I guess...” she said, her voice barely carrying over the cries of the various animals.

“Was there something you need?”

“Actually, yes. Do you have any medical supplies? Bandages, ointments, anything of that sort.”

The bashful pegasus looked quite confused, but didn’t ask any questions.

“Oh, I suppose... just follow me...”

Fluttershy led Twilight into the cottage. The soft yellow walls and plush furnishings were cozy and welcoming. They walked over to a storage closet. Inside were stacks upon stacks of various gauzes, medical tools and medicines.

“Just take as much as you need. I can always restock.”

Twilight complied, and proceeded to stuff one of her saddlebags with as much as she could fit, though she had no idea what they would need. Sufficiently loaded, Twilight turned back to her friend.

“I’m going to be gone for some time.”

“Well... yeah, I could see that. Where are you going?”

“I can’t say. But if... no. *When* I come back, it will be in a few months”

“Oh... okay.”

“That’s the second reason I came by: To say my farewells.”

With surprising speed, Fluttershy had locked Twilight in a tight hug.

"Then I'll see you in a few months!" she squeaked.

"Yeah. See you later, Fluttershy."

Twilight broke the embrace. She made for the door.

"I'd prefer you keep this news on the down low. If you don't mind."

"Oh... no problem. I won't tell anyone."

With that, Twilight offered a final wave and stepped outside.

* * *

The Carousal Boutique was a fair distance from the cottage. If Twilight was to travel in wild lands, she would need some suitable clothes. She didn't even make it halfway before she found herself knocked onto the ground.

"HEY TWILIGHT!"

The pink puffball had elected to sprint out of an alleyway and bowl into her. Twilight was on the ground looking up at Pinkie Pie, who was wearing an impossibly large grin.

"Pinkie, have you considered ever just saying 'Hello!'?"

Pinkie Pie stepped away and helped Twilight back to her feet.

"Uhhhhh... Nope! Not really! That is sooo much more boring! So what are you doing?"

"I'm headed over to Rarity's shop to pick up a coat."

"Oh, are you going on an adventure and you need a thick winter jacket to keep you warmy warm while you hike through the wildy woods?" Pinkie guessed with surprising accuracy.

"I... uh. How did you know?" Twilight asked, shocked by her friend's perception.

"Well this morning while I was opening up Sugarcube Corner I felt an itch in my mouth by my right cheek. That usually means someone I know is going on an adventure! So I spent all day looking for who it was and when I

saw your ginormous saddlebags I knew that person was YOUUU!!!” With that, the pony threw confetti and streamers into the air.

Figures. Twilight thought.

“Pinkie, I need to leave Ponyville as soon as possible.”

“Oh! You need a farewell PARRRTAYYYYYY!!!!!!” Pinkie shrieked.

Twilight covered her ears. “No, Pinkie. That’s exactly what I don’t need. It would mean the world to me if you could keep this news to yourself.”

“Okie dokie lokie, Twilight! My lips are zipped!” she said nodding her head rapidly.

“Promise.”

“Don’t worry, Twilight! I promise!”

“Pinkie Pie Promise.”

“Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick cupcake in my eye!” she said while preforming the motions.

Satisfied, Twilight smiled.

“This is my final goodbye, Pinkie. I do not know when I will be back.”

“Ooh! I’ll have a welcome back party just for you!”

“Yes... I’ll probably need it.”

After a brief embrace that was entirely dominated by Pinkie Pie, the two parted ways. Twilight fought the urge to take a last look over her shoulder while her friend bounced her way back to Sugarcube Corner.

* * *

“Trekking gear, you say? My goodness, darling, that is not a typical request. A backpacking trip with a coltfriend, I assume?”

Twilight blushed. “Rarity, this is serious. I don’t know what I’ll be heading into, and I want to be adequately prepared.”

The purple maned unicorn let out a refined huff. “Very well, dear. All of my outdoors wear is in my storage closet. If you’ll just give me a

moment..." Rarity trotted off through a door. A minute later she returned levitating an impressive array of the finest, most stylish coats, jackets, parkas and ponchos she had to offer. "Take any one you want. My treat."

These wouldn't work. Not at all. "Uh, Rarity?"

"Do you not like them?" she asked, a hurt tone in her voice.

"No, they're fine. It's just... I need something a bit more practical. These are too... bright." Twilight said, gesturing at one that was made of a florescent green material and adorned with hundreds of gemstones.

"Oh, alright! Just tell me what you need!" With that, Rarity levitated a sketchpad and pencil over to her

"Durable and dark is all I need." Twilight said.

Rarity gave her a blank stare.

"My goodness, this really is serious, isn't it."

"You could say that."

With a sigh, Rarity scribbled a few quick designs.

"Just give me a few minutes to throw this together dear."

Rarity left the room and went upstairs to her studio. Twilight sat in silence, listening to the occasional thumps and bumps coming from the work room above her. True to her word, Rarity emerged six minutes and twenty-three seconds later, a large bundle of drab brown cloth floating behind her. Unfolding it, she held it before Twilight. It wasn't exceptionally pretty.

"Is this what you needed, Twilight?" she asked.

"Exactly what I was looking for." Twilight responded.

It was less a jacket and more a thick sheet with sleeves.

"At the very least it'll keep you warm without restricting your movement. I can't say I'm particularly proud of this piece. But as long as it serves it's purpose, I'm willing to accept it." Rarity's sigh suggested she was less happy with it than she was pretending to be. "Now, allow me to put this in those *massive* saddlebags of yours."

“Oh, Rarity, please. I can do that myself.”

“No, I insist!” she hissed.

Before Twilight could do anything, she felt the left saddlebag on her back unzip as Rarity proceeded to stuff the jacket in.

“Ah, there isn’t enough room in here. I’m sure I could rearrange it a bit so it will fit...”

“Rarity, stop. I’ll take care of it!” Twilight protested.

Ignoring her, the white unicorn continued “These books and folders could be slotted a bit better. If I just put this over th--” Rarity suddenly paused.

“What is it?” Twilight asked.

“Why on earth would a pony like yourself need books like *this*?” Rarity asked as she levitated a book out and held it in front of Twilight. “*The Art of War* by Sun Tzhoof? *The Corpsponies Creed: A Battlefield Medicine Crash Course* by the Equestria Military Academy?” The unicorn gasped as she read the next one. “*Search and Destroy: Modern Warfare Strategy and Tactics* by General Stoneshoe? Goodness me, filly. This isn’t light travel reading you have in here.”

Twilight winced. That, among other things, was the reason she didn’t want Rarity peeking around her saddlebags. She would need to read up on her military sciences if she was heading into battle. There was no point trying to keep a secret.

“I’m going on a journey, Rarity.”

“I know that, but why would you need these books on such abhorrent subjects?”

She repeated herself. “I’m going on a journey. You know why I need those.”

There was silence as Rarity thought. Her face changed from mild shock to stupor.

“Oh. Oh my.” she stammered.

“I don’t know if I’m coming back.”

The books dropped to the floor as Rarity took a step back and looked at Twilight face to face.

“My dear, you could have just told me.”

“I didn’t want you to worry. I didn’t want you to try to come with me. I’m sorry, but I cannot in good conscience endanger my friends as well as myself.”

Rarity pulled Twilight into a hug.

“I think I understand.” she whispered. It was a blatant lie, but it was the right thing to say. “I won’t question why you’re doing this.”

“Thank you.” Twilight said, her voice quivering.

“But you be careful. I couldn’t bear to lose you. None of use could. You come back to us, understand?”

“Rarity...”

“You’ll be back.”

They broke the hug. Twilight unceremoniously shoved the books and coat into her saddlebag.

“Farewell for now, Twilight Sparkle.”

Twilight could only flash a smile back at her as she exited the store.

* * *

Rather than be have her enormous saddlebags be the subject of many ponies stares, Twilight decided to take a less traveled route back to the library through side streets and alleyways. She noted, with great discomfort, that the pack was extremely heavy. Twilight drank in the sight of the town. This would be the last time she would see it for some time.

“Hey, Twilight! Over here!” the bush said.

Twilight rubbed her eyes. *Did that bush over there just talk?* She walked over to the talking plant.

“Um, hello?” she said.

“Give me a second, let me just undo this spell.”

With that, the bush dispersed into a cloud of smoke. In its place stood Princess Luna. She started coughing and pumping her wings to blow away the magical dust.

“Sorry about that. I didn’t want any pony to see me. It was just a simple illusion spell.”

Twilight nodded. “So what brings you here to Ponyville?”

“Well, to say goodbye, for one thing.” Luna answered.

The unicorn stared at the ground. “Sorry for not telling you the truth earlier in the castle. I figured if Celestia wanted you to know, she would have told you herself.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Celestia said she’d rather take care of the issue herself. Something about rectifying her own mistakes. It seemed like a touchy subject, why you were doing this, so I took my leave.”

“Why are you saying goodbye now, rather than back in Canterlot?” Twilight asked.

“Well, I realized after you left there was a way I could help you. Something my dear sister decided either didn’t want to do or simply ignored.”

With that, Princess Luna’s horn flared with magical light. Two objects began to materialize out of the ether beside her. As they took form, Twilight could see that they were a wicked blade and a intricate suit of armor.

“The Horn of Ceros and the Armor of Boreas. Ancient treasures of the Equestrian royal family that I borrowed from the palace vault. Legends say they are made of arcane energy in physical form.”

With a smile, Luna added: “I tend to disagree with that claim. May they serve you well, Twilight, through your travels, though I hope you need not use them at all.”

Twilight looked up at the princess. “How could I ever repay you? These are worth more than my very life!”

Chuckling, Luna held the unicorn by the shoulder. “Just bringing them back in one piece is all I need.”

She took a step back and turned around. Spreading her graceful wings, she prepared to take flight. Luna suddenly paused and looked over her shoulder, back at Twilight.

"I never did say thank you."

Without another word, Princess Luna took off to the sky as Twilight bowed in respect. When the blue shadow faded out of sight, she levitated the two artifacts off of the ground. Lacking space in her saddlebag, she simply lashed the ornate horn blade and the armor down on her back. Her head swimming from the encounter, she continued back to the library.

* * *

My dearest Spike,

Do not worry, I'll be back; I just do not know when. I want you to be waiting for me when I return.

*Always with you,
Twilight Sparkle*

* * *

"I'll be back."

Twilight whispered the words to herself as she boarded the chariot still waiting in the town square. The pegasi pulled into the sky with her and the farmers in tow. The sun hung low in the sky to the left of them as they flew south.

She had written the letter in a hurry. It seemed to her that the best way to calm the dragon was to leave him with as few words as possible; it would be less for him to worry about. The child had passed out some time before, and was still sleeping when Twilight left the paper on the dining table.

They were headed to the edge of Equestria Proper. The chariot would drop them off at the borderlands. From there they would continue on hoof to the designated rendezvous points that the mercenaries would meet them at.

The chariot ride proceeded without a hitch. Conversation was sparse, save for Pan asking about details regarding how they would proceed once

they were in the borderlands. Twilight was glad for the quiet. She needed time to still her thoughts. As she looked to east, towards the rising sun, Princess Celestia's words echoed in her mind.

I shall watch you from above as the sun rises.

Chapter 4

The Edge of the World

The chariot ride, was, despite the context, very dull. The five ponies made idle small talk as they sat in the carriage. It did not take long for Ponyville to fade, and they had scarcely seen any other cities or towns since. All that lay below them were vast forests, grasslands and farms. Out of boredom, as well as a burning curiosity, Twilight inspected the two objects of war she had recently been gifted. They were, despite their bulk, surprisingly light.

Not surprisingly light. Impossibly light.

Luna had mentioned that they may or may not have been made from magical power in solid form, though even she had expressed her disbelief of that claim. The meaningless chatter from the farmers had ceased, and, with nothing better to do, Twilight's horn began to glow as she started to magically probe the armor and the blade.

Nothing seemed unusual at first. The armor was composed of some sort of metal, though she was not able to identify what exactly. Metallurgy never was her strongest field. She remembered a spell she had learned back in school at Canterlot. An identification spell; useful for determining what a material was composed of. It could tell her what the metal was.

Her horn flared as she cast the relatively easy spell. For a unicorn as gifted as her it was about as draining as blinking. A ray of light emitted from Twilight's eyes down to the armor. The light reflected back a submicroscopic image of the material. The spell had the added advantage of helping her decipher whatever image she saw. And the image surprised her.

Carbon. That certainly wasn't what one usually considered to make armor out of.

She continued her magic probe of the gear. There was a faint trace she picked up on a bit earlier. It was weak, but it was definitely there. A golden apple being waved before her face. She took the bait and followed the magical stream.

It led her to an enchantment. A spell designed to passively effect the target in some way. It was archaic; ancient. The most notable aspect of the spell, however, was the raw power it exuded. This was no ordinary enchantment. The pony who cast it must have had extraordinary control over their abilities; Perhaps more so than Twilight herself. And, judging by the design of the spell itself, the caster was likely far older than even Celestia and Luna.

She pulled her probe out of the armor. A chill ran down her spine. These were questions that could be answered later. For now, she continued with her analysis. Twilight held up the armor, drinking in the sight.

The Armor of Boreas. An ancient treasure from times before the Princesses. It certainly looked the part. There was something off about the armor; as if it shouldn't belong in this day and age. It lacked the grace and refinement of the armor of the royal guards. Here, in her hoofs, was a tool of war. It was built for blood. For intimidation. It spoke not with benevolence, but with authority. Despite it being lifeless, it seemed as if it was about to pounce on her.

It was composed of many separable plates, all made of the same matte black carbon material. From what she could tell, it adequately covered most of the body and legs, but left a lot of joints fairly exposed. Twilight concluded that the armor was meant for more nimble fighters. A full range of motion allowed by sacrificing some protection. While the neck had some reinforcement via a flanged collar, the head was completely exposed, save for a rather frightful crown. The whole set had an angular look to it. It gave off a vaguely reptilian vibe. The fact that the carbon plates fit together like scales certainly added to the effect. She visualized a warrior in this armor charging at her with blood on their mind. The mere idea was terrifying.

"Where'd you get that from?" it was Mane.

Twilight realized she had been completely entranced with the armor. By the look on Mane's face, it seemed he had been trying to catch her attention for some time.

"From a friend." She was intentionally vague.

Mane looked at her, then back at the other farmers. He shrugged. No point interrupting her; she had been staring at the black suit for over an hour, occasionally casting a few spells.

Twilight quickly brought herself back to the task at hand. She rotated the crown in her hooves. It didn't look like a traditional one. It was completely dark and rather than sit straight up, it was slicked back like the feathers on a bird's head. Carvings swirled all about its strange shape. It menaced with spikes.

I suppose I should try it on. the unicorn thought. She slipped it over her head. It fit pretty well, all things considered. Actually, it fit perfectly.
Well, that wasn't so hard.

Indeed it was not! Hello There!

She ripped the crown off. The voice was unfamiliar; it felt like it had resonated throughout her entire body. Twilight looked around the chariot to see who had spoken. The farmers seemed oblivious.

"Uh, hello?" Twilight said.

Pan glanced at her. "Huh?" he said.

Twilight blushed. "Sorry, nothing." She put the crown back on.

Well that as weird.

I think you will find you can communicate with me better if you *think* rather than *say*. If you get what I mean.

Okay, that was weirder.

She didn't take the crown off this time.

You know I can hear your thoughts, right?

What in Celestia's name is going on?

Oh, Princess Celestia? Do you know her? She's an old friend of mine. Did you know that? No, of course you wouldn't. No one would know that.

WHO ARE YOU? HOW ARE YOU IN MY HEAD?

Who am I? YOU IMPUDENT, MERE MORTAL! You cannot possibly comprehend the infinite power of the almighty alicorn, BOREAS!

She ripped the crown off, again; less because she was frightened by the voice but more because it was extremely loud. At least, it had the illusion of being loud. She found her ears to be quite intact. Whatever mental trickery this entity was employing was limited to the crown. Intrigued by the change of events, she replaced the crown.

That was rude.

That was loud. Now, who are you?

If I could sigh, I would. I am Boreas, the legendary alicorn of ancient times.

Twilight just then noticed that the voice was decidedly male, and if ever a spirit was capable of expressing sarcasm, this Boreas fellow was a master at it.

Boreas? As in the name of...

Boreas, as in the name of the armor whose crown you are now wearing. And yes, I do as a matter-of-fact live in this crown, before you ask.

I believe there are a lot of other questions you need to answer.

Filly, I have been waiting for this moment for stars know how long. Allow me to start from the beginning...

And how long will this take?

I'll be done before we land. Trust me.

* * *

The last time Boreas existed in physical form had been some untold thousands of years in the past. In his own words, it could have happened "one, two, three, maybe even four-thousand years ago. Likely even more." He had, in his isolation, lost track of time. It would be important however, to describe Boreas' life as it was prior to being an insane old alicorn in an antiquated suit of armor.

He was, as all alicorns are, a member of the Equestria royal family. The family was much larger, in his days. Some of his fondest colthood memories were of him playing with his alicorn siblings and cousins. But Boreas had never been much of leader. If you asked him, he would say it was because he didn't want to, not inability to do so.

It was no shock, then, when his cutie mark appeared and it was of an anvil. He always had a fascination with metal, and in particular armor. It was no disappointment to his parents. Plenty of alicorns in the royal family did not have the panache and talent to be the next kings or queens. They usually just used their pre-destined gifts to service Equestria in other ways, mostly in the form of various bureaus and departments. Boreas, given his exceptional skill with metals, decided to metaphorically take the reins of the Department of Technology. His main focus was the advancement of material sciences. It had always been his dream to create the ultimate metal: Minimum weight with maximum strength.

Equestria always had rivals, and ancient times were no exception. The mere thought of the land of alicorns possessing an indestructible metal was terrifying to them. Over his long life, Boreas had escaped his fair share of assassinations. Most were unsuccessful. Some left their marks. He had gotten close to a breakthrough on numerous occasions, and without fail an attempt was made on him every time. It didn't matter in the end. All of his 'advancements' ended up failures. Too brittle. Sheared easily. Financing nightmare. Thousands of formulas and techniques never amounted to anything.

Frustrated with his constant failure, the nearly predictable attempts on his life, as well as a growing distance between him and his family, Boreas threw all he knew out the window and tried a different approach. Perhaps the miracle metal he was searching for was not a metal at all.

Diamonds. Super-compressed carbon atoms. Surprisingly strong, considering what they were made of. In a mixture of boredom and self-pity, he relegated himself to manipulating carbon atoms with magic, seeing what interesting allotropes he could devise. An easy feat for a creature as powerful as him. That's when he found it.

His masterpiece. The ultimate material. He had no name for it. It was above names. Here was the sum of all his anger, his fears and his wrath. They had tried to stop him. They had nearly ruined his life. With a delicate flash of his horn, he prodded the sheet of carbon. It didn't warp a

nanometer. His life's work had become his outlet for rage. Now it was his turn.

Boreas did not head back to the Department of Technology facility. He could not trust anyone with this. He fled into the wilderness. There was safety in isolation. Here in the untamed lands his fury could fester and grow. In the foothills of the mountains, he drew upon nature to provide his resources. Plants and animals withered as he absorbed their precious carbon. Slowly, before his eyes, the armor took form. Years of malice, of torment, poured into the ghastly black suit of war. A hollow spectre of death, waiting for its creator to step into it.

But this was not what he wanted. He did not want to harm anyone. He looked about himself. At the extinguished life that had been squashed around him. The assassins were right. He was a monster. This... thing in front of him was an abomination. There is only one choice.

He must destroy it. But he cannot bear to.

He can only protect others from it. His horn begins to glow.

Boreas falls. His body, lifeless, collapses on the mountainside.

But he is not dead.

The Armor of Boreas lives, its crown a testimony to the sins of the creator.

Boreas the Royal Alicorn lives, an eternal guardian against his own evil.

* * *

They had been walking for an hour. Equestria's pleasant green flora had given way to the borderlands dry and dusty browns. True to Celestia's words, they had been deposited at the northern edge of the golden plains. She already had the plan memorized, but out of worry she double-checked the intel folder. The first page, as expected, was the rendezvous schedule.

1. Iron S., Break,
Hoofall Town Square, NE
1200 D.N.S.

“Sixteen Pigeons”

Who, where and when. The last line was the challenge to assure they were the correct contact. They were to meet Iron Shod and Break at the north east corner of the Hoofall town square at noon on any day. They were told to be there every day at that time to watch for them. And, of course, the challenge was “Sixteen Pigeons.” The chariot drivers had told them that Hoofall was a straight shot south. They couldn’t miss it. And so south they went.

Twilight thought back to earlier, to Boreas’ story. He had been quite thorough in his explanation of how he ended up in her hooves. Once he saw the horror created by his own magic, he cast a very special spell on himself. A soul transfer. The power the armor could potentially give somepony was too terrible to imagine. Thus, he sacrificed a normal life to make sure the armor’s evil could never reach its potential. No pony could use the armor without him allowing it.

Boreas was no fool. Along with the soul transfer he placed a massive assortment of enchantments and binds on the suit. Among the many other abilities he boasted about, Boreas was most eager to point out that he could adjust the measurements of the armor to fit anyone, that he could telepathically communicate with the wearer, and that the suit acted as his eyes and ears. Anything that the nigh-indestructible suit could see and hear, he could as well.

He didn’t say much beyond that, other than prior to being given to Twilight, he had been sitting in the Canterlot palace vault when Luna suddenly remotely teleported him and the Horn of Ceros to Ponyville. **We’ll talk more later. For now, I want my thoughts to myself.** were the last words he communicated before requesting that Twilight take off the crown. True to his words, they were just pulling in to land at that moment. With nothing else to think about, Twilight tried to recall all the information she could about where they were headed and who they were first meeting.

Hoofall. The largest settlement in the borderlands, and the closest thing one could compare to the real Equestria. It was relatively safe, if rustic. Pegasi didn’t manage the weather here. Earth ponies didn’t watch over their cows and pigs; they systematically herded them like lesser beings. It all seemed so backwards, but it was not her place to condemn them. It was their choice to live here.

She thought about the first two mercenaries they were to join with. Iron Shod and Break. The dossier files on Iron Shod were sketchy at best. What wasn't classified tended to be very vague. From what she could tell, he had had some previous run-ins with the Ministry of Intelligence, and had in fact received numerous commendations from Celestia herself. There were also hints that he had done some undercover work in Umala. His bio seemed to paint the picture of a war hero. His record indicated such.

Break's profile was more straightforward. He was actually an Equestrian citizen prior to relocating to the borderlands. Break did high-altitude surveillance for the Mol before quitting and joining the Hammer Hoof Private Military Corporation, one of the more reputable companies of such trade that had a presence in the borderlands. Officially, his reason for quitting was frustrations with the chain of command. Unofficial questioning of his former colleagues indicated that he was in fact dissatisfied with his line of work, and became a mercenary to satisfy his thrill-seeking urges. Additionally, he had apparently served under Iron Shod for some extended period of time.

It was approximately eleven-thirty in the morning. They were supposed to meet with the two ponies at exactly twelve. As they crested a small hill, they saw the town in a distance. It wasn't particularly impressive.

Strangely enough, The Armor of Boreas started to vibrate. Twilight, unsure of what it meant, levitated the crown and put it on.

Nice little trick to get you're attention, wouldn't you agree? Not to admonish myself, but I must say I thought of just about everything with these enchantments.

Yeah, sure. You need to tell me something?

Just a warning. Hoofall isn't a town meant for Equestrians. You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy. Be careful in there, and don't trust anyone but those mercs.

I'll keep that in mind. You have anything else to say?

Nothing at the moment. Now, if you would so kindly remove me...

She tugged the crown off and replaced it on her back.

"Say, Twilight, why do you keep wearing that crown?" It was Rise.

it.” The question caught her off-guard. “I don’t know. I... I guess I just like

Rise’s next question nearly made her trip. “Can I try it on?”

“I... well...”

“Please?” Rise was giving Twilight her best puppy eyes.

“Well, I don’t know...”

The armor vibrated.

“Come on, Twilight!”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt...”

The armor vibrated again. Hard.

“...buuuut I promised my friend I wouldn’t let anyone else touch it. So sorry, Rise.”

Rise huffed and gave her best pouting face, but didn’t say anything else.

The vibrations stopped.

* * *

True to Boreas’ words, Hoofall didn’t live up to any expectations. The first pony they saw was piss drunk and relieving himself in an alleyway. The streets were fairly devoid of life, presumably because everypony was off working. The town square wasn’t hard to find. The main entrance road led right to it. Despite how empty Hoofall had seemed earlier, the plaza was bustling with life. They didn’t have time to sit and stare, though. They had some ponies they needed to meet.

They would be waiting somewhere in the north east area of the town square. She would recognize them from their dossier pictures. Since they had entered from the northern side of town, Twilight led the group over to their left.

The square was just a large, dusty clearing with a busted fountain in the center. On top of the fountain was a vandalized statue dedicated to the Liberty Trotters, who had founded Hoofall hundreds of years ago. Not

wanting to get boxed in by the milling crowds that dominated the center of the square, she and the farmers skirted along the edge, on a wooden walkway. They reached the northeastern corner with no problem.

She looked around. A grey earth pony and a light brown pegasus. They were nowhere in sight. Behind her was a large, brick building with a simple sign that read:

Hoofall Tavern

Her gut told her they were in there. Her instinct told her to get as far away from the building as she could.

“You four wait here.”

The farmers nodded and shuffled off to a spot that wasn't in the way of the traffic.

Twilight stepped inside the fine establishment.

* * *

Dank, loud, muggy, putrid, dirty and distasteful would all have been adequate words to describe the Hoofall Tavern. Decency seemed to have no meaning in the bar, judging by how the ponies behaved. Fights broke out every few minutes, bottles shattered against skulls and stallions belched their most impressive gas collections.

It was all overwhelming to Twilight. She spent a full twenty seconds standing in the doorway, just staring at the scene, before she came to. Careful not to brush into anypony, she made her way to a corner. She hid in the darkness, not bringing attention to herself. From here she could try and identify her two mercenaries. Her eyes started to scan the crowd.

A hoof was suddenly pulled over her mouth. She tried to scream as she was dragged out of the bar via a backdoor down a hallway. The perpetrator kept her mouth sealed. The alleyway she found herself in was deserted save for a dumpster, a few rats, and of course the stallion that had ponynapped her. Or two stallions, as the case was, because another one walked out of the backdoor to join them.

“You can let her go, Break.” the one that just joined them said. He was a hulking grey beast of an earth pony. His mane was white; not by birth, but by age. The gravelly voice confirmed his time in the world.

Twilight gasped as her ponynapper released her. Iron Shod and Break. The mercenaries. “Consider this a fair warning. You’re new in town. Carrying all that gear, your a prime subject to rob. You’re lucky we got to you first.

“Sixteen Pigeons.” she said, still panting for air.

Iron Shod gave her a blank stare.

The voice behind her spoke.

“Are you fucking kidding me.” Break said.

Iron Shod, disregarding Break’s comment, replied to the challenge. “Sixteen Pigeons, Eight Nests.”

“She’s our contact?”

A siren blared in the background.

“This isn’t the time for this. We’ll grab your friends and head back to the safehouse.”

Break muttered something to himself, then shot up into the sky over the tavern to grab the farmers.

* * *

Rise watched Twilight disappear into the tavern.

“You think she’ll be okay by herself?”

Pan turned to face her. “She’ll be fine.”

They stared at each other for an awkwardly long time.

Her throat tightening, Rise broke the gaze. “If you say so...”

Pan let out a very long, silent exhale.

A strange winged pony suddenly landed next to them and herded them off to an unknown location. They didn’t bother resisting.

* * *

Iron Shod was peeking out the blinds onto the street below. Their safehouse certainly lived up to half of its name. They were in an abandoned home, but given the way it creaked under their hooves, Twilight

wouldn't have been surprised if it collapsed on them. The siren passed by them.

They had wordlessly grabbed the farmers and the two mercs more or less dragged the four of them through back alleys and side passages to the edge of town. The seven of them now sat around an old wooden table, dead silent.

Break was the first to say anything. "So."

"What was that, earlier?" Twilight asked.

"A bit of trouble with the fuzz."

"No, before that. The ponynapping thing."

Iron Shod answered. "Our version of a Hoofall welcoming committee."

"What kind of welcoming committee strangles a guest?"

"It's our way of showing newcomers to town that they need to be careful. Teach them a lesson and such. We meant no harm."

The farmers were confused. Pan had long since concluded that there was no point trying to make sense of these Equestrian ponies.

Iron Shod gestured at Break and himself. "We need to speak to you in private, Miss... uh..."

"Twilight Sparkle is my name."

"The fuck kind of name is Twilight Sparkle?" Break said, cracking up.

Iron Shod just grinned and covered his face with his hoof.

"Well, Miss Sparkle... we need to talk."

Iron Shod and Break led Twilight to a separate room. Break closed the door behind them. It was a small space; it barely fit the three of them. Apparently, it was an old storage closet.

Iron Shod started the questioning. "So, Miss Sparkle, would you mind telling us *who the fuck* you are?"

The coarse language grated against her ears, but in an effort to stay diplomatic, she did not show her distaste. "I am the contact sent by Princess Celestia."

"Bullshit. The messenger told us that our contact would be the most powerful unicorn Equestria has to offer. If I had to guess, your magical prowess is floppier than a bag of donkey dicks."

Break snickered at the crude imagery. The pegasus flapped his wings.

"I make no habit of bragging about my talents, Mr. Iron Shod."

"And I make no habit of having my ass covered by some prissy-ass Equestria unicorn that can't levitate a fucking fork. Do you have any actual combat experience?"

"Well... sort of... there was this thing with an Ursa Minor..."

This seemed to catch Iron Shod's attention. "An Ursa Minor, huh? Big talk from the little shit. How'd you do it? Choke it with a boulder? Club it with a tree? Rupture the veins in its eyes?"

Twilight didn't answer, in part due to shock at the graphic nature of Iron Shod's suggestions, but also because she had a feeling telling them she rocked the bear to sleep wouldn't help her cause.

Break took over from there. "Nothing, huh? So you're a liar, too? Probably how you got that fine-ass bitch Celestia to send you down here, too! Told her you were good at magic and shit! Wanted a free tour of the south, with some state sponsored baby-sitters, didn't you!"

That was too far. No one, NO ONE referred to her teacher with such derogatory terms.

"You. Take. That. Back." Twilight stated with all the fire she could muster.

"Or what? You're going to go tell mommy on us?"

"I'm warning you!" Already, her horn started to shimmer.

"Oooh, Shod! She's starting to cook up a spell! I wonder if it was that comment about what damn nice flanks Celestia's workin' that got her hissy like a bitch in heat!"

“YOU ASKED FOR IT, YOU GET IT!”

One moment, Break was standing next to Iron Shod. The next, there was a pegasus shaped hole through the wall behind him. And the wall behind that. And the wall behind that. Her telekinetic blast had sent the pegasus flying a hundred feet into the street.

“NEXT TIME YOU WANT TO INSULT MY TEACHER, YOU BETTER DIG YOURSELF A HOLE!”

The farmers burst through the door behind Twilight.

“What the hell happened?” asked Mane. One glance at Twilight’s horn and the holes in the walls answered his question.

Iron Shod began to laugh.

“Something funny, Shod?” Twilight spat at him.

“Funny? That was hilarious! Seeing Break get his ass beat by a little filly is the best thing I’ve seen in years!”

He turned to look out the holes.

“YOU OKAY, BREAK?” he yelled.

No reply.

“He’ll be fine.” Shod said, turning back to the others. “Don’t worry about what we said earlier. We were just testing you.”

“Testing me?”

“Just making sure ‘fine-ass’ Celestia was telling the truth about you.” he said, holding in laughter. Turning his attention to the farmers, “Could you four please leave? We’re not done in here.”

Without protest, they went back through the doorway.

Iron Shod looked back at the unicorn. “You’ve demonstrated your power. I have no doubts of your ability.”

Break stumbled his way back through the holes in the walls, covered in dirt.

“...but that doesn’t mean jack shit. I know your type. Equestria, born and raised. The most blood you’ll ever see is a scrape on the knee. Is this true?”

Twilight thought back to Koi breaking the stallions arm in the alleyway back at Canterlot.

“...I guess?” she replied.

“I read the intel; looked at the surveillance. That village we’re going to is a death trap. A shit-hole surrounded by forests, mountains and rivers.”

“It’ll be dangerous. I know.” Twilight said.

“Yes, it will.” he replied. “But not for you. You’ll be fine, I can almost guarantee it. A unicorn as powerful as you won’t be taken down easily. It’s the rest of us I’m worried about.”

“What do you mean.” she asked.

He was silent for a moment. His tone darkened. “Dirt, mud, the stench of death. Your hearts pounding, your ears are ringing, your vision is tunneling. Your best pal got his leg ripped off by a shoulder cannon the other day. It’s showing signs of gangrene. Your insides are failing on you; dehydration, hunger, disease. Your about to collapse, but you need to keep fighting. To collapse is to die. Your enemy charges your position. You stay glued to your stinking trench, waiting for them. They come. One falls, a blade in his throat. Another, his skull cracked open. Your covered in blood; your own and that of the pony you just gutted like pig. No mercy. To show compassion is an invitation to get shot.”

Iron Shod menaced over Twilight. “When the shit comes rushing at you, when my ass is backed up against a wall, will you be able to do what you need to save my life? To save your own?”

The implication was obvious. Was she ready to kill?

No.

“I... don’t know.” was all she could manage.

Shod snorted. “You better figure it out soon.” With that he left the room.

Break walked over to Twilight. "Have no doubt, *unicorn*. The decision will come, and it's coming soon."

* * *

Mane was lying in the cot. It was a bit short for him. Not as if he could sleep anyways. Him, his friends and Twilight had been shoved into a spare bedroom. It was stuffy, and Pan was snoring. He glanced about the dark room, trying to make out his companions.

Koi was absolutely still, but obviously still awake. It was a tad unnerving. Rise had shoved her pillow over her head, trying to block out Pan. The black and white pony himself was comfortably asleep.

Twilight, on the other hand, appeared to be wide awake. She had the crown on again. He had seen the armor and blade Twilight was carrying around. They gave him the shivers just looking at them. There was something about that crown that she was wearing that Mane found unsettling. Why was she wearing it? It didn't look very comfortable for sleeping in.

These were mysteries Mane had no answer for, and thus decided to sleep on them. He found himself staring at Twilight as he faded into unconsciousness. *The things I'd do to that mare.*

* * *

Tell me about the armor.

I already told you.

Not everything.

There are some things I'd rather keep to myself.

Very well. Tell me more about what happened between binding yourself to the armor and now.

You know, you haven't even looked at the Horn of Ceros, much less try it on.

It... scares me. I'll have to at some point, but as of right now, I'd prefer to pretend it doesn't exist.

Don't like the implications of wearing the weapon?

Such as?

Such as it would truly make you a machine of war.

I suppose. It seems wrong for a unicorn like me to wear it.

You know you'll have to, at some point.

Then I'll just wait for that moment. Now, could you answer my question?

Not much of interest, really. The armor was found about a century later, my corpse long since decomposed. The explorer pegasus who found it recognized the Royal crest on the shoulder of the armor, and returned it to my family in Canterlot. From then I remained in the vault for who knows how long.

You didn't try to communicate with anyone?

Though many tried on the armor at some point, I made a point to make sure it didn't fit them. I only allowed the King and Queen to properly wear me. They were the only ones responsible enough to know the truth.

Something tells me that didn't happen much.

You guess correctly. Before Luna and Celestia, I had talked to a grand total of two others before that; a King and a Prince.

Wait, Princess Luna?

Long before that whole Nightmare Moon fiasco, little Princess Luna was quite the curious little alicorn. She had been exploring the vaults when she encountered me, and later introduced me to Celestia. I, by my own discretion, decided to open a mental link to them.

She knows about you?

Well, of course! I'm the one that asked her to send me to you, after all!

You knew about me before?

Conversations with Celestia. We can talk about this later. Goodnight, Twilight. You should get some rest; You'll need it.

* * *

1. Jutsu

Hangbuck's Folly

2400 D.N.S.

"Flash"

They left in the early morning, before the rest of the town had waken up. Iron Shod and Break packed fairly lightly. Just survival necessities and their weapons. They deemed armor unnecessary weight. They were sitting in the safehouse, making final preparations to leave.

"What is that strange saddle you're wearing?" Pan asked, the question directed at Break.

The pegasus was wearing a strange device over his back. It looked like a secondary set of wings that sat behind his real ones. On the bottom of the extensions, attached were dozens of hoof-sized cylinders and canisters.

"The SH12 F/B." Break said, with overwhelming smugness.

"What does it do?"

"Well..." he pulled out a strange device mounted on the harness and held it in his mouth. He clicked a button and a beam of light emitted from it. "Whoever has this laser points it at their target. I select whichever of these little tube things I want. They fall to the exact spot of the laser with the help of some magical enchantments."

Pan had a blank expression. The technology was beyond him, and magic was completely out of his realm.

Break sighed. "Whoever is in the area of the bright red dot is becomes very, very dead. You get me?"

Pan could understand that. "And what about those?" he asked. This question was for Iron Shod. He pointed at the two metal... things he had slung over his back.

He looked at Pan. "Bludgeons." he muttered.

“What do they do?”

“Turn my hooves into bowling balls. You wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of these if I kicked you.”

Pan didn’t say anything. *Break seems to have far more versatile equipment.* he concluded.

Iron Shod looked over at Twilight. “We were told there are three more to pick up, but not who or where. I’m assuming you know?”

Twilight, recalling the information in the intel folder, gave him the answer. “A mare named ‘Jutsu.’ We are meeting her at someplace called Hangbuck’s Folly.”

Break, who had been taking a swig of water at the time, spat it out. “JUTSU? Did I just hear that right?”

Twilight was taken aback. “Um... yes? Is that a problem?”

“A problem? No. At least, not for us. I must say I feel sorry for those bandits, though.”

“I’m assuming you’ve ran into her before?” she asked.

“Me? No. Not in person. She keeps herself too secluded for us common ponies to regularly see her. But she has a reputation...”

“For what?”

“Being the best damn mercenary in the business.” Iron Shod finished for him. “Come on, we should go before the townsponies notice us leave.”

Without complaint, Twilight shouldered her saddlebags and lashed down the armor and horn on her back. The farmers hefted their supplies. The seven of them stepped out of the door and into the streets of Hoofall. The sun hadn’t risen, but it’s glow was steadily becoming brighter on the horizon.

“Hangbuck’s Volley is half a days travel to the southeast. What time are we supposed to meet with her?”

“Midnight.” Twilight answered.

“We’ll make it before sundown. Let’s go.”

No one stopped them as they walked through the cold streets to the southern edge of town. Hoofall seemed almost pleasant without the usual traffic. One could even call it peaceful.

“Drink the sight in, everypony. It’s the last real civilization you’ll see for a while.”

They stepped onto the dirt road and followed it south until it ended just out of sight of Hoofall. Without hesitation Iron Shod began to lead them through the untamed grasses, single file. They had walked for a few minutes without conversation.

Twilight trotted up to Iron Shod, who was in the lead. “So, you’ve worked with the Ministry of Intelligence before?”

“Classified.” he responded.

“No, really?” Her sarcasm was well-refined.

He sighed. “Direct action. Search and destroy type stuff. Understand?”

Twilight gave a loose nod.

“What about Break?”

“Eyes in the sky. Remote destruction.”

“I read that he served with you a couple times.”

“Some Mol and mercenary joint operations. I was his commander on numerous occasions. We’ve saved each others asses more times than either of us could count, too.”

She paused to consider this. “Why’d he leave the Mol?”

Iron turned his head to look her in the eye. “Not sure. I guess once he saw me and my teams in action he found it more exciting than regular intelligence work. You’ll have to ask him.”

Twilight looked behind her. Break was hovering a few feet off the ground, bringing up the rear of the group. “I’d rather not.” she said.

Iron Shod didn’t reply.

“You two travel together frequently?” she asked.

“You could say that.”

“By your choice?”

“Not really, but I know the importance of good friends.”

Twilight changed the subject. “What do you know about Jutsu?”

He cleared his throat. “Not much. She’s a top-tier mercenary, though. I pride myself on being able to demand large payments, but she is on an entirely different level. A pony could save up for their entire life and not be able to afford her services.”

“She sounds good at what she does.”

“I wouldn’t know. She doesn’t make a habit of leaving survivors.”

Twilight dropped back to her original place in the group, her questions more-or-less answered. She levitated the Horn of Ceros off her back and held it in front of her face. It was a wicked looking blade that would slot over a unicorn’s horn; an extension of their own body. Twilight was no swordpony; she doubted she would have the skill to properly use the weapon.

Like she had done with the armor a day before, she probed into it with magic. There was no anomaly with the material. Just plain steel.

No. There was something. A familiar feeling trace. An enchantment. She followed it deeper into the ether. A strong vibration on her back pulled her out of the probe. She put the crown on.

Yes?

Were you going to try it on or just stare at it?

There’s an enchantment on it. I didn’t have a chance to look at it, but it felt a lot like yours. There won’t be three voices in my head if I put it on, will there?

I’m not sure. The blade was forged many centuries after my passing. It was one of my favorite weapons to stare at when I was collecting dust in the vault. It never spoke to me in my thousands of years sitting across from it, so I doubt anypony is in there.

The pony who created it; Ceros, I’m assuming?

That would be correct.

Do you know what she was like?

I don't know much. All I know is that she was a unicorn, and that she acquired her cutie mark at an exceptionally young age. News didn't exactly fly around in the vault.

Should I try it on?

Might as well see what this enchantment is. I can probably help you decipher it.

Well, alright.

Twilight put the blade unto her horn. It, like the armor, fit perfectly. The Horn of Ceros was made of no miracle material, though. Twilight felt her head being pulled down by the metal weight on her skull.

Well, let's take a look here...

Waiting for Boreas to finish up, Twilight took a look at her surroundings. The sun was about midway up the sky. The plains gently tumbled in endless hills.

"Scary lookin' horn you got there."

The voice made her jump. It was Break.

"That and the armor aren't exactly standard Equestrian equipment, If I had to guess."

"You need something?" she asked, mildly annoyed with him.

"Oh, nothing. Just wondering why a pony as..." he coughed. "...well-mannered as yourself would use a weapon like that."

Uh... Twilight.

"It was gift from a good friend of mine."

"Your friend collects weapons?"

Twilight.

"...sort of. It's a... family heirloom of sorts."

“A bit of a brutal looking thing to pass down.”

“Yeah, I guess. I didn’t ask.”

TWILIGHT!

“What?!” she said.

“Huh?” he asked, surprised.

“I... ah...”

What?

The horn!

“You know what it is?” she asked.

Break looked at her with a blank stare. He looked to other ponies, but they seemed as lost as he was. “Uh... you okay, Twi?”

Yes, I’m fine!

That was in your head.

She sighed.

It would appear you need more time getting used to this.

He sounded like he was laughing. she pulled the crown and the blade off. She could find out what Boreas had discovered later, when she wasn’t distracted by an impudent pegasus.

* * *

Hangbuck’s Folly was not the most welcoming place. It was essentially a massive rocky pit surrounded by pine trees. True to Iron Shod’s words, they had arrived there before sundown. They started to set up camp against one of the cliffsides. It offered little cover.

“I don’t like this.” It was Break.

“Neither do I.” replied Iron Shod.

Their eyes scanned the top of the cliffs. They were fish in a barrel.

“That bitch better show up soon. Every minute we sit here is dangerous.”

“Give us a read on the land.”

Break nodded then shot into the sky. Iron Shod watched him become a speck in the vast blue. As he did so, he removed a device from his pack and looped it over his ear. A communication device.

“Feed me, Break.” he said as he walked back over to the others. They were throwing up mobile shelters. Koi was gathering wood for a fire. Iron Shod walked over to him and knocked the kindling off his back. “No fires. We don’t know who is watching.”

On cue, the farmers and Twilight looked up to the cliffs. A lump formed in the unicorns throat. It was seven in the evening; five hours until the rendezvous.

“We got something, Shod.” Break’s voice clawed its way through the static. “Mare unicorn, about ten miles to the north.”

“Following us?”

“Maybe. I didn’t see her earlier.”

“Armed?”

“Optics aren’t showing anything. Negative on any obvious weapons.”

“Give me a full sweep of our immediate area. I don’t want anypony or anything sneaking up on us. And keep an eye on that unicorn. Tell me if she gets closer.”

“Aye, Shod.”

* * *

While her companions were sitting outside together, Twilight had retreated into her tent to talk to Boreas again.

Sorry about earlier.

No problem. You want to hear about the horn?

Yep.

Well, I was correct in saying it was made much later than my armor. The enchantments language was... different from mine. Dialect-wise, I mean. Much more modern.

What did the spell do?

Nothing shocking. Mostly practical stuff. I think you'll be pleased to find that the horn will never lose sharpness. It also seems to glow when you run magical energy through it. Brightly. Like a lantern. Some sort of light amplification, I assumed. There was also something about subsonic vibrations. It was a bit over my head, but apparently by rapidly vibrating it will make slicing and dicing that much easier.

Lovely. That was it?

Well... there was ONE other thing.

What was it?

A soul transfer spell.

I didn't hear any pony when I put it on.

That's the thing. The spell was never completed. Or it failed. The entire enchantment was a mess of jumbled traces, likely do to that one bad spell.

So there's no pony in there?

Doubtful. Even if there was, I don't think they'd be entirely 'there', if you get what I mean. Soul transferring is a fairly complex field of magic. I'm afraid even I don't know the exact effects of a failure.

Well, that's good to know. thanks, Boreas.

My pleasure. Was there anything else you needed?

Yes. You were talking about Luna and Celestia earlier. Why don't you want to talk about it.

It's more a matter of if Luna and Celestia *want* me to talk about me and them.

You're not sure if you should tell me?

Precisely.

Any idea why that is?

I think they don't want the idea that they talk to a crazy alicorn soul bound to a terrifying, pitch black crown of virtually indestructible material floating around in public. Just a guess.

Well, since I already know about you, and I'm a close friend of Celestia, and, to a certain degree, Luna, I can't see any harm in you telling me.

I suppose.

* * *

"Hey Celly! Come check out something cool I found in the vaults!"

"Sister, you really should spend less time down there. When was the last time you went outside?"

"I'm serious! It's super-duper cool!"

"I'm busy."

Luna put on a pouty face. Celestia sighed. "Alright, this better be good."

The blue pony raced down the hallway. The older one, with her longer legs, easily followed after her. After descending many staircases and crossing dark hallways, they stood before a golden door. Luna slid her horn into the key-slot. An ancient spell detected the touch of the royal alicorn, and the vault opened without a sound. She stepped inside and Celestia went in behind her.

"What is it that's so cool you had to show me right away?"

"Here, try this crown on!"

* * *

I was pretty disheartened to hear about Luna turning into Nightmare Moon a few hundred years later. Celestia was kind, though. She came down and talked to me every few weeks or so. Kept me up

to date on the happenings around Equestria and the world. If it hadn't been for her updating my vocabulary, I'd be trying to talk to you in ancient pony tongue.

Interesting.

Quite.

Yesterday you said you were the one who had asked Luna to take you to me. Care to elaborate?

Celestia often came to me in times of trouble to seek my advice.

What of it?

She had also mentioned her prized pupil in many of her conversations.

...Continue.

I was the first one she went to when those farmers showed up. I may have... suggested a powerful unicorn go in for the rescue.

I don't know how I should feel about that.

In retrospect, it probably wasn't the greatest decision. However, now that I have met you in the flesh, so to speak, I have the utmost confidence in your capability to help the Umalians.

Why didn't Celestia give you to me? Luna said she had ignored the option.

To be honest, I don't think Celly trusts me.

Any idea why?

Not really.

Well, should I trust you?

You could always take me off.

* * *

The pit was cold. Bitterly cold. Twilight stood in the middle of it, completely surrounded by darkness. The others had taken position across the cliffsides; watching for danger. Break circled overhead, silently making

sure nothing was out of the ordinary. It was midnight. Jutsu was supposed to be here. As far as the unicorn could tell, Hangbuck's Folly was devoid of life. Not as if she could see anything in the pitch black.

Her head was suddenly snapped back, her throat constricted by an impossibly strong leg of a mare.

"You have one chance. Give me the proper challenge or I snap your neck." the perpetrator loosened her grip enough for Twilight to speak.

"Flash!" she coughed out.

The choking leg slipped away.

"Thunder." Jutsu replied.

Three down, two to go.

Chapter 5

The Wild

1. Wood W., Raw Ap.
Yearling City, Breezeman Manor; Yearling Inn,
D.N.S.
“Third Month”; “Home”

She was quiet. Reserved. Controlled. The mare had said only a few introductory words before withdrawing into passiveness. Her coat was a bloody maroon; her mane a black that could match even Boreas' armor in lack of hue. Piercing eyes dominated the other features of her face.

There was no doubt about it. Jutsu was a killer.

“We must move soon. This is no place for a pony to stay at night.”

She had the hints of an Umalian accent, like the farmers. It was forceful and even. Absolutely every facet of her body she had exemplary control of. A deadly combination of grace and power. Twilight had experienced that first hand when her iron legs clamped down on her neck; Jutsu had snuck up on her without any of her ‘friends’ noticing.

“If you don’t mind me saying, Miss Scary Mare, it’s the middle of the night. It’d be more dangerous being on the move than staying here.”

“I hear wolves have a profound fondness for pony meat. I’m sure pegasus wings are considered a delicacy.”

Break grunted, seeing her point. Swearing under his breath, he started to deconstruct his tent in the dark, aided only by a small lantern. The others did the same. They were all itching to get out of Hangbuck’s Folly as soon as possible. Within minutes, they were trotting up a cliffside pathway, allowing Jutsu to lead the way.

Twilight offered to use her horn as a light, but Jutsu insisted that they restrict themselves to vision by moonlight. And so they ambled through the dense forest surrounding the folly, following their newest companion to an

unknown destination, bumping into every branch and rock on the way. All of them except Jutsu, who weaved around them with finesse.

They stopped twenty minutes later in a clearing. There was nothing interesting about it, but Jutsu seemed to be searching for something. She pushed against a boulder as big as she was. Surprisingly, it moved. Even more surprisingly, there was a hidden staircase underneath.

“Get inside.”

Not ones to complain, the seven of them shuffled in.

* * *

“What is this place?”

Jutsu was quick to answer Pan’s question.

“Umalian forward outpost, long since abandoned.”

They had lit the torches planted in the walls. The spacious room was cozy, in a strange way. Long since rotted away remains of chairs and beds were scattered about the room.

“Very few ponies know of their existence, and fewer still know where to find them.”

“What were they used for?”

“Scouting forays, mostly.”

The ponies rolled out bundles of mats to sleep on. Iron Shod rumbled out a command.

“Better rest up. We’re leaving at dawn. Break?”

The pegasus snapped to attention. “Yes sir?”

“Sitrep.”

Break climbed back up the staircase and took flight. The grey earth pony put his earpiece back on.

“We all clear up there?”

A voice responded. “I’m not sure, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

“That unicorn mare is closer. She set up camp about three miles away, back near the folly. But there’s something else…”

“What is it?”

“I can see smoke, maybe ten miles off.”

“More ponies?”

“Likely. It’s coming from behind a hill. Thermal isn’t picking anything up. I have no visual.”

“Go check it out. And swing by that unicorn on the way back.”

“No problem, sir.”

He removed the ear piece and relayed the information to the others. A knot formed in Twilight’s gut. She had a feeling whatever Break discovered wouldn’t be good. Shaking her head, she banished the thought. In the meantime, she decided to continue what she had started. Levitating a book out of her saddlebags, Twilight resumed her studies. *The Corpsponies Creed: A Battlefield Medicine Crash Course* by the Equestrian Military Academy. It was, despite the subject matter, a surprisingly good read. She picked up where she had left off last time, at a section that discussed the importance of good hygiene, particularly when stationed in frontline fortifications.

* * *

She was awoken by voices. The room was dark save for one smoldering torch in the corner. The book was lying on her stomach, still open. She looked over to the farmers; they were sound asleep. Iron Shod and Jutsu were listening to Break, who had just returned, almost an hour later. Groaning, she got up and ambled over to them.

“What’s going on?” Her mouth felt like cotton.

Break sighed. “There’s a unicorn that’s been following us.”

“Hm?”

“She doesn’t appear to be hostile, but we’ll just have to keep our eyes open.”

“That was all you found?”

“No. Fifteen clicks due east, there’s a group of fourteen earth ponies camped out. No notable armaments, just a few hoof-blades between them. A couple of them have some major injuries as well. I spotted a broken leg and some major chest injuries.”

Her heart started pounding. “Oh no...”

Iron Shod gave her a quizzical look. “You know something?”

She nodded. “Back in Canterlot, the farmers and I were ambushed by fourteen earth ponies. They attacked with hoof-blades, but Koi was able to fend them off.”

“You’re saying these are the same ponies?”

“No doubt. Celestia warned us to reach the village before the agents got back to their Jade Lotus employers. They knew who the villagers were, and thus if they are able to relay the information that the farmers are coming back to Umala with a contingent of mercenaries... well...”

“The village would be royally fucked before we could get there.” Break finished for her. Despite his brash behavior, the pegasus was surprisingly perceptive. “I’ve heard about the ridiculous isolation laws of Umala. No pony in, no pony out.”

Iron Shod furrowed his brow. This certainly complicated things.

“What do you say, Shod? It’s pitch black out there; we could give them the jump. They don’t even know we’re nearby.”

“I’m not going to lug it ten miles in this rocky terrain when I can’t see. No, we wait until morning.”

“And then?”

“And then, we stalk our prey.” The old stallion grinned.

Jutsu gave an approving nod.

* * *

It was the only crossing within twenty miles. Despite the relative shallowness, the freezing water reached up to her flanks. The fact that they

had galloped all the way to the river didn't help. Despite her sour mood, Twilight had to agree: This was the perfect ambush spot. Immobilized by the water, the thugs would be incapable of retaliating. She shivered. Something in her was going to change; she knew it.

They had woken up early and made their way as fast as they could to the crossing. Break periodically checked to see where the thugs and the unicorn were. Their quarry had departed their camp an hour after they themselves had left the outpost. The mysterious unicorn that was shadowing them was nowhere in sight.

The ponies had less than an hour to set up. Pan, Mane, Koi and Rise decided to retreat into the forest for their own safety. Iron Shod put on his bludgeons. Break had never left his battle harness. Jutsu was wearing two exotic looking hoof-blades; much longer and more ornate than the typical fare.

Twilight herself tried on the entirety of Boreas' armor for the first time. It, like the crown, automatically adjusted to fit her perfectly. The plates fit over her skin like a carapace, giving her an utterly terrifying appearance. She looked down at the ground. A bunch of scribbles in the dirt formed a rough map of the area that Break had drawn. She ran through the plan in her head multiple times. It was simple. Effective. Brutal. She wished they didn't have to do it.

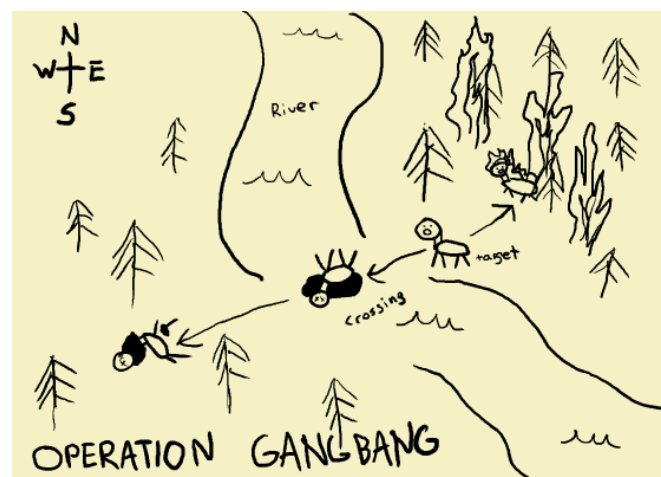
I see you've deigned not to wear the Horn of Ceros.

It doesn't become me. Besides, I won't need it.

That was true. Break had asked her to use the laser designator. She graciously accepted the job, though the obvious implication was that the pegasus didn't want to rely on her in hoof-to-hoof combat.

Suit yourself. Speaking of suits, you look positively frightful in my armor. I myself would have second thoughts about approaching you.

Thanks, I guess?



I suppose that wasn't much of a compliment. Regardless, you look great in that armor, if you don't mind me saying.

She examined the laser designator. It was a simple enough device. One just held it in their mouth and pointed it at the target. Break had explained what would happen. His package would descend on the target and detonate. He had a wide variety of weaponry for every situation; anti-pony, bunker busting, incendiary, and an assortment of debilitating crowd suppressors amongst many others. The pegasus even mentioned that he possessed a sound-emitting decoy.

Break had made it clear, however, that Twilight would be aiming the lethal varieties of bombs. It wasn't going to be pretty. "Like fireworks, but with more flying body parts," was how he described it. The words hadn't encouraged her in the slightest. Instead, she could only look at the tool with horror. Today, she would kill for the first time.

No. Break is the killer. I'm just... assisting.

Twilight...

Yes?

There is nothing wrong with you if you do this.

Oh, yeah, sure. In a few minutes I'm going to cause the horrific deaths of a group of defenseless ponies. Nothing wrong with that at all.

You will always be you, no matter what happens today.

What am I doing here, Boreas?

What do you mean?

A few days ago I was sitting in a library in Ponyville reading about advanced irrigation techniques. Now I'm in the middle of the wild, wearing an indestructible suit of armor, with the power to instantly kill in my hooves. I'm not meant to do this. Why did the Princess send a filly like me?

I wouldn't have cho-- that is, Celestia would not have chosen you if she thought you couldn't succeed in this. She believes in you, Twilight. I believe in you.

I don't feel any better, but thanks anyways, Boreas.

You know, I'd be concerned if you felt good about this. Never take pleasure in violence. Consider that your lesson for the day. Now, I believe Jutsu is coming. The time is soon.

"Are you ready?" the red mare asked, walking up behind her. The stone faced mercenary actually seemed slightly perturbed by the armor. She hoofed her an ear held communication device like the ones Iron Shod and Break had.

"I suppose so." Twilight replied, slipping the black device on.

"Then take your position. They will be here within ten minutes. And Twilight?"

"Yes, Jutsu?"

"Steel your heart against what is ahead. Make no doubt, there will be blood."

Jutsu turned and disappeared into the forest.

Twilight whimpered.

* * *

The stallion leaned against a tree, looking at the crossing. He didn't like this, but they could not afford to delay. They had to get to Umala as soon as possibly. There was mild cloud coverage just over them. A warm late-morning sun filtered through the forest canopy.

"No point being stupid about this. Three at a time! Once a group makes it halfway, the other goes! Get into the forest as soon as you can! Being in the open means being vulnerable to attack!" He gestured to some of the ponies. "You'll have to help carry myself and Phoenix." As he said this, the ponies looked over to Phoenix; she was the mare whose ribs had been broken by Koi back in Canterlot.

They made quick salutes and hefted the two injured ponies onto their back.

"Wounded will be carried by the fourth group! Don't turn around until you are out of this damn forest!" he shouted. "Go!"

The first three waded out into the current. Another three followed. The first ponies disappeared into the shadowy forest. Another group in front of

him started to move. He felt himself moving as the three ponies holding him and the mare trotted to the river. Out of the treeline, sunlight started to beat on his neck. They entered the water. The ponies started to struggle in the mud under his weight.

“Don’t. Stop. Here.” he growled. They picked up the pace.

He glanced up at the cliffs around him. Something was off. A strange, opaque black form was crouched on the top of the jagged rocks. There was a red light coming from it. Before he could think anything of it, the world exploded.

* * *

“Last group entering kill zone. Designating target.”

Twilight said the words in what wouldn’t even qualify as a whisper. True to her words, though, she pointed the laser device at the center of the river. The five ponies were oblivious to what was about to happen.

“Confirming target.” Break’s voice pierced through the ear piece then paused. “We’re green. Leaflet salvo 1, released.”

Twenty seconds later, hundreds of tiny metal shards fell from the sky. They hit the water.

A concussive blast sent her ears to the moon and back. The ringing was painfully loud.

She blinked at the intense brightness of the explosion, and then tried to see the aftermath of the leaflet bombs. The water had turned crimson. Ponies were screaming. The third group soon returned to see what was going on. They started to wade into the water to try and rescue their comrades.

“Leaflet Salvo 2, released.”

Another twenty seconds, and another detonation rocked her to the core. She didn’t look this time. Her stomach was about to turn inside out.

“Leaflets depleted. Requesting next target.”

She banished the thought; there was a job at hand. She pointed the laser at the next target: the forest the ponies had just come from. Her entire body was shaking.

“Receiving new target.” Another pause. “Confirmed. Incendiary salvo 1, released.”

Two ponies were trying to retreat back to the north. As they re-entered the treeline, the woods erupted in a hellish nightmare. Twilight couldn't breathe as the air was sucked away. She tried to imagine the horrible fate the two thugs had suffered. Her insides decided to unload their contents.

“This is Break and Twilight. Seven neutralized, one unconfirmed. My munitions are depleted. Resuming over watch.”

Switching to a private channel, Break sent a message to her. “You did good, kid.”

* * *

The bark was cold to the touch. The moss even less pleasant. Jutsu was pressed against the tree. Even from this distance, the rumble of the Break's aerial superiority in action had shaken the leaves off the trees.

A rustle in the undergrowth. “Fuck! What do we do?”

“Run, dammit!”

The three thugs started to break into a gallop. They didn't make it far before Jutsu leapt out of her cover and eviscerated the one in the lead. His intestines fell to the forest floor. The others pulled to a dead stop, shocked at what had just happened. It wasn't until the second's skull was bashed in by Iron Shod did the last one start to run again. Jutsu was much, much quicker. Leaping onto the back of the mottled grey stallion, she wrenched his head to the side.

CRACK.

As the pony collapsed to the ground, Jutsu leaped off and landed gracefully in the grass.

Three down.

Iron Shod melted back into the undergrowth. Jutsu did the same. Another explosion shook the earth. The voices of ponies drew nearer.

“Holy shit! What happened to these two?”

“Just keep moving! You heard the captain!”

Iron Shod bucked the trailing one in the side. He stumbled into the undergrowth, where Jutsu was waiting with two blood-stained hoof-blades. The colt died without a sound. The maroon pony took off after the other two who were oblivious to their companions death.

She leaped into the air above a mare. Moments later, the Jade Lotus agent found an impressively large sword planted in the back of her skull and emerging out of her mouth. The remaining stallion finally noticed his friends were missing. His eyes went wide as he looked behind him and saw a mare with two blood-drenched swords. He goaded his legs into galloping harder.

It was to no avail, though, as Iron Shod’s metal hoof slammed into his nose, jamming the bone into his brains. He crumpled to the floor, his face unrecognizable.

Six down.

* * *

They had barely entered the forest when they felt the thunder of high-explosives. The three thugs turned around and raced back to the river. The sight was beyond horrific. One of the stallions had burst into fleshy chunks. Yet another was ripped in half at the chest. The third was entirely non-existent; the majority of his body liquefied and floating down the river.

“The captain and Phoenix are in there! We have to rescue them!”

He was still alive, but barely. They could see the stallion bobbing on the water, slowly drifting. And so they dove into the river to retrieve him. That’s when the second salvo hit.

One was flung clear of the river. He then slammed into a tree head-first. The unfortunate stallions skull burst open like a melon. The other two were peppered with shrapnel, but otherwise alive. Phoenix was now a lost cause. They reached the unconscious captain and dragged him back to the shore they had originally departed from. The captain sputtered back into consciousness and coughed out water. The bodies of the stallions carrying him had protected him from the worst of the explosives.

“Sir, we need to get out of here!”

The captain looked around. "Are you the only ones left?"

"I don't know about the first and second groups, but I think we are, sir! We need to go!"

"It would appear we do. I think it's about time we beat a hasty retreat. Every pony for themselves."

"Sir?"

"It's more important that the Jade Lotus knows what's going on than me surviving! GO!"

They snapped a quick salute. "It's been an honor, sir!" They galloped into the northern forests.

"Good luck..." he whispered to himself.

The forest they had ran into suddenly burst into flames.

"Fuck."

With no other appealing options, the stallion hobbled down back to the river, then joined his former companions in floating down the current. Perhaps he could find a crossing down river.

* * *

"Thirteen confirmed killed. One missing."

"Missing?"

"The leader. I lost track of him after I dropped the napalm. He was wounded though; if the SOB is still alive, he can't have gone far."

* * *

No amount of blankets could stop her shivering. She felt impossibly cold. Numb. Dead. Nausea formed in her gut, but she had given up everything she had. Thus another fit of dry heaves set in as images of the torn, mutilated ponies entered her mind once more.

From a distance she had been able to withstand it. It was something far away; she didn't have to deal with it because she could look away. Twilight didn't know why she had looked. The two leaflet bombs detonated.

She peeked over the cliff. Severed limbs, heads and gallons of blood swirled in a horrific stew. The screams... oh, Celestia, the screams...

It was disgusting. Disturbing. Vile. A necessary evil in a good name. She had crawled away from the cliff, her breakfast spewing out her throat. Break had found her and carried her back to their shelters deep in the forest.

They were stacking the bodies. A heap of shredded carcasses, or whatever remained of them. The mercenaries had no respect for the dead. Missing eyeballs and hooves were indiscriminately tossed onto the crows feast. Senseless was the only word that could describe the scene.

She had done it. She aimed the laser. Their blood was on her hands.

Jutsu, Break and Iron Shod were conversing amongst themselves.

"We need to clear the area ASAP. Every pony around is going to see that smoke from the napalm pretty soon."

"I don't think we'll be moving anytime soon."

As Jutsu said this, she gestured over to the deathly pale unicorn.

"She's not taking this well."

Iron Shod grunted. "Break, take a look around; see if there's some high ground nearby." He paused, then added, "I'll go talk to her."

The pegasus took off and Shod ambled over to where Twilight was huddled. He didn't say anything for a while, but just sat down next to her.

"How do you live with it?" she croaked.

"I don't."

Twilight did not react, but continued to impassively stare at him.

"I've killed plenty of ponies in my years. It never gets easier. I close my eyes and I see them: all of them. Old and young, powerful and weak. So many I've lost count." He returned her gaze. "There is no pride to be found in murder, Twilight. I do not fight because I enjoy it. Only a truly sick pony will find pleasure in ending a life."

Iron Shod put a hoof on her shoulder.

"Twi, you are no sick pony. You will not become a deranged soul. Your will is strong; no amount of blood will make you forget who you are. This mission; you were sent on it for a reason. When the looming cloud of battle stares you down, never forget who you are. The past does not define you. It only shapes you. Who you are is a matter of now, not then. No matter what you do, you will still be you. We're counting on you to do what is necessary when the time comes. You'll be ready for it when it does."

Break's voice buzzed in through the ear piece. "Two miles due west, there's a decent hill with a clearing near the top we can set up in."

"Got it." he replied. He turned back to her. "For now, all we need you to do is take a gentle stroll through the forest with us."

* * *

Though no one had asked for it, a respectably large fire was burning in the middle of their circle of tents. They needed it. For the rest of the day, they had decided to rest. Night had fallen without a disturbance.

"How far is Yearling City from here?"

"Two or three days, depending on how fast we go."

His question answered, Pan returned to silence.

Mane looked over at Twilight. This certainly wasn't the right time to make any sort of move. She was vulnerable. Besides, he had given up on having a true relationship years ago. Still, the least he could do was ask how she was doing.

"How are you doing?"

Twilight's reaction was to keep staring at the flames. Iron Shod glared at him. *Don't bother her.* his eyes read. Mane got the message and shut his mouth.

Pan looked over to Rise, who was sitting to his right. The white pony had helped gather the bodies. She was certainly much more resilient than Twilight; she had been shaken, but not to the point of stupor.

"You feeling okay?" he whispered in her ear. "That wasn't a pleasant task, earlier."

She cocked her head at the question.

"I... yeah. I'm fine." she answered. Her next words made his heart skip a beat. "Uh... can we talk in private?" she said as she nodded in the direction of the forest behind them.

He gulped. This was the chance he was waiting for, and it had fallen right into his hooves. He eagerly smiled and nodded. She stood and walked off into the forest. It had taken him a full three seconds before he followed after her. The awkward exchange seemed to have been a gift from the gods above. As the firelight faded into darkness, he heard a snicker behind him.

Fuck you, Break.

* * *

"You feeling okay?" he asked again.

They were sitting on a patch of grass. Above them, they could see a cloudless sky filled with hundreds of stars.

Rise sighed. "No... I suppose not."

"Hm?"

"I'm worried, Pan. About our journey. About our new friends."

"You mean your worried about Twilight."

"I... yes. It feels wrong to say that when she's done so much for us. She just seems so out of place, here with us."

"No, I understand what you mean. I'd have to agree with you, in fact."

She chuckled. "Thank you, Pan."

He was taken aback. "For what?"

"For being with me."

They sat in silence, staring into each others eyes. Pan asked her an innocent question.

"Remember when I asked you why you came on the journey back in Canterlot?"

"Yes."

“You never answered the question.”

Despite the darkness, Pan could see her roll her eyes. “You’re not very bright, are you.”

“Huh?”

Rise suddenly pulled him close in a tight embrace. They tumbled onto the ground, with Pan finding himself pinned under an extremely emancipated white pony with the body of a goddess.

“Oh.” was all he could manage before they took their friendship to the next stage.

* * *

“Pfffftttttt!”

The sound Break had made when Pan and Rise departed was hard to describe. Most would call it a cross between a snicker and a full-on laugh. It wasn’t until after they were out of earshot that the true laughing began. Even Twilight had cracked a smile at the absurdity of the situation.

“Gotta give the colt some respect! Knows when to get a girl when their vulnerable! Just after picking up dead bodies! HA!”

“She’s gonna get it in the ass like those fuckin’ thugs at the creek!”

“The entire time! I just wanted to yell at him ‘hurry up and get on that mule, you dipshit! She’s beggin for ya!’”

Break and Iron Shod traded crude jokes about the two of them for the better part of a half hour. Even Jutsu and Koi offered their grins. It was good. Twilight felt much better. The others had been making an obvious effort to help lighten her mood, and it was working.

She made a resolution in her heart. *They care for me. They trust me. I must not take their gift in vain. I will do whatever I can do within my power to help them when the time comes, no matter the price. They would do the same for me.*

Looking up at the stars, she thought back to what Princess Celestia had told her. *Never forget the Elements of Harmony. They may serve you well in the trials ahead.* It hadn’t made sense at the time. But now, in the

company of her new friends, her teachers intent was starting to become clear.

* * *

Laughter.

Chapter 6

My Little Killer

My dearest ponies,

It would seem this stallion was making a pathetic attempt to reach Umala with a broken leg. I took the liberty of taking care of him for you.

Always watching,

The G. and P. T.

* * *

“Holy shit.”

Break’s words perfectly describe what they saw. The stallion was thoroughly dead. His corpse was hanging by a noose from a tree in the middle of field. Judging by the way his liver was embedded in his esophagus and how his intestines were hanging off the remains of his sternum, it seemed he had not been given the privilege of a swift execution. A pool of blood mixed with a variety of organs and bones sat below him. The whole area swarmed with flies. He had been up since yesterday. A letter had been rolled up and placed in his mouth.

“At the very least, we don’t have to worry about chasing this guy down.” he concluded.

“I suppose so. But now we have a psychopath trying to get chummy with us.”

Break considered the situation, then turned to Iron Shod. “You don’t think...”

“The unicorn.” the grey pony finished.

Without a word, the pegasus went up for another look-about. That unicorn mare. He had spotted her two days ago, back near Hangbuck’s Folly. After that, though, he lost track of her. She had disappeared into the forests. There was little doubt, however, that she was responsible for the gristly scene.

He fitted a piece over his eye. An OPTEX 2315. With it he had an astounding array of optical devices in one simple package. It flickered to life, and he used the thermal scanner to check the immediate area.

There was nothing unusual. A few forest critters at most. He upped the magnification. He looked back to the hill they had stayed at the previous night. It was clear. He glazed over the forests east of the field the others were standing in. A red blob caught his attention. A pony.

He switched to normal optics. Given that her legs and horn were stained with blood, it seemed logical to assume that the unicorn was "The G. and P. T." that had left the present hanging from the tree.

She waved at him.

He dropped like a brick.

Back on the ground, Break relayed the information to them, but left out the part about her greeting him. The absurdity of it was too ridiculous for even him to convey.

* * *

Rise and Pan were walking side by side. The forests were starting to transition to a rocky plateau. A late-morning sun shone on their right as they continued south towards Yearling City. Their conversations were much more free-spirited than before.

"You know every filly was crazy about you back in the village, right?"

Pan was taken aback by this. "What? No way."

"It's true! They were so jealous when they saw I was going with you."

He muttered to himself. "And here I thought I was the lucky one."

Rise lifted an eyebrow. "What was that?"

"Ah, nothing."

Dirt was crunching under his feet. The forests had fully receded. Despite this, it was surprisingly shady. Pan looked up and saw that Break was flying mere inches above him.

"You want something?" he asked.

Break stuck his head between Pan and Rise. "Oh, nothing. Just wondering how it was last night."

Rise smacked him across the face with a hoof.

"Yeesh, alright, alright. I'm going." He took off into the sky. "*Fucking psycho bitch...*" he cursed under his breath.

They silently steamed for a moment, then chuckled. Break was just being Break.

"So, Rise; Tell me. What do I have that the fillies like? I never made a habit of talking to them."

She giggled. "Your brains, Pan. Your brains. Us mares go crazy over a guy with some meat in their skull."

With a flirtatious grin, she added: "As well as some meat in other places." It sounded like a joke.

He found himself blushing. Still, it was less than satisfactory answer. He had been hoping for something along the lines of 'his dashing good looks,' or 'his disarming charm,' or even 'his fabulous physique.' Not like he could complain. Due to his brains he had just bagged the finest flanks in all of Umala.

"Plus you're so cute when your awkward."

His ears flattened. That was the opposite of what he wanted to hear. The fillies thought he was *cute*? Not, say, handsome or striking? He found it extremely emasculating.

"Uh... thanks?"

* * *

"Hey Shod, the G. and P. T. is following us." With a lack of better name, the group decision had been to refer to their little killer as what she had signed on the letter.

The stallion looked up to the black speck that was Break. He hoofed his ear piece.

"How far back?"

“That’s the thing; she’s *ahead* of us.”

“Teleportation spell?”

“Maybe. I didn’t see her moving before. That’s the only way she could have gotten ahead of us.”

“What’s her heading?”

“She’s stationary, sir. By the looks of it, she’s waiting for us. Think we should take on her offer?”

“I don’t see why not. One unicorn can’t hurt us by her lonesome.”

“Aye, sir. I’ll keep an eye on her.”

* * *

The G. and P. T.

Hm?

I feel like I’ve heard that before.

I wouldn’t know.

Oh well. I suppose we’ll find out soon enough.

So it would seem.

The ponies were traveling in as best a line as they could manage in the rocky terrain. Iron Shod had taken the front while Jutsu hovered near the middle and rear, where Twilight and the farmers were trotting along at a steady pace. Above, Break maintained visual contact with the unicorn.

You know, you’re still wearing the armor. You even slept in it last night.

I honestly couldn’t tell. It feels like a second coat.

Aw, thanks. Even though that wasn’t necessarily a compliment.

Well, it’s true. Between the light material and the perfect fit enchantment, it’s like I’m wearing nothing at all.

Indeed. Well, all the same, in case you didn’t notice, your companions are a bit spooked by it. Especially Mane.

Mane?

He's been giving you strange looks ever since you tried the crown on back at the border. Though, if I may say so, I don't think *I'm* the reason he's been eyeing you up.

I... uh... what do you mean?

I know that you know what I mean.

You're saying he is... ah... physically attracted to me.

My dear Twilight, I'm saying he probably wants to take you 'downtown to pound town,' as Break would say.

She took off the crown and set about removing the rest of the armor; no easy task while they were moving. Twilight's face was burning red. Boreas could be a tad infuriating at times. That conversation had been interesting. She looked over to Mane; he briefly caught her eyes then instantly averted his gaze. Twilight, having no significant experience in the realm of interacting-with-the-opposite-sex, was unsure of what to think of the strange reaction.

* * *

Trixie. The Great and Powerful Trixie. The G. and P. T.

That made sense.

No, wait.

That made no sense at all.

"What are **YOU** doing here?"

The blue unicorn gave the most offended huff one could ever hear. The Great and Powerful Trixie did not react well to demands made upon her.

"Waiting." she answered. Her very voice oozed with arrogance.

"For us?"

Trixie's silence, as well as her contempt stare, indicated that the answer was yes.

“You know her?” Iron Shod asked.

“We’ve butt heads before.” Twilight responded.

She noted that Trixie was not wearing her signature hat and cape. Instead, she was clad in a matte black body suit with a staggering array of highly advanced tools and gadgets attached. That was a change.

“Oh yes, The Great and Powerful Trixie and this filly have... *ahem* ... had our differences. Fear not, Trixie is not here to antagonize!”

Twilight found herself even more resentful of the unicorn. She still had the same superiority complex that had been demonstrated ever so tactfully in Ponyville.

“Tell us, Miss... Trixie: Why are you following us?”

“Just ensuring that Celestia’s package is returned undamaged.” As she said this, Trixie nodded at Twilight.

“The Princess sent you?”

“That is for Trixie to know and you *not* to find out.” She flashed an insufferable smile.

Iron Shod motioned for them to gather together. They huddled away from Trixie, while the enigmatic unicorn remained planted on rock at the edge of the dirt clearing. Even when sitting still she seemed to be constantly inflating her already massive ego.

They were whispering. Break started. “What’s with that infiltration suit? She looks like an Mol operative, if I ever saw one.”

“Sent to keep tabs on us, I presume.” Jutsu said.

“I’m not keen on taking her along, especially if that’s the case.” Iron Shod added.

“Nor am I.” Twilight offered.

“We all saw what she did to that stallion. She’s fucking nuts! The blood hasn’t even been washed off her suit. As far as I can tell, we don’t know *anything* about her; she could be dangerous. And why does she refer to herself in the third person?” Break kept looking over his shoulder as he said the words.

“No idea, but we need keep going. She doesn’t seem to have anything we need to stick around for.” Iron Shod replied. “...Though I have a feeling she’ll just continue following us, regardless of what we tell her.”

“Let’s just cut her throat and leave her here. It’s pretty dry out in this desert; I’m sure her body would be nicely preserved.”

Twilight’s eyes shot wide. “What!? No!”

Break sighed. “It was a joke, Twi.”

The unicorn just grunted. She was not particularly familiar with or fond of military humor.

They broke the huddle.

“Weeeeellll, we’re just going to ignore you and continue on our way. Thanks for taking care of the stallion, though.” Break said to the unicorn.

“Oh, no need to thank Trixie. It was simply necessary for the job. Wouldn’t want your mission to end in failure, after all.”

They gave her blank stares.

Iron Shod butt in. “We’d prefer it if you don’t follow us from here on out.”

“There isn’t much you can do about that, Iron Shod.”

His ears perked up at that, but he didn’t reply. She knew his name. He turned back to the others. “Let’s go.” he grunted.

They departed from the clearing. The strange pony followed them at a distance.

* * *

The three mercenaries were gathered around Twilight. A mid-afternoon sun was pulling the sweat out of their pores.

“What do you know about her?”

“Not much, really. She showed up in Ponyville one day, putting on a magic show. It was an... interesting experience.”

“How so?”

“She was making outrageous boasts; something along the lines of stopping an Ursa Major from destroying a town on her lonesome.”

“Is she really that powerful?”

“No. At least, I don’t think so. When an Ursa Minor showed up in Ponyville, she... ah... ran away.”

Break snickered. “So you were telling the truth about that Ursa back in Hoofall. Imagine that.”

“I don’t make a habit of lying, Break.”

The wind was starting to pick up. Dust was getting kicked into the air.

“That suit. It looked like some Ministry of Intelligence gear.” Break said, abruptly changing the subject.

“Looked like a pretty recent design, too. It didn’t resemble anything I’ve seen before.” Iron Shod replied. As he said so, he looked over his shoulder. The unicorn was barely a speck in the distance.

“You believe what she said about being sent by Celestia?”

“I don’t see any reason not to.”

Twilight jumped in. “All we know at this point is that she may or may not work for the Ministry of Intelligence and that she may or may not be on an assignment from Celestia to perhaps protect me.”

“That sounds reasonable.” Jutsu concluded.

“We also know for a fact that she is a psychotic murderer.”

“That too.” Break muttered.

“I’m not sure about you guys, but I am not at all comforted by the fact that the pony that was sent to protect me is a sadist with a very possible grudge against me.”

Iron Shod affectionately punched her shoulder. “Not to worry, little missy; We’ll protect you.”

For now, they silently agreed that they were not going to get any answers without talking Trixie herself.

A surprisingly strong gust hit them, peppering the group with sand.

“Break, find us somewhere to set up for tonight.” Iron Shod coughed.

Minutes later, the pegasus’ voice came in through all of their comm devices. “About ten clicks south there’s a bunch of copses scattered about. It seems this damn desert is gonna turn back into forest another thirty from them. What do you think?”

“Can we get to the forests before nightfall?”

“Sure, but there’s a bigger issue: Big ass dust cloud coming in from the west. I reckon we have one or two hours before we’re trapped in the middle of that thing. I... uh...” There was a pause. “Okay, about twelve clicks southeast there’s a ravine. That should shelter us from the wind, but I can’t promise it’ll be comfortable. In the case of a haboob rolling through here, though, I’d rather be in a ditch than a topside meadow.”

“Affirmative. Point us to the ravine.”

They angled to the left, following the direction Break was leading them. True to his word, the sun was blotted out in a matter of hours.

* * *

“I hope she’s okay.”

“Trixie?”

“Yeah.”

The descent had been simple enough. An easily followable creek dipped down into the ravine, which widened and flattened near the bottom. It was surprisingly spacious; near the banks of the flow, grasses and shrubs were thriving. There were even a few wilted trees.

A hundred feet above them, the sky was completely dark. The sandstorm was directly above the travelers. It was only minutes after they set up camp in the ravine that the sunlight rapidly receded.

“I’m sure she can handle herself.” Jutsu cut in, interrupting Twilight and Break.

“Hmph. Why do you even care, Twi?” the pegasus grunted.

She wasn't sure. Perhaps it was just her nature as an Equestrian pony to care for others, regardless of who they were. Evidently, that logic didn't apply back at the river crossing. She banished the thought. *No dwelling on the past.*

"I don't. I just think it'd be a shame for such an asset to go to waste."

Break chuckled. "I didn't think you thought like that. I was expecting you to say something along the lines of 'because of the kindness in my heart!' or some sappy shit like that."

Twilight furrowed her eyebrows and stared at the ground. The realization stung her. It was true; she *was* starting to think like that. It was only their fourth day on the road and already her mannerisms were starting to slip. Slightly more reckless and less organized. A more ominous truth chilled her spine. She was becoming less empathetic. The more horrific sights she saw, the less they impacted her; the stallion that morning was proof enough of that. The grim display had drawn a relatively subdued reaction out of her.

The river crossing had changed Twilight. There was no doubt. She had blood on her hooves. It tainted her by her own choice. She gulped as a new thought came into focus.

Before her was a lake, the gentle waves lapping at her legs.

Do I jump in, not knowing how it will feel once I'm submerged? Will I be able to come out unscathed, or will the currents pull me from shore?

Do I walk away, and let the sand stick to my skin? Will I leave having never known what lurked out beyond what I could see?

She had made a promise. To the farmers, to Celestia, and to herself. She was going to dive headfirst into the water regardless of the cost. That was a promise she intended to keep.

The sandstorm raged overhead, a shrouding blanket to block out the solace of fiery orb.

* * *

Dinner consisted of canned beans, rice provided by the farmers and water from the creek. They were gathered around an electric lantern, enjoying the moments respite. Pan and Rise were sitting together, all

pretenses of secrecy abandoned. It was somewhat amusing, watching the monochromatic colt be flustered with every question by the mare.

Koi and Jutsu, oddly enough, seemed to be having a very private conversation. They were sitting separate from the rest of them. By the looks of it, the subject was not pleasant for either of the two.

Iron Shod and Break ate in silence. Having been in similar situations before, they knew that thinking too much was a surefire way to lose focus.

Twilight, having never been in such a situation before, had lost focus. It didn't help that she was increasingly aware of the peeks Mane was shooting at her. Was Boreas being serious? She had no previous experience to compare to how the stallion was acting. She'd never had a coltfriend, nor had anyone asked her on any sort of date, save for a few invitations to some school dances years ago. The bookish unicorn had rejected all of these, preferring the company of her texts over that of the mouth-breathing stallions.

I don't even like him. she realized. He was bitter, sarcastic, arrogant and possessed a stifling amount of smugness to rival Trixie. Mane wasn't particularly revolting nor handsome. He wasn't cruel or mean-spirited; just disillusioned with the world. *No. He's too different from me. It would never work. Even if I wanted it to. Which I don't.*

A snarl from the darkness shattered her train of thought. With lightning reflexes, Break and Iron Shod were crouched down in combat-ready poses. Jutsu and Koi scrambled to rejoin the others. The guttural cry had not been lacking in magnitude. Whoever, or whatever, had produced it was no mere forest critter.

Pan, Rise and Mane, being mostly defenseless, were huddled around the lantern. The rest, with their greater offensive capabilities, formed a circle around them. Their eyes darted about, scanning the murky darkness for movement.

"What was that?"

"SHH!"

Rise, having been silenced, returned to quivering and holding tight to Pan.

An unearthly silence descended on the ravine. No pony stirred for an agonizingly long time. The roar was never heard again.

"Looks like we'll be having a night watch." Iron Shod muttered. With that, they returned to their meals, uneasy and no longer hungry. Twilight set aside her food and cracked open a book. It was going to be a long night.

* * *

"...in the absence of effective bandages and anti-biotics, cauterization may be necessary to stem the flow of blood and prevent infection. If one does not possess the standard-issue instruments normally used in the procedure, a suitable flame can be improvised via direct application of..."

She closed the book. It wasn't that she found it uninteresting; far from it. Rather, Twilight figured it would be wise to peruse through the other volumes she had brought along. With magic, she probed into her bulky saddle bags for her other readings. Rarity's coat, some food items, Fluttershy's medical supplies, the notebook she had been using to keep tabs on their journey, and...

A jar?

Twilight pulled the foreign glass container out of the pack. It was filled with a shockingly colorful fluid. There was a note taped to it.

I slipped this into your bag when you weren't looking. I'm sure it's kick will help you out along the way.

-R. D.

Liquid rainbow. The cyan pegasus' parting gift. She vividly recalled her time in Cloudsdale, at the weather factory. Pinkie Pie had sampled some of the substance; her reaction had been unpleasant. The memory made her smile. A comforting recollection in a time like this. She replaced the jar in her bag, unsure of what practical use it had.

Break gently nudged her. She looked up to her left at him.

"Get some rest, Twilight. We're going dark in a few minutes." As he said it, he angled his head at the lantern. She wouldn't have anything to read by very soon. Her droopy eyes, however, told her that he was right.

Nodding, she shuffled off to her shelter, dragging her saddlebags behind her.

Inside the tent, she plopped down onto her sleeping mat. The unicorn decided to at least read the first chapter of one of the other books. At random, one was pulled out.

Search and Destroy: Modern Warfare Strategy and Tactics by General Stoneshoe

With a click, the light suddenly disappeared. In darkness, she groveled. It seemed like she would have to make her own light. Her horn started to tingle as a light orb spell began to take form. Suddenly, she recalled something Boreas had told her. Something regarding the Horn of Ceros.

She pulled out the blade, and, with a bit of a disgusted look, fit it over her horn. The alicorn had said that the horn was under an enchantment that made it emit magical energy as light. Run a current through it, and it would light up like a torch. At least, that's what Boreas had guessed. He didn't sound too sure of himself when he had described it to her. Caution thrown to the wind, she gave the horn a gentle pulse.

The entire ravine was lit up like there was a miniature sun. Twilight scrambled to eliminate the flow. Slowly, the horn returned to its normal metallic luster. Evidently, a gentle pulse was more than enough to fuel the enchantment.

"The hell was that, Twilight?" Break's voice was coming from outside. "Damn near blinded me!"

"Sorry! I was just... trying something out."

"Well then try it out in the morning!"

She couldn't discern what he said next, but judging by the inflection in his voice it didn't sound pleased. Removing the horn, Twilight started to read with a normal light spell. There was no complaining this time.

"...a soldier thrives on fear. Fear is what keeps him alive. Fear is what drives them forward. Terror is what kills a soldier. A fearful fighter will tread on, hoping that an escape lies ahead of him, but a terrified fighter will wallow in the mud. Victory is not achieved by the blood of one hundred martyrs, but by the living bodies of one hundred survivors..."

“...when assaulting a fortified position, it is of the utmost importance to minimize exposure to the enemy. Whether armed with spears, bows or rifles, being caught in the open for any amount of time is always a risk. It is thus important to understand the benefits and pitfalls of suppression, particularly from an entrenched position...”

“...ultimately, the outcome of a battle comes down to the application of battle magics. It is the goal of every unicorn on the field to protect their allies at all costs. This can be achieved by impenetrable defense or overwhelming offense. Ideally, a force of arms would have multiple contingents of unicorns dedicated to one or the other. In the absence of multiple magic users, however, it may be more prudent for a unicorn to focus on protection over attacking (See section 5F)...”

A sudden noise brought Twilight out of the engrossing work. Her ears perked up to try and catch the sound again. She was soon rewarded with a small whimper. It was coming from the tent next to hers. Out of curiosity, she cast a hearing amplification spell; one of the many useful things she had learned in her endless studies. She soon regretted doing so. The tent next to hers was Pan's tent.

He wasn't alone. There was a slow, rhythmic pounding emitting from the shelter. Periodically, a stifled feminine groan would be coaxed out. She was somewhat astonished that Pan and Rise would actually attempt engaging those sorts of activities while in such close proximity to the others.

I shouldn't be listening to this. she realized with guilt. But she couldn't bring herself to cancel the hearing spell. It was fascinating, in an extremely messed up way. Twilight felt herself flushing with embarrassment. A strange pang resonated in her heart, but she could recognize it. Jealousy. She envied Rise, but not because of the absolutely sensual experience she was having.

Oddly enough, Twilight realized just how alone she was. Sure she had her friends back in Ponyville. And Spike. And even Princess Celestia. But she often felt herself holding them at a legs length away. She had no one to truly confide in. Her true thoughts had always been her own, and after the last few days, they were starting to wear on her soul.

The noise died down as Pan and Rise's heated session came to a close. Twilight thumped her head to the ground, wishing the empty stinging

to go away. It was not working. Her ears picked up a new sound: the armor was vibrating. She put the crown on.

What.

I don't have to be a creepy old alicorn to know that something is bothering you.

Am I not allowed to wallow in sadness?

No, that's perfectly within your rights. You want to tell me what's got you all huffy?

I'm alone.

There are seven other ponies around you to talk to.

Talk to? Yes, of course. But not be close to.

Feeling a bit overloaded, are we?

I suppose so.

Well, you can always talk to me.

You wouldn't understand...

I am quite familiar with loneliness, Twilight. Speak your mind.

Everyone I know has someone that they can fall upon. My friends back in Ponyville can go to their families and each other. Spike always has me, but I don't feel as if he can support me all the time. Celestia has her sister. I just overheard Pan and Rise having a satisfying experience a few feet away. I need someone, Boreas.

You have me.

Thanks... but no thanks. I need something more... real. No offense.

None taken. I understand what your saying. You need a pony in your life that you can actually talk to face to face.

Precisely. Not a disembodied soul. I need a physical relationship.

To fulfil certain... ah... needs?

Why you... No! That's not what I meant at all!

It was a joke.

A rather, poor one, then! You've been becoming increasingly annoying as of late, Boreas.

Sorry. I've always been regarded as easily impressionable, and listening to Iron Shod and Break is doing nothing to stem this.

Excuses.

Truth.

Whatever. I just wish I had somepony real to talk to.

I'm fairly confident there are plenty of ponies around you that are willing to listen.

Such as?

Well, if you would take a moment to listen in on Mane, in the tent over...

She crooned her head over towards where she recalled Mane had set up his tent. Her ears adjusted to the new angle as the amplification spell worked its magic. She unfocused on the ambient noise and tried to discern what was coming from the tent.

There was a steady thumping sound. It was accompanied by a strange, moist peeling sensation. Mane was whispering Twilight's name every few seconds to himself. If eavesdropping on Pan and Rise had been infuriating, then this was absolutely humiliating.

Oh... oh my.

I'd say he'd listen to you.

That's disgusting! What kind of colt would do that?

Every colt, if you must know.

I'm sure no proper Equestrian colt would resort to such perversion!

You'd be surprised. Hey, if I were you, I'd be taking this as a compliment. He thinks your cute. At least, cute enough to warrant... this.

There is no comfort to be found in knowing that a farmer is pleasuring himself with me in mind.

You don't like him?

No!

Why not?

He's... well... he's just not very nice to be around.

He's an ass, so to speak.

I... yes. He's an ass.

Well, if he's not an option, perhaps you'd like to hear what Break and Iron Shod think about you. They're keeping watch outside. Maybe they're talking about their companions.

Audibly groaning, she complied. Turning her head, Twilight used her ears to search for the two bad-mouthed mercenaries.

* * *

"What do you think?"

"...about?"

"About the mission."

"Completely fucked." The dark grey pony kicked a pebble into the creek as he said the words. Turning back to Break, he added: "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

The pegasus gave a short, forced laugh. He glanced back over shoulder, to the tents. "You think she'll be alright?" he asked.

"Twilight?"

"Yeah."

Iron Shod considered this for a moment. "She's a smart girl. Sooner or later that filly will figure out that it's for her own good that she lets her hooves dirty."

They sat in silence for a while.

“Pan is one lucky son of a bitch.”

“Yep.”

More silence.

“But, you know, if I had to... I wouldn’t mind taking Jutsu for a tumble through the hay...”

“If she heard you, she’d probably geld you and shove your balls up your gaping ass.”

“Hell, I don’t mind. It’d just be an excuse to get her hooves near that piece of meat.”

They both genuinely cracked up at that comment.

“She’s probably too old for you, Break.”

“She’s probably too young for you, Shod. How old are you, anyways? Late fifties?”

With the most solemn expression he could muster, Iron Shod used the gravest voice possible. “That’s classified information, private.”

Break just stared at him with the most quizzical expression he could. Moments later, they were both convulsing with laughter once again.

“And if I get REALLY desperate, I’m sure you could help me tie down a certain purple-maned filly we all love and hold dear to our hearts...”

Iron Shod shook his head. “She’s just a kid. That is fucked up...”

Then, with a smile: “But I like the way you think.”

Still chortling, Break continued. “Maybe we could get that Trixie mare to join in on the fun. I’m sure she’s just as crazy in the sack as she is with her magic...”

* * *

Twilight had deactivated her hearing spell long before the stallions were done talking. Their banter was disgusting, depraved, and absolutely sickening.

That was disgusting, depraved, and absolutely sickening.

Okay, so maybe those later things about massive orgies and Umalian whores were a bit unsavo--

Boreas.

Ah, right. Well, you heard them! They were worried about you. I'm sure they'd listen if you just asked.

I appreciate what you're trying to do, Boreas, but I don't believe that you or these ponies have the answers I'm looking for.

Well, I tried.

And I thank you for doing so. I need to get some rest. Goodnight, Boreas.

That you do. Goodnight, Twilight Sparkle.

* * *

She was standing in the lake. It was red.

Was it sunset?

No.

The skies were overcast.

It was blood.

She wanted to run. She wanted to get away.

The vile liquid coagulated around her legs, sealing her to fate.

Below the crimson waves, shadows lurked. They flickered about in an insane dance.

She had to go below the waves. She had to see for herself.

But she could not. She did not want to.

Whatever secrets the abyss contained were not worth bathing in blood for.

Behind her. A gust of wind. She tried to turn, but could not.

The blood had frozen her neck stiff.

The wind grew into a mighty gale. Her bonds were ripped as she was thrown into the lake.

Wave after wave pounded her deeper and deeper.

The shadows; bodies.

Mane, his eyes gouged out.

Rise, her skull cleaved in two.

Pan, his body crushed under massive a boulder.

Koi, impaled on a stake.

Jutsu, mighty gashes in her throat.

Break, his wings ripped off.

Iron Shod, his brains blown out.

She could not breath. She could not swim. She would die in the murk of death.

A hoof reached out from above the surface. She grabbed it.

It pulled her up.

Up.

Up.

She woke up.

* * *

"I don't know what you were expecting. You're lucky Trixie was watching over you, otherwise this thunder lizard would have torn you all to shreds!"

The sandstorm had receded in the early morning. They began their ascent out of the ravine just before daybreak. The sun was just peeking over the distant mountains as they were re-entering the flatness of the desert when they came across the massive corpse with a smug unicorn leaning against it.

“Honestly, you foals should think twice before having a camping trip in one of the places bad boys like these like to hide in during a sand storm.” As Trixie said this, she patted the mutilated carcass of the massive reptile.

Twilight had read very little about thunder lizards. They weren’t an Equestrian species, and most information about them had come from the rare sightings deep in the Everfree forest. In short, a nomadic, predatory lizard larger than a fully grown alicorn at birth. Judging by the size of this particular specimen, it couldn’t have been more than a few decades old.

“So that sound we heard last night...”

“Ah, yes. The roar of a thunder lizard. Reputedly as loud as a thunder clap. Trixie was quite impressed to hear the rumors were true.”

That made sense. Given the distance from their current position to their camp in the ravine, the volume of the roar seemed to match.

The eight of them examined the dead beast. If Trixie’s work with the stallion the day before had been a five minute sketch, then this was a true work of art. The head had been cleanly decapitated at the base of the neck fronds and was proudly displayed on top of a nearby rock. Trixie had evidently pulled out the creature’s own back spikes and used them to stab the creature in the belly. At least, that was the logical conclusion seeing that there were hundreds of spikes missing from the spine and hundreds of spikes embedded in the belly of the beast. The mace-like tale, which had been severed, was apparently used to bludgeon the lizard. All of the appendages displayed compound fractures that would have matched up with that sort of attack.

The underside was, like the stallion, cut cleanly down the middle all the way from the throat to the nether regions. The small intestines had been dragged out in their entirety; Twilight could only guess at their length as she tried to follow the brownish tube with her eyes through the endless sand dunes. The ground surrounding it was stained with blood and bile. The stench was unbearable.

Break whistled. “Wow. Just wow.”

“The poor bastard was trying to take shelter in the ravine you were cowering in. Thankfully, the Great and Powerful Trixie was here to van--”

Iron Shod cut her off. "Well, thank you, Miss Trixie, but we need to keep going."

She huffed. "Suit yourself."

They shuffled off into the desert, resuming their journey to the south.

* * *

"You know, she's right. We'd probably be dead right now if it weren't for her."

The earth pony snorted at Break's comment.

"She's still crazy." Iron Shod replied.

"Oh, no doubt of that. But I don't think I would have liked that thing getting the drop on us. It would have been messy. Hell, she took that monster out by herself. I don't think one of my leaflets would even scratch that thing."

"Are you saying we should have her tag along?" he asked.

"I'm sure she'd have her uses. But I'll agree: She's fucking nuts."

The desert was starting to flatten out into a rockier, barren wasteland. In the distance they could see the faint green of a forest, backed by an even less discernible mountain range.

Iron Shod turned to face the others. "That sand storm cut off our traveling time by a few hours. I don't think we're making it to Yearling City by tonight. That's the West Spur of the Sampan Mountains up ahead. We should reach them before nightfall."

That sounded good to them. Subtly, they began to pick up their pace. If they were to reach the mountains before dark, speed was essential. The coarse, pebbly ground soon morphed into gentle grasslands. Within an hour the ponies found themselves once again under the welcoming shadows of ages-old pine trees. Dried needles crunched under their hooves. They took a break for lunch.

Twilight pulled out an apple from her bag. Harvested only days ago from Sweet Apple Acres by her hard-working orange-coated friend, Applejack. She bit into the red orb. Her tongue was treated to an ecstatic

balance of sweetness and tartness. The rest of the fruit was quickly wolfed down.

Mane walked over and sat next to her. She tried not to gag.

“Hey, Twilight.”

no no no no no no no no no no

“How are you doing?”

NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO GO AWAY GO AWAY GO AWAY

“I’m fine, why are you asking?” she flashed a weak smile at the green pony.

“You just looked a bit lonely, sitting by yourself.”

OKAY, YEAH, THAT’S TRUE. BUT STILL. GO AWAY.

“I... I suppose so. Was there something you wanted?”

“Oh, no. Just wanted to chat.”

Just wanted to sleep with me, you meant.

“Alright.”

Why did I just move to make room for him to sit? I’m not very good at saying no, am I...

“Tell me about Equestria.”

With an amount of enthusiasm that she hated herself for, Twilight found herself detailing the many nuances of her homelands society. Mane seemed unnaturally engrossed with her words. That, or he was great at pretending to be.

“...oh, I think we’re getting ready to move out again. We can talk later.”

Iron Shod was making his rounds, telling the ponies to pack up.

Mane raised his eyebrows. “Can’t we talk while on the way?”

She sighed. “I’d... rather be by myself right now. Sorry.”

He just shrugged then walked over to the others. She put on the crown.

How do I tell a colt I'm not interested?

That was hilarious.

Please. Tell me.

No.

Why not?

Because this is sure to be entertaining over the long run.

You are an evil pony.

Just an easily amused pony. Regardless, I think this will be a good learning experience. I'm sure you of all people could use some practice with managing relationships.

Very funny.

I know. I'm a regular comedian.

Is there anything at all you could tell me?

Just don't send him mixed messages. If you don't like him, make it clear. Being nice about it will only make this worse for both of you.

Is that all?

That's all I will tell you.

Well, thanks.

They weaved their way through the undergrowth. It was not particularly dense, so they managed to maintain a decent trot. Mane was near the back of the group. Twilight did her best to stay as close to the front as possible. The slope they were ascending was starting to turn from pleasant grass and moss into eroded black stone. Up ahead was a dull, constant roaring. A waterfall.

Twilight hadn't been paying attention when Break, who she had been closely following, suddenly went to a dead stop. She bumped into him. Either not feeling it or ignoring her clumsiness, Break was thoroughly

engrossed with the sight in front of him. They were standing at the top of a cliff. To their right, a stream was cascading down a hundred feet. Far below, the bottom of the gorge flattened out into a large basin, rocky sandbanks extending into slopes that reached back into the forest. There, on the pebbly beaches, stood Trixie, clad in her black body suit. She was surrounded by five haggard looking stallions; three earth ponies and two unicorns.

“Come on, filly! Give us what ye got!” one of them cried.

“Ya on our turf; ya play by our rules.” a second said.

“What Thick Skull said! Give us them shinies on that belt there or bad things may happen to ye!” finished the third.

The unicorn stood her ground. “And If I don’t?”

The first one smiled. “If ye don’t we get ta tie ye up and drag ye back to our hideout. Then we can teach you some humility!” As he said it, he spat at her hooves.

Trixie’s reaction was simply to narrow her eyes. “You can try.”

Two of the earth ponies unsheathed their hoof-blades with wry smiles.

“GET HER!”

They all lunged with astounding agility. Trixie simply winked out of sight. A teleportation spell, but not like any that Twilight had ever seen. There had been no cast time; she had instantly vanished.

“Teleporter!” one of the unicorns yelled. They quickly untangled themselves and formed an outward facing circle, looking for where she had reappeared.

Twilight herself was unsure of where the blue pony had gone. That was, until a voice suddenly emerged from behind them.

“You foals going to help me take these brutes out or just stand there?”

Iron Shod was quick to react. “How did you... ah, forget it. Who are those ponies?”

“Bandits. Robbers. Outlaws. I don’t know. They jumped me when I was refilling my canteens down there.”

Of note was the fact that she wasn’t talking in her normal third-person sing song voice. It was a welcome change.

Iron Shod looked back down the cliff. “Those unicorns would tear me apart before I could get close. Not without any spell protection.”

“I, too, am useless in this situation.” added Jutsu.

That left Break and Twilight. The lavender mare gulped.

Trixie shot them a smile. “You two up for some fun?”

Break was already starting to circle above.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

* * *

The bottom of the gorge was no-ponies land. A flat expanse with virtually no cover. The five stallions stood in the middle of it, the three earth ponies forming a shield around the two unicorns.

“Thick Skull, can ye trace her spell?”

The brownish-white unicorn shook his head. “Nope. Teleport got covered up.”

“Think she scooted out ah here?”

“If she smart she would’ve.”

They let their guards down. There had been no sign of their quarry for nearly five minutes.

“Damn shame. Looked like she had some real schwanky gear on her. Would’ve fetched ah good price over in Yearling or Maresville.”

“Fuck it. Let’s just get outta here. This place givin’ me the creeps.”

The stallions started to walk, following the direction of the water.

A sharp whistling sound suddenly breezed past them. One of the unicorns crumpled to the floor, a pebble embedded in his skull.

“BARRIER, NOW!”

Thick Skull’s horn flashed as an invisible protective envelope surrounded them. The air seemed to shimmer where the dome was displacing matter. The unicorn had it up in the nick of time as a shower of pebbles flying at lethal speeds suddenly slammed into the magical wall.

“How ya holdin’, Skull?”

“I’m alright, sir!”

“Good. We need to--” the stallion looked up to the sky. “What the hell is THAT?”

Countless metal shards were descending upon them. They could only watch as hell itself broke loose around them. The unicorn’s barrier held, but barely, as the last of the leaflets unleashed its explosive contents.

“Gah, Fuck!” he groaned as the light from his horn flickered. Thick Skull staggered to the ground as the barrier popped.

“Dammit, back to the safehouse! Go! Go!”

They sprinted along the pebbly banks, the unicorn limping behind them.

* * *

Her voice absolutely icy, Trixie gave the order through her ear piece. “We’ve got them where we want them. Chase them down.”

“*What?!*” Twilight interjected. “They’re already on the run! You don’t need to kill them!”

Break’s voice crackled over the static. “One air-burst claymore away. Enjoy the meager fireworks, fillies and gentlecolts.”

She could only watch in horror. The four stallions were doing their best to get away, stealing glances over their shoulder to check if they were being followed.

There was a puff of smoke above them. The screams were clear even at that distance. The dirt danced as hundreds of steel balls pelted the ponies and the ground around them.

Twilight was already racing along the cliff to reach the bottom. As she reached the bodies, she noted with morbid relief that they had died quickly. Unlike the scene at the river, this was far more pleasant, if such a word could be used to describe it. The stallions were more or less intact, if peppered with countless half-inch incisions. Much less blood this time around.

A groan caught her attention. The others were starting to catch up to her and Break was descending to the bank. Twilight identified the source of the call: the unicorn, Thick Skull. Cautiously, she approached him.

He had been lucky to be lagging behind the others. Being outside of the kill zone of a claymore had its perks, the main one being not dead. Thick Skull was very not dead. The systems of immediate necessity to his survival; namely his brain and heart, had escaped the brunt of the shower. His lower body and his flanks were a different story. Blood flowed freely, staining the rocky ground crimson. She crouched down next to him. The unicorn tried to turn his head to look at her, but he instead fell into a coughing fit.

"Kill me." he wheezed.

"I... I can help you."

"You killed ma' blood brothers. Kill me so ah can join them."

Trixie and the others walked over to join her. They all stared down at the dying stallion.

"Don't be ridicu-"

"KILL ME!"

Twilight spoke not another word

Trixie leaned in and whispered in his ear.

"This won't hurt a bit."

Her horn flickered. There was a snapping sound. The unicorn spasmed a few times before remaining perfectly still. He was dead.

"What did you do!?" Twilight demanded.

“Severed his brain from his spine. Granted him his dying wish.” the mare coldly answered.

“He could have survived! We could have helped him!” she screamed.

“To what point, filly!? He was a thief and murderer. Giving him death was an act of mercy on my part.” the blue mare snorted.

She was about to retort when Iron Shod put his hoof on her shoulder. Twilight turned to face him. His eyes spoke all the words that were needed.

Let it go.

No.

Killing a gang of violent thugs was a necessary evil.

Murdering petty thieves was cruelty.

She would not let this go.

Chapter 7

The Waiting Game

“We’re moving.”

He flicked his mane as he said it.

“At this point I don’t care if you join us or leave us. You’ve proven your use.”

Iron Shod directed the words at Trixie. She didn’t reply, her only response being a small shrug. They shouldered their gear and began to walk along the river bank, putting the waterfall behind them. All of them but Twilight.

She was still crouched next to the body of Thick Skull, staring intently at the corpse. There was no emotion, just a growing coldness festering in her. The mare traced her hoof over the muzzle of Thick Skull; the blood staining her coat not bothering her in the slightest. He was still warm.

A flash of her horn, and the ground next to her started to shift. Pebbles were lifted from the ground and deposited feet away. Another load of earth, added to the pile. A pit started to form in the ravine floor; a grave.

Thick Skull was laid to rest. Twilight turned her attention to his blood brothers.

* * *

Contempt was all Trixie could feel as she watched the filly. She was so naive. This was not her realm. The ponies had stopped when they realized Twilight wasn’t following. In silence, they watched the unicorn pay her respect to the murdered stallions.

“We don’t have time for this.” Break grumbled.

Iron Shod gave him a harsh glare, and the pegasus backed down. Jutsu was utterly impassive, while the farmers shifted uncomfortably. Trixie was sitting on a rock some distance away, watching Twilight labor away with great interest.

The blue unicorn levitated a metal pamphlet from one of the many compartments in her suit. A small switch on the side was flicked, and the Personal Magic Assistant came to life. She browsed through numerous files until she came across what she was looking for.

A three-dimensional model rendered on the screen. The Armor of Boreas. She studied the file, then compared it to what Twilight was wearing. She was wearing the crown, but the rest of the armor was lashed to her back.

“Interesting.” she murmured.

“Hey, that looks like that armor Twilight has.”

Had Trixie not been in control of her abilities, Break’s neck would have been splayed open at the moment. Instead, she decided to remain impassive to the impudent pegasus. She turned off the PMA, sliding it back into one of the compartments.

“That some new, high-tech Mol gear?” he asked.

She snorted. “It could be.”

Having been hovering behind her, he decided to instead touch down beside her, sitting side by side on the rock. Trixie found the experience to be extremely unpleasant, but did nothing to betray her feelings.

“Don’t be coy. I used to work for the Mol as well; I know the signs of one who works for them.”

She took a deep breath, eyes closed. “Break, Male, Pegasus. Service Code 87793123S112. Surveillance, Remote Destruction. Received high marks from superiors for actions during Operation Thunderhead. Left active service for unknown reasons. Currently based out of Equestrian borderlands. Active mercenary. Status Green.”

Break’s jaw hung slack.

The mare continued “I know far more about you than you will ever know about me. I know what you’re trying to do. . No, I do not find you intriguing at all. And for the record, regarding your comments last night in the ravine, former agent Break: I am not as crazy in the sack as I am with my magic. So, may I wholeheartedly suggest that you fuck off.”

The pegasus walked back to the others, his tail between his legs. Iron Shod snickered and punched his leg.

Trixie turned her attention back to watching Twilight. In particular, her gaze was fixed on the black crown resting on her head. An impossibly black accessory that gave off a menacing aura just looking at it.

Determine if the armor and horn are a threat to her or the mission. Do not let her or the artifacts out of your sight. Ensure that either they are either returned or completely destroyed.

The voice echoed in Trixie's head. She had been given a simple enough goal, but it was not easily achieved. Protect Twilight. Observe the effects of the two treasures. Her briefing had been vague. She had no idea what effects she was supposed to be looking for.

A sigh escaped her lips as the mare finished burying the last of the bodies. Twilight simply stood still, observing her handiwork. Trixie dismounted her rock and trotted over.

"Wash that blood off your hooves. It'll give you a rash if you don't."

* * *

Dead leaves and pine needles crunched underneath as they rose in altitude towards the Sampan Pass. They had long since left the gorge, and were now back on their original southern heading towards the mountains. After making their way through the pass, they would head west along the base of the range until they reached Yearling Mountain. Coincidentally enough, Yearling City, their next rendezvous point, was nuzzled at the heel of said mountain.

Koi and Jutsu walked side by side, their conversations barely audible, even in the still of the forest. The others, out of respect to the two ponies, did not attempt to eavesdrop, instead content with talking amongst each other. Except for Trixie, who had taken her usual position, a few hundred yards away either far behind or way ahead. Her teleporting was disorientating.

The orange stallion craned his head down. "You said last night that you are a duelist. I've never heard of any mare that matches your description in all of Umala."

She looked up at him with contemplative eyes. "My dueling career never took off until after I had left my homeland."

He nodded, seeming to understand.

"What about you? You seem quite knowledgeable for a mere farmer."

Koi recoiled from the question. "... I haven't always lived in the village."

Jutsu, meeting his stare, didn't pursue. She had her suspicions, but kept them to herself. She changed the subject. "It has been some time since I've talked to a native Umalian. I've heard the stories, but I want to know; how are things really?"

"Getting worse by the day."

She shifted her gaze to the lush floor. It was not the answer she was hoping for. "I suppose my return won't be the one I was hoping for, in that case."

Koi was silent for a moment. "How long ago did you leave?"

She did not reply. It had been a long time, evidently. Her eyes were focused ahead, hooves pounding away at the soft mossy dirt. Ahead of them in the line, the other farmers, Pan, Rise and Mane, were murmuring amongst themselves.

"Twenty-two days." Pan remarked.

"Hm?" Mane grunted.

"Twenty-two days to return to the village."

"And if we don't make it back before then?" asked Rise, her eyebrows raised inquisitively.

"It's only a rough approximation. The harvest is going to be delayed as long as possible, but they can't wait that long."

"Well, we reached Canterlot well before schedule. I'm sure we can return in good time." the green pony remarked.

Pan still had doubts in his mind. They had already been traveling through the borderlands for five days, and by Iron Shod's reckoning they

were about halfway between Equestria and Umala. They had crossed this distance in a week previously, although that had been a straight shot without detours. Still, the hue-less pony could only sigh as he considered the odds. The farmers had been lucky; too lucky, really. It was only a matter of time before there was a setback. Until that happened, though, all he could do is wait with bated breath.

Sensing his apprehension, Rise nuzzled against him. Pan let out a reluctant sigh. Feeling awkward, Mane pretended to ignore the two lovers and stared straight ahead into nothingness. Chuckling, Rise nudged Mane's side.

"Hey, don't act so serious. I'm sure there's a filly out there for you."

He snorted and muttered under his breath. "There already was, and now she's gone."

Not quite catching his words, the white mare furrowed her brow. "Huh?"

Mane didn't answer, but continued to resolutely stare deep into the thinning forest. The ground was noticeably sloping and the trees were starting to fade into heartier coniferous varieties. Mosses and lichens were replaced with igneous rock fragments and fine dirt. With a flurry of dust, Break took off into the air, getting a lay of the land.

A familiar buzz emitted from the ponies earpieces. The fighters looked instinctively looked skywards.

"Five or so clicks to the beginnings of the pass. Wouldn't recommend trying to cross them before nightfall, though. Looks like the terrain is going to get a lot trickier from here on."

Mid-afternoon sunshine warmed their backs. Iron Shod voiced back his agreement. He tasked Break with finding a suitable camp site.

Loosely piled earth crumbled under her feet as Twilight walked southwest along the northern face of the Sampan mountains. The pass was some five kilometers away. Boreas' ethereal voice interrupted her thoughts.

Trixie is getting closer.

Hm?

Coming down towards us from the mountain side. No idea how she got all the way up there.

Twilight looked up the imposing slope. Sure enough, hundreds of feet above, a blue pony was making her way down.

Teleporting, I would assume. She wants to talk to us?

I wouldn't know. The look on her face suggests she does, though.

How can you see her face from here? I can barely even see her.

Just another enchantment. Eagle eyes, you know?

That makes sense.

You feeling okay, after that skirmish back at the falls? You've been pretty glum for a while.

'Skirmish?' I think you mean slaughter.

Fine. That thing that happened at that place. You can't go around with this stuff weighing on you all the time. It's not healthy.

Let me wallow.

You're only hurting yourself.

So what, I should just forgo all my morals?

That's not what I was saying...

Should I have left those bodies out to be picked clean by buzzards?!

No.

Then what can I do BUT feel sorry for myself?

There was a slight pause as Boreas did not respond.

Endure.

Easy enough for you. You're immortal; you have nothing to lose. I have but one life to spend, and I'd prefer not to live the rest of it regretting my decisions.

You'll have to let go at some point.

Then all I can do is wait for that moment.

* * *

Trixie's news was not good: There was a massive windstorm moving in from the south. They'd be fine on the northern side of the mountains, but the pass would be a deathtrap until the storm moved out of the way. Break had made them aware of a suitable campsite about three clicks away. The uniform decision was to head there and plan the next course of action from then. The ponies resumed their journey, but this time Trixie did not disappear into the forest. Instead, she positioned herself at the six o'clock of the group, keeping to herself.

She's staring at me.

At you?

Yeah. It's creeping me out a bit.

You sure she's looking at you and not at me? Or something up ahead?

I am one hundred percent certain she is looking directly at me.

Should I do something about it?

Break said she was a Ministry of Intelligence agent, right?

That's what he guessed at least.

In that case I think it would be a good idea for you to put me away.

Why?

Just do it.

...alright, if you insist.

We'll talk later, when you're alone, if you want.

As always.

She levitated the crown off of her head and placed it on her back with the rest of the armor. Out of curiosity, Twilight stole a glance backwards.

Trixie was floating a metal pad in front of her face, engrossed with whatever the device was showing her.

If you want to talk, nothing is stopping you from coming back here.

The voice caught her surprise. It was in her head. It wasn't Boreas' voice, which would have been impossible regardless. For a moment she wondered if it had somehow been Ceros, but that didn't make any sense either.

She blinked then refocused her vision. Trixie was looking straight at her. Her eyes rolled and she made a nodding motion. *The voice was Trixie's.* Twilight realized. Unsure of what she was doing, Twilight slowed her pace until the others had passed her and she was side-by-side with the fellow unicorn.

"How did you--" she started.

Telepathy spell.

Okay, that was obvious. "I didn't think that was possible."

Of course not. Telepathy spells were banned by the Trotsmare Declaration some untold hundreds of years ago.

"So how are you using them, then?"

Ministry of Intelligence secrets, my girl.

The others were starting to stare back at Twilight, wondering why she was talking to a seemingly unresponsive Trixie.

Would you like me to teach you so that those other foals would stop giving you weird looks?

With that, Trixie floated her PMA in front of Twilight. On display was the details to a spell; the telepathy spell, she assumed. Twilight looked at it inquisitively.

Ah, yes, you've probably never seen one of these before. Prototype technology courtesy of the Ministry. Think of it as a portable library.

She reverted to a whisper so the others wouldn't think she's crazy. "Isn't this sort of spell illegal? And why aren't you talking to me normally?"

My dear little filly, you may not have noticed, but we are no longer in Equestria. The same rules don't apply. And to answer that second one, because I like watching you be humiliated.

On a wry note, Twilight realized she must have been referring to the events back in Ponyville. This was her meager attempt at revenge. The situation was too absurd to think much of it, though. With a shrug, she levitated the PMA out of Trixie's grasp and held it in front of her, pouring over the spell in minutes.

The concept was a tad more difficult to understand than the process, but eventually it clicked. To sum up: direct manipulation of the targets brain waves. She realized with some trepidation that this same method could be used to inflict serious damage. It was no wonder the spells had been banned.

You won't hurt me, in case you're wondering. I have safeguards in place for protection.

With a gulp, Twilight's horn flashed as she reached out to Trixie in the ether.

Hello?

Well done. Consider that your first lesson.

Lesson?

I'm sent to protect you, so I figure it'll do you some good to learn some magic techniques that could end up saving your life.

I am more than capable of defending myself.

A sharp pain coursed through her body, starting from her horn and ending at her tail. An electric sensation, burning in such a way that it made her squeak, again drawing the attention of the others.

I could have overloaded your nervous system and caused catastrophic organ failure right then and there if I wanted to. And that would be merciful compared to the other thousands of ways I could kill you in the blink of an eye. You can hold your own against as many Earth ponies and pegasi a fight may throw at you, but I can guarantee any unicorn worth their horn would toss you aside like a rag-doll. Believe me when I say, filly, that you need some lessons in Battle Magic 101.

* * *

Mane was watching to two mares with great intent. They had been utterly silent for the past hour, even since reaching the campsite. Rather than set up shelters, the two sat on a rock together, staring at nothing in particular. Every so often, one of their horns would spark with life. It was utterly bewildering to the stallion.

“Telepathy.”

He raised his head to the speaker, Iron Shod.

“Huh?”

“They’re speaking inside their heads with magic. I suppose you Umalians wouldn’t know about that, though, being entirely earth ponies.”

He turned back to look at the two unicorns. *So they’re not crazy.* With a internal smile, he noted that he had a perfect opportunity to charm the lavender mare while she was otherwise occupied. Her saddlebags were deposited against a boulder a few feet away...

* * *

Telepathy, safeguards, barriers and command magic. A good starting point.

So we’re done?

Recap, my dear. Try and sum up those four subjects as best you can.

Telepathy is direct mental communication. Command magic is a subfield of that, in which you communicate directions to allies, often assisted by a unicorn relay team. Telepathy can be used in an offensive context, often by taking control of a body or other forms of mental trickery.

Sounds about right. And what about safeguards and barriers?

Safeguards are enchantments used to protect against magic directed at the enchanted. The most common variety would be telepathic blocks to prevent mind control. The efficiency of the safeguard is dependant on the design of the spell and the amount of energy put into it. A unicorn that knows the design of the spell can exploit any weaknesses to shatter it. Alternatively, a sufficient application of energy will break any safeguard, but that is not a recommended method.

Good, good. Barriers?

Fields of energy arranged in such a way to deflect any physical attack. The size and strength of the barrier depends on the ability of the caster. They are difficult to maintain over time, but are practically indestructible so long as the barrier is maintained.

You know, that Thick Skull fellow back at the falls had one of the strongest barriers I've ever seen.

Don't remind me.

Hmph. Well, for what it's worth, he provided a good example of how to properly use a barrier in a combat scenario. Anyways, you've already demonstrated exemplary ability at telepathy, so give me a demonstration of a safeguard. Devise a guard that will prevent me from reading your thoughts, and I'll see if I can break it.

Some time later, Twilight informed Trixie that she had done so.

"Obviously, I won't be able to telepathically communicate with you unless you design the safeguard to allow certain ponies to do so. I wouldn't recommend this, though, as it has a tendency to create faults in the spell weave. Anyways, I want you to think of any random thing, and I shall attempt to break your safeguard and read what that is."

Twilight thought about the dying tree about fifty yards down the slope. Trixie closed her eyes in concentration.

With Trixie lapsing into silence, Twilight let her thoughts wander. She took a glance behind her. What she saw made a rock form in her gut: Mane was setting up her tent. There was an odd popping sensation in her skull as Trixie resumed her telepathy.

Well, for a beginner that was a pretty good safegua-- oh my, you really hate Mane, don't you.

You weren't supposed to read that.

Perhaps you should have been thinking about something else, then. Anyways, those Umaliens are a funny bunch, aren't they. Setting up tents for others without asking. I mean, it's almost as if he likes you.

Uh...

Oh. Well, no matter. He won't be successful in wooing you. I can and will personally guarantee that.

Trixie.

Right. I think that is good for now, as the sun has almost set. I'll be testing you on this later.

Testing me?

On all the things I have taught you. Better be able to learn on your feet. Now, was there anything you wanted to talk about before we part ways?

Yes. Why are you here?

To protect you.

You know that I know that isn't all of it.

Think what you will. That's all I'm going to tell you.

Fine. Well, what about Ponyville? What would a Ministry of Intelligence agent be doing showing a common carnival show in a backwoods town? That's been bothering me ever since you showed up a few days ago.

An evaluation, dear Twilight.

Evaluation? Of what?

Of you.

...?

Certain leaders of the Ministry of Intelligence wanted a gauge of how your magic abilities were progressing. I was sent to... ah... incite you into showing off.

So that Ursa Minor was meant to pop up?

No. But it worked out in the end, and I got the information I needed. I could have taken care of it myself had it been necessary, but you seemed more than capable of handling it.

And yet you ran from danger.

I call it a stylish get-away. We're done here, and I believe you need to go say thank you to Mane.

Trixie withdrew from the mental link. Fully alone with their thoughts once again, the two stared at each other wordlessly. The blue unicorn winked, and Twilight flattened her ears. Trixie plodded over to the others.

"The Great and Powerful Trixie shall be on her own for the night out of preference. Fear not, I am only temporarily leaving."

The ponies were once again bewildered by the unicorn as she teleported and winked out of sight.

"I'm pretty sure she's just been fuckin' with us the entire time." Break remarked, capturing all their thoughts perfectly.

The sun was starting to dip below the horizon. There would be no fire this night. Offering nothing other than a courteous nod to Mane, Twilight entered her shelter and pulled out one of her books.

Search and Destroy: Modern Warfare Strategy and Tactics by General Stoneshoe

It was starting to come together. The flow of battle. Unicorns would relay the orders to the rest of the soldiers, who would then execute with precision. The edge went to the force who had better communication; armaments and skill meant nothing if the enemy was able to coordinate a surround with frightening efficiency.

The next deciding factor was the magic. A single broken safeguard could potentially doom a fighting force. The unicorns were tasked with maintaining protection and harassing the enemy with offensive spells, as well as receiving and sending out instructions. Well disciplined unicorns could dominate a battle as easily as poorly trained ones would be slaughtered.

That was, of course, assuming the battle was a head-on clash. Warfare as of late had become swift and vicious. Large battlefields were unheard of, most conflicts resorting to minor skirmishes scattered across a region. Cunning and surprise had taken the crown from skill and armaments. General Stoneshoe described it as "exceedingly swift guerrilla tactics in an ever changing field."

As Twilight flipped through her intel folder, that certainly seemed the case. Advanced explosives, such as the ones Break had strapped under his harness wings, were a relatively new development. Firearms, as lethal as they could be, were held back in development because only unicorns were capable of practically using them via their telekinesis, and even then there were better ways to use their magic. The variants that the Umalians possessed, the breech loaders, had the advantage of being usable by all varieties of ponies, but they were ultimately unwieldy.

She skimmed through the various weapon readouts contained in the thick volume. Hoof-to-hoof weapons were still, by and large, the preferred arsenal by Umalians and Equestrians alike. Twilight hypothesized that it likely had to do with the current impracticality of firearms; they'd certainly come into vogue eventually.

Voices outside of the tent interrupted her thoughts. She poked a head out, and saw that Break, Iron Shod, Jutsu and Koi were sitting beside an electric lamp. The unicorn shuffled out to join their circle, silently listening in on the conversation.

"...I don't want to be stuck here any longer than necessary. If that storm doesn't clear out by noon tomorrow, were moving regardless of conditions."

As Iron Shod said this, he nodded at Twilight, acknowledging her presence.

Break chimed in. "Gonna have to agree with you. The longer we wait here, the less time we have to get to the village."

Koi shook his head. "It's too risky. Treacherous terrain combined with strong winds? That's asking for it."

Jutsu nodded in agreement. The two stallions didn't argue. Iron Shod turned to Break.

"Is there any other route to Yearling City?"

"If you want to spend the next three days hiking west around the mountains, then yes."

Twilight closed her eyes and the conversation faded from her ears. She had nothing to contribute, nor any solutions to their predicament. Instead, she mentally reviewed what Trixie had taught her.

Safeguards. It would be wise to place on herself some while she was unoccupied. Which ones would she need? Telepathy blocking? Some sort of automatic barrier? She thought back to her practice earlier that evening; Trixie had said that her telepathy block wasn't quite good enough. She had cracked it with little effort.

Recalling the spell, Twilight began to reform it. Minor tweaks here and there were made to the product until Twilight was satisfied with what she was visualizing in her head. With a spark of her horn, the safeguard went into place. There was no way to test it without another unicorn, unfortunately.

Automatic barriers. The idea was simple, but she had no idea what the spell would be like. Erect a shield whenever a projectile was moving at her within a certain range? She shook her head. It would be extremely difficult to maintain, not to mention the sheer exhaustion it could cause. This was a matter she would have to discuss with Trixie given the chance. Until then, she had to make do with knowing that her thoughts were her own.

"Well, let's just try to see if we can make it tomorrow. If it's too risky, we'll turn back."

* * *

Celestia's sun was angled just perfectly so that it shined through a gap in the shelter's lining and illuminated Twilight's face. With a groan, she stirred and turned over. The dawn still held the world in its dark grasp. Taking a peek outside, Twilight noted that none of the others were up. Daintily, she stepped out into the brisk morning air.

"I see you've made a new safeguard."

Twilight whipped around to her left, facing the voice. Trixie was sitting on a rock, as usual, watching the sun. She sat down next to her, keeping a respectable distance..

"I'm assuming you tried to crack it?" Twilight asked.

"Yes, and to little success."

"So it worked?"

“It worked brilliantly.” Trixie said, beaming. “Not as if I would expect anything less from a unicorn as talented as you.”

Twilight found her cheeks reddening. “Oh. Thanks, I guess.”

For a moment, the two silently watched the fiery orb climb into the sky. It was both awkward and oddly relaxing. With a cough, Twilight continued.

“You work for the Ministry of Intelligence.”

“Maybe.” Trixie responded, playfully raising an eyebrow.

“What do you do for them?” Twilight asked.

“Wetworks.” she answered in monotone.

The filly raised an eyebrow, unfamiliar with the euphemism. “Wetworks?”

Trixie gave her a complacent look.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

The blue unicorn sighed. “I’m really good at killing things.”

Twilight recoiled away for a few seconds. “So you’re saying that you’re--”

Trixie cut her off “--an assassin. Yes. Amongst other things. Cloak and dagger type operations. A bit of surveillance here and there. Understand?”

With a gulp, the lavender mare realized that Trixie was probably one of the many agents that acted directly under Princess Celestia’s command. She didn’t know whether to feel relieved that the Princess had taken the precaution of sending one of her best agents to assist her or to be terrified because the pony was a psychotic killer.

Suddenly, Trixie shifted the subject. “Anywhooo... you want Trixie to teach you a bit more magic before the others wake up?”

* * *

The pass was windy. Very, very windy. The Sampan Pass was just a massive gash through the width of the mountain range; massive cliffs

soared on both sides of the ponies as they started their plunge into the rocky hills of the pass.

Thank you, Rarity, for your quality work. Twilight thought as she wrapped the coat tighter around herself. The hem of the garment was wildly flapping in the breeze, like her mane and tail. The others were not faring as well. With no insulation other than the skin on their flanks, the unclothed ponies staggered their way through the five kilometer natural highway. The mid-morning sun did little to warm them, as it was quickly being covered by an overcast sky.

Dust was rolling through the gorge at frightening speeds. In the distance, one could hear trees snapping as the storm bowled through them. At the very least, it wasn't raining. Still, the gale was powerful enough that they were forced to lean into the wind at an unnaturally low angle. Breathing was difficult in the extreme conditions.

"WE NEED TO TURN BACK." Break screamed out to Iron Shod. "I CAN'T SEE WITH THIS FUCKING DIRT IN MY EYES."

Iron Shod, with his weight, rooted himself to the ground as he looked to his companions behind him. They all looked equally miserable in the biting wind. Even Jutsu, who had been stoic ever since first meeting her those many days ago, was wearing a haggard expression. They could barely force their limbs forward against the storm.

In silent agreement, the grey pony nodded and gestured back to the north they came from. They beat a hasty retreat to the safety of the north, having made it less than a quarter of the way through the pass. For now, waiting was the only option.

* * *

Trixie was perched on a rock, as usual. They had returned to the campsite from the night before, only to find a unicorn with the most self-satisfied grin they had ever seen.

"Not strong enough for the storm?" she taunted.

They all gave her dirty looks.

"Perhaps you will be pleased to learn that Trixie has found a suitable alternative to braving the pass."

Iron Shod, not missing a beat, trotted up to her. "Tell us."

Whispering, Trixie leaned in close to Iron Shod's head. "You wait."

The stallion snorted as the unicorn continued. "Bad timing on your part. This time of year is famous in this region for the windstorms. Cold air moving up from the Umalian sea towards the mountains. Quite foolish of you to even consider attempting to cross the pass in these conditions."

The grey pony turned to the others. With a grunt, he repeated Trixie's information. They'd be stuck here for another day or two.

* * *

"Umala? No, never been there before. I mean, obviously it's sitting just to the south, but there's no reason to go, you know? Nothing there worth risking trying to cross the border for. Ain't nothing there but jack shit."

* * *

"The clans? Hell, I don't know much. There was some Jade Lotus fella, and some Red Dragon fella, and they were some leaders during the peasant rebellion, what, two hundred years ago? After the take-over, those two were the most powerful ponies following the power vacuum. Their descendants been quarreling ever since then. Last I heard, the two had agreed to an armistice. Don't know how long that will last."

* * *

"Why we're told not to trust Equestrians? Because you're the ones that caused the whole mess. But we're just farmers; as long as we have our crops, there's nothing to complain about."

* * *

I really don't know much about the subject. Celestia has never made a habit of confessing her mistakes to me. The only knowledge of Umala I could impart you with would be inconsequential history of the region from centuries ago. Sorry I can't tell you anything.

Well, it was worth asking.

Happy to be of assistance; though, if I may ask, why do you ask?

I just want to know more about what I'm getting into.

Fair enough, but be careful. Don't get too attached to it.

Get attached to it? What do you mean by 'it'?

To the idea of saving the village.

You think we could fail?

No. Poor choice of words on my part. Just... you may find it easier to detach yourself from the situation.

So I should just give up?

I... nevermind. Forget what I said. Don't lose yourself is all I'm saying. By the end of this, things will be different.

What 'things' will be different?

Everything.

* * *

Her tent set up once again, Twilight rubbed her eyes inside the shelter. Through her conversations with her companions, she was trying to piece together a rough picture of what exactly Umala was.

Various papers from the intel folder were spread out before her. The image that was forming wasn't pleasant. Impoverished, dangerous and repressive were all good words to describe the flailing nation. She looked at a map that detailed the current borders between the Red Dragon and Jade Lotus. The two were evenly matched in the amount of territory they controlled. No side seemed to hold any decisive geographic advantages; fertile agriculture lands, resource wealthy mines and access to international waters were possessed by both of the clans. That they had been struggling for so long didn't surprise Twilight.

"Hi."

Trixie's voice startled her for the second time that day. She turned to face behind her. The blue pony had teleported inside, again using her strange method that seemed to neglect emitting sound or light.

"Uh... you need something? Or are you just trying to creep me out?"

“I saw you were trying to get a head around the situation. Want me to fill you in a bit?”

Part of Twilight wanted to ask how she had been watching her, but she didn't voice that thought. Instead, the mare shrugged, accepting Trixie's offer.

“Now...” Trixie sat down on the tent floor, close to Twilight. Too close, really. Twilight fought the urge to scoot away to the left a few inches. Given the unicorns strange way of reacting to everything, she decided it was best to be as inoffensive as possible.

“Two hundred years ago, you have the peasant uprising. All is going well, the emperor gets forced out of the country. Said emperor decides to go around asking his allies to help him out. Equestria, being both the closest and the most powerful, is naturally the first to be asked. I'm pretty sure you know all this.”

Twilight nodded.

“Okay, well then, skipping ahead a bit. Following the assassinations of numerous rebel leaders, there are only two left with any semblance of real power: Red Dragon and Jade Lotus. Initially, they're good pals, and they know that working together is going to be mutually beneficial. At least, for the time being. Since we Equestrians had failed in completely cutting off the head of the rebellion, those two were able to successfully demonize our country. It proved a great rallying cry, and Umala was well onto its way to recovery.

“But, as these things go, both Red Dragon and Jade Lotus had been planning on eliminating the other at the opportune moment for the sake of power. The two, while perhaps insane, were not foolish. They knew that if they killed each other, Umala would fall into chaos. So they did what they considered to be the logical decision: divide the country in half, one side held by Red Dragon and the other by Jade Lotus. Both of the clans considered themselves ultimately Umalian, but from that time since it has essentially been a civil war between the two in the effort to decide who has the real power. The agriculturalists, like those farmers sitting outside, are pretty much always either too stupid or simply don't care enough to understand what is happening in their own nation. As such, the war has been waged pretty much exclusively by clans ponies and mercenaries since the beginning.”

Trixie finished her impromptu lecture. Twilight sat in silence, staring intently at the map.

“So the only reason I’m on this trip is because the Jade Lotus clan cares more about conquering the Red Dragon clan than it does protecting its subjects? They’d rather go out killing mercenaries than put a halt to banditry?”

“Yep.”

Her face was utterly non-expressive. The ultimate solution to all of this was quite simple, but impossible without massive outside intervention. It would stop once when of the clans was victorious. Maybe.

Trixie cocked her head to look at Twilight. “And if I may add one more thing...”

“What?”

“Think fast.”

A sizable stone was suddenly flying towards Twilight at frightening speed. In panic, she buried her head in her forelegs. Inches away from impact, the stone stopped then harmlessly fell to the ground.

Trixie leaned in close to the cowering filly’s ear. “Always expect danger. Always have that barrier spell ready to cast in an instant. That was your first test, and you failed.”

The blue unicorn disappeared into thin air, teleporting to an unseen destination; A will-o-the-wisp with a talent for inscrutability.

* * *

What do you think?

About Trixie?

Yes.

She creeps me out. There’s definitely more to why she’s here that she isn’t telling us.

Any idea what these secrets may be?

It... it may have to do with me.

Elaborate.

Well, the horn and I weren't sent to you by Celestia.

So...

So if Trixie is one of Celestia's goons, then maybe she's here to make sure that the Princess' treasures are returned safely? I'm not sure. But given the fact that she's been staring at the crown pretty much any time she can, it wouldn't surprise me.

That sounds reasonable. Do you think I should confront her about it?

No. At least, not yet. See if there's anything else you can find out about her tomorrow.

The mare stretched out on her sleeping mat. A throbbing soreness throughout her body reminded her that rest was essential. Her mind blanked as the days new-found knowledge assimilated into the more secretive portions of her consciousness.

Boreas?

Yes?

How do you deal with fear?

Thinking of the battles ahead?

I'm thinking of what they will require. I know Iron Shod has been trying to push me in the necessary direction, but I don't think I will do what is needed when the time comes.

You're not ready to kill?

I don't believe I'll ever be.

I'll be here when you need me. Even in the thick of battle, I'll be watching over you. You'll be fine, trust me.

I'm not sure I want to do fine. Doing fine would mean doing exactly what I've been having nightmares about.

You have a strong will for a filly as young as yourself. It will take more than a bit of blood to bring you down. Get some rest, Twilight; these thoughts are going to eat you alive.

The crown was surrounded by a purple glow as the unicorn deposited the exquisite headpiece by the rest of the suit. Taking Boreas' advice to heart, Twilight shut her eyes, keeping her mind focused on the present rather than the future.

* * *

Trixie teleported into the tent without a sound. She could feel the warmth emanating from Twilight a few feet away; the sleeping filly was completely unaware of the intruder. Casting a quick spell, Trixie's eyes began to glow with unearthly light as they adjusted to see in the dark interior.

Sitting in the corner, she saw her prize. With practiced ease, she silently stalked over to the armor and horn, and then crouched down next to them. The unicorn began to probe Boreas' home.

Carbon tubes, hm? Pretty advanced considering how old this thing is.

She turned her attention to the crown.

Adjustment enchantments, vision enchantments, hearing enchantments, telepathy enchantments, telepathy safeguard... Interesting. You would only need these if somepony cast a--

If Trixie was shocked, she displayed no exterior sign of that.

...cast a soul transfer.

She put the crown on, not entirely sure what to expect.

Boreas, I presume?

No response.

Well, if you're in there, do you mind telling me what you intend to do with our dear friend Twilight Sparkle?

The crown remained silent for a few moments, until a bass heavy voice ripped through her cranium.

Well met, Trixie.

A bit theatrical, are we?

Hmph. Perhaps just a bit. What do you want?

Answer my question first.

Providing assistance.

Indeed. That's it? No hidden schemes? Not trying to exploit her for your own benefit?

You shouldn't be the one asking that.

Fair enough. But the way I see it, a legendary royal alicorn directly linked up with her brain is far more dangerous than an obsessive compulsive assassin like me.

Would you prefer it if Twilight didn't have anyone to talk to?

What, does she confide her secrets to you? Her crushes? Her childhood memories?

She's in a stressful situation and needs a pony that she can vent on. It's as simple as that.

I'm sure it is.

I detect no sarcasm. Are you giving up?

Yes.

From what I've seen, that doesn't seem like you.

From what I know about the history of the alicorn Royal Family, even trapped in a suit of armor you still possess more than enough telepathic power to shatter all of my safeguards and liquefy my eyeballs. I'd rather not tempt fate before my job is done.

You are wise beyond your years.

Perhaps. Just know this, Boreas: If I get so much of an inkling that something foul is afoot, I will personally pull apart this ugly suit of armor atom by atom, and you with it.

I'd like to see you try.

Removing the crown, Trixie laid it back exactly as she had found it. No trace of her ever being there. As she had a habit of doing, the blue mare teleported into the surrounding wilderness, resuming her nightly solitude.

Chapter 8

Yearling

Had a foreboding sign ever existed, the massive cedar blocking the way through the Sampan pass was proof of it. Only the faintest wind disturbed its needles, the dying ones gradually piling up below the fallen beast. The previous nights devastating storm had proven too much for the ancient tree; far above on the cliff sides, the ponies could see the splintered remains of a stump.

“Well, isn’t that convenient. A big-ass tree decided to fall on the narrowest part of the trail through the pass. And we can’t walk around it. Perfect. I get to lift everyone over.”

Break was making clear his disgust at the obvious solution to dealing with the obstacle. Unless there was some way to move it, having the pegasus carry them one at a time seemed to be the only option.

“You won’t even be able to lift me and Koi.” Iron Shod said.

The brown pony flicked his mane, perhaps a symbol of stubbornness. He was going to do it, regardless of what anypony told him. His pride as a stallion was now on the line.

“I got this.” He spat.

“Don’t waste your energy.” the grey stallion replied.

“It won’t be that hard.”

“There has to be another way.”

Twilight tried to cut in with little success. “Hey, uh... I could just--”

“If you have any bright ideas, skipper, shoot.”

“Just give me a minute to think.”

“Every minute we’re not moving is a minute lost.”

Sighing, Twilight turned her attention to the massive tree. A bit later, the forlorn plant had been safely cast away, shrouded in a purplish glow.

Break and Iron Shod stared slack-jawed. With a smile, Twilight turned to them. A dull throbbing in the back of her head steadily intensified into rhythmic pounding, increasing with force by the second; A general wooziness descended on her skull as she felt her legs turn to jelly.

She blacked out.

* * *

Dancing figures were all about; fading in from the darkness, their incessant chanting had a vaguely demonic character.

In the utter blackness, Twilight stood with her back to an unseen wall. The wicked cacophony of mortality drew closer.

She tried to defend herself. A barrier. Lashing out with telekinetic power. Nothing worked. The figures reached out for her with vile claws.

There. On the ground. A blade.

She held it aloft with her magic.

With ruthless precision, she brought the blade down on the nearest assailant. It collapsed with a horrid scream, blood gushing from the missing section of her neck.

The other shades hesitantly slip away into the black.

Twilight looks at the body of the awful ghoul.

It is a pony.

* * *

Green locks tumbled over his backside as he shook his head in a futile effort to clear his thoughts. They were just now exiting the south end of the Sampan pass, all of them grateful to finally be out of the northern wilderness. Mane, ever the pessimist, did not seem to display any sort of external happiness. By and large, he hadn't even noticed they were exiting the mountains by the time noon rolled around.

He looked over to Koi, and the small lavender package secured on his back. She had strained herself too hard, that much was evident. Though he was not at all knowledgeable of the ins and outs of magic, even he could tell that she had probably bitten off more than she could chew. All

too often, he found himself tensing when he spotted an irregularity in the unconscious unicorns breathing. Thus, he shook his head in an attempt to stop thinking about the filly.

What the hell am I expecting, anyways? I'm an asshole and the biggest coward I've ever known.

A lump formed in his throat as he thought back to many years ago. Regret and guilt were the only things he had felt since that day. Not a single moment passed without demeriting himself; If anypony in the world's opinion ever mattered, then surely one's own opinion would matter the most. He hated himself. He hated his past and how he had dragged himself along since then. He felt lost.

I don't deserve her. She shouldn't even consider stooping as low as me.

The group had stopped a few miles south of the pass, temporarily setting up camp until Twilight came to. Rather than help set up a tent, Mane found himself slipping into the woods. Loneliness was his most needed companion at the moment.

* * *

Her head hurt, that was for sure. She realized her eyes were still closed Groggily, the two slits peeled open. She was in her tent, though she had no recollection of how she got there. A canteen was suddenly presented before her. Noticing how cotton-like her mouth was, Twilight drank eagerly. Resting her head back on the mat, she closed her eyes again, the light having blinded her to a degree.

She was very surprised to see Trixie floating upside down above her when she opened them again. Looking back over the top of her head, the mare realized that Trixie was actually just standing behind her and looking down at the incapacitated unicorn.

"Trying to lift that whole tree by yourself? You should know your limits."

Though she said nothing, Twilight's eyes asked what happened.

"You passed out from over-exertion."

She tried to flip over and stand up, but Trixie laid a hoof on her shoulder.

“Just rest.”

“What happened.” Twilight croaked.

“Well, you moved the tree, that’s what happened. And then you fainted.”

Her brain felt like it had gone through a blender. The pain was focused around the general area where her horn jutted from her cranium. A groan escaped her lips.

“So where am I right now, if that’s the case?”

“We’re about three hours from Yearling City. Right now we’re taking a break until you’re back on your feet. It’s mid-afternoon at the moment. I’d suggest you get rested up soon if you want to sleep in a proper bed tonight. Otherwise, it’s another night of camping out.”

“You carried me all the way from the pass?”

“Not me. Koi did. You should go thank him when you’re up to it. Anyways, I was just waiting here to brief you when you woke up.” Suddenly shifting in perspective, the mare began to speak in her trademark pedantic voice. “Having done so, Trixie shall take her leave.”

The unicorn turned to exit the tent. A rock suddenly whizzed out of nowhere and pegged Twilight in the side, leaving a visible welt.

“Ow!”

Trixie sighed. “Keep that barrier ready.” She stepped outside.

Try as she might, Twilight could not force herself to rest. She was exhausted, but not in a physical manner. The past week on the road was taking its toll on her psyche. *Even before then.* she realized. Ever since Canterlot, ever since that conversation with Celestia, she hadn’t felt quite right.

When was the last time I smiled?

Her body longed for many things, and among rest as one of the needs was food. Empty pangs in her stomach told her she needed to get

some grub. Not wanting to further exert her dwindling magical energy, Twilight crawled over to her saddlebags and pulled out a few of Applejack's pastries.

The baked goods were starting to lose the quality that earned them the the title 'good'. Regardless, as she bit into the stale fritter, Twilight felt a wave of rejuvenation go through her body. It wasn't enough to kick start her system, but at the very least the throbbing was slowly ebbing.

You can trust her.

Boreas' voice resonated in her mind soon after she adorned the crown.

She has only the best intentions for you.

Why the sudden solidification of opinion?

Just observation. There is nothing unsavory in her mind, as far as I can glean.

So, what? Start being really friendly with her?

Only if you want to. For the sake of professionalism, I'd advise against it.

Professionalism.

All I'm saying is that she won't murder you in your sleep. What you want to do with that knowledge is your decision.

Well, what would you do?

Don't act any differently.

* * *

It was three hours of steady marching to Yearling City, wherein the next fighter awaited them. Twilight was back on her feet, if barely. Her head still felt more tangled than a manticores mane, and her capacity for magic was barely a fraction of the normal. Even her legs were on the verge of giving out. She stumbled along, barely forcing herself to keep up with the others.

Trixie, rather than taking her usual post at the point or flank of the band, was walking besides the ambling mare. The two were wordless, declining to communicate telepathically. It seemed all that the mare was doing was helping the other keep in pace with the group. The black-clad mare was levitating her strange magical tablet in front of her. Twilight couldn't resist peeking at what the device displayed; Trixie made no attempt to stop her, assuming she even noticed the spying mare.

Oddly enough, it was a dossier about Wood Wey, the next mercenary they were going to pick up. The same one Twilight had in her saddlebags at the moment, in fact. She checked it off as further evidence that Trixie was in fact sent by Celestia. With nothing better to do, she read through the parts of the document that were visible to refresh her memory on the fighter.

Wood Wey claimed the surname of a prestigious family that had lived in the southern regions of Equestria for countless centuries. Yearling City, the town in which their manor was located, had long been regarded as the closest thing to a resort and artists haven in the borderlands. Even after the schism between the north and south, the Wey's remained on their ancestral lands.

That much had actually been Twilight's own background knowledge from studying the Equestrian aristocracy. Another tidbit of trivia, which the dossier did in fact mention, was that it was a family tradition for the stallions to take the role of the royal guard of Princess Celestia herself; for generations the Wey's dedicated the prime years of their lives to protecting and servicing the most powerful figurehead in the world.

The stallion was listed as having served a single year as a royal guard. The reason for his early dismissal was not detailed in the dossier. However, of note was that he had spent six years after that in the Ministry of Intelligence Ground Operations Division. The unicorn seemed to have a knack for long-range extermination and ambush. If his combat records were any indication of their skill, he would surely be as much a boon to the team as Jutsu.

"Interesting of Celestia to pick him for this." Trixie commented, so quiet it seemed to be spoken to herself.

Twilight's ears perked. "Hm? What makes you say that?"

Trixie shot her a look that seemed to suggest she was surprised Twilight had heard. "I've worked with this stallion before. And from what I've learned about him, I can't imagine why she would recommend him for this."

"...why?"

The blue mare shook her head. "Later. Maybe after we've actually met with him."

* * *

Late afternoon. That time of day where the sun hangs at an angle that is strangely indescribable. One may feel that the day is close to drawing to an end, but it is in fact just beginning as the night kicks in.

With that strangely poetic thought running through his head, Iron Shod found himself dropping back in the group towards Twilight and Trixie. He figured this was as good a time as any to talk to the strange duo consisting of a pacifist and the sadist. Soon he found himself walking side by side to the right of Trixie, with Twilight on her left.

"Hello, Mister Shod."

"Trixie."

"Here to chat?"

"I guess you could call it that."

"I suppose you want to ask why I'm here. That's what everyone here is wondering."

Iron Shod nodded, persing his lips as he did so.

"If you must know, I'm here to make sure this filly next to me doesn't get her head cracked open by a bandit; or, at least, not without a fight. And that is all I have to say."

Twilight looked over at the two of them and gave an exasperated shake of her head.

"Fair enough. Twilight may trust you, but that doesn't mean the rest of us will. I don't give a damn if you are a psychotic stalker or just a Mol spook sent by Celestia; Until I know more about you and what your game is, I've got my eye on you."

Trixie snorted. "A bit dramatic, hm? Don't worry, if I was going to kill all of you, I'd have already done it."

"Your head would be on a stick before you could even get a drop of your piss-mop magic out of that horn."

Her voice suddenly went rigid. "Iron Shod, Male, Earth. Designation EFMC Battle Master. Close quarters, Martial arts, Command. Numerous instances of collaboration with Ministry of Intelligence. On active alert. Currently out of Equestrian Borderlands. Status: Green." Flashing a smile, she added, "Life saved by active field agent Trixie during Operation Thunderhead--though he doesn't even know it."

He looked at her dumbfounded.

She gave her trademark grin, that being insufferably snobbish. "I know everything about you. I know your history. I know how you think, I know how you act. If I had to guess, at the moment you have at least three planned physical strikes should this conversation turn to blows, the one you go with depending on where in your walk cycle you are. You have also considered what the best method to incapacitate me with little struggle would be. Referencing your field tests from a decade ago, you likely have two or more escape routes in mind should a retreat be necessary; perhaps even four or more if you are still as sharp as you were ten years ago. Shifting your weight towards your hind legs tells me that you are prepared for any danger that requires lethal response. Tenseness in your forelegs signals to me that you are preparing to grab your bludgeons at any moment."

Iron Shod tried to keep a stone face, but a slight twitch in his eye gave away the fact that Trixie was eerily accurate in her predictions. Assuming they even were predictions. The mare continued with her dissertation of the stallion.

"I'm sure you have defeated many a unicorn in one-on-one combat, and I must applaud you for your excellent foresight into the future when you came to talk to me. However, what you are not aware of is that I am currently poised to telepathically tunnel into your mind and can kill you in any number of ways in a heartbeat well before you could lift a single hoof. Besides that, I have several sharpened stones levitating one-hundred yards above us that are ready to descend on your head at a moments notice. Also, if I may, I'd be surprised if you could even touch me before I snap

your neck and gouge out your eyes with my bare hoofs. Just because I'm a filly unicorn doesn't mean I am incapable of close quarters combat, *caballo-a-caballo*."

She stared straight at him with a malicious glint in her eyes. "Don't fuck with Trixie, and Trixie won't fuck with you."

Iron Shod's response was to silently plod back up to the front of the line, cursing.

"That was unnecessary." Twilight croaked.

"Maybe. But it was damn fun."

* * *

Far above, Break was flying lazy circles, watching the landscape. Yearling City was in sight from the aerial vantage, some two hours walking distance by his reckoning. Wispy columns of smoke and scattered farmlands were the only visible signs of civilization.

Something caught his eye in the distance; a bird. An extremely large one at that. He focused his optics on the creature. Shortly thereafter, he raised a hoof to his ear piece.

"There's a Hammer Hoof mercenary flying away from Yearling City. Griffin. Injured. I'll see what's up."

* * *

His Hammer Hoof combat trio had gotten jumped by a group of freelancers in the middle of the town according to the griffin, who identified himself as Eagle Eye. At the moment, the ponies were positioned on the outskirts of the town, squatting in a forest overlooking farmlands. Twilight had taken the opportunity to practice some of her newly learned first aid, bandaging up a nasty gash along the winged beast.

"Our unicorn, Dead Eye Duncan, got a face full of steel pellets. Dropped instantly. Enemy unicorn outta no where managed to get us off guard."

His face contorted in a visage of agony as a new coating of anti-septic was applied.

“No idea what happened to Raw Apple, though. That crazy mare bolted off into the fields. Said something about laying a trap. I was on the way to the nearest Hammer Hoof way station to get some back-up when you spotted me.”

Iron Shod paced back and forth, occasionally examining the muscular griffin, who was easily twice his size.

“Freelancers, you said? Sounds like a hit team.”

“My battle trio is one of the best reputed in the corps. We were cutting into somepony's profits, evidently. Damn shame, too. Duncan was one of the best magic users I've ever served under. And Apple? She's almost magical as well with the way she handles explosives. Or was. Sure hope she made it...”

The stallion motioned for the others to huddle, separate from the wayward mercenary.

“I have no obligations towards the Hammer Hooves. It's better to not get involved with them when possible.”

Twilight piped up. “We can't just leave that mare out in the fields. Those free lancers are going to look for her.”

“Mercenaries killing mercenaries. Happens all the time.” he grunted in response.

Twilight dug her hooves into the dirt. “We're helping.”

“No, we are not. With all due respect, *filly*, we are going to get to Breezeman Manor.”

She solemnly shook her head and steeled her gaze. “I have the ultimate authority here as your pseudo-employer on behalf of Princess Celestia. We are helping.”

The two glowered at each other for a while as the others watched the conflict unfold with morbid curiosity.

Iron Shod cursed under his breath. “Fine. I take no responsibility of things go wrong.” He kicked the dirt, symbolizing his deference of command, at least for the time being.

Turning, the unicorn relayed a query to the mercenary. "What were you doing in Yearling City?"

"We are-- or, we we're on an escort assignment for our demolitions expert, Apple. She was hired out on a special contract to some classified client. Me and Dead Eye were there to make sure she got into the contacts hands undamaged."

"It would seem you failed in that regard." Break mused.

The mercenary glowered but said nothing.

Twilight turned back to the huddle with the others. "Oh, I just remembered! That 'Raw Apple' mare is our last contact after Wood Wey."

Iron Shod snorted. "Imagine that." he remarked, his sarcasm evident.

"It would appear we need to help anyways, for the sake fo the mission." Jutsu dryly noted. The others nodded in agreement.

Facing the griffin, Iron Shod told him that they were the contacts they were scheduled to meet.

"We need to pick her up. Alive, preferably. To which farmlands did our demolitions expert flee?"

* * *

"Raw Apple, this is Eagle Eye. You still alive, down there?"

There was no audible reply, but a green acknowledgement light in his optical device confirmed she was kicking. The griffin switched his ear piece to a different channel.

"Iron Shod, is it?"

"Yeah."

"She's hunkered down in the northeast fields. Hiding. Can't talk."

"The freelancers?"

"Sweeping the fields. They'll find her within thirty minutes at this rate. Suns going down around then, too."

"Should we jump em?"

“Negative. She’s waiting for them to come to her. Wait for the booms.”

* * *

Burnt orange was the dominant color of the sky, signifying the fleeting presence of the dusk. Four ponies, dressed down in battle armor, were methodically cruising through the fields southwest of the town of Yearling City. Their prize was close. They could feel it in their bones.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

A familiar sound. Both terrifying and comforting. Death was close at hand, but at the very least it would be swift. The four ponies examined the ground about them, their hooves rooted in place.

Six metal discs protruded from the earth. One of them, a unicorn, threw up a barrier. The mercenaries we’re in the worst position possible; spread out in such a way that their spellcaster couldn’t effectively protect them all at those distances. None of them moved, fearing that they may set off the mines, or play the hand of whoever had planted them.

From the branches of a nearby tree, a yellow mare spotted black with a leaf green mane dropped down to the dirt ground. In her mouth was a small cylinder. A detonator. The pony waved to them, and cried out around the device.

“Say hello tuh Dead Eye fer me in hell!”

A series of concussive thuds were all that signified the demise of the assassins. Their remains were scattered like cremation ashes across the immediate one hundred yard radius, mostly in chunks.

* * *

“Raw Apple, at yer service.”

Her accent had a tinge to it; a rustic quality. It was subdued, though, as if the mottled dark yellow mare was trying to bury it under an air of professionalism. She brushed a few stray green hairs out of her eyes.

“Apple? As in the Apple family?”

“Just ah name, Miss... sorry. I never caught yer name.”

“Twilight.”

“Hmph.” She didn’t seem impressed. “So yer the contact? Along with the rest of these ponies?”

“Yes.”

Raw Apple paced around the rough circle of ponies, examining each of them. An older grey Earth pony, a pegasus that had surely seen better days, a massive orange stallion, a pretty enough white mare, an oddly monochromatic colt, a green colt that seemed not to be entirely in the moment judging by his glazed over eyes, and Jutsu.

Her eyes went wide as she passed by the maroon warrior. Clearly, their newest acquaintance had recognized the fighter. Had she been saying anything, Raw Apple would have been choking on her words at the moment. Shaking her head, she continued her silent circling around them.

The only two left to finish the group were two unicorn mares; one lavender, one blue. Oddly enough, the one in blue was wearing an all-black body suit. The lavender one was boring in appearance in comparison. She noted that the blue one seemed a tad out of place. Perhaps it was body language, perhaps it was something else entirely, but all she knew was that this black clad pony was not necessarily with the rest of them.

Finishing her impromptu examination, the mercenary shrugged. “Well, let’s get this show on the road.”

Iron Shod raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you need to go pay your respects to your fallen companion?”

Eagle Eye, who had been standing off to the side, cut in. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll pick up Duncan and bring him home. Give him a proper Hammer Hoof discharge.”

The stallion muttered something under his breath and turned away. The griffin raised a feathered eyebrow but kept his beak shut. He turned to Raw Apple.

"It's been a pleasure serving with you, Apple. And to the rest of you: Good luck. I don't know where you are going, but if it requires the services of one of us Hammer Hooves, it must be some deep shit."

He leaned in close to the yellow mare and whispered something in her ear. She solemnly nodded in reply. With great bravado, the two took a step away from each other and snapped to attention; an improvised ceremony of parting. The griffin, with great force, lifted into the air and moved towards Yearling City to recover the body of their slain ally.

There was an awkwardly pregnant pause that Twilight found herself forced to break.

"Wellll... we still need to pick up our last pony. He's here in Yearling as well."

"Who is he?" Raw Apple asked.

"A certain 'Wood Wey,' by my understanding. We're meeting him at Breezeman Manor, wherever that is."

A mischievous smile emerged on the mares face. "Breezeman? That's on the other side of town. I think you'll like it there..."

* * *

Decadence was the lifestyle of choice for Wood Wey. Their first steps into the foyer were greeted by twin staircases winding up to a second floor, marble statues lined against the intricate carpets of zebra design. Before that, they had walked through a wrought iron gate up a road flanked by expansive fruit orchards, personal farmlands and towering hedges as far as the eye could see in the lingering minutes of daylight. The entire mansion was made of some exquisite, unidentifiable wood that must have been imported.

An older stallion sporting a dapper bow tie greeted them at the door.

"Greetings, distinguished guests, and welcome to Breezeman Manor, the ancestral residence of the Wey family. If I may, follow me to the guest room. The master will greet you shortly."

For the second time in the past few weeks, the farmers were thrust into the exceedingly unfamiliar environment of Equestrian decadence. In this case, however, the display of wealth was far less subtle and refined, unlike the thoughtful designs of Canterlot. They wordlessly followed the butler through the main hallway. Trixie and Raw Apple trailed behind, feeling a bit out of place in regards to the others.

The butler opened an exceptionally carved door into a large living room. White seemed to be a common theme, as the entire space seemed to be adorned in the color. He gestured to the sofas near a stone fireplace.

“Make yourself at home.” he then motioned to a small bell sitting on an end table. “Ring that, and one of the maids will be happy to oblige any indulgence. I’m sure you must be hungry after being on the road. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I shall alert Sir Wey to your presence.”

With a curt bow, the servant left the ponies to themselves. None of them sat, preferring to instead scatter about the room, analyzing their surroundings. Trixie, on the other hand, decided to take a spot on the luxurious furniture. None of them felt relaxed enough to let their guards down. Aside from that, they’d probably ruin the furniture with their collected filth accumulated from a week in the bush.

Break was positioned by a window overlooking an interior courtyard, his wings stretched out in alert. Iron Shod walked over to him and whispered something only the two of them could hear. The pegasus nodded, agreeing with whatever the stallion had said.

Three of the farmers, Mane, Pan and Rise, were warming themselves besides the fireplace, unsure of where else they could be while looking like they had purpose. As had been typical of the past few days, Jutsu and Koi were standing together near the doorway in silence.

Twilight, wanting to take advantage of the brief sample of high life, was admiring a sizable portrait of a dashing gentlecolt, no doubt one of the former owners of the mansion. Their new ally, Raw Apple, joined her and gave the unicorn a playful punch to the leg.

“So what’s yer story? Why you the ring leader in this here group? Sent by Princess Celestia herself?”

Twilight was a bit surprised by the upfrontness of the earth pony. “Oh, well. I’m her personal student. I guess you could say I’m the prized pupil.”

“Hmph. So I guess this fancy mansion ain’t too great compared to some of the things you’ve seen.”

“I suppose. I haven’t actually been in any environment like this for quite some time.”

“And why’s that?”

“I’ve been living in a small town far from the big cities of Equestria Proper for the past year or so. My visits to the royal palace have been sparse as of late.”

“Where exactly? Just cause I spend most my time in the borderlands doesn’t mean I don’t know what the real Equestria looks like on a map.”

“Ponyville.”

The yellow mare was quiet for a moment, trying to formulate her next words. “Ponyville, huh?” A passive aggressive inflection in her voice signaled that she was not entirely fond of the area. Raw Apple seemed to choke back the words, though, as if she hadn’t meant them. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to sound like that. Ahm just not too fond of some folks livin out that way. Just forget I ever brought it up.”

Twilight raised an incredulous eyebrow, but didn’t act on it. Shrugging, she turned back to the painting. She could interrogate the newcomer later; for now, all she wanted was some peace and quiet as she felt the last remnants of her headache ebbing away. The masterful artwork on display did wonders to her scattered mind. It was as if they were combs straightening out the mess that was her brain.

She trotted over to the couches and collapsed into the forgiving cushions, across from Trixie. The other unicorn seemed oddly serene despite the surroundings. Twilight closed her eyes and leaned her head back, trying to pick up the conversations of the others.

Raw Apple was making her rounds, individually introducing herself to each member of the group. Her tone had become more professional, contrary to the affable language she had been using around Twilight. When she came to Iron Shod and Break, it was almost a formal military greeting of sorts. They exchanged their current employments and their specializations, then offered affirming nods to each other before parting ways.

Jutsu's only response to the mare's overly enthusiastic greeting was a subtle tilt of the head. It seemed that she did not disdain Raw Apple so much as she was annoyed by the earth pony. Based on appearances alone, Jutsu looked weathered enough to be her mother. A hint of condescension was detectable in her brief acknowledgement of the yellow mare, who responded by prudishly backing away, head bowed.

Having acquainted herself with everypony, Raw Apple sat down on the third unoccupied couch. Twilight was having a difficult time determining if the mare was clashing aesthetically with the room. Yellow with black spots and a green mane was not a typical color palette one would come across in Equestria. Place that smattering of hues on a pure white couch and a bystander couldn't help but think how ghoulish the whole thing appeared.

Still, she wasn't ugly. Though Twilight was no fashionista by any means, even she could tell that had Raw Apple been given the gift of a more 'normal' coat color, she might have been walking down a models runway rather than sprinting across a battlefield. Her general demeanor certainly didn't show that she was a contract killer working for the most reputed private military corporation in the world; if anything, it was almost child-like. A feigned ignorance of her surroundings, as indicated by her disregard for social norms. Privacy and personal space being the main culprits.

His entrance had been so lacking in pomp and circumstance that at first, Twilight thought the green unicorn stallion was another servant. There was no aristocratic flair to his appearance--nor was there any sort of domineering overtone in his stride. Wood Wey, despite his background as a member of one of the most powerful political families in Equestria, carried himself in a surprisingly apathetic manner.

"Twilight Sparkle, I presume?"

He stopped in front of the lavender mare, standing at rigid attention. It was making Twilight very uncomfortable.

"...Wood Wey?"

"That would be me."

The two stared at each other for an awkwardly prolonged period of time. Wood Wey auspiciously coughed.

“If I may, I would like to invite you and your companions to stay here in Breezeman Manor for the night before setting off tomorrow. Supper will be served in a few minutes, and I’m sure you will enjoy some warm food and proper shelter after hiking through the wild for so long. If you would follow me...”

He did not even look back as he walked out the door, having exited as quietly as he entered. With nothing else to do, the ten of them followed.

Once more in the spacious main thoroughway of the mansion, they followed Wey towards the end to a pair of enormous wooden doors. Pushing his way in, he gestured for the others to enter as he held it open.

They found themselves in a dining hall of magnificent proportions. A dazzling chandelier hung from the ceiling, which itself was adorned with frescoes of various events in pony history. Five massive tables stretching across the length of the room were completely set up with the various utensils and silverware needed to feed a crowd in excess of a couple hundred ponies.

Wood Wey closed the door behind them and walked up to Twilight. “Normally I’d use one of the auxiliary dining rooms for a group as small as this, but they are currently not being maintained. So, by all means, sit wherever you’d like and the servers will bring food to us.”

Wanting to avoid another awkward moment of inaction, Twilight quickly decided that the section of the closest table between the middle and far right end was the optimal spot to fit the ten of them. She hurried over and sat down. Wood Wey took the place across from her, and the others filtered in around them. The farmers, unused to chairs in general, tried as best they could to do what they did.

As Wood Wey had said, within moments large trays of food were deposited within the area around them. An attendant standing nearby rattled off the items as the metal covers were removed from each platter.

“Mushroom soup to clean your pallet and rejuvenate the sense, Alfalfa and feta cheese salad for balance, honey glazed corn on the cob, potato fritters, string beans with a garlic dressing, and classic Cavallerian spaghetti. Dessert will be mango custards imported from the zebra lands. Can I interest any of you in any adult beverage from our wine cellar?”

Twilight, who wasn't of drinking age, and didn't consider herself a drinker regardless, shook her head. The others did so as well, perhaps not feeling that the loosening effects of intoxicants were not the ideal conditions to be in at this point in time.

"Uh, you have any Buckweiser?"

The attendant blankly stared at Break, and gave an irritated tick under his breath. He shuffled off through a door in search of the inferior booze. In the meantime, they prudently shoveled food onto their plates and dug in. The masterfully prepared dishes were a welcome divergence from cold beans and packaged oat bars.

Some time later, with their stomachs filled to content, they followed Wood Wey once again through the passages of the mansion. They found themselves standing in front of a dead end wall. The unicorn touched his horn to a nearby bust of some ancient aristocrat, and the wall slid apart to reveal a surprisingly modern interior. Upon entering, Twilight realized that they were in a conference room of sorts.

They all sat at a pure black table. Monitors surrounded them, all humming with a luminescent glow that reminded Twilight of Trixie's Personal Magic Assistant. Wood Wey sat at the end of the table in a position that allowed him full view of every pony in the room, as well as having all monitors available to him to look at.

"I got the message from Celestia. The only information I received was who the contact was, that being you, the bare bones of the job at hand, and how I fit into this. Aside from that, I was instructed to house you and whomever you brought with you in this mansion, and that at some point it was of special importance to get a full briefing from you in regards to the mission. With that said, perhaps you would like to explain more fully what is going on?"

Not hesitating, Twilight jumped right into the swing of things. "We are headed deep into southern Umala with the intent of protecting these farmer's-" she nodded to the ponies in question. "-village. Following the barley harvest, fourty bandits will descend on the village and plunder it without resistance."

Wood Wey nodded. "That much I know. Aside from that, though, everything is a mystery to me. If you don't mind me asking, why did the

Princess deem it necessary to expend valuable resources on protecting a nameless village in a hostile country? If the only resistance expected is earth ponies, then two or three unicorns would be more than enough to adequately protect it.”

“Personal reasons, and the fact that these four farmers traveled all the way to Canterlot from their home, risking life and limb, on the impossible hope of somehow finding outside help. As for why there are so many of us, I can’t answer that. All I can say is that we should expect the unexpected.”

“So she felt some sort of moral obligation to help in any way she could?”

“I can’t speak on her behalf regarding this. It wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“Hmph. If she really wanted to help, she should just take over Umala and rule it her own way.”

She stared at him with a look that suggested he had chosen the wrong words. Realizing his mistake, he changed the subject.

“What’s our time frame? How long do we have to get to the village before this barley harvest?”

“Nineteen days after tonight, assuming the villagers can delay the barley harvest that long. If all goes to plan, it’s about one and a half to two weeks on hoof from here to the village.”

The stallion furrowed his brow in thought. “That gives us one, maybe two weeks to prepare a defense. Of course, we have three unicorns, so I can’t see this being a problem. What sort of resistance are we expecting?”

Twilight pulled out her intel folder from her saddlebags, flipped it open to a page and pushed it over to Wood Wey. He began to read it out loud.

“Information scarce. Expected armaments: Assorted hoof-blades, bludgeons, shoulder guns, steel plate armor.” He looked up and turned to address Twilight. “I fail to see how this requires six of us. The only remotely dangerous tool they have are those shoulder guns.”

He turned through the folder until he found what he was looking for: A blueprint for a gun of Umalian design. “Ah, yes. A blunderbuss. They really have no chance against us if that’s the best they have.”

“Well, whatever. She sent six of us even if that many is unnecessary. The more the merrier.”

He nodded in agreement, then turned his attention to the monitors on the wall. An overhead image of the village appeared.

“Now, I received some pegasus-taken surveillance from Princess Celestia that she asked we look over prior to heading out”

The six of them, plus Trixie, began to discuss the details of the task ahead as night fell on the borderlands surrounding them.

* * *

Wood Wey strode down the hall towards the guest wing, intending to check in on each pony to insure that they were as comfortable as they could be. It was very possible that for some of them, this would be their last night in a proper bed. Assuming Twilight and Trixie were as talented as him when it came to magic, then they should be fine.

Trixie. That wasn't a name he hadn't heard in a long time. He shook his head to wipe away the thought and then knocked on the first door. The black and white stallion, one of the farmers, greeted him.

“Pan, is it?”

He nodded.

“Ah, good. Just checking in to make sure you are comfortable.”

Pan gave him a once-over, then leaned in and whispered in his ear. “We're sort of in the middle of something, if you don't mind. But we are fine, thank you.”

As he said so, he gestured back towards the room. Wood Wey, understanding the implication, backed away and allowed Pan to shut the door.

He continued to the next room, where he was greeted by the hulking orange stallion who had introduced himself as Koi. Asking the same question, he received yet another satisfactory response.

The next room contained Iron Shod, whose only response was to stare at him and then close the door.

Break did the same thing, but in a far more aggressive manner.

The fifth door was opened by Mane, who offered the most normal exchange yet. Confident that his fellow green stallion was content with his furnishings, he walked to the next door.

“Jutsu.”

The maroon pony met his eyes. It was a tad unnerving.

“Uh... just checking in on everypony. You need anything?”

She spoke with surprising softness.. “No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

The door closed behind him as he turned away to the next room. Interacting with one of the deadliest warriors on the planet had a tendency to make ponies jittery.

Raw Apple opened the next one, her cheery disposition a welcome change. She too, however, did not need any special accommodations.

Twilight, oddly enough, invited him in to talk.

* * *

“I’d be the first to admit that I’m a night owl. Staying up late just sort of grew on me.”

Wood Wey let himself into the room with slight apprehension, wondering what the mare unicorn had to say beyond business matters, which they had gone over quite thoroughly in the hidden conference room.

“Was there something you wanted to talk about?”

“I just want to know more about the ponies I’m going to be on the road with for the next month or so. This is as good a time as any.”

“Fair enough. What in particular do you want to know?”

“Well, you could tell me about the Wey family. The extent of my knowledge peaks at knowing that you have a tradition of serving as Celestia’s personal guard, and that you yourself served under her for a year before moving on to... other things.”

“Not much to say. Every stallion borne into this family becomes a guard when they are old enough. We’ve lived out here in the southern

regions for many centuries, long before the break between the north and south. I guess we decided to stay here rather than move up to Canterlot because we were already so well established in Yearling.”

“How does that work? Working in Canterlot but living hundreds of miles away? Considering the chariot airspace restrictions, it must take weeks just to go back and forth.”

“As of late, Breezeman has becoming less and less populated. A lot of my family has been moving back into Equestria Proper. Occasionally they’ll pop back in here for a vacation, but some relatives I haven’t seen in years. I... personally prefer it here. There’s nothing for me up north.”

“What do you mean? You prefer the loneliness?”

“No, it’s just that, well, I’m not entirely welcome in Canterlot’s courts. If I lived up there, I’d have to find some non-government job. I prefer to work within my abilities, that being fighting and magic. I live off the family fortune and do whatever odd jobs get sent my way from whomever. Usually typical mercenary work in foreign countries, but occasionally I’ll get things straight from the top.”

“Straight from the top? As in directly from Celestia?”

“Either her or the Ministry of Intelligence. Mostly the latter.”

“Why do you do mercenary work if you don’t need to?”

For that, he had no real answer.

“To keep myself sane, I suppose. Perhaps I have some internal moral obligation to serve the crown in any way I can, even if I’m not officially allowed to.”

“I take it you’ve been pushed out of any involvement with the government?”

“Pushed out? No, I left for personal reasons. A year of working with Celestia was all I could take of her. After that, I mucked about in the Ministry of Intelligence for a few years before coming back home.”

“I take it you weren’t too fond of the Princess?”

“Hated her. Hated her policies, hated the way she acted, hated the way she looked.”

There was a slight pause in the conversation. She didn't show it, but Twilight was slightly repulsed by the stallion, mostly because he didn't share her opinions on the Princess.

Wood Wey picked up again. "What about you? Why are you here? The message didn't give me much information on you."

"Well, I'm Princess Celestia's personal student."

He winced as he realized his words had probably offended her, albeit unintentionally.

"And I'd prefer it if you kept disparaging remarks about her to yourself. Not everyone shares your grievances, whatever they may be."

"Fair enough."

Twilight cleared her throat. "I don't want to start this off on the wrong hoof, so let's just pretend that exchange didn't happen, okay?"

He nodded in response. "If you're her student, that must mean you're pretty handy with magic."

She blushed. "Well, about that... I'm not actually a fighter in any way."

"What do you mean?"

"I only know the rudimentary basics of some of the more illicit arcane arts. Until about a few days ago, I had no idea telepathy even existed. Trixie has taken to teaching me about barriers, safeguards and mass telepathy."

The stallion sighed and planted a hoof in his face. "And she expects you to go into the middle of a war zone and kill?"

Abashedly, she replied. "Uh... yes?"

He added that to his mental list of things that annoyed him about the Princess. "Remind me in the morning to grab you a book from my archives. It has pretty much every single spell ever devised since before the numerous bans instated during Celestia's rule. Advanced teleportation, energy redirection, offensive conjuring, illusions, and hexes amongst others. You'll need to read up if you want to be helpful."

He stood up. "Now, if I may, I shall take my leave. We can talk more tomorrow if you wish."

She didn't say anything as he resolutely strode out of the room, eager to separate himself from the growing tension. Back in the hallway, he turned to another door. The last one. Trixie's.

He didn't want to knock. The conversations back in the conference room had brought back his memories of the blue mare. His hoof hovered in the air in front of the door as he debated internally.

Are you going to stand there like an ass, or are you going to come in?

The telepathic invasion took him by surprise, but he didn't show it externally. He pushed his way into the room as he scrambled to create a new safeguard before Trixie could pry into any private thoughts. The fact that she had broken the first one without him noticing was incredibly perturbing.

Trixie was sprawled out on her bed, no longer in her black skin suit. Wood Wey stood awkwardly in the corner, averting his gaze away from the mare who was in a rather evocative pose. Noticing his apprehension, she adjusted to look a bit more approachable.

"I don't need anything, before you ask," she started.

"Why did you let me in, then?"

"I overheard your conversation with Twilight."

Sheepishly, he dared a glance directly at her. "Figures. Well, what of it?"

"My presence has nothing to do with you. It seemed best to set your mind at ease."

"That doesn't make me feel any better about you being here."

She chuckled. "I wouldn't want you to. I love watching you squirm."

He wheeled about and made for the exit. "Fuck you, Trixie."

Chapter 9

The Grand Equestria Basin, Part 1

Three days to lug it across the massive expanse. An endless flatland of grasses, gentle knolls and the occasional hoodoo near the edging mountains. He was exceedingly clear in describing how uneventful their travel through the Grand Equestrian Basin would be to Twilight.

Even a grizzled veteran like himself could feel slight trepidation at the thought of it. It went against all his natural instincts as a soldiers. There was literally nothing to be watchful of deep in the plains. No rough terrain, no strange weather patterns, no predatory night stalkers, and even banditry instances were rare in the empty plains.

This being the case, Iron Shod decided to resign himself to boredom for the next few days, and be done with this inner bickering. There wasn't much choice, so there was no point thinking about it.

Their stay in Breezeman had been a welcome change, but as surely as they had planned, the next morning found them shouldering their bags and setting off down the main drive of the manor, once again with a southern bearing. To their left, the faintest signs of the sun were starting to peek over the Sampan mountains.

Wood Wey hardly suffered a glance behind as he left his home, perhaps for good. Petty remembrance was not a vice of his. Seeing this, Iron Shod marked Wood Wey off as a pony he could relate to when times got tough.

And things were bound to get tough. His feelings about the mission got worse by the day. Twilight on the verge of a mental breakdown, a government assassin keeping tabs on them, and some of the most exorbitantly priced mercenaries in the business forming the bulk of the entourage.

Why the hell is this mission becoming so complicated?

There were too many new factors. Too many loose strands. Something large was brewing, but the grey pony found himself unable to see through the murk. The least he could do in the meantime was to

continue to pound away at the ground, carving the way for the rest of his companions to follow.

Once again on the road, the group filed into the usual formation. Iron Shod in front, Trixie in back, Break watching from above, and the others forming a rough perimeter around the farmers. Within an hour they broke free of the foothills and were in the beginnings of the true basin. Stalks of hearty wheat billowed in the wind all the way to the horizon, the panorama studded with occasional grassy knolls.

By and large, things were appearing to progress quite uneventfully, until Twilight slipped up next to him out of the blue with a travel journal floating next to her.

“Hello!” she chimed.

“You need something?”

The unicorn flipped the journal open to a page about halfway through. She levitated it towards him so he could read the contents.

“I’ve decided to use my scholarly abilities to good use and act as the official scribe of this journey. It is thus my duty to learn the tales of those who I am traveling with, so as to better understand them when it comes to writing their actions on paper.” the mare stated in a most pedantic manner.

The stallion stared at the unicorn with punitive ambivalence.

She let out a barely audible whimper and leaned in closer. “Please. I need to do this.”

Iron Shod nodded with understanding.

“Unlike you unicorns, I can’t write while walking. Just leave a space for me and I’ll fill it in when we stop.”

* * *

In hindsight, he should have taken one last look at his home. This mission was far too dangerous for all of them to make it out unscathed, and it was just a matter of drawing straws. Perhaps his refusal to acknowledge his past was his final act of defiance before setting off into the great unknown.

His past. It wasn't something Wood Wey liked thinking about. He kicked his foot through the tangled shrubs, setting a plumage of sickly green and golden yellow stalks into the air. The distraction didn't help him feel any better.

A distraction, was, in fact, the very thing he required most at the moment, though his options were woefully limited in the Grand Equestrian Basin. With a nervous gulp, he dropped pace to do the one thing he hated most: socializing.

Making sure not to drop so far back as to be side by side with Trixie, he found himself walking next to a certain mottled yellow mare with an auspiciously green mane. A green which, coincidentally enough, nearly matched his own coat.

"Hoi, there, Mister Wey!"

"Hello, Raw Apple."

"You just here to talk, or do you have somethin' you wanted to ask?"

Though taken aback by the brash, upfront vernacular of the mare, he forced himself to forge ahead for the sake of acting his part as an aristocrat. "Oh, no. Just trying to get a feel for the team. We didn't have much time yesterday to make formal introductions."

"Don't sweat it, Woody. I've never been much for fanciness, anyways."

He recoiled slightly at the nickname. "Ah, well, I must apologize regardless."

There was a brief silence which Raw Apple filled with an irritatingly smug grin directed at 'Woody.'

"Okay. So were talking now. Anything in particular you want to know about me?"

The conversation proceeded for a few minutes in the same awkward manner, the contrasting mannerisms of the two ponies contributing much to their inability to communicate. In that time they managed to exchange brief, mostly uninformative histories, anecdotes of their former work, and various details regarding their role in the group as a whole.

Satisfied with what he had learned, Wood Wey excused himself from her presence and moved on to the others. Jutsu was the pony next up the line.

He subtly coughed to announce his presence. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

The maroon mare glanced over at him. "No."

"Well, you probably heard me talking with Raw Apple back there, if you are as perceptive as they say you are."

She continued to stare at him, and nodded.

"So..."

"I'm not going to tell you my story. It's for me only."

Wood Wey broke eye contact for a few seconds. "Fair enough. What can you tell me?"

"I can tell you that I am of Umalian descent, that I am no longer welcome in my homeland, and that I specialize in all forms of hoof-to-hoof combat and general warfare. Now, if I may, I will suggest that you talk to the others. They will have far more satisfactory answers to your questions."

Acting upon her advice, the green stallion found himself next to the other green stallion shortly following a brief farewell.

"Mane, is it?"

"Yes. Can I help you?"

"Just wondering how my twin is doing."

The joke was lost on Mane, who tried to maintain a straight face. Wood Wey flattened his ears out of habit. "What's your story?"

Again, Mane kept a straight face, though this time he actually replied.

"I'm a farmer. There's nothing to talk about."

Desperate to escape the situation, Wood Wey quickly nodded, said his goodbyes, then moved up to Pan and Rise. That didn't go much better. Koi was equally unresponsive. His composure was faltering as he replaced himself back in his original position in the line.

In front of him, Twilight finished writing down whatever it was Iron Shod was telling her. At that distance he couldn't discern the words, and using a hearing amplification spell would be bad manners.

Rather than return to the rear with Trixie, Twilight instead simply slowed down until she was aligned with Wood Wey.

"Here. Take a look at this."

* * *

Being at the back of the pack had it's advantages, the primary one being that one can anticipate new situations coming towards them far better than those in the front. For the past hour or two, Twilight had been shuffling backwards down the line. Trixie watched in bemusement, a hearing amplification spell having informed her of the purpose of this way back when she was starting out with Iron Shod.

Thus, when Twilight finally reached the flank, it was no surprise when Trixie floated the journal out of the purple filly's grasp and into her own. She quickly set about scanning through the contents, and soon enough was making an addition of her own. Twilight could only watch in silent frustration.

Finishing her entry, Trixie snapped the book close, and at the same time a pebble came streaking towards Twilight.

"Ouch!"

At the front, Iron Shod called for them to halt. It was about time for a breather.

Chapter 10

Twilight's Journal

If you've received this journal then that means I have a task for you!

We will be in the thick of hostile territory within a matter of days, and though it pains me to think about it, the atrocities I have witnessed over the past week or so have convinced me that there will undoubtedly be some form of loss on our side. I know I must remain positive, but I'm sure that many who know me would confirm that I am a tad paranoid.

So what are you supposed to do with these pieces of paper?

Write your story.

I won't share it, unless you want me to.

* * *

It's okay if you want to read this! I have nothing to hide.

I suppose it's only fair that I start, being the one organizing the venture. Who am I? I am Twilight Sparkle, a unicorn who grew up in Canterlot and currently makes residence in Ponyville. I am Princess Celestia's personal student. There are a lot of things that I am, but of all these, one fact stands above the others: I am the keeper of the Element of Magic.

Due to my relatively sheltered upbringing, even for an Equestrian, I have no stories that could possibly interest anypony, except for two.

Though this will sound like bragging, I do not wish to imply that I feel superior to anypony else. With no other way to say this, I'll just spit it out. It was my friends and I who stopped both Nightmare Moon *and* Discord, no doubt saving the nation, and perhaps the entire world, from destruction.

But then, there is not much to say about that. Life returned to normal shortly after those two incidents. It was almost as if they had never occurred, though of that fact I am grateful.

I miss Equestria. The borderlands certainly have their fair share of beautiful sights, but that doesn't make up for the shocking depravity that occurs within its boundaries. I can respect the ideals upon which this wayward section of the world was founded, but I cannot on good conscious approve of the lawlessness.

I miss Ponyville. Though I knew what to expect when I came all the way out here, I had no idea it would be *this* bad. It hasn't even been two weeks and I already long for tightly kept weather schedules, the succulent crops of Sweet Apple Acres, and the crisp aroma of the priceless fabrics in the Carousel Boutique.

Perhaps most of all, I miss the friends I've left behind. Princess Celestia. Spike. Applejack. Rarity. Fluttershy. Rainbow Dash. Pinkie Pie.

I can't leave them.

* * *

I'm not the best writer, and my grammar isn't so hot either. But you gave this thing to me, and I understand why you want us to do this, and I don't blame you.

I was born and raised in these borderlands, though nowhere near where we've been traveling. Around the eastern mountains, to be exact, to a pair of gem miners. Never cared for them, probably because they didn't care much for me. I ran away when I was, what, a few years old? I recall thinking that I was going to strike it rich and rub it in my parents face. I don't even know if they're still alive at this point, but my gut tells me probably not.

Ah hell, I forgot to write my name. Iron Shod.

I try not to think about the past. Focus on the future. I can't recite with perfect accuracy exactly how everything played out. Eventually, I got picked up by some freelance mercenaries in the middle of nowhere. They took me under their wings, and I just went with it. That's how I got my start as a freelancer.

You could say I'm military through and through. I been fighting all my life. I won't claim to be a good pony. The amount of blood on my hooves is inexcusable. But I've made my bits, so what is there to complain about?

I've had my fair share of battles, and I don't plan on stopping anytime soon. Perhaps my experience is the only reason I got picked for this fubar mission. I don't expect much. Hell, by my reckoning this will either be extremely easy or will end up killing us all.

Experience. Bah, that's bullshit. I have plenty of experience in defeat, but I can't say the same for victory.

My life ended ten years ago, after Operation Thunderhead.

I'll write down what happened below, but I don't want you reading it until I say it's okay.

* * *

My formal title is Duke of Yearling, though that royal endowment has long since lost its political sway in the courts of Canterlot. The existence of the Duchy of Yearling is scarcely mentioned by anypony, anywhere, likely due to the fact that it no longer exists, and hasn't for the past two centuries.

What am I to do other than hate Princess Celestia? Her decision separated our beautiful home from formal connection with Equestria. And then I am expected to serve as her personal guard?

I will, to the day I die, defend Equestria as the greatest nation on the face of this Earth. I will not, however, support the policies of the Princess. The best decision she ever made happened to be the worst one for my lineage.

So why am I here? Perhaps Celestia wants to get me killed; An excuse to remove that thorn from her side, the one that has been stabbing her for the past decade. Or maybe it's because I'm the best of the best. A unicorn whose talent is matched by few. My records from the Ministry of Intelligence would certainly attest to that.

Ultimately, I agreed to this lost cause because, as much as I hate the commissioner, I sympathize with the cause.

That is the extent of my story. I served Celestia for a year, and then switched to working in the Ministry. And then I left. That's that. At least, that's all I'm willing to write. If you want to know more, perhaps you should ask me face to face.

* * *

I'm Raw Apple, representing the Hammer Hoof Private Military Corporation. The best of the best, the cream of the crop. I've been with them for most of my life, and I don't plan on stopping until either I'm too old to walk or I end up in a ditch.

So what's my story? Ran away from my fuck-head parents, joined the fiercest fighters in the Equestrian borderlands, if not the world. And now I'm one of the best.

And that's it. There isn't much to me. At least, nothing worth sharing.

* * *

I don't claim to be the fastest, the strongest, or the smartest. Nothing exceptional about me, other than being the best damn over watch pegasus the Mol ever had.

Went through military schools, joined the Ministry as fast as I could. I did, and still do, what I do best: Supplying precision death from above. And something about relaying the face of the battlefield to the ground ops. That wasn't as important, most of the time.

I did that for a few years (five or six?), then left. Now, I love Equestria and all, but it doesn't take much looking around to realize how much bullshit they shovel around to cover up the real dirt.

Operation Thunderhead. After that clusterfuck, I couldn't stand how the gov reacted. It never happened. Made it illegal to even mention it. Hell, I should probably be arrested for even making reference to it.

Iron Shod says I shouldn't talk about it anyways, but to hell with him. If it were up to me, the whole world should know what the hell happened those few weeks a decade ago. But no. Celestia can't let a minor blunder ruin her image in the eyes of her pretty little ponies.

Hah. Celestia making a mistake? Never heard of that before.

Tell you what, Twilight. Come talk to me, and I'll tell you all about the worst military operation in Equestrian history. I'm sure it'll be quite eye-opening for a little filly like you.

* * *

My dearest Twilight, why would you want to hear our stories? Surely there are better ways to occupy your time. And you've certainly learned by this point that mortality is our greatest curse, so it is better to completely detach ourselves from forming deep relationships with others. I only wish I was sarcastic.

But since you've gone through the effort, I shall indulge you. However, my story comes second. I read through the other entries, including the things they've told you not to read. I am not you, so I would imagine I am exempt from that rule. And I would also imagine that their answers are very unsatisfactory in your eyes.

They might not want to share their stories with you, but I certainly will share them.

So let's start with our good friend Iron Shod. Quite the handsome fellow, even in his relatively old age. A grizzled ruggedness to him. Very masculine. I've known him for some time, though he hardly knows me. By my reckoning, he has probably been wondering why I look so familiar, though he can't quite place his hoof on where he may have seen me before.

He's seen me during Operation Thunderhead. Don't worry about the details. Break is more than willing to fill you in on that event. Well, seen me isn't quite the right choice of words. I was a distant observer for the vast majority of the time. Once you talk to Break, I think this will make more sense.

That was a life-changing moment for him. Mol psychology reports indicate that he suffered a severe degeneration in mental health. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder seems to be his poison of choice. The old stallion is probably near the end of his rope, and I'd be surprised to see how he fares through this.

Speaking of Break, if there is anypony in this ragtag outfit that I would trust, it would be him. Background reports come up with nothing alarming about him. Of all the ponies with us, he is likely the most useful. Aside from us unicorns, of course.

Raw Apple? Definite relation to your good friend, Applejack, though I can't say how closely. As with Break, I think you'll find you can rely on her. Just don't mention her family within earshot of her. That may piss her off.

There are plenty of things I could say about Wood Wey, but the most important advice I can give is that you should under no circumstances trust him. He didn't "leave" Celestia so much as he was "fired" for failure to adequately respond to pressing circumstances. I've had the pleasure of watching him for the past few years, making sure he didn't do anything suspicious. Technically, he's on political suspension. Not allowed to participate in the courts of Canterlot. Try to stay on his good side, and he'll prove useful.

And, of course, Jutsu. She has not worked with the Ministry of Intelligence much in the past, and thus our information regarding her is scant at best. She's from Umala, and she's a samarei. That's all I know. You can ask her.

So that just leaves myself. Well, I lied, because I'm not telling. My story will die with me.

* * *

Jutsu declined to write down anything, and the farmers either can't write or simply do not have anything they want to share. Regardless, having read these little notes, I feel I have, at least to some degree, a better understanding of who these ponies are.

More inquiries are necessary. All of them are holding back something, and I can't trust these ponies if I do not know their history.

We are about to head out once again. I shall add further discoveries to this record once I have uncovered them.

- Twilight Sparkle

Chapter 12

The Grand Equestrian Basin, Part 2

The journal slipped into her saddlebag once more as the entourage hoisted their gear and slipped into file again. Armed with some rudimentary knowledge, Twilight made it her goal to become closer acquaintances with the mercenaries over the course of the march.

It reminded her of her first few days in Ponyville, though the looming reason for why they were thrust together was slightly distasteful. The similarity was striking, though the implication hardly enthralling. This time it was in the context of a military operation, not friendship.

Of course, she would have to wait a bit to allow the group to settle back into the rhythm of marching across the fields before giving them a distraction. In the meanwhile, she kept in pace next to Trixie.

Up for some more lessons?

I guess so.

It seems you understand safeguards well enough, though your barriers thus far have been fairly non-existent.

I haven't had time to practice.

You have all the time in the world. When you're walking, when you're sitting, when you're eating. Work on being able to react to danger at a moments notice, and to be able to cast a powerful barrier as soon as possible.

Well, if that will take some time, then perhaps you should teach me something else in the meanwhile.

Indeed. Is there something in particular you want to know, or should we carry on like we did last time?

Twilight thought about this for a moment.

Your teleportation spell. You seem to be able to do it instantly and silently. I've been wondering how you do that. More Ministry secrets, I assume?

Correct.

Care to explain?

Not at all. Bear with me, though. This is going to get complicated.

* * *

The sun was well into its long descent into the west by the time the instructions ceased. In the hour they had spent together, Twilight had become sufficiently well-versed in the art of advanced teleportation magic.

Advanced was a suitable descriptor for the method. It required not only an impeccable knowledge of the mathematics and laws surrounding the physics of magic, but an ability to apply said information to the situation. Beyond that, it was extremely taxing on the body, and only the most capable unicorns could even dream of utilizing it, and even fewer could use it on a whim. Twilight, possessing both vast intellect and nigh unlimited magical potential, took to the new technique with surprisingly little difficulty.

"I have a question, Trixie."

"Yes?"

"A few days ago you mentioned something called the Trotsmare Declaration. What was that?"

Trixie floated out the electronic tablet from her bag. Within moments, a body of text appeared on the screen. She cleared her throat.

"The specifics of it are far too long-winded and unimportant for me to have memorized. A basic summary would be that it was a declaration calling for the banning of all forms of directly offensive magic from being taught in Equestrian lands. Eventually it turned into a series of laws that prevented any sort of directly aggressive magics, or any magic that could be exclusively used in a military context, from usage within Equestria. The Declaration occurred well before the Princesses's time, though. History from that time is virtually non-existent, so I can't tell you specifics."

"What qualifies as 'directly aggressive magics?'"

The blue mare scrolled through the contents of the electronic document until she found what she was looking for. "According to the first draft, '...including, but not limited to: telepathy and all derivatives thereof, hexes, curses, harmful conjuring, direct battery in any form, and any other magics that can cause damage in any form, whether physical or mental.'" She chuckled as she lowered the book. "Evidently, telekinesis and teleportation are not considered dangerous, though they tend to be the two things that lead to the most pony fatalities."

"Wait, if teleportation isn't included on that list, then why is the stuff I just learned a Ministry secret?"

Trixie shook her head. "Invisible teleportation was likely added at a later time. It is quite useful for assassination, and that was probably a factor leading to it being banned as well."

That made a chill run down Twilight's spine. She had just spent an hour learning a technique that had no doubt been used on numerous occasions to stab pony in the back. It was all for a good cause. Right?

Have you ever used this spell for... that?

Yes.

At the very least, she knew it was effective. She chided herself; always look on the bright side. Even if the bright side was that it would probably keep her alive at the expense of others. Ideally, no one would have to pay anything, but at that point, such wishes were beyond her control.

"What about telekinesis? That has the potential to be far more deadly than any others."

Trixie shrugged in response. "No idea. Perhaps it's because most unicorns don't use telekinesis to kill others, so it isn't technically an aggressive magic."

It wasn't an entirely satisfactory answer, but it would have to do. She offered thanks to Trixie for the magic and history lesson, then set out to accomplish her original goal: learning her companions stories.

Her first order of business was to talk to the farmers. She sped up to them, then walked besides Pan. Of note was the fact that it was the farthest away from Mane she could be while still being able to converse with them.

“Hello, Twilight!” Rise offered with a warm smile.

“Hi!”

“Is this about that journal?” Pan asked.

“Yeah.”

The black and white stallion turned to his companions. They both made faces that seemed to imply they had nothing to say. He swiveled and faced her once again.

“It would appear that Rise and Mane have nothing to say.”

“What about you?”

To this, Pan looked taken aback. “Uh... there’s nothing special about me.”

Twilight grinned. “Oh, sure. That’s what everypony says.”

“I... fine.”

“Hm?”

“I’ll tell you.”

She popped open the journal and prepared to write down whatever he had to say next. Pan cleared his throat.

“About fifteen years ago, there was a particularly bad outbreak of banditry. That sort of thing happens all the time of course, but this one was far more damaging than most. At the time, I was an apprentice under a landlord just outside of Coltashi.”

He paused as Twilight scribbled furiously.

“I was training to be a scribe at the time. One could say that I was doing pretty well compared to the rest of the common folk of Umala. Not that it made a difference to the bandits.”

The implication was obvious, and Twilight found her throat clenching.

“I became one of the thousands of refugees, and eventually found myself picked up by the group of ponies that first settled the location of our village about ten years ago.”

Twilight interrupted. "Wait, you created a brand new village in only a few years?"

"It took about three years to get it to the state it's in as of now, assuming it still exists."

The glum note reverberated throughout her mind, accompanied by numerous questions. At the very least, she had to admire the resilience of the Umalian peasantry. They were able to accomplish what took most Equestrians a decade to do in three.

She finished writing his words. "Don't worry. I'm sure the village is fine."

They all flashed fake, uneasy smiles.

"Do you two have anything to add?" she asked, directing the question at Rise and Mane.

"We're just farmers. There's nothing interesting about us." Mane rebutted.

Their clear lack of esteem was disconcerting to Twilight, but she didn't press further. If their lives were as simple as they claimed they were, then they likely weren't too intent on sharing about it.

She closed the book. "I'm so sorry. Something like that would never happen in Equestria. It's hard for me to comprehend a lot of the things I've heard about in the past few days."

"There's nothing to apologize for. The ones who could defend themselves did, and they survived. Us? We were weak. It's our own fault."

Upon hearing Pan's remark, Twilight took that as her cue to leave. Koi was walking just a ways ahead. Her next objective.

* * *

Next to Koi, Twilight looked like a filly. As far as age and experience went, that was probably true. With that in mind, the unicorn felt somewhat juvenile as she approached the behemoth of a stallion with her little journal floating beside her. Even when she was barely a hoof-lengths away, he hadn't spared so much as a glance to his right.

She coughed. He continued to stare ahead into the empty void of the plains.

The two continued to walk in silence, Twilight looking up at him expectantly.

“Do you need something, Twilight?” he rumbled.

A slight flinch gave away the fact that he had successfully intimidated her. She shook her head and started her prepared speech.

“Ah, yes. Obviously, you declined to do it earlier, so this time I’m asking directly. Do you want to tell me your story?”

“Not really.” he answered.

She bowed her head and prepared to leave.

“Nothing personal. My past is my own.”

She took mental note of this mystery, then distanced herself from the stallion. Perhaps she should go bother someone else. A glance over her shoulder showed her that Jutsu was walking a few paces behind them. The maroon pony met her gaze, however, and solemnly shook her head.

It seemed that Umaliens preferred their privacy. Regardless, Jutsu picked up her speed until she was matched with Koi and Twilight.

“Openness is a custom of Equestria, not Umala. I cannot speak on Koi’s behalf, but I can say for myself that I’d prefer my words to remain in the air, not on a piece of paper. I do not regularly espouse my history.”

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Ah, but you were attempting to anyways.”

“I...” she winced, realizing it was true, and averted her gaze. “Sorry. You’re right. It isn’t my place.”

They were momentarily silent, as Koi and Jutsu gave each other subtle nods.

“Now, if you don’t mind me asking, what is *your* story?” she asked with a surprisingly upfront smirk.

Twilight, utterly confused, only mumbled a half-hearted “What?”

“There has to be a reason you were sent out here. It can’t just be that you’re decent at magic.”

Twilight was about to respond, when Jutsu continued.

“Why is a filly like you, from the least violent nation in the world, being tasked with defending a worthless village in the middle of a backwater nation? A filly that, despite boasting some considerable magical prowess, is utterly inept at using her abilities in a combat situation?”

Twilight considered retorting to the obvious insult, but decided that wasn’t in her best interest. “I volunteered.”

The earth pony tousled her mane. “As if that changes anything. You had no reason to.”

Though she hated to admit it, Twilight conceded that Jutsu was correct. She had no business in the world outside of Equestria. Sure, she genuinely sympathized with the farmer’s plights, and was horrified by the situation in Umala, but that didn’t mean in any way that she was the right pony for the job.

But then, she was the most powerful pony in Equestria, if not the entire world (save for the princesses, of course). The implication was painfully clear: their success relied on the presence of an extremely powerful unicorn. She happened to fit the requirements, save for the part about actually knowing how to fight.

That in turn raised another question: Where were all the other unicorns? She couldn’t possibly be the only one with enough power to ensure the success of this mission. Celestia had something about having a reserve corp of mercenaries to rely on when ministry agents wouldn’t cut it. Why not one of them?

With Twilight lapsing into deep thought, Jutsu took that as her signal to take her leave. “You had better sort this all out before we get into Umala. Distractions are what is most likely to kill a pony.”

* * *

Break activated his ear piece.

“Hey, skipper!”

A few moments later, Iron Shod responded. "Something up?"

"Yeah. There's a trade caravan a few clicks along our heading."

"Hostile?"

"Unconfirmed. Heavy armaments, but it looks like they're more for a defense. I... uh... wait a minute." he trailed off.

"What is it?"

The pegasus' voice cut back in again. "They're signalling us. I guess they spotted me. Recommended course of action?"

"What armaments are we looking at?"

"The standard gear, one exception. They have one of them fancy breech-loading rifles. I have no idea what the range on that thing is. Looks like a newer model I've never seen."

Iron Shod swore as he called for the group to halt. They gathered around him as he relayed the information. "Break and I will handle this. The rest of you fan out and stay hidden. If it goes sour, you know what to do."

* * *

Evening was not an ideal time to approach a heavily armed group of ponies from the northeast. At that time, the sun had the unfortunate tendency to be directly west, and, coincidentally enough, in their eyes. Iron Shod and Break put on faces of bravado as they closed in on the trade caravan under these unfavorable conditions.

The convoy of white covered wagons were arranged in a defensive circle. Clearly, their travels for the day were over, and they were holing up for the night. As the two stallions neared the formation, a group of ponies emerged from the circle to greet them. They were soon being held at gunpoint.

"No offense, but it isn't often that we run into other ponies here in the basin. We'll have to check you for hidden surprises before anything." a light blue earth pony said, walking ahead of the others to distinguish himself. A cutie mark depicting a circular stone was imprinted on his rear.

They gave consenting nods, and a pair of stallions walked up and shook them down for weapons. Iron Shod and Break had the foresight to

entrust their priceless arsenals with their companions. The searchers gestured to the blue stallion, indicating that the intruders were clean.

“Sorry about that. Come on in!”

The entire group suddenly filtered back into the wagon circle. With no other choice they followed. In the center of the circle, a massive stack of wood was piled up, likely in preparation for a fire. The ‘leader’ (as far as they could tell), motioned for them to sit with him on a mat laid out near one of the closest wagons. They did so.

“Now, what brings you two all this way out here?” he asked as they settled onto the cloth.

The two looked at each other, before Iron Shod answered. “We’re just passing through here. We came from Yearling City.”

“I’m assuming you’re heading to Edgeville or New Fillydelphia? Those are the only towns along this vector.” He spoke with a refined, diplomatic tone; a sure sign of his background as a traveling merchant.

Break whispered in Iron Shod’s ear. “Should we tell him?” He shook his head in response.

“Private business. I’m sure you understand.” Iron Shod answered, addressing the question.

The merchant nodded, before piping up. “Ah, where are my manners? I never introduced myself. I’m Rolling Stone, but most ponies just call me Mossy. I own, run and manage this caravan. And you are...?”

“Iron Shod.”

“Break.”

He enthusiastically pat Iron Shod on the back. “Well met, in that case!”

They couldn’t help but crack a smile at his enthusiasm.

“This may seem overly presumptuous of me, but allow me to offer you permission to stay with us for the night. We always love having guests!”

Iron Shod didn't have to think about it for long. The sun was about to set, and they needed to find a place to sleep anyways. "Thank you for the offer. We actually have a bunch more of us hiding out a little ways away. Is it okay for us to go grab them as well?"

"The more the merrier!"

* * *

It was an almost alien experience, being surrounded by so many ponies. Two weeks in the wilderness had that effect on an individual. If anything, it was like coming home after a long vacation for Twilight; the warm smiles and genuine friendliness were a sight she had not come across in all of her travels.

The warm welcome had a soothing effect on all of them. Stress from days of lugging it through forests, deserts, mountains and plains, interspersed with violent clashes with unexpected opposition, seemingly dissipated within the fighters. An enormous bonfire in the center of the circle loosened them in such a way that they instantly felt at ease with the situation.

At least, the smiles had remained for the farmers and Twilight. Once Trixie walked in, with her militaristic stance and garb, the greetings subsided to near silence. As Wood Wey, Jutsu and Raw Apple followed, the merchants were utterly quiet. The blue pony motioned to Iron Shod, who then walked over to him.

"Is something wrong?" the grey stallion asked gruffly.

"You didn't tell me you were mercenaries." Mossy answered.

Iron Shod looked at him blankly. "How is that a problem?"

The blue pony shook his head. "It's bad for business. People don't trust mercs. I don't either. If word gets around that we're hosting you, it'll eat into our sales. Especially with recent events."

"Recent events?"

To this, Mossy looked genuinely surprised. "What, are you not one of them?"

"...one of them?"

“Hundreds of ‘em. Thousands even. Every day, mercenaries are heading into northern Umala for whatever reason. Can’t be good, whatever it is. You folks said you were heading down south; I’d say that narrows the options.”

“I was not aware of this.”

“Of course you weren’t. Nobody is. Not a damn soul in the borderlands smart enough to pay attention to what’s been going on. But us traveling vendors? We see everything. The other day, we saw a squadron of griffins heading into Red Dragon turf. A week before that, a couple battle trios of Hammer Hooves. And speaking of the Hammer Hoof corporation, their ranks are nearly depleted as of this moment. Most of ‘em have been hired and sent down south to Umala.”

“I can assure you that we are not affiliated with whatever is going on in Umala.”

Mossy momentarily lapsed into thought before replying. “Okay, I trust you, but only because you came on good intentions the first time around. But we’re going to be watching you. It’s nothing personal, but I’m sure you are just as aware as I am of the unsavory reputation of mercenaries.”

“Thanks. Don’t worry, we’re not out to cause trouble.”

The blue pony stood up. “I’ll let your posse settle in. Most of us are pretty friendly, though you sure as hell spooked them with your weaponry.”

Iron Shod nodded, then rose as well. He paced over to his fellow mercenaries, and retold the results conversation. They quickly set about dropping their gear and setting up their shelters in a relatively empty corner of the circle.

* * *

Finally able to enjoy a few minutes of solitude, Twilight stretched out in her tent and opened up the hefty volume Wood Wey had loaned to her. It was a thick, ugly brown thing the reeked of age. It’s contents, however, were a virtual treasure trove of knowledge: An astonishing assortment of spells whose invention dated back thousands of years, well before the Trotsmare Declaration.

For the most part, it was fairly useless, trivial content. A few gems in the rough, however, such as a non-friction enchantment and an artificial

magnetic field conjuration, had wide enough applications that the unicorn found herself continually turning the pages.

She would have continued to read all through the night, until Trixie poked her head in.

“Time for some sparring lessons. Get your nose out of that damn book.”

Her face receded back into the firelit outdoors, and Twilight nonchalantly stared at the empty space that was the entrance to her tent. With a sigh, she closed the book, dragged herself to her feet, and exited out into the wagon circle.

Trixie was standing near the bonfire, gesturing at her to come closer. She did so. Of note was the fact that the flames were unbearably hot at that distance, though the blue mare seemed to not be bothered by it.

“Sparring lessons?” Twilight asked.

“If we’re going to be working on your arcane disciplines, we might as well work on your physical discipline.”

“I don’t see how this is necessary. My magic is plenty powerful enough to keep me safe.”

With no warning, Trixie vanished into thin air, then just as suddenly reappeared next to Twilight, with her horn digging into the lavender mare’s throat.

“Unless you have the reaction time of a fly, magic won’t guarantee anything.”

Twilight slowly nodded, careful to avoid impaling herself on the horn. The other unicorn stepped away, allowing her to relax.

“Now, let’s start. Try to hit me. The only rules are no magic and no using your horn. We wouldn’t want anypony getting hurt.”

A mocking wink told Twilight that it was time to begin, and that her claim of safety was less than genuine.

Near the lead wagon, Iron Shod, Raw Apple, Wood Wey, Mossy and the purple stallion with the breech-loader, who had since introduced himself

as Rhubarb, were gathered together on a large mat. Their attention as focused on the two unicorns in the center of the clearing.

Twilight half-heartedly lunged at Trixie, and was promptly hooked, pretzeled, then cast aside into the dirt with a ground-shaking thud.

“Get up! Put some effort into it!”

With excessive groaning, she scampered back to her feet. This time, she put some more thought into it, and decided to attempt faster, lighter strikes rather than a massive swing. She bucked out with her rear legs. Trixie simply sidestepped then slammed her foreleg into the extended appendages, causing Twilight to flip and slam onto her backside.

“Get up!”

An intimidating sternness in Trixie’s voice coaxed Twilight into action once more, lest she disappoint the field agent. Her legs were definitely bruised, and it felt like she had fallen oddly on her back. She forced herself to refocus on attacking Trixie. Crouching low to the ground, she leaped at the blue mare and swept at her legs.

Trixie’s right foreleg was there to greet her, smashing down on her back and knocking her once more to the ground.

The others watched on, both impressed by Trixie’s lethality and bemused by Twilight’s clear lack of experience. At the very least, they had to admire the purple mare’s tenacity. Even after eating dirt for the sixth time in the row, she continued to rise up and make another go at it. She was making little progress.

“It doesn’t look like Trixie is givin’ her much in the ways of lessons.” Raw Apple remarked.

Another dull thump sounded as Twilight was thwarted again.

“Your friend seems quite to be quite aggressive.” Rhubarb commented.

“You have no idea.” Wood Wey replied. “She’s just getting started.”

Thump.

They all cringed. That one had been particularly loud.

“Give her a break, Trixie!” Iron Shod shouted.

Either they hadn’t heard him, or they were ignoring him, because they continued without so much as glancing at the stallion. He shrugged, then turned to the others.

“Where did you get that thing, anyways?” he asked, directing the question at Rhubarb and his breech-loading rifle. As if by instinctual reaction, the other stallion hugged the metal tube closer.

“A company of Ferdinese troops passed through here a month ago. Really fancy group, too. Expensive gear. Looked like shock troopers, if I’ve ever seen em. They told us to keep our mouths shut. We, ah, managed to bargain for some of their goods. Including one of their rifles.” he said, nudging the gun as he said so.

“And yet here you are, telling us about them.”

Rhubarb shrugged and flashed a wry smile. “Well, you know how things go.”

“What were those Ferdinese ponies up to, anyways?” Raw Apple asked.

Mossy answered. “They were headed the same way as all the other mercs. Umala.”

The Iron Shod, Woody Wey and Raw Apple looked at each other with a sinking feeling developing in all of their guts. Ferdinese troops and swarms of paramilitaries pouring into north Umala, and no one knew why. And, given the ways things had been progressing so far, they’d be in the thick of whatever was stirring in the wayward nation.

“Well, this will be fun!” remarked Raw Apple with overwhelming sarcasm edging her voice.

Thump.

“Oh, for fucks sake.” Wood Wey muttered as he rose to his hooves. With power in his stride he walked over to the two unicorns.

“Let her take a breather, Trixie. I’ll spar you if you need some practice.”

Twilight gratefully staggered away to the others, and plopped down on the grass beside the mat, panting heavily. Trixie and Wood Wey dropped into defensive poses in preparation for the coming fight. All around the circle, ponies were focusing on the spectacle about to unfold with attention undivided. Even Jutsu emerged from her shelter to watch.

“No horns, no magic?” Wood Wey inquired, though he said it in such a way that the only answer was yes. The two circled around each other in dead silence, save for the spitting fire a leg-lengths away. All around, ponies were sucking in their guts in anticipation.

With no warning, Trixie sprung forward with incredible velocity. Wood Wey sidestepped and raised a hoof to intercept her mid-flight, to which Trixie responded by dropping down to the ground and below the extended limb. Anticipating such a reaction, he in turn pivoted around and lashed out with his hind legs.

Had the strike connected, it may have had the power to shatter bones. Instead, it cleared her side by mere inches before sailing through the air. She took advantage of his exposed backside to duck around his side and wrap a leg around his throat. With great dexterity, she wrestled him to the ground and held him in a choke, her other legs fighting to control his flailing limbs. Utilizing his greater size, Wood Wey simply rolled and threw her off his back. They both climbed to their hooves and struck at each other again.

“Impressive.”

Jutsu had drifted towards where her companions were sitting. Iron Shod looked up at her, then nodded in agreement. It truly was a dazzling display of physical prowess. The two unicorns' deft hoofwork was blindingly fast, and their kicks were equally ferocious. Neither had managed to land a substantial hit, and it was clear that the both were starting to run low on stamina.

“You Equestrians seem to favor brute force and efficiency when fighting.”

“...is that a problem?” Raw Apple asked innocuously.

She shook her head. “Swift strikes, grapples, holds, throws. I was taught to fight on equal ground with the opponent. While your kind favors doing whatever necessary to ensure success, my training has taught me to

respect the enemy. There is nothing to be gained in exploiting weaknesses, other than transparent bragging rights.”

Rhubarb piped up. “Sorry if this is a bit rude, but may I ask who it was that taught you?”

The mare gave a dry chuckle. “Some may have called my teacher wise, yet in the end, that did not save her from death.”

Trixie sucker punched Wood Wey in the side, then scrambled on his back to once more drag him to the ground, at which point she placed him in a powerful choke that he broke again by throwing her aside again.

“She was wrong. The new is better.” Jutsu concluded, so quietly it seemed to be to herself.

With a somber quietness falling onto the group, Jutsu walked back into her shelter across the clearing. Wood Wey and Trixie were starting to tire, and their sparring was far less intense than it had been a few minutes ago.

Iron Shod looked over to Twilight, who at this point had stopped panting and was sitting upright, watching the fight intently. “She’s right, you know.” he said.

Twilight turned to face him.

“You need to learn how to fight if you want to stop being a liability.”

She stared into the ground.

“Here, come with me. I’ll give you the basics.”

Iron Shod rose and walked over to an empty area of the circle. With a sigh, Twilight got up and followed him over. The others watched with curiosity.

“Obviously, there are a lot of different styles of hoof-to-hoof fighting, and countless variations on all those styles. It wouldn’t do you much good to teach you how to fight like I do, with bludgeons, but I can at least give you some... uh... theory, I guess.”

Twilight gave an apathetic nod. The sun had set long ago, but the night was still young. Their work could be accomplished in the firelight.

* * *

By the time they slunk off to their shelters, the three unicorns were bruised, battered, and just a little bloody. The exercises had been intense, and for Wood Wey and Trixie, who had already hated each other well before the mission, they were slightly infuriating. Neither had gained the upper-hoof in the entire fight. They reached a standstill, and both agreed that they were too tired to continue. At the very least, it had been extremely reinvigorating in some strange way.

Twilight, on the other hand, had her head in the clouds. Her mind was throbbing with new information, and her body was aching from so many falls, hits, throws and grapples. She had to admit, though, that she had indeed learned a lot in the past few hours.

Despite the protests of her body, she knew that more studying was necessary while she could still hold her eyes open. She levitated two items towards her: *The Encyclopedia Magicka* by Star Swirl the Bearded, and Boreas' crown.

Hello.

Hi.

You look tired.

Just a bit.

Maybe you should rest.

Probably. But I need to learn this by the time we reach the border.

You're devotion to reading is admirable, but I think you're going about this the wrong way.

What do you mean?

You already have the only spell you'll ever need.

I'm not sure what you mean.

Telekinetics.

How is that the only spell I'll ever need?

Most types of physical magic have their roots in telekinetics.

That's basic knowledge. So what?

So, rather than read an impossibly massive book, just imagine up a spell, and see how you can use telekinetic power to achieve that.

You're saying I should come up with my own spells?

I don't see why not.

It's just something that ponies don't do.

Any idea why that is?

It... uh... goes against what we are taught?

What is it that you are taught?

That magic is a responsibility, not a privilege. That we should not flaunt what we have been given.

Bah. Things sure have changed from when I was a foal. We flaunted our magic as much as we damned well pleased.

Well, I'm not you, and I can't say I'm particularly enticed by the idea.

Just give it a shot.

No.

Please?

Fine.

That's more like it.

I have no idea what I should try, though. Creativity isn't my strong suit.

Try... oh, I don't know. You could make some energy lances. Those can be pretty handy in a fight.

Energy lance?

Concentrated magical energy shaped into whatever form you wish. Launch it at something, and it'll make a pretty big boom.

Sounds dangerous.

That's the idea.

Well... here goes nothing?

A small one was all that was necessary for a proof-of-concept. Some sparks emitted from her horn, which she promptly scooped up in a telekinetic sheath and formed into a tiny ball. She sucked in her breath, and, squinting her eyes in fear, launched the pellet of energy at the floor of the tent.

It burst apart with the sound like that of glass shattering, then dissipated. There was a tiny burn mark on the shelter.

I'm assuming I'd need to make that a lot larger?

It would seem so.

That hardly seems like an efficient use of my finite stamina. If I ever wanted to do substantial damage, which, mind you, I don't, I'd probably pass out before I could create a large enough sphere. And besides, I could always pick up a pebble or something like that if I needed to throw something.

I think you missed the point.

Enlighten me.

You have so many options that you aren't even aware of. Take the example of that energy lance. If you needed to light something on fire, or melt through a metal door, you could use that same technique. Or, you know, kill somepony.

Uh... well. Thanks?

Sorry. Bad example.

I don't think I'll be ready.

For when the time comes that you'll have to do what's necessary to survive?

Yes.

No one is ever ready to face death. Now, stop worrying and get some sleep. You have another two days of walking ahead of you.

* * *

“Hey, Trixie, just how old are you, anyways?”

Raw Apple had taken to talking to the blue unicorn. Surprisingly, Trixie seemed to be handling the energetic mares unceasing conversation with grace.

Once again, the sun was peeking over the eastern horizon. The day was just beginning, and by now the wagon circle had faded from sight. Farewells had been brief and to the point. Despite them being mercenaries, they had managed to resupply some of their items, food being the main one. Twilight had made a mental note to remember the names of the lead merchant and the bodyguard: Rolling Stone, or Mossy, as he was called, and Rhubarb.

“Older than you.”

The earth pony squinted at her, then laughed. “Fine. Be that way. I’ll just guess. Thirty?”

Trixie grinned. “Close. I’m not saying anything else.”

The sight of Trixie smiling bewildered Twilight, who was walking nearby. It was a warm, genuine smile; beautiful, even. Happiness brought on by good company. The sun in the background gave her light blue-grey mane an orange fringe. Those two combined, the dazzling smile and the effulgent mane, made for a very memorable visual.

Huh.

Her smile faded away, and Twilight shook her head. *What was that?* For a brief moment, Trixie had seemed, well, normal. A genuine character under the hyper-aggressive, callous exterior. Friendly, even.

Raw Apple continued to prod the unicorn with questions, most of which she refused to answer; It was painfully clear that Trixie was either lying about or covering up her past, given the way she forced her few answers, though she wasn’t making any effort to stem the interrogation.

Question.

“Whereabouts in Equestria are you from?”

“Nowhere in particular.”

Yes?

Should we ask Wood Wey to set up a telepathic link with us, or is that too intrusive? It seems like it's important for us unicorns to work together.

It may be our best option, but I doubt he'd let me link with him. If you want to, however, be my guest.

"What's that portable monitor thing you got in that pouch?"

Alright. I'll be right back.

"A Personal Magic Assistant. It helps organize and manage digital files. Very useful for researching while out in the field."

Trixie didn't visibly acknowledge Twilight's departure, likely because it had been instantaneous. As soon as she disappeared, the mare sprung up besides Wood Wey, who was walking a fair distance ahead of them.

"Hello, Wood Wey!"

The green stallion seemed surprised by the unannounced arrival of Twilight. "Oh, hello. Can I help you?"

"I need to ask you something. It's about telepathy."

He narrowed his eyes. "...how do you even know about it?"

She averted her gaze. "Trixie taught me."

In his head, Wood Wey uttered an expletive far too extreme to say out loud. Another item was added to his list of reasons to hate Trixie for. Telepathy was far too complicated a subject to teach on the road. Too many loose ends; too many ways it could go horrifically wrong.

"Alright. What about it?"

"Should we use it? From what I've been reading, it seems like it's the most important spell a unicorn can possibly possess on a battlefield."

"True." His voice was noticeably strained.

Twilight gave him a strange look. "Is there something I don't know?"

He nodded. "Telepathy is very risky if you are not able to account for all possible vulnerabilities. Every hole you make in the safeguard for a

friend to go through weakens the entire spell. I'm assuming you've already linked with Trixie?"

"Yes."

"Don't. She may be able to watch her weaknesses, but you aren't. Focus on the safeguard. The ability to communicate comes second to protecting your own mind. Most ponies need years of training before they are ready to even consider taking their skills into the field. You've had a week. It isn't worth the risk."

She bowed her head. "Well, can *you* make a loophole? Just so I can communicate with you one way?"

"I'd rather not unless absolutely necessary. It would complicate things."

Twilight clicked her tongue a few times as she digested the information. "Alright. I understand."

Wood Wey dipped his head. "It would be useful for us to be able to communicate in such a manner, but I'd only consider doing that if I was confident in the other party. No offense."

"None taken." She gave a dry, almost bitter chuckle. "I wouldn't rely on myself, either."

He gave an uneasy snort. "So it would seem."

The two were taciturn as they pounded away at the ground below. Twilight swiveled to the left to catch a glimpse of the rising sun. Into the distance, she could see the stalks of grass billowing in the morning winds as the cold air from the sea rushed in from the southeast to push out the thermals above the plains.

She was stricken with a sense of agoraphobia as she attempted to look to the ends incredible flatness. Faint fog obscured the peaks to the east and west. In Equestria, a pony always had some landmark to orientate themselves to: the nearby mountains, or Canterlot perched on its rocky bluff, or the Everfree forest, or the reassuring light pollution of Manehattan. Out in the borderlands, however, there was nothing. Just empty, continuous nothingness, the only apparent frame of reference being the rising and setting of the sun, and a few scant swells of hills that never reached their full potential.

“Can I ask you a question?” she asked.

“Shoot.”

“Why did you leave working for Celestia and join the Ministry of Intelligence?”

“I could tell you, but I get the feeling you’d hate me even more than you did before.”

“How so?”

“You are close with Princess Celestia, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then it is best that I keep this to myself. It’s not that I am uncomfortable sharing it, but it would likely jeopardize our ability to work with each other in the coming days.”

Twilight’s scholarly nature took the best of her, and she knew that this was a mystery she needed to solve. She’d have her answers, one way or another. “I understand your reasons, but I think we’ll both be better off if you tell me.”

He sighed. “Well, alright. If you insist. About a decade ago, I joined the Royal GUA--”

Break dropped to the ground like a rock in front of them, interrupting the unicorns train of thought, and Iron Shod held a hoof up and pointed it towards the ground. They all crouched low. The entire group fell completely silent. Iron Shod motioned for them to gather up around him. With deliberate slowness, they all crawled up to and circled around the two stallions.

“Trouble up ahead.” Break muttered, cocking his head back, towards a sizable hill that was obscuring their view of the land beyond. “The big boys are duking it out on the other side of that rise. Manticore and a giant eagle. I wouldn’t go near, if we can avoid it.”

They all nodded. Iron Shod was quick to lay out their next course of action. “We’ll try and head southeast around the hill and valley beyond. All odds considered, they won’t even notice us. Even so, I don’t intend on tangling with either of those two if I can help it. Keep your head low.”

All of them rose to their hooves as Iron Shod started to stalk off towards the sunrise-facing side of the hill. Though they were a considerable distance from the action, an unnerving reticence fell over the entire group.

The terrain, for the first time in... well, not that long, really, changed from the monotonous flatness of the plains to something that seemed to resemble a rugged mountainside, just without the actual mountain. In fact, as Twilight looked out as far as she could see, the plains seemed to be fading into the less hospitable badlands. Through the distant haze, the alien, monolithic forms of sandstone hoodoos rose up from the earth.

It was faint at first; a distant rumble and the occasional throaty war were the only signs of the epic battle the ponies had caught thus far. As they circled the hill, however, the din was intense enough to give them good reason to keep their distance. The source of the terrifying cacophony was just beyond the edge of the slope.

At first, it didn't seem all that large. The eagle was swooping up and down, lashing at the other beast every time it reached the bottom of its descent. Only when the manticores came into view that they truly appreciated the staggering size of the predatory bird. The entire group stopped, watching the procession from their meager vantage point, poised at the rim of the valley.

The manticores wing had a horrific gash through it; not permanent damage, but the injury prevented sustained flight. Thus, the massive feline-arachnid was unable of flying, or, at least, not for very long. As such, it had little option but to try and swipe at the deft bird every time it zoomed by.

Talons dug into its hide, as the eagle made another pass-by before the manticores could react to the previous strike. It howled in agony as crimson blood gushed from its flanks, trickling down its hind legs. The eagle climbed into the air, the bright pigment visible on its wicked claws even from the distance they were standing at.

As it sliced the clouds with its plumage, it banked as it prepared to dive once more. The manticores tail, with its infamous stinger, rose in preparation. With renewed energy, the chimera crouched down in anticipation of the coming strike. The eagle shrieked as it entered into free-fall, wings tucked in for speed, and talons pressed up against its body, ready to lash out in a moment.

The eagle, which had been a speck in the sky, quickly became, much, much larger. As the ground closed in, the bird spread its wings and thrust forwards with its talons, reaching for the throat of the manticore.

The manticore, not one to disappoint, quickly jumped away, spun around, and then slammed its barbed tail down into the eagle. It squawked. Impaled on the stinger, the eagle was smashed against the dirt several times as paralyzing poison seeped into its veins. No longer moving, the manticore ripped the eagle off of its tail with its teeth, and began to feast on the slain foe.

Despite what had appeared to be a brutal battle, the victor seemed utterly apathetic. No ceremony, no pomp and circumstance. It had simply conquered and reaped the rewards. Periodically, the manticore took a break from tearing the corpse apart to scan the nearby landscape, wary of any unseen foes that may take advantage of its vulnerable state.

“Time to move.” Iron Shod grunted. They eagerly complied.

* * *

“Ain’t too often you see that.”

It was high noon, and they were sitting on a sun-warmed boulder, oddly placed in the middle of one of the numerous valleys that were starting to form as they neared the heart of the badlands. Towards the southeast, they could see the distinct form of a singular mountain. Wood Wey had identified it as ‘The Mountain of the Boar’, though he did not go into the details of the origins of the name. He made an off-hand comment about a lake on the far side of the mountain.

“Yep.” Raw Apple replied, some time after Break had made his remark.

“I mean, the eagle, I can understand. We’re pretty close to the mountains. But that manticore? Those are forest dwellers. No idea what it was doing out here.” He shrugged and laid out on his back. “Eh. Even if that thing had attacked us, we would’ve taken it out, no problem. Nothing a bit of telekinetics can’t solve.”

He nodded and winked at Trixie. She snorted.

Twilight was sitting upright near the edge of the rock, chewing on a packaged alfalfa bar and telekinetically rotating a pebble in front of her. The

blank look, combined with the uneven grinding of her teeth, indicated that she was either lost in deep thought or completely out of the moment. As it were, the former was true.

At a level unseen by the naked eye, the matter of the pebble was slowly being stripped away by Twilight as she formed the stone into a pointed projectile. With the reckless abandon characteristic of a child in a toy store, she haphazardly bound enchantments to the weapon. Emit showers of sparks when in flight? Explode on contact? Flash with a blinding light to blind the enemy? Why not? She floated the strange stone into one of the numerous pouches stitched onto her saddlebags, then took another meager bite out of the energy bar.

The battle had bothered her; so much so that she was forgetting to eat. In her mind, she replayed that even from so long ago, when she and her friends were rushing through the Everfree forest, desperately hoping that they'd find what they need to stop Nightmare Moon at the old castle. That had been the first time she ever encountered a manticore. But it had been different, as there were no deaths that night.

Perhaps that was the difference between her and the ponies around her. She had been taught since a young age to seek the amiable solution. But then, she had also been raised in an extremely stable environment, with plenty of outside support. The others had no such luxury. Raised for the military, forced down paths they didn't desire, even running away from oppressive parents; she had no way of understanding what befuddling histories compelled the creatures of the south lands to rush to violence. Evidently, the manticore was equally disinterested in making peace.

Militarism wasn't entirely absent within Equestria, of course. The most evident show of force were the royal guardsponies. However, they rarely, if ever, carried visible weaponry, and it seemed their presence was more ceremonial than practical, though they occasionally took on roles of typical service ponies when required. Next to that was the Equestrian Royal Air Force, but they too were a ceremonial corps. The only things they ever fought were rogue weather patterns and the occasional tree that had trapped a cat.

The irony of it was laughable. Here they were, trekking across of hundreds of miles in the middle of nowhere, on their way to some backwater village in the middle of a war-stricken nation which they weren't technically allowed to be in, with the intention of fighting off a mob of fourty

bandits. Back at home, Applejack was probably putting a few more freshly harvested barrel-loads into her cellar. And Rainbow Dash was likely practicing her stunts for whatever event she had coming up next. Fluttershy would be dressing some abrasions on a fuzzy forest critter. Rarity was almost definitely working up some new gorgeous design for a new client. Pinkie Pie was doing... something. A weak grin formed at her lips.

Oddly enough, Twilight found that she wasn't notably homesick. Undeniably there were sights that she had seen within the past few weeks that she hoped to never see again, but in the end she found it to be a very intriguing learning experience. There were many things in the world that the unicorn had little knowledge of, and it was her duty as an academic to become acquainted with those subjects. If said subjects included the practice of bloodshed and military endeavours, so be it. At the very least, she was becoming aware of a far bleaker, more terrifying view of the world. A view that, as far as she was aware, was entirely absent from the minds of most Equestrians. In a way, it gave Twilight a sense of peace, knowing that she was doing something about the injustice in the world, even if the actual task at hand would have little effect on a global scale. Almost as if her actions made up for the general apathy of her fellow countryponies.

"Do you want to continue where we left off?"

Wood Wey had shuffled across the boulder over to her, finished with his own rations. He looked at her with an expectant face.

"Sure."

He cleared his throat. "My family, the Wey's, has, for centuries, made a tradition of sending the stallions off to Canterlot with the intention of acting as one of the royal guards. To a degree, this is still upheld to this day."

"To a degree?" She raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, to a degree. Technically speaking, I am the last member of the Wey family. Others may share my blood, but none share my name. Over the course of the years, we've lost our unity."

With genuine sincerity, Twilight remarked, "How tragic."

Almost as if he was ignoring her, he continued. "Without the direct political support of North Equestria, it has been hard to keep everypony at

the manor. We've dispersed all across the world, but mostly to Canterlot and Manehattan. The worldwide hubs of aristocracy, coincidentally enough. That, combined with the fact that few stallions have been born into the family, or, for that matter, any foals at all, means that my title will almost surely fade away with me."

"You don't seem too bitter about this."

"I've had plenty of time to be angry. At this point, I've accepted it."

The two sat quietly, looking out away from their perch. Behind them, some distance away, were all the others, well out of earshot.

Twilight's ears flattened slightly as she asked her next question. "Have you ever... you know... considered getting married?"

Now it was his turn to raise an eyebrow. "Hm?"

"Well, you said your family hasn't had many foals recently, so I just figured... yeah."

He snorted. "It'll be easier to tell you this if I finish my story first."

"Go ahead."

"About ten years ago, at the cusp of my adulthood, I set off from Breezeman Manor, my childhood home, to Canterlot. I arrived there safe and sound and, as expected, I was quickly placed into Celestia's ranks. We Wey's have a reputation for our magical prowess, and I was a natural shoo-in. Not much happened. Nothing ever does. Except for one day. And this is the part that you won't like. Are you sure you want me to go ahead?"

"Yes," Twilight said with confidence. Wood Wey took a sharp inhale.

"There was an assassination attempt. Celestia was meeting with a foreign emissary in Manehattan. I was with her at the time."

"An assassination?" she asked with a hint of agitation. Her eyes narrowed and she leaned in closer, eager to hear the next part.

He continued as if she hadn't said anything. "The shooter had propelled an explosive charge through a window with magic, intending to detonate it in her face. My fellow guard and I had our barriers up to protect the princess and us the moment the glass broke. Hell, Celestia herself may

have helped with the barrier. Regardless, we were fine. Can't say so much for the emissary."

She exhaled heavily with relief, then caught in her throat when she heard the last bit.

"I tried chased after the assassin. Long story short, I had him pinned down on the rooftop of the adjacent building." With a strained look, he shut his eyes tight. The memory seemed to be troubling him.

In a prodding manner, Twilight asked him, "What happened then?"

"We talked."

"And what did he say?"

"*She...*" he corrected her, "told me her reason for her actions." Again, he went silent, as if he was imploring her to dig deeper.

"And then?"

"And then, I let her go."

* * *

"She doesn't seem happy."

"Nope."

After another half a day of walking, the group had set up shelter as darkness started to take over in one of the numerous small crevices that seemed to dominate the landscape. Monotonous grass had been replaced with repetitive rock formations, stretching anywhere from just above their heads to hundreds of feet high. Long since dried out river beds were common. Pan and Mane were sitting a short distance from the curious portable lamp that Iron Shod carried around in his bags. It exuded light, but not heat. The two of them were watching Twilight with curiosity. She had been in a strange mood since noon, after hearing whatever Wood Wey had said.

"What do you think Sir Wey told her?" Mane asked to his fellow Umalian.

Before he could answer, Trixie strode up from behind. "A difference in opinions regarding our Princess."

Pan's ears perked up. "Princess Celestia? The one we met in Canterlot?"

"Yes." She spared a brief look at Wood Wey, who was talking with some of the others, then refocused on Twilight, who was rooting through her saddlebags. "He is under the impression that Celestia is a benevolent tyrant of sorts. Perhaps it was his upbringing in the borderlands that has led him to believe that ponies shouldn't live under the rule of an all-powerful monarch."

Trixie peeked over at the two stallions. Mane was utterly confused, but Pan seemed to understand at least some of what she said. *I suppose not all peasants are stupid.*

"Of course, she being the naive little filly she is, and given her background as Celestia's pet, is naturally unwilling to accept any criticism of her tutor. Nor is she necessarily wrong in doing so. The Princess is, without a doubt, one of the greatest political leaders in the world, and has been for centuries. The only thing Twilight is wrong about is assuming that the Princess is perfect."

The mare cleared her throat. "Nobodies perfect. Not even a mystical alicorn. She's made awful mistakes--mistakes that have been felt by every individual on the planet. But she's still better than all of us combined." At that, Trixie departed without a word, as was her typical fashion.

Both stallions looked at each other, then back at Twilight with renewed fervor. Trixie joined Break, Raw Apple and Jutsu, who were looking over some topographic maps of the village site. Actual photographs of the village were unavailable; the resources they had were limited to what little information could be scavenged from old geographic surveys.

"It's a damn bowl. Terrible position to try and defend," the pegasus muttered.

"That depends on the layout of the village. It seems relatively flat towards the center. Assuming they built away from the hills and cleared out the land for farming, it should be relatively open all around." Raw Apple replied. She yelled to the hulking orange stallion on the other side of the crevice. "Hey, Koi!"

He turned up from whatever he was doing and looked at Raw Apple. She beckoned for him to come over. Within moments, he was helping them

figure out the logistics of defense. Having nothing to contribute, Trixie floated over to Twilight.

Wood Wey and Iron Shod, who had been leaning against the wall of the crevice, both eyed the mare with suspicion. "You're both Mol. What do you know about her?" The grey stallion asked the question in a gruff, hushed tone, implying the clandestine nature of the information.

The unicorn was quick to reply. "She's a Tungrista."

Iron Shod's eyebrows raised. Not only was Trixie a high-tier operative, she was a *top*-tier operative. Celestia's personal shadow corps, the Tungrista. Though the origins of the strange name eluded him, he knew from his limited knowledge that the title was reserved for the best of the best. It seemed there was some validity to her claim from a few days ago that she could kill him many times over before he could even raise a hoof.

"Friend of yours?" he asked.

The green stallion grunted. "Not even close. She kept tabs on me my entire time at the Ministry. I guess it's what you'd call a professional rivalry. And personal. Our history isn't relevant to the mission."

"Alright. Wouldn't want either of you distracted."

After a slight pause, Wood Wey made another comment in an even quieter voice. "Her presence scares me. We'd only need a Tungrista if we were going into some serious danger. That, or there's something about this mission we don't know that she does. We don't need three unicorns; not for this type of job. Just one would suffice. Especially given the remarkable talent all three of us have."

The other shook his head in agreement. "You're right. Too much shit going on in the world for this to make sense. Mercs moving into Umala, Hammer Hoof almost completely sold out, Ferdinese troops scouting around in the borderlands..."

"I'm getting the feeling that we're just small pieces in a larger puzzle." Wood Wey sighed, then turned to look up at the clear night sky. Resting his head against the sandstone, he picked out constellations in Luna's domain, finding solace in their reassuring presence. Only they remained unwavering through the test of time.

* * *

The others are starting to worry about the mission.

?

Circumstances have them bothered. Particularly the stallions.

What circumstances?

Everything. You, Trixie, those things the merchants said. As far as they're concerned, things are getting too complicated for their liking.

There's not much I can do about that.

Indeed. However, I would implore you to try and reassure them of your abilities. Practice harder. Show them that you won't let them down. Anything you can do to increase their morale will help when the time comes.

Then it would seem I must keep studying. Where was I?

Chapter 63, Page 862. 'Applying Magic to Modern Biochemistry, and its Wartime Applications'. Certainly not bedside reading material.

I make do.

Don't strain yourself. You need to keep your energy levels up.

Duly noted. Though I never thought I'd be the one saying this, you worry too much. I'm fine. Really.

Your sprained ankle and the bags under your eye suggest otherwise.

Hold on. I've picked up a few first-aid spells that I think I can use for this.

...

There.

You can't rely on magic to compensate for your physical shortcomings. Look at yourself! You can barely keep your head up after that! As important as it is that you know your material when you

need it, you'll be dead anyways if you have no reserves left for casting. Get some sleep. Please. I can't have you dying on me.

...

Oh, look at that. You're asleep. And I'm talking to myself.

...

...Don't fail me, Twilight.

* * *

She was standing in a lush conference room. Across from her, on the other side of an elliptic table, sat a stallion. For whatever reason, his features were fuzzy, as if she couldn't focus her eyes on the stranger.

She looked to her left. To her surprise, Princess Celestia was sitting at the table. Her lips were moving, but no sound was coming out. On the far side of the princess, an unfamiliar stallion, with the instantly recognizable powdered white coat and trademark golden armor of Celestia's guards came into view. His face was also indecipherable.

She whipped her head to the right at the sound of breaking glass. One of the windows shattered, and a small metal disk flew into the room. By some instinct that she didn't know she possessed, a barrier suddenly flew up, creating a buffer between her and the princess, and the explosive charge.

She felt her body stagger as the disk detonated, the fragmentation pinging against the invisible wall. Within the barrier, the world became utterly silent, save for the breathing of the three Equestrians.

She felt the blood drain from her face when she saw the pegasus. He was gone.

Twilight looked at Celestia straight in the eye as she let the barrier drop. There was a faint smirk on her face.

* * *

Three days in the basin. It was getting boring.

Just a bit.

Twilight was starting to loathe how the sun rose in the east every day. And how it set in the west every night. And how everything had been the exact same for far too long. It was only mid-morning, and already she wished their trek would hurry up.

Still, it was preferable to chasing down bandits along the gravelly banks of a creek, or indiscriminately massacring fourteen earth ponies without giving them any chance of retaliation. Unfortunately, the recent events were starting to effect her psyche; the dream she had last night had surely been brought on by recent occurrences. There was no making sense of what she had seen. At best, she knew it to be some sort of projection of Wood Wey's account of the attempt on Celestia's life, though it seemed hardly accurate for numerous reasons.

"Is something bothering you, Twilight?"

She caught sight of a green coat in her peripheral vision. At the moment, she had no desire to see either of the two stallions who fit under that category. The accent, however, told her it was the Umalian.

Demonstrating Equestrian etiquette, she answered serenely. "Nothing important." She shivered when she caught a glimpse of his cutie mark; something about having a barbed appendage imprinted on your flank seemed rather repulsive. Perhaps in Umala there was a more amiable meaning to the mark.

"Oh. Okay." Mane sounded a bit rejected, but didn't show it.

They continued to walk together.

Go away, please. I'm sorry, but I don't find you at all endearing.

"So..."

Bah.

Mane was about to say something when Trixie barged in between them. "Time for more practice." she stated, looking at Twilight with a hint of playfulness.

"Ah, yes. What do we have today?" Twilight asked eagerly, utterly thankful for the diversion. It had come not a moment too soon.

Trixie answered “Oh, this and that. Let’s drop back a bit; wouldn’t want anypony getting tangled up in our affairs.”

With great enthusiasm, Twilight followed Trixie as they fell to the back of the pack.

You’re welcome.

Thank you. So what do you have to teach me, actually?

A bit more theoretical today. You have a grasp of the main components of combative magic. Now its just a matter of applying it.

You mean using the spells I have learned to their fullest extent.

Exactly. While it’s nice to know how to instantly evaporate water and cause a steam explosion, or how to generate a gravity well, the most efficient methods of killing or otherwise incapacitating a pony are telekinetics and telepathy.

Lovely. And so you’re going to teach me how to push my telekinetics and telepathy to the limit.

You catch on quick.

* * *

The day had, fortunately, progressed far quicker than those before. Trixie’s lessons proved a worthwhile distraction. In fact, it had been the blue mare who called for it to end, on account of her weariness. It had dawned on Twilight that though she possessed a vastly inferior scope of knowledge compared to Trixie or perhaps even Wood Wey, she vastly out-classed them in raw power -- courtesy of her special talent being the keeper of the Element of Magic, of course.

That wasn’t to say the other two unicorns were weak by any means. The other mare had, on numerous occasions, demonstrated her exceptional capacity for the arcane arts, and, though he had thus far had few opportunities to demonstrate his ability, Wood Wey was certainly a force to be reckoned with. At worst, they were leagues above the average Equestrian unicorn. At best, they were likely some of the strongest in the world, given their background in the Ministry of Intelligence.

Admittedly, Twilight was fatigued as well. She was still feeling the repercussions from lifting the tree at the pass a few days ago, and the lack of rest wasn't helping. Trying to focus on learning combat magic while walking across moderately rocky terrain wasn't exactly easy, either.

But that was no excuse to be unproductive. A message to Break via the ear piece was enough to bring him back to ground level. Within moments he was floating just above the grass next to Twilight.

"Operation Thunderhead?" he asked.

She nodded.

He looked around, then leaned in closer to her ear.

"Let's drop back a bit. You never know who's listening."

* * *

If you want to understand what happened during those weeks, you need to understand one other thing. That other thing is just how isolated Equestria really is. You've no doubt heard of all these countries. Ferdin. Prance. Hästi. But do you have any idea what our relationship with them is?

Well, I'll tell you. Shit, amiable, and good. In that order.

Of course, the papers never tell you this. For the past thousand years, Celestia has kept a tight lid on what can be said within her realms. And, well, it works. It works damn well. Equestria is one of the happiest, most prosperous nations on Earth, and their cultural output is virtually unmatched despite the setbacks. You'd think that repression of freedom would lead to dissent, but the princess is a master of PR. As long as the ponies are happy, they have no reason to believe everyone else in the world isn't.

This isn't the case. Ferdin? Umala? Chevall? They hate us, and justifiably so. We didn't rise to the top by playing nice. Sure, we had the benefit of having the two last alicorns in existence on our side, but that doesn't mean it came easily. We had to stab a few backs to rise up, and over the course of history, we've managed to piss off many.

So that brings us to a decade ago. We received reports from our ally, Prance, that Ferdinese troops are mobilizing along the borders. An attack seems eminent, so of course we have to do something about it.

Thus, Operation Thunderhead. Coalition forces composed of Prench, Hästians, Equestrians, and a few others were tasked with striking numerous military installations along the Ferdinese coast with the intentions of knocking out any sort of potential invasion force before it could muster.

Equestria hasn't had any real army since... well, I don't know if we ever have, so of course our main contribution is supplying the intelligence and leadership personnel required. And, with our limitless money, we hired a fuck ton of mercenaries. Like our good friend Iron Shod.

And so comes the night of the operation. Shod is one of the strike force commanders, and I had the privilege of being his over watch pegasus. Before that, he had been one of the Ministry's go-to ponies. I had heard of him, and, to be honest, I was pretty damn excited to be working with a legend.

Our job was to eliminate a naval depot. Loosely interpreted, that meant wreck as much shit as possible, and then get the hell out of there. Other strike forces had the same basic job, though at other facilities. Staging bases, supply compounds, relay stations and the likes.

It gets time for our job. We landed on rafts this sandy spit a few clicks away from our target. We snuck through bush for an hour, and quickly came up with a plan of attack when the depot came in view.

Suffice to say, we were extremely successful, no doubt due to the excellent leadership of Shod. The entire place was leveled to the ground with a couple packs of HE. We even managed to sink and sabotage a damn impressive number of the ships in the harbor. Not to mention the scores of Ferdinese fuckers we jacked up when they tried to fight back. To top it off, we only had three casualties in our force of one hundred or so. Not a bad run at all. A few hours of that and we high tailed it out of there back to that sandy spit.

And that's when things went to shit.

We found all of our boats were set ablaze, and there was a massive flotilla waiting for us along the beach. A few of us bit it right there, but we

managed to retreat into the forest before too many of us got tangle up in a skirmish.

And that's how we spent the next two weeks. Hiding in the forest, on the run from the Ferdinese, and surviving on the morning dew and MRE's. Our ultimate goal was to try and get to the Prench border, but that wasn't easy with massive patrols and pegasi sweeping over the forests all the time.

Somehow, we got out of there. We went in with one hundred ponies, and came out with twenty. It isn't something I like to think about. Lot's of good folk were lost over those days.

What do we find out when we get back? The operation failed miserably. There were seventeen facilities that were supposed to be destroyed, and our target was the only one that could have been called a success, despite the losses. The others were complete butchery of our side.

All we got out of it was a bonus to our normal payment and a massive fuck you. No recognition. No ceremony for the losses. They just told us to not talk about it, and that they'd throw us in prison if a word popped out.

At the very least, it prevented any sort of immediate aggression from the Ferdinese. We took out about a quarter of their supply train at that depot, and gave them a nice taste of what they'd have to go against if they wanted to tangle with us. Ain't heard a peep out of them since, except for a few dirty looks.

Nowadays, I can't say if relations are better or worse. Ferdin hasn't made any obvious moves, but they seem to be pretty intent on rallying other nations to their cause. A few years ago they managed to pick up Chevall. I'm sure Umala is one of their priorities as well, if they can unfuck the fuckery going on down there.

But I don't know what the future holds. What I do know, is that Thunderhead fucked up Iron Shod bad. And not just his record. He was... different after those weeks. I'm not a psychologist, but even I could tell a few days after reaching Prance that he wan't quite right in the head. Hell, I'm probably not either.

I left the Mol pretty soon after that. Found myself hanging around the borderlands, doing merc jobs. I had a brief stint with the Hammer Hooves,

but I didn't like their rigidity. By chance, I ran into Iron Shod a few years ago. I've stuck with him since.

So there you go. Operation Thunderhead. The tragedy that never happened. There's not a single history book in Equestria that will tell you what happened that night, ten years ago. Perhaps its for the better. The princess wouldn't want her precious children getting uppity, after all.

* * *

The Solar Compact was the largest political entity in the world, and not a single commoner in all of Equestria had ever heard of it. It's existence was a direct result of the events a decade ago; the realization that Ferdin had adequate military power to repel a multi-front assault by numerous nations was more than enough to scare the coalition forces into unifying under a single banner with the intent of mutual protection.

It was no coincidence that the alliance took its name from the Equestrian princess of the sun. If anyone had the diplomatic panache and public image capable of fronting a united military organization, it was Princess Celestia.

Of course, it was due to the sensitive military nature of this compact that knowledge of its existence was not to be found within Equestria. Indeed, this was all news to Twilight.

"...well, the three main players are Equestria, Prance and Hästi. Aside from those three, pretty much anyone who stands to lose something in the case of an attack by the RTO has joined the compact. Really, though, the others aren't even worth mentioning. The bulk of the military power comes from the French and Hästians. We provide the technology and intelligence."

The RTO. Another thing that she had never heard of. The Reclamation Treaty Organization. A collection of nations who were unified in their goal to unify the planet under a just rule. By necessity, achieving that goal meant deposing the "tyrannical, repressive rule" of Princess Celestia. Ferdin and Chevall were the two powerhouses of the collective.

Break had been talking to Twilight for the better part of the daylight hours. It was late afternoon, as evidenced by the dimming sun sinking lower towards the horizon. In that time he had given a very thought-

provoking dissertation on Operation Thunderhead, its long-term impacts, and the current global political stage.

Despite all appearances, the pegasus was an incredibly poignant orator. By the time their conversation was slowing down, the unicorn had a very good picture of what the world was really like. To describe it in a word, frightening.

"I... yeah. There isn't much else to say that comes to mind."

Twilight gave a charming smile. "Thanks, anyways. That was certainly eye-opening."

The two were a distance behind the rest of the group, out of eavesdropping range. Break had landed and was actually walking on his own legs. It was certainly a rare occurrence. The two enjoyed a moments silence as they considered what they had just discussed.

"Listen, Twilight..." Break started with unexpected trepidation in his voice.

"Yes?"

"Are you scared?"

She looked to the ground. "I don't know what else I could be at a time like this."

Break stretched and flapped his wings as he looked up to the sky. "You're not alone."

The unicorn glanced at him inquisitively.

"I'm scared. Iron Shod's scared. Hell, all of us are scared." He sighed. "I know I've been acting like an all-around asshole the entire time you've known me, but I'll level with you. I'm not nearly as ferocious as I pretend to act."

The brown stallion turned to her. "Not a single soldier has ever gone out to the fields without fear coursing through their guts. I'm no exception. I act the way I do so that I don't have to deal with that fear. That other Break, that other pony that everyone sees on the outside, he's the one that can handle fear. But me? I'm just as scared as you. But as long as I can pretend to be brave, I am brave."

He took a deep, agitated breath. "You know, I realized a strange thing a decade ago, when I was crouched down in that forest with Iron Shod, caked in mud and inches away from that Ferdinese patrol. You can know a pony all your life, but you'll never really know them until both your lives have been on the line. That moment, when the coin flips, and your fate is decided? If you make it out in one piece, you'll find who your real friends are."

His wings fanned out as he prepared to take to the skies once more.

"Iron Shod? He didn't make it out in one piece. Me? I'm still trying to figure that one out."

He pumped his wings a few times.

"Take it easy, Twilight."

With that, the pegasus reclaimed his position far above the basin, an ever watching eye in the sky. This time, though, he was more than a mercenary watching for danger. For Twilight, he was a friend protecting the ponies that really mattered to him.

Celestia's sun gently kissed the peaks of the western mountains, coloring the sky a brilliant vermillion. Far at the front, Iron Shod called for them to halt. The Umalian border was within their sights, signified by the faint smoke plumes of guard houses, tucked deeply in coniferous forests that spread below them as they crested the final hill of the Grand Equestrian Basin; the ancient highway through the south lands.

* * *

Loyalty.

Chapter 12

Trouble on the Homefront

The intelligence ponies have told me everything they know. It's my duty to help them, but I just don't know how I can do it. They'll be here within a few hours, and I need to have a plan of action as soon as possible.

This sounds like something for your mercenary goons to take care of.

Perhaps. And don't use that word, 'goons.' It makes me uncomfortable.

Umala is a fickle situation, isn't it.

Indeed. The steady influx of mercenaries to the region that those farmers come from means whoever goes in will have to contend with some considerable resistance. Not to mention the understated threat of modern weaponry. The reports from the Prench regarding their unicorn casualties from gunfire are... disheartening.

You need the best.

Unfortunately, nearly all of my reserve corps are stationed on the Prench-Ferdin border, or in naval bases in Hästi. Choices are slim, and they'll need a powerful unicorn. There are none left that I can trust with a fairly sensitive mission like this, let alone allow them be away for the time necessary while we are in the midst of staging.

...I have an idea, but you won't like it. Nor do I, for that matter.

* * *

She stood motionless for a very long time, watching the chariot disappear into the distance. Through the early morning haze she could faintly make out the clump of structures that constituted Ponyville, and beyond that one of the many stunning mountain vistas that characterized Equestria.

Had she done the right thing?

Perhaps Boreas was wrong. Perhaps this was something do-able without the service of her student. He put up a strong argument, that she couldn't deny. Even in her inexperience, Twilight had more than enough magical potential to defeat the forty bandits many times over, by herself. The risk of having a mercenary succumb and somehow get traced back to her would be too dangerous; not with the ties between Umala and Pferdland strengthening by the day. Her student needed to be there, to ensure that no trace of them ever being there remained by the end of it. Whether that meant by preventing casualties or destroying the evidence still needed to be seen.

Besides, she had sent some of the best mercenaries in the business to assist her. Nothing could go wrong with such powerful assistance.

At least, that was the idea.

Once the black speck faded from her vision, she relaxed as best she could and strode back through the gatehouse and into the palace. The court would soon open, and her presence was required to meet the needs of her subjects.

* * *

"Who is next?"

The scribe glanced down at the parchment. "The Hästian ambassador. Recent laws instated in Hästi have slightly changed the method in which the nation engages in diplomacy. It would seem he is here to clarify what exactly these changes are, and how they will affect our current relations."

Though she would never show it on the outside, quite frequently the Princess found herself wishing she could flip over a table or two and scream at the petitioners to leave her in peace. The stress from that mornings sending-off ceremony only compounded her frustration. "What else is on schedule?"

"The Earth Pony Construction Union, a report from our western settlements, your weekly briefing with the Ministry of Intelligence brass, and another meeting with the Grand Marshall to relocate reserve military forces," he droned while pushing his glasses farther up his muzzle.

She groaned. "Tell the ambassador that I will be an hour late. I must take care of... personal business."

"Yes, your majesty." the scribe said. He bowed then strode down from the throne and disappeared into the waiting room.

The ambassador was an old acquaintance of hers, but at the current moment she could not bear another meeting. Celestia stood from the splendid chair and spread out her wings in a very conspicuous stretch. With only a meager attempt at grace, she ambled out of the chamber and into one of the many service corridors. There was no particular destination on her mind, her only goal being to find a spot where she could clear her mind. Politics was not a game one could play while distracted.

Soon enough, she was standing before the family vault. A conversation with Boreas would do her wonders. He was eerily fluent in the art of calming a pony. That was a skill that Celestia herself envied: the ability to always say the perfect thing at the best time. She slotted her horn into the groove in the enormous metal sheet, and it sparked to life as it slowly rolled aside to welcome the ages-old alicorn.

She paid little attention to the various treasures she passed by, having seen them thousands of times before. Old maps, original copies of various intellectual treatises, masterpiece paintings and sculptures, assorted memorabilia from the royal family of old, and piles of precious metals, gems, and priceless accessories.

A sudden transition in location found her surrounded by the old armory. Suits of armor, intimidating blades, war banners, and hundreds of other items related to the art of waging warfare were neatly organized in hundreds of racks, shelves and cabinets. Not all of them were of pony origins, either. Griffin, Dragon, Zebra, and even a few Mule and Donkey sets were scattered about.

These were all ignored as Celestia strode to a seemingly insignificant section of the armory. She stopped and scanned the empty cabinet. A shocked expression slowly crept into her face. Shaking her head, she headed for the exit with new-found rejuvenation in her step.

Where are they.

Huh?

You know what I'm referring to.

I'm afraid I don't.

A flash of light later, and Celestia was standing in Luna's office, where the smaller sister was wearing a face of surprise.

"What is it that is so urgent it requires you to violate one of the bans you yourself instated?"

Celestia was wound up tight, almost as if she was getting ready to pounce. "The armor. And the horn. Where are they."

"...which armor." the blue alicorn dared.

"Luna."

She was silent as she realized there was no use in trying to derail the subject.

"Boreas. He's not in the vault. You are the only other pony who even knows about him."

Luna stood up and stepped away from her desk.

"You are worried about the safety of Twilight, correct?" her tone was utterly diplomatic.

Celestia was still glowering. "Of course. What of it?"

"And yet you declined to give her any sort of armaments for her mission."

"Yes."

"Why."

"She wouldn't want them, even if I offered. The closer she is to appearing the warrior, the closer she is to actually being a warrior. Neither I nor her want that."

"You realize may have put her life at risk? Even more so than before?"

"No harm will come to her."

Luna paused as the words continued to formulate in her mind. "Sister, you have grown too confident in your rule. Even I can see that Umala is not as vulnerable as it once was. Every day regiments of foreign mercenaries flood into that forsaken land."

She casually shuffled a foot against the ground. "Pegasi, griffins, even a zebra or two. But most of all, unicorns." Luna looked straight into Celestia's eyes. "You've sent her to one of the most dangerous areas for an Equestrian to be on the planet, with nothing more than a few ponies she hasn't even met. So, if you must know, I did indeed give Twilight the Armor of Boreas and the Horn of Ceros. They seemed to be two most versatile pieces of equipment we have to offer in that antiquated armory downstairs, as you have not yet given me the clearance to request armaments from the Ministry of Intelligence, but that is a different matter altogether."

No. This was not good. It was Celestia's turn to speak.

"Sister, do you realize what you have done?"

The mare looked admonished. "Why, yes. I do. I've saved your students life. And gave her an excellent mentor for her time on the road."

A fire crept into the white Princess' eye. "You weren't with him for those one thousand years. You didn't learn the things about him I did."

At this, Luna dropped her guard slightly. "What do you mean?"

"He never told you how he made the armor."

"...what of it?"

Celestia's voice turned to ice. "He's a murderer, Luna. A killer. That armor wasn't made from the earth."

"What do you mean?"

"It's made from living beings, Luna. He ruthlessly exterminated the life around him to create that monstrosity."

The blue princess was wordless.

"He can form his words like no others. He can spread his ideas frighteningly well. And he can certainly be a good counselor when you need him; I won't deny that he's gotten me out of more tight situations than I can remember. But he can not be trusted. Not by me, not by you, and not by

Twilight. He might not be outright evil, but I worry for his soundness of mind.”

Luna sat down in her chair once more, stupefied by the realization. Celestia turned and leaned out the doorway and gestured to a courier in the hallway. She whispered something in his ear, and he ran off as fast as his legs would allow. Celestia repositioned herself in the room, and the two sisters were silent, neither allowing themselves to look each other in the eye.

A few minutes later a blue unicorn mare in a black body suit let herself into the room. An air of cocksureness followed.

“What do you need this time, Celestia?”

* * *

“Make sure the armor and the horn are safe and ensure that Twilight is protected. Pretty vague, but I guess this won’t be the first time you’ve given me broad orders. And you said they’re on their way to Hoofall at this moment?”

Celestia nodded, confirming Trixie’s recounting of her orders. The unicorn in turn flashed a toothy smile. “Good. I like having plenty of clearance. Well, I’ll be on my way. I’m going to borrow some of your chariot fly-boys if you don’t mind. No way I’m walking all the way.”

Trixie whipped around and strode out the door. She had been there for all of three minutes, in which time Celestia had given her an extremely unspecific task with no clear goal, and a few intel folders, which the mare had promptly breezed through and slipped into her sleek saddlebags, which were attached by modular design to her body suit.

As always, Celestia was left with a coppery taste in her mouth. It seemed to be Trixie’s trademark whenever the two of them spoke. She looked over to Luna. Her sister was staring off into space, lost in thought. Given the strained look in her eyes, she seemed to be troubled by the recent occurrences. Celestia, knowing better than to interrupt her sister when she was thinking, remained silent, unsure of what to do next.

Unexpectedly, two guardsponies strode in. They were escorting a beautifully dressed white unicorn mare with a gracefully styled purple

mane, who was walking between them. She bowed as she entered the room.

“Please excuse the interruption, Princesses, but there is a matter of business we simply *must* attend to.”

* * *

The moment Twilight had stepped out the door of the Carousel Boutique, Rarity was packing her bags. Her presence was needed in Canterlot Palace courts, whether Princess Celestia knew it or not. Spike had told her and her friends yesterday where Twilight had gone, but other than that he had no information.

“Sweetie Bell?” she chimed.

On cue, her sister poked her head around the corner of the door to her bedroom. “Yes?”

Rarity was flying around the room, levitating the necessities for a trip and putting them into her bag. A hoofful of elaborate dresses, various hats, mane and coat care gels, and countless other objects that were integral to the life of a fashionista on the road. “I’ll be gone for a day or two. Very short notice. Can you manage on your own until I’m back?”

The filly strode into the room with a face of confusion. “Where are you going?”

“Canterlot, on account of some *very* serious business. I’m sorry, Sweetie, but you won’t be accompanying me this time.”

She looked dejected, but didn’t voice her dissatisfaction. Rarity stopped what she was doing and walked over to her sister, and held a hoof under her chin. “I’ll make it up to you next time.”

Sweetie Bell looked up at her with eyes of irresistible adorableness. “Promise?”

The older sibling smiled and ruffled the filly’s mane. “Promise.”

She finished packing, and started to head out the door. Before heading downstairs to the foyer, she turned to her sister, who was still standing in the middle of the room. “Perhaps you should see if you can stay at Apple Bloom’s. I’d hate for you to be bored while I’m away.”

Her green eyes lightened up at the proposition, and before Rarity could say anything, the bombastic filly was racing downstairs. "Great idea! I'll see you in a few days, sister!"

Rarity could only smile as she headed out the door herself, making sure to lock the door. With purpose in her stride, she set off for the nearest chariot station.

* * *

Both Luna and Celestia raised an eyebrow when Rarity strode into the room, demanding their presence. The guards seemed to be a bit emasculated by the mare, hence their willingness to even allow her to delve that far into the palace.

Celestia put on the voice of a hostess. "The Element of Generosity! It's always a pleasure to see you, Rarity, even if the circumstances are a bit... odd." She looked to the guards. "You can go, thank you." She gestured to the two chairs in front of Luna's desk. Her and Rarity took them, and the three ponies gave each other curious looks. "Is something wrong?"

Rarity took a deep breath. "Where did you send Twilight?"

The princesses shot each other urgent looks. "What do you mean?" Luna asked.

"Twilight had some very strange items in her saddlebags. In particular, a collection of books about various military endeavours. Obviously, there's a correlation between that and whatever happened here in Canterlot yesterday and the day before." There was a hint of jeer in her voice. She didn't seem happy.

What on Earth do we say?

I don't know!

Should I tell her the truth?

She doesn't seem like the type of mare to spread a secret. Just word it... nicely.

"She's on a peacekeeping mission in Umala."

The unicorn gave them her most respectable glower. An awkward silence ensued.

“Umala?” Rarity asked with a disbelieving tone.”

“It’s a nation directly south of Equestria. Things have been a bit... hectic down there. Twilight was needed to rectify some issues.” Luna answered.

The unicorn opened her mouth to speak, but Celestia quickly tacked on to Luna. “Twilight probably had the books because she was expecting the worst. It’s not as bad as she probably made it sound.”

Rarity’s glower only further intensified, but she knew better than to attempt to verbally joust with royalty. Even a tongue as sharp as hers could not hope to hold its own against the silver in the voices of the alicorns.

“Hmph! Very well! I am sorry for disturbing you, and also must apologize for the rather confrontational nature of this meeting.” She rose from her chair and flicked her mane.

Luna and Celestia rose as well, and wordlessly dipped their heads as the flamboyant mare walked out, bitter disappointment welling up within her. She shut the door behind her, leaving the two royal ponies with only each others presence.

* * *

Rarity made a point of conspicuously huffing every few steps as she made her way through the palace. The numerous pages and scribes darting around the halls of the palace consistently shot her strange looks as they passed, but never tarried to ask her what was troubling her so. Noticing this, Rarity stopped huffing and instead started to emphasize her exhales. That didn’t change anything.

The venture hadn’t been *entirely* useless. As it were, she was more knowledgeable now than she was prior: She knew Twilight was in Umala (assuming the Princesses were not lying), and that Twilight was on some sort of mission that may put her in serious danger (again assuming the Princesses were not lying). She racked her brain trying to recall whatever she could about the nation to the south, but her knowledge was paltry at best. It wasn’t particularly large and small, and, if the rumors were true, they seemed to have a particular dislike of Equestrians, for whatever

reason. International politics was not a subject that had ever interested her in the slightest, and as such she had not the faintest idea as to what could possibly be occurring in Umala that would require 'peacekeeping' efforts, whatever that meant.

Before long, she found herself walking across the massive facility that was the PCS, the Palace Chariot Station. Though one would be hard pressed to call the structure ugly, it certainly lacked the regal refinement of the palace proper. The PCS was essentially a box carved into the side of the mountain that the palace was perched upon. So great was the size of it, one could see it with a fairly weak telescope from a distance as great as Ponyville. The interior decorations were, as with all of Canterlot, splendid. Marble columns, fountains, thoroughfares flanked by bronze statues, and fresh bouquets of flowers all around. Though from outside it appeared to be an ungainly gash in the side of an otherwise pristine mountain, only from the interior could one appreciate the scope of its impact.

The PCS was, in a word, a hub. While there were certainly many entryways of Canterlot, which was built in, on, and around the mountain, the most important of them all was the main chariot station. From there one could hail a wagon to be taken to any street side location imaginable, or simply ride the countless magical lifts to wherever they needed to go. For royalty, envoys, dignitaries and ambassadors, it was the preferred arrival and departure point for its magnificent furnishings and convenience. For the common ponies, it offered them a faster, if more expensive, method of travel.

Every hour, hundreds of pegasus drawn chariots would fly in and out of the PCS, like so many bees to a hive. Some chariots were small, two-seater affairs for short distance hops across Equestria. Others, such as the *Mother Goose 636*, carried upwards of one hundred passengers, and required the combined efforts of numerous pegasi and expertly crafted enchantments from unicorn engineers.

The true heart of the whole affair, though, lied in the southern wing of the station, for there resided the private chariots. Unimaginably splendid and outrageously expensive, many the patricians of Canterlot housed their priceless vehicles in that region of the expansive airport. Notably, the interior design increased in opulence the farther south one moved along the PCS.

With no flights to Ponyville departing within an hour, Rarity hopped onto the tram that shuttled ponies up and down the length of the station. Eventually, she found herself on the southern end, and, out of curiosity, hopped off. The area was shockingly empty, in contrast to the hustle and bustle of the crowds near the public flights to Manehattan, Fillydelphia and Trottingham. A few Earth pony technicians, a family returning from a vacation, walked along the red carpet pathways a few hundred yards away.

The ceiling was a few hundred feet above her. She looked to the end of the hanger, to the southern wall. The red carpet extended all the way to the end, a quarter-mile away. To the left, humongous doors indicated the entrances to private hangers, all of which seemed to be massive white blocks that stretched to the ceiling. The open sky wasn't visible from her location, thanks to the rather ugly hangers.

In fact, the only hanger that was different was the first one. It had two marble pillars in front of it, and overall it seemed to have a more noble appearance. The giant alicorn royal family crest plastered just above the door offered an adequate explanation.

"Funny, finding you here." A voice said from behind her. Shortly after, she heard the hiss of another tram departing this end of the station.

She jumped slightly, and turned to face the new pony. It was a blue unicorn mare, with an almost grey mane, though she was much younger than the color suggested. She was, in fact, the same mare that Rarity had seen leaving the room Luna and Celestia were in just before barging in herself, though the two hadn't acknowledged each other. Now that she thought about it, the unicorn seemed awfully familiar. Perhaps the horrifically hideous carapace-like body suit was throwing her off.

"Excuse me?" Rarity asked with genuine bewilderment.

The mystery mare continued like she hadn't heard her. "I know why you came to Canterlot."

"...huh?"

"Fear not, Twilight is safe. Rather, she will be, once I catch up with her." the mare said cryptically.

"I must say, you have me quite confused. Do I know you?"

A shower of sparks emitted from the strangers horn as she cast a quick spell and walked towards the first hanger, the royal one. Sparing a slight glance back, she smiled as she disappeared into the doorway. Rarity, still utterly confused, noticed that her hair felt different. She conjured a small mirror in front of her, then dropped it as she shrieked, drawing the attention of the nearby technicians.

Her hair was green.

* * *

It had taken her the better part of an hour during the flight home to force out the last remnants of green with magic. Her method had been far too brute force for her tastes, but without any sort of access to the proper cosmetics necessary to fix such a travesty, she resorted to dying her hair as best she could.

At times like this, she wished she possessed Twilight's incredible intellect. Sure, anypony could look at the read-outs for a spell and cast it, but only those of staggering academic ability were comfortable working in the finer fields of magic. Telekinetics, and, to a certain degree, conjuring, were under Rarity's control (not to mention her special talent for finding gems) given their simplicity in most cases, but advanced topics such as teleportation and molecular chemistry were out of her grasp. Had she gone to a medical school, she would have the scientific knowledge necessary to repair the tattered remains of her hair instantly. As it were, she was unable to draw out the green pigment from her mane, for lack of knowledge of how to do so.

Once again, she conjured the mirror. It was about as close to fixed as it would ever be until the green naturally faded back to her normal purple. Only a slight lack of luster indicated that anything was amiss. The unicorn sighed as she rested her muzzle against the railing of the chariot, looking down at the farmlands below, nickering as she did so. It was a tad frustrating at times, knowing that a whole world of magic was open to her, but that she lacked the skill to submerge herself in it. For that, she envied Twilight.

Even the Element of Generosity gets jealous sometimes.

The morose thought made her dryly chuckle, but did little to lighten her somber mood. Gears were starting to turn in her head, however. Trixie,

she now recognized the mare, had used a type of magic that required some sort of scientific study. And since Trixie didn't seem completely inept at magic, given what she had seen of her in the past, then it was not unreasonable to assume that wherever she was headed off to would require an advanced background in magic. If Trixie was indeed following Twilight, as her comment seemed to hint, then...

The thought made her shiver, and the wind wasn't helping. What on earth had Twilight gotten herself tangled up in? She hadn't the faintest idea, but too many factors were starting to come into play for it to be something as simple as a charity job in a mildly dangerous area. Perhaps, for the first time since her schooling days, she required a trip to the Ponyville library to utilize its facilities. Research into 'Umala', a name she had heard of but had no information attached to, would be necessary.