

Night's Favored Child

By Municipal Engines



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Prologue

Midnight Hunt

The midnight sky was bright, unnaturally so. The stars lit the world like lamps and the moon was as brilliant as a searchlight. A fitting description, as the master of the night was indeed on the hunt. Soldiers were flocking the streets of the city and all the inhabitants were ordered to clear the streets and remain inside their homes. Any unfortunate soul to be found on the streets was deemed a possible rebel and was to be detained. Detainment for suspected rebels usually included an 'interrogation' by the infamous Blackcloaks.

But despite the very real fear of 'interrogation', two figures were making their way through the mountainside city of Canterlot. Hugging the shadows and moving from one pitch black alleyway to another, the figures did their best to avoid passing patrols of armoured troops. After one such group walked beyond a certain gloomy crevice between buildings, the pair darted across the street to the next hiding place. A brief moment under the shine of a street lamp revealed the figures in full; a mare and a stallion. The female held tightly and magically to her body a basket with a bundle inside.

"This way, dear," the male whispered, motioning to a corner in the maze of backstreets that was their saving road to escape.

It took the two quite some time to reach their goal, a building at the edge on the city. It stood alone, with little in the way of neighbouring structures. They both knew that meant there was hardly any cover, and so hardly any time to do what needed to be done. The mare brought the basket out in front of them and peeled back of the cloth enough to reveal a face. It was a baby foal, blissfully asleep under the light of the moon.

"She looks so peaceful," the mother said weakly, tears beginning to form in her eyes.

The stallion's mouth curved upwards in a small smile. "Thank goodness she is asleep. Otherwise this would be so much harder than it already is."

"Do we have to do this?" the mare looked to her partner with blurry eyes.

“Yes, it is what’s best for her,” he said. “It’s only a matter of time until we’re caught, and she cannot be found with us when that happens.”

“But an orphanage... is that really the best place for her?”

“All of our friends are either on the run themselves or can’t take in our daughter. Don’t worry, I know the owner of this place, she is in good hands. She’ll find a new family, and have a normal life with a normal foalhood. That’s something we could never give her even if we kept her.”

“I hope so,” the mother looked to her child again, tears now falling freely down her face.

Together with the slumbering filly, the lovers walked to the large doorstep of the orphanage. Carefully placing the basket in front of the door, the two ponies took several minutes to look for one final time at their daughter. The mare knelt down to kiss the foal.

“Goodbye, my darling,” she whispered. “We will always love you.”

Her eyes were still glued to the filly until the stallion called her name. She wrenched herself from the doorstep and walked away with her husband, who rang the doorbell as they turned back and headed for the cold, gloomy streets of Canterlot.

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With lamps lit on every road and park, there was scarcely a shadow to hide in. The capital city of Equestria was alive, but not with people. Legions of guardsponies, even more than earlier, coursed through the streets like blood through veins. The quiet night was disturbed by their marching. Anypony who peeked out of their windows would notice the great lengths that were unfolding during the hunt. Some would even say that the hunter may have been getting desperate. None would have said that to her face.

Standing tall and regal, the hunter looked about her city. It was long into the search, and no street had been left unguarded. She wanted as many guards on the pursuit as could be managed. Her instructions had been

clear: no road unchecked and no city block unlit. She needed the fugitives to be found.

A stallion, a large and muscular pegasus dressed in the armour of an officer, marched formally up to her. His stoic face revealed little to none of his emotions, but through subtle body quirks, the mare could tell he was apprehensive. So he should be – she had directed her anger on several people that night. He bowed low in front of her, lower than most soldiers usually bowed. Obviously the news was not good.

“Your Majesty,” he said. “I regret to inform you that we have not, as of yet, found the fugitives.”

Despite expecting this news, she scowled at the stallion. “Then why have you bothered to report to me. Did I not make it clear enough the first time around that I wanted only good news or no news at all?”

“I apologise Your Majesty,” he bowed his head. “I only wished to report the situation so that you may act accordingly and wisely, as you always do.”

Her scowl deepened. “I am in no mood for any sycophantic idiocy today, Captain Clipper. I want results. Don’t bother coming back to me if you haven’t found them, unless you desire my wrath.”

“Yes Your Majesty. Right away Your Majesty.”

He was soon off, not bothering to march as he ran. The Empress would have chuckled at the sight of such a strong and accomplished soldier scurry away in a panic like that, but she was more focussed on worrying about the fugitives. Had they escaped the city? Did they deliver their stolen item? What were they planning to use it for?

The dozens minutes passed as she waited for good news. The huntress sat on a chariot, pulled by strong pegasus ponies clad in the finest armour. Her Honour Guard was fiercely loyal and capable, although they were mostly used as a show regiment in ceremonies and for carrying her around Equestria. The monarch had originally thought that they would be nothing more than that, as it was widely believed that nopony was brave or stupid enough to break into the palace. But, somehow, somepony had.

Out of the corner of her dragon-like eyes, the regal mare saw a pony trotting casually and confidently towards her. The form was draped in a long black leather cloak with boots that matched the imposing outfit, and wore a pair of tinted goggles. The empress knew this pony – the head of the Blackcloaks and her closest advisor. He was the only one who was so casual around her, the only one who had the gall to occasionally voice his own opinions.

“I trust this is good news, Inquisitor,” she growled.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” he said, bowing slightly. “If it were otherwise, I would have sent one of my subordinates.”

The mare allowed herself a quick smirk before continuing. “So you have found them?”

The advisor gave a short bow before calling over to a group of Blackcloaks. They came forward, their steps seeming to have been choreographed to create an air of tension; even now, every fibre of their being seemed to be focussed on the goal of fear and intimidation. It was what impressed the Empress the most, and what disturbed her the most. Very few things disturbed the mare, and the Blackcloaks were at the top of that list.

The Blackcloaks split down the middle, revealing two chained and slightly beaten ponies. A blue stallion and a light grey mare with a purple and white-streaked mane. They were forced to kneel before the tall, pitch black Empress, who sneered at them.

“You two have caused me quite a bit of trouble tonight,” the Empress chuckled. “Breaking into my palace, then into my vault and running out again. Such a dangerous mission, all to steal a little trinket.”

“I think we both know that it’s far from a ‘little trinket’,” the stallion said.

“So you do know what it is?” she smiled wryly. “I had wondered what you were hoping to accomplish with it. Not that it matters now—”

The stallion then did a surprising thing. He laughed. It was small and out of breath, but the empress could hear every ounce of defiance and contempt

that the pony had for her in that laugh. She narrowed her slit-pupil eyes at the prisoner.

“What is it that you find so funny?” she growled.

“You’ll never find it,” he spat. “We’ve hidden it and even if you search for a thousand more years, you’ll never find your ‘little trinket’.”

And he still laughed. Even the mare next to him contributed a weak smile. Anger swelled within the huntress, making her shake. The insolence of this criminal was overwhelming. What was more; she saw something in the mare’s eyes, something that should not have been there. Hope.

“Take them away,” she hissed. “Find out all you can from them and then kill them.”

The Blackcloaks swarmed on the two, silencing the rebellious stallion with a couple of hard blows. As the ponies were dragged away, the male screamed out to the night.

“The dawn will come!”

Those words scared the Queen of the Night more than anything had in a very long time.

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On the outskirts of Canterlot, where the buildings thinned and space became ever more plentiful, a very important basket lay on the doorstep of an orphanage. The cold night air was picking up just as the doorbell rang. The door opened and out stepped unicorn, brown in colour and with a grey mane that curled down her neck like mist. Looking around, she saw no pony around in the midnight cold, and was about to head back inside when she heard a soft, quiet yawn from below.

Looking down, she saw a baby filly. Purple, with a curious mane of dark blue and a streak or two of pink and yet more purple. A small horn could be just seen poking out of its hair. A bundle of cloth was wrapped around the foal, protecting it from the chill of the sunless day. In the basket alongside the infant were a letter and a small box.

“Well, what do we have here?” murmured the mare, bending down to pick up the basket, still staring at the filly. “Who in their right mind would want to leave you all alone out here?”

Her gaze shifted to the letter, as she guessed that it would answer her question. Still holding the basket and the foal, she opened the letter and read:

Dear Wake,

This letter is not the way I want you to receive my daughter and this basket, but I had no other option. The walls are closing around us, I'm afraid, and there's little else I can do. If you get this, then it means that we have succeeded and have stolen one of the most precious items in the world from the Usurper. It also means that I am most likely dead. We have placed our daughter in your care, in the hope that you raise her as you do with all of those in your care. Please give her a normal foalhood that any normal filly would have. Please tell her how much she means to us, and that we didn't abandon her without good reasons.

As for the box, that too is important. I want you to hide it away in a place that nopony will ever find. Protect it and keep it safe until the Movement has rebuilt itself and recuperated from its losses. I apologise for using our codenames again, but if this letter was to fall into the wrong hands, then our identities must remain anonymous. Thank you for everything you've done for us. You have always been a good friend. The Dawn will come.

Your friend and comrade, Crescent.

The mare sighed and put the letter back into the basket. She glimpsed something written on the back. A name for the foal. She smiled and looked at the blissfully sleeping filly.

“Let's get you inside and warmed up,” she said. “You have a long life ahead of you, little Twilight Sparkle.”

Chapter One

First Meeting

Little Twilight Sparkle had grown without the care of a mother, or a father. Instead she had the care of a matron, Miss Loch Mare, which while good, was not as satisfactory. Though loving, the love was divided between the several dozen other orphans Twilight lived with. To make matters worse, Miss Loch was a very busy pony, and her assistants were more like big sisters than adequate substitute parents.

Twilight was a filly that, despite however hard Miss Loch would try to get her to socialize, found it awkward or unwanted when she 'hung out' with the other foals. She preferred to study and read all the books she could find. This was much to the disappointment of Loch, but the adult pony let Twilight do what made her happy. It hadn't been long until her constant reading caused her to be the recipient of many jokes and jibes by the fillies and colts of the orphanage. Some were good natured, such as saying that her cutie mark should be a book. Others were... much less so. It was from such foals as the latter bunch that Twilight learned that ponies can be very cruel indeed.

Nopony even knew where this thirst for knowledge came from. Miss Loch suggested that it had been inherited from one of her birth parents while one of the assistant ponies, a psychologist in training, suggested it was the result of some sort of inner resentment towards ponies for the feeling of betrayal caused by her orphaning. All Twilight knew was that she very much liked to read.

But one of her other and more recent passions had a direct cause that Twilight remembered vividly. It began on the night of the Annual Eclipse, when the country would celebrate as the Empress used her vast magical capabilities to turn the moon black and make light play around its edges. Twilight had run off from the orphanage to see this event. The night was warmer than usual, and the square was filled with ponies of all races and ages.

In the middle of the square, a platform had been raised. On it was the

Honour Guard of the royal household, always emotionless. They were dressed in armour more ornate than that of the average soldier. As they blew on the trumpets to announce the empress, Twilight could barely contain her excitement.

At the fanfare, a regal pony walked into viewing. Sporting a horn and a pair of large wings, the mare was unlike anything Twilight had ever seen. She had a coat that was a shimmering black like obsidian, and a mane of deep violet ether. It was filled with the night sky – an infinite myriad of stars and constellations that floated about freely; the tresses danced as pure magic. The mare wore polished silver armour that gleamed in the moonlight. Her eyes were teal and catlike, adding a supernatural beauty to her.

Everypony bowed, as this was the immortal Empress of Equestria, Nightmare Moon, and respect for her was expected. Twilight, in her youthful innocence, did not know that domineering ponies in black kept a vigilant watch out for any insubordinate member of the audience, so a 'casual reminder' could be given that such disrespect for the Empress was frowned upon.

"Rise, my subjects," she commanded in a soft but firm voice. They did as they were told, standing back up, and she continued the ceremony.

Her horn sparkled with an aura of magic. The outline of energy grew more vibrant and shifted into a translucent sheen that covered the horn. As it grew more and more opaque, the sky reacted to Nightmare Moon's will. The moon skirted across the sky and under the horizon. Then, she spread her wings and launched herself into the air, flapping higher and higher. As she did this, the moon again rose from the horizon, but this time it was shrouded in darkness with a light like fire dancing on its periphery. The farther the Empress climbed in the air, the more the transformed moon ascended. This continued, until at last the orb was at its highest position in the sky. For added effect, a flash of light was produced, and Nightmare Moon touched gracefully back down onto the platform.

A simultaneous gasp rippled through the crowd and, once their ruler was finished, a cheer. The eclipse would last for the rest of the night, the centrepiece of the festival until Nightmare Moon would lower it for the evening. Twilight did not join in on the cheer, but was instead mesmerised by what the Empress did. The way her horn reacted fascinated her and the

whole ordeal captured her imagination. It was from that moment that Twilight wanted to learn everything she could about magic.

And so over the weeks following the Eclipse Festival, Twilight Sparkle poured herself into every book and every resource she could get her hooves on – all were about magic. From the histories to the theories to the intricate diagrams and instructions on how to perform spells. She learnt the difference between curses, enchantments, hexes and conjurations. Unfortunately, many texts were out of reach from ponies as young and unimportant as her; tomes locked away in the palace and scrolls that wizards would never let just anypony borrow. Still, the little filly devoured all the books she could find.

Miss Loch had, like most of Twilight's interests, indulged the filly. This behaviour had been common throughout her time at the orphanage. When Twilight developed an interest in something, she would latch on and spend large chunks of her free time studying and analysing the subject. In the beginning, Loch Mare worried that this behaviour was counterproductive to a growing mind, and that play was healthier than study for Twilight, but soon the purple unicorn stood her ground and the matron had soon given in.

It hadn't been long until Twilight began begging Miss Loch to try and enrol her in the famed Imperial Academy for Gifted Unicorns. Twilight knew that if she was able to get into that school, then she could fully explore what she felt was her true passion and calling. To her surprise, Miss Loch had at first kept dodging the request and tried to take Twilight's mind off of the subject. But the more she refused, the more Twilight hardened her position and continued to implore her caretaker to help her achieve her desires. In the end, Miss Loch had reluctantly sent forth the application form.

Now Twilight was walking with Loch Mare down the halls of the academic wing of the palace grounds. The young filly's nervousness was evident to all. Even Miss Loch had subtle contours of worry on her face. As the marble floors echoed with their hoofsteps, Twilight noticed how empty it was.

"I've read about the Academy," she said suddenly. "They hardly ever accept students unless they're really gifted. What if I'm not good enough? What if I fail? Or if they gave away the last position and I can't get in? What

if—”

“Twilight, *breathe*,” Miss Loch cut in.

Twilight stopped talking and tried to calm down, focussing on inhaling and exhaling and not on her jitters. She knew that there was an entrance exam for the Academy; apparently a string of tests to measure a unicorn’s skills and smarts. She had no idea what the exam would entail, but she could make an educated guess of the difficulty of it. How gifted was she? She had no idea what her calling in life was, being a blank-flank. Twilight felt, deep down in her heart, that it had something to do with magic and all those things she read about.

“Remember Twilight,” the adult pony said to her. “Just be calm and smile. I’m confident that you’ll pass, but even if you don’t, it isn’t as if your entire life hangs in the balance.”

Somehow, the filly felt otherwise.

The two came to the end of the hall. To their right was a set of double doors. Passing through them, they walked into a large lecture hall. A dusty blackboard was facing the lines of seats, each row rising above the one in front of it. As Twilight’s eyes darted nervously around the room, she took in the globe and lectern in the corner, the carvings and the flags that hung on the wall. Each was different, but all were dwarfed by the two that hung either side of the chalkboard, bearing the crescent moon emblem of Equestria.

Surprisingly, Miss Loch had been allowed to be present in the room with Twilight for emotional support. Not only that, but she had been encouraged to remain in the lecture hall. The purple unicorn expected Miss Loch to have had to stay outside the exam room, but this reaction made her wonder whether it was part of the test – to put a little extra pressure on the hopefuls. Or was she just being paranoid?

“Remember, smile and remain calm,” Miss Loch whispered to Twilight as she crossed the room to take her place to the side. Twilight managed an anxious smile.

There were four judges at the back of the room, looking down at her in

expressions that looked somewhat like boredom. All were unicorns, and all wore similar dull outfits of shirts and vests and tweed as each other. As she grinned nervously, the doors opened and a cart was pushed into the room. It was full of hay, in which was resting a large purple egg. There was a sign on the cart, indicating clearly through drawings what the little pony was supposed to do. Hatch the egg.

“Well, Miss Sparkle?” a judge said expectantly.

The filly gave a small, trembling chuckle.

The judges simply picked up their clipboards and jotted down some notes.

Gulping, Twilight felt the gravity of the situation fully. The invigilators seemed bent on taking every action on her part and evaluating it. *Is that how it was for the whole selection process of the school, or is it just the judges’ own method of doing things?* She shook her head and those thoughts away. She could not afford irrelevant questions distracting her. She needed to focus.

Stepping back, she lowered her head and pointed her horn at the egg. Twilight did not know the spell to hatch an egg, but she had to try anyway. Straining, she willed her horn to hatch the egg. Some weak sparks of magic jumped from her horn, but other than that, nothing happened. She tried again, straining harder and grunted from the effort. She tried to see the egg in her mind and crack it and somehow transfer this process to her horn’s magical properties, but again she failed. Once more, she closed her eyes and concentrated, but when she opened them the egg hadn’t moved at all. There were no cracks, or even signs that anything she was trying was working.

One of the invigilators yawned loudly and another looked at her watch before returning her apathetic gaze to Twilight.

“We *don’t* have all day,” she said callously.

Panic struck the little unicorn at that moment. The four ponies judging her every move in the test were growing increasingly irritated with her and she continued to try and hatch the dragon egg. She tried everything; different positions, different mental approaches and – when she became desperate

– even waving her forelegs at it. If sheer will and desperation were enough, she might have passed the test. But every time, the egg remained intact. She gave one last attempt, focussing with all her might and pushing all of her muscles to their limit. When she held her breath and gave a final push, the tip of her horn glowed and more sparks of magic sprung out. Then that was it, the filly could exert herself no more and collapsed exhausted on the ground.

Twilight's spirits plummeted. A realisation dawned on her, one that broke her heart to admit. This had been the single most important day of her life – determining her very future – and she blew it. She could feel a tightness in her chest and tears begin to collect in her eyes, but she forced them down. Many emotions welled within her, and she knew that she would look back at this night with regret for the rest of her life. Pulling herself to her hooves, she hung her head in defeat and looked up at the adjudicators with heavy eyes.

“I’m sorry I wasted your time.”

The words barely escaped her mouth. Twilight could have given anything for the whole outcome of the exam to have changed. But, as the four unicorns were writing on their clipboards, an explosion shocked the fragile Twilight Sparkle. Then she lost all control.

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Basking in the noontime glow of her moon, the Empress strolled casually through the palace grounds. She often had these sorts of walks. Relegating a fair portion of government responsibility had allowed her an abundance of leisure time. Day-to-day affairs were handled by a parliament that was supervised by a council of loyal delegates. While they were all involved equally in the decision-making in theory, the Empress had a feeling that the head of the Blackcloaks had them all answering to him. This, of course, was something to be corrected at some point, but they were doing such a good job that she figured that the means justified the result.

The Inquisitor, the aforementioned commander of the Blackcloaks and her closest advisor, had first come to her a very long time ago. His service to her was so long and flawless that he blurred into her memory, making it hard to pinpoint how long ago he actually arrived to her. It almost felt as if

he had been with her since the beginning. Nightmare Moon had no idea whether he was young or old, but she felt that by now at least a few bones in the pony's body should be getting weaker. By still now he was more vibrant and busy than ever, which unsettled the winged unicorn. He never even gave her a name, saying that he had none and only used titles. All those decades ago, the strange stallion had introduced himself as 'The Inquisitor' and nothing more. Even back then, he seemed confident in front of the closest thing Equestria had to a living god.

Where Nightmare walked, ponies bowed graciously before carrying on with their business. She could see their faces as they saw her. Most ponies in Equestria had learned centuries ago not to fear the Empress when seeing her in person. Most of the palace's staff had stopped regarding her with awe at around the same time. Now they all had looks of respect whilst some simply bowed as a formality, wishing to simply get back to their tasks. The Empress had learned long, long ago that she had far more important things to do than waste her time scolding her subjects simply for acclimatising to her. In the earlier days of her reign, it would irritate her when onlookers did not react with awe and fear, but now it didn't bother her at all. In fact, she liked being treated this way.

The alicorn looked up into the sky, as she so often did. A content smile came to her lips. Her country was prosperous under her watchful and firm rule, and despite a certain few restrictions, the populace was generally happy. The peacefulness of the night was eternal, and the beauty of the dark, star-filled sky was constant. So she smiled, knowing that this all was just the way she wanted it to be, the way it should be. Then, something suddenly broke that peace.

A deafening explosion swept the calm aside and a massive circle of colour rippled across the sky. Even with her innate magic-based sixth sense, Nightmare Moon could tell that the explosion originated from Cloudsdale. *I know what that is*, she thought. *Some pegasus has performed a sonic rainboom!* She had heard of it, but it had been widely believed to be nothing more than an old mare's tale.

It was at that moment that she felt something else. Something raw and powerful and completely out of control. The Empress could sense it clearly – a magical presence unlike anything she had ever known before. *Certainly no normal pony could have produced that?* Her deepest fears immediately

sprang to mind, before Nightmare Moon buried it. It was a new aura, not with the 'flavour' of her ancient nemesis, and not as powerful as an alicorn's own magic, so definitely it was a unicorn. As she rationalised her worries away, a voice called to her in her mind.

Your Majesty, came the oily sound of the Inquisitor's speech. *I know you felt that too.*

Yes, Inquisitor, I did. It is from the academic wing. I will meet you there.

She was at the location of the incident within a heartbeat. Concentrating on the Imperial Academy for Gifted Unicorns, the obsidian-black pony transplanted herself from her position to a new one just outside the school. With a flash, she was at the site and, unsurprisingly, the Inquisitor was there also. He wore his usual uniform and goggles and was looking at a building, which was clearly in bad shape. A large, fairly innocent-looking dragon had its head poking out of a fresh hole in the roof. Flashes of light came within and arcs of energy shot out from the windows and holes in the roof. The two magically-inclined ponies could feel the energy in the air, a certain heat that was undetectable to most ponies radiating from the Academy. The hair on their bodies stood on end at the energies seeping from the building.

Narrowing her eyes, Nightmare launched into a sprint, determined to find the source of the untamed maelstrom of magic. She ran through the entrance to the Academy and down the halls, rounding corners at full speed. Teleporting into the room would have been a bad idea, since she had no idea what was there. The Empress needed to see what was happening before jumping in to the situation.

When she rounded the last corner, she slowed down to the set of doors that had been left wide open. Light spilled from the room within. The alicorn walked to the doorway and looked inside the room. She saw a place where classes and lectures were held, and several pools of glowing purple-white aura, as well as what looked like an oversized baby dragon. One surrounded four ponies and their belongings, all being held up in the air. Another held a potted fern within it whilst the last one was surrounding the surprising origin of the magic. A small purple filly unicorn.

Such ability at such a young age was unheard of. *This unicorn* – Nightmare

Moon contemplated – *in the future could be a valuable asset or a dangerous enemy*. Whether she would be one or the other would depend on how she was raised, and if she was taught how to control this raw power inside of her. The Empress smiled slyly. After a few moments of thought, she knew exactly what to do with the filly. But first things first, she needed to control the situation.

Stepping forwards to the filly, Nightmare Moon reached out with a hoof and placed it on the possessed pony's shoulder. The filly turned her head around and stared at her with shining white eyes that were like burning windows into infinity; the mark that pure, untamed magic was swirling around in the unicorn's head. The Empress had to be careful with how she played this. She smiled sweetly and gave a reassuring nod to the little purple unicorn. The filly returned her gaze with a sad, regretful look. The blinding white faded from her eyes and, with a flash, the aura vanished from her and the pony was set onto the ground. Three more flashes around the room revealed a dazzled and petrified group of ponies returning to normal – one in much more of a daze from her brief stint as a plant – and an oblivious baby dragon, now sucking its own tail.

"What is your name?" she asked; a firmer and more formal tone slipping back into place.

"I... I'm so sorry. I didn't–"

"What is your name?" the Empress repeated, softer in tone this time.

"Twilight Sparkle, Your Majesty," she answered sheepishly, looking down at the floor.

Twilight? That's not a word I should be hearing. The lack of a day had banished words like 'dawn', 'dusk' and 'twilight' from the lexicon. So how was it that this filly's name had a word not used in almost a thousand years? Her interest piqued, Nightmare Moon slowly crouched to the unicorn's level.

"Who are your parents, Miss Sparkle?" she asked.

"I don't know," Twilight winced slightly. "I don't have any."

An orphan then; perhaps her parents named her, or others did. No matter, it's a mystery that can be resolved at a later time. She stood back up and smiled knowingly.

"I don't think I've ever come across a unicorn with your raw abilities before," she said in a regal voice. "It is a very special gift that you have, but one that must be controlled and tamed if you are to use it properly."

The young pony looked up at the Empress with a confused expression plastered across her face and let out an equally confused "huh?" The innocent little filly drew shocked looks from the other adult ponies in the room; surprised by what they saw as callousness in front of the ruler of Equestria.

"Twilight Sparkle, I want you to study as my personal protégée here at the Academy," Nightmare said.

Twilight was speechless. Her eyes were wide as she took in what the Empress had said. She looked over at the unicorn mare to the side, who was equally locked in a baffled silence. Turning back to the starry-haired alicorn and nodded hastily with barely contained excitement.

"Excellent, now wait outside while I talk to your guardian," Nightmare Moon said. When the filly left, the Empress turned to the four adjudicators at the back of the room. "You all can leave. Your work here is done."

They sprinted for the door, very visibly relieved at their escape. Walking up to the other pony left in the room, Nightmare Moon looked down at the mare. She cleared her throat.

"You are the guardian of Twilight Sparkle, correct?" she said.

"Yes, Your Majesty, my name is Loch Mare and I'm the head of an orphanage at the edge of the city," the unicorn said, bowing her head respectfully.

"Good, then I must inform you that I intend to take Twilight to live with me at the palace," informed the Empress.

"Um, is that really necessary," Loch Mare answered in a timid voice. "I

mean, why does she need to stay at the palace?"

Nightmare Moon lost some of her reserved demeanour at this; "Do you question my judgement?"

"N-no Your Majesty!" the mare bowed her head a little lower.

"It is not a request that Twilight Sparkle live in my palace, it is a royal decree," after this, her voice softened slightly. "Besides, where do you think Twilight would prefer to live, at your orphanage or at the Imperial Palace?"

"Well, she—"

"If you like, you can think of this as an adoption," the Empress said in a faux-cheerful tone before letting her smile drop. "One that you have no say in."

"Of course," the mare bit her lip.

"Oh come now, I am sure that you can visit from time to time, if Twilight wants you," she said, turning away and walking towards the exit. "And if I allow you."

She strode out with a maliciously entertained disposition. Waiting, in a happily jittery state, was the little purple unicorn filly. She had been staring at her own flank until Nightmare Moon came out of the room. Arching an eyebrow, the Empress looked at the spot that had preoccupied so much of Twilight's attention. It was her cutie mark, a large six-pointed star – the same pink colour as a streak on her mane – with several smaller white stars with the same number of points.

"That's new, I take it?" she asked.

"Oh yes, it is!" Twilight replied enthusiastically, before furrowing her brow. "What does it mean though?"

"I'd guess it represents the spark of magic," the Empress rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "And that's magic in general, not a specific kind. Your talent is extremely rare."

“Really?”

“Yes, it is, so that is why I decided to help you nurture it.”

“Thank you Your Majesty,” the filly smiled sweetly.

“Don’t mention it,” she smiled back and walked away, before calling back to her new mentee.

“Do tell that mare in there that you’re to move to the palace by tomorrow.”

“Yes Your Majesty!” the excited filly replied, dashing off into the ruined room.

As she made for the exit, Nightmare Moon thought about the future and what it held for her and little Twilight Sparkle. She had never had an apprentice before, but she felt that she could handle it. Twilight would be an excellent asset when she came of age. What’s more, the filly seemed to actually like Nightmare in an awestruck way. Very rarely did the Empress get to experience a foal’s admiration. All in all, the immortal pony ruler of Equestria felt that this would be the beginning of something new for both her and Twilight.

Chapter Two

Filly at the Festival

The pair waited until those who wanted to go to the Eclipse Festival had left to spring their plan. Miss Loch, as she did every year, had elected to stay behind. Twilight could never understand the mare's problem with the Festival, but she figured that it was just another adult being a stick in the mud. Nevertheless, the building was almost empty with the staff out chaperoning the Festival-goers. It was perfect.

Orion, as it turned out, was remarkably adept at sneaking out of places. It showed in his preparation and execution of what they fondly titled 'Operation Enduring Freedom'. A recorder had been set to play the sounds of Twilight snoring, the door had been locked and, as an extra precautionary measure, Orion had created some pillow-based effigies of the unicorn under her covers.

Twilight and he then lassoed a rope onto a nearby thick branch of an old oak tree. Making sure it was sturdy, Orion swung across to land on a lower branch. Helping Twilight do the same, they quickly scampered onto the ground. Now firmly entrenched on the soil, they scanned the area. No pony was around, and the only lights on were coming from the foster home and the epicentre of the city. Orion motioned for Twilight to follow him.

They raced along the darkness-shrouded field that separated the orphanage from the rest of the city. Twilight kept close by Orion, who skulked along the ground as fast and stealthy as a Shadowbolt. She had a hard time keeping up. In the corner of her eye, she saw a mass of blurs and light. Realisation quickly came to her, and she called out to Orion in a frantic half-whisper.

"Orion, there's some ponies coming this way!"

Orion skidded to a halt. He whipped around and grabbed Twilight. Silent to her still, he darted to the closest bush and motioned her behind it. Twilight saw from behind the leaves and twigs of the bush a light draw near to them. Orion turned around to face it calmly.

“Orion?” a familiar rural voice rang out.

“It’s me, Miss Apple Orchid.”

“Whatcha doin’ out here by yourself?” she asked, raising an eyebrow quizzically. “Alone, in the dark.”

“I’m just taking a mid-evening stroll,” the colt replied, flicking his eyes upwards towards the night sky. “The stars are really vivid tonight.”

“Ah take it you’re not gonna come with us to the Festival?”

“I don’t think so; I don’t really get along well in crowds,” he lied effortlessly. “I’d just like a quiet night alone.”

“Fair enough,” Apple Orchid smiled.

The counsellor then trotted away, bidding Orion a good night and joining her group of foals. As they resumed their previous course, Twilight breathed a sigh of relief. After several more minutes of patient – or, in Twilight’s case, impatient – waiting, the pair of young ponies resumed their own illicit escapade. Crossing the field, they arrived at the hub of city blocks that was Canterlot.

It was not long before the buildings became closer and closer together and larger too. The streets grew narrower as the pair of foals made their way to the square – though, keeping with Canterlot architecture, the roads were still quite spacious. Twilight couldn’t help but become slightly afraid at the hustle and bustle of the city. Despite the Festival occurring, there were plenty of ponies walking about, with carriages trundling up and down the centre of the road. An aloof and prideful noble glanced down at the pair with something like disdain. *Bully*, said her instincts. *Don’t draw attention.*

The white colt’s own face was mirroring those of the other Canterlotians. However, his was a softer somehow more dignified look of withdrawal. It was a common look on the stoic colt. Orion, ever since he had moved into Twilight’s room, never showed much in the way of feelings, except whenever he became engrossed in a particular train of thought, or entrapped by one of the many pet projects he liked to do. Neither did he

divulge much of his past to Twilight. He was a couple of years older than her, which had confused her at first; she'd expected a roommate her own age. Orion never spoke much about his life before the orphanage. From what Twilight had gathered, he came from a small town called Ponyville. All he would say about his family was their tradition of naming foals after star patterns. It sounded like he had lost his parents rather recently, but Twilight didn't press him to talk about it – sometimes she woke in the middle of the night to hear Orion crying quietly on the other side of the room, and that was explanation enough. She had never told him she knew.

Following Orion, Twilight turned the corner of a road and was faced with a sight that made her both excitedly giddy and irritatingly nauseous. Her stomach was full of butterflies intent on smashing their way out of her body, seeming to try and push through her throat. The unicorn forced the feeling of sickness down and focused on the scenery. Pavilions, gazebos, stalls and rides of all kinds stood in the square. A large ferris wheel caught her eyes, her eyes followed the motion of the ride for what seemed like many minutes, until a nudge from Orion set her straight. Shaking her head, Twilight followed the older colt as he started forward. Lights glared at her from all directions and the music was, while individually distinguishable at first, soon swirled into one blaring up-beat noise. A tent covered in stars was proudly displayed in an open space. Around it were slates that projected ghostly silhouetted images of ponies dancing wildly and luridly. While mesmerised by the display, Twilight soon found herself drawn to the constellations on the tent canvas – and how wrong they were. *Orion's Belt has three stars, not four*, she bitterly noted. It took all of her willpower to not go over there and tell the owner of the tent how wrong they really were. As Orion continued to walk, she tore her eyes away from the tent. The crowds were even larger than what there was in the streets. It seemed that every unicorn, pegasus, and earth pony in Canterlot packed the square, and even more still poured in from the surrounding settlements.

The air was hot and heavy with the warmth and scents of close-packed bodies under the supernaturally bright moon. She could barely hear herself think over the noise. Music and chatter compacted into a constant buzz. She listened to scraps of conversation and songs as they came and went, lost in the sea of noise. Her concentration was broken by a nudge at her side.

“Stick with me,” Orion said, his soft voice somehow managing to carry through the ambiance of the Festival.

Twilight nodded her affirmation as he continued to lead her through the square. It was not long before Twilight heard her companion murmur something then veer off to the left. With the filly in tow, he stepped up to a small stall stacked with all sorts of treats. Stationed at it was a stallion with a coat that reminded Twilight of burnt oranges. He wore a brown, dusty Stetson hat that his cropped strawberry mane just managed to poke out of. He was gruff and large and Twilight couldn’t help but feel slightly intimidated by him. But her fear quickly evaporated when he gave them both a friendly grin.

“Howdy y’all.” The earth pony had an accent that sounded an awful lot like Miss Orchid’s. “What can ah get fer ya?”

“What do you have?” Orion’s tone was reserved but warm.

“Well, ah’ve got apple fritters, apple tarts, caramel apples, apple crumble,” his grin grew wider. “And o’ course, ah have some of the best darn, freshest, juiciest apples you’ll ever taste. Sweet Apple Acres specials, is what they are.”

The white colt cocked his head to Twilight. “What would you like, Twi?”

Scanning the stall, the filly’s eyes fell on a sticky and inviting treat.

“That caramel apple looks good,” she replied, pointing a hoof at the sweet.

“I think I’ll have that too,” Orion told the vendor.

The vendor retrieved the two caramel-drenched apples and gave them to Orion, who in turn handed over the necessary amount of bits. The orange earth pony beamed at them.

“Have a nice night, both o’ y’all,” he said, waving at them as they walked away. “An’ don’t forget t’ thank yer brother for buying y’all this, little miss!”

Twilight was about to correct the stallion, until Orion yelled back his thanks and gave her one of the apple treats. They stopped walking for a while,

concentrating on the task of holding and eating their sweets. Twilight never tasted anything so sickeningly saccharine before, and nor did she eat anything so messy. The unicorn filly grunted in annoyance as the ichor coated her mouth. She tried licking around her mouth, but to no avail. Her growl of irritation was met by a chuckle from Orion.

“Here Twi,” he handed her a handkerchief, which she used diligently.

“What’s next Orion?” the filly asked, handing him back the newly caramel-encrusted cloth.

He looked around for a while before returning his gaze to Twilight. The elder pony broke out into a wide grin.

“Let’s go on some rides.”

Orion picked the first one. He chose the dodgems. Magically charged capsules ramming into one another at the will of their pony masters was, as it turned out, not as fun as Twilight first thought it would be. The little filly struggled to maintain control of her capsule, but she was being thrown around far too often for her liking. Orion, on the other hand, remained stable and let out a rare whimsical laugh whenever he smashed into another capsule and sent the pony lurching. Twilight noticed he would often come to her rescue, crashing into the side of a charging capsule driven by a particularly large and malicious-looking colt.

Staggering out of the ride, Twilight felt the world reeling. Her discombobulated senses barely picked up the mention of her name to her left. Orion walked up to her and held her steady, waiting for a while before repeating himself.

“Twilight, you okay?”

A vigorous shake of her head seemed to have a positive effect on Twilight.

“I’m fine,” she giggled. “Just a little dazed. It was kinda fun though.”

“Yeah, it was pretty rough for you. Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine, Orion. I had fun,” she reiterated.

Her eyes wandered the square, searching for a new opportunity for carnival fun. They fell on the tent she had seen earlier before. A small crowd had gathered around it, shuffling around with trepidation. Vibrant, neon colours crackled in the air as the phantom images of ponies continued their vivacious dance. From this angle, Twilight could now see the words of a sign that had been hung up over the entrance to the tent.

“‘The Wise and Wonderful Willow’?” Twilight read aloud, curiously, before narrowing her eyes to see the smaller text written beneath. “‘Fortune-teller, prophet and diviner of ancient secrets.’”

Orion snorted. “Sounds like a complete fraud if you ask me. Still, it might be entertaining to watch.”

After trotting over to the crowd, they found that it had already dispersed somewhat. This gave them ample room to squeeze their way to the front without stepping on too many hooves. Orion, being larger than most colts his age, drew many more irked glares than Twilight did. The lavender unicorn paid no attention to the reactions of the crowd, however, as her gaze was fixed curiously on a filly who seemed to be doing her best to attract the attention of the crowd.

“Each of you shall be awestruck with awe, for tonight!” the little azure unicorn stood as proud and tall as she could, letting the dramatic pause roll on for perhaps a little too long. “The stars and the ghosts of the world have come together for this sacred event. Witness, if you dare, the dive-nations—”

Twilight heard a hushed voice speak from within the tent. “That’s ‘divinations’, dear.”

“Witness the *divinations*,” The filly blushed slightly as she corrected herself. “of the Great, the All-knowing, the Mystical, the Magical, the—” There was the sound of the clearing of a throat and the filly blushed again, more pronounced this time. She bit her lip and continued, but much more hurriedly this time. “Presenting the Wise and Wonderful Willow!”

A flash of light blinded the audience for a moment, leaving a unicorn mare standing triumphantly on the wooden-tile stage in its wake. Her coat was a

deep, velvety purple and her mane had been curled in an exotic fashion – its locks the same blue of the filly's coat. The mare was dressed in satin that dripped off her back in stylised ruffles, although there was a parting on one of her flanks that proudly displayed her cutie mark – an azure eye superposed over a white star. Bangles and ribbons adorned her mane in a seemingly ramshackle, patternless display. The mare smiled sweetly at her audience.

“Greetings, everypony,” she cooed in a soft, whimsical voice. “The Wise and Wonderful Willow shall, on this most sacred of nights, consult with the spirits and peer into the world of dreams. She shall perform this hallowed rite all for *you*, mere mortals.”

Twilight's attention was ripped away from the display when Orion sighed in contempt and turned to Twilight.

“Come on Twi,” he said, perhaps louder than was intended. “Let's not waste our time here.”

“My, oh my,” the fortune-teller proclaimed. “It seems that we have a skeptic among us. Tell the Wise and Wonderful Willow, boy, why you take the words of the spirits so lightly.”

The stoic colt turned to her and answered plainly: “It's not the ‘words of the spirits’ that you're spouting, Miss Willow, it's just some gibberish that you're shoveling the crowd. I mean, do you really expect us to believe that, through all this pomp, you can actually see the future?”

The small blue unicorn next to Willow seemed just about ready to rebuke Orion, until the mare put a hoof on her shoulder to calm her down. She just smiled and stepped forward.

“Then Willow supposes you won't mind coming inside for a vision of your future,” she said, wryly.

“I don't have time for this, sorry,” the colt replied curtly, turning to leave until Twilight elbowed him.

“Come on Orion,” she said, enthusiasm creeping into her voice. “Let's just see it. If it's no good, then there's no harm done.”

The snow-coated pony looked warily at Twilight, then to Willow, then back at Twilight before sighing.

“All right then,” he relented. “But if it’s no good, I want my bits back.”

“Willow is generous and accepts your conditions,” the mare agreed smugly. She turned to the rest of the audience. “The Wise and Wonderful Willow shall not be too long. If you would form an orderly queue, she would be happy to consult the spirits for you in due course.”

Twilight eagerly cantered into the tent, followed by a much less enthusiastic Orion. The unicorn mare and filly headed in after them before sealing the entrance shut. When the door-flap was closed, the hum of music and noise from the Festival ceased. Twilight could guess that it was some kind of sound-proofing spell. She looked around the tent. The floor was plain canvas cushioned with rugs, and in the centre was a circular table with seating cushions either side of it. The mare took her place, motioning for Orion to do the same.

“So, how is this supposed to work?” the colt asked once he placed himself on the cushion.

“The Wise and Wonderful Willow will, with her star-given gifts, parley with the spirits of the dream world and—”

“Can you drop the horse-radish?” Orion asked rhetorically. “You’re not fooling anyone here.”

It was the filly who was the first to answer. “How dare you use that tone here! You have no idea who you’re dealing with!”

“Beatrix, *quiet!*” Willow snapped, shutting the unicorn filly up almost immediately. She returned her attention to Orion and gave a defeated sigh. “Fine, since you’re obviously too cynical to be convinced of this, then I’ll admit that I don’t actually talk to dream-spirits.”

A victorious smile grew on Orion’s lips. “Knew it. There’s no prophecy here.”

“But,” the mare held up a hoof, somewhat irritated at his pre-emptive conclusion. “I do see your future, just not with ghosts. I got my cutie mark for a reason, young pony.”

“So it’s magic,” the colt nodded. “Prove it.”

“I’ll need a name first.”

“Orion.”

“Give me your hoof Orion,” she commanded.

Orion gingerly complied, reaching across the table and allowing the enchantress to take his hoof in both of hers. She closed her eyes and concentrated. Twilight took the opportunity of silence to look around the room. The blue filly had placed herself next to Twilight, and was staring at her with an excited expression. Twilight raised her eyebrow at the foal, who simply grinned back and turned to look at Orion and Willow.

“This is when it gets really cool,” she breathed, her eyes widening with glee.

Willow’s horn was now glowing, an aurora of sapphire blanketing it like a rippling piece of translucent silk. The mare opened her eyes, which now flashed with a shiny, magical film that looked like pools of silver. They darted all over, as if a dramatic scene was unfolding right then and there. After a short moment of this, a faint, invisible wave pulsed through the room, setting Twilight’s teeth on edge and signaling the end of the spell. The unicorn mare blinked – her eyes losing their misty quality – and pulled her hooves back from Orion.

Shivering, the colt opened his eyes and looked at the diviner with a dead-set stare.

“What did you see?”

“As usual, Mister Orion, only snippets,” she smiled. “And before you ask, for me to see a more complete sequence of events I would need instruments and several hours of meditation. You’ll have to pay me for that particular service though, and it will certainly be out of your price range.”

Orion nodded, but repeated the question: "What did you see?"

"I saw you and Twilight Sparkle here," she indicated the now flabbergasted Twilight. *We never told her my name*, she shivered. "You hugged, and said goodbye. It seemed like it would be for a long time, from the looks of it. Then I saw you, alone in a darkened room. You were crying."

Orion and Twilight flinched at once after she finished. Twilight's heart caved in. *Goodbye, for a long time?* She forced the tears that began to form down, biting her lip. Beatrix, the unicorn filly sitting next to her, gave the purple foal a sympathetic look, lifting a hoof to console her, but quickly putting it back down. Twilight looked at Orion, who seemed to have retreated into his usual passive, emotionless demeanor.

"It's not the sort of thing you wanted to hear, was it?" the Wise and Wonderful Willow asked, sorrow creeping into her soft voice. "You seemed to be the type who would prefer the truth to a trivial vision of a future fillyfriend, or an out-of-context look at some euphoric moment in your life. I take it that you're dissatisfied?"

"No, you've just given me quite a lot to think about," Orion murmured, before looking up at the mare with a neutral expression. "How much do I owe you?"

"Ten bits, for this one."

Orion counted out the money and the unicorn scooped it up in a magical grasp. They bid their farewells as they left. Twilight walked closer to Orion than before, almost brushing up against him. She looked up at the large blue-maned colt with concern plastered over her face. He noticed her look and smiled down at her reassuringly.

"Come on Twi," a cheery tone was very thick in his voice. "Let's not worry about stuff that probably won't even happen. I mean, even if it were true, then now that we know the future, we can change it. Right?"

The filly beamed. *Of course! Why hadn't I thought of that before?*

"You're right, Orion," she chirped. "Let's go and enjoy the rest of the night."

They did just that. They visited more rides and stalls, from spinning teacups to water-squirting games. As she walked happily through the Festival, munching at a fluffy ball of cotton candy with Orion at her side, Twilight saw that ponies around her had begun to converge to the middle of the square.

“Is it time for the eclipse?” she asked Orion with barely contained excitement, who raised an eyebrow at her good-naturedly.

“I think so,” the colt replied. “Shall we get front-row seats?”

“You bet!” Twilight cried, her heart jumping at the thought of seeing the Empress up close for the first time.

Together they wormed and squeezed their way through a forest of legs, all the way to the core of the crowd. At the center, a crescent moon-embazoned platform held aloft a contingent of the Honour Guard of the royal household, always emotionless and vigilant. They were dressed in armour more ornate than that of the average soldier, with silver plates polished to shine and immaculate plumes of cool colours. The crowd of ponies attracted more and more members until it developed into an overflowing throng of anticipating souls, all happy at their chance to see their ruler demonstrating such splendid feats of magic. The little lavender unicorn, however, was not happy. Her small stature prevented her from seeing over the adults in front of her. These were definitely not the front-row seats Orion promised.

Frustrated, she looked for gaps in which she could squeeze past audience members. Slipping away from Orion, she squirmed through the crowd, drawing annoyed glances from those who she pushed past. At last she found a suitable position to watch near the front of the crowd. By now, she could barely contain her excitement. However, Orion’s panicked calls for her drifted through the hum of discussion almost made her turn back to go to him. Until the Honour Guard blew on the trumpets.

At the fanfare, a hush fell onto the crowd. All eyes turned to the platform. Anticipation froze the spectators in place as if they had all suddenly been turned to ice. In the silence, a regal pony ascended the platform from the rear. Sporting a horn and a pair of large wings, she was unlike anything Twilight had ever seen. She was larger than life and too beautiful to be real.

Twilight could only dream about having such a physique. Even Moondancer would have envied the Empress, and Moondancer was the prettiest filly Twilight had ever met. But no one would ever call the Empress 'pretty'. 'Beautiful' seemed to fit better, along with 'unearthly' and 'imposing'. Her face was so fine-boned and sharp-edged that Twilight couldn't shake the feeling that her touch would cut. Something deep in Twilight's soul told her this was a mare to be admired from a distance.

She had a coat that shimmered like polished obsidian, and a mane of deep violet ether. It was filled with the night sky – an infinite myriad of stars and constellations that floated about freely; the tresses danced as pure magic. Twilight was captivated by it, her pupils growing in wonder. The mare wore polished silver armour that gleamed in the moonlight. Her catlike eyes should have been terrifying in that exotic face, but their soft teal glow was somehow almost hypnotic.

Everypony bowed, as this was the immortal Empress of Equestria, Nightmare Moon, and respect for her was due. They were entranced; awed by her presence. "Rise, my subjects," she commanded, her voice seemingly too low to reach beyond the front few rows, but it rippled and echoed clearly to every corner of the square.

Her horn sparkled with an aura of magic. The outline of energy grew more vibrant and shifted into a translucent sheen that covered the horn. As it grew more and more opaque, the sky reacted to Nightmare Moon's will. The moon skimmed across the sky and dipped below the horizon. Then, she spread her wings and launched herself into the air, flapping higher and higher. The moon again rose from the horizon, coming from the same place in which it set, but this time it was shrouded in darkness with a light like fire dancing on its periphery. The unearthly contrast of pitch black and light fascinated Twilight; setting her imagination racing with ideas and fantasies of the image. The farther the Empress climbed in the air, the more the transformed moon rose. This continued, until at last the orb reached its zenith in the sky. For added effect, a flash of light erupted from the moon as it completed its ascent, and Nightmare Moon touched gracefully back down onto the platform. She smiled down at her subjects with a knowing look in her eyes.

A simultaneous gasp rippled through the crowd and, once their ruler was finished, a cheer. The eclipse would last for the rest of the night, the

centrepiece of the festival until Nightmare Moon lowered it for the evening. Twilight didn't make a sound; instead, she stood agape in awe of the Empress while her mind struggled to comprehend what she had just experienced. It fascinated and enthralled her. The Empress bent reality to her will, but while doing so she made it an art form. This wasn't the mundane force she saw used every day to lift things. It was... huge and terrifying and wondrous. The few scraps she could remember having read about magic suddenly snapped into focus in her mind like a puzzle assembling itself. Magic was both an extension of the self and an integral part of the world. *Spells are not discrete objects, like a book on a shelf, but rather a process of projecting a pony's will onto the world, in the same way that writing is the process of recording thought on paper.* The words came into her head unbidden, as if she had pulled an epiphany straight out of the writings of Aristotle. Twilight grinned in pride at the conclusion, silently thanking Orion for leaving his philosophy books around for her to pick up.

The Empress of Equestria struck the ground with a hoof, the sound echoing throughout the square, cutting through the jubilant voices. With silence and the undivided attention of all ponies, she gave a small speech commemorating the occasion and thanking them for their loyalty and admiration. It was a grandiose and eloquent benediction. The pitch black alicorn had such confidence that Twilight could not help but admire her. After this was finished, the Empress left the platform and the mob began to disperse. As the crowd thinned, Orion skidded around a knot of stragglers and spotted her at the same moment she saw him. His expression of relief lasted only a moment, though, before it collapsed into a stern glare. Coming from a colt his age, it would have usually looked out of place, but this earth pony was much more mature than Twilight was, and he pulled it off with the desirable effect.

"I'm sorry," Twilight shrunk back, ears drooping in shame. "I just wanted to see her."

"It's all right, Twilight. I'm not angry. I was just worried you had got lost." he smiled reassuringly at her.

Twilight simply nodded, lowering her head slightly. She felt him touch his neck to hers in an embrace. A smile graced her lips as she leaned into him.

"Thanks for bringing me here, Orion," she said.

“Don’t mention it,” the earth pony replied, his smiling face soon dropping back into its usual passive mask. “We should go. We’re out in the open, and that means that we’re more likely to get cau—”

“Twilight Sparkle!”

The two foals whirled around to face the source of the shout. There, walking determinedly towards them was Apple Orchid. Behind her was a group of colts and fillies of all ages, looking inquisitively at the spectacle that was unfolding. The mare marched up to the pair, looking first at Orion, then to Twilight. She pierced the young unicorn with a frown only an authority figure like the teacher that she was could give to a foal.

“What’re you doin’ here?” she asked rhetorically. “Didn’t Loch Mare ground you for the destruction of Home property?”

The little filly was about to debate the latter question, until Orion stepped forward.

“I brought her here, ma’am. I knew she was grounded, though, and I accept the full blame for the situation.”

Shaking her head, the chaperone rejected his chivalrous offer: “That’ll be for Miss Loch to decide. But if it were up to me, ah’d ground your sorry flank for a couple o’ weeks! Now stay by my side, I don’t want to take my eyes of you two.

The two young ponies sidled up next to Apple Orchid remorsefully, but as the group began their walk back to the orphanage, Twilight’s head was ablaze in thought. The evening had been spectacular. First, that Willow pony’s display of mysticism had impressed her greatly, but the sheer beauty and grace of the Empress’ sorcerous performance had opened up a world of new possibilities for the filly. She craved the Home’s library now; she needed to understand everything about what she just witnessed. She wouldn’t care if she was grounded for a month. Twilight had plenty of reading to catch up on.

Chapter Three

Prospects

The first rays of the Bright Moon streaming in through the window alerted Twilight Sparkle that she had been reading all night long. Even *she* usually fell asleep at some point during a marathon study session, but every time she closed her eyes, the Eclipse flared in its full radiance once more behind her eyelids. Who could possibly sleep when the world held such glory? She was binging, she knew it, and she didn't care. What else was she supposed to do?

As if brought on by her realising the time, a wide yawn came close to dislocating Twilight's jaw. *Okay, maybe I should sleep after all.* The little unicorn closed her book and finally sallied forth from the tottering tome towers of her personal palace of parchment to undertake the epic journey across the barren Hardwood Plains to the inviting, softly rolling hills of Featherdown.

Squirming into the warmth of her bed, Twilight looked over at Orion, who was still asleep and snoring lightly. He wouldn't be awake for another hour or so. Even then, he would have little to do. This was their second week of being grounded together, and it had taken a mighty bit of convincing on Twilight's part to get Miss Loch to reconsider separating them. Twilight smiled softly in the darkness as she mused at how accustomed she had grown to having a roommate – to having a friend. Soon, her higher-pitched snores were playing counterpoint to Orion's.

The unicorn awoke from a dreamless sleep sometime in the noon, judging from the position of the moon in the night sky. Yawning, she stretched her legs and got out of bed. Passive voice. Orion looked up from the essay he was writing at the desk across from Twilight's. Unlike Twilight, the white colt focused his serious mind on his schoolwork as though every assignment were a matter of life and death. Twilight mostly just read through class time, and could still ace the exams half-asleep – a fact that never failed to draw the ire of her classmates. The teachers who rotated through the foster home's school room had long since stopped trying to catch her out for not

paying attention, since she always got the right answer anyway once they repeated the question.

“Good afternoon, sleepy head,” her roommate offered as he turned back to his work.

“Morning, Orion,” Twilight murmured the reply. “Or whatever it is now.”

She wobbled over to the mirror that hung on the wall just below the star chart, scrubbing the sleep out of her eyes with a hoof while the grogginess faded. Staring at a hairbrush that sat on the table, the filly began to reach out and slip her hoof through the brush’s ring to pick it up, stopped. She had an idea. Putting her hoof back down, she bent her head and pointed her small horn at the brush.

Twilight focused on the brush, trying to lift it through sheer force of will. Nothing. She concentrated harder, clenching her teeth, staring at it until her eyes burned, her neck straining as if that would produce better results. Still nothing. Then, like her telescope suddenly bringing the moon into focus, she found it: an odd sort of “empty space” in her thoughts, within which she could feel the shape of the brush when she concentrated on it. There was a strange tension in her head, like a muscle she hadn’t even known was there. She mentally pressed against it, and a faint purple aura sprung up around her horn, matched by an even dimmer glow around the brush. It twitched into the air, fell again, then rose and steadied.

I did it! I’m using magic! I’m—

Doing the same thing every other unicorn in the world does every single night, the cynic of her subconscious quipped. *Woohoo.*

After a few seconds of practice, she managed to run the brush through her mane, flattening the bed-head that had built up in the past few hours. Somehow, it should have been more satisfying. She should have been showing off to Orion or running to show Miss Loch what she could do. But really, why would they care? It just wasn’t anything special. It was...

An image came to life in her mind; the eclipse burning in the sky, crowned with fire and glory.

...normal, she concluded dispassionately.

When she returned to the room after having attended to all of the pressing needs of hygiene, Twilight trotted back over to her cushion and sat down. The filly searched her pillars of knowledge until she found *The Biology of Pony Magic*, carefully exhumed it from the stack, and flipped through until she found the page with the cross-section of a unicorn's head.

The horn is commonly mistaken for an extension of a unicorn's brain. However, this is not the case. Indeed, if this were so, there would be many more cases of unicorns who have lost their horns in unfortunate circumstances suffering severe repercussions from the loss of so much neural tissue. Rather, the horn is another organ entirely.

A unicorn's horn is a complex and varied organ whose precise characteristics vary by individual, but its general structure consists of three main layers (fig. 1). The outermost layer of the horn is a coating of keratin (A) secreted by a thin layer of epithelial tissue (B, see p.78). This material protects the horn against incidental damage. Beneath the outer coating is a hollow layer of magically conductive bone (C, see p.140) which serves as the horn's primary structural component and permits the flow of magical energies from the corpus arcanum (D) within. The corpus arcanum consists of a softer tissue which, while osseous, is both highly porous and heavily permeated with nerve fibers. Were one to cut away a unicorn's horn (fig. 2), a distinctive pattern of rings would be revealed, not unlike a cross-section of a tree trunk. This is where the magic happens, as it were.

The pores of the corpus arcanum channel magical energy from the ignis minorum (E), which resides at the proximal end of—

A loud rapping at the door tore Twilight's attention away from the text. Sighing in irritation, she stood back up and marched reluctantly towards the door. She tugged open the door to admit the chocolate-coloured matron of the foster home, Loch Mare.

"Good afternoon, Twilight," she said, crowding into the already cramped apartment. "I'm glad to see that you're still making the most of your punishment," she indicated the piles of books scattered about the room.

“Oh, I am Miss Loch; magic is *fascinating*,” the filly nodded in keen affirmation.

“Of course,” Miss Loch smiled indulgently. “From what Orion told me earlier tonight, you found it so fascinating that you stayed up to the early hours of the morning studying.”

The little purple unicorn blushed and looked at the ground with her ears folded, grinning awkwardly at the subtle accusatory tone Miss Loch had used. “Heh, yeah... I do kinda get a bit carried away at times.”

Still smiling, the brown mare raised her brow. “Indeed you do. I hope this sort of thing won’t happen too often – it’s an unhealthy lifestyle.”

“Yes miss, it won’t happen again,” Twilight mumbled, shooting a betrayed glare at the oblivious Orion. *Tattle-tale*.

“Well that’s good,” the mare closed the door behind her as she moved deeper into Twilight’s abode. “Now, about that little thing you’ve been pestering me for over the past week...”

All Twilight’s annoyance at the interruption and scolding instantly evaporated. Even Orion peered over the edge of his textbook, investing attention into the matron’s words. *The Imperial Academy for Gifted Unicorns!* It took a supreme level of restraint from Twilight to keep from erupting in squealing glee. Ever since reading about it in a biography of the Great Hoofdini, Twilight had been fascinated with the greatest of all unicorn-centric schools in Equestria (or, as some claimed, the entire world). She had placed it to the forefront of her studying for several nights. It had not been long until the filly had begged Miss Loch to put her up for a placement in the school. She had taken a test for it only several nights before. Twilight knew that if she had any chance at the Imperial Academy, she would need not only a pass, but a high enough mark to achieve the scholarship to attend.

“How did I do?” she blurted. “What mark did I get? Did they like me? Did they say whether I was the kind of pupil they were looking for? Did I *pass*?”

Taken aback by the sudden outburst, Loch Mare flinched. "Twilight, calm down," she said, staring down at the slowly purpling filly. "And please take a breath."

Twilight took a gulp of air, and was just about to continue her interrogation when Miss Loch put up a pre-emptive, silencing hoof. The mare cleared her throat before replying.

"Twilight, please remember that whatever mark you get, you did your best in that theory test."

"Please, Miss Loch," Twilight groaned. "Show me the results."

"Very well, since you insist," the mare huffed.

Miss Loch floated the envelope out from behind her and unsealed the flap while Twilight restrained the urge to bounce up and try to catch the first glimpse of its contents. The letter slid out of the envelope and unfolded. Three sets of eyes tracked to the red ink in the upper corner.

"An A-plus!" she cried, springing up and hopping joyfully around the room. "An A-plus! An A-plus!" She didn't notice Loch Mare's shocked double take or the waver in her normally rock-solid telekinesis.

"Congratulations, Twi!" Orion grinned. "You passed."

"I did, didn't I?" the filly bounced higher than ever. "I passed! I passed! I'm going to the Academy! This is the best night ever!"

The old mare, meanwhile, had been reading the letter more deeply. "Twilight, there's something else."

The solemn voice of Miss Loch brought Twilight to an abrupt halt right in front of the mare. She looked up with wide, eager eyes and leaned forward in anticipation. *Something else?* The possibility of more wonderful things from a simple piece of paper excited her. *Oh, I know; they're gonna give me a scholarship! And they're gonna beg for me to talk with the head of the Academy. They'll want me to meet the Empress, I know it!*

"What is it? What is it?!" she asked, her voice pitched to explode into shrieks of joy again.

“Manners, young lady,” the matron eyed her sternly, drawing a penitent look from Twilight. Loch turned her eyes to the paper and pointed a hoof at the red markings at the bottom. “There’s one more thing you will have to do before you’re accepted.”

Twilight’s heart sunk. Her elated mood died in the instant Miss Loch uttered those words.

First disappointment welled up within her, but she made a conscious effort to replace it with frustration.

“What do I have to do, Miss Loch?” she asked with trepidation.

“The Academy has invited you back for an entrance exam.”

“But I *just* did one!” the filly protested.

“That was just the preliminary theory test, Twilight. This is the practical exam,” the mare sounded almost apologetic. “One is designed to test your knowledge and the other is designed to test your magical capabilities.”

Twilight’s good mood now was completely gone. She had jumped through hoops for the Academy; that theory exam was two hours long and very hard. *Now they want me to do another exam?* She felt a pout coming on.

“Two exams before I even get considered for a spot!” the lavender pony snorted, blowing a gust of angry air out of her nostrils. “That’s not fair!”

“It *is* a very prestigious school, Twilight,” Miss Loch leaned down to meet with the filly at eye level, giving her an encouraging smile. “All the applicants have to go through this. Unicorns from all over the world come and they fight tooth and hoof for a placement.”

Seeing that this only worsened Twilight’s disposition, the elder unicorn quickly changed her approach: “Besides, you might get in regardless of how well you perform at the practical. You saw how good those test results were; they would want a smart young mare like you regardless of power, right?”

“I... guess so.”

“Please don’t get worked up over it, Twilight.” Loch gave the filly a quick hug. “It’s a couple of nights from now. I’m sure that’s plenty of time to prepare.”

“Yeah...”

The mare sighed and began to walk towards the door. “I have to go and work now. Please think about it. And be positive, okay?”

Twilight barely mumbled a response as the matron left, closing the door behind her. Sinking to the floor, sitting dejectedly, she felt a hoof on her shoulder. Turning to her side, she found Orion looking down at her, his face plastered with concern. It was a look that almost made her burst into frustrated tears.

“Oh, Orion, I can’t do it!” she cried.

“What do you mean, Twi?” the white colt furrowed his brow.

“This practical exam! I’m gonna fail it, I just know it,” she sniffed. “I have to focus so much when lifting something as stupid as a brush. It’s an effort to do that sort of stuff, and they’ll probably want me to do some spell that only destined mages can do!”

“What about what Miss Loch said?”

“What, that I might get in on the theory alone?” she practically growled the answer, drawing a weak nod from Orion. “She also said that it’s a ‘very prestigious’ school. They’ll only want ponies with smarts and skills, and I’m nowhere near as powerful as they’ll want me to be!”

“Twilight, look at me.”

He planted his hooves firmly on her shoulders and turned her to face him. She reluctantly met his eyes, which were filled with an unyielding wisdom that would not usually belong in a colt of his age. In his stern but sympathetic gaze, Twilight felt safe; protected from the troubles of the world.

"You're smart, so very smart. Smarter than me even – I can tell that much. But you're still young and you can be a real fool sometimes," Orion managed a small smirk and continued in his soft voice. "You got to be confident in yourself, and in your abilities. I've been living with you for over half a year now, and I've seen what you can do if you put your mind to it. You can overcome any obstacle if you put your mind to it. Trust me on this, Twi. Now say it: 'I can do this'."

"I... can do this," she murmured.

Orion raised his voice only slightly. "Louder."

"I can do this."

"Louder!"

"I can do this!" she declared, jumping up, beaming. "I *can* do this."

The blue-maned colt nodded. "You have a couple of nights till the exam. What are you going to do until then?"

"Practice!" she cried.

"Good," Orion beamed. "You're going to get through it, Twilight. I mean, what's the worst that can happen?"

=====

Dear Glitter,

I'm afraid I've made a terrible miscalculation, and now I must call upon you to ensure that all our hopes do not go awry.

I indulged Spark in her desire to apply to the Academy, and while I knew she was intelligent, her performance in the preliminary was (no pun intended) stellar. She is in danger of not only being accepted, but achieving a scholarship as well! As much as it pains me to do this to her, you must ensure that she fails in the practical. And as much as it pains me to ask it of

you, this must be done even at the risk of exposure. You know what is at stake.

Secondnight, 10:00, Rm. 501. At all costs.

The Dawn will come.

Your friend and comrade, Wake.

=====

Basking in the noontime glow of her moon, the Empress strolled casually through the palace grounds. She often took these sorts of walks. Delegating a fair portion of government responsibility had allowed her an abundance of leisure time. Night-to-night affairs were handled by a parliament supervised by a council of loyal ministers. While they were all involved equally in the decision-making in theory, the Empress had a feeling that the head of the Imperial Overwatch had them all answering to him. This, of course, was something to be corrected at some point, but the results were sufficient to justify the means. She could leave that lay for a decade or so.

The Inquisitor – the aforementioned commander of what the public had dubbed ‘Blackcloaks’, and her closest advisor – had first come to her a very long time ago. His service to her was so long and flawless that he blurred into her memory, making it hard to pinpoint how long ago he actually arrived at her court. It almost felt as if he had been with her since the beginning. Nightmare Moon had no idea whether he was young or old, but she felt that by now at least a few bones in the pony’s body should be getting weaker, but he was as busy and tireless as ever. That should have unsettled her more than it did. He never even offered a name, saying that he had none and used only titles. The strange stallion had introduced himself as ‘The Inquisitor’ and nothing more. How long ago had that been? Decades, certainly. Even back then, he seemed curiously confident in front of the closest thing Equestria had to a living god.

Not that Nightmare Moon demanded grovelling reverence from her staff. All the bowing and scraping had gratified her for the first couple of years, but it was terribly inefficient. The Empress of Equestria had more important things to do than scold her subjects merely for growing accustomed to her

presence. A gardener – *Amber something-or-other*, she noted – dipped her head gracefully as Nightmare passed, then turned back to her work. A few years ago, when she was presented for royal service, the self-same mare had bowed so hard she knocked herself silly on the floor of the throne room. Fear and awe had their place, but even the sweetest fruit grew monotonous without variety. The sense of familiarity was... comforting.

The alicorn looked up into the sky, as she so often did. A content smile came to her lips. Her country was prosperous under her watchful and firm rule, and despite a certain few restrictions, the populace was generally happy. The peace of the night was eternal, and the beauty of the dark, star-filled sky was constant. So she smiled, knowing that this all was just the way she wanted it to be, the way it should be. Then, without warning, the night's peace shattered.

A deafening explosion swept the calm aside and a massive wave of colour rippled across the sky. Even without sensing the flow of the magic, Nightmare Moon could tell that the explosion originated from Cloudsdale. *I know what that is*, she thought. *Some pegasus has performed a sonic rainboom!* It had been three centuries since she had last heard of anypony performing such a stunt.

Hard on the heels of the blast, another surge of magical energy washed over the Empress. It was raw and powerful and completely out of control; a magical presence unlike anything she had ever known before. *Certainly no normal pony could have produced that?* Her deepest fears immediately sprang to mind, before Nightmare Moon buried them. This was a new aura, with a different 'flavour' from that of her ancient nemesis. Powerful, but not as powerful as her own magic. A unicorn after all, then, but one more capable than any mage she had ever encountered. As she rationalised her worries away, a voice called to her in her mind.

Your Majesty, came the silky sound of the Inquisitor's speech. *I know you felt that too.*

Yes, Inquisitor, I did. It is from the academic wing. I will meet you there.

She was only a heartbeat away. The obsidian-black pony transformed into an indigo cloud and streamed toward the Imperial Academy for Gifted Unicorns with the speed of the wind itself. The Inquisitor, in his usual

inscrutable way, was already waiting for her there. He wore his usual uniform and goggles, but he stared up at the Laboratory Tower with an expression of shock she had never seen on his normally impassive face. A large, fairly innocent-looking dragon's head poked out through a fresh hole in the roof. Flashes of light came within and arcs of energy shot out from the windows and holes in the roof. The two magically-inclined ponies could feel the energy radiating from the Academy like some mysterious form of heat that was undetectable to most ponies. The hair on their bodies stood on end at the energies gushing from the building.

Narrowing her eyes, Nightmare launched into a sprint, racing into the maelstrom of untamed magic. She burst through the entrance and plunged down the halls of the Academy, rounding corners at full speed and rocketing up stairwells in full flight. She dared not teleport into the room without a clearer idea of what she would find there.

When she rounded the last corner, she slowed down cautiously. A set of doors at the end of the hall hung open, spilling brilliant light and bolts of arcane energy into the hallway. The alicorn crept to the doorway and peeked around the corner, her horn glowing with a prepared shielding spell. It was a lecture hall, half occupied by the dragon she had seen from outside. A humming aura of purple energy held four ponies and their belongings suspended in the air, and another surrounded a potted fern. The center of the chaos, though, was only a small, purple unicorn filly.

Such ability at such a young age was unheard of. *This unicorn*, Nightmare Moon contemplated, *could be a valuable asset or a dangerous enemy*. Whether she would be one or the other would depend on how she was raised, and how she learned to control this raw power inside of her. The Empress smiled slyly. After a few moments of thought, she knew exactly what to do with the filly. But first things first, she needed to gain control of the situation.

Stepping fully into the room, Nightmare Moon strode through the waves of energy, parting them past her like the tide around a cliff. She reached out and touched the wild pony's shoulder with a hoof. The filly turned her head around and stared with shining white eyes like burning windows into infinity as the pure, untamed magic swirling in her head sought any means of escape. Time stretched into an eternal instant for the Empress and the foal. She could feel the filly, tiny, helpless before the raging flood of magic.

Nightmare had to be careful how she handled this. She pressed her mighty will against the filly's, gently but firmly shoring up the unicorn's control while being careful not to simply crush her mind. After a few subjective seconds, the filly realized what she was doing and leaned against the Empress's support as she began to close off the flow of power. Time resumed its usual course and Nightmare Moon smiled encouragingly at the filly, the little unicorn returning a look of terrified embarrassment as the blinding light faded from behind her eyes. With a flash, the aura vanished from around her and the pony dropped to the ground. Three more flashes around the room revealed a dazzled and petrified group of ponies returning to normal – one in much more of a daze from her brief stint as a plant – and an oblivious baby dragon, now sucking its own tail.

"What is your name?" she asked, a firmer and more formal tone slipping back into place.

"I... I'm so sorry. I didn't–"

"What is your name?" the Empress repeated, softer in tone this time.

"Twilight Sparkle, Your Majesty," she answered sheepishly, looking down at the floor.

Twilight? That's not a word I should be hearing. The lack of a day had banished words like 'dawn', 'dusk' and 'twilight' from the lexicon. So how was it that this filly's name had a word not used in almost a thousand years? Her interest piqued, Nightmare Moon slowly crouched to the unicorn's level.

"Who are your parents, Miss Sparkle?" she asked.

"I don't know," Twilight winced slightly. "I don't have any."

An orphan then; perhaps her parents named her, or others did. No matter, it's a mystery that can be resolved at a later time. She stood back up and smiled knowingly.

"I don't think I've ever come across a unicorn with your raw abilities before," she said in a regal voice. "It is a very special gift that you have, but one that must be controlled and tamed if you are to use it properly."

The young pony looked up at the Empress with a confused expression plastered across her face and let out an equally confused “huh?” The innocent little filly drew shocked looks from the other adult ponies in the room, surprised by what they saw as callousness in front of the ruler of Equestria.

“Twilight Sparkle, I want you to study as my personal protégée here at the Academy,” Nightmare said.

Twilight was speechless. Her eyes were wide as she took in what the Empress had said. She looked over at the unicorn mare to the side, whose face was still locked in an expression of horror as she stared at Twilight Sparkle. Turning back to the starry-haired alicorn, the filly hastily nodded with barely contained excitement.

“Excellent, now wait outside while I talk to your guardian,” Nightmare Moon said. When the filly left, the Empress turned to the four adjudicators at the back of the room. “You may all leave. Your work here is done.”

They sprinted for the door, very visibly relieved at their escape. Walking up to the other pony left in the room, Nightmare Moon looked down at the mare. She cleared her throat.

“You are the guardian of Twilight Sparkle, correct?” she said.

The unicorn shook herself out of her shock and quickly bowed low before the Empress. “Yes, Your Majesty, my name is Loch Mare and I’m the head of an orphanage at the edge of the city.”

“Good. I intend to take Twilight to live with me at the palace. Make the arrangements.”

“The palace?! Um, is that really necessary?” Loch Mare answered in a timid voice.

Nightmare Moon lost some of her reserved demeanour at this; “Do you question my orders?”

"N-no Your Majesty!" the mare blurted in a rush and bowed her head a little lower.

"Consider it an official Royal Edict," she boomed, then slightly softened her tone. "Besides, where do you think Twilight would prefer to live, at your orphanage or at the Imperial Palace?"

"Well, she—"

This unicorn was either slow or a stickler for procedure, and it was beginning to grate the alicorn. "If you like, you can think of this as an adoption," the Empress said in a faux-cheerful tone before letting her smile drop. "One in which you have no say."

"Of course," the mare bit her lip.

"Oh come now, I am sure that you can visit from time to time, if Twilight wants you," she said, turning away and walking towards the exit. "And if I allow it."

The blasted mare made one last effort to assert some measure of authority. "We'll need some time to prepare the paperwork and pack her things..." she offered carefully.

Nightmare Moon paused, suppressing a flash of anger from colouring her tone. "I will send the Lord Captain of the Overwatch to collect her tomorrow at noon," she said flatly without looking back.

"The Overwatch..." the matron breathed, stark terror in her voice.

"See that all goes smoothly."

She strode out with a maliciously pleased smile. Waiting, in a happily jittery state, was the little purple unicorn filly. She had been staring at her own flank until Nightmare Moon came out of the room. Arching an eyebrow, the Empress looked at the spot that had occupied so much of Twilight's attention. It was her cutie mark, a large six-pointed star – the same pink as the streak in her mane – circled by several smaller, white stars.

"That's new, I take it?" she asked.

“Oh yes, it is!” Twilight replied enthusiastically, before furrowing her brow. “What does it mean though?”

“Given your little display this morning, I would guess that it represents the spark of magic,” the Empress rubbed her chin thoughtfully. “And that’s magic in general, not a specific kind. Your talent is extremely rare.”

“Really?”

“It is. That is why I have decided to help you nurture it.”

“Thank you Your Majesty,” the filly smiled sweetly.

“Don’t mention it,” she smiled back and walked away, before calling back to her new student.

“Yes Your Majesty!” the excited filly replied, dashing off into the ruined room.

As she made for the exit, Nightmare Moon thought about the future and what it held for her and little Twilight Sparkle. She had never had an apprentice before, but she felt that she could handle it. Twilight would be an excellent asset when she came of age. What’s more, the filly seemed to actually like Nightmare, in an awestruck sort of way. Very rarely did the Empress get to experience a foal’s admiration. All in all, the immortal pony ruler of Equestria felt that this would be the beginning of something new and exciting for both herself and Twilight.

Chapter Four

Goodbyes and Hellos

“Hey Twilight, is it true?”

Twilight stopped cramming her books and clothes into the case and turned to the cream unicorn. She sighed and decided to indulge the filly.

“That depends on what you’re referring to, Moondancer,” Twilight replied without looking up, as if she hadn’t answered the same question at least a dozen times already.

“Um, that you’re gonna be a princess?” her voice simmered with excitement. “I mean, if the Empress adopts you—”

Twilight put a hoof up to pre-empt the flow of words. “Moondancer, this isn’t an adoption. I’m studying under her and living at the palace while I do it.”

“Oh, really?” Moondancer looked down her violet-purple swirl of a mane falling over one of her eyes. “Sorry I jumped to conclusions.”

“It’s all right,” Twilight said. *You’d almost think it was her being not-adopted instead of me!* “I’m actually really excited about the Empress teaching me. Imagine it; she’ll be showing me all her tricks and skills! Oh, I bet she’ll let me see her move the moon!” The purple unicorn bit her lip, stopping herself from getting lost in her excitement. *Focus on packing, Twilight.* “Anyway, could you just tell everypony else that I’m not a princess, and I’m not being adopted by the Empress?”

“Yeah, yeah. You have to admit, though, that it would’ve been kind of cool if you were going to be a princess. I mean, that’d mean I’d know a member of the royal family! And you’d be that royal family member and...”

“Uh huh,” Twilight raised an eyebrow and sighed to herself as she tuned out Moondancer’s gushing over the living fantasy that was royalty. Instead she concentrated on folding her things into the bags.

The ponies at the orphanage had received the news of Twilight's departure with varying reactions. If Twilight had simply been adopted by a Canterlot family, then she would have left with very little fanfare. However, the orphanage was a compact place and when Twilight let it slip where she was going, everypony knew – staff and foster foals alike. Most had been happy for her, telling the unicorn how lucky she was. Others had been perhaps feigning happiness; Twilight could hear some whispers of jealousy as she walked the building's halls. Some particularly *nasty* things had been said by the older ponies to each other when they thought she couldn't hear. *Not that I have to care about that*, she thought, a small smirk curling her lips. *Not anymore.*

Then there were those like Moondancer – with imaginations that blew everything completely out of proportion. She internally scoffed at Moondancer's notions of fancy balls and being waited on horn and hoof. However, there *was* something quite spectacular about living under the Imperial Household. She suppressed a squeal of delight as she pictured the palace, the servants and, of course, the lessons with the Empress. What would she learn under the tutelage of a pony as powerful as Nightmare Moon? Twilight shuddered with a mix of excitement and awe as she was once again drawn back to the moment of the eclipse. The Empress, silhouetted against the corona, terrible in her power and beauty. Twilight blinked away the image, but the Empress remained. The testing room at the Academy – she turned, looking up into eyes as cold and vast as the depths of space. *I don't think I've ever come across a unicorn with your raw abilities before*, the Empress had said. What did that mean, “*Ever*”? In all the history of Equestria? Twilight Sparkle, the orphan bookworm, had more potential than Nickerless Flamel, or Ponymcelsus, or even semi-mythical Marelin? How powerful *was* she, really?

Uneven hoofbeats behind her distracted Twilight from her thoughts. Moondancer was making for the door, skipping all the way.

“So yeah,” she said, cheerily oblivious to the fact that she had been ignored all throughout her monologue. “I hope you have a real good time at the palace. But don't forget to visit us lowly commoners, ‘Your Highness’!”

Twilight humoured the Moondancer with a strained laugh until the door clicked shut. The lavender filly sighed and resumed her packing. She made a point to use magic to lift all of her belongings – practice makes perfect, as

they say. Ever since the fateful morning before, Twilight felt as if there was a stream inside of her that had been recently cleaned and unblocked. Magic flowed freely and easily from her. It flowed so freely that sometimes she would open a door and almost tear it off its hinges. She really didn't know her own strength.

After steadily filling her cases to the brim with accessories, books and what little clothing she had, Twilight stared at the telescope that sat in the centre of the window – in between both sides of the room. She couldn't fit it in any container she had with her, and the unicorn did not trust herself with the task of dismantling it without breaking anything. She knew, intellectually, that the palace had whole observatories full of far better equipment. But she hadn't used those telescopes to count the craters on the moon, or to watch Hackamore's Comet progress across the sky evening after evening. Or to stare at the eclipse until her eyes ached, then trade off with—

The door opened and closed with barely a whisper. Twilight knew in an instant who had entered. She turned to greet a softly smiling Orion with a brief hug, pressing her neck to his.

"Do you need any help?" the white colt asked.

Twilight shook her head. "No, I've got this." She focused on the cases, straining herself as she tried to lift them all at once. Having to divide her focus was more difficult than she thought, and she grunted under the strain. They hovered for several seconds before she had to let go, gasping from the effort. Potential or no, her magic didn't seem very consistent. Perhaps it was less like a dam that had been opened and more like one that had been fixed up, and the operators closed and opened its floodgates at their leisure.

Orion chuckled. "It's like weights, Twi; start with the lighter objects first and then work your way up. You'll get better with time, I'm sure of it. Here, let me take a few."

Once loaded up with Twilight's baggage, the two deposited them down by the Home's entrance and went back up to their room. The filly stared forlornly at what had once been her side of the room. Everything was gone, save the map and the star chart on the wall. Those were Orion's now. The earth pony next to her motioned to the telescope at the window.

"I'll help you take that apart for your trip," he offered.

Twilight spun to face him, her mind abruptly made up. "No! You keep it."

"Twilight, I can always get a new one if I want to," Orion shook his head softly. "Please, you take the telescope. As a gift."

"But the palace probably has loads of telescopes. I can't take..."

"Please?" he smiled as he bent down to her level. "We built this thing *together*, and I want *you* to keep it. You know, as a memento of the time we spent together in this place. And mine will be your maps."

The filly bit her lip. "Okay then," she whispered. "I'll take it with me."

He nodded happily enough, but Twilight noticed his expression grow sombre as he turned to gaze at the telescope. He heaved a sigh as he stepped over to it. "Come and help me, then," he called over to her. "I'll need that fancy magic of yours for the fiddly bits."

Together, they began to carefully dismantle their machine. Twilight dug its case out of the back of the wardrobe and dusted it off while Orion unscrewed the lenses. He directed her on which of the smaller pieces she needed to take apart with her magic, more than once wondering aloud how its creator expected anypony but a unicorn to assemble the thing. They both fell silent for a while as they went to work on the less delicate fittings of the tripod, then Orion suddenly spoke in a low, resigned tone.

"I guess she was right, then."

Twilight stopped, looking at the earth pony in confusion. "Who was right?"

"The fortune teller back at the festival," he replied. "She said we were going to be separated for a long time."

"Oh," Twilight's shoulders slumped. "Yeah..."

"But it's all right, Twi," he gave her an assured smile. "Because we're not really separated – I can write to you and you're still in the same town."

Besides, you're going to have a great future at the palace, with the Empress. It's all you've ever wanted, huh?"

"Yeah," she returned his smile. "I guess it is."

He gave her a quick hug. "And if you're happy, I wouldn't change it if I could."

When the last piece was taken off, Orion folded up the tripod legs and laid them gently in the case. The lid snapped shut with an odd sense of finality, and Twilight followed the colt out of her room for the last time.

As the pair trotted downstairs once more, Twilight broke into a sudden gallop. *My luggage is missing! Everything!* For a moment she thought this was some final prank against the new "Princess". Then the open door drew her eye and she spied Miss Loch waiting there, eyes locked on to the darkness beyond; the cloud-filled sky doing well in blotting out the Bright Moon's light while she watched for the royal carriage that would take Twilight away. She glanced to Twilight as the two foals exited the building.

"I brought your things outside, Twilight," she noted. "It's best to not waste the Lord Captain's time by popping back inside for them when your carriage arrives."

"Thanks, Miss Loch."

"Twilight, can I tell you something?" the mare asked after a long silence.

"Um, okay?" The filly shifted her weight nervously, not comfortable with her caretaker's tense, brittle tone.

"If... if there's any problem," Miss Loch swallowed, clearing the way for a more fluent speaking. "If you're feeling lonely, or sad, or in danger; come straight to me. Don't go to the Empress, or anypony else in the palace. Come here – we can help you no matter what."

"I... okay, Miss Loch," Twilight said, hesitant with her words. "But the Empress will help me, I'm sure of it. I *am* her personal student, after all."

"I know, Twilight, but I just want you to know we've always been here for you. And we always will."

She leaned down to give Twilight a quick hug, which Twilight reciprocated. "I know you will, Miss Loch," the unicorn foal murmured, before raising her voice to a chirpier tone. "Is there anything else you want me to do?"

"Be respectful to the Empress," she warned with a hint of a crack in her voice, drawing back and giving Twilight a firm, worried look. "Don't get on her bad side, and try to work hard. Don't pester the staff or the guards. And..." Her tone dropped, grim and tight. "Stay away from anypony dressed in black."

Twilight saw her guardian close her eyes and shudder at something in her own thoughts. The filly looked behind her to the windows of the building, seeing rows of ponies gathered at them, watching her. The sound of hooves beating on the cobblestone road and wheels trundling behind them turned Twilight's attention away from the foster home.

The carriage was carved with intricate designs and varnished to make the woodwork glow in the moonlight. Silver and white gold could be seen on parts of the frame, placed just so for an aesthetic sense of grandeur. Of course, there were the tell-tale crescent moons etched into the carriage that told all who this vehicle belonged to far more than the precious metals adorning it. A strong pair of earth ponies, clad in matching armour – plates of silver overlaying what was likely a reinforcing layer of iron – pulled the carriage. A figure stepped out, his hooves making no sound as they met the cobbles.

In an instant, the ponies at the windows had disappeared and Miss Loch and Orion had stepped back. The white colt's face was set with an intense mistrust whilst the mare's was a mask of fear. The figure stepped into the light spilling from the doorway to reveal a corpse-grey unicorn stallion with a mane the colour of char. He seemed on the thin side, though the folds of his voluminous black leather cloak could have concealed a good deal of muscle. A pair of tinted goggles rode high on his forehead, up against the base of his horn, giving the filly a good look at eyes so dark that the irises almost blended in with his pupils.

The pony smiled, revealing a neat row of teeth white enough that it seemed they should shine more than they did. A wry, almost boyish grin twisted his lips, but his eyes reminded her of the blank expression Orion got when he

was holding something inside. The expression gave Twilight the unsettling feeling that she had tried to excuse bad behaviour with a lie so absurdly transparent that he would have to double her punishment, once he finished laughing at the idea that she thought he would actually believe it.

"I am here to accompany you to the palace," he said, his voice unexpectedly silky and pleasant. It had a calming, almost sedative quality that set her at ease as immediately as his appearance had intimidated her.

What did I expect? the filly thought, almost giggling to herself. *"I vant to suck your blahd!"* Miss Loch had taught her not to "judge a book by its cover", after all. She felt herself smiling back as the Lord-Captain of the Overwatch continued.

"Let me help you with your luggage." A faint, black tint of magic formed around her bags as they were lifted off of the ground and slotted into their places in the carriage. The stallion then looked at her expectantly, standing aside to clear her way into the carriage.

"Just a moment, please, sir," Twilight said sweetly.

She spun to Loch Mare and hugged her, snapping the pony out of her dread-filled petrification. The mare scooped Twilight up into a tighter hold. After a moment or two, she released the unicorn filly and smiled reassuringly at her, though what she was reassuring her of, Twilight was uncertain.

"Visit us soon," she whispered.

"I will, don't worry," Twilight nodded.

The unicorn then sidled over to Orion and looked up at him. He smiled weakly as she pressed into him. He leaned down and rested his head on her withers. After this silent embrace, the colt stepped back and forced his smile wider.

"Have a good time, Twilight," he said. "I'll miss you."

"You can always come and visit me, right?" she asked.

“Sure, and I’ll write to you until then,” Orion replied less dolefully.
“Goodbye!”

Twilight grinned and turned back to the waiting stallion, hopping up into the carriage with an excited squeal. As the vehicle began to move, she waved back toward the orphanage and called out goodbyes to the ponies she was leaving behind. Soon they were out of sight and she sat down, her eyes meeting the black-clad pony’s own impossibly dark ones. He was still smiling, although this was much smaller and much less lively than when they had been outside the orphanage. She was too excited to remain silent. It would be the first time she had seen the palace up close, and she felt like she would burst from the anticipation of beginning her new life there, in the presence of the Empress.

“What’s your name, sir?” she asked suddenly, unable to take the silence any longer.

“The Inquisitor,” the stallion replied simply.

“The Inquisitor’?” the foal knitted her brows. “Don’t you have any other name? A proper name, or a family name even?”

“Not really,” he answered, casual and bored. “I have only this name.”

“Why?”

His pupils contracted as he stared harder at the foal. His pleasant smile morphed into a smirk and he arched an eyebrow, regarding her with an almost patronising look, as if she had amused him.

“Because I want it to be so, little girl,” he said ominously, before turning away and looking out of the window.

Despite his light-hearted tone, Twilight couldn’t help but shiver a little. She turned to stare out the other window, electing not to bother him anymore. The city of Canterlot rolled by in a blur of ponies and buildings. The afternoon moon slowly broke through the clouds while long, silent ride gradually dulled excitement into boredom. She sighed and stared out aimlessly into the shapes and colours that came and went, trapped in the slowly rolling limbo between her past and her future.

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The carriage rounded one final curve, and the Imperial Palace finally rolled into sight. Twilight couldn't believe her eyes! She had seen the palace before, but as most of her life was spent on the other side of the plateau-bound city, it was never more than a cluster of tower-tops in the distance. She had always meant to go on a tour of the castle at some point in her life, but either never had the chance to, or always kept putting it off until later. Now, she was not only going to see the centuries-old palace, but to live there too.

It hung almost daintily off of the side of the mountain. Just to its side, from further up, a waterfall cascaded down the cliff face into a lily-filled pool that stretched to form a moat between the palace and the rest of the city. These waters tumbled off of the mountain into the valley below, the spray casting pale rainbows under the Bright Moon. Twisting, dark silver spires pierced the sky – lances with glittering emblems of stars and moons at their tips. Lavender marble and violet tiles had been sculpted into domes and pillars and towers; all amalgamated into a poetically chaotic yet stable complex. Curves and angles jostled each other for architectural dominance, but had seemed to settle their dispute amicably in the lassitude of old age.

"Quite something isn't it?" A hint of disdain escaped with the words. "They say it's beautiful, but I don't really know about that. It's far too... bulbous and... chaotic for my liking. Not what *I* would have designed at all; but those silver spoon-fed idiots never *could* stop competing long enough to do anything truly grand."

The carriage stopped when it came to the courtyard and the doors were opened for them by servants. The Inquisitor was the first to step out. When he did so, the attendants stiffened and bowed low before him. Twilight followed, staring up in wonder at the opulent interior of the castle. Its courtyard was symmetrical and filled with flowers that complimented the colours of the palace – white roses, lavenders, violets and chrysanthemum. Once again, her attention was captured by the Inquisitor's smooth voice.

"Take this luggage up to the royal apartments," he ordered. The servants bobbed their acknowledgement and rushed to obey.

They had hardly taken a step, though, when a marsh-green pegasus glided to a landing beside them. She wore a uniform almost identical to the Inquisitor's, save the raised hood and goggles planted firmly over her eyes. The cloaked pony bowed low.

"Master," she began tonelessly. "The Imperial Council will be in session shortly."

"Thundersong, do you have anything to report?"

"I have found out that the Hierophant is going to introduce a new bill regarding grants and tax-cuts to proprietors of Way property," she answered. "I also believe the Duke and his faction will support it."

The Inquisitor muttered something under his breath before raising his voice. "Very good, Thundersong, you have done well."

The black-dressed mare waited in her place expectantly. Smiling, the Inquisitor held out a hoof, upon which the pegasus pressed her forehead in what seemed to be a look of pure bliss. After lingering for a few moments, she broke away, bowing and uttering her thanks as she left them. The Inquisitor turned to Twilight and offered a thin smile. "I have business to attend to in court, so the servants will take you up to your room."

The filly's eyes lit up with curiosity. She had never seen the Imperial Court in action before. She tried to imagine the sight of so many intelligent nobles and clever politicians verbally fencing with one another, but she had nothing to go on but a few old woodcuts from over a century ago. "Oh, can I come? I mean, I'd really like to see the ponies there and it'd help me know my way around the place."

"You're too young to be getting mixed up at court, even if you're the Empress's personal..." his face seemed to brighten with an idea. "Actually, I think it would be good if I were to... if you were to get to know the court and its inhabitants a bit better."

"Thank you, sir!" Twilight chirped.

The Inquisitor nodded and beckoned for her to follow him. He led the young unicorn through a pair of tall, heavy doors that opened into the reception

hall. A huge marble staircase sprawled across half the room, richly clothed in red carpets and railed with polished wood that Twilight Sparkle didn't even have a name for. The rest of the room was tiled in white and violet, the walls hung with elaborate banners. Sprinkled about the room, chatting pairs and small groups of ponies mingled, all dressed in elegant fashions that screamed 'aristocrat'. While all breeds were represented, Twilight noticed a disproportionate number of unicorns among the Canterlot elite. Servants waited on them with trays of wine glasses; there was a constant flow of traffic to and from what the filly assumed were the kitchens. A small group of courtiers were the first to become aware of the Inquisitor's arrival. Their chatter stopped and Twilight noticed the ponies hesitate, looking towards a well-dressed mare for guidance. The Inquisitor smirked as this unicorn peeled off from her clique and strode over to the pair.

"Ah, Inquisitor, I did not expect to see you return so soon," she said, her tone light and playful. "The Council is just about to convene, although Her Holiness has decided not to attend."

The unicorn was definitely stylish, not just in clothes but also in looks. Her curly, dark lavender tresses had been pulled up and curled behind her head into a cylindrical bun, with the forward-falling hairs brushed to either side of her horn. Her soft fuchsia form was mostly covered by an elegant silvery-white silk dress, trimmed with indigo. She wore silver bracelets and necklaces that all sported the symbol of the crescent moon, and her head was lightly topped with a delicate silver circlet.

"Hierophant. You're looking elegant as ever," the Inquisitor replied, lowering his head in an overly respectful nod, his voice laden with a generous amount of sarcasm. "I hope that you will reconsider your proposal for tonight's Council session."

"Not in any way, good sir," the mare looked at Twilight, finally noticing the filly. "Who is this? Your illegitimate foal? Oh, Inquisitor, this is hardly a 'bring-your-daughter-to-work-night' kind of place!"

"This," his tone sharpened. "Is Twilight Sparkle. Twilight, may I present Hierophant North Star. As the leader of the Enlightened Way's uppermost council, she deals with all the superstitious nonsense that manages to gain precedent in this country."

“Nonsense!” North Star countered, her eyes lingered on Twilight, as if her next words were for the filly, before snapping back to the Inquisitor. “The Imperial Cult deals with the matters of the Gods themselves! That is hardly nonsense.”

“You can say whatever lets you sleep at night, Hierophant,” the Inquisitor snipped. “But talk of gods is, to me, nonsense that does not belong in court.”

“Even if the court is that of the incarnate god-Empress herself?”

The Inquisitor smiled smugly and nodded. “Especially then.” Incensed, the Hierophant glared daggers at Twilight, who had tried to distance herself from the argument. Now finding herself the target of the priestess’s ire, the filly shrank back.

“And may I ask why you have brought a child into the palace, let alone to court?” she growled.

“Twilight Sparkle is to live here at the palace. She will be studying under the Empress as her personal student,” he answered with the cool grin of a cat which has cornered a mouse. “I thought it beneficial to her coming education to familiarise her with the palace’s business and its *lovely* inhabitants.”

North Star stepped back a pace, eyes wide in surprise, her cheeks reddening as her face worked through a flurry of emotions. She seemed nervous at first, then glared accusingly at the leather-clad stallion, before directing an ingratiating smile toward Twilight. She performed a graceful bow that took the filly by surprise.

“It is an honour to meet somepony who has been chosen to take a coveted position so close to Her Holiness,” the Hierophant breathed. “I envy your position, Twilight Sparkle. You must be especially gifted if you have caught the attention of She Who Stayed.”

Twilight blushed at the compliments, but her curiosity quickly overcame the nervousness that had been plaguing her. She had read little on the subjects of religion, largely sharing the Inquisitor’s opinion on ‘superstitious nonsense’. “She Who Stayed?”

North Star's eyes lit up. "Oh, how terrible it is that you haven't been educated in the Cult Imperia! Such a young mind as yourself should not go without knowing the truths of the world; ripe for some *cynics*—" She flicked a glare towards the Inquisitor. "—to corrupt. Allow me to enlighten you."

The stallion of the group quickly swerved in front of Twilight, much to the filly's intellectual disappointment. He raised an eyebrow at the fuchsia mare.

"As much as I'd love to listen to one of your rambling sermons, my dear, I'm afraid that it's time for Twilight to be escorted to the Empress," he turned to the lavender unicorn. "Try not to give too much thought to the Hierophant's ideas, Twilight. Though she may be high up in the Enlightened Way's institutions, her little Empress-worshipping sect is not exactly what you would call mainstream."

"We *would* be if you and Marshall Silverstar wouldn't keep getting everypony to block my proposals for reform," North Star snapped, obviously irritated by the interruption and hoping for a new argument.

But the Inquisitor had already whisked Twilight on her way through the hall, towards the stairs. He turned back and called to her.

"We'll discuss this another time, Lady North Star! But until then, I'd think about choosing reforms that make much more sense!"

Twilight's head spun from the rapid switches from friendly banter to bitter rebuke and back. For a moment, the grand hall and its courtiers reminded her of the playground back at the orphanage, but with all the bullies and queen bees hiding behind bland smiles. She made a mental note to read up on courtly behaviour and learn about the court's rivalries, and soon. They had barely made it to the top of the stairs when a large white unicorn intercepted them. He wore a tuxedo and a sash, decorated with several golden emblems and a family crest. His golden blond mane was tied back in a reserved, practical fashion that still gave off a look of sophistication. He regarded the Inquisitor with disdainful, icy blue eyes.

"Inquisitor," he muttered, nodding stiffly. This was returned with a sly smile. The stallion looked at Twilight. "Who is *this*?"

“Twilight Sparkle,” the Inquisitor was nonchalant in his reply; as if the question was trivial. “She is to be the Empress’s personal student.”

“Her *what?*” the blond stallion bit off, narrowing his eyes.

The Inquisitor huffed, seemingly bored. “Her Imperial Majesty has decided to take on this young filly to be her protégée in the academic and magical arts. I am already late, ‘Your Grace’, and I won’t be made even more so by you.”

As the Inquisitor began to move, the Duke put a halting hoof on his shoulder abruptly. The black-cloaked stallion narrowed his eyes at Blueblood, giving him a look that sent chills down Twilight’s spine. The noblecolt quickly put his hoof down, but continued seemingly unabated.

“What family is she from?” he insisted. “Is it the Hoofenzollerns? Or the House of Gildhorn?”

“Neither. Twilight Sparkle is an orphan,” the Inquisitor replied, grinning while Blueblood’s eyes widened with incredulous shock. “Now that your curiosity is satisfied, I’d like to get a move on. We’ll discuss things later when council commences. Come Twilight.”

The ashen pale pony brushed past the silently seething Duke with the filly close in his wake. They left the hall, passing beneath the arches, with Blueblood stamping off to commune with fellow aristocrats. From the top of the stairs, Twilight could already see ripples of excited conversation radiating out through the crowd from Heirophant North Star and Duke Blueblood. As a mahogany door frame cut off her view, she silently hoped she hadn’t made too much of a stir.

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High above, in a tower that seemed to jut impossibly far beyond the edge of the cliff, dim candlelight flickered in the personal study of the Empress. Polished beams and ornate trim of rich, dark wood shone with reflected light. A fire roared in the hearth, warming the dusty air. The only sound in the room was the contented, steady breathing of an alicorn, the crackle of firewood and the rustling of paper. It was just bright enough for the

Empress to read the parchments and scrolls spread out in front of her. They were mostly reports of domestic and foreign affairs that were important enough for the monarch's notice. But no matter their importance, they seemed inconsequential at the moment for Nightmare Moon. She was thinking more about the newest arrival to the palace. Servants had come in to her office earlier to inform the Empress that Twilight Sparkle had arrived at the palace. The Queen of the Night hoped that the Inquisitor had warmed up to the filly. She shifted uncomfortably in her cushion as she recalled her last conversation with the Inquisitor.

"She's a danger," the Inquisitor stated. "A pony running around with that kind of raw power is a threat."

"Oh seriously, Inquisitor – she's only a filly!" the Empress retorted.

"But she can grow to become a mare with deadly control over that power of hers."

Nightmare Moon huffed. "This is why Twilight is to become my student. Her mind is young and ripe – full of potential. I can teach her the ideals and values we hold dear. She will be a useful ally when she matures."

"I understand her value as a tool, but what if she was manipulated by the wrong ponies?" the Inquisitor remained adamant. "We cannot afford that risk."

"What would you have me do?"

"A quiet execution will permanently remove her as a danger," the leather-clad pony answered. His words had no emotion to them.

*The Queen of the Night froze and glared at the unfazed Inquisitor with an icy fire in her eyes. "I will **not** condone the murder of foals, Inquisitor!" She stamped her hoof, punctuating her disgust. "Do you understand?"*

The Inquisitor bowed his head courteously. "It was merely a thought, Your Majesty. I apologise."

*Nightmare Moon continued walking, looking away from the stallion. "Twilight Sparkle **will** be my student. That is my **final** word," she rumbled.*

“And you will treat her with the utmost care. Do you understand? Should she suffer an ‘unfortunate accident’, her fate will be yours.”

The Inquisitor closed his eyes and nodded graciously. “I understand perfectly, Your Majesty.”

A knock at the door wrenched Nightmare Moon from her memories. She flicked her eyes towards the origin of the sound, having a fairly certain guess as to who it was. A smile grew on her face, anticipating the meeting to come. “Come in,” she called, trying to not sound too forceful.

The ornately carved and inlaid doors opened, and The Inquisitor stepped in, followed by her new student, Twilight Sparkle. The Inquisitor was smirking – his most common expression. He was, in a way, quite boyish and easy-going. Even his mane, a smooth black and grey wave, seemed to have been lazily combed, yet fell back perfectly over the nape of his neck. His tail was also a handsome product of such apparently indifferent caretaking. From a distance, he seemed quite a catch for any young mare, but prolonged exposure to him quickly told a different story. He nodded courteously and trotted up to the Empress, leaning down to her ear.

“I’m quite sure that the Council knows about your new student,” he whispered, his hot breath tickling her ear. “I was unfortunately cornered by several of our court’s illustrious members and I had to tell them who Twilight was.”

“Who did you speak to?” the Empress groaned. She hadn’t had time to prepare for the filly’s proper introduction to court. Doubtlessly her new student would be a subject brought up by at least one of the Councillors.

“Hierophant North Star and Duke Blueblood.”

She groaned again, louder this time. “What did you tell the Duke?”

“Only that our little orphan was to be your personal pupil,” the Inquisitor replied, humour creeping into his voice.

Nightmare suppressed yet another groan. *Now I’ll hear no end from Blueblood*, she thought miserably. *The stuck-up nag will be outraged that his son has been overlooked in favour of a commoner.* She checked

herself, forcing down the urge to lash out verbally at the Inquisitor. Her vizier seemed amused at the trouble he had caused her.

She glared down at him, her ears folding back in annoyance. "Leave us. Now," she muttered, making a note to punish him later. Ordering him to make a goodwill visit to the Griffon Kingdoms would be suitable. The thought made her smile faintly. *I'm sure he'll love having to suck up to High King Lucien.*

The Inquisitor gave a short bow and headed for the door. His cloak billowed like a sail as he whirled around, that insouciant smirk still plastered across his muzzle. He glided to the door, hoofsteps silent and smooth, as always. Not for the first time, the Empress found herself curious as to what the Inquisitor was hiding under his all-concealing Overwatch uniform. She had never seen him without it; she didn't even know what his cutie mark was. Of course, Nightmare Moon could simply ask him to show her, but ordering her Prime Minister to strip naked and bare his flank for her could easily be misconstrued by the ever-present scandalmongers. Gossip was terribly rife in the palace, and servants and nobleponies alike frequently blew such things completely out of proportion.

She found herself staring at the door, unfocused and lost in thought. A nervous shuffle in the corner of her eye caught her attention. Twilight Sparkle was standing near the corner of the room, looking down at the ground. She traced her hoof along the ground, nervous and abashed. Glancing up, she saw the Empress looking at her and quickly returned her gaze to the ground, lowering her head at the attention. It seemed that the filly had lost all the boldness she had in the Academy.

"Hello, Twilight Sparkle," the Empress smiled awkwardly.

She tried to sound comforting. Nightmare Moon liked foals; it was a relief to see a bright young face, innocent and keen, in a palace full of scheming and grim courtiers. But the truth was, she had little experience actually dealing with them. In hindsight, she should have expected this reaction from Twilight. The foal was in the presence of the highest authority in the land. Even though she had set aside her armour and even her crown while reading reports, she supposed she remained an imposing figure. The mystique of power was not so easily shed.

The filly looked up at her. The mare still towered over her even while lying on her cushion. "Hello, Your Majesty," Twilight replied, unsure of herself.

"Take a seat," Nightmare floated over a cushion for the filly to sit on, which she dutifully did. There followed a brief, uneasy silence until the Empress continued. "How was your trip?"

"It was all right, Your Majesty."

"Were you able to bring all your possessions with you?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Twilight nodded, still refusing to meet the Empress's eyes.

Nightmare Moon offered one more attempt to strike up a conversation with the filly. "I heard you bumped into some of the figures in the Council."

Twilight did in fact perk up a bit.

"Yes, Your Majesty," she said – the overuse of the address was actually beginning to grate the alicorn a bit. "We ran into the Duke and he seemed a bit rude. I don't think the Inquisitor likes him all that much. Before that we met North Star, and she was kind of friendly, but kind of weird. It's hard to tell if the Inquisitor likes her or not."

"How so?" the Empress inquired softly, allowing the filly to carry the conversation. Twilight seemed to grow more courageous as she talked.

"Well, they joked around a little, even though they seemed like they were trying to insult each other – they even had an argument – but they were just really polite to one another. It was confusing. I mean, if you don't like someone, you usually don't joke around with them, right?"

"In the palace it's different," the sovereign of Equestria interjected, smiling easily. "Here you have to be courteous and friendly even if you don't like the pony you have to be polite to. As for the jokes, well, it's something that the Inquisitor does to everypony, but North Star always rises to the bait. I personally think they might have a thing going on..."

"What do you mean, a thing?" Twilight raised an eyebrow.

Nightmare Moon backpedalled quickly. “Uh, nothing,” she said, hurriedly standing up. “How would you like to see your room now?”

“Oh, yes I would, Your Majesty!”

Twilight scrambled to her feet, nervousness evidently ebbing quickly, and followed the Empress out of the study. The entire wing of the palace was dedicated for the royal apartments – a collection of rooms set up as the Empress’s personal living space. The halls were more elegant and simplistic than the lavish designs of the more public parts of the palace. Nightmare Moon found the complex relaxing. A faint breeze trailed them through the corridors, warm and laden with the late spring scents of the gardens outside. The Empress greatly preferred this part of the castle to any other wing. Of course, it was her home, but there was also something that reminded her of a time long ago when she knew only innocence and leisure.

They stopped by a pair of double doors which faced one another across the hall. Nightmare Moon gestured to the more magnificent set, trimmed in silver, with the Imperial crest shaped into knockers.

“This is my room. You need to knock before you come in. And this...” She walked to the less extravagantly designed doors and pushed them open. “...is your room.”

Twilight let out a small gasp and stared around the room with a twinkle of wonderment in her eyes. Bookcases lined the walls, packed with texts selected to cater to a young filly’s education. The shelves were separated by an eclectic collection of paintings from many of the greats: Gust-off Crimp’t, Leonardo of Veneighce and even a piece by the griffon modernist Andy Warhawk. In the middle of one wall was a large fireplace, ornately carved from smooth, dark granite. Soft cushions surrounded a sizeable table, and against the far wall lay a bed large enough for four adult ponies, let alone one tiny filly. It was covered with sheets and pillows of the finest silk. This was a room fit for a princess.

“It’s... it’s beautiful,” Twilight murmured at last. Then she noticed her luggage stacked neatly in the corner.

She beamed and scampered over to the luggage, searching through the bags until she uncovered a battered wooden case nearly twice her size. The Empress craned her neck curiously as the filly tugged it free of the pile.

The alicorn's smile softened as Twilight Sparkle dragged the case over to the balcony doors. Nightmare Moon, seeing the foal struggle to lift what was probably several times her weight, stretched out her magic to help her pick it up. Once it was near the balcony, Twilight gave her timid thanks and opened the case with an air of solemn reverence.

In it were parts; cylinders, tripod legs, lenses, knobs and screws and more. Twilight ran her eyes over the contents of the case, lingering on each fragment nostalgically. The Empress sat down and broke the silence, and the concentration of the foal.

"Is this a telescope?" she asked.

Twilight nodded and replied in a soft voice. "It's the one my friend and I built together. He gave it to me."

"Do you use it often?"

"Not as often as I'd like to," the filly admitted.

"It looks like a good machine," Nightmare Moon offered. "You must have worked at it for quite some time."

"We did, yeah," Twilight furrowed her brow. "But Orion did most of the work. I don't even remember how to set it up, and I lost the instruction manual."

The alicorn rubbed her chin thoughtfully. Her student had taken this thing out before unpacking everything else, and it obviously meant a lot to her. It would be a shame for the filly to be unable to watch the stars this evening. The Empress's heart fluttered with joy as she realised that Twilight Sparkle did not simply live under her night, but actively took notice of its beauty. Somepony who appreciated her art was always welcome.

"Twilight," the filly looked up at the Empress. "I think I see how it all fits together. I can help you set it up if you want."

The lavender unicorn's eyes lit up and a happy smile graced her lips. She sprung up to her feet. "Oh, yes please, Your Majesty!"

Nightmare Moon chuckled at the reaction. "But only if you promise me that you'll look at the stars this evening."

"I will, Your Majesty!" Twilight's voice cracked with glee.

"Good, I'll make it an extra special evening then."

The teacher and her new student spent a healthy portion of an hour figuring out how to put the telescope together. It was a complex device, and no diagrams and instructions meant that most of their progress was trial and error. But when they were finished, the contraption stood proudly on the balcony, and it was time for the Queen of the Night to lower the Bright Moon to make way for the Dull Moon. And as she promised, the evening sky was a tapestry – nebulae and stars glittered in the crisp night alongside sparkling pinwheel galaxies and the ephemeral streaks of meteors. Nightmare Moon stayed with her new student into the late hours of the evening, and together they admired the night.

Chapter Five

The Courtiers' Game

Behind the fiercely guarded doors of the Canterlot throne room sat Nightmare Moon on her Obsidian Throne. Lamplight gleamed off of the polished surface of the purple-black seat. Smooth and glass-like, the Obsidian Throne was carved like a monolith jutting out of the floor, surrounded by circular platforms through which cut a flight of steps carpeted in wine red. It was a magnificent sight, towering high over all who would come to seek an audience with its occupant – the Empress of Equestria. She sat at ease on her throne, resting on cushions of the highest quality and comfort. To her right, on the podium below, was a smaller throne on which the Inquisitor lounged.

Before the Obsidian Throne, a semicircular meeting table seated two dozen or so high-ranking military officers, ministers, influential nobles, and assorted hangers-on such that they could all face the Empress and her Prime Minister. The meeting had been going on for twenty minutes now; the members of her Privy Council had been bickering over minor issues – tax-cuts for lands owned and rented by the Enlightened Way, and grants for building on such lands. Hierophant North Star and Duke Blueblood had spent the last ten minutes of their meeting laying out the proposal for her. The Empress was not an idiot; she had seen before they even began that the proposal would benefit the nobles who leased land to the Way – Blueblood's constituency, of course – and increase the influence of the Way itself. The Hierophant could convince a great many nobles and townships to give her faction land and facilities if it meant keeping a few more bits in the local coffers.

Of course, Marshall Silverstar would fight tooth and hoof against the proposal. The Empress admired the stallion for his tenacity and fierce nature in a den of political vipers. A natural leader, he had become the voice of the common-blooded ministers and champion of what he called "Rose Q. Taxpayer". The earth pony made no secret of his disdain for religion in general, but he seemed to hold a special grudge against North Star and her Cult Imperia.

“The expansion of Cult powers into every aspect of our society continues unabated,” Silverstar growled. He had the refreshing tendency to call things as they were. “Special privileges for Cult properties are just another step. Soon, the only way anypony will gain any advantage in this Empire is to join the Cult.”

“As you may have heard, Lord Marshall, the bill does not give privilege specifically to houses of worship for the Cult Imperia,” North Star made a grand gesture as she continued. “We all here follow the Way, as the Way is Perfection. Would it not be good and just to ensure that the Way – beneficial as it is – should flourish? And would it not be unfair to heavily tax the property of a non-profit organization?”

“So we should have tax cuts for all Way-owned property, including buildings of a secular nature?”

“I believe that you’re now grasping at straws, Lord Marshall,” Duke Blueblood interjected. “The Way owns very few establishments of primarily irreligious nature – and these are usually homeless shelters, museums and libraries. I fear that you just cannot tolerate the privileges faith has, and its special place in the hearts of the public.”

“What I cannot tolerate, Your Grace, is the tendrils of the Cult that are seeping into the mainstream doctrines, and mainstream society.”

The Hierophant stood up, pointing dramatically at the military commander. “What we *all* should not tolerate is your flagrant disrespect for our beloved Empress!”

Heads turned at her outburst, first to her and then back to Silverstar. He hesitated and his eyes flicked to the Empress, who was doing her best to look completely impassive. She bobbed her muzzle in the tiniest fraction of a nod; he would have to tread carefully to avoid any hint of irreverence, but he’d offered her no insult she was aware of. That seemed to stiffen his resolve.

“And in what way have I disrespected the Empress?” he demanded. Nightmare Moon’s ears pricked forward with interest as the Hierophant prepared her volley.

“You scoff at the Cult Imperia, and you openly declare us to be, quote, ‘a gaggle of ramblers and insane sycophants!’” North Star’s tone grew more hysterical with each word, until she might as well have been delivering an impassioned sermon. “Your blasphemy and disregard for the truth is an ongoing affront to Her Holiness! It is her truth we spread, and her glory you ignore!”

The Empress blinked and rolled her eyes – checking that none of her Council saw. The usual, then. No charges she hadn’t heard a hundred times before from the zealot. *Talking about me as if I wasn’t here seems more disrespectful*, she thought grumpily. Giving a quiet sigh, she blotted the ensuing exchange of tirades from her hearing and turned to the Inquisitor. His impossibly dark eyes caught hers and he raised a knowing eyebrow at her. She gave him a small equally knowing grin. Silverstar and North Star both had explosive personalities, and now all bets were off. There was nothing for it but to let the argument burn itself out; if she stopped them at this point, they’d be sniping back and forth for the rest of the meeting instead of paying attention to the matters at hoof. North Star’s fanatical indignation didn’t even make for an entertaining argument, like Duke Blueblood or the Inquisitor. The Inquisitor gestured to the bottle of amontillado at his elbow, but she shook her head. He shrugged and sipped from his own goblet. The Empress turned back to the table. At least Duke Blueblood had, like a true gentlepony, remained aloof from the row.

I think this may be a new record for the shortest time between the gavel and the first personal insult. Nightmare Moon stifled a sigh. Sometimes she felt less like more like a school mistress with a class of rowdy foals than Empress of the known world.

A century ago, the Cult had begun as a small sect of the Way. Nightmare had basked in their reverence when it was new and exciting, and their worship of the alicorn as “She Who Stayed” was, in its way, touching. The Inquisitor hadn’t liked the idea, though, and had the courage to tell her so. In hindsight, she supposed it did seem somewhat unfair that she was lauded above her kin who were forced to move on from the mortal world, but at the time she had rebuffed him viciously.

With her visible support and acceptance, the Cult had grown powerful enough to attempt to add its own dogma to the doctrines of the entire religion. Like making her servants grovel, however, the veneration soon

became tiresome. Her objections only deflected their adoration such that they referred to her as if their Empress and the black alicorn on the throne were two different people.

Nightmare was jolted out of her thoughts by a sudden, sharp bang. The Inquisitor, it seemed, had finally had enough of the squabble and was smacking his hoof against the dais for silence.

“There will be order in the presence of Her Majesty and the Council!” he demanded. Though his words barely rose above his usual speaking voice, the firm tones cut through the din like a warm knife through butter. Teeth clacked together instantly, biting off arguments in mid-word as all eyes turned toward to pale grey pony. “Now, I think I have heard enough, and I would like – at Her Majesty’s pleasure – to move this along.” He looked at the Empress, his expression one of boredom.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I believe it would be best if we proceed to the voting on the matter. All in favour of the proposed Religious Properties Tax Reform Act raise your hoof.”

Thirteen hooves were raised. Most were nobility in Blueblood’s orbit, or those officials under the influence of North Star. Others were, Nightmare Moon recognised, the usual fence-sitters and aspiring Marechiavellis who attempted to play at the game of thrones despite having too little power to gather their own cliques of hoof-lickers. These were the swing votes that the Marshall, the Duke, the Hierophant and the Inquisitor often fought over.

“And those against?”

The Empress counted eleven. These were Silverstar’s lot – selected representatives from guilds and hard-working cities – as well as the Inquisitor’s puppets. The Inquisitor also had his hoof raised, which counted for two votes.

“A tie,” Nightmare declared. “As the decision is ultimately down to me, I shall take into account your arguments and retire to consider my decision. My choice shall be submitted to you all in a memorandum. For now, Council is adjourned. Good night, my lords and ladies.”

All stood up, save for the Empress and her Prime Minister, and bowed to the throne. Nightmare Moon accepted the gesture with her own shallow nod, and they turned and left in swift succession. Servants poured in, quickly busying themselves with the table and chairs. The throne room was to be cleared quickly. As they hauled them out of the room, Nightmare Moon relaxed, breathing out a sigh that she had been holding in for far too long.

“Troubled, Empress?” the Inquisitor asked, smiling his usual enigmatic smile, his voice strangely comforting. “Perhaps you would like me to pour you a glass of sherry?” He gestured with the bottle of wine.

“I swear, Inquisitor, you try to get me to drink far too often,” she grinned slyly. “Do you aim to make me drunk so you can take advantage of me?”

The Inquisitor didn’t reply. He simply blinked, his face remaining still and fixed in a small, polite grin.

“That was a joke, Inquisitor,” she sighed.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he nodded, brushing the attempt at humour away. “Do you want some tea instead? I’ll summon a servant for you.”

“Actually, Inquisitor, I think I’ll take some time for myself. Our drinks will have to wait for later,” she stood up and stretched, spreading her wings and giving them a couple of limbering flaps. “Before I go, do you have anything to report?”

The Inquisitor shrugged. “The Gallopfreyans are still complaining that they can’t have an ‘Empire on which the sun never sets’. I don’t think the Eclipse counts for them.”

Nightmare Moon glowered at him.

“That was a joke, Empress,” his smile widened ever so slightly.

“Good night, Inquisitor.”

The black alicorn left her prime minister sipping at his wine. She could feel his dark eyes on her as she went, but suppressed an involuntary shiver until she was out of his sight.

Outside the throne room, it was somewhat warmer and brighter. Lit chandeliers poured warm light down the cool gray walls and across marble tiles only a few shades above midnight blue. The kiss of golden light on the dusk-gray marble brought to mind ancient memories of her sister's-- *brought to mind candle light on dark marble and **nothing more***. Glancing around, she found no pony but her ever-faithful Imperial Guard, standing like fierce metal statues. So dedicated they were, with the patience of dragons and the loyalty of dogs.

Exclusively male, she noted, not for the first time. For some reason, the mares of her country were largely disinclined toward military service. Silverstar often complained about it, and there was always planning for a recruitment campaign aimed at mares. This was always quashed by North Star and Blueblood. Nightmare still had no idea what their motivations behind *that* particular move were.

The Empress passed through a pair of doors that led to a balcony. The supernatural warmth of the Bright Moon filled her bones with soothing heat. It was nothing like the embrace of the sun, but it was hers and it was enough. She watched the gardeners go about their nightly business for a time, fighting back the advancing armies of weeds and lichen and quelling the unruly branches and leaves that sprouted from the trees. The bluebells were in full bloom, as were the lilies and lotuses that floated daintily on the surface of the moat.

Breathing in the crisp air of the night, Nightmare Moon spread her wings to the faint breeze. She was going to enjoy this flight; she so rarely had the chance to. The prospect of dashing through the clouds and gliding so far up in the heavens that the cities of the world below her looked like stars always excited her. She loved flying. Stretching her wings out and bending her knees, she tensed to leap into the star-studded sky.

"Your Majesty!" a sophisticated voice called out.

Oh, Ancestors! What now? the Empress thought grumpily. She folded her wings and resumed a dignified posture as she fought down a scowl that

might well reduce her visitor to dust. He wore his sash proudly, with each medal and sigil polished to shine like the stars that hung above them. He was handsome, no one could say otherwise, but so dreadfully arrogant. That little goatee of his always seemed to be in such an immaculate state that it would have taken a dozen servants to get it that way. It probably did. “Yes, Duke Blueblood?”

“I have heard of the most recent addition to your illustrious household,” he started. “A student, one Twilight Sparkle.”

*Of course, pester me about this **just** when I’m about to enjoy myself.* “Yes, I have decided to take an especially gifted young unicorn into my fold. Is there anything you would particularly like to talk about in regards to my decision?”

“No, Your Majesty,” the Duke quickly lowered his head in an overly ostentatious display of humility. “I simply did not know that you were taking in students. If I may suggest—”

“Only the one, Duke Blueblood. I am only tutoring the one unicorn.”

Blueblood flinched at this, but came back, still determined. “There are also many other fine potential candidates for apprenticeship under Your Majesty. Gifted, worthy unicorns such as Skygold of the House of Hoofenzollern, or even my son, Prince Blueblood the Tenth.”

“I am afraid that the position is already filled by Twilight Sparkle. I only really have time for one student,” the Empress stated, her voice almost breaking its regally stoic tone as she began to lose patience with the unicorn prince.

Blueblood did his best to hide an appalled look, but Nightmare Moon knew him well enough to see it as clear as the craters of the moon. “Your Majesty, I simply must protest your decision. The idea that a commoner – an unknown orphan no less – has been selected as your protégée over more noble and eligible candidates is offensive to many of the aristocratic families.”

Nightmare Moon’s icy, dragon-like eyes locked with the Duke’s blue ones in silent warning. He backed away from her glower. She stepped forward to fill

in the gap, and narrowed her eyes at him. Blueblood nervously glanced at the doors to the palace halls before returning his eyes to the Empress and did his best to put on a dignified face.

“Then let them be offended, Blueblood,” her voice was almost a growl. “But don’t presume to argue with me over my decision. I see in Twilight Sparkle all the qualities that so-called ‘eligible candidates’ like your son lack. The foremost are ability and dedication. Manners also come to mind, which your son has almost entirely forgotten. Now leave me be, Blueblood. Your interruption has already eaten into my precious spare time.”

With that, the Empress turned and launched into the air with a powerful spring from her hind legs. As she soared up into the black night sky, the alicorn smiled at the feeling of the wind in her hair. The shaken unicorn shrunk rapidly behind her, then finally vanished beneath a layer of clouds.

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Dear Twilight,

Sorry this didn’t get to you yesternight. Miss Loch’s been making me work my grounding off, so I’ve had hardly any time to write. But anyway, I’m glad that you’re settled in. That gigantic library is probably the perfect place for you – I bet you’ve been in it most of the time. The Empress seems nice, although I always saw her as kind of scary. I guess first impressions aren’t always the right ones.

It’s pretty dull over here without you. Those three who were always teasing you have stopped picking on everypony. One of the earth ponies ran away, but he was picked up by the Canterlot Watch, and the other came to me to give his apology to you. That was really awkward. Blitz hasn’t done or said much lately. He’s still horrible to everypony, but he doesn’t have his lackeys to back him up anymore. He keeps giving me a really bad look whenever I see him.

Miss Loch’s decided not to assign me another roommate after all. Which is good, I think. I don’t know what I’d do if it was somepony who was really hyperactive, or really stuck-up. It’s been pretty weird having nopony else in my room though, but sometimes I can definitely appreciate the privacy.

I hope you're having a good time over there. I bet you can't wait for the Empress to start teaching you things, huh? Just stay away from those Overwatch ponies, and even though that Inquisitor guy sounds all right, I still would watch out if I were you. Be careful over there.

Your friend, Orion

Twilight smiled and put the letter back on the bedside table. Sitting up in her oversized bed, she turned to face the rest of her room. Even though only a few nights had passed, books already scattered the room like a small mountain range. The filly spent most of her time either in the library or in her room, joyfully digging through the almost infinite variety of volumes that were available to her.

The library itself was gargantuan, with several floors and hundreds of bookcases. Thousands upon thousands of books, old and new, lined the shelves and her choices were never limited like they had been back at the orphanage. *Well, almost never*, she thought begrudgingly. Certain sections of the library were locked and the head librarian even said some of the more dangerous books were kept in vaults. This only piqued the foal's interest, but she knew that she shouldn't anger the Empress by trying to break into the palace's vaults in search of a few dusty tomes.

Twilight slid off of her bed and stretched. She had the whole summer before the Academy reopened, and this was time that could be spent doing whatever she wanted. Right there and then, Twilight wanted to explore beyond the Royal Apartments. She grinned at the thought of what she might find in the massive complex, her thoughts wandering even to the idea of stumbling upon an enormous room filled with all the treasury's valuables, glittering like a golden bejewelled sea.

As her stomach gave a soft, quiet rumble, Twilight quickly amended her plan with a side mission. *Operation Snack is a go*, she thought. *Maybe I can get some exploring done on the way to the kitchens.* Twilight strode boldly out of her room and past the doors of the Royal Apartments into the more public body of the palace. Already she saw servants wandering to and fro, tending to any number of tasks. Twilight briefly considered following one of them into the maze of service corridors where an army of menials maintained the palace behind the scenes, but dismissed it with a

mental shrug. While it would be interesting, she was in search of wonders tonight. And food, her stomach reminded her.

The halls seemed to form a labyrinth, turning into spiralling staircases or meandering and splitting off into junctions. There were so many rooms, and Twilight had no idea what even a few of them were for. Curiosity finally taking a firm hold over her, she stopped at one of the doors and peeked inside. It was an office, spectacularly furnished, but merely an office nonetheless. Disappointed, she tried another door further along. This one was a storage cupboard. Glaring as if the door had personally offended her, Twilight flew into a frustrated flurry along the corridor, checking every door she came across. To her increasing irritation, they were all either offices or storage rooms. The little filly stomped her hoof and moved to intercept a passing servant for answers.

“Excuse me, but what part of the palace is this?” she asked.

“These are the clerks’ offices,” the mare said in a brisk, quick voice. The servant’s sense of urgency was lost on the filly.

“Why would the palace need clerks?”

“Oh, you know,” the mare waved a hoof dismissively. “Taxes, number crunching, addition – all that kind of tediousness. The government’s centred in the palace, after all.”

The pony brushed past Twilight and walked at a doubled pace down the hall. Twilight thought it best to leave it at that, until her stomach growled a greedy note at her.

“Excuse me, miss?” she began.

The mare whirled around, evidently irritated by the interruption. “Stars above! What do you want?”

“I just wanted to know where the kitchens were,” Twilight lowered her head and looked at the floor, biting her lip. “I’m kind of hungry...”

“Head towards the dining area – near the palace residences – and you’ll find them around that area, towards the back,” the servant instructed firmly, though she made the effort to soften her voice.

Twilight gave her thanks and a smile before she turned back the way she had come from and scampered towards the kitchens. Emerging back into a slightly larger thoroughfare, she hesitated, glancing left and right. *Toward the back, she said. Which way is the back?* The filly took a chance, heading to the left, following the hall through two more turns and down a stairwell. Whenever she was presented with a choice of paths, she chose the one that her meager sense of direction suggested would lead toward the residential areas. Her sense of unease grew each time a hall curled back on itself or forced her into a stairway, and she quickly found herself entirely alone in the silent corridors. She knew she was lost again when she came upon a dim corridor that ended in a blank wall.

The little filly’s gaze drifted to the walls, where paintings hung, gathering dust. The whole area looked like it had not been occupied for some time, and the silence seemed nearly unnatural. Twilight couldn’t help feeling that there was something off about the place. It was as if the quiet and the lack of life were somehow deliberate. Glancing from one painting to another, Twilight saw the grim faces of mares and stallions that were, in all cases, quite unremarkable. Their eyes unnerved her, though. They seemed to track her every move, following her actions like a predator watching prey. Without apparent cause, a chill suddenly ran up Twilight’s back. She really didn’t want to be down this corridor. Eyes darting nervously around her, she had only taken two steps back when she heard a faint but soul-chilling noise, like the dying, whispery echoes of a ghostly scream. The filly turned and bolted, slamming right into somepony’s chest.

Twilight fell and landed back on her rump. Shaking her head, she looked up and her eyes met with the cold, dark eyes of the Inquisitor. His brow was furrowed in bemusement at her, but he didn’t seem cross. His face, in fact, was relaxed and passive. Nonetheless, the darkness of his gaze sent shivers down Twilights spine and she inched away instinctively.

“Twilight, what are you doing here?” he gave a soft wry smile, which made the lavender unicorn relax a bit. “This area is forbidden.”

“I... I was just... lost,” she stuttered pathetically. “I’m trying to get to the residential wing.”

The Inquisitor glanced momentarily at the end of the corridor behind her before raising an eyebrow at the foal. “Let’s get you on the proper path then. Follow me.”

Twilight obeyed without a sound. The Inquisitor kept her close as he navigated the winding hallways. Servants, staff and even what looked like nobility gave him a respectfully wide berth and bowed their heads as he passed. He kept his eyes front and paid them no heed. Eventually, he led the young filly to the residential wing.

“And here we are, Little Spark,” he said, grinning boyishly at the nickname.

She smiled back and said her thanks as he wheeled around and left in the direction they had just come from. The area Twilight now found herself in was not far from the entrance to the Royal Apartments, which veered off into another entirely separate wing of the palace. These were the rooms of government officials and household members who had the privilege of living in the palace. The faint scent of baking bread drew a fresh round of complaints from the lavender unicorn’s empty stomach, and before long, she had followed her nose straight to the dining room, and then to the kitchens.

Inside, the air was permeated with the smells of herbs, vegetables and spices of all kinds. The scents filled her every breath and her stomach growled a fiercer desire for food. Pots and pans and an assortment of knives and other utensils lined the counters. Steam leapt from pots as the sounds of whistling and bubbling and clattering attempted to rebuff the din of the chefs’ strident voices. She licked her lips and took a step forward, but was stopped almost immediately by a stern-looking stallion.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice giving the definite indication that he was from somewhere in Gallopfrey, Trottingham perhaps. “Little fillies aren’t allowed in the kitchen. In fact, I don’t think little fillies are allowed in the palace.”

“I... I live here,” she said. “In the Royal Apartments.”

He raised an eyebrow. "Sorry, kiddo, I'm not buying that rubbish."

Twilight gulped and backed away. Perhaps if she left now, she wouldn't get into trouble? The chef might call for the guards to escort her out, or he might even tell the Empress. Twilight could imagine the midnight-coated alicorn towering over her, with a look that said 'perhaps I made a mistake bringing you here'. She bit her lip.

"Chef Ram Sea, sir, we've got a problem with the salts," a mare appeared next to the Gallopfreyan chef.

The stallion groaned. "What happened?"

"Uh, they're not here yet. There's been a mix-up with the suppliers and—"

"Well that's just bloody perfect!" he threw his hooves in the air. "Stars above, Salt Wind! How am I supposed to get anything done without the damned salt?"

"I don't know sir, I..." the mare finally noticed Twilight. "Who's this?"

"Some girl, don't know her name," he muttered. "But she shouldn't be here."

Salt Wind furrowed her brow, studying her momentarily. Vague recognition came to her face. Turning to Ram Sea, she gave him a nervous, almost frantic gesture for silence. She turned back to Twilight, smiling pleasantly at the little filly.

"I'm so sorry about that, dear. Do you mind telling me your name, sweetie?" she asked in an overly-friendly voice that reminded Twilight all too much of the staff at the foster home.

"Twilight Sparkle," the purple foal replied.

The mare gave a gasp, her eyes suddenly widening in realization. Salt Wind pulled the stallion aside.

"Chef Sea, I think this is the filly the Empress brought in a few nights ago," she told him in a voice that, though hushed, Twilight could still hear. "I

heard the maids talking about a purple little pony called Twilight Sparkle, but I don't know what she's supposed to be."

"I'm the Empress's personal student," Twilight offered.

At this, the chef jolted upright, shock plain on his face, and stared at the filly. His gaze flicked to the mare every now and then to gauge her own reaction. She remained calm, even somewhat smug. He gave a short, apologetic nod of a bow to Twilight.

"Sorry, Miss Sparkle – I didn't realise," he pressed his lips tightly together. "Anything you ask, I'll be happy to help."

"Um, it's all right. I was just here to look for a snack," Twilight replied, feeling more than a little awkward. She was taken completely off guard by the sudden shift in the cook's attitude. Was she really this important that she would get special treatment?

The stallion stepped forward nervously. "What can I get for you?"

"Oh..." Twilight scuffed her hoof against the floor, uncertain. Back at the foster home, the best she could have hoped for was an apple or banana from the fruit bowl in the dining room, but here she had the whole pantry available to her. "Can I have some bread and cheese, please? Oh, and some grapes would be nice. Some cucumber and celery too."

He nodded and sent Salt Wind cantering off to the food storage. She returned a few minutes later – thankfully breaking the awkward silence that had developed between Twilight and Chef Sea. She carried a bowl filled with an assortment of breads, cheeses, fruits and vegetables. Salt smiled at Twilight as she passed her the bowl. *Oh my stars!* she thought excitedly. *That actually worked!*

"And please can I have a cookie too?" she asked sweetly, deciding to press her luck. To her surprise, the mare nodded and disappeared across the kitchen, soon returning with a warm chocolate-chip cookie. Twilight took it graciously and wolfed it down.

“Don’t mind Head Chef Ram Sea,” she said cheerfully. “He’s just always under a lot of pressure, what with cooking for the most important and powerful people in Equestria.”

“Thank you,” Twilight beamed, before looking at Chef Sea. “Both of you.”

After the cooks gave her directions, she left them, the stallion looking much more relaxed. Her booty in hoof, she traversed the sinuous corridors and into the palace gardens. Willows seemed to be the dominant feature of this part of the gardens, and wide patches of bluebells grew next to the trees. The wooded area was quiet, save for the light singing of birds and the faint rustle of the leaves in the wind. The drooping branches of the willows rocked gently as the breeze blew through them. It was so peaceful, and the flowers were so beautiful. The ground was somehow very soft, whether through the tireless work of master groundskeepers or through magic Twilight was not sure. The unicorn lay down with her legs curled underneath her body, and set the bowl to her side. Smiling contentedly, Twilight picked up her food with magic and began to eat. Bread crumbs dusted her coat as she bit down on a cheese-covered loaf, but she paid no heed – she was far too hungry to care. The filly didn’t even notice when a set of hooves stomped towards her.

“Ugh, I would have thought even a servant girl would have at least some control when eating.”

Twilight paused with a string of cheese hanging down her chin and looked up. In front of her was a young, handsome unicorn colt. He was around as old as Orion was, perhaps older, and had an immaculately kept coat of pure white. Golden tresses fell down to his shoulders and his fringe was swept neatly across his forehead. His eyes were brilliant blue orbs that stared down at her in a manner that reminded Twilight all too much of Duke Blueblood. Glancing at his cutie mark, Twilight saw a gold and silver compass rose.

“Excuse me?” was all she managed.

“You are getting crumbs all over your coat,” the unicorn snorted. “Brush yourself off and come with me.”

A number of retorts, questions and answers came to mind, but Twilight looked wistfully at her food-filled bowl and moaned, "But I haven't finished my lunch."

"Too bad, now come along," the colt gave no indication of waiting for her response, instead simply turned around and led the way.

Twilight harrumphed. *Who does he think he is, ordering me around?* She had half a mind to ignore the colt, but then her thoughts turned to the Empress. After all, she was a guest in the palace, and this pony had an air of importance around him. *Perhaps it would be best to just follow him and see what he wants? That way I won't accidentally offend the Empress.* Sighing with indignation, the purple unicorn picked up her bowl and cantered after the colt.

He led her back into the castle and to the reception hall, where Twilight had been introduced to courtiers earlier in the week. Despite being nowhere near as bustling as it had been on that night, there were still plenty of ponies around, whether they were servants or government officials. The unicorn trotted over to a spot in the corner where there was a circular stone rococo table surrounded by plump elegant cushions. He stood there, looking at her expectantly. Curious, Twilight inspected the spot, seeing what was bothering him. Nothing out of the ordinary was there.

"Well?" he asked. She just stared at him.

"Well what?"

"Are you not going to do anything about this travesty?" he asked.

As a demonstration, the unicorn put a hoof on one side of the table and pressed down. There was a distinct wobble accompanied by an irritating sound of stone table leg clapping on marble floor. He repeated the action several times, driving home the point. Twilight could only stare at him dumbfounded.

"*This* is what you dragged me out here for?" she asked, angrily setting her bowl of food down on the table. "A dumb wobbly table?"

“Well, yes,” he replied, as if it was obvious. “I am a prince, and so I cannot sit at a deficient table now, can I?”

“But there are loads of tables all over!” the lavender filly gestured to the many tables that were indeed scattered around the hall.

“But this is my favourite spot,” the prince replied. “I always sit here for lunch when Papa needs the dining room for meetings.”

“Why not just drag another table over here then?”

He looked appalled at the suggestion. “A prince should not exert himself! That is servants’ work.”

“Okay, then why not get a servant?” she asked.

“All of the servants said they were too busy. The nerve!” he sniffed.

“Besides, you *are* a servant, even if you are a foal.”

“I’m not a servant,” Twilight stated stiffly.

“You’re not?” the white unicorn rubbed his chin in thought. “Well then, you must be the daughter of a servant or a clerk. Certainly not the foal of a noble house – no proper Lady would eat like you did outside.”

Twilight’s jaws clenched at his remarks. “I don’t have any parents.”

The prince’s attitude immediately changed. Where there once was condescending negligence, there was now shock. He took a step back, staring at her with surprised eyes.

“You’re an orphan!” he declared. “A pauper storming the palace to steal food, or money! Stay away from me, thief! These cufflinks are worth hundreds of bits!”

Much to Twilight’s chagrin, his wailing had cut straight through the chatter of ponies in the hall and now all eyes were on her and the colt. She felt heat coming unbidden to her face at the attention and the circumstance in which she was receiving it. She needed to get the situation under control, and fast.

“No, please, you don’t understand,” Twilight stepped forward. A poor move.

“Ah! I said stay back! Guards! Guards!” he lowered his head. “I have a horn and a second-place position in the Fencing Tournament and I’m not afraid to use it!”

Twilight backed away and looked to the crowd helplessly. They eyed her with interest, or suspicion. Many were quietly laughing to themselves and their fellows. She felt even hotter than before. Twilight hated it when everypony paid attention to her. Just then, a stallion stepped out of the midst of the gathered ponies. He had a dark brown coat and a grey mane – likely gone that colour from him being well into his middle ages. Sprouting from his face were bushy but tamed sideburns and a glorious bristling moustache that looked as though it would leap off his upper lip at any moment and wrestle the nearest bear. The stallion wore medals of valour on a deep blue vest that was obviously military in design and a sword – noticeably lacking in opulence – fastened to his side.

“What’s going on here, Prince Blueblood?” he asked.

“I found this filly on the grounds!” the prince pointed an accusatory hoof at Twilight. “She’s an orphan off the streets and she’s trying to break into the palace!”

Twilight felt herself shrink as the earth pony stallion turned to inspect her. After several moments of taking her in, he smiled cheerfully.

“You must be Twilight Sparkle. I’ve heard so much about you. Is Blueblood disturbing you?”

“Marshal, what are you doing? Arrest her!” Prince Blueblood was aghast.

“Well, sort of,” Twilight glanced at the now seething unicorn noblecolt and then to her bowl. “I was having lunch outside.”

“Well, I’m sorry that he’s wasted your time,” the Marshal said. “He does that quite often.” This received a great many nods from the crowd.

“Marshal,” the colt said, now keeping his hysterics in check. “Can we please at least *escort* her off the palace grounds?”

The Marshal turned to the princeling and furrowed his brow, his smile dropping. “I’m afraid we can’t do that. She lives here.”

“What?” Blueblood was incredulous. “Why did this orphan foal get to live at the palace?”

“Because she is my student,” a new voice was carried through the room.

Everypony turned to see the tall and proud form of the Empress gliding through the assembled mass, parting it as they stepped away to give her space. All bowed at her arrival, save for Prince Blueblood. The white unicorn gave a high-pitched squeak and froze, locked in an awkwardly hunched position. Beads of fearful sweat now began to pour down his face. She looked down at Twilight, smiling warmly, before turning her gaze to the white unicorn colt.

“I think, Prince Blueblood,” she began, her tone carefully strict. “That it would be best if you got to know a new pony first before you jump to a conclusion.”

The prince kept his head bowed, but Twilight could clearly see his cheeks redden in embarrassment. The Empress looked around her, stern gaze quickly getting the message through to the crowd for them to disperse and return to their former activities. Blueblood remained in place to risk the Empress’s wrath until formally dismissed.

“Thank you for intervening here, Marshal Silverstar,” the Empress said.

“No need to thank me, Your Majesty,” he bowed again, before turning to the prince. “I think you can get back to your father, Blueblood. You’ve more than likely caused him enough embarrassment for one night.”

The unicorn carefully slunk away, head hanging low. Silverstar bowed to the Queen of the Night and marched more than walked away, his posture rigid and dignified and his steps like perfect clockwork. Twilight and the Empress were left alone in the corner of the room – the courtiers giving

them both a respectfully wide berth. Nightmare Moon cast her attention back to Twilight, her face brightening.

“I was thinking, Twilight, that we could begin your first lesson in unicorn magic tonight,” she mused. “What do you think?”

Twilight could barely contain her excitement. “That would be great!” she cried, a wide grin quickly growing across her face. Remembering where she was and who she was talking to, the filly continued in a more reserved manner. “I would love to learn from you tonight, Your Majesty.”

The alicorn smiled softly at the little filly, who was looking at her with something akin to giddy adoration. “Follow me, then, Twilight,” Nightmare Moon started on her way towards the exit. “There’s a very nice private place in the willow groves I think you might enjoy.”

Chapter Six

Tact and Wiles

Dear Orion,

It's weird; the last couple of my letters have been a bit late, even though you're just on the other side of town. I think it might be because the mail system here at the palace is just so overloaded with all the letters and reports going in and out.

Everypony's so busy here all the time. The servants don't even have time to talk, less than the assistants at the foster home did. But they're all really polite though. The chefs I told you about are pretty nice when I got to know them. Salt Wind is also very nice. At mealtime, she always gives me a little extra for dessert. Ram Sea doesn't really talk to me, though. He always just excuses himself or apologises for being so busy and gets Salt Wind to do it.

It's all so fancy, too! The ponies, the rooms and even the gardens are fancy. There are so many ladies and gentlecolts here. The city seems to get fancier and more elite the closer you get to the palace. They don't really talk to me though, which is fine, because they don't have anything all that interesting to say when I do talk to one.

And yes, I have used the observatory telescope. It's so clear and I can see stars I've never been able to notice before! But every evening before bed, I still like to use our telescope to look at the sky for a bit.

It's hard to think that it's only been a week and a half before I moved here. It feels like forever since I've seen you. The Empress has been teaching me loads of things about magic, but we haven't really done anything all that difficult. I've been catching up on my reading though. There are so many books in the palace; I don't think I'll ever be able to read them all!

You don't have to worry so much, anyway. I haven't gone near any Blackcloaks if I can help it, although I run into the Inquisitor a lot. But I am

perfectly fine. I know what Miss Loch says sometimes, but the government isn't all that mean. All the ponies at Canterlot have been really kind.

Nightmare Moon has been making sure I'm okay. In fact, she's been especially nice to me. Sometimes she can be a bit intimidating, but I think she's a good mare underneath all that tradition and authority. The Empress showed me some spells earlier. The way she performed them was absolutely perfect! I can't really describe it, but watching her do magic is kind of like attending a lecture by your favourite philosopher, or seeing one of those martial artist ponies you like to read about demonstrating their techniques. I really can't wait for you to meet her!

I do think about Miss Loch and the foster home and you a lot, though. But I'm sure you can come over sometime soon!

Your friend, Twilight

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The Inquisitor *hated* these mountains. Not because of the cold, or the height; he found those aspects quite exhilarating, in fact. No, he hated *these* mountains because they were the Eyrie Peaks – precisely in the middle of Griffon territory. From the top of the highest peak, he could look down on the ancient city of grey stone had been built on the mountain; not on any plateau or mesa, but right down the side. The griffon city of Highroost was, if anything, a feat of remarkable engineering. The buildings were dug into the face of cliffs, tottering thousands of metres over the ground, nearly vertical. There were plazas, many of which hung off the side of the heights like a very thick, very large balcony. A highway of stairs led right to the palace at the summit, where the Inquisitor was now, idly wondering how much of the mountain had been hollowed out to construct the capital of the Kingdom of Rodor.

The palace itself was cut right into the peak. Its front was dominated by a massive verandah that was lined with impossibly large columns several metres in diameter; well over four times that in height. If it wasn't the columns outside that gave a clue to what the architectural theme was, then it would be the smaller, skinnier but numerous columns of the interior that would. There was very little furniture in the main hall – which took up most of the palace's first floor – just steps, columns and the circle of thrones right

at the back. The 'windows' of the palace were in reality just large square holes, in the wall that served as easy access points for those beings that could fly. *Ancestors, I'm high up*, he thought absent-mindedly. The Inquisitor turned away from the open egress and headed for the thrones.

Climbing a set of stairs to the elevated part of the hall, he came to a round stone table surrounded by stone thrones. *Stone, so much stone*, he grumbled. It wasn't even marble or polished granite – just generic, sturdy, dull stone. The whole palace, the whole city even, was grey; pragmatic and impressive, yet so dull. The largest of the thrones faced the main entrance of the great hall, and was studded with milky diamonds. It had scenes carved into it depicting fierce griffon warriors and kings, engaged in battles, flying high and proud, or accepting tribute. Without a doubt this was the Sky Throne of the High King of the Griffons.

These seats were mostly occupied, and the one directly opposite the Sky Throne was reserved for him, as was the Rodorian custom. The Inquisitor nodded respectfully to the griffons in attendance, and again to the male seated on the Sky Throne. When the stallion took his place, his fur-collared coat was taken away by a servant and he smiled dryly at the High King.

This particular griffon was old, yet looked young for his age. Around fifty or so years, High King Lucien was a portrait of a fine griffon. His feathers were stark black, a noticeable difference to the rest of the griffons gathered, and the feathers around his eyes and on his crest were of dark red. A circlet – a band of gold studded with rubies and emeralds – rested on his head. His unflinching gaze never left the Inquisitor, who blinked calmly and coolly as he waited for the High King's reaction.

"Welcome, Lord Inquisitor, Prime Minister of Equestria," Lucien said at last, in Griffon Speech, his harsh voice thick and booming. "I invite you to attend this Hrófmoot as representative of your nation."

"I accept humbly your invitation, High King Lucien, Lord of the Heavens," came the traditional and expected reply from the Inquisitor. In truth, the pale grey stallion despised having to verbally humble himself in front of this foreign king – and a griffon no less. To make matters worse, propriety required that he use Griffon Speech himself instead of the nobler Equine language.

Lucien smiled coldly. "Shall we proceed to the Exchanging of Gifts?"

"Yes, of course," the Inquisitor responded. The griffons were a people who had a particular love, one almost fanatical in proportions, of traditions. They were worse than the conservative aristocrats in Equestria when it came to adherence to custom. The griffons always exchanged gifts from host to guest and vice versa.

The High King began the exchange, beckoning for the attendants to carry forth a chest. Placing it next to the stallion, they opened it and revealed to him the treasure inside. The Inquisitor's smile became a little more genuine. It was filled with feathers that shone an unnatural gold. Each one had been painstakingly enchanted and cleaned, and had likely come from some old wizard of a griffon who had recently died. Griffon feathers had potent medicinal properties even when they were not treated and enchanted. Griffons guarded their dead jealously, so the Inquisitor knew that this particular griffon had likely gifted his body to the pursuit of healing.

"This is a very special gift," he smiled politely. "The Empress will be pleased."

The Inquisitor ushered forth one of his black-clad retinue, who placed an ornate bottle on the table. The griffon kings' eyes lit up and Lucien lent forward, mesmerised by the shifting, glittering liquid within. It glowed softly and subtly changed colour as it swirled around in the glass.

"Liquid magic," the High King murmured. "I've never seen so much before."

The High King was taken completely off-guard by the gift. The Inquisitor had been, too, when Nightmare Moon told him to present it to the Hrófmoot. He loathed giving away such a priceless and rare commodity, but the Empress was adamant about repairing the strained relations between griffons and ponies. The amount of the precious substance the griffons had been given was enough to warp the very world around them; shattering the constraints of physical and natural laws. The Inquisitor idly wondered what would happen if he were to ignite it within the palace. He would have loved to see the effects it would have had on the mountain and its inhabitants. He suppressed the thought and returned to matters at hoof.

“Shall we get to business?” the stallion asked. “I am needed back in Equestria and the sooner we get this wrapped up, the better.”

“Of course,” Lucien nodded and motioned to a servant, who spread a map of the region on the table. The griffon king made a sweeping gesture. “The Griffon Kingdoms are surrounded by the equine nations. The Equestrian-Rodorian border is the largest of our frontiers – made even larger ever since your country’s annexation of the Great Western Wilds (which we have not recognised as legal in any way). To the south-east, you can see here that the Cawcasus Mountains form our border with the Tsardom of Konnica, and we have already signed a treaty with them properly establishing our borders in the region.”

The Inquisitor rested his head on his hoof and wallowed in his thoughts. He knew where High King Lucien was going with this, and it angered him that the griffon would have the gall to even suggest such a thing. But nevertheless, he waited.

“The Western Wilds are rich in coal and iron. Not to mention diamonds,” the High King continued. “As I said before, your government’s settling of the land has not been recognised as legal by my government.”

“That may be so, Your Majesty, but the Equestrian people have settled there already. You should have laid a claim to the lands to the west before we began establishing towns,” the Inquisitor replied, coolly and calmly.

“But we did,” Lucien’s voice became stiffer. “And your government seemed to ignore the claim and decide that the *entire* Western Wilds were yours by right. The griffons have not shut their eyes and ears to the outside world; we know what your media has to say about your so-called ‘Manifest Destiny’.”

“Your Majesty,” the leather-clad stallion began, remaining as nonchalant as he could. He had a very good poker face. “While it is unfortunate that your people are unable to expand, I am afraid there is nothing we can do about it.”

“You can consider evacuating the northern half of the Great Western Wilds.”

Externally, the Inquisitor remained locked in a polite smile, but internally he felt his anger surging. Surely this creature wasn't suggesting that the Equestrian Empire bow to the whims of outsiders? He cocked his head sideways.

"I'm afraid that what you're suggesting is quite impossible. The northern regions of the Wilds are forested and rich in resources. That is by far the more valuable half."

The griffon kings began to raise their voices, saying any number of things to counter the Inquisitor's statement. It was all lost in a maelstrom of voices, which raged until Lucien banged a fist on the arm of his throne. Silence fell over the table and the ashen pony waited patiently for the High King to speak.

"We cannot accept that," Lucien announced, his gravelly voice was firm and adamant. "Our claims were ignored by your government and the region was settled without regard for our intentions in the area. This has been a grave insult on Equestria's part."

"The Empire will not bend on its position in the Wilds. Our citizens are already settling in the north, and plans have been drawn up to settle in the southern deserts," the Inquisitor steepled the tips of his hooves together. "We cannot surrender territory that rightfully belongs to our government and is home to Equestrian citizens."

"The Wilds are not yours by right!" the High King barked. "Where else can we expand to but the frozen wastes of the north and the western icy seas that border our kingdoms?"

There was a chorus of agreement from the table. One griffon king spoke up. "The only way we can expand is south!"

"Either into the Wilds, or into Equestria!" shouted another.

This comment made, the chatter stopped abruptly. The Inquisitor grimaced bitterly as eagle-like eyes fell on him, gauging his reaction. The grey pony frowned and stood up, leaning forward on the table. His dark eyes locked onto the griffon that had last spoken, who shrank back as the piercing gaze seized his heart. The Inquisitor knew well how to intimidate and had

perfected it to an art form. He had no need for the raising of voices or of show of arms, or even the need to speak. He required only that they look at his eyes; for once they did he seemed to stare into their very soul with contempt. In a way, this was true.

“Believe me when I say that I do not take threats very kindly. You would do well to remember the Five Years’ War and how poorly that turned out for the griffon kingdoms. I seem to remember that the military casualties on your side were over five times of our own. As for the damage to your civilian population, well, I think we both know how disastrous *that* was.”

The High King was roused to respond. “We have grown much stronger since then. Our armies are thorough in their training and in the doctrines of war.”

The Inquisitor shifted his glare to the red-crested griffon. He narrowed his eyes at Lucien and twisted his mouth into a bitter grimace. “I do believe there is a young daughter of yours studying in Cloudsdale as part of a little cultural exchange project. Am I right?”

Lucien was visibly taken aback by this sudden comment, but quickly recovered with a fierce scowl. “Threaten me and my nation all you want, unicorn, but don’t you dare presume to threaten my family.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’ then,” the black-clad stallion smiled wryly. “In any case, consider it a gift that she remains in Cloudsdale. I shall post agents making sure she is well cared for.”

The griffon snarled; his plumage curled in a hostile gesture. “I will not tolerate your insults, Equestrian. You have come to my home as a guest – sharing our fire and eating our food – and you try to intimidate my household. You will do well to remember your place.”

“And you would do well to remember yours, griffon,” the Inquisitor retorted, black fire in his eyes. “You may have learned from the mistakes of our past conflicts and improve your military, but our armies will still crush you. If you dare try to plant your flag in the West, then we will retaliate quickly and mercilessly.”

The angered voices of the griffon kings broke out again, some rose slightly out of their thrones – ready to pounce on the stallion. The guards

surrounding the table too seemed ready to draw their weapons, talons wrapped firmly around the hilts of their swords. Behind him, the Inquisitor's own Blackcloak entourage remained silent and still, but their master knew that at the sign of movement they would leap to the slaughter. *'Hold,'* he told them, the voice of his mind projected into their heads. *'I would rather this not turn into a massacre.'*

They obeyed silently and the Inquisitor mentally went through his plans in meticulous fashion. The griffons, it seemed, were reacting as expected; that meant that this diplomatic mission would soon have to be cut short and he would need to stoke the flames just a little more. The fire in his eyes died as he sat back down in the seat and gave a short smirk. The High King saw this gesture and gave a slow, careful nod to his fellows. The guards' claws left their weapons and the kings settled back down in their thrones. Lucien cleared his throat.

"I think we have both made our governments' positions clear on the matter of the Great Western Wilds. Perhaps it is best we move on to less volatile matters?" he suggested, his gravelly voice betraying a hint of hope.

The Inquisitor shook his head solemnly, smirking still. "I am sorry, Your Majesty. I think it would be best that I return to Canterlot, where my absence has gone on for long enough. Another diplomatic team can meet with your representatives at a later date to discuss more minor points of interest."

The stallion stood up and looked to the Overwatch mare on his right, gesturing her over to the bottle of liquid magic. Sure enough, when the mare whisked the bottle off of the table, the air in the room once again grew tense. A stiff, heavy silence fell on the griffons as they held their breaths all together, widening their eyes at the sight. The Blackcloak attendees closed the chest of feathers and inched it towards the kings, clarifying their intent to refuse the gift.

The stallion stood up and looked to the Overwatch mare on his right, gesturing her over to the bottle of liquid magic. "I am again sorry, Your Majesty," he said, voice heavy with sarcasm. "I'm afraid we cannot accept such a generous gift." Tension filled the air as the mare whisked the bottle off the table. A stiff, heavy silence fell over the griffons as they held their breaths all together, eyes widening at the blatant insult. The exchanged

gifts were supposed to remind each party of their amicable meeting; refusing the exchange was, to the griffons, as hostile an act as a physical blow. The Blackcloaks closed the chest of feathers and pushed it back toward the kings, ensuring there could be no mistaking their intent.

“Leave now, Equestrian,” he growled.

The ashen pony bowed mockingly to the gathered lords and abruptly whirled around to the entrance. He marched away from the table, flanked by his retinue of loyal Overwatch guards. As he prepared the spell to transport them all back to Canterlot, a victorious grin grew on his face.

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The grass brushed against Twilight’s hooves as they waved in the stiff morning breeze. She stood in the willow grove – their usual place of learning – with the Empress lying down several metres behind her. The light of the Bright Moon was particularly strong that night, and the grove had hanging in its branches several lamps. Twilight could see the area around her clearly. The unicorn braced herself with a slightly wider stance and lowered her head, aiming her horn at the target before her. A casket of spherical weights lay open in front of her. She held her breath and focused.

“Relax, Twilight. You’re far too tense,” Nightmare Moon instructed. “Breathe slowly; control your body. The spell will come more easily.”

Twilight obeyed. Her shoulders drooped as she softened her posture. The tiny filly sucked in the sharp forenoon air and levelled her breathing. Closing her eyes, she concentrated and, one by one, a shimmering purple aura enveloped the weights. Twilight lifted each out of the box and drifted them closer to her. The weights were really quite light, but Twilight wasn’t sure whether this was how it was supposed to be for unicorn fillies her age, or if they were supposed to be much harder to lift.

Nightmare Moon nodded. “Well done. Your form is improving. Continue with the next step of the exercise.”

Furrowing her brow, Twilight guided the weights into several rows, then arranged them to form the edges of a cube. Twilight held this shape as best she could, each ball hanging in its place. After quite some time, Twilight

began to sweat from the exertion, her vision growing blurry from the mental discipline needed. The balls began to tremble as she struggled to maintain the cube.

“Focus, my student, and breathe.”

Twilight realized she was holding her breath again and tried to relax her body while keeping her attention on the weights. The spheres were wobbling with her slipping control now, the whole cube slowly deforming as she struggled to keep her focus split so many ways. The unicorn foal bit her lip and tried to push each sphere that dipped out of its place back into position. As she did this, she shifted her concentration from others and they too became loose. She growled at the effort it took to maintain her shape.

“You may release them.”

She gave a relieved sigh and immediately let go. The cube frame collapsed and each ball dropped heavily to the ground with a ceremonious thud. Twilight sat down, panting slightly despite the lack of physical activity. The Empress smiled and floated a carton of Sweet Apple Acres brand apple juice to the filly, who sucked it down enthusiastically.

“Well done, Twilight,” the alicorn said. “You’ve improved since our last time together.”

Twilight wasn’t too sure about that. *What does levitating a bunch of weights have to do with magic?* she thought. *I want to learn the good stuff!* She held her tongue, though. It was important to respect the Empress, who had thousands of years of experience and wisdom in her. Still, Twilight wanted to get on to what she thought of as “real magic” sometime soon. She had been meeting with the Empress over the past week and a bit, but she had yet to attempt a spell more advanced than what any unicorn could do. All her lessons consisted of levitation practice, mental exercises and creative problem solving, and nothing much else. While these were all fine to Twilight, she desired more and had expected her lessons with the Empress of Equestria to be much grander, with powerful spells and long-lost magics.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” she said instead, unable to keep a hint of disappointment out of her voice. The Empress’s ears flicked toward her in curiosity.

“Is something wrong, Twilight?”

Twilight pawed the ground nervously with a forehoof. She almost denied it, but this was an opportunity. The Empress had asked, after all. Hesitantly, she replied. “Well... I was wondering... I mean, I’d just like to know when we’ll be moving on to the proper magic lessons.”

If the Empress was offended, she did not show it. Instead, the alicorn held a look of bemusement on her face. Twilight folded her legs under her body and lay down on the soft grass. Somehow, that expression was worse than a rebuke. It seemed to say she wasn’t... smart enough. That she was a disappointment. After a short but nonetheless awkward silence, Nightmare Moon spoke.

“What makes this lesson not ‘proper’?” she asked, her voice careful and calm.

Twilight gulped. “Well, Your Majesty, I just wondered when I’ll be able to learn all the big spells and the powerful magic.”

Nightmare Moon furrowed her eyebrows, preparing for a lecture. The filly braced herself as if expecting a blow, focusing on the grass in front of her as she dragged the tip of a hoof in small circles through it.

“Twilight, I am giving you these exercises for a reason.”

“I... I know, Your Majesty, but...” Twilight swallowed again and hesitated while she mustered the courage to speak. “But I have the ability. You told me I’m very powerful, that I’m capable of great things.”

“Just because you have more power doesn’t mean you are automatically better at magic than anypony else. Granted, you have the special gift of a natural aptitude for magic, but that is beside the point.” The Empress gave her a knowing smile. “Even if a pony has infinite power and magical reserves, she can still fail at the most basic spells if she lacks control and focus.”

Twilight listened intently, nodding as she took in the alicorn’s words. It made sense – she felt first-hand how difficult it was to maintain her

concentration. She wondered what it would have been like to try to perfectly hold a spell that was much more complex than a simple levitation trick.

“That’s why you have been giving me all these exercises to do,” the filly clarified.

“Yes, Twilight. Practice is what makes the magician great.”

Twilight nodded in understanding again, but she still had more questions. “What about those creative activities and problem solving? The night before yesternight you had me drawing so many random things. How does that have anything to do with magic, Your Majesty?”

The midnight black alicorn raised her head, looking up in thought. “Imagination is a very important part of magic. Ingenuity can help a unicorn invent spells and apply both new and old ones to unusual situations. It’s what separates the technicians from the true sorcerers. These activities are designed to help you flex and develop your imagination so you can find better solutions.”

“I see.” Twilight pondered this, digesting the information. There was so much she didn’t know about applying magic. Twilight realised just how far she had to go before she could become a master in the magical arts. She was certain that she needed a lot more study and practice before then.

As she lay there thinking, a subtle telltale crackle in the air alerted Twilight to Nightmare Moon’s own activity. A shimmering coat of translucent purple covered the balls as the Empress lifted them off of the ground. Twilight kept her eyes glued on the demonstration as Nightmare Moon expertly contorted the weights into perfect, motionless figures.

“It is always good to practice the basics, I think. You cannot be the best you can be otherwise,” she said, the spheres flowing smoothly into flawless patterns at her will.

She concentrated and brought all the spheres together. As her horn flashed, the metal surfaces of the weights rippled like liquid. When they floated together, and the spheres touched each other, they merged rather than stopping. Soon all the balls were gone, absorbed into what was now

one large shimmering sphere of liquid metal. Another flash, and the rippling stopped – the ball solidified. Setting the large round weight to the ground, Nightmare Moon gave a proud smirk to Twilight.

“That way, you can excel at more advanced spells,” she said.

Twilight stared, awestruck, at the results. Overwhelming curiosity dragged her over to the metal ball, which she tapped experimentally with a hoof. It was still solid. *Must be some kind of phase transition spell*, she assumed. She turned to the Empress, excitement twinkling in her eyes.

“Can I learn how to do that?” she asked.

“One night, Twilight,” the alicorn smiled. “But for now, I think I’ve made it clear why we need to focus on the basics first.”

They continued with the exercises after that. Twilight lifted the new giant weight, seeing how long she could hold it. Nightmare split the weight whenever Twilight finished with her practice. The actual lifting was pretty easy, as Twilight found. The Empress said she had phenomenal reserves of magical strength within her. What was difficult was trying to balance each sphere as the Empress divided it again and again. The lavender filly began to wonder if there was a way she could pick up multiple objects without having to keep her focus on all of them at once. The thought of not having to constantly think about what she was holding appealed to her. She was already getting a headache from all this.

The next part of the lesson involved problem solving and more mental exercises. Nightmare Moon would present a practical problem for Twilight to solve in as many ways as she could.

“You are in a locked room, with no windows and no furniture. It is concrete, or stone, and not too large – around sixteen square metres in area. The only way out is a locked door which has been hexed with plenty of counter-spells; enough for you to exhaust yourself for weeks trying to find a way to open it. The floors, ceiling and walls are also hexed, so you cannot dig or blast your way through them using magic.” Nightmare Moon raised a brow at Twilight as she continued. “How do you escape from the room?”

Twilight bent her head in thought, before looking back up to the Empress. "What is the door like? Does it have a viewing hole or something like that, or a window?"

"It does have a rectangular viewing hole with a sliding cover, but other than that it is blank and featureless – no handle either. It is locked by a single large deadbolt."

Twilight nodded and bowed her head, delving into her thoughts. Her first idea would be to teleport out of the room. She knew it was too simple for the alicorn's taste, but she suggested it nevertheless, and it was expectedly shot down. This meant that the room was virtually inescapable. *So my solution needs to stay inside the cell...* "I can use an invisibility spell so they think I've escaped and leave the door open!" she declared.

"Do you *know* an invisibility spell?" the Queen of the Night asked archly.

"No," Twilight sighed. *How do I escape a room where I can't blink out from, or dig through, and where the door is impenetrable?* Twilight knitted her brow in frustration. Nightmare Moon gave such impossible problems. There was no solution. Why should she even try to escape? That thought led to another question: *Why am I in there in the first place?* She briefly wondered if following this train of thought would seem like quibbling over details, but the Empress had never discouraged her from investigating every possibility.

She voiced the question to Nightmare Moon, who was watching her with an intent, catlike gaze. The alicorn allowed the corners of her mouth to curl upwards very slightly. "You're held captive by a group of ponies who want to ransom you."

"Then I'll pay the ransom!" she answered with a grin. Nightmare Moon let out a throaty chuckle.

"A valid option," she allowed. "Though it hardly counts as escape if you are released by your captors."

The filly pressed her lips together. *Held for ransom. Which would mean...* "Then they wouldn't want me to be hurt? Because I'd be less valuable to

them?" Nightmare simply nodded, allowing the little unicorn to come to her own conclusion. Her smile grew larger and more encouraging.

"Do they come around to check on me then? To give me food and water?" Twilight felt a smirk of her own sprouting up on her face.

"Yes, they keep an eye on you through the viewing slide in the door."

"So all I would have to do is cast a spell that gives me the symptoms of a disease bad enough that they would come in to check on me," she answered, giving a victorious grin. "Then I can hit them with an offensive spell."

The Empress smiled warmly, but rebuffed her answer. "What if they have shields against your little attack?"

Frustration growing, Twilight's grin faltered, but she aimed to make her answer work. "Then I would use a sleeping spell."

"And if they have wards against those?" Nightmare Moon asked.

"Then... then I'd just make a break for it!" Twilight sighed, exasperated at her teacher's obtuseness. Her sense of victory had now completely vanished.

The black-coated alicorn chuckled and shook her head slowly. "I'm afraid these ponies will simply grab you with magic if you try to run."

"Then what else can I do by then?" Twilight suppressed an irate groan.

"Well, you could let them take you to an infirmary, or whatever place they would use to treat you," Nightmare moon suggested. "At least then you could plan your next move."

"That's not a solution though, I'm still in captivity!"

"But you did escape the room," Nightmare Moon shrugged.

Twilight harrumphed. She did not like problem solving at all. It was always like this. No matter what solution she came up with, the Empress would

poke holes in it, even having to invent the most unlikely situations in which her plans would fail. Twilight had to make the solution more and more audacious each time.

"These scenarios are implausible," the small filly complained. "I mean, when would there ever be *that* many charms in place? You're... you're cheating just to make it complicated!"

Nightmare Moon simply gave a calm, sympathetic smile. "While it is good to remember that the simplest solution is often the best, a sorceress must know how to apply her imagination and ingenuity to solve even a seemingly insoluble problem. A single spell and the creativity to apply it to a hundred situations will serve you far better than a hundred spells used in only the most obvious way. Learning new spells is trivial compared to learning how to think like a master mage."

Nightmare Moon rose and led Twilight down the winding garden paths as the lesson continued, leaving the levitation spheres behind with long, graceful strides. Twilight found many distractions along the way. Despite her fascination with the Empress' lectures, the unicorn found her attention drifting to the many things that were happening around her. The gardens were abuzz with activity, whether from ponies or from wildlife. The patterned stone path acted as a thoroughfare for many wandering residents and workers of the Imperial Palace. The groundskeepers trimmed the hedges, moulded into elegant shapes, and pruned the artfully-positioned. Twilight found it curious that there were sometimes entire rows of plants that seemed to have been meticulously sculpted to aesthetic perfection and in other areas there were simply wild masses of vegetation studded with colourful buds and flowers.

A dapper pair of nobles parted to allow them passage, bowing almost to the turf as the Empress passed. Twilight noticed that many of the nobles walked with their necks craned uncomfortably, noses in the air and eyes apparently closed. *How do they get around without bumping into things? Are nobles capable of echo-location?* she wondered, suppressing a giggle.

The purple filly caught a glimpse of Duke Blueblood strutting along with his son. They were talking, but she couldn't hear their words. Ever so slightly, she scooted closer to Nightmare Moon and turned away from the two unicorn aristocrats, in case they caught her staring. Their presence reminded her of a question she had been meaning to ask the Empress.

"Your Majesty," she interjected when Nightmare Moon next paused. "How come Blueblood is a prince? I looked in the genealogies, but I couldn't find when you married one of his—"

"I've never married," the alicorn cut her off sharply, eyes wide with surprise and something that *looked* almost like anger.

The foal cringed in the Empress's shadow, babbling a hurried apology. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"No, I'm not married, Twilight," the alicorn repeated. Though her voice was not raised or angry, it was nonetheless strained and carefully flat. "I never have been. Nor do I have any children." The black mare took a steadying breath and continued more gently, though her tone held the finality of a royal edict. "Please... don't ask about it again."

"I'm sorry," Twilight repeated and lowered her eyes.

"It's all right, Twilight," Nightmare Moon sighed. The Empress began walking again, and her student tailed her dutifully. They meandered through the garden in silence for a time, and all the while Twilight grew increasingly worried that her lesson would be cut short. Then, as they crossed a bridge over a small stream that jutted out from the pool, Nightmare Moon paused and broke the quiet. "I know you're curious about these things, but my past contains many bad memories which I would rather forget."

Hearing some warmth come back into the Empress' voice, Twilight looked back up to her and changed her tack slightly, careful to avoid the painful past. "But if Blueblood's not family, then why is he a Prince?"

"When I first came to power, I needed a castle and some land to establish my capital. Canterlot was a prime choice, and I so took it from the Duke – the Bluebloods' ancestor," Nightmare Moon explained. "In return, I recognised him and his descendants as the 'Princes and Princesses of Unicorns' and gave them a few extra privileges."

"Did you have to give them titles, though?" she glowered as she thought of the younger Blueblood, head held high with a kind of smarmy pompousness as he strode along with his father.

“I felt that at least some sort of compensation was in order, so that they would not be too bitter about the move,” the Empress chuckled. “It’s funny, in a way – the title is worth nothing without the weight that others lend it, but they still seem to prefer it over the land.”

“They’re kind of mean,” Twilight knitted her brow. “Prince Blueblood was really rude to me earlier this week.”

“I know, but that’s what happens when somepony is raised to believe that they’re a higher, better class of pony than others just because they have money, land and the privilege of a title. Duke Blueblood can be just as bad in his own way,” said the Empress.

The pair's wanderings brought them to a bench where one of the groundskeepers had laid out his lunch. The stallion almost choked on his dandelion and lettuce sandwich when he noticed Nightmare Moon so close by. Immediately, the pony leapt up from his seat, hurriedly bowed to his monarch. The alicorn smirked, but Twilight smiled sweetly over her shoulder as they passed the earth pony, leaving him to his break. They entered a less trafficked part of the garden, silence stretching as they left behind the bustle of the main path. This close to the edge of the plateau, clouds of spray billowed up from the first cataract of one of Canterlot's great waterfalls, refracting pale rainbows in the moonlight. Dense hedges and the roar of the cascade covered any noise besides the clop of their own hooves and quiet birdsong.

“Your Majesty, if Blueblood is so mean, why does he get to be so high up in the government?” Twilight asked suddenly.

Nightmare Moon sighed. “It’s part of being linked to the Royal Family. They hold enormous influence over many important and powerful ponies. If I don’t give them some concessions, they can make governing Equestria very difficult for me.”

Twilight was surprised by this admission. The idea that Nightmare Moon – most powerful equine in the world and custodian of the night – could be pressured by her underlings was a thought that was completely alien to Twilight. She seemed so beyond the constraints and vices of normal ponies; an untouchable force that commanded respect and loyalty from all.

“But can’t you just tell them what to do and they’ll have to do it?” the filly asked. “I mean, you’re so strong and if they try to disobey you can just, I don’t know... banish or imprison them or something.”

The alicorn winced, though this reaction passed over Twilight’s head. She sighed and shook her head lightly.

“It just doesn’t work like that, Twilight. I used to think it did, but even if I could use force to get ponies to do what I want, they still found ways of making things harder than they should be. Strength is, I found, not everything when it comes to ruling. You must also have tact and wiles if you are going to rule properly.”

Twilight was not sure if she could get used to the idea that the Empress needed to manoeuvre around her own government officials. She would have much preferred it if Nightmare Moon had absolute control over the politics in Canterlot. The unicorn didn’t much like the thought of ponies like Duke Blueblood being able to throw their weight around.

Nightmare Moon smiled reassuringly, seeing the perturbed look on her student’s face. “If it makes you feel better, Twilight, as Empress I do have everypony listening to me and obeying diligently most of the time. Anyway, how have you been finding life at the palace, besides the rude behaviour of local lordlings?”

Twilight pushed away her musings and beamed at the Empress. “Oh, it’s been wonderful, Your Majesty! The library is amazing, and the gardens are beautiful. It’s so nice to read outside. I’ve looked through the telescope at the palace observatory, and I’ve never seen anything like it! Everypony’s been so nice to me as well; so polite. Miss North Star has been trying to get me to come to her chantry services and she wants to introduce me to her Cult Imperia thing, though—”

“She wants to do *what*?” Nightmare Moon drew her shoulders up, tensing at the filly’s statement.

“She wants to show me the Cult Imperia,” Twilight repeated, her tone sweet and innocent, oblivious to the fire that was growing in Nightmare Moon’s eyes. “I think it’ll be really exciting to learn about.”

"I will have to have a talk with the Hierophant before you go anywhere near the Cult Imperia. If I am convinced that it will be beneficial to your education, I will accompany you to a service myself; you are not to attend one alone," the Queen of the Night said in a firm voice.

Twilight blinked in surprise at the pronouncement. "Yes, Your Majesty?" she said, her tone inviting further elaboration, but the Empress said nothing more on the issue. She gave a mental shrug and decided to change the topic. "Mister Silverstar has been really nice to me."

"Oh?" The warmth was back in Nightmare Moon's voice, which brought back Twilight's smile. She nodded.

"He's been asking me about what I've been studying and how I am. He's a lot nicer than some other ponies and he's really fun to talk to."

"Well, he certainly does have a certain gruff, down-to-earth charm about him," the Empress said. "He's been taking an interest in you, then?"

"Oh yes, he's been really friendly," the purple little unicorn chimed. The Marshal was one of her favourite ponies around the palace. He seemed like a gruff old stallion, but on the inside, he was really quite caring.

"That's good to know. I've heard that the Marshal has always been good around foals."

"Does he have any fillies or colts my age then?"

"No," Nightmare Moon sighed. "His wife died in foalbirth. I don't think he's ever remarried."

Twilight recoiled, her ears flattening at the horrible news. "Oh..." she trailed off, unsure of what to say next. They were both unsure; the alicorn's answer left a gloomy air hanging over their heads.

The teacher and the student found themselves having followed the path to its completion, rounding back on the more familiar parts of the gardens. Twilight realised that the gardens were more uniform the closer they were to the palace; like a planned, geometric art piece with the very ground as its

canvas. The outer bounds of the palace grounds were wilder and less tended to, but no less beautiful.

Then, she remembered a question that she had been meaning to ask the Empress all night. Mentally chastising herself for forgetting until now, she bit her lip as she thought of a way to properly phrase it. The silence grew between them, and Nightmare Moon was looking somewhat uncomfortable at the lull in conversation at such a depressing note.

"Your Majesty," the foal began. "Would it be all right if I invite a friend from the foster home over?"

Nightmare Moon gave a soft smile. "Of course, Twilight. You can even have her over tomorrow."

"Actually, Your Majesty, it's a colt," Twilight replied. "His name's Orion."

"Really? I would have thought that you're too young for a coltfriend," the Empress grinned, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

"N-no!" Twilight's eyes widened at the assumption. "He's just a friend!"

"Of course, Twilight, I was just kidding," Nightmare Moon winked at her flustered student. The filly gave a weak smile in return.

"I knew that!" Twilight squeaked, her cheeks feeling hot. "I was just playing along!" It was a hopeless ploy against another foal her age; much less the millenia-old alicorn, but pride compelled the words.

"Indeed," the Empress gave her a knowing grin.

A sharp crack of thunder rescued Twilight from her embarrassment, drawing her eyes upward to where a bright yellow pegasus mare was berating a brown stallion. They were so distant that the scolding played out in pantomime, but it was clear that he had been handling his cloud too roughly.

"It seems the weather pegasi are right on schedule," the Empress said. A fat drop of rain landed on Twilight's nose, making her jump. "And that means our session is over for tonight. Hold still while I get us inside."

Twilight blinked confusion at the dragon-eyed alicorn. “What do you mean by tha—?”

Before her eyes, Nightmare Moon evaporated into a glittering blue-violet cloud. The vapour swirled into a ring around Twilight, then began to spin like a tornado. The process took only a second or two; the whirling vortex scooped her up and collapsed around her in a flash of indigo light.

The next instant, they were inside the palace, in the main atrium of the Royal Apartments. Nightmare Moon stood as steady and regal as ever, but Twilight's stomach was reeling. She staggered a few steps in a dizzy circle, then threw up.

“Whoops. Sorry,” was all the Empress of Equestria could say.