

The Struggle for Power

By Scribbles



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Chapter 1

The Grievance

Luna awoke from her slumber, and looked at the sun streaming through the window. It was getting late in the day, meaning that it was time for her to get up and get ready for the night. As she slipped out of bed and made her way to the door of her private room, she passed by her mirror. She looked slightly frazzled, and she levitated a comb toward her untidy mane. As she brushed, she reflected on her current situation. It had been almost an entire year and a half since the Nightmare Moon incident, and she groaned inwardly as she thought of it. It had been so rash, so foolish of her to think that she could take on her sister. She had just been so frustrated! 1000 years of banishment from Equestria...yet after the first 100 or so it had been tolerable. Enjoyable even. That other kingdom she had discovered, kept secret until now...they respected her. And that was all she could ask for. And it was far more than the Equestrians gave her. The citizens of Equestria didn't even notice her, and that was the worst of it. They paid her as much attention now as they had before hand, which was exactly as much as they paid her when she was banished to the moon; none.

Luna grew more excited. She dropped the brush and began pacing back and forth, her mind working furiously. Celestia didn't understand where Luna was coming from. After all, Celestia had always been the favorite of their parents and all of the citizens of Equestria. She didn't know what it was like to be forgotten. To be uncared for, to be unloved. *Of course they didn't even notice I was gone for all those years, because Celestia took over my duties.* An impish plot began to brew in Luna's mind. *I can't force the night to stand forever. Even I recognize that was not well thought out. But to take it away...only the Ancients remember the time of Eternal Sun. Well, let's give the citizens of Equestria a bit of a history lesson, shall we?*

Luna hesitated for a moment. She needed to make sure she was ready for it. Her magic had finally recovered since she had been defeated for the second time. In fact, she was more powerful than before. With careful planning, even the living Elements of Harmony would prove

useless. There was an ancient magic that had been long forgotten by the realm. The Unstoppable Magic. She already had half of it, but to recover the other, she would have to go through with her long-forged plan. The more she thought about it, the more she realised she had waited long enough.

Luna glanced back into the mirror, a wicked grin on her face. *No, no, I have to make it seem like I am hesitant to do it.* She calmed herself, and watched as her dark smirk melted into a troubled expression of despair. *Much better. I'll prove to everyone that Luna's enough for them. Nightmare Moon represents my childish nature. Princess Luna is regal, someone to look up to. And once I'm gone, only then will they realize how much they've needed me. It's time to put the final stage of my plan in motion. The time is right. My plan cannot fail.*

* * *

Celestia had already begun lowering the sun in preparation for her younger sister when she finally arrived in the throne room. There was an aura of pensiveness around her, as if she was lost in thought. Celestia took note, and after the sun had finally fallen below the line of the horizon, she stepped down from the throne and walked quietly towards Luna. "Luna, something seems to be troubling you."

Luna looked up, her eyes sad yet determined. "Celestia, you've been nothing but kind to me since I returned from my banishment, and I cannot blame anything on you. But I feel as if the original problem that caused me to become Nightmare Moon persists. Nobody cares for the night, and my creations still go unnoticed." She looked out one of the high-arched windows and gave a sigh. The Moon was rising in all of its unappreciated splendor, brightening the sky once more. Its light wasn't harsh like the Sun her sister had dominion over. It could be stared at while you contemplated life or were just lost in its deep silvery well of beauty. *I'll bet nobody even gives the moon a second glance anymore.* Luna turned back to Celestia.

"It is for that reason that I feel I must retract my gift of the night to the citizens of Equestria." Celestia, who had been listening with genuine concern, was shocked. Sure, Luna had been moping around the castle for a couple of days, but this seemed so...sudden.

“Luna, think about what you are saying. Equestria depends on harmony to survive, and without the night, the day would be far too long. Crops would wither in the heat of the Sun, and it would be too bright for anypony to fall asleep.”

Luna scoffed. “You can still have the Sun set. Equestria will get plenty dark without it. No Celestia, I’ve made up my mind. I will abdicate the throne and leave to form my own kingdom. Consider this my two weeks’ notice.” Luna deliberately turned her head away.

Celestia paused for a brief moment, her long years of diplomacy and good-intentioned manipulation all flooding back to her mind. “What would it take for you to stay? An official holiday where everypony watches the moon rise? A greater hoof in the affairs of the kingdom?” Luna remained silent. “Luna, even if nopony else seems to notice you, you and I both know that I care for and love you.” Luna turned, fury in her eyes, tears beginning to show.

“THEN WHY WOULD YOU BANISH ME?! And kill HIM?! I only wanted recognition for my work! My sacrifice! My beautiful creation! Even after voicing my grievance, and serving my punishment for doing so, the only friends I have to call my own are creatures no ‘normal’ pony can stand! All the ‘terrors of the night’ are under my jurisdiction! And everypony thinks I’m lumped in with them.” She stood, looking frighteningly regal with tears and pure emotion flowing from her eyes, giving her the appearance of one of the avenging angels from the legends of old.

“It was for your own good! You needed a level head if you were to take control of the kingdom!”

Luna laughed, a small crystalline pool of liquid sorrow gathering around her hoofs. “I. Have. Never. Been. More level headed in my life! 2,714 years of experience have led up to this moment, and I have never been surer of a decision. It’s not you. It’s not even the citizens of Equestria. Their negligence in recognizing true beauty is their own shortcoming. No, it’s only me. I’m the one that caused all the pain, both a millennium and just one short year ago. Ha! If I had never existed, life would have been better for everypony! But I guess I’ll just have to accept being ignored for my entire life. Being forgotten isn’t so bad. But it’s something you’ll never know, isn’t it?”

Luna's accusatory words burned into Celestia's soul. She truly did care for Luna, but she was acting so rashly, she knew that to defend herself would only infuriate Luna further. Luna sniffed and turned away yet again. "I thought so."

Celestia left the throne room silently, which was now bathed in the silvery light of a full moon.

She's already made her decision. I won't be able to dissuade her, not after this, but perhaps the only other pony she might even consider a friend can.

Twilight was up late doing a science experiment. She carefully maneuvered the fizzing chemical off of the burner, and poured it into a beaker filled with a different compound. After a not too exciting hissing, the substance turned a pale blue and gave off a foul odor. She wrinkled her nose, and wrote down a couple of notes. Her quill snapped as she was startled by a loud burping sound upstairs. "SPIKE! What have I told you about doing that when I'm working?"

Spike's head appeared around the corner of the stairs. "It wasn't my fault! I just got a letter from Celestia!" That made Twilight's ears perk. Celestia was always considerate of down-time. Only something truly important would make her intrude this late. Spike ran down the stairs, opened the letter, and pompously began;

My faithful student Twilight Sparkle,

I have a matter of grave news that perhaps only you will be able to amend. My sister Luna, ruler of the Night, has decided to abdicate the throne and leave Equestria to form her own kingdom. She will be taking the moon and the night with her. I fear that her rashness will cause a division amongst Equestria. Without the balance and harmony brought by the day-night cycle, many aspects of life here will change, I fear for the worse. I ask that you bring your most trusted friends and try to talk her out of it. She will not listen to me.

Twilight, this is a matter that must remain secret until Luna decides to make the decision public. Any more news of it might cause her to further cement herself in this decision made while she was blinded by emotion. As a sister, I truly care for her happiness, but as a ruler, the welfare of the kingdom comes first. I trust your judgment.

-Princess Celestia of Equestria.

By the end Spike's voice had grown more sober. Twilight listened, her heart sinking. She had talked to Luna several times since the Nightmare Moon incident, though as she reflected, not often enough. She felt a pang of guilt, as it was really only her own choice. Luna was kind and amiable for the most part, and actually enjoyable to socialize with. Twilight knew that she was good at heart, and as such this seemed out of character.

With a start Twilight realized Spike was waiting for a response. "Spike, take a note to the princess." Spike already had everything ready, so Twilight began "Princess, we will visit her tomorrow morning, just before sunrise. We will do everything in our power to help the situation. Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle."

"Short letter for such a big problem." Spike commented as he rolled up the scroll and prepared to send it.

"False hope bred by reassurance won't help princess Celestia, Spike. Send the scroll, and we'll go see how many of the others will come along with us." She gathered up her saddlebag and got a few traveling necessities, and after a moment's consideration, put a stopper in a bottle of the concoction she had just made, and added that to the pack.

Spike groaned. "I know this is serious, but it's already pretty late..." he yawned to emphasize his point.

Twilight rolled her eyes. "Alright Spike, you can hold down the fort. I'll be back sometime next week." With that, she left the library, and headed out along the roads of Ponyville.

"Now, if I remember correctly, Rarity is working on a huge order, so she would be too busy for a trip to Canterlot and back." Twilight mused as she walked. Applejack had finished the harvest, and had a cool

head that would be useful for persuading the dejected God of the Night. She had a way of making life seem better. Pinkie Pie was cheerful and always looked on the bright side, but perhaps not the best choice for such a serious matter. Fluttershy. Of course she'd have to come. Rainbow Dash...well, she was perhaps a bit too brash, but another perspective might be helpful.

Twilight decided the greater the numbers the better. Rainbow's house was the closest, and she might be able to get Fluttershy while Twilight asked Applejack along. Of course, there was the small problem that Rainbow's house was a cloud, and as such was floating some 60 meters off the ground. It was times like these that Twilight cursed her lack of wings. Then she always came to her senses and realized that if she were a Pegasus, she couldn't have the magic associated with being a Unicorn. After all, only the rulers of Equestria could be both Pegasus and Unicorn. Alicorn, she corrected herself.

"RAINBOW DASH!" Twilight called. It was dark already, the moon now well into the sky. Twilight was most likely interrupting her friend's sleep. Sure enough, a sleepy-looking Dash poked her head over the edge of the cloud.

"What the hay are you up to Twilight? Can't a pony get a good night's sleep around here?" Her voice was slightly annoyed, but good natured.

"Sorry to disturb you Rainbow, but there's some grave news." Rainbow flew down and listened while Twilight gave her a rundown of the situation.

"Sounds pretty serious. And Princess Celestia wants us to convince Luna? Well, that shouldn't be too hard. After all, if she left Equestria, she'd never have time to chat with me!" After a stern look from Twilight, Rainbow sighed. "Alright, alright. So who else is coming?"

"Fluttershy and Applejack. Fluttershy's cottage is a little bit farther, and since you're the fastest around I was hoping you could go fetch her."

Rainbow grinned, all hints of sleepiness gone. "I'm on it."

As Rainbow spread her wings to go, Twilight added “We should meet up in the Town Square. There should be a carriage that will take us all to Canterlot there.” Rainbow nodded understanding, and true to her name, dashed off. Nodding to herself, Twilight proceeded down the lane towards Sweet Apple Acres.

Applejack was already long asleep, following the age-old adage of “early to bed, early to rise, makes a pony happy, healthy and wise.” She was pulled out of her slumber by the sound of a small “clink” on her window. She clopped over to the window and looked down. Twilight was motioning for her to come down. Shaking the stupor from her eyes, Applejack quickly donned her hat, and making certain to not wake her peacefully sleeping family members, made her way out into the front yard.

“Twilight! I wasn’t expecting a visit from y’all this late.” Noting the worried expression on Twilight face, Applejack added “Nothin’s wrong is it?” Twilight’s look told otherwise.

Within a couple of minutes, the two ponies were heading back into Ponyville. Applejack had left a note, letting her family know where she was off to. Big Macintosh would have to take over any farming duties, finally repaying Applejack for the time she bucked half of the apple orchard by herself.

The four friends met up in the center of Ponyville, where sure enough, a carriage sent by Princess Celestia was waiting for them. The entire village was asleep at this point, with only a few lights stubbornly dispelling the darkness of the peaceful night. As the carriage took off, Twilight discussed their plan of action.

“Unless we can convince Princess Luna to stay in Equestria, things are going to fall into disorder. I mean, imagine what life would be like with the Sun always in the sky.”

Applejack frowned. “Well, that’d be too much sun for the smaller plants, and I’m not sure even the older trees could handle *that* much sun.”

Twilight nodded. “Exactly. This situation is of the upmost importance, and we should be honored Princess Celestia chose us. So we need to treat

it seriously. I can try to convince Princess Luna to stay through logic, but if that fails, we'll have to appeal to her emotions."

The Pegasus guards, if they heard the conversation, showed no outward signs to indicate such. In due time the group reached Canterlot. Most of the citizens were asleep, but there was enough official government business going on that it seemed like the entire populace was out for a midnight stroll to the ponies who had spent their whole lives in Ponyville. "Maybe Luna just hasn't noticed how many ponies are out right now," said Fluttershy, voicing what they all were hoping. They made their way through the city until they got to the main castle, where they were stopped by one of the guard pegasi.

"Halt! What is your business?"

"We're seeking an audience with Princess Luna, at the command of Princess Celestia," said Twilight. The Pegasus guard nodded, remembering that the princess told him a group would be coming with that purpose, and stepped aside to let them in.

When they finally got inside, the three Ponyvillian ponies gasped. They had never been to the capital city, (except for the Grand Galloping Gala, where they only got to see the main event hall), let alone the magnificent throne room, and even Twilight was still impressed by its high arches and feeling of openness. The long carpet led to the throne whereon the on-duty ruler sat ready to take care of the affairs of the kingdom. The long walk up to the throne gave Twilight a sense of smallness, and Luna's penetrating, indifferent gaze did not help.

"Princess Luna." Twilight began, bowing respectfully while her friends kneeled.

"Twilight Sparkle." Luna said. There was a brief pause during which Luna seemed to collect her thoughts. "Let us both cut to the chase. I know that you are here to advise against my decision." Twilight nodded. Rainbow Dash and Applejack exchanged glances of uneasiness. Luna's gaze drifted off thoughtfully. "It's for the best, I suppose. I do need to let Celestia know that the decision is mine, and not borne of emotion. Make your case."

Twilight cleared her throat, and began. "Princess Luna, your grievance, as I understand it, is that you feel underappreciated?" Luna nodded her affirmation.

"And, so we understand each other, what do you hope to accomplish by leaving Equestria?" Luna turned to Twilight, her eyes full of a wisdom that could only be born of a thousand years of reflection on one's self.

"To regain my dignity."

Chapter 2

The Division Decision

Twilight started. She hadn't expected this. "Your...dignity?" Luna nodded tersely.

"Yes, Twilight, my dignity. A ruler must be perfect in the citizen's eyes. Anything less makes a weak ruler, and by extension, a weak kingdom. The Nightmare Moon incident, which you four were extremely helpful in clearing up, is that one mistake that has ruined my career as ruler over Equestria. Everypony will only remember *that* when my name is brought up. You cannot love a ruler you resent. And think how hard it would be to have diplomatic discussions with other nations!" she paused, remaining as cool and collected as ever. "By leaving Equestria, I'll be able to leave my past behind. I can make a new name for myself. And perhaps someday I'll be able to return. But until then..." she flicked her tail to emphasize her point.

Twilight thought for a moment. It was a pretty good reason. But she still had to try to convince Luna otherwise, for both the Princesses' sake as well as the kingdom's. "Princess Luna, the Kingdom needs you. You know that your creation is significant, even if most ponies don't recognize its value. The night is just as important as the day. The night is the only time that is peaceful enough to recover from a long day's work. I'd say more ponies look forward to sleep than they do to getting up in the morning."

"I know I do!" interjected Rainbow Dash. Twilight gave her a stern look, and then continued.

"The stars and constellations have been a subject of study for hundreds of years. Their beauty and magnificence still astounds. Why, I even wore a gown featuring them to the Grand Galloping Gala, which I had the disappointment of not seeing you at."

"The Gala's too stuffy, as I heard you found out, so I decided to skip it." The princess and the four ponies all grinned at the memory of the

events that had happened, until Luna brought them back to the conversation.

“Relaxation is nice, but a nice shady tree is generally enough to emulate the peacefulness of the night. And besides, Celestia could just lower the Sun past the horizon, it’d get plenty dark then.”

“Too dark!” said Fluttershy. When Luna’s gaze fell on her, she faltered, and then continued. “Princess Luna, I love all the creatures of Equestria, and I know that your beautiful moon guides many of them. Some of the creatures even like the night more than the day! The wise owl and the crafty bat all call the night their home! If you took it away, how would they survive?”

Luna laughed. It was a kind, normal laugh. Nothing like when she was Nightmare Moon. “Fluttershy, I believe it was? I appreciate your concern, but as the Mistress of the Night, I know about all the creatures that stir in my domain. I love them all, perhaps almost as much as you do. That’s why I decided to take all of them with me when I form my new kingdom.”

“WHAT?” Twilight looked around, and then realized it was herself that had yelled the exclamation of disbelief. “Princess Luna, I don’t mean to question your motive, but that might throw things even more out of whack. As far as ecosystems go, the creatures of the night are extremely important in keeping pest population in check. Why, without all the animals in the Everfree Forest, the parasprites would overrun Equestria in an instant! Why, one alone almost took out Ponyville!”

“Twilight Sparkle, you are quite the studious one, aren’t you? Then you must also know that if a population grows too large, it will extinguish itself like a candle that consumes all the oxygen in its container.”

Twilight winced. The princess was rebutting everything they threw at her, yet in a calculated matter. If she was emotional, perhaps. But this indicated she had made her mind up before they even began. As she was starting to despair, Applejack stepped up, giving her hope once more.

“Princess Luna, if ya don’t mind me askin’, what’s your favorite food?” Luna raised a brow, but answered anyway.

“Why, a nice summer salad, I suppose.”

“Now tell me, princess, where do the nice lettuce leaves come from?”

“The ground, of course. A farmer would likely be tending hundreds of these plants at a time to feed the populace.”

“Now let me ask ya somethin’. If the sun was always up, do ya think the plants could survive? Or if it was always night either?” Luna shook her head, already well aware of where Applejack was going with this.

“Of course not.” Said Applejack. “You see, we need both the day and the night if we want to grow crops. And without food, civilization wouldn’t last very long.”

“No, you are quite right, Applejack. However, you’ve also seen how dark it is in some parts of the Everfree forest, correct? Well, plants grow there too. Edible plants, even. You see, life is a versatile thing. Sure, the comfort of the belly might be tested, but I believe that enough food could be found in either extreme, eternal day or eternal night.”

Luna looked around at the disappointed faces. “It’s nothing personal, believe me. You’re all great ponies, and I wish I could get to know you better. But I have my reasons, and I really want to carry through with this.”

Rainbow Dash stepped up. “Princess Luna, I know it probably won’t change your mind, but I have to say, flying at night is the coolest thing ever. The clouds are absolutely beautiful when the moon shines on them just right, and it’s amazing how many stars you can see when you’re that high in the sky.”

Luna gave a little chuckle. “Well, I’m glad the four of you at least appreciate the night. But you are only four ponies out of an entire kingdom. If nothing else, my absence, as well as the night’s, will hopefully let everpony else recognize it. ‘After all, absence makes the heart grow fonder.’ Thank you for coming all the way up to Canterlot just for me.

Perhaps you can show them around the capital city, Twilight, so the trip won't have been for naught?"

Twilight bowed her head. "I will. Thank you for your time Princess Luna. Please remember us on your travels." With that, Twilight and her friends turned to walk the long carpet out of the Audience Chamber. Luna watched them leave, her gaze never faltering.

"I will Twilight Sparkle. More than you could even fathom."

* * *

The end of the two week deadline found the friends amid a mass of ponies, all gossiping about Princess Luna's abandonment of Equestria. The news had come as a surprise to the general populace. Most hadn't heard much about her, besides, of course, the Nightmare Moon incident. They had all taken part of Princess Luna's return celebration, but to most it had just been an extension of the Summer Sun Celebration. To make it worse, Luna, typical to her nature, had remained reserved through the whole celebration, and spoke very little.

It's a fact of life that the less information is known about a subject or a person, the more ridiculous the gossip becomes. The theories for the cause of Luna's departure ranged from a covert operation in the neighboring griffon kingdom to rumors of a hoard of vast magical objects that would make Luna more powerful than Celestia. Other rumors were not so kind. It pained Twilight to hear them. Luna, though she had been difficult, didn't deserve some of the scathing remarks her supposed friends were saying around her. Her core friends, of course, understood where Luna was coming from, and tried their best to defend her.

Finally the final night arrived. It was more beautiful than Twilight could ever remember a night being. Everything about it was perfect. As the full moon climbed into the sky it illuminated the ground for miles around. In the distance, Twilight could see the creatures of the night awaken and begin their trek into the Everfree forest and into the unknown. *Can't say I'm going to miss the bats, but their role is vital to the careful balance of nature.*

A soft 'hoo' behind her pulled her out of her musing. "Aloysius? What are you doing here?" Aloysius turned, looking towards the migrating masses. As she looked, Twilight could make out the silent and beautiful

forms of a group of softly gliding owls. Twilight suddenly understood, and looked back towards her Midnight Assistant. "Aloysius...you're leaving?" Twilight began to feel sadness well up in her heart. Aloysius nodded, and turning around produced a tail feather that had been loose. "Aloysius...thank you." Silently, the owl flew away, and was lost to the night.

A few hours later, Twilight her five friends were in Sugar Cube Corner, trying to cheer each other up. "Well, look on the bright side, perhaps Princess Luna will realize she misses Equestria and will return." Rarity looked around hopefully at the glum ponies. Even Pinkie had been subdued.

"Well come on now, why are we wastin' the last night we'll see? Let's go get some fresh air." Applejack got up from her seat and the others followed suit. They walked and made small talk as they went, but everypony's mind was on the future. They eventually found themselves outside of Fluttershy's Cottage, only a short distance away from the Everfree forest. Most of the migration had already finished, and only a few stragglers were still entering the forest, only to be swallowed up by the thick trees. They watched silently, pondering what life would be like without the night, let alone the creatures.

"Enjoying your last night? I tried to make it especially beautiful, specifically for you six." They all snapped around at this unexpected voice.

"Princess Luna! We'd thought you'd left already!"

"Of course not. Like I told your friend Fluttershy here, I care for the creatures of the night. They're going ahead of me, and I'm making sure every one makes it through alright."

"Princess Luna, if I threw you a party, would you stay? We'd be able to play any games that you want, and there'd be presents and cake and balloons and-" Pinkie Pie's motor mouth was cut off by a raised hoof from Luna.

"I appreciate the offer, but I must carry through with this. For reasons I don't even fully understand. Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, Applejack, Rarity, Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie. Thank you for being the

closest thing to friends I have. Farewell.” Luna walked majestically down the path into the forest, and with her the very last creatures of the night.

“Well, I guess that’s over.” Said Fluttershy. A sudden gust of wind caught them off guard and Applejack’s hat flew off, down the path that Princess Luna had just traversed.

“HEY!” yelled Applejack, already galloping after it. The others followed after her. “Gotcha ya tricky little hat. Hey, what’s this?” a feather, which had been covered by Applejack’s hat, was picked up by a softer breeze. As it floated past Twilight’s eyes, recognition flashed through her mind.

“This is Aloysius’ feather!” She pulled out the other, given to her only a few hours earlier. The markings matched.

“You don’t think something happened?” said Fluttershy.

“No, Aloysius is too fast and attentive for that. Kinda like me!” Said Dash.

“Then perhaps Aloysius was trying to tell you something, Twilight?” said Rarity.

As if in answer, the wind blew harder and the feather suddenly turned direction and sped down the path into the darkness of the trees. “Well, there’s only one way to find out.” The ponies ran into the forest, leaving the silvery moonlight and entering a darkness they were all too familiar with now.

As they ran, they began to recognize landmarks from their first adventure together. The cliff where Twilight had almost fallen, the clearing where they had the tussle with the manticore, the very heart of the forest where Pinkie had taught them the value of laughter, and even the river where they had met that nice serpent. He didn’t seem to be there at the moment, unfortunately. As they crossed, still following the persistent feather, Rarity remembered she had never asked his name.

“Oh how thoughtless of me. The discussions we could have had on fashion! He had such a magnetic personality.” As Rarity lamented the times

that could have been, they finally reached the bridge that Rainbow Dash had fixed after her test of Loyalty. The feather landed on the first step.

“Why would Aloysius have led us back the ruins of the castle?” mused Twilight.

Rainbow rolled her eyes. “Well, you’re the one that believes in coincidences. Perhaps it was just a fluke?”

“I don’t know, something about this seems awful fishy to me. Perhaps we should go investigate?” Applejack extended a hoof towards the castle.

Twilight nodded. “We’ve come this far.”

“Besides! It’ll be fun!” Pinkie leaped ahead of them all, her cheerful personality finally returning.

The ponies entered the ruins of the castle, which had remained untouched since their last visit. There seemed to be an aura around it that kept the creatures of the forest out. It wasn’t exactly threatening, just...foreboding, Twilight realized. They made their way through and found themselves in the throne room. The only thing that really caught the eye of the run down place were the remains of Nightmare Moon’s armor. Twilight cantered over and nudged it. The shattered pieces shifted, but did nothing unexpected. Completely lifeless.

“Well, that’s not why Aloysius led us here. Maybe it really was just a-” she was cut off suddenly by hoof clops echoing down the hallway. Looking around, and seeing all her friends accounted for, Twilight gave a signal to remain silent. They all stopped talking, and listened. They seemed to be leading away, deeper into the castle. Rainbow Dash flew ahead to scout, her wings silent enough that she could avoid detection. After a few minutes, she returned with a confused expression.

“I followed the hoof steps into center of the castle, but they suddenly disappeared. There’s a strange looking mirror, and I thought I should come get you guys before you get bored.”

“No need for silence anymore, if whoever it was is gone. Come on girls!” Twilight galloped ahead, following Rainbow as she guided them.

They found themselves in a large circular room. The eye was immediately drawn to a large mirror in back half of the room. It was fairly undecorated with only a simple brown wooden frame. Twice as tall as each of the ponies, the mirror seemed like it could topple over at any moment, as it had no supports. Yet still it stood. As Twilight frowned at the mirror, trying to discern its purpose, her reflection did the same. She looked far more serious than usual, she realized. With all the life changing events going on, it was understandable. Yet it still disturbed her.

“Oh, my mane looks simple horrible.” Rarity raised a hoof to fix it.

“But Rarity, your mane looks fine.” Fluttershy now looked in the mirror. “That’s odd. In the mirror it does look a rather tangled, but in reality, it looks as good as always.” The others, looking back and forth, confirmed this.

Applejack frowned. “What’s the point of a mirror that doesn’t show what life is really like?”

Pinkie giggled. “Obviously it’s like a carnival mirror. These are so much fun!” She ran up to it, and started making silly faces to her reflection. Suddenly she stopped, frowning. “Why do I look so...dark?” true enough, her reflection had a mischievous, if not deceitful gleam in her eye.

“I don’t like this...” said Fluttershy. Twilight nodded.

“Something about this feels wrong. I can feel magical energy coming off of it, but its source seems to come from beyond the mirror itself.”

“Well there’s nothing back here!” yelled Rainbow from behind it. “Just a wooden backing.”

The six friends gathered together. “Well, it doesn’t seem inherently dangerous, but something definitely odd is going on here. What purpose does it serve? And whose hoof steps were those?”

“A better question is where did they go?”

“Well, maybe the mirror has something to do with it.” Fluttershy approached the mirror, and gave it a light tap. The mirror, rather than resisting her hoof, absorbed it, and the mirror’s surface rippled. As could be expected, she gave a sharp shriek of fear and jumped backwards. Nothing else seemed to happen, however.

“So what, it’s a...door to somewhere?” Applejack approached and did just as Fluttershy had. “Hmm...seems harmless enough. Well, wish me luck girls.” She took a deep breath, and walked through. After the ripples cleared, all that was left was the worried reflections of each of her friends. After what seemed like an eternity, Applejack’s head reappeared. “It doesn’t seem like anything’s too dangerous here, and on this side the castle’s beautiful!” She disappeared yet again. After looking at one another, the others followed.

As they entered the friends couldn’t help but gasp. The room they entered through the mirror, was, as could be expected, a reflection of the room they had just left. But this room wasn’t like the other; rather than being torn down by a millennium of decay, it was in its prime. Everything was pristine and beautiful. The walls were decorated with beautiful, though unfamiliar, objects that evoked memories of a past long forgotten.

“What is this place?” asked Rainbow Dash, flying up to look at the strange décor.

“Well, isn’t it obvious? We’ve just entered a magical mirror, so this must be a reflection of the real world. And it’s much better looking than the run-down castle.” Rarity was already strolling down the hallway.

“Girls! We should stay together. Who knows what’s lurking in here?”

“But Twilight! We haven’t seen the throne room!” Rarity returned regardless of her half-hearted complaint.

“It’s probably better if we stick close to our way out of here, in case things go south. We need to know what we’re getting into. Let’s see just how everything differs from real life.” She approached one of the

decorations hanging on the wall. It seemed to be a kite made of metal, with two long semi-flat poles with pointed edges attached to the back. The metal kite itself was painted with a picture of the moon with another one of the semi-flat poles going through it.

Twilight had no idea what she was looking at. "It's like nothing I've ever seen, or even read about. What purpose does it serve?" she ran a hoof along the pole, and suddenly there was a flash of information sent to her brain that she had never experienced before. Whatever it was, it wasn't good. "Ow! That..." she looked for the right word, holding the hoof gingerly. Something she had read long ago came to her. "...hurt."

"Twilight! Are you okay?" Fluttershy ran over. She gave a gasp of concern.

"You're...leaking." Twilight turned the hoof over, revealing a gathering stream of a thick deep red liquid. It was already dripping, forming a small pool of liquid crimson around her other hoofs.

"What is this stuff? Ah! It hurts! Worse than anything I've ever felt!" The gash was only a couple of inches long, but felt even worse than the time Ditzzy Doo had dropped the flower pot, anvil, piano, *and* hay cart on Twilight's head. It was a completely new sensation, one Twilight didn't even know existed. In reality, mishaps always left her disoriented, but that normally went away after only a couple of minutes.

"I don't know what's happening here, but no good's coming from it.." Applejack clopped up to her friend. "Come on Twilight, let's get you back to the infirmary. Hopefully Nurse Redheart will know how to take care of this."

"We need to slow the flow somehow. I'm already feeling dizzy."

Rarity fidgeted, and finally came to a decision. "I do have my scarf. You can-" her voice cracked, but then she continued. "You can use that. Hopefully this liquid, whatever it is, will wash out." As Fluttershy wrapped the makeshift bandage around Twilight's hoof, Twilight looked at Rarity with deep gratitude in her eyes.

“Thank you so much Rarity.” Rarity kicked her hoof, looking at the ground.

“It’s the least I can do for our favorite bookworm.”

“We should get back home. I need to do some research on what’s happened here. And I need to figure out if Celestia knows what this mirror is, and why it acts differently than reality. Let’s go girls!” Twilight half-ran, half hobbled back to mirror. As she approached, she realized her reflection wasn’t showing. *A one-way mirror?* She thought. But with other things on her mind, the detail was soon forgotten.

As the friends entered the mirror, one by one, the hidden eyes that had been watching them the entire time finally turned away. It was time to report to Princess Luna. They had been discovered faster than would have been nice, but not so early it put a damper on their plans. More drastic measures would have to be taken. That was all.

After giving one last glance over her shoulder, the pony galloped down the hallway, echoing as she went. Five more followed. The fact that they had remained unseen and unheard was unexpected, but could be used to their advantage. Luna would be most pleased to hear it.

Chapter 3

Bloody Ponies, They Drive Twilight to Drink

Eventually, the friends made their way back to Ponyville. Nurse Redheart quickly ran out of the infirmary after she heard that Twilight was injured. “This can’t be...” she said, examining the injured hoof, which had slowed, though not yet stopped leaking. She looked up at the concerned ponies, and gave a weak smile. “You did the right thing wrapping her hoof. It shouldn’t be much more of a problem, and I’ll clean it up, but re-wrap it right now while I go check something.”

They sat impatiently for a few minutes, and finally the nurse returned. She carried a book in her mouth, and she dropped it in front of Twilight. The book was simple, plain, and most mysteriously, had no title. In place, there was a note attached to the front. *Use only for the ancient injuries. –Princess Celestia.* The signature itself was far more disconcerting than the pain Twilight felt. It meant that the Princess had known about this...whatever it was.

“It’s called ‘blood’.” Said Nurse Redheart. “It’s been unheard of in Equestria for just about 1000 years. This book is given to all the official Nurses in each city...but most of it doesn’t make any sense. Until now.” She opened the book with her hoof, and it fell to a page marked ‘lacerations’. Twilight began to read.

“If a patient comes to you with a wound similar to the one pictured” she grimaced as she glanced at the highly descriptive picture, “staunch the bleeding by wrapping a clean cloth around the wound, tightly, and apply pressure. The patient’s body knows how to take care of itself, but if the wound is serious enough, a simple spell such as the following can be used to speed the healing process. WARNING: The spell takes the energy directly from the patient, so they will be drained afterwards. The bigger the wound, the more tired they will become. The spell *does* have a failsafe, however. If the patient goes unconscious, the spell will automatically break and stop draining the patient. However, the wound will also stop healing.”

“Remember, the most important thing about these wounds is to keep them clean; if Disease is reintroduced, your job will become much harder.” Twilight raised a brow. “Blood? Disease? Well, what are they? And why have I never heard of them?”

Nurse Redheart gave a sympathetic glance to Twilight. “There is an entry for disease in that book, but it isn’t pleasant. I thank that Celestia was able to banish them long ago, but if they’re coming back, who knows what’s next?”

“Wait, what do you mean she banished them?” Twilight leaned forward, her hunger for answers far greater than ever before.

Redheart glanced side to side. “I’ve already said more than I should’ve. If you wish to know, you should probably ask her yourself. She might be willing to tell you, but I don’t have the liberty to.”

“Well what do-”

Twilight was suddenly cut off by a yell from outside the infirmary. “NURSE REDHEART!” In ran the two town troublemakers; Snips and Snails.

“Boys! What seems to be the problem?” Twilight felt she had a good idea of what it was.

Snails was the first to answer. “Well, we were running from Big MacIntosh because he was mad at us for taking a sample of those awesome apples they grow over there-”

For once, Applejack had to be restrained by Rainbow as Snails continued “-and so we were running from him, laughing to ourselves, when suddenly Snips tripped and then that happened.” Snips turned and showed his right flank, where, ironically, the wound had happened right where his “scissors” were cutting.

Sure enough, the young colt was bleeding. He also must have been in some pain, because he was far quieter than usual. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you. You’ll be fine.” As the Nurse led the two troublemakers away, Twilight gathered her friends together.

“Girls, we might have a problem here. Before we entered that mirror, this ‘blood’ and such extreme pain were unheard of. But since we’ve returned, we’ve shown that not only can we get it, but that others can too! We might have let the cat out of the bag on this one, so to speak.”

“Well, we’ve all felt pain at some point. But from your description and body language, Twilight, yours must be worse than I’ve ever heard of, or even imagined.”

Rainbow Dash nodded her agreement to Rarity’s words. “Yeah, and you’re pretty tough too Twilight. With all the tussles we’ve gotten into, you seem like you can take on anything.”

“That’s what worries me,” Twilight said. “I thought the same, but while I was sitting there, it felt so horrible I was worried I was going to Blink.”

“Don’t worry Twilight. As long as we’re around, your friends will make sure you don’t go before your natural time’s up.”

Twilight smiled, looking around at all the supportive faces of her closest friends. Then, her smile dropped as she remembered what had troubled her so much before.

“Something still concerns me. And we need answers. Why haven’t we heard of any of this before now? Princess Celestia seems to know what is going on, but it’d have to be quite serious for her to keep it secret from me. What is that mirror, and why did our discovery of it coincide with Princess Luna’s departure? I mean-”

“Well you could always just ask her, silly! That’s what I do when somepony knows something I don’t know!” Pinkie gave her typical Pinkie smile, one that made Twilight wonder if she knew more than she let on.

“You’re right, Pinkie. I should’ve done that first! Spike, take a le-” Looking around, Twilight realized her mistake. Of course Spike was back at home. He had, once again, opted out of the late-night humdrum ‘party’ they had the night before. Something about ‘wanting to get one last good night’s sleep before needing a good day’s sleep.’

“Well, we should head back to the library anyway. Hopefully we can fix this before anypony else gets hurt.”

As they trotted off to leave, the Cutie Mark Crusaders ran by. They thought nothing of it until Sweetie Belle cried “NURSE REDHEART! WHAT IS THIS STUFF?” Rarity turned suddenly as her sisterly love took over.

“Sweetie Belle! Are you hurt too?” The little pony turned to face her big sister, her eyes full of tears. That told enough.

“Let me see it. The Nurse is a little busy at the moment, and I might be able to help.” Sweetie Belle had been injured on the hoof just like Twilight. Rarity frowned at it.

“Oh you poor thing. Don’t worry, I’ll help you get this taken care of right away. What was the spell again Twilight?” After a few seconds consulting, and deciding they had it right, Rarity’s horn began to glow as her brow furrowed in concentration. A similar glow appeared around the wound, and the blood that had been dripping down her hoof into the grass began to flow back in, leaving all impurities behind. The wound itself began to close up as Sweetie’s hide stitched itself back together.

“Wow sis! That was great! I feel so much better and...” she never finished her sentence, because she had fallen asleep on the grass, due to the spell draining her energy. As she peacefully slumbered, Rarity let the other two Crusaders know what had happened, and warned them to be more careful next time.

“We promise Rarity! That was a sweet spell you used! And don’t worry, we’ll keep her well rested.” Scootaloo yawned. “Actually, we *were* up late last night. We might as well fall asleep now, seeing as the Sun won’t be going down any time soon. There’s not really a ‘night’ to fall asleep in.” The two friends curled up next to their previous hurt comrade, and they too began to nap. It was the perfect scene of serenity.

“Well, I’m glad we could help your sister, Rarity, but we really should get going. The sooner we deal with this problem, the less ponies will get hurt. Let’s go girls!” Twilight turned and began galloping towards the library. As they ran they heard yet another cry of “NURSE REDHEART” spurring them to run even faster.

The friends finally reached the library, where Spike was busying himself by organizing the nooks Twilight had left out from her last study session. "There you are Spike!" Twilight said. He raised a brow at this.

"What, were you expecting me to be someplace else? Of course I'm here Twilight! I'm your number one assistant, after all."

Twilight chuckled. "Thanks Spike. Listen, I need to compose a letter to the princess. Also, do you know where that old book I found is? It's titled *101 Olde Tyme Remedies and Potions*. I was working on it the night we received that letter from the Princess."

Spike grinned. "I was just about to put it away." He grabbed it from the top of the stack, and handed it to Twilight. She took it and headed back to her chemistry set-up, which had been forgotten with the events of the past two weeks. She found her pack, and got the bottle that contained the compound she had created.

"See, it's like I thought, this potion makes far more sense now that we know about blood. It says here that the potion is a great way to help victims of blood-loss. At the time, I was just making it to see if I could figure out what it even meant." Spike, who had continued his work, now turned suddenly.

"Wait, you didn't know about blood?" Now Twilight turned, giving him a questioning look.

"You did?"

"Of course! Why do you think I used the ketchup to try to frame Aloysius?" realization dawned in Twilight's eyes.

"Of course! I had always wondered why you added that! But how did you know about blood in the first place?"

"How does anyone learn about it? By making mistakes. Getting cut after falling down the stairs (which keeps happening), picking a fight with my kin, you know, stuff like that. Now that I think of it, though, I've never

seen any of you ponies bleed. Not that I wish it on you, but nobody goes through life without getting hurt.”

“Well, we’ve all gotten hurt, but never bled.” Said Fluttershy. “I’ve helped a good number of animals with problems of their own. And if the most common way for bleeding to occur is through a cut, why haven’t any of the fish I feed to the ferrets or the worms to the birds bled?”

“I’m guessing a good deal of magic is involved here. Perhaps some that I don’t even understand. So this potion’s good for blood loss, eh?” Twilight unstopped the bottle. Again, the horrid smell wafted out of it. “Ugh, that’s unappetizing. But hey, if I want to get back on my feet.” She put the bottle to her mouth, and drank it all. After a shudder and a gag reflex, she could feel the potion begin to work. She felt stronger, not as, well, literally drained as she had been before. She also felt a weird sensation in her eyes, but it went away quickly enough she didn’t think it would be a problem.

“I do feel better, though it tasted awful. I might have to show Nurse Redheart this book, I don’t think she has a copy. Now, about that letter Spike…”

“Yes ma’am!” he grabbed a scroll and a quill, and wrote as Twilight began.

“Dear Princess Celestia, I have a matter that concerns me and I think you might be able to shed some light on. My friends and I found a mirror in the ruins of your old castle in the Everfree forest, and it exhibits extreme magical capabilities, the seriousness of which remain to be seen. The mirror acts as a gateway between reality and, as far as I can tell, a mirrored world. In this world I cut myself on a strange object and began leaking a red fluid. I later conversed with Nurse Redheart, the local nurse in Ponyville, and she says it is ‘blood’, an ‘ancient injury.’ I do not wish to sound accusatory, but how is it I have not heard of something so serious? Upon returning, several other ponies reported to Nurse Redheart, they bleeding as well. The multiple occurrences cannot be coincidence. I wish to know as much as possible so we can prevent any others from being wounded. Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle.”

Applejack frowned. "Hopefully she takes it well. We wouldn't want to hurt her feelings."

Rarity nodded. "Well, yes, but we do need knowledge here. And she knows she can trust us."

"That's just it though, if she did, wouldn't she have told us earlier?" Twilight looked around at her friends, who suddenly had something else much more interesting to stare at.

"Maybe even she doesn't know the full extent of this, Twilight. I mean, we didn't discover the mirror until today, perhaps it's new?" Rainbow's words dispelled some of the doubt on Twilight's mind.

The friends busied themselves perusing the books or messing with Twilight's setup while waiting for the Princess's response.

Finally, Spike, who had previously sent the letter by way of fire breath, burped up the return scroll.

"Alright ponies, hold onto your hats. Well, I guess only you have one Applejack. Actually, Pinkie, I think you'd look good with a nice-"

"Just read it already, Spike."

"Alright Rainbow, hold your horses. Or ponies, as the case may be..." he muttered to himself.

"Ahem.

Dear Twilight,

First of all, I want you to know that the reason I have kept this information from you is not because I think you can't handle it, far from it. The information that you have unfortunately stumbled upon has terrible consequences that I have tried to shut out for the peace and safety of the land. In fact, it is so important, that it can only be explained by a face-to-face discussion. I will tell you everything you need to know. Like you, I don't want anypony else getting hurt. I fear Luna might be involved in this. I will come visit you just as soon as I decide what to do with the sun for a temporary 'night'. Bring your friends, but keep the meeting secret. The less

other ponies know, the less panic there will be and the easier it will be to go back to a normal life.

Princess Celestia.”

Chapter 4

The Oracle of Time and Devourer of Baked Goods

To avoid unwanted attention, they had arranged to meet the Princess at Fluttershy's cottage. It was out of the way and off the beaten path, two highly important factors for a secret meeting. When Celestia finally did show up, the sun had been set to the horizon, and had begun tracing it clockwise. It was odd, but it allowed it to be dark enough that people knew it was night, while not so dark it became impossible to see. The stars barely shone through the amber sky, as if to cry out that they were still important despite the cataclysmic change.

Besides the sun itself, one other change showed that this was no normal visit. Celestia's usual Pegasus guards were absent. Of course, they were nothing more than a formality. Everypony in Equestria loved Celestia, and no one wished her harm. Well, except of course Nightmare Moon, but Luna and Celestia had reconciled. Or so Twilight hoped.

Twilight gave a more full account of the events that had led up to the discovery of blood, including the feather and Luna's disappearance into the Forest. Celestia listened all the while, her face growing more somber as the facts were laid out in front of her. When Twilight finally finished, the Princess's smile had been replaced by a frown.

"It's just as I feared..." Twilight waited for the Princess to continue. After a slightly awkward pause, Twilight coughed. "Sorry Twilight, but what you've told me has brought back memories I wish I could forget. This is no ordinary occurrence; it's one that should be impossible. And it's only the beginning of far worse. I'm not normally one to have a pessimistic outlook, but life in Equestria is about to get far more dangerous."

"Excuse me for interrupting, Princess," said Rarity "but you're being mysteriously cryptic. What exactly has happened, and how will it get worse?" The Princess gave a half hearted smile.

“That’s what I love about you ponies. Always to the point and trying to figure out the next step. Well, I’m going to have to give a little bit of history here.

“Blood and the extreme pain you felt, Twilight, were common occurrences before Luna became Nightmare Moon. But at times you would wish that was all you were troubled with. There were far worse ailments, the chief amongst them Death. Death is like Blinking, but far, far worse. Rather than an instantaneous movement from this life to the Next, it is drawn out, with pain one hundredfold of that cut you got, Twilight. True Death cannot be stopped, and the emotional pain of others being forced to watch with nothing they can do is a memory that makes me shudder.

“For obvious reasons, these Ailments are to be avoided if at all possible. When I banished Luna to the moon, and became the sole ruler of Equestria, it was perfect timing to banish all the other things that made life too painful. I banished as much as I could without completely ruining the order of life. Pain still existed, but on a far smaller scale. Without pain, after all, how would a young filly or colt learn that some objects are not to be played with? I kept Death, yet on a far reduced scale that came to be known as Blinking. Painless. Instantaneous. Not a drawn-out trial that tore families apart. No, a happy occasion, marking yet one more step of progress. I would have done away with Death altogether, but there was the problem of overpopulation, and besides, everypony deserves rest after a long life of work.

“Now, the magic involved in banishing concepts and ideas is far more advanced than banishing a physical being. Because pain, for example, is in the mind, I had to banish the *memory* of true pain. You encountered this memory in the mirror realm you entered. A realm known as the Land of the Lost and Forgotten, forged by the creators of this world for memories, events, and ideas better forgotten.

“But from what you’ve told me, Luna has found a way into the Land of the Lost, and after drawing you after her, somehow made you take the memories back into reality. Her motive behind this remains unclear, as of yet, and though I thought her changed, could very well be dark in intention.”

Twilight gestured to her friends. "Princess, you know that we're always willing to help. Just tell us what you need done."

Again, the Princess smiled. Her trust in these six ponies was well founded. "Your willingness makes me regret what I have to ask of you even more. You'll have to reenter the Land of the Lost and meet with Princess Luna. Of course, as you can surmise from what I've told you, you will most likely encounter the banished Ailments, as well as some far more serious Memories."

"What could be more serious than a drawn-out Blink?" asked Rainbow.

The Princess gave a sad smile. "I hope you don't have to find out. Now, you could enter the Land of the Lost and Forgotten the way you did before, through the mirror. However, now that you have entered the Realm, you can go through a different way. In fact, you can enter it in this very room. There's a fairly complicated spell that puts you in yet another realm that the creators forged. It's called the Natural Plane, and it is maintained by a pony whom I believe to be a friend of yours."

The friends glanced around at each other, wondering whom it could be. The Princess gave a little chuckle. "You'll see soon enough. The Natural Plane acts as a gateway between each of the realms, and the Keeper will get you started on the right path. Now, if you're all ready to go..." each of the ponies nodded in turn, and so the Princess began. "Twilight, you'll have to use this spell if you want to get back, so watch carefully."

The Princess' horn began to glow with a soft light, and a crack appeared suspended in midair. It began to grow in size, and it began to swirl, giving off a similar light. Within a couple of moments the crack had grown into an oval, a portal into the unknown. "This is just like the mirror," the Princess said. "You'll enter it and be in a different place. Try to stay out of trouble, and keep as low of a profile as possible. There are entities in the Land of the Lost that aren't exactly friendly. Now go, and I'll keep watch over you here."

"Thank you Princess, you can count on us." With that, Twilight lead the way into the portal, and disappeared into the golden glow that it gave

off. After each had gone through the Princess nodded. "I only hope that you'll make it back alright."

The Natural Plane wasn't quite what Twilight had expected. Then again, she hadn't really known what to expect. It seemed to be an endless expanse of mostly transparent mist. The only defining feature was a log cabin standing on emptiness. With nowhere else to head, the friends made their way over to it. The cabin itself was fairly normal, looking like one you might find deep in Whitetail Woods in a beautiful clearing, where most older ponies lived the last years of their lives. The only thing truly odd about it was the sign next to the door, which read

"Derpy Hooves/Ditzy Doo/Bright Eyes/Hawkeye: Oracle of Time and Keeper of Paths. Inquire inside." Underneath this confounding message was scribbled in "Restroom around back."

After the friends had stood dumbfounded for a couple of moments, Applejack was the first to recover. "Wha-...Ditzy? Really?" Twilight shrugged, and as usual, led her friends into the unknown.

The group was greeted by the warm smell of freshly baked blueberry muffins. A familiar blond, grey mare had her back turned to them, busying herself by the oven. "Um...Ditzy?"

"Hold on a second, I'm just putting this next batch in. I'll be with you in a moment."

There were several dull thuds as jaws hit the floor. This was most definitely Derpy...er, Ditzy, yet she had made a completely intelligible sentence. Beyond that, she was in an alternate realm that Twilight had never even heard of before today.

Ditzy turned around and looked over each of the friends. Nodding to each, she said "Hello Twilight Sparkle, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Rarity, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Diane."

"Um...Ditzy, there's no Diane here."

"Please, call me Derpy. Everyone else does. And of course there is."

Rainbow Dash, who for once had been trying to be polite, finally couldn't stand it anymore. "Derpy! Your eyes! They're normal!" In truth, it was beyond normal. They seemed to glow with an intelligence that even Twilight was finding herself jealous of. One look into Derpy's eyes and you knew that *she* knew everything about you. And in an almost insulting way, it seemed she didn't find it interesting.

"Actually, Rainbow, that's because though I answer to her name, I am not the Ditzzy Doo that you know. I am one, and all. To be less cryptic, I have been chosen by the Gods to mediate the realms and act as the Oracle of Time. Actually, Oracle is inaccurate, because it implies that I am not certain how the future will play out. Future Historian is more correct."

"Wait, you mean to say you can divine the future?" Twilight knew the concept behind prophecies, but like Pinkie's Twitchy tail, was always hesitant to believe.

"And the Past. I know everything that has happened and everything that will happen. As you can imagine, that's a lot to process. So I need three bodies to do so."

"Wait, three bodies?"

"Yeah, one in Reality, one in the Land of the Lost and Forgotten, and one right here."

It was too much, too fast. "So wait...what?"

Derpy sighed. "I guess I'll have to explain it to you. Which I already knew, of course, but for sake of normalcy I'm feigning surprise." After a few moments of silence she continued. "That was a joke. Kind of. Anyway.

"One thing that Celestia failed to mention, because she thought it might discourage you, is that she banished one more crucial thing into the Land of the Lost. Dark personalities. Each and every pony in Equestria has an alternate self in the Land of the Lost. You know those little urges you get to be selfish or cruel? These come from the mirror realm. Your Reflection in the LOTL subconsciously reaches across space to influence your decisions. As do you with their decisions. But as you can imagine, the effect has been greatly reduced. There was a time when they resided in the

same body, but life had far more problems because of it. So Celestia banished, in a sense, EVERYpony into the Forgotten Realm. All the dark personalities live a reflected, not an opposite, life to the one we live in Reality. Where we have only every known peace and prosperity, they know only hardships and destruction.

“The one thing you need to remember, however, is that they ARE us. And trust me, it’s much easier to get into an argument with yourself than with a friend.” The friends sat quietly, taking in this unexpected news. After a few moments, Derpy got up. “While you’re digesting this, how about some muffins?” She clopped over to the oven, and brought back the tray of muffins that had just been taken out when they arrived.

The group ate in blissful silence, though Twilight felt it was the calm before the storm.

“Derpy, just something that’s been on my mind.” Began Fluttershy. “If you don’t mind me asking, why do you love muffins so much? They’re great, I’ll agree, but I hardly ever see you eat anything else.” Derpy winked at Fluttershy, a knowing look in her eye.

“Actually, muffins are just about the only food that can get me enough energy (and the right kind, at that) to control three different consciousnesses. Ah, that’s another thing. The reason my other two selves seem, well, derpy, is because I’m pulling all their brain power to keep the flow of time straight. I’m using 300% brain power almost constantly.”

Suddenly there was a clutter in an adjoining room. A head stuck around the corner of the door that connected the two rooms. Twilight recognized the stallion as a Ponyvillian, one she had seen often but with whom she never had a chance to speak. “Oh.” He said. “Hello Twilight. Friends.” He turned to Derpy.

“Do you have that self-adhesive bonding strip?” Derpy looked at the newcomer with a grin.

“You have to make everything so complicated, don’t you Doctor? You could just call it tape.” The Doctor rolled his eyes.

“But that takes the fun out of everything!”

“Excuse me, Dr. ...” trailed Twilight.

“Just the Doctor.”

“Dr. Who?”

“In this case, Whoof. But just Doctor or The Doctor will do.”

“Alright then, Doctor, but what are you doing here?”

The Doctor grinned. “Well you see, Derpy and I make a great team. She sees discrepancies in time and I fix them. I’ve actually been stranded on this planet for a while, but it really isn’t that bad. Still plenty to do around here, saving the universe one event at a time. Actually, I’m in the middle of fixing a paradox YOU create, thank you very much. And THIS” he said, grabbing the tape from Derpy who had by then retrieved it “is quite necessary for a problem you’ve just made.”

Twilight glanced around, not certain if she should be offended. “What have I done?” The Doctor waved a hoof impatiently.

“You haven’t done it yet, but you’re going to. My past, your future, same old drill.”

“Couldn’t you tell me what I’ve done so I can avoid it?”

“But then it wouldn’t happen and I’d just create another paradox that I’d have to patch up, one that puts my existence at risk. No thank you.” He stopped at glanced at the empty air next to his head, obviously in thought. “Hopefully I haven’t already done that by telling you. When I get back, I’m going to ask you if you’ve already heard this from me. See you in a couple of moments, or rather a couple of days in your case.” He disappeared back into the other room, and an echoing swooshing sound could be heard.

Twilight looked back at Derpy. “So, what, he’s a time traveler?” Derpy nodded.

“From the far reaches of the galaxy, actually. So a space traveler too. He wasn’t even originally a pony, but that’s a different story.”

The friends stayed silent for a few more minutes, enjoying their muffins and processing all this new, life changing information. It was finally Derpy who spoke.

“Twilight, I notice that though you have a natural hunger for knowledge, you haven’t asked me to tell you your future. It’s for this very reason that I feel I should offer it to you. Those who are too eager to know their destiny often end up ruining it.”

Several things went through Twilight’s head. If Derpy truly did know the future, and who was she to say she didn’t, it might come in handy knowing what to expect in this strange land they were about to enter. But Twilight also remembered all the stories she had read of the fantastic heroes of old, and how much trouble they got into when they asked other Oracles to tell them their future. She quickly came to her decision.

“Actually Derpy, I don’t think I want to know. Really, like you said, anypony who tries to know their future will either ruin the good or head straight for the bad.” Derpy gave a grin a mile wide.

“You’ve shown great wisdom, Twilight Sparkle. Celestia chose you for this task well. You’ll need everything you’ve learned for what’s ahead.”

Now Rainbow Dash spoke up. “Listen Derpy, Ditzzy, whatever you like to be called. I’m not exactly known for being the wisest, so I wouldn’t mind knowing my future. I need to know what kind of awesome stuff I get up to!” Derpy turned and gave a stare that made Rainbow back up a few steps, nervously.

“Rainbow Dash, you will be dead within a week. And I don’t mean Blinkered, I mean DEAD dead. Pain, bleeding, slowly losing consciousness, all the fun stuff that Celestia banished. Sorry, but that’s the way the future goes sometimes.”

Rainbow’s eyes were bigger than Luna’s moon. “Wha-what? I can’t die! I’m...too awesome?” She didn’t sound convinced. Derpy just gave a quick shrug.

“Derpy, do I...die in vain?” At this Derpy gave a sad smile.

“No, don’t worry. You die quite valiantly, protecting your friends in a way that only you can. Really, don’t worry about it. But live your life like you only have a week to live. Because you do.”

Derpy got up suddenly. “On that happy note, let’s get moving. As fun as it is to talk to you all, you have a mission you need to carry out. Follow me, if you would.” She left the cabin, and the others followed. “Alright, I’ll make a gateway into the Land of the Lost. Remember all my warnings and you should be fine. If you need to get back to reality, I can do that as well, but focus on what you’ve been sent to accomplish. Like Celestia said, you need to meet with Princess Luna, who has almost certainly taken refuge in LOTL, and you need to discover why and how you managed to bring blood and pain back. Hold on just a moment.” Derpy closed her eyes and began muttering something softly. Then, as she opened them, a bright light began to flow out of them. The crack in the air appeared again, and within moments a portal similar to the one they had taken to get here was ready for use.

“Go quickly, my friends. If you need anything from me, you can always find my Reflection in the Land of the Lost. I can even transfer my consciousness to that body so we have a normal conversation. Oh, and Diane? Don’t mess with them too much.” After the group had left, Derpy ran back into the cabin, and pulled out the next batch of muffins. She needed to recharge after opening the portal and maintaining true societal functionality for so long. As she munched on the still-too-hot-to-eat baked good, she reviewed what the future held for the friends. Knowing the future didn’t help Derpy’s anxiety for them. Times would get far worse, and the peaceful life in Equestria would be forgotten. War was coming. And the ancient entity about to awaken was not a pleasant one. Derpy shivered at the thought, and attacked her third muffin with renewed spirit. It pained her to not be able to influence events more directly, but she had learned her lesson when...no. An all knowing pony, and that was the one thing she could not bear to think about.

“Godspeed Twilight Sparkle. You’re going to need it.”

Chapter 5

Sharp Words and Sharper Wings

The Portal led the friends to the inside of what appeared to be a tent. The canvas was a forest green, not nearly as pretty as the ones in Reality. The tent itself was fairly large, with space for a simple cot and an oak desk. The desk had maps of Equestria on it, but upon closer inspection, familiar landmarks had very different names, while the map itself seemed reflected. The Everfree forest, Twilight noted, was called “Stonewood Forest” and Ponyville itself was named Moon Pool. In other places, it seemed that more than just the name had changed. In place of Sweet Apple Acres, for example, there seemed to be rows and rows of squares, whatever those meant. It had been renamed “Moon Pool Cemetery”. Twilight frowned at the word cemetery. It had a melancholy feel around it, and she couldn’t place exactly what it meant. That troubled her.

There was a quiet sucking sound as the portal closed behind the last of the ponies. The group just about filled the tent. “It’s a bit cramped in here...maybe we should go outside?” Applejack started towards the tent flap when suddenly a loud voice began approaching the tent.

“Whips and Flails! You were supposed to report to the Arena ten minutes ago! Get over there before I kick you there!” The tent flap suddenly flew open and a light yellow pegasus bumped into Applejack. “What the-Cider? What are you doing in my tent? AND WHY AREN’T YOU ATTENDING TO THE DECEASED? JUST BECAUSE YOU RUN THE UNDERGROUND MAFIA DOESN’T GIVE YOU FREE REIGN OVER MY PRIVATE QUARTERS! YOU GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE I...”

The loudmouthed pony, who was wearing a round, forest green helmet, suddenly noticed the rest of the group. “Slash? Diane? Dawn? Temperament? What is this? Why are you all in my tent? And who might you be?” a hoof shot forward towards Fluttershy.

“Uh...I’m Fluttershy...” The other pony sniffed and looked Fluttershy up and down.

"Hmm..." she began to pace around Fluttershy, who stood feeling very out of place. "Something fishy is going on here. With your yellow coat and pink hair, you look almost exactly like me!" Now that the newcomer pointed it out, the two ponies did indeed look similar, once you looked past the grime in the newcomer's hair, (which could barely be seen underneath her helmet) and the dirt and muck on her coat.

"Different Merit Mark though." The newcomer slapped Fluttershy's flank with her swagger stick, an object none of the other ponies had seen or even conceived before. Indeed, the Cutie Marks, or "Merit Marks" as the strange pony had mentioned, differed. While Fluttershy's was a picture of butterflies, symbolizing the time she discovered her talent with animals, the other pony's was a picture of Pegasi wings around two crossed flat pointed poles, similar to the one Twilight had cut herself on.

The newcomer circled the others now, a feat to be applauded now that space had run out in the tent. "Wha-all of yours are different than theirs!" She turned to Applejack. "You're not Jackie Cider, are you? Why does this seem familiar..."

Suddenly, Pinkie Pie jumped forward. "Excuse me Sergeant Shuddercry, I believe I have the answer to your confusion." She leaned in close and whispered something into Shuddercry's ear.

Suddenly the Sergeant snapped to attention, her face becoming flushed. "Oh...er...how could I have forgotten. All the new trainees, you see. I really didn't..." she stammered. Pinkie just watched her fumble around with an amused look. Shuddercry looked at the rest of the group "Uh...you lot. Come with me." She walked through the tent flap, and Pinkie turned back to her friends, her face beaming.

"...What just happened, Pinkie?" Twilight said. Pinkie smiled back at Twilight innocently. "You'll find out soon enough." Pinkie then bounced out of the tent, and with nowhere else to go, the others followed.

As they stepped out into the open air, they were greeted by the light of day...no, Twilight realized. It wasn't quite day. She glanced up in the sky, and let out a gasp of wonder. There was the sun, suspended in the sky, but it gave off a different kind of light. The center of the sun itself was black,

and suddenly Twilight realized what it was. It seemed in the Land of the Lost, day was an eternal solar eclipse. It gave off a subdued light similar to the Moon's at night, yet with far greater brilliance. Obviously Luna had control over this realm equal to Celestia's in Reality.

After she was finished gazing at the heavens, Twilight looked down at the soil. Instead of grass, like she had been expecting, the earth had been replaced by glowing sand. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be finely powdered glass, which caught the half-daylight and made the earth blaze with heavenly light. It was quite beautiful, Twilight decided, but it obviously made it hard to grow plants. The area around the tent was devoid of foliage.

"Ahem," began Shuddercry, startling Twilight. "It has been made clear to me you are foreigners. So I represent the whole of the Lunar Republic when I say welcome to the world of Equilibria. As long as you stay out of trouble, I believe you will find your stay here quite pleasant."

"Thank you very much...it was Shuddercry?"

"Sergeant Shuddercry, head of the Moon Pool Militia. I keep all the ponies on their toes in case of an attack."

"An attack? Who tries to attack you?"

Shuddercry gave a blank stare. "What, you don't know? You must be *really* foreign if you don't know about the war we're having with the Griffon kingdom. And of course there are always creatures from the Stonewood Forest or the Desert of Truth. And the City-States don't always agree. Little border clashes do happen."

"Are you implying that you fight with other ponies?"

Shuddercry shrugged. "Sure; sometimes one group wants a certain resource or a specific landmark. The borders are always changing. But that's life."

"If times are as dangerous as you say, what makes you trust us?"

Shuddercry looked at Twilight with a serious look on her face. "Because I know where you're from. You come from a land called 'Equestria', a realm that mirrors Equilibria. Where we have to fight every moment to survive, to even eat, you get a cushy life where you can waste your time learning about friendship. It doesn't work like that here. We only make two relationships: enemies and associates. I also know now, as I was reminded by Diane, that SHE" said Shuddercry, pointing to Fluttershy "is my reflection. Pity too. I was hoping for someone a little bolder."

"Excuse me," Applejack said, butting in, "but I think you have this backwards. She's not your reflection, you're hers."

Shuddercry scoffed. "Who are you to tell me that THIS" she gestured to the world around her "Is not Reality? I have grown up here, I have fought for survival, and I have lived just as full of a life as she has, if not greater. Shouldn't the Personality who has done more with their life deserve the title of the Core Personality?"

"Now wait just a moment, you don't go around beating down Fluttershy like that!" Rainbow stepped right up to Shuddercry's face. "How can the reflection of such a nice pony be so rude?"

Shuddercry looked both calmly and smugly back at Rainbow. "You just answered yourself. A reflection of a nice pony would obviously be rude. However, I'm not attempting to be, and if you'll step away from my face for a moment, I'll believe that you'll find it is YOU who is being rude. I just welcomed you to our city and country, but I can just as quickly kick your sorry ***PLOT*** back into 'Reality.' You are talking to the leader of the main fighting force in this region, and if I decide you're the enemy, you better start running. Fast.

"Anyway, sorry I wasn't more prepared to welcome you. A small choice group has known about your foretold arrival, but we didn't know exactly when or where. I wish I could stay and chat, but like I said, I'm busy training the citizens of Moon Pool. I'll escort you to the local tavern, 'The Sugarcube' where the real Jackie Cider can give you a proper greeting. Then I'll head back here, where you'll be able to find me if you need me for anything."

Sergeant Shuddercry began to walk away, but stopped and looked as if she were thinking. “I just recalled what I meant to tell you. Most ponies here don’t know anything about other worlds or ‘reflections’ or anything like that. It’s best if you just say you’re from another city-state. Don’t do anything too out of place, okay? We’re mistrusting of outsiders around here, but Princess Luna wants you safe while you’re here.”

“Wait, the princess knew we were coming?”

“Of course, she counted on it, actually. But come now! Why worry about your important mission on hand? You’ve just entered a world that will tell you more than you ever knew about your own! Go out there and experience it! Or rather, I need you out of my hair. Let’s just get going.”

As they walked through the rest of the camp, the group got several weird looks from the training ponies. Twilight realized that they all had a serious look about them, as if they had seen more of life than they ever wanted to. The same held true when they actually arrived in the center of Moon Pool. There was a sense of foreboding, as if everyone was just waiting for something terrible to happen.

“Alright, we’ve arrived. The Sugarcube. You’ll never find a more wretched hive for scum and villainy. They’ve got some great food though. And you can learn a lot if you listen to people’s conversations. Anyway, look for Jackie Cider—your reflection, Applejack. You’ll know her when you see her.”

Shuddercry gave a quick salute. “I’ll see you ponies around. If you get bored, you can always head over to the arena; it’s the main source of entertainment around here. I’ll be off now.” As she trotted away, the friends entered the tavern. Of course, they had no idea what to expect from it. They let out a collective gasp of half-disgust half-amazement when they saw what was happening inside.

Sugarcube Tavern contained the most chaotic gathering of ponies the group had ever witnessed. There was a never-ending chatter while odd looking drinks were passed around and guzzled. Every table was occupied except for one in the far corner of the room, which everypony seemed to be shying away from.

Most of the occupants of the tavern just flat out ignored the group, though a couple eyes stuck a few moments before returning to their conversation or drink. One pony, however, stood up after she saw the friends at the door. "Ah, if it isn't my long time friends! Welcome, come over here, take a seat." This friendly enough pony was indeed obviously Applejack's reflection. Her coat was orange like Applejack's, and her mane was blond as well. In place of Applejack's rancher hat, however, this pony wore a sleek black fedora, and was further adorned with a black necktie and snow-white collar. Her Cutie Mark... Merit Mark, Twilight corrected herself, was a picture of three dice seemingly in mid-roll.

"Come, sit down, I was wondering when I'd be able to see you again." As the ponies took their places around the table, this new pony leaned in closely. "Listen, I'm Jackie Cider, nice to meet you. I haven't quite met you in person yet, but it's better if everypony thinks I know you. The less questions asked about your visit, the better." Twilight suddenly remembered where she'd heard Jackie's accent. It was a Brooklane accent, from Lower Manehattan.

Jackie leaned back, looking fairly relaxed, almost as if she owned the place. "Hey, Mrs. Loaf! Bring the owner of this joint a round of drinks for her friends! What do you think I pay you for?" Apparently she *did* own the place, Twilight thought. Mrs. Loaf hurried over with seven glasses filled to the brim with an odd looking, yellowish, foaming liquid that gave off a scent Twilight recognized as fermenting wheat.

"So let me see if I got this right;" Jackie lifted a hoof as she pointed to each of the friends. "You're Twilight Sparkle, you're Rarity, hello Applejack, Fluttershy, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie/and/or/Pinkamena Diane Pie."

"Wait, what?" Twilight said, looking back and forth between Jackie and Pinkie.

Pinkie giggled. "Yup Jackie, that's me! I'm still mostly Pinkie Pie, giving her time to relinquish control before I fully take over. It works so much better when the personalities agree."

Twilight frowned. "Pinkie, what are you talking about?"

"I thought the smartest pony around would have been able to figure it out by now! Obviously I've been to the Land of the Lost before, duh. And I

just happened to meet my alternate personality while I was there! We quickly realized what had happened, and after a discussion and a look in Dawnlight Glimmer's School of Magic, we found out that not only could the personalities re-merge into one body, but great power could be gained from doing so! Actually, I did it before I ever even met you. The specific power I gained from Merging was Spatial Distortion, one of the Greater Space powers. Why do you think I can do all those really fun things like appear in mirrors when I'm stalking you?"

"I don't know, I always assumed you were just being...Pinkie Pie. You're telling me you were using magic? Magic gained from a lost world?"

Pinkie beamed. "Now you're getting it! Diane made me promise not to tell anyone though, or else it would ruin her plans she had worked so hard on...So, I just used it to make people laugh! After all, at the end of the day, you've spent your time well only if you've made somepony else happier."

Twilight was getting frustrated, as she always did when Pinkie knew more than she did. "But Earth ponies can't use magic!" A fierce 'SSHHH' from Jackie made her drop her voice. "Only Unicorns have the ability to!"

Jackie cut in suddenly. "Can I take it from here, Pinkie? Alright, listen Twilight Sparkle." Twilight gave a fierce look to Pinkie that told them they were not quite done discussing this. Pinkie just smiled back.

"I know all about how Celestia banished all the worst bits of life into here, but she banished a couple of good things too. One was respect; a lower form of something you have that's been forgotten here; love. The other was non-unicorn magic. Sure, here Unicorns are *better* at it, but they're not the only ones who can use it. Twilight, how do you think Pegasi walk on clouds? That's magic. But here, in the Land of the Lost, the Pegasi and Earth ponies learned magic out of necessity. It's much harder to get food here, and we need every bit of help we can get. But what Pinkie Pie discovered is an ancient magic, one that's from before the Land of the Lost was created." Jackie looked around, making certain nopony was listening. Again, she leaned closer.

"Why do you think the rulers have so much power? Merging and the Alicorn's Ancient magic...they're very closely related, but nopony knows exactly how. If we could tap into the power of the Gods...just think! In

reality, you could make the world perfect! Here in the Land of the Lost! We could at least make it livable!”

Jackie leaned back again. “But, I’m getting ahead of myself. Right now, my job is to make certain you have a good time while you’re here. And don’t worry about getting attacked. Even if something gets past the militia, they’ll have a hard time making it past the Apple Family. We’re the underground mafia that everypony knows about. Really, we’re the ones who control Moon Pool. The citizens don’t cause any trouble and we don’t give any to them. It’s the perfect system. Now, I’m guessing that the rest of you will want to meet your reflections?”

The group nodded, curiosity getting the better of them. “Well, I can go introduce you, but really, none of you have touched your drinks! And on second thought, let’s get some food over here too.”

After the meal was over, the group was well fed and several members were feeling a little tipsy. “Well, if we want to meet your reflections, we can start with yours Rainbow Dash.”

“Really? Cool! I want to meet her! Is she as awesome as I am?”

“Her? Rainbow, your reflection’s a boy. His name is Spectral Slash.”

“Wha-a boy? How does that work?”

Jackie shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe since you’re so much of a tomboy or something? But really, don’t worry about it. I’d even go so far as to say he’s...20% cooler than you are.”

“How’d you know my catch phrase?”

Jackie gave Rainbow a look of surprise. “Didn’t I tell you? There’s a spell that Princess Luna taught Eclipse (That’s me and the rest of your reflections) that allows us to see into your world. It gave us the ability to learn about you so we’d have the chance to get to know you. Some didn’t think it worth their time, however, which is why Serge didn’t seem to recognize you. Yeah Rainbow, I was watching when you were giving Rarity such a tough time. Ha, how do you guys even deal with such close relationships? Better to keep your distance, in my opinion. Prevents others from stabbing you in the back.

“Anyway, like I was saying, I can introduce you to Spectral Slash. He’s actually been here the whole time, and if I know him, he’s been listening to us.”

“He’s been here the whole time?” asked Rainbow eagerly. “Really? Where?” She glanced wildly around the teeming mass of chatting ponies.

“Oh, he’s hard to find unless you know where to look for him.” Jackie extended a hoof towards the empty table in the corner.

“What, that? But it’s empty!”

Jackie laughed. “Look closer.” Rainbow strained her eyes and gave a small gasp when a pony seemingly materialized out of nowhere.

“How’d he do that?”

“It’s mostly skill, with just a ‘dash’ of magic. He’s learned to be a silent presence in any room, which makes him very knowledgeable about gossip. He keeps to the shadows, keeps still, and unless you’re looking for him, your mind rejects the fact that he’s there. Let’s go talk to him. Though he can hear us from here with his sharp ears, he really doesn’t like raising his voice.”

As the group made their way over to the ‘empty’ table, Spectral Slash gave no acknowledgement of their approach. As far as being the silent observer, Slash definitely looked the part. He was wearing a jumpsuit similar to the one that the Wonderbolts wore, but his was all black. From what you could see of his coat, it was a light gray, about as light as Rainbow’s blue. Slash’s mane was a spectrum of grayscale, from black in the back to white in the front. He had an aura of cautiousness about him, as if he was ready for to sprint for the exit or attack at the slightest provocation.

“So the delegates of Celestia have finally arrived.” He said it quietly, making the ponies strain to hear him in the hubbub of the tavern.

“Hey there Spectral Slash, I’m Rainbow Dash, your reflection. Sweet name, I’ve got to say. So, what do you do around here?”

Slash finally looked up. "I keep the peace."

Dash turned her head at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means if somepony's out of line, I knock some sense into them. Or they disappear."

"What do you mean by disappear?"

Slash looked at Rainbow, his emotions hidden by his tinted flying goggles. "So innocent. I only wish things could be that way around here. In short, Rainbow Dash, I'm an assassin. I don't expect the word to mean much to you.

"To keep it simple, if somepony does something wrong, I force them to die. I kill them. It's a bit harder than it sounds though. Here in the Land of the Lost, if somepony dies, for whatever cause, they come back to life, in a completely new body. Their old corpse remains, actually, which can cause battles to end up with ten times the bodies of the original fighting force. We call this resurrection Blinking, because it happens in an instant.

"There are rules to Blinking, however. You can cause a pony to stay dead longer, or when they come back, to have forgotten who killed them or in what circumstances. But no matter what precautions are taken, they will come back. This is because of this realm's tie-in with yours. One side cannot truly die without the other doing so as well. It keeps the balance between the two worlds. In your world, if I'm not mistaken, Blinking has a completely different connotation. It's how you die, correct? Completely painless. If the personality in your world, Reality, Blinks, then the personality here, in the Land of the Lost, will not. They will die one last time and cease to exist. The laws of the universe make certain that the death in LotL and Reality are simultaneous, and events here will play out in a way that the pony will die at the exact right moment. So when the armies throw themselves at each other, about 10% of them will truly die. Getting in a fight is still a bad idea, firstly because pain can, and is, most definitely felt, and secondly because there's no way to know if this is the time the universe decided for you to end.

“In the very simplest terms, every time somepony you’ve known has Blinked in reality, somepony here has died for the last time.” He suddenly waved his hoof in impatience. “I’m getting off topic, but it’s better you figure that out now before you find out the hard way.”

Rainbow frowned. “You...kill people? For a living?”

Slash gave a tired smile. “Yeah, and I’ve gotten pretty good at it too. I’m actually the head of an elite strike force called the Thunderbolts. ‘We strike like lightning and leave before the thunderclap is heard.’ That’s our motto. It’s funny how everypony knows about all the secret groups, like Jackie’s ‘secret underground mafia’. I guess that’s another thing that, ironically, is missing from the Land of the Lost. The ability to keep a secret.”

Quite suddenly, Twilight realized the room had gone silent. It wasn’t that they were listening in on the friend’s conversation, they were listening to something else. She strained to hear as well, and it suddenly became clear. A voice in her mind.

Incoming attack from the East. A griffon squadron is flying in, about 100 strong. You know the drill people.

Suddenly the crowd of ponies jumped up and in an orderly fashion left the tavern and swarmed to take defensive positions.

Slash gave a wild grin. “Looks like you get to see your first fight!” He extended his wings, the front edges of which were, Twilight realized, bladed. The sense of foreboding suddenly fell on her shoulders, and she realized what it meant. People were about to die. Some, as Slash had said, permanently.

Chapter 6

Too Bad Ponies Don't Have Google Translate

The odd collection of ponies ran out of the tavern with the others. Off in the distance, a collection of shadows flew towards Ponyville-er, Moon Pool, growing ever so slightly larger. The citizens of Moon Pool ran about in an organized chaos. No pony seemed very scared, just intense. Twilight turned to Spectral Slash who had now joined her, watching the skies. "Spectral Slash, what was that voice I heard in my head?"

"It's the telepathic network we have set up. That specific voice was our lookout, Hawkeye. He's...not normal, but nothing gets past him."

A loud grating noise suddenly sounded, making Twilight look up. The roof of the tavern began sliding apart at the point of the roof. Where an attic would normally be located, the room was occupied by a strange looking contraption with pulleys and levers. It seemed to be a large wooden bow laid on its side. Neighboring roofs began to pull apart as well, housing similar machines.

"What is that thing?" As Twilight asked, the roofs around her began pulling back as well, revealing copies of the strange machine.

"It's a ballista. How do I explain this to you? It fires large, pointy projectiles in the hopes of killing someone. In this case, we hope to thin the numbers of the griffons before it becomes one on one combat."

Twilight frowned. It just seemed wrong to intentionally hurt somebody, even if they disagreed with you. "Why are you at war in the first place?" Slash glanced back with a look of exasperation as if he just wanted the fight to start.

"We had to expand our borders to feed our growing population. The griffons couldn't handle it peacefully, complaining that we had, and I quote, 'thoughtlessly overtaken [their] sacred breeding grounds.' Likely story. They weren't even using it for anything when we came by! Tons of farmland

going to waste! Anyway story short, we told them ‘tough’ and they fought back.”

Twilight bit her lip. “But that makes it sound like you were the bad guys.”

Slash shrugged. “Maybe we were. Maybe we *are*. But it benefits us, and only the strong survive.” He looked up, and smiled. “They’re just about into firing distance.”

A familiar Pegasus flew overhead. “RIGHT THEN EVERYPONY THIS IS WHAT WE’VE TRAINED FOR. KEEP THE BALLISTAE STEADY.” Sergeant Shuddercry’s voice carried over the tops of the roughly constructed buildings. The ponies that had remained in the buildings to operate the ballistae finished the final calibrations and loaded bolts onto the machine.

Another telepathic shockwave blasted through the town. *Begin the Song of Scourge. Make them pay for their crimes.*

A sudden silence fell over the entire city. The Calm before the Storm. Suddenly, the entire village, excluding Twilight and her friends, began to chant as a strange melody began to flow around them.

“Mae'r un sy'n cysgu, gwrando ein crio.
Rydym yn ymroi ein heneidiau a gwasanaeth i chi.
Eich gelynnion tarfu ar eich cynlluniau, taro i lawr nawr.
Sicrhau bod ni fyddant yn codi nes bod y penyd wedi ei thalu.”

As the song had progressed, Twilight felt a force begin to swell around her. It came from the earth itself, surging through the ground like lightning. *Magic*, Twilight realized. *Yet far more powerful than I’ve ever felt before. And it seems angry.*

The song was sung in a language Twilight had not heard since her first year in Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. Ancient Equestrian, Twilight realized. The language spoken by the gods. And as such, it was forbidden from extensive research, due to the unspeakable power it contained. Spoken magic was the most powerful. It had created the physical Elements of Harmony, from the Words of Creation. Not only did

the citizens of Moon Pool know the language, they were abusing its power. She listened, trying to discern the song's meaning, but she only knew a few words, as some of these were quite complex.

The force grew in strength, and the citizens of Moon Pool began to sway. They had remained with their eyes closed, concentrating on the spell. As they chanted off the last lines of the song, their eyes all flew open, each eye glowing with a bright, burning light.

“Gan fod y negeswyr eich digofaint, yn caniatáu i ni eich cryfder a dial ofnadwy.”

The earth gave a pulse of the same burning energy, right underneath the flock of griffons. It struck each one of them in rapid succession, but it didn't seem to harm them physically. The griffons themselves just glowed in an aura of the same burning light, seemingly untouched, though they all squawked in what was either frustration or annoyance. Twilight found herself wondering what use the massive spell had been. Behind her, the citizens of Moon Pool cleared their eyes, and got to work.

Work being a euphemism for killing, of course.

“FIRE!” At the Serge's command, the ballistae across all the rooftops fired into the midst of the griffons. The shots weren't all that accurate, nor were they intended to be. With that many targets it didn't matter much at all. The griffons, of course, did all sorts of aerial maneuvers, but a few unlucky members of the strike force were shot down, heavy, bladed pikes weighing them to the earth. The wounded spiraled to the earth, their horrible, agonized screeching piercing Twilight to her soul. The ballistae reloaded, and managed to shoot off another volley before the griffons arrived for the close combat. More griffons went down in a puff of feathers, a trail of blood following them. Twilight almost retched.

The ballistae had done their job, taking out about 17 of the griffons, give or take a few. The Pegasi force of Moon Pool flew up to take on the first arrivals, their wings bladed like Spectral Slash's, while the others rocketed towards the ground to fight the earth ponies.

Slash looked back at Twilight as he extended his wings for takeoff. "You and your friends will either want to hide or fight. The griffons won't take the time to see if you're friend or foe. Neither should you."

He took off with a sudden and fierce gust of wind trailing behind him, and immediately clashed with a griffon forerunner. While Twilight watched on, Slash pulled an acrobatic twist which left the griffon clutching its throat, before it plummeted to the ground.

That was all Twilight had time to watch, because she found herself surrounded by a group of griffons who didn't look to happy to see her. Twilight breathed in, not certain of herself. She wanted to keep herself safe, but she couldn't bring herself to attack the griffons. She had been taught her entire life to not harm others.

The griffons, on the other hoof, had no qualms about it. Still glowing from the earlier incantation, one of them leapt forward, an animalistic growl sounding from its throat. Twilight tried to dodge away, and instinctively lashed out with her hind leg. It collided with the side of the griffons' head, making a sickening cracking sound. It turned back to her, growling now with fury as the now all too familiar crimson liquid dripped from its beak. The other griffons began stalking towards her as well. Twilight backed up, and quickly found herself against a wall.

She glanced to her sides, but found her friends occupied by their own aggressors. The Moon Pool-ians were busy as well. With no chance of escape either, Twilight only did what was natural. She panicked.

To an outside observer, what she proceeded to do was completely natural. She was fighting for survival. Base instincts took over. But these base instincts had been forgotten in Reality. Sure, she had been cornered by a Hydra, confronted an Ursa Major (Minor), and stood up to a dragon. But in each of those situations, there had been some form of control. Always a way out.

But she hadn't known of death or pain at those times. The wall behind her made her feel small, gave her a sense of helplessness. With these thoughts pressuring her, Twilight lost control of herself, and gave into animalistic defense. Combine animalistic defense with the most powerful unicorn in Ponyville, however... and things get a little messy.

Time seemed to slow down. She saw, or rather, felt, each griffon stalking towards her. She sensed the tension in their muscles as they began to leap towards her in slow motion. She heard their baited breath, could imagine the pain their razor sharp claws and beaks could do to her.

She couldn't allow that to happen.

Twilight's eyes began to burn with the fury of the heavens, much as it had when she took her entrance exam into Celestia's school. Acting on pure instinct, she gave a primal scream of rage and defiance as her horn lit up with white flames. She swung her horn to the griffon that reached her first, the one with the bleeding beak. Upon contact, her horn pierced the griffon's skin, and it flung against another building from the force of the blow, both physical and magical. The other two met similar fates.

Twilight quickly galloped towards one of the griffons attacking her friends, channeling even more energy into her horn. When she struck the griffon, it gave a squawk of surprise, which was quickly cut off. Once the connection had been made, the pure energy channeled through Twilight's horn and into the griffon, vaporizing it instantly, leaving only a cloud of dust in its wake. Twilight barreled through the cloud, scattering the particles as she met the next unlucky griffon who chose the wrong pony to pick on.

Twilight lost herself to the fury of the battle. She had unwittingly rediscovered something else that had been Forgotten. Bloodlust. The fight seemed to last forever as everything seemed to slow down thanks to Twilight's heightened senses. She saw both griffon and pony fall around her, but she was untouchable. As the citizens would later whisper in awe, Twilight had taken out about 30 griffons by herself, with no former training. After seeing the awful destruction that was Twilight Sparkle, the griffon attack party quickly retreated with more than half of their forces desecrated.

As the dust from the updraft of the griffon's wings settled, Twilight stood alone in the center of the battlefield, a ring of awestruck ponies around her. They kept their distance, leaving her completely alone with an awful silence in the air. She was breathing heavily, her horn and eyes still glowing so brightly it was painful to look at them, as she towered over the bodies of the fallen, both pony and griffon alike.

Her friends stood quite a ways off as well. Each of them wore a shocked expression, except for Pinkie Pie, who had a chilling smirk on her face. Sure, they had been glad for the help, as each of them had been in danger as well. But they had quickly realized this was not the Twilight they knew. In truth, they were scared to approach her. Her fury had been so awful and so intense it scared even the Dark Personalities.

Rarity was the first to speak. "Twi-Twilight? Are you all right, darling?" Of course she wasn't. Still she stood, daring somepony to approach her. Twilight was actually bleeding from about ten different wounds of varying seriousness, but she didn't feel a thing. Her body pumped with adrenaline. She began to laugh. "Am I alright? Ha! Am I alright! Ha ha! Ha ha heh heh..." as she trailed off, Twilight's body began to convulse. Her friends realized she was crying.

"I..." she said, the words thick in her throat as tears of terror began to stream down her face. "I lost control...I killed them. I could have used countless spells...*sob* to disarm them, to disorient them *sob*...but I killed them." Her legs grew weak, and finally gave way as she fell to the ground, letting out heaving sobs. "I killed... WHAT HAVE I DONE?!" Her friends stood, conflicted. They wanted to console her, but what consolation could they give?

The crowd of Moon Pool-ians suddenly parted and bowed to a pony whose commanding presence the friends could feel even from this distance. "I'd say what you've done is you've proven that you would make an excellent soldier."

The approaching unicorn was elegant yet she had an air of both control and impatience, as if she felt her time could be used better elsewhere. Her coat was a cloudy grey that seemed to shift in the pseudo-sunlight, and her mane had a silvery sheen. She seemed refined, yet at the same time as if she could handle herself in a tough situation. Her Merit Mark was three of those sharp poles crossed together, forming a star similar to Twilight's.

She trotted up to Twilight, who looked up with an expression of half grief, half confusion. The newcomer bent down and whispered in Twilight's ear. "I am Dawnlight Glimmer, your reflection in the Land of the Lost and Forgotten. I can explain what's going on here, but it's so important, not

even your friends can hear.” She stood up and continued, loud enough for the entire gathering to hear. “Come with me. We have some things we need to discuss. Sergeant Shuddercry?”

Shuddercry snapped to attention. “Yes ma’am.”

“Have everypony clean up the mess, attend to the wounded, and dispose of the deceased. The griffons got a big enough scare, and I don’t think they’ll be back for more anytime soon. Now then, Twilight, just follow me.”

Twilight, conflicted and mortified as she was, was in no condition to argue. She didn’t even say farewell. She just quietly followed Dawnlight, her eyes on the ground, unseeing as she whispered to herself “I killed...I killed...”

Rainbow Dash watched Twilight trot off, feeling concerned for her obviously confused and conflicted friend. She was pulled out of her thoughts by Spectral Slash landing next to her. “Hey,” he began, “You put up a pretty good fight against those griffons. Where’d you learn those moves?”

Dash blushed. “Oh it’s nothing. I took some karate lessons when I was a filly, and eventually even earned my black belt.”

Slash blinked. “Karate? Really? They teach you hoof-to-hoof combat skills in the land of eternal peace?”

“Well, it’s more of a sport, but yeah, I suppose they do. I’ll show you sometime, if you want. But you have to promise me you’ll teach me that crazy twist you did with the bladed wings. And maybe I could get a pair?”

Slash just chuckled. “We’ll see about that. Wouldn’t want you cutting yourself. You know, I once-”

“QUIT YER YAPPIN’ AND SET A GOOD EXAMPLE FOR EVERYPONY SLASH. YOU CAN WORRY ABOUT POTENTIAL MATES LATER.” Sergeant Shuddercry had snuck up behind them and had

unfortunately yelled that to the entire gathering, which had only just begun to disperse.

“I-er...”

“No, it’s not like that at all-”

“Yeah? Then why are you two blushing so much? Whatever. Slash! Just...work. And then I won’t have to get after you.”

Slash nodded, and turned back to Rainbow. “Uh, I do need to get going. And just so you understand, there’s nothing between us, right? We’re just two sides to the same person. Anything more than that would be nothing but weird.”

Rainbow nodded. “Yeah, totally. See you around Slash.” With that, Slash took off and headed towards the exact opposite of the battleground to help clean up.

Shuddercry now turned to the rest of the friends, excluding Twilight. “Now while you’re here you might as well learn how life is around here. We need to dispose of the dead and bring the wounded and dying to Temperment’s Medical Clinic. I assume you know basic levitation spells?” After receiving blank stares from all except Rarity, Shuddercry facehoofed. “Oh that’s right, you softbellies think only Unicorns can use magic. Well, I’m here to tell you otherwise. See this?” She indicated a griffon corpse next to her. “Really all that magic is, is envisioning what needs to happen, and the provision of the willpower to make it happen. Of course, it gets more complex than that, but for demonstration purposes, watch me.

“That griffon is currently on the ground, bleeding on our soil. We can’t have that, now can we? I have a motive to move it. Therefore it must be moved. To where shall it be moved? I’ll decide that later, so for now, it will temporarily regain flight.” She closed her eyes and wrinkles of concentration began to show underneath the darkness of her helmet. “You have to imagine it in the air. Will it to move. It comes easier with practice.” Her eyes flew open with a burning light, the same they had seen the citizens of Moon Pool use earlier against the griffons.

The griffon corpse began levitating in the same manner as they had seen Twilight do with various objects many times. However, instead of the soft lavender glow of Twilight's magic, it was the burning light once again.

"Now we simply imagine it moving through the air, and onto the cart." The body did precisely that. "Now you give it a try, let's see how you guys are."

The next several minutes were filled with a sort of grim humor as the friends attempted magic, and failed. Rarity, of course, did just fine, though she seemed a little hesitant to even come near any of the dead. Knowing they would be back to life relatively quickly didn't seem to help.

"Just keep practicing. But on the griffons. We need to be respectful to our fallen comrades."

Rainbow Dash walked amongst the wounded and the dead, grimacing at the groans of pain and the stench she now recognized as death. She loaded the bodies onto two large carts that had been brought in, one for the deceased, both Griffon and Pony, who were to be buried in the Moon Pool Cemetery. The other cart was for the wounded, and was, as Shuddercry had mentioned earlier, destined for Temperament's Medical Clinic.

As she had been struggling to carry some wounded griffons telekinetically earlier, Rainbow had asked Shuddercry why they even bothered if they just wanted the griffons dead anyway.

"That's assuming we *do* want them dead." Shuddercry answered. "Really, we just want them to not be able to fight us. If we keep them alive, yet weak, than it's even better than using the Song of Scourge."

"Yeah, what did that even do anyway?"

"Oh, it's a plea to the sleeping Ancient that lives in the namesake of the city, The Moon Pool. As Princess Luna discovered, whatever it is, it has the ability to hinder the Blinking process. Basically, as a collective we can direct where it uses that ability. So if we *do* kill the griffons, we at least make certain they stay dead for as long as possible, which is generally about a month or so.

“Unfortunately, the griffons have discovered a non-magic alternative to the Song. It’s a plant nicknamed ‘Poison Choke’ that grows only on their brooding cliffs. We do have a cure for it, but if the death is instantaneous there’s not much you can do. And of course they train for one-hit-kills. CAREFUL! You almost dropped that one.” Then, grudgingly, Shuddercry admitted “Though you’re doing a spectacular job with your first day of voluntary magic.”

“Heh, thanks.”

Rainbow continued sorting the casualties, occasionally stopping as she recognized some of the fallen ponies as reflections of somepony she knew. One, she noted, was obviously Lyra’s, with the same minty coloring, yet a sterner countenance, even in death. Rainbow closed the corpse’s eyes, shuddering at the thought that she could have ended up in much the same way if Twilight hadn’t shown up, in all her frightful glory.

She finally stumbled to the spot where Twilight had been cornered. The first three griffons Twilight had attacked still lay there, one deceased after bleeding out, and of the other two only one was conscious.

As Rainbow approached the conscious griffon, she could tell it was in a bad state. It was the same one Twilight had kicked, and the wound was already swelling. Its side was bleeding as well, where Twilight had struck it with her horn before throwing it to the wall where it still lay. When it saw Rainbow, it half-heartedly attempted to stand. After collapsing from the strain, the griffon spat out blood and gave a low growl.

“Pony scum. We fight only to survive. You fight just to conquer. You’re not justified, no matter what delusions your Princess has thrown into your head. Just kill me now and spare me the torture and dishonor of living amongst you.”

Rainbow looked at it with genuine concern. The griffon was definitely female from the voice at least, though the muck and grime and blood covered most of its other features. “Listen, I’m different from the others who live here. I’m just a visitor.”

The griffon tried to laugh, but it came out weak and shuddering. "Of course you won't take the blame. Nobody will. It's always somebody else's fault."

"No really, I didn't even know you were at war with the ponies. I think it's wrong."

"If you're telling the truth, I'm in Equestria."

Rainbow started. "What did you just say?"

"I said I don't believe you, dweeb."

"No, you said Equestria?"

"Yeah, and what's it *groan* to you?"

"This is Equilibria. Equestria's an entirely different world. It's the place I'm from."

The griffon's eyes widened. "You know about it too?" she asked in a quiet, and far more amiable voice. "It's the only thing we griffons even care about anymore. We need to return. We don't belong here."

Recognition flared in both minds at once. "Could it be..."

Rainbow looked closer, seeing past the grime and the tough set face that seemed to be standard in LOTL. "Are you...Gilda?"

"Rainbow Dash?"

They both gave out a small gasp of joy and wonder. Their minds flew like lightning, each wanting to tell the other thousands of things. Rainbow, true to her nature, was the fastest to collect her thoughts.

"Gilda, I'm really sorry about how I sent you out of Ponyville after Pinkie's party. It was horrible of me, and though we both were pretty inconsiderate, I feel like I did the worst of it. I could have helped you feel more welcome. Or not played all those pranks on you. Will you accept my apology?"

Gilda gave Rainbow a look that was both confused and pained.

“What are you even talking about? I haven’t seen you since Flight School. You know, Junior Speedsters?”

“But...I just saw you. Some months ago.”

Gilda thought for a few moments, and yet again realization flashed across her pained face. “Listen, I have a long story to tell you. So get me onto that wounded cart and I’ll tell you how all of this happened.” Then she grimaced as she tried to shift. “And fast. I think I might pass out soon.”

Chapter 7

The God of Stars and Vengeance

Rainbow set Gilda carefully into the cart, which was just about to be pulled off to the Medical Clinic. The medic on the cart bound up Gilda's wounds, though rather messily Rainbow thought, but regardless, Gilda looked a lot better than she had.

Rainbow, personally, had been wondering why they had been helping the dark personalities with all their gruesome chores in the first place, but after she knew she was helping the real Gilda, she didn't mind at all.

The cart was far larger than most Rainbow had seen, about the size of a small room, and had to be pulled by four ponies. It was segregated with wounded ponies on one side, and the wounded griffons on the other. Besides the medic rushing to and fro, Rainbow was the only unharmed pony riding the cart, with the rest of her friends following behind.

Well, Rainbow was mostly unharmed. She, like all her other friends except Applejack, had received some wound or another, though none were truly serious. The wounds had hurt like the dickens at first, which allowed them to sympathize with Twilight. But after the excitement of the recent events, Rainbow's pain had, ironically, been forgotten. She was completely focused on helping Gilda feel comfortable.

Gilda, for her part, was bearing her pain well, and adamantly ignored the glances of hate she received from the pony side of the cart.

After she had rested for a couple of minutes, which seemed an eternity to Rainbow, Gilda began her story.

"Since we parted Flight Camp, Rainbow, I've been busy, as I guess you have. I was welcomed back home with open wings, and Captain Garreth was particularly impressed with my improved skills. He took me under his wing, and taught me everything he knew. After about a year he surprised me and made me a patrol leader.

“For a while, life was great. I was loved and respected in the flock, and in fact, several guys tried to court me. But you know me. I’m not the type to settle down. I loved being a patrol leader too much. The thrill of the hunt, the joy I felt seeing my family fed by my claws. I even began teaching the cubs beginner flight tricks. But everything changed about a year and a half ago, at the Summer Sun Celebration. Well, we griffons just call it the Summer Solstice, but you know what I mean.

“The Summer Solstice isn’t as big of a deal in the griffon kingdom, seeing as it’s not *our* leader who’s the sun God. But hey, it’s an excuse to party.

“So there we were, just laughing it up about Garreth’s horrible dancing, eating, drinking, just having fun. What happened next was so sudden we only figured out the story long after the fact. There was a flash as bright as lightning and loud, echoing wavy sound.” Gilda tried to imitate it, which made the two friends laugh.

“Well, anyway, we didn’t know it at the time, but we had been transported to the Land of the Lost. After we saw that *seemingly* nothing was wrong, we just continued partying.

“Over the rest of the night, and the next couple of days, however, we began to notice things had changed. Unlike ponies, both Griffons and Dragons maintained the memory of blood, so we weren’t surprised when that showed up. But suddenly the blood was in far greater quantity, and the pain so much more severe. Then deaths began happening. We were left with the bodies of the fallen, like common animals. We were forced to bury our loved ones. Imagine our surprise, then, when they’d show up alive and well the next day.

“It didn’t stop there. We were attacked and harassed by a flock of Pegasi, no offense, who had no cause we could see to do so. From the bits and pieces we heard them yell at us, we gathered that there had been a previous group of griffons who wouldn’t give up some territory or whatever.

“Because it had no special meaning to us, we told them they could have it for all we care. But they just kept attacking. We found fairly quickly that though we would return from death, they could prevent us for a while through that spell of theirs you saw. We too found a similar method, after

one of our young died of an herb that grew next to the reflection of our brooding cliffs. When the child didn't return from death for several weeks, we realized we might be able to weaponize the plant. It was a great success, but in the end it only worsened our conditions. The ponies just fought that much harder.

"As we fought the endless war, we searched for answers. *All* of our previously friendly neighbors, including Ponyville, had suddenly turned hostile. Though some aspects of life remained the same, most had changed, including bits of our surroundings. We found letters we had never written in our homes, weapons in our gathering hall.

"The random documents we found were vague plans to move the entire population to a place called "The Land of Promise and Bliss." They gave instructions that didn't make sense at the time, and that we're only beginning to make sense of.

"As you can imagine, Rainbow, we all miss reality, and the dark pony personalities won't listen to reason. So we're trying to get back to our proper existence, by flip-flopping back with our own dark personalities, whom you had the misfortune of meeting. Sorry for anything I might have said or done."

"No, it's okay. It wasn't your fault."

Gilda shook her head. "That's just it Rainbow. Though we may exist in different bodies, the Dark Personalities truly are *us*. At the end of the day, they have just as much importance to our legacy as we do. Sometimes I wonder if LOTL is really the reflection or if Reality is."

Rainbow sat silently for a moment, taking all of this in. She didn't have much time to think, however, because the cart suddenly shuddered to a halt.

It had stopped in front of a building from which could be heard a loud metallic clanging. The building itself was fairly large, bigger than most in Ponyville. The sign hanging on the front door read 'Temperament's Smithy – Repairs and Customs'. As Rainbow was reading it, the door opened just a crack and a hoof suddenly shot out. It flipped the sign to the other side

which read 'Temperament's Medical Clinic – Healing, Birthing and Euthanasia.'

Now the door swung fully open, revealing a pony who, surprisingly, looked so much like Rarity that Rainbow did a double take. The main difference between the two was the pony's Merit Mark, which rather than three gems seemed to be three rectangular bars of metal. The hair and coat color remained the same, though both were coated with sweat and grime. This new pony's mane looked much the same as Rarity's had when she had overworked herself for her friend's Gala dresses.

The newcomer also wore an apron that may at one time have been white. It was now a blackish brown, as if it had been scorched. A hammer and a water bucket floated around her, indicating that she had been in the middle of something when they had interrupted.

"You guys got finished earlier than usual." She sniffed, looking over the overloaded cart. "Alright, start unloading them whilst I clean up." Then, seeing Rainbow and her friends as obvious foreigners, she added "Ponies first, of course."

Rainbow gave Gilda a few comforting words, telling her that she'd be fine and she'd be back for her. Then she struggled to telekinetically lift the nearest wounded. The magic was becoming easier with practice, though it still took a lot of effort and concentration.

The rest of the small parade got to work as well, leaving the indignant griffons to bide their time, still glowing from the Song of Scourge. Death from the wounds would mean that their blinking would be hampered for a month, but the same held true for the ponies with their wounds contaminated by the Poison Choke.

Shuddercry saluted to Temperament, made some quiet excuse, and flew away. Temperament lead the procession into the building, which seemed even larger on the inside. The building, Rainbow noticed, was actually split up into two sections. The section on the left looked more or less like a typical clinic. The room on the right must have been the 'smithy', which was a metalworks of some kind. There were three workers in the smithy who looked exactly like the Diamond Dogs in Reality. Applejack leaned over to Rainbow and said as much.

Then, continuing, she added “The reflections we’ve seen thus far have been fairly different than their true selves. So why are the Diamond Dogs the same, assuming those *are* the reflections?”

Rarity thought for a moment. “Perhaps it’s because, more or less, their dark personalities are just like their reflections in Reality. The Diamond Dogs weren’t evil to me, but none of the other reflections here have been either. Just cold and short tempered, which is just like the Diamond Dogs. But if that’s true, why does Temperament look so much like me?”

As the crowd continued, their view of the smithy was cut off and they found themselves in the clinic itself. There were two rows of beds, against the two longer walls. Temperament had cleaned up, though Rarity couldn’t see any difference, and was already tending to a few ponies, who must have walked to the clinic from the battle itself if they had beaten the cart. Temperament was cleaning their wounds with a white cloth that had been dipped in some sort of serum.

Without looking up from her work, she began giving the relief group instructions. “Just place the wounded on any available bed. I’ll be by to assess their condition. If they’re already dead, or if they die before I can get to them, put them in the backyard. Jackie Cider will be by in a few minutes to pick them up.” Rainbow was shocked at the forwardness of the whole business. From her experience, a Doctor was supposed to tell you you’d be fine, that everything would be okay. Even if they were lying.

When she had finished working on her current patient, Temperament walked up and down the rows of beds, giving quick comments about each wounded pony. “He’ll live, she’ll live, she’s mostly fine, he needs attention, so does he, she’s dead, or so close I can’t help, he’s critical, she’s fine. Leave those I said I need to attend to, and put the others in the back with the dead, they can come in later, and the medic can attend to them in the meantime.”

Rainbow willed herself to move to help the others, but found herself stuck to the spot in morbid curiosity. Now that she knew true pain, her empathy for the wounded ponies cause her to flinch as Temperament drew the Poison Choke from their tainted wounds.

After Temperament had cleaned the wounds of several patients, pointedly ignoring Rainbow, Rainbow put forth a tentative question.

“Um...aren't you going to patch them up?”

“So you are new. I thought so. You're from the place they call Reality, right? No, I just need to make certain that when they die” ((Rainbow noticed she didn't say if)) “it'll only be the normal one-day blink.” She finally finished with an entire side of the room.

“Alright everypony,” Temperament said to the wounded. “See you tomorrow.” A few of the ponies that were in better condition returned the farewell. Rainbow started forward in preparation to remove the treated patients. Then, without warning, Temperament's horn flared up and all the treated's heads began glowing with her unicorn magic. Simultaneously all their head pivoted to the right with a quick jerk and an audible, sickening crack. As the magic released them, the heads all dropped to their sides and the patients stopped moving and groaning. The chill spirit of death fell on the room.

Rainbow's jaw dropped to the floor. “What...what did you just do?! We're supposed to heal them aren't we? Not kill them!”

Temperament looked at Rainbow with an air of ‘really?’. “No, by killing them I have saved them the trouble of going through natural healing, during which they would have been crippled and weak. They will show up tomorrow in the comfort of their own homes, right after midnight. They'll be fully healed and ready to serve the community with full diligence. If you're concerned about the method of euthanasia, I made certain it would be fairly painless. It's what we've found as a community to be the most effective and efficient. Heck, I've gone through it a couple of times. You don't feel anything after the first second, and I think just about anyone could withstand one second of extreme pain.”

After that, things went like clockwork. They'd bring in a new batch of ponies, clean their wounds, euthanize them, and take the bodies out. Rainbow was still reluctant that they had to kill them, but the logic was sound.

Finally they got to the griffons. Temperament took just as much care for the griffons as she had on the ponies, Rainbow was glad to see. They still glowed from the Song of Scourge, so like the ponies earlier, if they died

of their wounds they wouldn't be able to blink back to life for a month. Rainbow tried to imagine what it would be like to be dead for a month. A lot changed in a month, she decided. Almost anything could happen.

Temperament finally finished with all the griffons. She had lost a couple patients throughout the day, both griffon and pony, but Rainbow could see why she was the main doctor. She was brilliant at actually healing the griffons, but was willing to make the tough decisions on who to lose.

Temperament washed off her hoofs, which had become drenched in blood after the last patient. "I'm pretty much done here, only patients who don't need euthanasia are left. You should probably help Jackie Cider with the bodies, and then I'm certain she'll be able to find a place for you to stay. Ah, here she comes now."

Jackie was strolling down the lane pulling the cart that had carried the bodies from the battlefield. She was teamed up with several other ponies, obviously the reflection of the Apple family. They all wore Fedoras like Jackie herself, and looked pretty spiffy actually. Applejack found herself grinning. Big Macintosh still looked like an adorable fool, in the land of hardship. As they pulled up, Jackie nodded to everypony. "Good to see you made it out of the fight okay, I wasn't able to account for you all earlier. Now come along, after we're done with this, maybe I'll be able to show you what we do for fun around here. It's not all death and pain all the time."

Twilight followed Dawnlight through the city, which was mostly abandoned due to the fact that everyone had rushed out for the fight. She still was lamenting how she had lost control. She had spent so many years of her life trying to keep a lid on everything, always being the one in charge, the one who knew how to deal with a situation. But the Land of the Lost had a quite different set of rules than what she was used to.

They walked silently, for the most part, except when Dawn would make a quick comment or two about the surroundings. They finally reached their destination, a towering...well, tower that seemed to be around six or so levels. Quite a feat of engineering, Twilight thought bitterly to herself.

“OH COME OFF IT ALREADY. What’s done is done, and you prevented more lives being lost, Pony lives especially. It’s better to kill 30 griffons if it will prevent the death of a single pony. Loyalty to your race, that’s the first rule around here, and you need to learn it quickly.”

Twilight sniffled, but pulled herself together. Her reflection was right, what she did may have been wrong, but it would allow her to be that much more controlled next time.

“Alright, now that you’ve composed yourself, let’s head inside.” They entered the tower, which was even more impressive from the inside. Books covered the walls, spiraling up to the ceiling. There was a staircase that spiraled up as well, leaving Twilight feeling dizzy. “Welcome,” said Dawnlight with a flourish of her front legs, “to Dawnlight Glimmer’s School of Magic. A reflection of your library. There’s much you need to learn about the Land of the Lost, and here’s as good of a place to start as any.”

Dawn trotted forward, beginning to ascend the staircase, with Twilight looking around in awe. There was so much knowledge stored in these books. Twilight found herself wondering if they might be able to extend their stay in the Land of the Lost so she could do some reading. “Now the first thing about LOTL that you need to know is that it is a perfect reflection of your world. Not only are the people reflected, but so are locations, specific buildings, major events, even weather patterns. But don’t think of it as being as simple as just a mirror. You could, I suppose, but you’d have to take into account the fact that your reflection has a mind and goals of its own. And again, reflections are not opposites.

“You fought a Hydra at...Froggy Bottom Bog, I believe it was? Well, we did something similar here. Only when we fought the hydra, it was at the top of a waterfall and the hydra didn’t walk away from that one alive. Or the cockatrice those three fillies ran into? We ended up tricking it with a mirror, and now the Sergeant has a nice lawn ornament. You’ll see similarities in the two worlds, but you won’t be able to assume too much.”

“Ah, I just thought of a perfect example. Thorn!” Dawn yelled it up the tower, the echo resounding in a very beautiful way. A screech was heard and from the top rafters dove a purple and green blur. It landed both gracefully yet forcefully on Dawn’s extended foreleg. “Twilight, meet Thorn, your assistant Spike’s reflection.”

Thorn gave a screech of recognition at his name. He was fairly small, about one and a half times the size of Fluttershy's pet bunny Angel. Thorn was definitely more fierce looking than spike, with his spines sharp and deadly looking. He seemed to be a different sub-species of dragon, however, because not only were his wings grown in, they replaced his arms.

"He hasn't learned to speak Equestrian yet, but make no mistake, he's smart. And wicked fast. I've seen Spike through the viewing portal, and I'm guessing you're wondering about the wings. He's actually a wyvern rather than a true dragon. They don't grow as big, but they're faster and a lot more active in adulthood." She lifted her leg and Thorn flew back up into the rafters.

"Anyway, that's not why we're here. The reason we are is because I'm going to lay everything on the table for you." She took a deep breath.

"As you may have surmised, things are tough here. Really tough, in fact. You've only had a taste of it. We've had to deal with it our entire lives. But you know what? That's life. Or so we thought. Imagine our surprise when about a year and a half ago Princess Luna reveals to us that we're not alone. That she actually comes from an entirely different world, one where peace and prosperity are common and life is more or less, happy. Now, of course, anypony will try to better their situation in any possible way. But we can't just leave our world, a world created to throw everything horrible into. No, because that would imbalance the system. Even our nation's name is a joke. Equilibria. That's all we are. A counterbalance to your world to ensure your utopia can survive, by making us take the fall.

"If we just walked into Reality the worlds would collapse on themselves and the destruction would be catastrophic for both sides. The only solutions are a careful and calculated switch, or a merging of the worlds. At this point, I'd be great with either.

"This is where you come in. Right now, we're attempting both. Better to have your plan B already in progress, yeah? You and your five friends are the Elements of Harmony. As such, you have the responsibility and power to maintain balance between the worlds. Well, as your reflections, we have a similar, yet reflected job. We're the Elements of Discord. We

have the ability and the motivation to cause imbalance, which will hopefully allow us to enter Reality. If you happen to get kicked into LOTL permanently, it's a necessary step."

Twilight held up a hoof, frowning. "Wait, you're trying to get everyone in Reality to switch places with everyone here? And why do you think I'm not going to stop you?"

Dawn smiled. It was one of the creepy ones that Pinkie Pie reserved for her plotting. "You're not going to stop me because you're going to help me. In fact, you already have. Everything in this world can be represented as a memory. A memory can be transferred very easily, if only someone remembers it. And as the Elements of Harmony, you and your friends are the perfect candidates for transfer. You've already started the process actually. When you re-entered Reality, you brought back the memory of blood and pain. The scale has already begun to tip, and anything you try to do to stop us will only delay the inevitable. It's like trying to hold back a waterfall with an umbrella.

"Just think, Twilight. You saw how bad it was when just YOU brought back the pain and blood. If the rest of your friends returned with it, it wouldn't just be localized to Ponyville. The entirety of Equestria would begin experiencing it. And now you've experienced bloodlust. One of the higher atrocities. You wouldn't dare go back, because it would mean others would begin to feel and act as you just did."

Twilight's heart dropped. Dawn was smart, too smart. She was definitely Twilight's reflection, but that just made matters worse. She knew how to push her around. "And as we speak, the plan has already been set in motion to have your friends experience worse. Don't you see? The longer you stay here, the more forgotten memories you'll undoubtedly pick up. And the next second you step into Reality, the torrent will flow. So you can't go back. The only way is forward."

Twilight began to growl. "You're sick, Dawnlight. You're putting the happiness of an entire world at risk just to help yourself."

Dawnlight shook her head slowly, as if she was disappointed that Twilight didn't understand. "But you are doing the exact same thing. Think about that.

“We’re not trying to make enemies with you or your friends, Twilight. But if it comes to that, we will. If it’s any consolation, however, I’m not the sole orchestrator of this plan. I’ve had help from high places. Would you like to meet them?”

“Only so I can tell them what a disgrace they are to the pony race for acting in such a way.”

“Careful, Twilight. You’re beginning to sound like one of us.”

They left the School with Twilight’s mind buzzing. There had to be a way out of this, some way to prevent this catastrophe from happening. Then it clicked. If she could convince Princess Luna to return, perhaps the LOTL could be closed off, or she could get the princess to convince them to pull off the plan. The Princess seemed to have some sway over things here.

Dawn lead Twilight out of the city, into the surrounding fields of very sparsely populated flora. The ‘Sun’ had almost dropped to the horizon. Twilight wondered what night would be like here. As they cleared the top of the ridge, the land quickly began to drop towards a crystalline, completely still pool. It seemed to perfectly reflect the dying light of the Solar Eclipse, and the stars which had begun to shine more brightly.

As she stood on the edge of the lake, Twilight began to feel nervous. There was a presence she couldn’t quite place, yet she knew it was antagonistic. She paced nervously at the bank. “Well, where are these fellow conspirers?”

Dawnlight answered, gazing over the still pool, taking in the haunting beauty. “You remember that light that struck the griffons? It came from the entity sleeping in this pool. One of the Ancients. He has bided his time for the past thousand years, almost exactly, so he can get his revenge on the one who wronged him. He is the Author of the plan. I am the Executor.” And suddenly, behind Twilight “And I am the Overseer.”

Twilight flipped around and gasped. Princess Luna stood over her, wearing a solid-set face. “I’m truly sorry you have to be dragged into this, Twilight. You’re a wonderful filly, and I respect my sister for her choice in

you. However, this goes beyond anything you know. We're trying to fix a history long forgotten."

A powerful, booming psychic blast emanating from the pool itself hit the three ponies, startling even Luna and Dawn. It was in ancient Equestrian, but for some reason Twilight could understand it.

"Not forgotten, but concealed from the world. Through the lies and treachery of Princess Celestia. Your mentor has been hiding secrets from you, Twilight. Things she believes will hurt you. And she's right. By not knowing the truth of your past you have been made weak. But we can remedy that."

A dark shape began to rise out of the pool, seemingly made of a liquid. As it began to gather its fluid form together, Twilight could see it was an Alicorn. The light coming from the moon up above was completely absorbed by the form, reflecting nothing. It was nothing more than a shadow in Twilight's vision.

"Twilight Sparkle, meet the stallion who murdered every single one of your ancestors. Meet the one who is the future of Creation. Meet the God of Stars and Vengeance. I suppose I should introduce myself formally. I am Seren, The Third Alicorn, The Slayer of the Alicorn race. I have a lot of titles, but I deserve them all. And you'll soon learn why."

Chapter 8

Celestia's Plot Revealed

The dark form began stalking out of the lake. The dark water seemed to try to hold it back, but to no avail. As the Alicorn stepped out of the lake and onto the dry ground in front of Twilight, the rest of the dark liquid retreated into the lake. Twilight found herself staring at an Alicorn that, in spite of herself, she found rather handsome. His gait showed he was extremely confident, and his golden, glowing eyes seemed to pierce into her soul with a deep intelligence. Though he had stepped out of the lake, he stood completely dry and regal looking. He wore a crown, signifying that he was a ruler of Equestria, which Twilight found blasphemous. This crown, however, rather than being gentle and flowing, was a collection of curved spikes that made Twilight feel small and insignificant. The crown's coloring matched his Merit Mark, which was two, deep blue star-headed comets chasing each other in a circle. He was a silvery-grey, and his hair was a far darker grey that had brighter, off-white highlights in it. All in all, he was a sight to take in, and he definitely had the presence in the small gathering of ponies.

As he stalked towards the three ponies, each hoof step left collection of ice crystals behind it. It certainly seemed fitting; there was nothing about this Alicorn that was warm or kind. He seemed cold and calculating, and Twilight had a feeling she wouldn't want to fight him. This Alicorn, Seren, as he had referred to himself, towered over Twilight, and even Luna. If Twilight had to guess, she would have said he was probably just a bit taller than Princess Celestia herself. This, Twilight found, was just a bit disturbing. The fact that there was another Alicorn besides the only two she had known of, and that he was stronger built, just seemed wrong.

Twilight gathered herself from her initial shock of seeing the Alicorn walk out of the lake. She remembered what she had just heard, and she had so many questions. But where to start...?

"Perhaps," came Seren's response to her thoughts, "with the deaths of your ancestors, for which I'm responsible?" Twilight noticed that Seren's

voice was just as powerful as his psychic thoughts had been. And that he had answered her unspoken question.

She opened her mouth to speak, but was once again interrupted in her thoughts.

“Yes I know what you’re going to say, but no, I can’t read minds. I’m just very good at predicting people.”

Twilight’s mouth shut, as she realized she had left it open. She waited for a moment, but then Seren gave her an encouraging nod.

“So...you killed my ancestors? You forced them to blink?”

The dark Alicorn nodded. “But! Out of self defense. I won’t ask you to forgive me. I don’t even care if you like me. But you deserve to know the truth.”

“How can I trust you? From what I’ve heard, you’re a manipulator and a backstabber.”

“Aren’t all government heads? And besides, don’t you know? But I guess you wouldn’t. She already has mislead you thus far...Alicorns can’t lie, at least not directly. Sure, we’ll try to weasel our way around a question, or we’ll get somepony else to lie for us, but if you can get us to answer a yes or no question we’ll be forced to tell the truth. It’s part of the package of being a God. You have to be completely certain of yourself. Besides, I have absolutely no motive to lie, at least to you. You have a story yet to be told, one that I can’t interfere with.”

“He’s telling the truth, for what it’s worth.” Said Luna somberly. Seren nodded gratitude and continued, his lips still unmoving.

Twilight frowned. “Well, maybe, but...” She trailed off as a sudden and unexpected surge of emotion flowed through her. “What...I-?” Suddenly remorse over the griffons she had killed filled her heart, coupled by rage at this smug Alicorn who calmly claimed to have killed all her ancestors. “YOU! I DON’T NEED TO HEAR YOUR STORY! Why, as a murderer you deserve to never be heard from again! And YOU!” she said, turning on Dawnlight “BY DRAGGING ME INTO THIS WORLD YOU’VE

MADE ME A MURDERER AS WELL! HOW AM I EVEN GOING TO LIVE WITH MYSELF! WHY IF I MANAGE TO...you'll..." She trailed off, suddenly feeling drained and tired and apathetic.

"Wha-what did you just do to me?" Twilight had noticed Dawn's horn glow just before she had lost her fury.

"Precisely what I had done earlier, when I needed to show you the library and explain your purpose here. I used an emotional dampener spell of you. We can't have your brilliant mind clouded by unnecessary emotions at such a critical time, can we?"

Seren gave a hearty laugh. "Brilliant Dawnlight! Of course, it's precisely what I would have done, and that's just about the greatest compliment you can get from me."

Twilight felt confused. She knew that she had every reason to be angry here, but it wasn't connecting. Well, at least she'd be that much angrier when the spell wore off again. For now, she decided, she'd have to listen to this conniving Alicorn.

"I'll explain myself in due time, Twilight Sparkle. Just know this, the truth hurts. But lies hurt you more. I know you adore your princess. She's a fine ruler, even I'll admit that. But she has a dark past that hangs over her, waiting for the right moment of retribution. That moment draws ever near. I will tell you why I had to kill your ancestors. Perhaps you'll even sympathize with me. But you'll have to hear me out. And you and I both know you will. The strive for knowledge is too great, especially if it's something about Celestia that she's never told you. You want to know why.

"Almost 1,002 years ago, I was nothing more than a Pegasus Guard. Head of the Guard, actually. Back then the pony race was far smaller than what I've heard it is today. The survival of our species teetered on the edge of annihilation as other races fought for control. The dragons, for example, were once a powerful and social kingdom, before they split up and became reclusive. Guards were not just for ceremony, as they are today. We had to actually defend royalty. As luck would have it, I was personally assigned to protect the beautiful Princess Luna.

"One fateful night, however, I accidentally overheard a conversation betwixt Luna and Celestia. It was a particularly heated one, and it left Luna in tears.

I overstepped my boundaries and consoled her. I gave her some advice on what I had heard, and soon enough she was back to her beautiful self.”

Luna dropped her gaze at this, blushing. Twilight raised a brow. Obviously this relationship was further along than just fellow conspirers.

“I found myself” Seren continued “assigned more and more often to protect her. We naturally had more opportunities to talk, and we eventually got to a first name basis. We came to trust each other completely. She would tell me her troubles with her sister and the country, and she’d kindly put up with my complaints about the other Pegasi guards and the horrible pay.

“After she realized she enjoyed my company, Luna promoted me to personal assistant and advisor. It was the happiest day of my life. It was a mixed blessing, however. As her advisor, I was now both allowed and expected to sit in on the meetings between the two sisters and their six core Alicorn advisors, the Council of Harmony. Their name in no small way coincides with the Elements of Harmony. The discussions were normally about the state and future of the nation. But as I listened closely, I began to realize a darkness behind them.

“It turned out the entire life I had lived, the same you continue to live, was controlled, fabricated, and scripted. The Alicorn class was purposefully stunting the progress of the other three pony sub-species. Specifically, Pegasi and Earth ponies. They hid their potential to work magic, and the full power of the Unicorns. When I asked the Princess about it, she said, and I quote “The system is in place to maintain the precarious balance of the social and economic structure.

“Of course, once I learned that I had the ability for magic, I worked my brains out trying to learn it. Luna was my mentor, and within a few weeks time I had progressed further than most unicorns manage in their lives. One thing I learned about magic is that it gains its power from motive and willpower. I had the drive against injustice behind me.

“When I told Luna I had plans to bring magic to the lower classes, to better defend ourselves from the rest of the dangerous world, she agreed with my idea, though not quite my method. She said it would be far better to convince both the Council and her sister through logic and reasoning rather

than forcing it upon them. If they had been as open-minded and idealistic as Luna was perhaps things would have turned out better for everyone.

“When we presented our plan for the gradual integration of magic back into the lower classes, the Council scoffed at it. They told me that the original reason that the Alicorns had taken magic away was because of an uprising a few centuries earlier. They said the same could happen again. And Celestia did not once, not ever raise a hoof in protest.

“The irony of the whole situation is that they only *caused* an uprising. I had secretly been teaching the other guards magic, without even Luna knowing.” A look passed between the two Alicorns, and Twilight sensed that this had been an earlier sore point. “With careful planning and convincing arguments, I gathered a core group of the best Magisi and we decided that the only solution was a revolution. Luna agreed that the other Alicorn were too oppressive, clinging to ancient ways that solved ancient problems, yet were not prepared for changing times. By withholding magic, the Alicorns solved internal problems, while completely disregarding the foreign threats.

“So we struck. We pushed through all other security, some too confused to stop us, and ended up in the throne room itself. This was the original castle in the Everfree forest, of course. Celestia had her personal guards with her as well, and her prize student and friend just happened to be there as well. Your direct ancestor, Twilight, named Gladebeam Shimmer. Luna and I were backed by my core group of Magisi, but several of them were preoccupied by the recovering outside forces. Back then, our magic was far more powerful, which is why I suppose Celestia was so cautious about it. In just under six months, I had taught and learned power that far exceeds what you’ve ever seen, Twilight. These Magisi, not even ‘meant’ to have magic, were able to hold off the rest of the castle single-hoofedly by creating a time-lock. It took all their concentration, granted, but we had trained for that as Guards. We had all the time we needed for our little conflict.”

“Celestia’s guards rushed forward to meet us. We had received the same training, so we would have been equally matched. But, again, I had learned magic. The guards were quickly handled, and we were facing only Celestia and Gladebeam.

“Celestia, of course, seemed completely surprised by all of this. She questioned us, demanding that we explain ourselves. So we did. But that’s where I’m going to leave off, Twilight. Because I can talk all day. But I’d assume you’d rather see it for yourself.”

Twilight gave him a questioning look. “What do you mean?”

Seren gave her a knowing smile. So his mouth apparently could open. “Bright Eyes did tell you about Memory Bubbles, did she not?”

“You mean Derpy? Actually, she didn’t, that I can recall.”

“Well, it’s what the sign on her door signifies. ‘Keeper of Paths.’ Have you ever wondered what her Merit Mark symbolizes? It represents her ability to walk freely between all Memory Bubbles. A gift given to only one pony of each generation.”

Dawnlight stepped forward now, after being silent the entire time. “A memory bubble is a physical spot in the Land of the Lost where forgotten or hidden memories reside. They can only be seen by those who were directly involved with the memories contained, their descendants, or those whom the Great Power decides have a need to see them. As Gladebeam was there, you are eligible to witness the events, more or less firsthoofedly.”

Twilight thought for a moment. By seeing it for herself, she would be able to form her own opinion on the matter. Unless of course the memory itself was fabricated, but she really didn’t have much choice. Bringing up the trust issue would only result in more reassurance from this strange Alicorn. “We might as well. Take me to it, then.”

Dawn extended a hoof in a direction other than the one they had taken to get here. Twilight began walking, with Dawnlight and Luna following behind her. After they had gone a small distance, Twilight looked back and saw that Seren wasn’t following them. “Aren’t you coming with us?”

Seren shook his head. “I was *part* of those events, remember. I have no need to. Besides, as much as I hate to admit it, I’m not yet powerful enough to travel beyond the bank of the Moon Pool.”

Twilight stopped, and Dawn almost bumped into her. “So what, you’re trapped there?”

Seren nodded. “By Princess Celestia, none less. She didn’t just banish me to the Land of the Lost after getting me killed, she banished me in a dungeon in the place she banished me too. Go figure. I’ll be here if you feel any extended need to talk to me.” With that, his form became as dark as a shadow again, re-liquidized, and drained back into the lake.

“Wait, you got killed?” Twilight turned to Luna, then to Dawn. “He got killed?”

“All in due time, my sadly naïve double. Let’s rediscover a history that Celestia’s tried to keep under covers.”

They came over a rise in the hill and Twilight gave a small gasp. In a dip of the land there seemed to be some sort of energy distortion, understandably in the shape of a bubble. It warped the light around it, shimmering like a stone sidewalk on a hot day. At the center of the energy distortion there was a ball of light, giving off small beams of radiance. In the almost darkness of true night, with only a partial moon above, it was rather beautiful.

“It’s amazing!”

Dawn grinned. “You haven’t even seen the inside yet.” Her horn glowed briefly, and Twilight felt her head clear even further. “I added another emotional dampener. We can’t have you going nuts part-way through this.”

Twilight shook her head. “Actually, I’m almost happier I’m clear minded right now.”

“Yeah, remember that you said that when the spell wears off, alright?”

Dawn stepped up to the edge of the memory bubble. She took a deep breath, and stepped inside. Even though the bubble itself was semi-transparent, she seemed to disappear completely.

“Don’t worry,” said Luna. “It’s safe. And Twilight, again, I’m sorry for dragging you into this, but you’re the only one who can convince Celestia of her wrong-doing. I know Seren’s methods are sometimes rash, but his mind is looking to a brighter future, one that will restore the natural order. We’re not meant to be two separate beings, a Dark and a Light personality. We’re meant to maintain balance within ourselves. If 1,000 years of reflection taught me anything, it’s that things cannot stay the way they are.”

Twilight kept a stoic face. “I’m not ready to abandon Celestia’s trust. But I’ll do whatever I think is right.”

Luna nodded somberly. “I understand, Twilight Sparkle. After you?” Luna extended a wing towards the bubble. Twilight stepped to edge, feeling the energy try to grab at her. Then she relented and entered into the glorious light, into a past forgotten by all except the three Alicorn that needed to answer for their actions.

Chapter 9

A Memory Bubble Within a Memory Bubble: Recollection

After Twilight entered into the memory bubble, she thought she had walked into a wall of snow. Her surroundings were a blindingly bright whiteness that seemed to extend forever, with no discernable ceiling or walls. She wasn't even certain what she was standing on.

Dawn clopped up besides Twilight, startling her. "The memory bubble is taking shape. Luna is guiding it to the point where Seren left off with his story."

"So what exactly happens here?"

"We will be placed into the very room that the events took place, at the same moment they did. We can watch the events from any angle or place of our choosing. The memory will play out exactly the way it truly did, unless we decide to interfere."

"Wait, we can interfere with the past?"

"Kind of. The greatest blessing of a memory bubble is the greatest curse. It allows us to see how events may have played out if we had been there, or if we were, if we had acted differently. Through trial and error, we can find a better solution to past problems. While this prepares us for the future, it tortures us, because we can never go back and change the past."

Luna suddenly appeared besides them. "It's ready. Now Twilight, you will see just why I became Nightmare Moon, just how Celestia defeated me, and why your ancestor died."

The whiteness slowly faded into a chaotic scene. Twilight found herself in the Everfree Forest castle in its prime, in the same room the mirror leading to LOTL now resided. At the moment, it seemed time had frozen. A group of ponies was charging through the doors, lead by Luna and a grey coated, dark haired Pegasus guard with ancient-style armor.

“That’s Seren.” Luna said. “He was known as Quicksilver at the time.” Then, tilting her head to the opposite side of the room, “Of course, that’s Celestia, and that beautiful mare is your ancestor, Gladebeam Shimmer.”

“Technically, mine too.” Said Dawn. “This is before the personalities had split. Everypony had a little bit of good and a little bit of bad in them. They still had to choose which side they were on.”

Luna nodded affirmation. “Sometimes it made life difficult. You could be betrayed, lied to, even treated horribly. But generally people would choose to be good. Even Seren, I believed then, as I do now, was justified though perhaps misguided.” She sighed, thinking for a moment, then continued “I am going to unfreeze the scene. It’s best if we don’t interfere at least the first time through. If you don’t intend to, the memory bubble won’t count any actions as interference. Are you ready Twilight?”

Twilight nodded, a lump in her throat. She needed to know the truth, and it was tantalizingly close.

The door burst open with a loud “BANG” from the force of Quicksilver’s telekinetic spell. Celestia and Gladebeam whipped around from their conversation to face the group of very serious looking ponies lead by Luna. Twilight noticed there weren’t any friendly looking guards present.

Celestia frowned. “What is this, Luna? What do you have planned?”

Luna too had a stone set face. “Only to claim what has become rightfully mine through your actions. Too long have the citizens of Equestria been following blindly in your footsteps, not realizing you’re actually making them more susceptible to the dangers of this world. Your actions concerning the dragons are unforgivable. The citizens fail to appreciate the work I’ve put into my half of the rule, my half of the day, giving you all the credit for the good I’ve done and conveniently forgetting the mistakes you make.”

Celestia returned a questioning and disapproving look. “Luna, these words aren’t your own. Who has twisted your mind..?” Her gaze fell on

Quicksilver, who headed the pack of magical pegasi, or Magisi. The others had been sent to hold off the rest of the castle with a Time Lock spell, as they would certainly be running to aid the Princess by now. Quicksilver scowled back.

“Ah, it’s you. Luna’s ‘personal assistant and advisor.’ How long have you been corrupting her?”

Quicksilver stomped his hoof. “It’s not corruption. I have done nothing except opened her eyes to the truth.”

Celestia snapped her gaze back to Luna. “Listen to me, Luna. You’re making a mistake by challenging me. I myself disapprove of the system of order I’ve been forced to create, but your way isn’t right either. Perhaps in time you’ll be able to see that.”

Luna’s nostrils flared. “Maybe I haven’t seen the whole picture. But I’ve seen more than enough to realize that you have fallen from the ideals we once shared.”

Celestia’s head dropped, shaking from side to side. “Luna, no good will come from this path. Turn back now while you still have the chance.”

“I can’t turn back, not while injustice presides. I challenge you for the throne.”

“Luna I-”

“Prepare yourself, sister.” Luna spat out the last word as if it pained her.

“LUNA! I HAVE NOT FINISHED SPEAKING.” The room grew dark as Celestia seemed to fill it. Twilight recognized it as an intimidation spell, another forbidden form of magic. Twilight began to have doubts. This was a side of Celestia she hadn’t seen, and she didn’t like.

“Well I’ve finished listening!” Luna’s horn glowed as she reared back into the air. She smashed the ground with her front hooves the same way Nightmare Moon would in 1,000 years time to destroy the physical Elements of Harmony. This time, however, the shockwave carried up the supportive pillars around the room and shattered the ceiling. The rubble fell

and vaporized as it hit the time lock bubble, and Sunlight began streaming through. But as Twilight watched the sky, a full moon appeared in a flash of light and eclipsed the Sun. The pseudo-light characteristic of the Land of the Lost now filled the room, giving the setting an ethereal feeling.

The moon gave another flash and a moonbeam fell onto Luna. It enveloped her and a dark Crescent Moon appeared at the center of the orb of brilliance. The light dissipated, and Nightmare Moon stood triumphantly in its place.

Celestia now seemed enraged, which scared Twilight. “Luna, you must listen to me. You’re not yourself. Change back or I will not hesitate to destroy you.”

Nightmare Moon laughed. Her voice was just as Twilight remembered it. “You couldn’t be more wrong, sister. I am the full manifestation of myself. I am the God of the Moon and Justice, and your crime has gone unpaid far too long. Sometimes Justice falls short, but as long as it has the backing of the people it represents, it shall remain undefeated.”

The mare of darkness suddenly switched from a smile to a hard set line of determination. “Now step aside and allow us to take the throne. Magic will be reintroduced to the lower classes, the natural order and strength of the pony race will be restored, and your punishment will be lessened.”

Celestia now had tears streaming through her frustration. “Luna you know why we can’t. Mother...”

“I am not Luna! I am Nightmare Moon! The pure essence of Justice and the Guiding Light of the Moon! I will lead the world into a time of eternal peace and calming night, and if you stand in my way, so be it. Let us end this.”

Celestia stood, sniffing. “Very well Luna. You leave me no choice.”

“You’ve had the choice to step down. You’ve had the choice to make the right decisions in the first place. The only thing you haven’t had a

choice over is the consequences of your actions. Your defiance will be your downfall.”

“No. It is the only thing that can save the future.” Celestia’s horn began to glow, flowing with pure magic. The tiny sliver of Sunlight that remained from the Solar Eclipse gathered around her in an orb of brilliance.

Just when the light became too much to look at, it formed into a pillar of fire that shot towards the heavens. The sun grew brighter around the solar eclipse, making the moon seem like only a minor barrier.

The pillar faded, leaving a very changed Celestia behind. Her mane had been replaced by brilliant flame, her delicate, decorative royal garb discarded for golden battle armor. Her eyes shone bright with the full fury of the sun.

Nightmare Moon smiled and gave a mocking bow. “Solar Flare, how wonderful it is to see you again. The God of Sun and Mercy. But I don’t suppose it is was mercy that allowed the entire population of Sweetbrook to be decimated, was it?”

Solar Flare stalked down the steps, leaving Gladebeam to stare down Quicksilver. Each step Solar Flare took left a rush of flames in its wake.

“Mercy is the ability to make decisions that benefit the greater good. Sometimes sacrifices must be made.”

“Never from your end though.” Nightmare Moon sneered.

“Always from my end. Each time I put another in harm’s way I wish that I could perish before them.”

“Yet,” Nightmare Moon began, a heavy weight filling the air. “As I recall, you stood by and allowed our parents to be murdered before my very eyes.”

Twilight’s jaw dropped. She had never heard much about the Alicorn’s parents, only that they had served a long and faithful rule. That

they were murdered, and that Celestia had allowed it, was almost too much to believe.

“Luna, you and I both know it wasn’t like that.”

“You’re going to tell me you didn’t? I invoke the sacred trust placed in Alicorns and demand that you tell me honestly: did you, or did you not have the ability to save our parents, and did you make any attempt to save them?”

Solar Flare gave Nightmare Moon a glare that made Twilight want to hide, its intensity was so great. After a pause, “Luna…”

“I’ve already told you, it’s Nightmare Moon! Until this is over, I shall remain so. I cannot have my judgments blinded by kinship or twisting words. If you won’t give me a straight answer, Solar Flare, then I’ll bring your ultimate condemnation. You and I both know that this event is far too significant to *not* make a memory bubble. So for our eternal remembrance, and whomever else is watching us, I will retrieve the damning evidence; the memory bubble created by our parent’s death.”

Solar Flare said nothing, only lowering her head. Gladebeam and Quicksilver clopped up next to the sides of the two sparring gods. Twilight stood in the middle, unsure of who to support. This past Celestia, this Solar Flare, was not the kind and loving teacher she knew. And her unwillingness to defend herself against these outrageous condemnations from Nightmare Moon shook Twilight’s beliefs at their core.

“Your silence speaks more than anything you could say.” Nightmare Moon’s horn glowed, and a distortion similar to the one Twilight had just gone through appeared. But rather than waiting for them enter, this new memory bubble expanded until it filled the whole room.

Again, Twilight was blinded by the whiteness, until it faded into a dimly lit room that looked like it would be in the same castle.

“The setting: About 700 years ago,” (Twilight realized that’d be 1,701 and a half years ago from her time) “six months before the wonderful Princess Celestia took the throne, as a direct result of this event. It was to

be the end of a long and glorious rule by our parents, Meddwl and Anadl, may their memory be praised. Let it also be remembered.”

The room itself was unusually small for the rooms in the castle, but it made it gave it a more warm feel. There was a small play pen whein an Alicorn filly that obviously Luna was gleefully stacking blocks. A younger, more carefree looking Celestia was engrossed in a book at the table in the center of the room. An Alicorn couple lay by the fireplace, proudly watching over their offspring. All in all, it was a perfect and happy family setting. Twilight almost found herself wishing she could be part of it.

The door suddenly burst open and almost all the light in the room was extinguished, leaving only what light came through the mostly shuttered window through. Twilight felt a sudden chill come over her. A tall, shadowy form filled the doorway.

The father Alicorn, Meddwl, stood up, placing himself between the apparation and his family. “Can I help you?” he asked.

The dark form stalked forawrd. “Yes,” it said. “Your reign has gone on long enough. I believe it is time for you to step down.”

“I beg your pardon? We’ve kept the world in order and peace, helping all work through their trials, teaching them to overcome their inner turmoil. Please, tell me what we’ve done that would merit such a request. Step into the light, friend, so I can see you.”

Twilight gave a gasp of shock as the now familiar Alicorn entered the light. It was Seren, looking even more powerful and confident than he had at the moon pool. How could he be here, 700 years before he even ascended to Godhood? Did Nightmare Moon know Quicksilver would become her parent’s killer?

Meddwl frowned. “Son, please help me understand your grievances.”

Luna peeked out from behind her father. Seren’s hardened look softened. “One day you’ll understand...” he whispered. He then returned his attention to Meddwl. “Your mistake is that you’ve produced her.” He nodded to a very confused and slightly scared Celestia.

“What has she done? She’s just a child! We’ve taught her nothing ubt how to be a wise, and kind ruler, one day to follow in our footsteps.”

“It’s not what she’s done, it’s what she will do. And sadly, the day she has to follow you is this one.”

Without warning, Seren attacked. He swung his head forward, sharpened horn lightning fast.

Meddwl, however, matched his speed with his reaction, blocking the attack with his own horn. "Who are you? Why do you wish evil on my family?"

"Because your daughter creates nothing but evil for me."

Meddwl suddenly caught on. "A Time Walker? But that's forbidden! The paradoxes that invariably follow are threatening to the very fabric of existence! And you're telling me you're abusing your power to harm my daughter?"

Seren gave a laugh that Twilight found even more chilling than Nightmare Moon's. "No, not to harm your daughter" he said, giving another swing with the horn that Meddwl again blocked. "Just to kill you and your beautiful wife. Like you said, the paradoxes threaten existence, and specifically, my existence. Which happens to be defined by the choices Celestia makes after your death."

"My death?! And just how do you plan to kill a God?"

"By attacking the source of his power. You are the God of Honor and the Void. Your wife, Anadl, is the God of Love and the Breath. Neither of you would allow me to do any harm to your daughters. Am I not correct?"

"You are. I would defend my daughters to the end."

"Then choose."

With a flash of light, Seren was suddenly behind Meddwl, his horn to Celestia's neck. "Renounce your Godhood, and I will allow Celestia to live. In fact, beyond that, she'll even avenge your death. She destroys me in 700 year's time. If you don't, I'll kill her. She hasn't God-tiered yet, and is therefore mortal."

"But as you just implied, she's heavily tied to your past! If you kill her, you will be wiped from time!"

“But you’re wrong. It’s already happened. You’re already dead. You’re going to make the choice, because if you don’t, you’ll lose your power anyway. By denying your first Title, the title of Honor, you’ll become mortal. Trust me, I’ve planned this for a thousand years. There’s no way around it.”

Meddwl took a step back, recoiling in despair. “You promise you won’t hurt them? I have your word as an Alicorn?”

Seren nodded. “I won’t. Not as long as I live.”

“And you’ll leave this timeline and return to your own.”

“I will.”

Meddwl bowed his head. “I only hope you will come to realize the need for redemption. I don’t know how you God-tiered, but know this; a God is meant for good and guidance only. You can’t go on like this without destroying yourself.”

Seren tossed his head to show his indifference. “We’ll see about that. Now renounce your godhood. You too, God of Love.”

Anadl joined her husband, both looking regal yet distraught. “Girls,” Anadl said. Her voice was both melodic and full of sadness. “Do not seek retribution for this. Allow us to die in both Honor and Love. Celestia, I am sorry to place the kingdom on your shoulders so soon. But you’ll do a fine job. Luna, though you’re young, know that you are meant for greatness. You and your sister are part of a bigger picture, and only by working together will you get anywhere.”

“Mommy?” asked Luna, her young, naive eyes fully of questions. Celestia only stood, too shocked to react.

Seren shook his mane. “Alright, let’s get on with this then.”

Meddwl and Anadl touched necks in a sad, loving way. Then they began a slow, mourning song.

“Rwy'n ymwrthod y rhodd a roddwyd gan y gorchymyn yn y bydysawd. Rwy'n rhoi'r gorau i'r privileiges a chyfrifoldebau, a dychwelyd fy hun i'r Ynni. Mai corff pasio i ffwrdd ac yn y dyfodol yn cymryd gafael.”

As they sang, their bodies began to glow, growing brighter and brighter until the very end, when it dispersed like a plume of smoke.

The two former Gods stood back to face Seren. “We hold you to your promises through our blood.”

“I accept the terms, and demand the payment promised.”

“We pay with our lives, that the future may be protected.”

Seren lowered his horn, a spell beginning to form.

“Mother...” Celestia managed. “Father...don't go.”

With one last flash of light, the two Alicorn disappeared. Seren stood alone, his back to the two young sisters. “And now, I go.”

A rift opened in front of him, black ethereal tendrils pouring out. They latched onto his body, pulled him in, and the room was silent.

The light returned.