

# Elements of Resonance

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# Chapter 1

## This is the Beginning of the Story

Golddusk really didn't have much social experience. Being one of the few ponies to work the night shift at the palace even before Princess Luna's return, he had very little exposure to it. He'd been raised simply, as a citizen of Canterlot, preparing his whole life for when he'd be asked to serve the princess. It was his family's duty to act as loyal servants to the royal family. His true enjoyment, however, was all that glittered. Specifically, all that glittered in the dark. Stars, lights on in the middle of the night, the light at the end of the tunnel. He had always been fascinated by brilliance that persisted to shine in the deepest of voids. Hence his Cutie Mark, simple gold stars on an otherwise black coat. He took small enjoyment in the fact that the shade of his mane and tail, as well as the tips of his wings, matched the gold of his mark.

However, none of his fascination with shiny objects in dark places, nor his small confidence in his proper colorations, helped him at all in social situations. Particularly, this one.

"So, Golddusk, what do you think?" Princess Luna asked him. He had frozen in place upon being approached by the Princess, having never dealt directly with either of them. It didn't help, in the least, that this particular Princess represented all that his Cutie Mark portrayed. Thus, freezing in place. "Golddusk? Is something the matter? You seem to have gone very still."

The colt shook his head abruptly, stammering, "Um, I-I'm sorry Princess, um, Your Highness, c-could you please repeat the question?" he finished quietly. He was sure asking a member of the Royal family to repeat themselves was a quick way to get disciplined, or worse, fired. Not many ponies would hire someone dismissed by the Royal family for impudence.

"Of course, since you asked so nicely," the Mare From the Moon said gently. "I'd asked you if you thought we should make any extra preparation for this Year's Winter Moon Celebration? Most of what is usually done each year for this particular festival is already underway, but I, having not

participated in the festival for... several years," she added wistfully. A pang of sympathy pulsed in the colt's chest like a heartbeat. She took a moment to regain herself. "I wish to do something... extra, something special this year, to commemorate my first real festival as part of Equestria's hierarchy once more. Do you have any suggestions?"

Golddusk again shook his head, this time as a negative response to her question. "No, I'm sorry. I only have constant accord with a very small handful of ponies. And I'm usually asleep while most festivities are going on. Having been raised in a family that has always guarded the castle at night, I've little if any interaction with anyone outside of my studies or work. You would be better off asking after one of the ponies that comes about just before dawn or leaves just after dusk. They might have more, um, experience with -with social interactions on a populace scale."

Luna raised an eyebrow at his response, having spent the entirety of his small speech in silent contemplation. "Why, if you are so uncomfortable with ponies, do you work in an area of such high traffic? Even at night, there is always somepony about the castle."

"It's not that I don't like social situations, I just don't have a great deal of experience with them. Most of those whom I've studied or work with I get along well enough, but, living in and working in the castle has... limited my ability to explore more diverse social situations."

Luna nodded. "I can respect that. No doubt you are aware of my social.. Handicap, as it were."

Golddusk nodded. "Yes, that's a safe assumption," he smiled. *She's rather easy to talk to*, he thought to himself.

Her expression grew stern. "You consider my banishment to be a point of amusement?" she growled, telltale sparks of magic arcing off her horn.

He stumbled back quickly, his flank reaching a wall, and he continued to scoot back, to no avail. It was at this point he saw a hint of a smile on the Princess's face. After a few seconds, she gave it up altogether. "I'm sorry, good sir, but my sister has encouraged me to try to be more sociable with my subjects, and she had suggested humor as one such avenue of conversation. I was merely trying to jest with you. I apologize if I gave you a start," she amended, seeing the expression on his face.

The Pegasus decided at that point that his best course of action was to play along. "Yes, well, very good, Milady. I expect you should find yourself very adept at it," he did his best to keep himself refined and composed, lest he give any indication he did not find her attempt at humor successful in the least. "Um, if you'll excuse me, I do need to be patrolling the southern halls. There's only a few hours before my shift, and I don't want to impede your tasks any more than I have."

Luna gave him a quizzical look, but allowed him to carry on his tasks. He took to hovering down the halls, making his way to the south end of the castle, in time to take post before his superior showed up.

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Having had enough exposure to ponies he didn't know, let alone were intimidated by, Golddusk decided to seek out the other colts and mares that he worked with every night. Most of the time, they could be found doing their duties as they were supposed to each evening until the break of dawn signaled for them to take leave of their posts. However, at certain times, such as an hour or two before they were due to clock out...

"How are you ponies never fired?" Golddusk muttered to himself, cantering into the smaller break room most other ponies had forgotten about. A couple of rather rambunctious-looking colts glanced up at him from the table they had laid their game out on. He sighed as he recognized the set up of cards and coin. "Three-bit Ante? Again? Stockpile, don't you ever get tired of hustling other ponies?"

Stockpile, the red-coated colt with a green mane at the right of the table, glanced up with a glimmer in bright green eyes. He flicked a bit on his hoof, and rolled his eyes. "It's not like the lad don' know what he be gettin 'imself intah," he reasoned, his accent thick and cheery, like his attitude. The black-coated pegasus heaved a sigh.

Across the table, a regal looking dark blue colt nieghed hautilly. "I do believe, good sir, that it is *your* turn. And do not worry about my, Golddusk," the unicorn added, glancing over at his friend. "I am sure this ruffian has learned his lesson from the last time. I would never assume the worst of my cohorts, anyway." He posed himself just so that an air vent next to him wafted a breeze through his bright yellow mane. Which everypony was convinced was dyed.

"Yeah, and that's why you get played every chance he gets, Stallius" a rather sturdy-looking mare in the corner stated, laid out on a pillow. Both eyes closed, she just spoke seemingly at the air. "It's the same story every time, Gold, you might as well just let it rest. Sometimes you just have to take things as they come, get used to it, and move on." She pointed her horn at a cabinet, and out floated something to drink. Most ponies figured it was best not to ask just what that something was.

Golddusk raised an eyebrow at the purple-coated mare, probably the most senior of the group. "Well, Artimare, that's one way to look at him. But I guess I just keep thinking one or both of them is going to learn their lesson."

"Speaking of impossible things, Golddusk," said a much more youthful feminine voice from another corner of the room. Gold turned to look at Octavia as she spoke. "Spend any more time staring off into space? Or at the Prin~cess?" she teased.

Golddusk shook his head, a gesture that most ponies knew him for by now. "In all honesty, she actually came up and talked to me," he told her.

The room went rather still. Then Octavia burst out laughing. "Talked to you! Are you crazy? You must have been nightdreaming again. Everypony knows she doesn't talk to anypony except her sister."

A heavy sigh and another shake of the head later, Golddusk explained, "I think it was more just because I was the only one around. She wants to do something special for the Winter Moon celebration, this being the first one she's had in over a millennia. She wanted to know if I had any ideas on special events or whatever for the party."

The group looked a little less skeptical at that, but it was Artimare's turn to scoff. "And she came to you? You're probably the most socially defunct pony I know. The only reason you actually talk to us is because at first we made you. Or, I should say, Stockpile made you."

The red and green colt chuckled slightly. "Yeah, t'was a right good bit o craic, really. Never thought you'd break even. Ever."

A quiet, stoic voice from the far back of the room asked simply, "What do illicit chemicals have to do with success in gambling?"

The group at large heaved a dramatic sigh, as was custom whenever the dark brown pegasus spoke. Stockpile especially, because it was his native slang that usually led to these exchanges, however awkward. "Not crack. Craic. Spelled with an I, ye lazy git. It means fun. You know fun, right? That thing that other ponies do while yer off mediatin' and shite?"

Kwan Do righted himself from his handstand, and leveled his gaze at Stockpile. The two looked ready to go at it when a knock came on the door. Golddusk rolled his eyes as the two didn't move, simply glaring at each other. Opening the door, he started, "Yes, how can I he-"

Most ponies in the room could easily guess why he had frozen, even if they couldn't see past the door. Which none of them could. Octavia chuckled. "Oh, Golddusk, is it another one of those cute maid-mares here to ask for help? You're so predictable-" but she, too, stopped, then stammered out, "P-P-Princess L-L-Luna! Wha-what brings you here?" she said in slowly higher and higher octaves. The other colts in the room instantly stood to attention in a line in the middle of the room, but Artimare simply opened an eye, chuckled at her friend's bad habits, and went back to what many ponies assumed was sleep.

"Why, hello," the Princess said cordially, taken aback by the rather untraditional greeting. Her expression softened, and she turned to address Golddusk, who was still frozen. Again. "Mr. Golddusk, was it?"

The colt took a few seconds to respond, with some help from a sharp elbow to the ribs from Octavia. "Um, y-y-yes. What can I do for you, Milady?"

She shook her mane, "Oh, no, it's not that I need help, I just wanted to apologize."

Golddusk, who had once again frozen at the display of Her Highnesses fabulous quaffire, took another elbow, and slowly asked, "What for? You didn't do anything wrong, Your Highness."

Luna looked a bit sheepish as she explained, "Well, to be honest, I wanted to say I was sorry for my poor attempt at humor earlier. I spoke to my sister about it afterwards, because you looked rather upset instead of amused, and I didn't really understand why. Celestia was polite enough to explain to me that that kind of joke is usually only amusing to an observer, not the person it's directed at. I apologize if I scared you."

"Wow, Golddusk, we mighta just found somepony who's socially inept as you are," Stockpile teased.

Luna looked rather abashed, shying away from the door and glancing at the ground. Golddusk rounded on him. "You will NOT. EVER. Address the Princess in such a manner, Stockpile. Not in front of me." He stomped hard up to the Irish pony, who took an unconscious step back. "She is our Highness and you will treat her. With. RESPECT. Do you understand THAT?" he growled, now all but looming over the red coated colt. Stockpile nodded.

"Good," Golddusk replied, returning his attention to the Princess. He noticed all at once that Octavia's mouth was hanging open, and Luna still looked a bit shy, save for a small smile. Which was enough to make him freeze all over again. "Um, yes, your Highness, thank you for taking the time and consideration to say so, I greatly appreciate it." he said in a rather rushed and higher than normal voice.

Luna regained her composure, and bowed cordially to him, and the group, who returned the favor. Stockpile, it seemed, had taken to bowing with such enthusiasm that Golddusk heard a crash behind him. "He's fine," he assured the Princess, who had looked over his shoulder to check on the fallen colt. "Does it all the time."

"Oi, I do-" *not* was what he was about to say, save for a withering glance thrown over the black Pegasus' gold-tipped wings. "Yup, do that all the time," he corrected, righting himself.

After a quizzical glance, Luna and the rest of the room exchanged simple pleasantries, and the Mare From the Moon sauntered off. After she'd disappeared around a corner, Octavia glanced at Golddusk as he was closing the door. "Why aren't you that assertive all the time?"

"Assertive?" he asked, slightly confused. The group heaved another sigh, returning to their regular duties.

*Dearest Princess Celestia,*

*It has been a week since we began preparations for the Winter Moon Festival. And things are looking good. I knew they would, after the Summer Sun Celebration, when I first came to Ponyville. These ponies really know*



*what they're doing when they throw a party. As the Official Overseer, it's been a delight to keep in correspondence with your sister, Princess Luna. She's been most eager to help any way she can, even if some of her suggestions may be a little, out-dated. But since Pinkie and I decided to make this year's celebration a tribute to the days of Equestria Old, her advice has fit in rather nicely. We're doing everything by hand this year.*

*Applejack's family is in charge of the food, as usual. But this time they've called their cousins down from Manehattan, the Orange family. They've been... somewhat disagreeable with our way of life, especially our electricity-free approach this year. But after some firm confrontations between Applejack and her upper-crust cousins, they seem to have found a good way to work together. Which is, they don't. The Orange family has taked to moving their operations to a whole other side of town! But at least nopony is fighting anymore.*

*Rarity is in charge of the decorations, and they are coming along beautifully. If a little ostentatious. We had a small issue with an overrun of Diamond Dogs once she decided to bejewel the main hall, but now we've got them working with us to help set up stands and booths for the festival. As long as they get to take home a few gems home for themselves. And Spike, too. Now that they're not holding Rarity hostage underground like they did last time, it turns out the Dogs and Spike get along really well. He's actually acting as the liaison for us!*

*Fluttershy is trying to get the music ready, and it's coming along just fine. We've been having some issues, because we had some extra volunteers this time around. A sea serpent friend of ours has offered his talents as a singer, but Fluttershy is having trouble working him into the program. Rarity suggested that he do some solo performances for the dance , and leave the precession and ceremonial music to the birds. I'm hoping it works out well for everypony.*

*Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie are all over town, setting up party games and activities for the young fillies and colts, and organizing some of the shows. Thank you so much for asking the Wonderbolts to perform this year. Dash is beside herself working with them to work their routine into the opening and closing ceremonies. I don't think I've ever seen her so excited. She keeps going on about this one Wonderbolt named Spitfire, who's*

*apparently their captain. I don't know too much about the team itself, but I'm happy for her. Thank you so much.*

*But there is something I'd like to ask you about. As you well know, it is tradition for ponies to sleep through the day before the longest night, and stay up all night to watch the rising and setting of the moon, and this year to celebrate the evening with Princess Luna. But I'm sorry to say that, even though we've been keeping in correspondence with each other rather well over the last few days, nopony in Ponyville really knows that much about her. And aside from you, I, and the other Elements of Harmony, nopony has really even spoke to her. At least, nopony from Ponyville. We were wondering if you could send a few others to help organize things in a way she would like. This festival is sure to be very important for her, and I want to have the chance to work with somepony who knows her well enough to tell us whether or not she'd be happy with the way we're doing things.*

*Always, Your Faithful Student,*

*Twilight Sparkle*

Princess Celestia rolled up the letter, and set it on her desk. In quiet contemplation, she raised her hoof to her chin, and thought aloud. "Somepony who knows her well? Well, I know her just fine, but I can't exactly leave all my other duties for a whole week. I could write letter, but I don't think they'd be as helpful as I'd hope. Hmmm, maybe Luna has some friends from the night shift she hasn't told me about." The Princess chuckled to herself. "I'll just tell her that they want somepony who's used to working at night to help move the preparations along faster. Oh, Luna!" she called up the stairs. Her sister, who had just gotten up to raise the moon for the evening, trotted slowly down the stairs.

She yawned ungracefully, and stared at her older sister through a mane of unkempt hair. "Yes, sister?"

"I have a small question for you. Do you think-" and she began to explain to Luna her recent idea. Or, at least, the version she wanted her sister to know.

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Golddusk stared at the scroll very cautiously. He had awoken to a messenger of Luna's knocking on his door to deliver the letter, which bore her seal. That was twenty minutes ago, and he still hadn't opened it. Another knock on the door knocked him out of his reverie. Moving to answer the door, it swung open of its own accord. Or rather, the impatient mare on the other side hoofed it open, and stared at him with one eye open. "Oh, Artimare, it's you. What's up?"

The older mare raised an eyebrow. "Apparently, you aren't. Not yet," she muttered, giving him a once over. At that point he realized he hadn't showered yet.

Taking his leave to get cleaned up, he called over his shoulder, "Make yourself at home. I think you left a flask in the top cupboard."

As the water started running, Artimare magiced down a small metal canister from the top shelf, twisting it open and taking a hearty swig. Moving to plop down on Golddusk's bed, she caught sight of herself in the mirror, and sighed. Her dark purple mane strewn casually about her face, a small scar here or there across her chin or flank, her slightly faded sword-and-shield Cutie Mark. She glanced at the flask in front of her. "Yep, still a soldier all right," she murmured sarcastically.

Laying out on his bed, the smell of his room left Artimare to contemplate the black-coated pegasus. Socially inept as he was, he had something she hadn't seen in herself in a long time. That little spark of hope that all youngsters have, that tiny little flame that told them things would be alright no matter what happened. But somehow, he'd managed to fan that tiny flicker of light. It roared inside him. Hopeful, yet lacking in naivete where it really counted. He didn't expect anypony to do things for him, or expect everything to work out alright in the end if he just wished hard enough. But he did show an unwavering faith in the outcome, as long as he pushed hard enough. Something she had thought more than once that she should have done when she had the chance.

The smell to his room was familiar. Not because they'd spent an inordinate amount of time together, but because out of all the ponies in the group, he was the one that usually gave her a place to hide out or crash if she'd gone through one too many flasks at once. Not that she hadn't thought about time with the younger colt. She'd thought about it with each

of them. She might even have actually gone through with it on one or more occasions, but she could never remember if they'd actually done anything,, or if she's just passed out. Golddusk particularly avoided the issue when it came up, but then, he did that with many topics involving interaction on any level.

She hadn't realized she'd fallen asleep until she'd heard him yelp. "Ohmigod ohmigod ohmigod! Artimare, wake up, you gotta help me!" he bellowed, shaking the mare awake. Well, awake-er.

Artimare glanced up with one eye at the letter he now held in his mouth. Magicing it in front of her, she read aloud, "Dear Mister Golddusk. It has come to my attention that the Winter Moon Celebration in Ponyville is in need of some additional assistance amongst the nighttime shift. I would like to ask of you that you and a few friends of your choosing go to Ponyville, with you as my liaison, to assist in the preparations for this most joyous evening." She heaved a hefty sigh. "You're going to ask me to come with, aren't you?"

Golddusk nodded furiously. "The letter says I can take up to three other ponies with me. I'm thinking you, Octavia, and Kwan Do. What do you think."

"I think if you tell Stockpile that you're denying him an entire town of suckers that he'd ram a bag of bits down your throat and use you as his new money pouch."

Golddusk flinched. "So, um, we can not tell him?"

Artimare rolled her eyes. "Oh, hell, why not. It's not like I'm accomplishing anything here. Besides, with those two hooligans out of the way, how can the four of us *possibly* screw this thing up?" she said sarcastically. Something Golddusk seemed to miss.

"Thanks for that vote of confidence. Alright, I'll send a letter back to the princess right away, as soon as we have word from Kwan and Octavia. I still can't believe she's asking *me* to be her liaison!"

Artimare scoffed and hopped off the bed. "Well, don't break yourself freaking out over it. Octavia would have my hide if you somehow skipped your way off a ledge and fell to your death on my watch."

Golddusk raised a brow at her. "Um, Artimare? I can fly."

The seasoned mare just walked on. *Yes, but would you remember that at the time?*

# Chapter 2

## Really, Universe?

Octavia gave Gold dusk a stern, flat look. One he up till now had done a very smashing job avoiding altogether and had never had used on him before. So to say he was unnerved was an understatement. He felt akin to having been brought before a disciplinary committee. He made a mental note to not joke with Stockpile on the matter from now on. Who, at the time, was sitting in the corner of the break room, snickering behind his hoof with the rest of the group, as Octavia glared down her nose at the cowering Pegasus.

"You're joking. We're going to... what was it, Ponyville? You have GOT to be joking. And you *volunteered* me for this assignment? And here I thought we'd finally gotten past the point where your absolute inability to gauge someone would cause problems, but no..." she rolled her eyes sarcastically, drolling out the last word in exaggaration.

"We-well," GOlddusk stammered, not really used to ponies upset with him, let alone his friends, "I-I haven't actually responded yet, but I thought you'd be excited to act as personal liaison for the Princess, and-"

"I'm the court *musician*, Gold. Why in Equestria would I want anything to do with *politics* of all things?" she snapped.

Gold felt slightly panicked now. "Um, because then you would have an entire village of ponies to swoon over your music and bow to you like the orchestral goddess you are?" he responded rather hurriedly.

The ponies in the back of the room stopped at that, as did Octavia. It was quiet for a moment, as Octavia considered this. "You really think my music is that good?" she asked, slightly dubious.

"Of course!" he answered, a little too quickly. "And I'm sure all of Ponyville would be ecstatic to hear you perform while we help prepare the Winter Moon Festival!"

Octavia's eyes narrowed again. "We have to help prepare the festival?" she asked slowly.

Golddusk flinched. He glanced over Octavia's shoulder to Athemare, silently pleading, *Help, me, please?* The older filly just shook her head, as if to say, *on your own, brony.*

*Horsefeathers*, he grumbled to himself. "Um, yes? Like I said, I haven't officially answered the Princess yet, so it's not like you actually have to go with me..." he backed slowly into the door, only to be knocked unceremoniously aside as it was flung open with gusto. Where Golddusk once was, now stood to rather aggressive-looking guards in gold armour, staring angrily at the room in general.

"We've come to receive a response from Mr. Golddusk in regards to the Princess's request. Where is he?" One of them barked dutifully.

Octavia, at first rather taken aback by their prompt entrance, simply huffed and turned up her nose, trotting to the back of the room to join the rest of her group. The two guards looked rather peeved at this response, until Artemare gestured to behind the door. One of the guards eased it open, and Golddusk tumbled to the ground, having been propped against the wall by the door itself. "Errrrmmmm..... Muffin button?" he mumbled, trying to right himself. He staggered a bit, coming to just inches from one of the guard's faces. "Oh, hello Halberd. Poleaxe," he added, acknowledging the other pony. The two nodded, their expressions softening from slightly enraged to the generic unhappiness they usually portrayed as part of their stern image. "Here to take my response? I haven't written it out, but you could just tell her what I said, I suppose."

The two guard ponies glanced at each other, and one shook his mane, falling out of step.. "Sorry, Golddusk," Poleaxe muttered, rubbing the back of his neck with a hoof, "Gungnir would have our heads if we didn't make sure everything was in writing."

Golddusk nodded. "Yeah, I know," he sighed, "Got a pen and paper?"

Halberd simply nodded, staying in his rigid stance, except to pull out the requested items and hand them over. As Golddusk took quill to parchment, he called out, "Alright, so who all actually *wants* to come to Ponyville?"

Stallius and Stockpile traded glances, then practically teleported the distance between themselves and Gold. "Oh, Golddusk, you didn't tell us we could *all* come," Stallius all but chattered, his voice full of excitement. "There's this designer pony in Ponyville that does the absolute *best* work, why, she even made outfits for Sapphire Shores *herself*!"

Golddusk nodded slowly, "Sure... Stallius, ok, you're going then..." he acknowledged, a little unsure as to whether taking the pony at all was a good idea. He thought even less, however, of the prospect of telling the unicorn no in the first place.

Stockpile cantered up beside him. "So, Goldie, yer not goin to leave such a right awesome business opportunity slip away from yer old boy Stockpile, are ya?" he asked, stepping closer as he spoke, until Golddusk had to move to the other side of the table just to have room to write.

"Ok, yeah, sure. You too..." he murmured.

Octavia huffed yet again, and sauntered up to the table. "You two lay off. Don't bully him into writing your names down, Celestia knows what kind of damage you two would do if set on your own." She heaved a sigh, and nodded. "Fine, yes, it looks like I'm going anyway. I can't exactly leave you to watch these guys on your own. Don't worry, Artimare, I'll fill you in when you get back."

The ex-soldier opened an eye and smiled slightly. "Actually, Octavia, I'm already going."

"As am I," Kwan Do offered. Octavia was more focused, however, on Artimare's response.

The musical filly did a double-take, then bumped Golddusk out of the way as he was finishing writing her name down. There, right below Golddusk's on the top of the list, were Artimare's and Kwan Do's. "What? But he hasn't even asked you yet!"

Golddusk pulled the paper towards him to finish off the letter. "Actually," he noted as he was writing, "Artimare was there when I got the news. She agreed to go with before I even talked to you guys."



Octavia's brow twitched. "And where were you when you heard about this?" she asked slowly.

"His room," Artimare added. Octavia practically fell over.

"What?" the grey filly shouted. Rather close to Golddusk's ear.

"Ow. Anyways, it's not that big a deal. She just came to wake me up, we talked a bit, and she fell asleep in my bed while I was showering," he said offhandedly, handing the finished letter to Poleaxe, who up until that point had been rummaging the snack cupboards. "And Kwan Do ran into me mid-patrol, so I got a chance to ask him earlier. Why're you so uppity about this? That is the right word, right? Upptiy?" he asked, casting an inquisitive glance at the older filly. She just shrugged.

"Right, thanks, Gold. We'll take this to Princess Luna right away-" he paused, having read through the letter while he was talking. "Um, Golddusk?"

"Yeah?" the black Pegasus asked.

"You've got 6 names on here. Your letter said you could only take 3 people," Poleaxe explained.

"Oh..." he muttered, turning around to stare at the group.

Octavia just turned her nose up and trotted off. Golddusk took that to mean she was generally unhappy with him. "Fine, fine. Stockpile and Stallius, you two stay here."

The two colts practically jumped at him. "What?" they protested in unison.

"Artimare and Kwan Do are the most disciplined ponies I know, and we're much more likely to get stuff done with them around than you two. And there's no way in Canterlot I'm leaving her by herself to deal with either of you," he said offhandedly, crossing out their names off the list.

"The two looked beside themselves. "Oi, brony, you can't just toss us of like that!" Stockpile complained. "What about us? We're going to half to stay by ourselves in this big ol' castle with nothing left to do but..." he shuddered slightly before continuing, "...work."

Stallius looked almost ready to cry, at least as much as a colt could. "And where else am I going to get the best fashion in Equestria? I can't exactly mail-order a custom outfit!"

Octavia, now seemingly rather pleased with herself for Golddusk's consideration, however intended, just waved a hoof at them. "Oh, you two stop worrying. We'll bring you back souvenirs! Now, buys," she added, all but snatching the revised letter from Golddusk and pushing it on Halberd, who simply put it back in his courier bag, "Don't be late! Off you go!"

The black Pegasus groaned. "Oh, I hope this goes better than I think it's going to...."

Golddusk's first impression of Ponyville was that it was too... open. Way too much room to roam. No corridors, vaulted ceilings (unless you went inside, and considering they'd arrived in the middle of the night, most places were locked up), and a great deal many more plants and dirt than the castle could ever hope to boast outside of it's garden. Which he made a point to never visit anyway. "Why did we come to this place anyway?" he groaned quietly. It had been a long journey, and the sun was about to rise.

The other three ponies shot him varying degrees of frustrated looks. Mostly, though, from Octavia. "Please oh please tell me you're freaking joking," she all but growled.

Golddusk just sighed heavily. "Sorry, I don't do travel well. Or wide open spaces. Or trees. Let's just find an inn or whatever and get a good day's sleep.

The group at large seemed to deem this a very good idea, and set forth to track down some lodgings. At least, until Artimare spoke up. "Hey, Gold? Aren't we supposed to be staying with somepony while we're here?"

Golddusk didn't turn around, he simply nodded. "Yeah, we are. Problem is, I have no idea what she looks like or where she lives, let alone whether or not she'd be awake at this hour. It's not even dawn yet."

Kwan Do spoke up, "So what is this female's name, exactly?"

The black Pegasus's shoulder's slumped. "Her name's Twilight Sparkle. She's a student of Princess Celestia herself, but if I remember correctly,

only one or two of us will be lodging with her. I know arrangements have been made for the other two or three of us that aren't bunking with her," he added hastily, seeing a rather agitated look on Octavia's face, "But I don't have those details yet. Sweet merciful stardust I wish I was in bed right now," he groaned. They stopped in front of a rather large building with a sign depicting a bed and a glass of juice. "This looks to be as Inn-ish as we're going to get," he conceded, and glanced at the door. The sign said open, so he knocked.

An elder colt poked his head out of the top of the split door. "Well, good morning', there. What can I do you for so early?"

"We're looking for a hotel or an inn, do you have a room available?" Octavia asked, cutting in front of Golddusk, who just took a few steps back.

"Sorry, little lady. We don't rent rooms here," the colt explained.

Octavia's brow twitched. "But your sign-" she started.

"Sorry, darlin', this here's mattresses and juice cups. I can sell y'all a bed, but you can't set 'em up here?"

Octavia's brow twitched harder, along with the respective lower eyelid. "Mattresses and juice cups? So what exactly do you sell?" she asked, keeping her voice to an even keel.

"Why, just what it says- mattresses and juice cups.," answered the store keep, as if it was the most normal thing in the world to only sell two items.

At this point the grey-coated mare started to twitch in small, but random directions, looking close to losing it. "Well, *sir*, do you happen to know where we can find an inn or hotel?"

"We ain't got no inns or motels in Ponyville," he explained.

Octavia stopped altogether. Not a twitch, not a flutter. Just stone still. "What do you mean, you have no inns or motels? How can you not have an inn?" she asked rather calm and somewhat quieter than normal.

"Ain't nopony opened one up yet, I suppose. Guess stuff like that just happens now and again," the store owner mused, raising a hoof to his chin

in contemplation. He appeared to never have thought about the subject before.

"But, but where are we going to sleep?" she asked, rather sadly. She looked close to defeated.

"Well, it's almost morning, so I suspect you got the whole day to figure that out," said the colt happily, like this was good news and she should take solace in his wisdom.

Octavia heaved a mighty sigh, and simply walked away. The rest of the group, acknowledging that they wouldn't be getting any answers here, set off with her.

About a block away, they heard behind them, "You know, if you're really in a pinch by the evening, you could always try the Bed and Breakfast a few blocks that away!"

The owner of Mattresses and Juice Cups had never before backed away from anything so quickly, nor had anypony seen Octavia assault a newly closed door with such ferocity before.

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"Are you sure you're going to stick to music," Artimare asked, as Octavia just drooped her head around her knees and walked in silence. "Because we sure as Celestia could have used somepony like you in the guard when I was around. I've never seen somepony turn around so fast to try to kick a door down from fifty yards."

Kwan Do nodded in agreement. "Indeed. If you were willing to take some time out of your day, I would be willing to teach you some basics of control and form. You could be rather formidable.

The musical mare simply trotted along in silence. At least, until she was stopped by running face-first into Golddusk's side, who had for some reason stopped in his tracks. "Gold, what the hay are you doing stopping in front of ponies like that?" she grumbled.

"Oh, sorry, Octavia, but I think I found Twilight's house," he explained simply. His voice had a slightly dreamy quality to it, like he wasn't all there.

"What makes you so sure you found it?" Octavia asked, following his gaze. Once she found what he was looking at, however, her eyes rolled heavily of their own accord and she let out an audible groan.

Only about a block or so away stood a multi-story treehouse, fitted with several windows and balconies. A rather modest front door was adorned with a hanging sign of a stack of books. But none of this, Octavia knew, was what had drawn the gold-striped colt's attentions. On a higher balcony at the top-and-right-most corner of the structure, set against a still-black sky, stood a unicorn mare staring out at the sky, lighting the tip of her horn with a small, but singularly bright, lighting spell. In fact, aside from the basic outlines and some reflections that gave away the aforementioned details of the house, thanks to her horn, the mare was the only truly visible thing in an otherwise pitch landscape.

And Golddusk's special talent, as everypony who'd taken to talking to him (I.E. the three ponies that had accompanied him to Ponyville) knew very, very well, was not only to find the light in the darkest of places, but it also included a rather unc customary habit of fixating on said light in said darkness. And they knew, too, from experience, that if that light happened, just so happened, to be cast by a mare, Golddusk was right and well taken with them from the get-go. A trait they could all agree was responsible for him having accepted this liaison mission at all.

Artimare heaved a sigh. "Is that?" she asked, not bothering to finish the question.

"Yes," Octavia replied, rather exasperatedly.

"And it's being..."

"Yes."

"And she's..."

"Uh-huh."

"So now he's gonna..."

"Be a blithering idiot whenever she talks?" Octavia finished. "Oh, yeah."

Artimare rolled her eyes, and knocked a fore hoof across the back of the drooling Pegasus' head. "Focus, kid. We still need a place to sleep. And don't think you can stare at her all night, cause she's gonna be asleep the whole time, and we got a job to do. Now stop filly gazing and go knock on the damn door.

Rubbing the back of his head both in embarrassment and discomfort, Golddusk just nodded sheepishly and set forth. Knocking a hoof lightly on the door. The purple-coated mare glanced down from the balcony to see who had knocked, and let out a slight 'Oh' of surprise at seeing the group standing in front of her house. "Just a minute, I'll be right down!" she called. A few moments later, she cracked the door open. "Well, hello! You must be the group from Canterlot, right? Celestia said you'd be arriving sometime this evening, I've had Owlwicious keeping watch until I got up," she explained, somewhat unnecessarily, and gestured to a small owl on a perch as she finished her statement.

Golddusk simply stood in place, and Octavia took the opportunity to introduce the group herself. "It's nice to meet you, my name's Octavia," she explained, gesturing to herself. "These ponies are my friends, Kwan Do," the other Pegasus colt nodded slightly, staring a little around the house. "Artimare," the wisened mare gave Twilight a brief shake of the hoof, and took a quick sip out of a flask the rest of the group hadn't even noticed until now. "And this is Golddusk, the official liaison of Princess Luna," Octavia finished, ending her sentence with a frustrated tone as the Pegasus continued to look starstruck. Upon hearing his Princess's name, however, he snapped to attention, much akin to the guards that had taken their letter a few days ago.

"Yes, ma'am," Golddusk greeted, standing somewhat curtly. Octavia raised an eyebrow at him, and Artimare smacked him again. "Ow, hey... what?" he protested.

The grey-coated filly just shook her head. "Please excuse him, he's unfortunately slightly socially defunct," she explained, slight desperation in her voice.

"Twilight raised an eyebrow at both the spectacle and Octavia's explanation of the strange colt's behavior. "Then why in Equestria was he chosen as a

liaison? That's a position that requires impeccable social aptitude," she mused, looking rather confused about the whole thing.

Artimare spoke up just as Octavia had opened her mouth. "To be honest, we're still trying to figure that out. But anyway, we had a question or two for you before we turned in for the day."

Again, Sparkle had to raise an eyebrow. "For the day? But aren't you-Oh!" she exclaimed, her memory serving fast. "That's right, you are all the night crew, aren't you! Yes, of course, what can I do for you?"

Artimare smiled slightly as she continued, "Well, from what we understand, one or two of us are supposed to be bunking with you, and the rest of us are taking to the B&B in town. We were wondering if you had any preference or objection to these arrangements."

Twilight looked slightly beside herself happy. "Oh, not at all! I've always wanted to have a houseguest, I'm sure I have a book on it somewhere!"

The older mare took her turn adopting a rather confused expression. "A book..." she said slowly.

"Oh, yes, I've read a few on the matter, including etiquette, proper housing and furnishing arrangements, cooking and sleeping schedule planners-" she kept on, starting to ramble slightly about the extensive amount of subject matter she's taken to reading on the subject of having a guest stay at her house, as she trotted into her living room, motioning for the others to come in. Most of the small group looked slightly unnerved by the studious filly's enthusiasm for taking the written word for granted, except for Golddusk, who had adopted 'The Stupid Look', as most ponies called it. You've assumedly seen one like it before, that expression where somepony's eyes glaze over and they forget that their mouth has a function called 'closed.'

As Twilight moved a few bookshelves about to reveal a door to a back room, presumably a bedroom, she turned to ask the group, "So, which of you will be 'bunking' with me, as the saying goes? I only have room for one other pony, so-"

"Him." Artimare, Octavia, and Kwan Do all gestured rather quickly at a now very confused-looking Golddusk.

Twilight clapped her hooves, set about asking Gold a series of questions that, under normal circumstances, he would have had trouble keeping up with. Given his propensity for becoming easily embarrassed around girl he'd become slightly taken with, he bore no hope of answering any of them. The other three ponies took this as an opportunity to leave, and waved their goodbyes as they trotted out the door.

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It was only a few hours later, and after spending several minutes asking Golddusk all kinds of questions that he had shrugged off by saying, somewhat embarrassed, that he was too tired to answer properly, she had shown him to his guest room, and he'd gone to sleep for the day. Thus began Twilight's day, as she set out to continue oversight of the Winter Moon Festival. She had just gotten to the Main Hall to check on Rarity's progress with the decorations when she ran into none other than Ponyville's top party planner, Pinkie Pie.

"Ooh, good morning, Twilight! Did you sleep well? Huh?" the pink pony asked quickly, bouncing about with a broad smile.

"Yes, actually. The ponies from Canterlot I was telling you girls about earlier showed up just a little while ago, right after I'd woken up. Most of them are staying at the B&B, but one of them is actually a guest at my house now!" she explained, rather excited by the prospect. "Ooh, this is going to be such fun! I've never been hostess to anyone before, and thanks to all of you, I've really gotten to love making new friends! I just wish he wasn't asleep right now..." she trailed off.

Pinkie, however, gasped in what normal ponies would assume to be abstract horror, and exclaimed. "Asleep? He's asleep? What kind of guest sleeps through the day? And such a beautiful day at that! He's supposed to be helping out with the festival, isn't he? How can he just snooze away while everypony is working so hard for this awesome party?" she ranted, obviously upset.

Twilight set a hoof on her friend's shoulder to calm her down. "Pinkie, Pinkie, it's ok! He's part of the new night crew! They're all asleep, because they work *after the sun goes down!*" she explained, slightly panicked that the pink party pony might take matters into her own hooves.



Pinkie Pie thought about this for, oh, a nanosecond, and said, "Oh, okie dokie Loki!" and trotted off. Her happy chant of "La la la..." followed her back into town.

"Good grief, I hope this whole night shift business doesn't cause too much trouble for everypony," Twilight muttered, and stepped into the Main Hall.

# Chapter 3

## The Nite Shift, Part 1

The first thing Octavia was aware of upon awakening was that she was not in her own bed. Not being a pony of promiscuous or adventurous standards, this obviously raised a great deal of internal conflict. A large portion of which, however, was resolved by her noticing her friends all in similar beds around her. Thus, she remembered that they had taken a shared room at the inn. Making a conscious effort to steady herself, one other question did arise in her head after a moment of rational thought.

"Why am I the only pony awake right now? Usually our alarm goes off..." she pondered out loud, and glanced over to the alarm clock that she had set next to her bed, mainly to keep the other two from fiddling with it. If Kwan Do had his way, they would not have anywhere near as much sleep as they needed. Artimare, probably too much. So Octavia took it upon herself to keep them all on an even schedule. Her simple train of thought on the matter derailed, however, when she noticed the time. To no pony in particular, she asked, "Why the hay am I awake an hour and a half early?"

"Hoo," was her reply.

And it was one she was not expecting in the least. Leaping all but parallel sideways out of bed, she crashed unceremoniously onto the floor, flank over teakettle. Staring up, (or down, as her current pose would have her), she noticed a rather handsome Tawny Owl staring wide-eyed at her from the windowsill. She assumed this creature to be responsible for her abrupt and early eve.

"Well, hello there," she greeted, steadying her voice, and heart, by talking slower than normal, and righting herself til she could stand on all four hooves. "Who are you?"

"Hoo," the bird responded, blinking slowly. It fluttered down to the hoof of her bed with a soft flap of it's wings.

"Yes, who?" she asked kindly.

"Hoo," was the reply.

"Yes, that's what I said," Octavia confirmed, a familiar twitch forming in her brow. One usually attributed to a black-and-gold coated Pegasus who-

"Aloysius?" came a voice reminiscent of late night adventures and awkward pauses. The owl turned its head. Octavia shuddered slightly at the sight of the body staying perfectly still.

"In here," Octavia called in response, sure that the feathered creature would simply stand there and wait for Golddusk to find it. Sure enough, the owl stayed put, and Gold's head popped into the window the owl had come through moments before.

"*There you are!*" the gold-trimmed Pegasus exclaimed. He scrambled the rest of the way into the window, all but falling on his face, and only as a last-minute precaution used his wings to right himself. "Listen, buddy, I need you to show me where the B&B is, I can't find it. All the signs are kind of hard to understand. I must have walked into three different furniture stores before I found you."

The grey filly blinked, and then blinked again. *Surely he's not that bad. He can't be. We've been friends for years, he can't be that-*

"Oh, hey, Octavia!" Golddusk said excitedly, having finally spotted her.

"Yes?" she asked innocently. *Ok, good. He should at least remember that I'm staying at the B&-*

"Do you remember where the B&B is? I can't find it for the life of me. Thank Luna Aloysius found you to ask, he's such a smart bird," the colt all but cooed, holding up a hoof for the owl to land on. He nuzzled the bird affectionately, which coerced a soft "Hoo," from it.

Octavia facehoofed, then responded, slowly, surely, and keeping her voice as flat as freshly stomped dirt, "Golddusk? We are *in* the B&B. I and the others told you this morning that we would be staying here. Aloysius came here because *this is the building you're looking for.*"

Golddusk looked slightly confused for a moment, just a moment, before his expression started to break. As if he was physically restraining himself, his

mouth slowly etched and morphed into a slight smirk, then grin, then an outright smile. With obvious strain in his voice, he told her, "I know."

The musical mare blinked, dumbfounded. "You... *know?*"

"Yup."

"So you already knew where we were when you asked the bird?"

"Aloysius? Totally." His smile was unmistakable, and he looked ready to burst for laughing.

Golddusk then became aware of many things at once. The first being that he was now upside down. Having no recollection of the time and or space between standing upright and being flat on his back, he made an attempt to orient himself. Thus he became aware of the second thing. Octavia was rather handy with a pillow. A realization followed rather rapidly by the knowledge that fluffy things *can* hurt, and, he would come to realize later, waking up a sleeping pony early simply to prank them was one of those things he would have to file away later as 'socially unacceptable.'

This didn't stop him laughing the entire beating through.

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Golddusk all but hobbled out of the building a few minutes later, to allow Octavia and the rest to sleep for their last hour or so. He, however, was way too wide awake and excited to sleep any more. His evening had started much earlier than he had expected, having been awoken by the owl now riding on his back. Twilight had apologized, but he had dismissed it almost instantly.

*"This little guy is awesome; I've never seen a bird quite like him at the castle. I usually stay indoors, and the only bird that goes inside is Wilhelmina," he'd explained. "Can I keep him with me while I'm doing rounds tonight?"*

*"Of course," she'd told him. "Just make sure, if you get lost, to ask Aloysius the way home. He's a very smart bird."*

*"Excellent! Well," Golddusk thought out loud, "Where should I start? It's a little after sunset, so I don't know who all is up right now..."*

*"Oh," exclaimed the purple mare. Golddusk would swear he'd seen a light bulb appear from nowhere above her mane. "Pinkie Pie doesn't go to sleep until she absolutely has to, and she's doing most of the event organization. Maybe she could use a bit of your input before the others wake up. That way, they'd have something to do when they start, instead of having to ask around." She sounded almost cheerful at what he could only assume she'd seen as a really great idea.*

*He had to admit, though, it had sounded... practical.*

*Golddusk chuckled to himself. "Pinkie Pie, practical. Oh, that's good."*

*After having taken in a meal and some polite conversation, most of which Twilight spent grilling him about his work at the castle, and the Moon Princess, topics he was most happy to answer about, he'd set off to find this... Pinkie Pie, whatever her name was.*

*Thus began his next lesson in interpersonal relationships. His first instinct was to find a crowded room, and ask loudly, "Anypony here know a Pinkie Pie?" A notion that was quickly abolished by a brief memory of stumbling into a room of sleeping day-shift ponies, who did not take well to being woken up simply to be asked where the break room was.*

*His second idea didn't fare much better than the first one would have, but it did save him a potentially sound beating and a room full of angry ponies. Plus, most all the rooms full of pony he could find were ponies' locked houses. So, he decided to simply try to deduce for himself which filly was Pinkie Pie. The only clues to go on being her name and the fact that he was looking for a mare, he figured the best course of investigation would be to look for a pink girl with a pie-related cutie mark.*

*A task which would have taken him all night, save for one simple grace. Namely, her spotting him first. From across the Main Hall, mind you. He'd no more than taken a single step into the building before he'd heard a rather audible gasp, and, flash of pink blur later, the pony in question was standing right in front of him.*

*And she was talking. A lot. "Ohmigosh are you one of the night crew my name's Pinkie Pie what's yours are you here to help with the party I love parties I throw the best parties in Ponyville do you want me to throw you one do you do you do y-"*

*Golddusk blinked, as no sooner had she begun rambling than a sky-blue pony with multi-colored mane and tail had shoved a hoof in her mouth. "Pinkie Pie, you may not need to breath, but if you keep talking like that, he might forget that he does," she explained in a cool, confident demeanor. Golddusk made note of Aloysius flying off to a rafter to escape the rambling pink filly.*

*The black Pegasus blinked. "Um, I'm going to assume that you're Pinkie Pie, at least I think I heard that name in their somewhere," he mused. The pink pony nodded vigorously, and Rainbow shook violently with the movement of her hoof still lodged in the party pony's face. "And you are?"*

*The other girl shook her hoof free, wiped it off, and posed. All in a rather hurried gesture. "My name's Rainbow Dash. Best flyer in Equestria!" she declared, puffing out her chest in pride.*

*It had taken a second for the name to register in the colt's mind. "Wait, the Rainbow Dash? Winner of the Best Young Flyer competition? Wow, I'd totally thought-*

*"What, that I'd be hanging around the castle, flying with the Wonderbolts? That I'd make some kind of flashy entrance with thunderclouds and a Sonic Rainboom?" she joked, still somehow slightly egotistically.*

*"Taller," he'd responded.*

*She all but deflated. "Wh-what?"*

*"I totally thought you'd be taller. Best flyer in Equestria? I'd just assumed you'd be about Luna's height or a bit... I don't know... less short. Makes sense, in flanksight. Spitfire's about the same build, and she's practically a goddess in the air," he thought out loud.*

*Rainbow Dash looked readily crestfallen, and Pinkie Pie had collapsed into laughter. "Ahahaha, taller! You're a shorty-shorty skimpy-shrimp!"*

*Golddusk had stared at her for a second, slightly bemused. Then something dawned on him. "Aren't you two the same height?"*

*It was the blue pony's turn to fall down laughing. "Bahahahaha. Way to go, Pinkie! Who's a shrimp now?"*

*The black and gold colt stood there a second, letting the two laugh it off. After a few moments, they righted themselves, and Dash asked him, "So, what do you need? I hear you're one of the night-shift ponies, right? Does that mean we can go to bed?"*

*"Absolutely not!" a rather haughty and somehow more sophisticated voice rang out behind them. Golddusk admired the acoustics in the large room. "There's still a great deal to be done, and we have hours before we can call it quits!" Gold turned around to spot a white unicorn with a purple mane and tail combo cantering up to them. "Oh, hello, sir. Are you here as part of the evening help?"*

*Golddusk nodded, shifting from hoof to hoof slightly at the slowly but steadily growing collection of ponies now talking to him. "Um, yeah, I'm Golddusk. Sorry, I know we weren't supposed to show up for another couple of hours, but I woke up early and Twilight said it'd be a good idea to track Pinkie down and get assignments for everypony when they wake up so they don't have to go asking around."*

*The new pony bowed her head slightly. "Yes, I'm sure she'd be eager to throw you into the thick of things as soon as she could. If I remember correctly, you're the official liaison to Princess Luna?"*

*The colt shied away just a little from that. "Yeah, I guess. Although I'm still not sure how I got the position in the first place. My normal job in the castle is mostly keeping things tidy and keeping an eye on the sky so Milady can do her work. Honestly, I've only really spoken to her once or twice. And I don't think I made a very good impression..." he slightly trailed off; embarrassed that he was acting so insecure, when he was supposed to be representing the Princess. He shook his head gruffly, straightening up. "But anyway, what can I help with?"*

*The three fillies all exchanged glances, and Rainbow Dash asked, slightly cautious, "Well, um, what're you good at?"*





"Hoo," was his reply, and the bird set off, Golddusk hoofing after him fast as he could-

"Wait, duh," he said to himself, unfurling his wings. "I can *fly*."

Mere moments later, pony and bird landed on the balcony of a building Gold didn't recognize. But he'd learned in a few short moments the bird tended to know what it was doing. He took a step toward the window just as Aloysius gave a soft "Hoo." Turning his attention to the bird, it gave him another, much softer, "hoo."

"Oh, you're right. I keep forgetting. Somepony might be asleep in there," he reasoned, and eased the windowpane open ever so slowly. The room was dark, much more so than he'd expected. Even with eyes that were used to night patrols and dark rooms, he had trouble seeing.

Which made the sudden presence of light so much more not ok that it would have been. As he flinched in the sudden brightness, and before he'd even gotten a chance to exclaim in displeasure his reaction, a loud chorus of "Surprise!" echoed in the slight room, followed by what seemed to be an explosion of ponies from every corner of the building.

"Holy Comets!" he exclaimed, making a valiant and furious attempt to pull a 180 and fly straight out the way he'd come in. Forgetting, in the process, that the window had closed behind him.

His collision was followed by an equally large chorus of "Ooh," as nearly everypony flinched from the impact. After letting the constellations float around in front of his eyes for a second, a familiar pink face swam into view. "Ohmigosh I'm so sorry I didn't mean to scare you!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, offering a hoof to help him up.

He took it, and shook his head as he stood. "Owww.... Um, it's no problem, really. I'm just... surprised."

The look on Pinkie's face could only ever be construed as sarcasm, even to somepony who'd never heard the word before. "Well, duh! That's why it's called a surprise party, silly!"

Rainbow Dash cantered up to them. "Yeah, Pinkie Pie nearly exploded soon as you left, rounding up everypony who wasn't busy to throw together

this last-minute welcome party! And trust me, when Pinkie Pie throws a party, you *want* to be there."

"Take your word for it," he said slowly, looking around. Most of the ponies were now regarding him with mixed expressions of concern and confusion. Making an attempt to think on his hooves, he added, "Um, party hard?" Which led him to realize that he may need to get used to loud bursts of noise if he wanted to keep working here, as everypony practically gave a war cry, eager to get the impromptu, if short, party started.

Pinkie Pie gave him a slight nudge into the center of the room. "Come on, there's a bunch of ponies you need to meet, anyway! I know every pony in Ponyville, and I mean *everypony*. Let's get started!"

The next few minutes proved an exercise in holding himself together amidst a rather large crowd of fillies and colts he'd never seen before. He recognized a few faces from his arrival that morning, but keeping track of the rest of the ponies seemed almost impossible. It didn't help that Pinkie took no time in between introductions. "And that's Lyra, and her fillyfriend Bon-Bon, and that's Carrotine, and over there's Big Mac, and Cheerilee, and..."

But one name in particular made him double-take. One he hadn't heard in a while. "Wait, wait, wait. Back that up. Who did you just say?" he asked, putting a hoof on Pinkie's arm to keep her moving to the next person before she forgot.

"What, who? Oh, you mean-"

But her sentence was cut short as Golddusk for the third time that evening lost all orientation and bearing, having been crashed into at rather abrupt speeds. A half second later, a familiar voice rang in his ears. "Goldy!" it shouted.

Or rather, she shouted. Having been helped to his feet yet again, he took a second to give his assailant a once over. Yup, there was no mistaking it. That blonde hair, those yellow eyes. The grey fur. Saddlebag full of-

"Hi, Derpy," Gold said, slightly exasperated. "I take it you're Ponyville's mailpony now?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

She shook her head vehemently, a muffin falling out of her bag. Half expecting her to panic as soon as it hit the floor, he was slightly taken aback as her tail flicked out and snapped it back in. "Yessir!" she saluted. "After Celestia did up that new magicky-scroll thing, I didn't have a whole lot to do. So boss sent me here! And it's a whole lot of fun!"

He regarded the mailpony with a mix of amusement and wonder. "And the bag of muffins?"

"Pinkie said bring snacks," she explained, taking a bite out of a blueberry muffin. One he was absolutely positive she hadn't been holding the moment before she'd sunk her teeth into it. Matter of fact, the bag didn't look like it's been tampered at all, save the muffin that tried to escape. She then proceeded to shove a poppy seed one in his mouth.

He chewed slowly, taking a bite, and letting the muffin fall into his hoof. "Riggghhht. So, party?" he asked, raising an eyebrow, and taking another bite.

Both Derpy and Pinkie yelled in chorus, "PARTY!"

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Octavia stirred slightly as her alarm went off. A modest, musical tune that she'd set herself, it did wonders to get her up and moving. At least, until she had to wake the other two. Kwan Do proved to be rather cooperative. Matter of fact, he was already awake, downstairs, had eaten, and was meditating. He'd raised an eyebrow as she stepped into the foyer, but simply acknowledged her with a nod. And returned to his focus.

The real challenge laid in waking up Artimare. A pony well known for her tendencies to do whatever she darn well pleased, without really worrying too much about obligation, outside of what got her paid. Most ponies were convinced that the only thing keeping her from pursuing a life as a soldier of fortune was that the night shift had a tendency to be really, really lax. Thus, she seemed to have learned to ignore most anything that would bother her. Or, indeed, wake her from a pleasant sleep.

"Come on, Artimare, we need to get going," Octavia said quietly, giving the purple mare a nudge to wake up. She then went about picking up her things and making her bed, to give the filly time to get awake and get up.

Turning around, however, she noticed her efforts had no effect. Nonplused, she simply gave the unicorn a nudge with her head. "Come on, Artimare," she said more sternly. "It's time to wake up."

Apparently, the older pony wasn't having any of this, and simply rolled over. Octavia noted that shoving her forehead into the other pony's spine wasn't pleasant, nor was it any more effective. Rearing up slightly to put to hooves on her comrade's back, she shook the mare vehemently. "Up! Get up get up get up! We have work to do! Come on~!" she groaned, achieving no more than giving her shoulder an ache.

Sighing discontentedly, she scoffed and trotted off. "Fine, see if I care! Let's see how you feel after we get all of the work done in a night, and you don't get to freeload anymore! I guess we won't be here long enough for you to try any of the apple-distilled drinks here!" she finished with a huff.

Her journey to the door was interrupted by a hoof on her shoulder. "Now, let's not get hasty, here," said a rather drowsy, if awake, voice.

Octavia grinned to herself, and then turned her head away. "Nope, you can sleep all you want! I guess we'll just have to work extra hard, if you're not in the mood to hang around, we'll make sure you can get home right away! I bet Sir Falchion has more than enough for you to do when you get back," she added, a final stab to a spot she knew well wasn't exactly bulletproof.

Artimare trotted slightly hurried to stand in front of Octavia. Leveling her gaze, she all but growled, "You wouldn't."

"Watch me," the grey filly countered, a smirk of confidence adorning her face.

The two stayed in nonverbal confrontation for a moment, before Artimare gave an almost inaudible sigh. "Fine. Where do we start?"

"Well, after we eat something, I expect the best idea would be to track down Golddusk. He woke me up earlier; all kinds of excited, so I'm sure he's well and wide awake by now. I'm sure he's found several things for us to do by now."

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As the conga line made another lap around the table, Pinkie noticed that Golddusk, who had been at the tail end of the line, had stopped for a second, lifting the lampshade partially off his head, and looking rather perplexed.

"What's wrong, Golddusk?" she asked, trotting up to him. Well, bouncing, really.

"I'm not sure... I just know that for some reason I'm really, really worried about something." He gave a nonchalant shrug, and rejoined the conga as it passed by him again. "Oh well, no sense worrying about it now, right?"

# Chapter 4

## The Nite Shift, Part 2:

### *Business as Unusual*

Kwan Do had always considered himself to be a pony always in control of his emotions. He meditated constantly, practiced physical and mental discipline at every opportunity, and in general had a very solid grip on who he was and what he wanted from life. Most ponies considered him stoic, passive, quiet. He had a reputation for being a little different. Not so much strange, but practiced in arts and techniques most ponies don't even take pause to think about most of the time. All in all, if asked, he would without hesitation tell anypony that he considered himself very strong-willed and sturdy.

So, really, flinching was a new thing to him. So was taking several cautious steps in the other direction without turning around. Yet he felt both were prudent, if unavoidable, as Octavia took one look inside Sugarcube corner, and promptly went Hoofcon 3. Even though he wasn't the target of her quite understandable, if slightly exaggerated, rage, every bone in his body told him, quite sternly and with much conviction, "You might wanna take a step back, there, man."

"You... were... *partying?*" Octavia screamed. Over her shoulder, Kwan could see what was unmistakably Golddusk cowering under a lampshade, as if not being able to see Octavia would make her go away. "You wake me up an hour early to pull a prank on me, then go off and *party? We're supposed to be working!*"

Now, Kwan knew as well as anypony that Gold had a very surefire way to defuse the situation. All the black Pegasus would have to do would be to look as pitiful and remorseful as possible and say something really heart-wrenchingly sad. This usually had the effect of making Octavia feel rather lousy, and instead of yelling trying to console him. Whether or not he was aware of this, the martial pony didn't know.

However, he was pretty sure the answer was no, especially after Gold's only response to the grey filly's outrage was to pop his head out from

cowering under the lampshade, hold out a muffin, and offer, rather sheepishly, "Poppyseed?"

Had anypony bothered to listen, they would most likely have heard the very last twig in Octavia's head snap like a... well, yeah. What followed next was the most varied and impressive array of uniquely different frustrated, confused, and borderline insane expressions Kwan Do had ever seen on a pony before. Then, just as suddenly as she'd snapped, she stopped. Looking rather curiously at the muffin, she paused, then her eyes widened. "Oh, tell me that's not-"

Kwan Do made a note to ask the grey pony that had appeared *out of freaking nowhere* how she achieved such flight speeds. It could do him well. Golddusk, on the other hoof, just smiled and nodded. "Yup. You should know better than to start sentences she can finish for you."

"Octa-v!" Derpy cheered, bear hugging the grey mare she'd just plowed into the floor with a tackle hug.

Wrestling free of the blonde pegasus's grasp, she righted herself, and straightened her mane. "It's *Octavia*, Derpy, *Octavia*."

"Octa..gon?" Derpy asked slowly, having known issues with pronouncing the other filly's name. Most ponies were unsure, however, whether she did this on purpose or not. Kwan Do, in fact, wasn't sure about her at all, only having met her twice on rather, memorable, if confusing occasions.

"I think that is about as close as you're going to get," Kwan Do interjected, as the recognizable spasm in Octavia's eyelid resurfaced. Most ponies in the room turned to look at them. Considering the large amount of... debris... in the room, Kwan deduced that there were significantly more present before Octavia snapped. "Octavia, it might help to remember that even we are not technically on-shift yet. We still have a half hour before our work schedule takes effect. Therefore, losing your temper at Golddusk, while I expect he's had it coming for a little while, may be a bit... unwarranted?"

Golddusk smiled gratefully at the martial Pegasus for coming to his rescue. An expression which faltered as Kwan Do spoke to him, in turn. "And Golddusk, as much as I can excuse your actions, I would expect that you know the boundaries of certain interpersonal relations, however scarce

your prior experience in the field may be. It would do you well to, at the very least, apologize. And do remove the lampshade before you do." Having said his piece, he took a small but noticeable step back, to let his words sink in and give each pony a chance to act on them. After all, his cutie mark wasn't a universal symbol of balance for nothing.

Golddusk blinked, slightly taken aback, and feeling more than a bit sheepish. "Um, I guess now would be a good time to get to work, Octavia?" he implored his female friend.

Octavia heaved a sigh. "Oh, fine. I can't really argue with Kwan about this, so I guess you're off the hook for now. Sorry everypony," she added, turning to address the rest of the room, "Looks like party's over for tonight. We have to get to work."

With a loud, collective 'Awww', the remaining guests departed, and Pinkie Pie went about cleaning up after a relatively successful soirée. "I guess we'll just have to party harder tomorrow!" she cheered, 'La-la-la-ing away to clean up her home, and blissfully ignorant of Octavia's glare.

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"Right," Octavia started, having gathered her group together back at the inn. "It looks like, having cleaned up the mess at, what was her name, Pinkie's house, it looks like our first official task is to ensure that all of the groups have coordinated their contributions properly."

Golddusk blinked. "What is it with you and syllables?"

An exasperated sigh escaped the grey filly's lips. "We need to make sure all the parts of the party match. You know, that everyone is following the same themes?"

Gold looked offended. "I know what the words meant, what I don't understand is why you use such big ones," he huffed.

*Twitch, twitch.* "Listen, Gold. I can forgive the party, and I'm willing to forget the prank, but we came here to do a job. And I kind of need everypony on the same page to get it done properly. It's only two nights till the Winter Moon Festival. So try to stay on topic, ok?" she pleaded. Gold nodded respectfully. "Good. Now, Artimare, I was thinking you could check on the



athletics field. The pony in charge, Rainbow Dash, went to bed after the party, but she left me some basic plans and ideas, and I figure you could just go cross-check all of it and make sure they have the right idea."

The purple unicorn nodded, taking a small pile of papers and putting them in a side bag. "Simple enough. Wasn't she also in charge of the opening and closing Wonderbolt performances?"

"Yeah," confirmed Golddusk. "But she's this last Best Young Flyer's Competition's First Placer. She knows what she's doing."

Artimare shook her head. "Not worried about that, kid. I'm more concerned that giving her two really huge parts of the festival to focus on might detract from her work. Some of these notes look a little... weak. How exactly does she want us to make the race course 'twenty percent cooler?'"

Octavia smiled in response. "Actually, Pinkie Pie is also in charge of the events and activities. I think I have some notes from her, too-

FFFFWWEEEEEE! Went the saddlebag as Octavia pulled out a small pile of papers, apparently rigged to a small confetti noisemaker. The grey mare all but froze in shock, and fell over. Golddusk followed suit, bowled over in laughter. "Oh my god! That's the greatest expression *ever!* You should see it, I want a picture want a picture want a picture..." he continued guffawing as the grey mare righted herself, slowly calming down and supporting himself on the table.

"Done?" Octavia asked quietly.

"Give me a second," he responded, taking a few deep breaths. "Ok, think I'm good. Hoo, that was awesome."

"Hoo," came a response from the rafters. Golddusk glanced up. "Aloysius!" he cheered.

"Oh for... Gold, we need to focus!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, sorry," the black Pegasus commented, the owl landing on his back. "It's just that I thought I left him at Pinkie's, he must have followed me back. Guess he's staying with us. Anyway, what do you want me to do?"

"You are going to take over the decorations. There's still quite a bit to do, as they've only actually just started on some areas, so they've set up a night team. You're going to want to look for a pony named Rarity, if she's still awake. I believe Stallius mentioned her a few times," she added, rolling her eyes. "Just make sure they don't screw it up. And seeing as how you're *technically* the head of this little gang of workers we've become, you're also responsible for talking with Twilight about coordination. Apparently she has some additional questions for you regarding... well to be honest I don't know, she just said she needed to talk to somepony, and that's your job."

Kwan Do took a step out of the corner of the room. "And what shall you and I be doing?"

Octavia blinked. "Oh yes, that's right. Well, I'm part of the music crew. Hopefully a major part. Did you hear what they did for the Summer Sun Celebration? Birds? Nu-uh. Your job," she added, pointing a hoof at Kwan Do, "Well, Celestia has already sent some guards to keep order around here while the festivities are prepared, to make sure nothing goes south for the winter that isn't supposed to already be there. Can you lend them a hand? You are technically a guard pony."

The brown Pegasus just nodded. "Alright, of you go!" she adjourned them all, taking a small pile of notes and heading off out the door, following Artikare and Kwan. Golddusk followed soon after, but Octavia turned and stopped him. "And Gold, please, if you need help, just ask somepony," she added softly.

Gold nodded. "Yeah, ok," he said noncommittally. Octavia raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything more. Once they were done, he turned his head a bit to glance backwards at the owl. "Ok, Aloysius. Where's Twilight now?"

Without hesitation the bird flew off, with pony not far behind. The bird led him through town, off to a large courtyard with a fountain, where Twilight was busy talking to a pony he knew to be Rarity. The two looked to be at odds over something, but from where he stood, he couldn't quite hear it. He cantered up slowly to get a better listen, and make sure he wasn't interrupting.

"...not going to work? We can't set up lights around the fountain, Rarity, we're doing everything by hand! That also means no electricity!" Twilight argued.

Rarity's version of arguing sounded a bit more like whining with facts. "But, but, it would look so *tacky* to just have streamers and ribbon! How are we supposed to get everypony's attention when Princess Luna takes the stage to raise the moon?"

"I haven't figured that out yet, but we can't just go back on the whole theme now! Maybe if we used a big lighting spell or something!"

Before Rarity was able to reply, Golddusk stepped up and chimed in, "Excuse me, Twilight?" as he spoke, Aloysius flew up and landed on Twilight's back, grabbing her attention.

The purple unicorn all but rounded on him. Seeing who it was, however, her expression brightened. "Golddusk, hi! Listen, can we get your opinion on this? What do you think Luna would like as far as her stage goes?"

"Stage?" he asked slightly quizzically. "What stage?"

Rarity huffed. Something he was sure she'd had practice in. He didn't really care too much for her from the few minutes they'd talked... "The stage she's going to raise the moon from, of course?"

This got Gold's attention, and he almost laughed. "The princess doesn't raise the moon from a *stage*, silly. Duh." Rolling his eyes, he cracked a smile.

The white unicorn twitched. "And *what*, pray tell, does she raise the moon *from*?"

He couldn't stop himself. Stifling a laugh, he told her, quite simply, "The sky."

Rarity looked ready to explode. And Twilight having to hold back a snicker or two didn't help, either. "Look, if you're not going to be helpful, then you can just *leave*," she snapped.

Twilight laid a hoof on her friends shoulder. "Look, I'm sure he means well. And we're both pretty tired, anyway. Let's just have a quick chat over what we want done, and let the other ponies know who he is, so he can take over from there. Now, Golddusk, how exactly does the Princess go about raising the moon every night?"

He nodded, having chortled quietly to himself, sufficing the out-loud laughter he'd had to suppress. "She flies with it, actually. It's rather majestic. Of course, that's when she actually starts raising the moon. It gets pretty funny if you wake up early enough to watch in the castle. Well, you know what I mean."

Twilight tilted her head in confusion. "What do you mean, funny?"

Golddusk grinned, like most ponies do when they know something others don't and get to pause a second right before telling them. "She kung-fu's the sun."

"...what?" both unicorns asked, exchanging slightly worried glances.

That he got a laugh out of. It was proving to be a really entertaining night. "It's actually the most adorable thing I've ever seen. See, she's still kind of a little kid at heart, even if she's older than everypony except her sister and plays the part of royalty really well. Every night she flies out above her balcony and pretends to karate chop and kick the sun while it's going down, like she's beating it up. She even makes kung-fu action noises."

Their confused expressions showing no sign of going away, he continued, kind of hastily, "But when she actually raises the moon it's gorgeous. She just kind of floats there, against the backdrop of stars and black sky, flapping her wings slowly while she concentrates. Then, almost out of nowhere, the moon rises up behind her, if you're looking at it right, and when it's full, it circles her entirely. Even if it's not full, she still looks the picture of grace and majesty when she's working," he concluded, rather dreamily.

The two fillies watched as he stood there a moment, lost in space, then Twilight shook him slightly. "Um, Golddusk? Back to Equestria?"

The black Pegasus shook his mane. "Sorry, bad habit. Listen, the stage is a good idea, but I seriously doubt she'll even set foot on it unless she has

to. She's not that great with crowds, yet. She's still a little... out of touch with society, I should say. I think she'd be a bit afraid to stand up in front of so many ponies all at once. Better off just letting her do her thing," he mused, making an effort to sound sure of his reasoning.

Twilight seemed to understand. "Right, I guess that's something we hadn't thought of. She's been writing letters here, and making suggestions, but without her actually *in* Ponyville to help direct, we needed somepony who knew her well enough to fill us in on these things."

"Well, I guess that's all you're going to need from me for tonight, then?" Rarity asked, slightly less whiny. Twilight nodded, and they said some goodnights. "I will see you tomorrow, Golddusk. Be sure to drop by my shop so I can get you an outfit done up for the festival. We can't have you trotting about one of the year's most important events as the Princess's liaison without *some* kind of formal wear." She trotted off before he could say anything.

Twilight just smiled when he turned to ask her. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about it. She's not the best for nothing, you know. Anyway, I had some questions about some of the other places we've done decorations for, I was wondering if you could offer some last-minute tips before we move on?"

"Oh, definitely. That's what I'm here for, apparently. Where do you want to start?"

"I was thinking the main hall. I know you've been there earlier, I was wondering if you'd had a chance to mull any of it over. The work we've done, I mean," she elaborated, cantering off and leading the way.

"Yeah, I found Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash there, but to be honest, I got so distracted by that party pony that I didn't even notice the décor," he explained.

Twilight chuckled a bit. "Yeah, Pinkie has that effect on ponies. Now, let's get going. I'm eager to see what you think of what we've done so far."

Golddusk, to, was eager, until he stepped into the hall and took his first good, long look.

"Oh, FARK no."

"Right, then, first stop is the racetrack, is it? Now, where is this Rainbow Dash? I hope at least one of these two ponies is awake, I'm not doing this all on my own," Artimare told herself, trotting along the outskirts of Ponyville. She took notice of some of the carnival-esque booths that were being set up by families and small groups, grateful that that wasn't part of her job description.

She'd no sooner reached the center of the racetrack, however, when a loud, boisterous voice called out from somewhere above her, "Look out below!" The purple mare took a short glance behind her, just in time to see the large sports ball headed straight for her. Almost on reflex, she spun around, leaned forward, and gave a hard buck straight back. A satisfying thump told her she'd made contact with her target. A second one told her it had made contact with something else.

Well, that, and a very loud 'Ow!' Almost dreading the poor pony she'd bucked the ball into, she turned around slowly, closing her eyes. She slowly opened one, and saw, rather bemusedly, a blue-and-rainbow colored pony sat, teetering back and forth in dizziness, a soccer ball only a few feet away. Artimare trotted up to help her to her feet. "I'm going to take a stab and say you're Rainbow Dash."

The multicolored Pegasus shook off her dizziness, and snapped back into the air. "One and only! That was quite a kick you got there! Almost as good as a certain cowpony I know. What's your name?"

Slightly bemused at the gusto in which Dash had taken a soccer ball to the head, she answered, "Artimare. I'm here as part of the night shift. Was told to look for you and this other pony named Pinkie Pie?" she finished inquisitorially. "I didn't get a chance to actually see her with the whole thing at Sugarcube corner earlier.

"Yeah, that was crazy, wasn't it? What was that filly's problem?" Rainbow laughed, flitting about as she talked. It was rather distracting.

The unicorn shrugged. "Boy trouble. Golddusk's always been able to push her buttons. And most of the time he doesn't even mean to."

Rainbow's expression fell flat. "Yeah, I know ponies like that. "Well, I'm pretty much ready to call it a night, so howzabout I give you the short tour, and you can take over from here?"

Artimare nodded in agreement. "Sounds good. So what did you mean by 20% cooler?"

Rainbow Dash's eyes lit up, and she went into a small rant about all the suggestions she had for 'improving' the race course. Artimare was glad she wasn't one of the participants, after a few minutes.

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"Birds, *birds*," Octavia mumbled to herself. She'd taken her instrument of choice with her, a small violin, just in case they'd decided to use bees or badgers or something equally laughable. A royal celebration needed *proper* music, after all.

Of course, her worries started to prove themselves unfounded, as she came up on the small pitch off to the side of the courtyard, where the band seemed to have been practicing earlier that day. There didn't seem to be anypony left, but she could tell, with the wide array of instruments, and the setup they'd put together, that at least *somepony* knew that they were doing. The only problem was finding a good place to insert herself into the band.

There were plenty of instruments set in their cases or left covered for the night, marking their places for practice the next day, but Octavia couldn't find anyplace she'd be more than an awkward addition to the group. She then resolved to get up earlier the next evening and speak to the pony in charge, to see what she might be able to contribute. There wasn't a great deal she could do from here.

Taking a gander at her checklist, she saw a small map through what was labeled the 'Everfree Forest', and instructions on how to get to a serpent's lair that apparently had something to do with all of this. Collecting her papers and things back together, she set off out of town, and started walking. And walking. And walking.

"How the hay big is this forest anyways?" she cried in almost dismay, when she stepped out of a rather dense cluster of trees, and came upon a slightly shallow, yet wide, river. She made a note to come back here and wash her face once she'd found this ser-

"Oh, dear, what are you doing out here all by yourself?" cried a rather effeminate voice from somewhere a little to the left. The next thing she knew, she'd been scooped up off the ground, and was traveling busily through the air.

"Help, help! I'm being ponynapped!" she cried, rather distraught. All at once, as if in response, she'd stopped moving. Just long enough to realize she was being held in the air by a large scaly claw. *Rather shiny scales*, she thought to herself, before she jerked in midair again. Next, she was face to snout with a rather large... well, she assumed this to be the serpent she was looking for.

"Oh, no no no no no!" the purple sea creature cried. "I'm not ponynapping you! I'm just getting you out of this yucky forest! There's a big, beautiful lake just upstream of here, much better!"

Octavia thought to herself, *well, that's rather gentlemanly*. "Would you happen to be the serpent who has volunteered to perform for Princess Luna's Winter Moon Festival?" she inquired.

The serpent gestured grandly to himself. "Why, yes, I am! My name is Steven Magnet, dearie! And I want to share my musical talent with the world!"

She had to admit, he was rather amicable. In fact, he was downright friendly. After he let her down on the shores of the lake, she turned to get a good look at him. And not only was he friendly, he was most likely the best-groomed creature anywhere *near* Ponyville!

"Ooh, Mr. Magnet, you look dashing! Is that how you're going to appear at the festival, because that looks wonderful!" she beamed at him, rather impressed with his manners and sense of good personal care.

"Oh, yes! I have to make sure I look this good all the time! It's quite a bit of work, you know," she nodded almost sagely, and then broke out a wide smile. "Oh, but go on, you said you'd come to see me! How can I help?"

Octavia nodded and grinned. This serpent was alright. "Well, I'm here to help with oversight and coordination of the musical performances throughout the festival, but seeing as how everypony else had gone home



for the evening, I decided to come see you! I do hope I didn't wake you," she added, slightly concerned.

"Oh, of course not!" he assured her. "I'm always up at night, the sun's so bad for my scales! Moonlight is perfect, and the cool air feels so good!"

"Oh, that's wonderful," she agreed. "I'm also a night-timer. I'm part of Luna's court, so to speak, so I sleep at day and work at night. I find it makes things rather easier for me. But down to business," she finished, taking out her violin case.

"Right! Straight away!" Steven agreed, lowering his head to be on level with Octavia. "Now, what did you have in mind?"

"Well, seeing as how their band has been properly arranged, and as I understand it, you as of yet didn't have any instruments to accompany your performance, I thought we could take some time and practice together, and you could run me through the songs you wanted to perform," she explained, testing her bow and strings. Everything seemed in order.

"Oo-ho-ho-ho, an accompaniment! But of course!" he cheered, and took a deep breath.

Octavia cued her bow. This could prove to be a rather enjoyable evening.

[illegible]

Golddusk was exasperated. How could they expect Luna to like *any* of these decorations? Sure, she'd be cordial and polite and appreciate their hard work, but this festival was *for the princess*, and it was her first in a thousand years! The real trouble was, having the heart to tell them.

"Oh, well," he told Twilight, who'd just asked him what he didn't like about the decorations. "Oh, I might as well be honest. You're using too warm of colors, first off! Luna loves darker, more mysterious shades! Bright red ribbons and lots of green just isn't going to work. I can see where you're going, Christmas decorations during a Winter season festival, but no. We need blues and purples, maybe offset with a splash of white here or there, she loves snow, maybe some hanging crystals?" he mused out loud, glancing out over the elaborately and almost completely decorated main hall.

Twilight looked rather taken aback. "But what about all the work we've done already? How am I going to tell all those ponies that they need to start all over?"

Golddusk shook his head. "Oh, I have no idea. I'm just tempted to say screw it and hope she likes it. I honestly don't know if she likes Christmas or not, but I know we don't make it a mass celebration at the castle. We always just got time off to go visit our families and stuff. Who knows what she'll think about it? She hasn't even had a Christmas together with her sister since she got back, oh, what's she going to say?" he paced back and forth frantically. This was proving to be a great deal more work than he had anticipated.

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"I'm telling you, there's no way anypony is going to want to race on a track full of obstacles that could easily get them hurt," Artimare fumed, inches away from Rainbow Dash.

"And *I'm* telling *you*, there's no way I'm going to let the biggest deal of the year go on with some namby-pamby hills and hurdles! The *Wonderbolts* are going to be here, *and* both the Princesses! We need to look our best! And we can't do that if we're taking it easy!" Dash shouted back.

"It's a party! Not some tryout for the Gymkhana games!" Artimare countered.

The two ponies butted heads, all but growling at each other.

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Octavia couldn't believe it. The serpent had wonderful scales, a grand, effeminate voice, perfect grooming! And he couldn't hold a note! "Um, Mister Magnet, sir, may I pause you for a second?" Octavia asked hesitantly.

"Oh, of course, but just let me finish this piece, it's my favorite!" Steven told her, and continued singing.

She clamped a hoof over one ear as she tried to play along, rather distraught.

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"These decorations aren't going to work *at all*," Golddusk moaned, his hooves over his head as he lay on the ground.

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"We are NOT going to do the track this way!" Artimare barked.

"Yes. We. Are!" Rainbow countered.

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"Ooh, this is going to be a disaster..." Octavia cried, hiding behind her violin.

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"What else could *possibly go wrong*?" the three ponies cried in unison, unbeknownst to them.

# Chapter 5

## The Nite Shift: Part 3

### *The Last Straw on the Pony's Back*

Golddusk only wanted one thing after the night he'd had. Sleep. And copious amounts of it. He'd not only had to redo all of the decorations in the building, (thank Luna that Twilight knew some color-changing spells, amongst other things,) but it also involved rearranging a lot of decorations that could not simply be pallet-swapped. Thus, his wings got a great workout that night as he ran and flew about the Main Hall taking down and replacing decorations. The hall now sported dark and light blue banners, streamers, and subtle star-themed decorations. Golddusk had been insistent that the location of the Moonrise ceremony make Luna feel welcomed and celebrated.

Just convincing all of the ponies that had been working on the decorations in the first place had been an hour's work. He was properly exhausted. And apparently, so were his comrades, as they were right and properly asleep by the time he'd gotten there. He spent no time in getting to bed. Taking a small glimpse at the moon through the window above his bed, he let himself drift off to sleep.

The next thing he was aware, he was waking up in his own bed, staring at the same moon. In fact, it was in pretty much the same position it had been when he'd fallen asleep. Two thoughts occurred to him: one, that he'd slept pretty much 24 hours and the moon had come full circle, which he dismissed almost immediately, as Octavia would have woken him well before then. He'd made the mistake of sleeping in before, and hadn't wanted to repeat the experience.

The second thought that occurred to him was that he'd only been asleep for minutes, if only seconds. Realizing this, he looked around for whatever had woken him up. Which led to the discovery of several ponies in his room and surrounding the building.

"Rrrr," he growled to himself. "If they'd objected to the new decoration scheme this vehemently, they should have said something much earlier."

Taking his dear sweet time getting out from under the covers, he raised his head to look the 'lead' pony in the eyes. A rather mature-looking tan-coated mare with glasses.

"I am the Mayor of Ponyville," she announced herself, "And I demand an explanation for this atrocity!"

Blink. Blink. "Atrocity? The decorations aren't *that* bad, are they?" he asked sleepily, his eyelids already starting to droop.

The Mayor did a double take.. "Wha-no! The decorations are fine! But we seriously need to discuss-"

"Decorations were all I was responsible for. If it's something else, wake one of the others," he explained hal-feartedly, making to climb back under the covers.

"We're already awake, Gold," said a rather unhappy-sounding Octavia muttered from beneath her sheets. "What else could you want, anyway?" she asked gruffly, poking her head out from her blankets to stare drowsily at the group of ponies in the room. "It's not like Stephen got anywhere *near* the village during practice," she mused. "Something I wish would have offered at least some kind of assistance to his skill," she added, shuddering.

"How can you not know by now?" one of the ponies in the group asked, rather aggrieved. "It's sitting right there in the sky!"

Golddusk glanced lazily back at the window. Not much had changed in the 30 seconds he'd since looked. "Ok, I see the stars and moon and night sky. That's what happens when you wake me up forty seconds after I fall asleep!" he all but barked.

The Mayor blinked at him. "You mean... you mean you really don't know?"

"How could I? Or any of us, for that matter? They were well asleep by the time I got back, and the last thing I did before going to bed was lock up the Main Hall. So unless you were waiting to ambush us for something ridiculously outrageous, I suggest you let us get back to bed," he grumbled. He didn't even blink at the varying expressions of surprise and indignation amongst the group that had invaded their bedroom.

"Well, first off," the Mayor explained, "You haven't been asleep forty seconds."

"You mean you didn't even give us *that long* to sleep?" Artimare growled from under the covers. Golddusk wondered whether or not Kwan Do was also asleep, or merely ignoring them all.

"It's not that," the pony that had spoken up earlier, a yellow-coated filly with blue and purple hair, "You've been asleep for hours. It's noon," she told them.

Golddusk froze halfway under the blanket, and turned his head slowly; the covers slid slowly to the floor as he moved. "What did you say? It's noon?"

The rest of his group had snapped to attention as well. "You mean the sun hasn't risen?"

The filly shook her head. "Nor has the moon moved in hours."

"Which means," Artimare mused aloud, "that either one or both of the royal sisters are in some way incapable of performing their tasks." Octavia leaped out of bed, alert and looking all the more concerned, as Artimare and Kwan Do followed suit, yet Gold hadn't moved.

The Mayor looked rather abashed. "I-I'm sorry. I assumed that, it still being moonrise even in the middle of the day, that Luna had... and you are members of her court, so I..."

Golddusk finished her sentence for her, rather quietly. "You assumed she was responsible, right? Even after all she has done to atone for allowing Nightmare Moon surface? How can you assume so much?"

The group that had invaded their room had started to empty out, leaving the Mayor and the other pony who'd spoken earlier. "We-I... I'm so sorry. I'd thought-"

"Stop," Golddusk told her, his voice still as quiet, but much more gentle. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have laid so much guilt on you. Of course that's the assumption you'd make. You don't have any evidence to the contrary. And to be honest, neither do we. But I know the Princess. Not as well as I'd like, but I have the utmost faith in her. As I'm sure you do Celestia, I don't

believe for a second that she would make such a mistake again. Especially with how excited she's become over the festival. I can't imagine her wanting to sabotage herself so much, anyway."

The rest of the room stared quietly at him, then Octavia spoke up. "You're going to have to forgive him. He has kind of a soft spot for Princess Luna, and he's not really used to being accused of anything, But more importantly, we need to get back to the castle. Since it doesn't look like it's going to get brighter anytime soon," she mused, staring out the window, "my guess is that leaving now would be the best option. I know we haven't had a full days'-er-night's sleep," she continued, "but it's not like we can sit on our laurels on this one. Especially since our job is to make sure the Winter Moon Festival goes off without a hitch, it's kind of hard to make that guarantee if the moon's in the sky before it even starts."

"Not to mention the agricultural, social, and environmental implications of not having a sun," Kwan Do pointed out.

Octavia nodded sheepishly. "Yeah, those, too."

The mayor glanced over to the other filly. "Bon-bon, please go fetch Twilight, and have her write a letter to the castle, to let them know these ponies are returning. And see if she can't get any information from whoever's taken over, if that's the case."

Bon-Bon nodded. "Yes, ma'am!" she agreed, galloping off. The mayor turned back to the group. "I'll understand if you don't want to say goodbye to anypony, and it's not like you'll never see us again, but do try to keep us updated."

Octavia nodded. "I'll try to find a way to send Twilight letters on whatever we find out."

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Even before the others had returned to the castle, however, things amongst the royal courts were in complete turbulence. Guards had been flying back and forth since what would have been sunrise, the servants and cooks and other non-militia ponies had been either sent home or kept in their quarters while things were sorted out, and nopony, absolutely *nopony*, had seen Her Highness Princess Celestia.

And Luna was about to lose her mind over the entire situation. After more than a few hours of interrogation both on her part, and having to answer questions herself from some rather critical high-ranking captains, she'd all but reached her limit. Especially since there seemed to be rather quite a few ponies in Canterlot who would still cast a suspecting eye on her, even as she gave orders for teams to go out in droves to look for her sister, and trying to find some way to raise the sun and set the moon in her dear sister's stead.

She'd decided to try and speak to some of the night court that hadn't been assigned any tasks to build up some more ponypower and keep everything moving normally. Amongst everything else, she did have one other idea for tracking her sister and resolving the issue somewhat peacefully, but there was one catch: nopony took the idea seriously but at all.

And they were quickly running out of ideas. They'd sent word to every province in Equestria, every town, and Celestia hadn't turned up anywhere. Luna had even gone so far as to search the old castle of the Pony Sisters for clues, or to see if some remnant of Nightmare Moon had survived long enough to try and retake the sky, but she'd found nothing. Not even Celestia's personal guard had a clue as to where she'd gone, and they were there day and night. Entire gaps of memory had been stripped from their minds, it seemed.

At this point in time, she'd taken a moment to do the only thing she hadn't had time for since the catastrophe had kicked off early this morning: cry. Curled up on her sister's pillow, and weeping silently, she'd locked herself away from the rest of the castle, only for a moment, to weep and give herself a chance to recompose herself. It was at that point that she was aware of Golddusk and his team returning. To be honest, however, the first thing she was aware of was a large crash at her door as somepony tried to barrel through it. She launched to her feet, about ready to counterattack whoever had tried to break in. "Who's there?" she demanded, her voice shaky from tears. "A-an-announce yourself!" There was a moment of silence, then she heard a voice from the other side of the entry.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit, that hurt..." muttered a male voice, rather disgruntled and obviously in pain.



"Well, of course it did, you idiot. The door is *locked*," said a rather snarky female. "I'm guessing the best idea would be to *knock*."

"Oh...uh...right," the male voice muttered. Shortly followed by a rather sheepish-sounding knock, if there was such a thing. "Um... Princess?" said the same male voice, which now sounded rather familiar. "Um, can we come in? It's Golddusk. We came as soon as we heard what was going on... I mean... we were asleep when the sun... oh, that's not..."

Luna had cautiously approached the door as the two had started talking, and was simply standing on the other side, listening to Golddusk stumble over his words. It was about the end of his rant when she clicked the door unlocked and let it slide open. The black pegasus just kind of peeked in cautiously as Luna backed away from the door.

Once the entry was completely open, Gold slowly trotted into the room, giving the Princess a cautious look. "Are you... I mean, I'd imagine you're not ok, but how're... I mean, what can we do?" he kept tripping over his sentences, like he was trying to defuse a bomb.

Luna felt a pang of guilt, in realizing that he may also believe what others suspected: that it was her fault her sister had disappeared. "So... you too, believe it's my fault? Is that why you're so nervous? That I might do something to you, too?" she felt tears well in her eyes as she realized they didn't have any reason to believe otherwise.

So of course it came as a slight surprise when Golddusk protested almost exuberantly. "What? No, no no no no no! Not a chance in Canterlot! Oh, my god, did you think... no, no way!" he rambled, waving his hooves frantically. Luna stared at him, rather taken aback. She was almost unaware that she was still crying.. "Ok, I know I'm totally not supposed to do this," Golddusk started, "but-" he stopped talking, and hesitated for just a second, before reaching forward and wrapping the younger Princess in a large hug. "I'm so sorry. I don't ever want you to think that we'd believe for a second you could do such a thing."

The Princess of the Moon was not only taken aback much farther than she was used to, but also deeply moved. It wasn't until she was crying into his shoulder that she realized she had a great deal more tears to let stayed like that for a while, as Octavia and, Luna noticed, taking a glance over Gold's

shoulder, Artimare and Kwan Do stood aside, somewhat uncomfortable, or, in the older filly's case, indifferent. She looked almost like she was bored.

Luna took a moment after to compose herself, and looked to the group that had arrived. Then a thought occurred to her. "You asked me when you came in if there was anything you could do, right? Well, I may have a task for you." The excited expression on Gold's face surprised her, but she kept going. He didn't show any signs of wanting to interrupt her, either. "Well, there's one other course of action outside of what's already been implemented that I can think of," she explained, trying to keep to the same royal visage and presence her sister was so known for. It helped her focus, at least. "There's an old legend, parallel to the Elements of Harmony, that I've been doing some research on since I returned from... well, since I came back. I'm not entirely sure the best way to explain it, as I've been researching mostly the arcane implications and traditional methods of invocation-" she paused, as Golddusk's eyebrows did a kind of confused-still-trying-to-look-like-he-knew-what-was-going-on expression. She stopped for a second, and decided that talking like her sister wasn't helping.

She decided to start again. "Ok, nopony else in the castle believes me on this, but I think, and so did my sister, that our parents left us *both* a set of Elements. The Elements of Harmony were originally a power that our mother, Queen Nebula, had created, to give Celestia the power she needed to raise the sun. I don't remember, and neither does she, but we think my father, King Stardust, also left me a similar power. But neither of us can ever remember me using it. Everypony I talk to insists that it must have been Celestia in the first place who rose the moon for me, but I know that's not how our family's powers work. But nopony who uses magic believes that, because I can't prove it to them."

"So I'm guessing nopony is exactly lining up to help you look for this power?" Artimare reasoned.

Luna nodded. "Exactly. I don't even know what they're supposed to be called, let alone what they consist of, how to find them, or what... or more likely, who, they're attributed to. And there's no way I can go off and find them on my own without arousing more suspicion or abandoning a great deal of responsibility. And seeing as how you guys don't exactly have a

great deal of responsibility..." she trailed off, trying not to be obtrusive or strike some kind of nerve.

Artimare snorted amusedly. "To be honest I kind of like how lax our 'jobs' are. But yes, it's not like we can't take on something else to do. After all, we were able to pretty much drop everything and go to work in Ponyville. So what exactly do you want us to do?"

The Princess nodded appreciatively as the rest of the group looked ready to follow whatever orders she gave them. That kind of loyalty seemed to bolster her, and was a refreshing change of pace. "Ok, there's a pony in Ponyville called Twilight Sparkle, whom I know you've spoken to," she explained, then paused. Octavia and Artimare looked slightly exasperated, and Gold looked slightly excited.

"Yes, we've met her," Octavia muttered, glancing sideways at the black pegasus. Had she not noticed the undertone of slight exhaustion in her voice, she would have assumed something akin to jealousy.

"Well, she seems to have a penchant for research and recognizing signs that not many other ponies pick up on. She's part of the reason the Elements of Harmony were able to reform. She's the only one I can think of who would have anything close to an answer about it. But I can't go talk to her, and it's not like anypony else is exactly chomping at the bit to go for me. Do you think you could go back to Ponyville, under this new mission for me?" she asked tentatively.

She got her answer almost immediately. Kwan, Artimare and Octavia all bowed their affirmation, and Gold looked ready to jump out the window and fly straight back to the small town right freaking yesterday. Octavia had to lay a hoof on his shoulder to remind him that bowing was customary at this point, a gesture which he promptly complied to by all but slamming his face on the floor.

"Yes, of course we will, Lu-I mean, Your Higness, er Princess-" Golddusk stammered, seemingly much happier than she thought the occasion called for.

"Well-yes. That's good," she said, recovering herself. *This meeting*, she thought to herself, *is NOT something I could have prepared myself for.* "There is one other thing. I expect, should you get any answers from

Twilight, that you're not going to be coming back here until you've found what your looking for. Especially since we don't have a great deal of time. So if there's anypony else you can think to take with you, I'd suggest having more than just four of you. With everything that Twilight's group had put in front of them when they were trying to defeat..." she drifted off again, but the rest of the group nodded, understanding her difficulty in talking about it. "Let's just say having more ponies wouldn't hurt. Just make sure they're people you can trust to make the *entire* journey with you."

Her subjects seemed to agree with this notion, and they said their goodbyes, as the four set out to start in on their next task. She noticed, however, that one pony in particular hung back, waiting to speak to her only after everyone else had left.

"Yes, Octavia?" Luna asked, somewhat hesitantly. The musician looked slightly more serious than she had when she showed up. "Is.. is something wrong?"

The grey filly shook her head. "Not exactly, I just thought... well, we need to talk."

The Moon Princess nodded. She recognized an attempt at diplomacy when she saw it. "Of course. About what?"

"Well," Octavia started, seemingly hesitant herself. "To be honest... Golddusk."

Luna raised an eyebrow at that. "Really? I thought-"

"Yes, I'd figured," Octavia answered, after Luna decided to let the sentence drop. "But everything else you've talked about I don't have any reason to question. And I'm not questioning anything about you and Golddusk, on any level," she added hastily, "but there's something you need to know." She gave a rather deep sigh, and pressed on. "Of all the ponies I've met since working at the castle, even before you returned, I've never met anyone as loyal to you as him. I mean, I haven't met everypony in Canterlot or anywhere else, obviously, and even then I haven't talked to all of the night shift, but I'm sure they'd be hard pressed to show you more loyalty and trust, and dare I say... faith, in you, than he has. It's kind of hard to explain, but I do have a point here," she added, struggling to find the right words. "Well, let me put it this way. Do you know what he did every night

since I've met him, and likely every night before that, even before you came back?"

Luna shook her head. "Not really. I guess I'm not entirely sure what his job is here."

Octavia chuckled, "I don't think any of us are. He seems to do a wide variety of things, like assisting in guard duty and cleaning. But without fail, at least for an hour or two every night, he just stands there and watches the moon. I have no idea what he's thinking, but he does it every night. Even last night, as we were working, I saw him take at least a few minutes at a time to stop and stare at the sky. I asked him once why he did it, and you know what he told me?"

Again, Luna shook her head.

"Well, after I shook his shoulder a good two or three times to get his attention, then asked him *again*," she explained with a hint of sarcasm. Luna had to chuckle at that, and Octavia joined in. "After all that, he told me a story. About how there used to be a Princess that rose and set the moon every night, and how lonely she'd become." Octavia looked rather serious, and Luna thought she could guess full well where this was going. "How she'd become so lonely that she tried to make it night time all the time, so that at least somepony would be with her while the moon rose, so that somepony could see all of the beauty of night and the moon and stars that she brought them every night. And how her hope for attention, and somepony to talk to, had done nothing more than achieve her total isolation in the moon for a thousand years."

Luna had started to tear up again at the story, but Octavia continued. "And then, after you came back, I'd never seen him happier. He was completely excited that you'd finally have an opportunity to have all of the friends and companionship you'd ever wanted. But even after you'd returned, he noticed, you were still alone. Even with the night shift going, there wasn't anypony around for you to talk to. You were always so busy rising and setting the moon and diving into your work whilst everypony slept. So, he told me, he'd keep watching the moon. Because he thought that there should always at least be one pony who watched what you brought to this land each and every night, and rejoice in it."

Luna looked almost ready to cry again, but held her composure. "So, where are you going with this?" she asked, a little more gruffly than she would have liked.

"My point is, he's gotten it into his head that you should never, ever, be lonely again. He's all but devoted himself to you, and I'm almost completely sure he's done that, too. His isn't any kind of loyalty you could earn or buy under any normal means. He's under the impression that the only way to make sure you are never lonely again is to show you that there is somepony out there who would give there all for you. When you asked him to be your liaison to Ponyville, for whatever reason, I've never seen him happier. It was as if a light had switched on in his head. Like you finally saw that you weren't alone in the world anymore, and he's been walking on clouds ever since. And you asking him to go on a private mission for you? You saw how excited he was. But my point is this, however long it took to get here: He's willing to do anything for you, and I'm pretty sure that isn't a limit you could test till it breaks. And I'm not under any assumptions that that's what you're doing," she added, seeing the look on Luna's face.

Octavia paused for a second, realizing she'd been speaking all on one breath, almost. "What I'm trying to say is that even though I'm more than sure that there isn't anything you could ask him to do that he'd say no to. I want you to realize that there are things that you shouldn't *expect* him to do for you, even if he would. The last thing I want is to see him go down because he put his loyalty to you over his own limitations," she finished.

The Princess froze for a moment, both over the realization of what her subject was willing to do for her, and the sheer amount of thought that Octavia had put into what she was asking.

"I... I see," she answered, after a few moments. "I think I see exactly where you're coming from. And I don't have any intention of asking him to do something I wouldn't be willing to do myself," she said, nodding to the grey filly, who nodded back, bowed, and started to walk out.

A few paces before the door, however, she paused, and turned back. "Just think about this, though, Your Highness. He can't *do* everything you can, can he?"

# Chapter 6

## Exodus, Part 1

### *Out the Gate*

One thing most ponies understood about Stockpile and Stallius is that no matter how angry one seemed to become with the other, they for whatever reason had always been able to make up their differences. Another was that, at any given time, in order to find one of them, a pony simply needed to find the other. They were never more than a room or two apart anywhere in the castle, if only because most other ponies in Canterlot had the good sense not to get mixed up with them.

Not that they were bad ponies in any sense of the word. Outside of Stockpile's habit of turning cards for a quick bit or two, the pair were usually rather amicable and somewhat fun to be around. But theirs were personalities that could only be taken in small doses.

The *really* unfortunate part of this scenario was that theirs were personalities that they could only stand for so long in relation to *each other*. And yet they tended to spend quite a bit of time together, leading to a variety of conflicts over a range of grandiose-to-petty things, including who used the last napkin, to who fell asleep during guard duty. But when anypony asked either of them why the two were such good friends and spent such large quantities of time together, they would always invariably receive the same answer, as if it had been rehearsed: "What are you talking about? *He follows me around.*"

Which left them with not a lot of options socially speaking when the majority of people who could put up with them for any amount of time more substantial than necessary to give them another task or ask them a question involving... whatever it is the two specialized in, had left to help set up a festival neither of the two had any plans to attend. Which left them with, inevitably, each other.

This became rather apparent to them their first night on duty, as they were posted outside the castle's West Gate (the farthest from the public entrance), on either side of the door. And that doesn't mean one inside,

one out. They were literally standing twenty feet away from each other for nine straight hours.

It didn't take long for conversation to devolve rather quickly.

"Right," Stockpile grunted, after some thought. "So you get t' spend a night in the chambers of either Princess, whole night, no questions."

Stallius groaned. "Ok, but..."

"*But*," Stock continued, "If it's Celestia, you have to tell Twilight Sparkle about it the next day, every detail. And if it's Luna, you have to tell Golddusk."

The white colt breathed in sharply with a hiss. "Ooh, ouch. Oh, I don't fancy having to have that conversation with Gold. Not sure what he'd do. I'd probably go with Celestia, if only for the fact that Luna's been out of touch with... 'current affairs'," he added lightly, "for a millenia. I'd want to make sure that my... well, that the lady is educated in such matters. And besides, Twilight would be too busy writing a 'letter to the princess,'" he air quoted, "to do anything to me right away. I'd just bail after I told her. And it's not like she wouldn't let me finish."

The red-coated pony snorted at that. "Tha's true, innit? She'd probably spend the rest of the day in her room with that image in 'er 'ead, just-"

"FOCUS!" came a bark from a balcony above them. The two 'guards' snapped to attention and barked in unison, "Sir, yes sir, Rapier!"

The captain of their guard gave each of them a condescending look from on high, and went on his way. After a couple of minutes in silence, Stallius spoke up, "Ok, you get to use a Captain's BitCard for a whole day, no limits on where you can shop,"

Stockpile's ears perked, "Right, right, and?"

"But it's Halberd's, and you have to hand it back in person when you're done."

Stock flinched. "Oh, that's not pretty. I'd rather go broke for a week than have to owe a cent to that blowhard."



Their conversation continued for a little while, until they heard another shout of "MEN! FOCUS!" and responded once again to a rather tiffed captain.

"Yes, sir," Stallius low voice didn't do much to mask his sarcasm after their captain had left. "Are they back yet?" he sighed.

"No," Stockpile groaned.

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"High alert! High alert!" the alarms rang out through the castle, as guards and servants ran to and fro, under a state of complete panic. "The Princess has gone missing!"

Stockpile, who had taken to a rather long and much-appreciated nap, slowly dragged himself out of bed, after having tried to suppress the commotion through his pillow for several minutes. His more than tired and slightly less than worn-down body fell to the floor with an unceremonious thunk, and he trotted as slowly as possible without not actually moving, before he nudged his barracks door open.

Halberd, who had been part of the ungodly racket for the last five minutes having spent that time knocking loudly on Stock's bedroom door, glared hard at his subordinate. "Oh, I'm sorry. *Did I wake you?*"

Stockpile shook his head. "Nah, the ruddy alarm did. S'effective, that. Whatcha want?"

The guard captain, resisting very much the urge to beat Stock round the head and neck for insolence, simply barked at him. "We are on *high alert* because *the Princess is missing*."

"Which one?" the gambler asked sleepily.

"THE Princess. *Celestia*," Halberd growled.

"Right, wake me when it's over," Stock mumbled, turning to go back to sleep. Halberd quickly moved between him and his bed.

"*What the hell do you think you're doing*," the captain seethed.

"Do you remember th' *last* time Celestia went missing?" Stock asked in a low grumble.

"Yes, I do. The Summer Sun Celebration," Halberd answered, a gruff tone still present in his voice.

"Wrong. Month and a half ago. Gone for three days. Came back without a word. Two months before that. Same thing. Gone about a week. She's been popping off on her own for days at a time ever since Luna got back, remember?"

Halberd balked at him. "Well, that's true, but..."

"An' th' only reason we panicked at the Summer Sun Celebration, which apparently we were right ta' do, was because she hadn't taken any time off at all in centuries, and was due to make a public appearance that morn', which she never misses. Just go ask Luna, she'll tell you th' same thing she does every time: 'I can't tell you were she is, she won't let me.' Bet you money," he added, moving to step past him.

Halberd nodded his head at Stock's logic, then interjected in a worried tone, "That's all well and good, except *Luna's the one that reported her missing, and the sun hasn't risen.*"

Stockpile's eyes widened, before scrunching them closed and letting out a low hiss of "Ffffffffff-

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"-UCK ME," Stallius barked, charging down the stairs after the captain that had woken him, Guisarme. "Are you serious? Who the hell's gonna raise the sun now?"

"Luna's looking it up," Guisarme barked behind him, banking a hard left down a corridor. They were making tracks for the armory, as high alert meant that every guardpony able to take arms was to do so and remain at their post until the crisis was resolved.

Stallius missed a step at that and fell flank-over-teakettle down the flight of stairs he was breezing past. "Ow, ow, holy mother of OW!" he declared, rolling down a rather unforgiving set of marble steps. When he finally

reached bottom, and regained enough faculty to raise his head and talk, he asked, "*Looking it up?* We are SO doomed."

"Get yourself together and get to the armory. The longer we keep this place at any level less than fully and completely secure is another mistake waiting to happen. We can't waste time worrying about details we don't have any control over, so MOVE YOUR FLANK," Stallius's captain yelled behind him, taking off for the armory again.

The white unicorn picked up after him,. "I *knew* I should've stayed in the city," he grumbled.

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"I knew I should've stayed overseas," Stockpile groaned wearily, having stood at post for a couple of hours at this point. Luna was doing some more research on how to raise the sun, but said she couldn't make any guarantees as to when.

Stock and Stallius, who had taken their post together once more, were very much on edge. "What do you think would've happened to us if we'd decided to never become guards?" Stallius mused, in a weak attempt to pass time.

"You mean aside from being awake at the most ungodly of hours? Thank Luna we're used to it being dark." Stock grumbled. "I'd be a might richer, tell you. If I'd stayed in Manehattan I'd've made bank well before now. But we're 'ere and we're guardin', so get over it."

Stallius shook his head. "You are very much not the kind of pony that takes radical changes to his sleep schedule well,."

"Says th' cheapskate who won't share his Sleepwake spell with somepony *he owes money to*," Stock's response came in gruff, quiet tones.

"Well," Stallius responded with a sheepish grin, "It does take rather large amounts of magic and oh look is that who I think it is?" he derailed, pointing a hoof at the sky.

Stock glared at him for a few seconds more, then raised his gaze skyward, following Stallius's gesture. Sure enough, he recognized the flying group of

four ponies as his fellow night-shift workers. "Well, s'bout damn time. Maybe I can get s'more sleep when they get to guardin'."

Stallius raised a brow. "You do remember that only one of them is an *actual* guard, right? And he works on the *opposite side of the castle from us*?"

"...I hate today." Stock groaned.

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Luna looked wearily after Octavia as she left the room, pulling open some more books, reminding herself that she was supposed to be looking for how to raise the sun herself, despite what she'd told her night court. Heaving a much-withheld sigh before diving back into her books, she mumbled as she read. However, having not found much of anything for hours already, she gazed at the moon in contemplation.

"I do hope they'll forgive me," Luna whispered to no one in particular. "I couldn't have told them the truth. It's practically more radical than what I *did* tell them. They'll learn more at Twilight's, but I don't know if it will be enough. Twilight and her friends went in with very little information and pulled off a miracle. I don't think we have words for what I asked them to do."

Pulling another book off the shelf and letting it fall half-heartedly to the floor, she opened it with a nudge of magic, and muttered to herself. "Father, what did you do with it?"

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Stallius and Stockpile were practically overjoyed when they were told they were relieved of duty, and to go to a meeting room for different instructions. They were even happier to see their friends surrounding the conference table when they trotted in, and took their seats with sleepy grins.

Their elation didn't last very long, as they took in the various expressions of their teammates. Before they were given a chance to speak, however, Golddusk stomped a hoof down on the table. "In or out. Right now."

Stock and Stallius both raised eyebrows, in an almost comical mirror of one another, before Stallius asked, "What?"

"We've been given a mission by Princess Luna. I need to know that we can include you in, and trust you to stay through the entire thing. You also can't tell anyone the truth of what we're doing for her," Gold answered simply.

Stallius heaved a sigh and Stockpile facehoofed. "Are you serious," Stallius groaned, "Now you're taking it upon yourself to do missions for her? You've got to-"

"Luna herself asked us," Octavia interjected, matter-of-factly.

"-be... I... oh. Well, then," the white colt trailed off sheepishly. "Well, whatever it is, I can't imagine it being any better than guard duty, so I'll pass for now."

Octavia's eyes went wide. "You've got to be kid-" she cut herself off, seeing Golddusk raise a hoof to interrupt her.

"She said we should only take ponies we can trust to stay with us for the entire mission. If he can't make a commitment now, I seriously doubt he'd be able to go however far we'd need him to," Gold explained.

"Now wait just a minute!" Stallius objected. "I never! Fine. If you need help, then I'm more than capable of seeing a mission start to finish! Count me in!"

Octavia blinked a few times at this, and turned her head, ready to ask the black pegasus a question, when she noticed a hint of a smile on his face. She started to say something, but let him continue.

"Stockpile, in or out. Right now," he repeated.

The red-coated colt thought for a second, then grinned. "Right, right, you got me. Like I can stay away when you put it like that. So, what're we doing?"

"Well, to be honest," Golddusk smiled, one the two guards hadn't seen before, "Twilight's going to tell us."

Stock and Stallius glanced between each other, then back to Gold. "What?"

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Ponyville was at quite possibly the highest level of silent tension it had seen since Twilight left the morning of the Summer Sun Celebration. Twilight and her friends were currently waiting quietly in the library, after the purple unicorn had received a package and instructions from Princess Luna. "Oh, aren't they supposed to be here yet?" Twilight asked anxiously.

"Oh, don't go getting' yer mane in a twist, Twi," Applejack assured her, resting a hoof on her shoulder. "They'll be here soon enough. It's not gonna help any if you worry yourself silly before you can tell them all that stuff they have to do."

"But that's just it!" Twi exclaimed, running back to the small scroll the Princess had written her, reading it's instructions yet again. "I barely know that much! She expects me to be some kind of authority on the Elements, but I barely know how they work! We've only gotten them to work once ever, and even then I only knew some really basic stuff."

Rarity raised her eyebrows in concern. "But of course you did research on them afterward, right?"

The librarian pony nodded. "Of course. Tons. Princess Celestia handed me a bunch of stuff on it. But I only really understood the technical stuff. Nothing in any of that could have prepared me for a completely different set of Elements that, if I'm reading this correctly, work entirely differently than what we were using!"

Pinkie Pie hopped across the room to read over Twilight's shoulder. "So why did we only use the Elements once, huh?"

"Apparently the Elements of Harmony were originally powers from Princess Celestia herself. SO after we used them to take down Nightmare Moon, she took them over again. According to her, they needed some kind of catalyst to work the way we needed them to without her around," the purple pony ranted.

"So of course she can probably use them whenever she wants," Rainbow muttered.

"Actually, apparently she's been using them ever since she banished Nightmare Moon those thousand years ago. I don't know the details, which just makes it harder to understand this Elements of Resonance thing!"

"Um... Twilight?" Fluttershy mumbled.

"Not right now, Fluttershy. Look, according to the material Princess Celestia sent me, the Elements of Harmony can only be used by those outside of the royal family when six ponies of specific predispositions having natural magical energies that can work in tune with each other are working together on emotional levels that compliment one another," Twilight's barrel of exposition was still quite full.

Applejack shook her head. "But only two of us can use magic."

Twilight sighed, and smiled lightly. "Actually, everypony can use magic. But Unicorns are the only ones who can use it in more than one way. How do you think Rainbow Dash generates rainbows when she flies fast enough? Or how Fluttershy can talk to animals naturally when there are other ponies who work with them that spend years learning to do just that? We all *have* magic. But because unicorns have learned over the years special ways of manipulating it to do more than one thing, we're seen as the ones who can quote unquote use it."

"Um... Twilight," Fluttershy said again, a little louder.

"Yes, Fluttershy?" Twi asked, somewhat exasperatedly.

"They're here," she answered, pointing a hoof to the now open door, full of ponies.

"What?" Twilight exclaimed, and Fluttershy jumped with a soft squeak. Why didn't you say some- oh," she finished sheepishly.

Golddusk took a step into the room, and asked simply. "So, Captain. Orders?"

# Chapter 7

## Exodus, Part 2

### Through the Rabbit Hole, Down the Looking Glass

"Captain," Twilight paused, rather unused to being greeted with any kind of slang, nickname, or similar. "Whatever," she shook her head to free herself of distracting thoughts, returning her focus to the problem at hand. "You guys aren't going to like this, but the only place I can think to send you to give you any answers is The Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters. Which is in the Everfree Forest. That's where we discovered our Elements, and even though I have *absolutely no idea how Resonance works*, it's your best bet."

Artemare raised an eyebrow. "How does that make sense, exactly?"

"Because that was the last place the Elements were used, right?" Twilight gave a quizzical look.

"So Nightmare Moon had access to the Elements of Resonance?" Artimare asked.

"I... well, I don't know. There's not a lot on them, they're treated even more like a myth than the Elements of Harmony and why are you still all standing in the doorway?" Twi rambled.

Golddusk tilted his head as Twilight stared at him, then a series of cogs and gears clicked into place in his head. "Oh! Well, then" he responded rather sheepishly, moving aside to allow the rest of the Night Court into the library. The various ponies sat around the room, visitors and residents, to discuss this further. "So, anyway. Elements of Resonance. Castle of the Pony Sisters. What do?"

A few ponies gave him weird looks, mostly those that didn't know him well, before Twilight went on, "Well, we were sent to the Castle because it's the last known place the Elements of Harmony were used. Still is, considering Celestia mentioned that she didn't need them once Luna had returned. But I don't know where the last place the Elements of Resonance were used."



"Probably one of two places," Golddusk chimed in. "Either The Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters, or The Crater at Moonfall. But the latter is going under the assumption that Luna lost access to the Elements once she became Nightmare Moon. If that's true, then the place that Nightmare emerged, Moonfall, is the last place Resonance was last seen. Either way, I vote we go there first."

Twilight and a few of the Night Court dropped jaws at his exposition, not expecting a word of contribution from him past 'Ok, let's do that'. Applejack piped up with, "Ok, I can tell from yer' friends faces that you knowing this, well, whatever it is you just said, is kind of a big surprise. So I'm gonna ask: How'd you do that?"

"That's my job," he replied simply.

"Right," Applejack responded, as if that was it.

His friends, however, didn't think so. "Wait, *what?*" Octavia yelped, in a pitch usually reserved for calling dogs. "Your *job?* I thought you were a guard!"

Stallius and Stockpile laughed, and even Kwan Do smirked. Golddusk just raised an eyebrow at her. "Um, hahaha, no? Do you seriously not know what I do for a living?" Everypony in the room shrugged save Artemare. "Wow, thanks, guys. Feel *really* appreciated."

"So out with it, what do you do? And why are we having this conversation?" Rainbow Dash blurted from her perch in a window sill.

"I'm the Journeyman Apprentice to Princess Luna's current Private Historian. As of next year I'll be the Private Historian of the Lunar Archives myself," Gold explained.

There was a brief pause, a silence filled only by the sound of Octavia's hooves as she slowly made her way over to Golddusk. Then she proceeded to beat him around the head and neck. "Why! Didn't! You! Tell! Us! Sooner!"

"I-ow-thought-ow!-you-OW-knew! OwowOW." the black pegasus scurried away from his assailant and hid behind Artemare. "It's not my fault!"

Twilight felt a muscle in her face twitch. "Golddusk, how much do you know about the Elements of Resonance?"

"Jack squat," he answered simply. "Not even Star Chronicle knows anything, and he's the guy I'm apprenticed under."

"I'm surprised you didn't put in a transfer to be one of Luna's personal servants or guards the moment she came back," Stallius smiled

Artemare answered for him, shaking her head. "Apprenticeships in Canterlot are permanent. Once you commit to one, that's what you do for the rest of your life. You can't retire from it, even after you receive Grandmastery. And if the Grandmaster of the Lunar Archives doesn't know, we're really screwed."

Twilight was in disbelief. "But if you're the apprentice to the Private Historian of Luna herself, then surely you've talked to her about her history? Did she mention anything?"

"Only that Celestia was the strongest in a really long line. She outclassed her *parents*," Gold rolled his eyes dramatically. "Luna mentioned a few times that Celestia was the stronger of the two, pretty much at all times. I don't know much more than that. The Elements on either side are considered a Royal Family Heirloom, so nopony except the sisters is allowed access unless they deem it necessary."

Rarity posed a question: "So why do you think Moonfall is just as good an option as the Castle?"

"I don't, not really," Gold mused. "But most everypony knows the story from a half a year back. You girls all found what you were looking for on your way to the Castle, and found the stones that house the Elements of Harmony there, right? Did you see anything related to the Resonance there?"

Twilight shook her head. "If anything, it's more likely that they're at the Crater. Nopony's gone through that rubble in a millennium. It's supposed to be an obscene place, both physically and magically. Which is a problem. If the Elements of Resonance are there, then it's likely they've been corrupted by the inherent chaos that place has become."

Rainbow Dash sat up. "So you guys are marching off to a place full of really bad magic to look for something that may or may not be there, and may or may not be totally jacked up?"

Stallius and Stockpile, Kwan Do and Artemare, Octava and Golddusk, all exchanged glances, from one to the next to the next. "Looks like it," Artemare answered.

"Why?" Pinkie Pie asked, a lilt of concern in her normally cheerful voice.

"Because the alternative equates to hell on Equestria and a few other things I don't want to think about," Golddusk answered. "You guys want to come with?"

"Ok, no, hold on," Stallius interjected. "Something is bugging me. If you're apprenticed to the Lunar Archives- a position that requires *multiple* interviews with Princess Luna herself- then why did you freak out when Luna came to talk to you? Shouldn't you be used to her presence by now?"

"Key word there is *apprenticed*, Stallius. I don't get to talk to the Princess in a professional capacity until I've graduated from Journeyman and no longer need direct instruction. Chronicle all but loses his lid when I go anywhere near them during interviews," the black pegasus told him.

"Um, why are we talking about your job? We have a world to save," Twilight pointed out. "I don't want to be rude, but we've got quite a lot to do. And if he doesn't know any more about the Elements of Resonance than we do, than we're wasting time. Why don't we make this easy? If we can't use the Elements of Harmony, and you can't find the Elements of Resonance, than wouldn't it make sense for *all* of us to go looking for an answer? It's not like we have very much else we can do. And two groups of six is more than enough to split up and investigate only two locations. So why don't we do that?"

A few seconds passed before Stockpile raised a hoof. "Were you actually waiting for an answer, cause I dun got one."

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"Straws. *Straws*. Why did it have to be *straws*?" ranted Stallius. He and his merry band of what-have-yous trotted through the Entrance to the Everfree Forest, with the blonde noblecolt lagging in the back.

"Oh, you are *impossible*," Rarity whined, casting an almost scathing glance behind her. "At least you don't complain about getting a little dirt on you," she amended, almost a compliment.

"He and I are guards, or at least, supposed to be. Being afraid of dirt is more than a little counterproductive," Kwan Do explained, peeking his head around the side of a tree. He'd taken point, being the only one in the group with any kind of wilderness skills. Fluttershy had gone with the other group to Moonfall.

"Well it's not like anyone *told* you to take that straw," Stockpile jeered. Stallius shot him a burning glance, knowing full well the pony's penchant for manipulating the draw, even to the point where he'd slowly raise one straw above the others to make someone unconsciously choose it. And of course he'd made the suggestion to choose their groups that way in the first place.

"Look, if y'all are going to fight the whole way there then we're gonna have problems. Last time we spent a whole journey fighting it didn't exactly go well for us," Applejack explained. She glanced skyward. "How you doin' up there, Rainbow?"

A streak of multiple colors and the blue pegasus rocketed into view. "Nothing too bad. There's some hills up ahead with some really dense trees, so I can't tell very well. And I don't exactly want to fly ahead in this place."

"So what is the danger of this place again? Twilight said you had been to this castle before, and come out fine. Wouldn't you know the path by now?" Stallius asked, trotting to catch up with the rest, and glancing over his shoulder at a rather ominous looking patch of trees. As if to accentuate the dark atmosphere of the forest, owls hooted, and a flock of birds flew far overhead, casting slight shadows over what little moon they could see.

"Well, this place ain't exactly right. The clouds move on their own, the animals do whatever they want, and we got a lot of really dangerous creatures out here. The dangers in this place change every day," AJ explained. Then she halted, seeing a signal from Kwan Do up ahead.

"Something's coming. Big. Teeth. I suggest we wait," he offered, taking a few steps back.

"Oh, that's just great," Dash rolled her eyes. "I wonder how much better the others are doing?"

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"Twilight?" Golddusk asked, deadpan.

"Yes?" the purple unicorn responded, more in shock than anything.

"Please do me a kindness and explain to me what the hell I'm looking at," he all but monotoned, in a somewhat effective attempt to keep his emotions under control.

"I'm not entirely sure," Twilight responded. The rest of the group stood behind them, their mouths slightly agape. "In fact, I don't have the slightest idea. You did say that the inherent magic of the land would become more distorted and unpredictable as we got closer to the Crater.

"Yes, but there really isn't anything in any of the books I've *ever* read that could have prepared me for a *river of moonlight*."

None of the others could respond to this statement, nor, in fact, would they know what to say, were they to be in a proper place mentally to recall what that sentence would have been. Because before them lay a sight that no textbook could prepare anypony for. Seeming to start from the very rays of the moon above them, laying itself across the vast and, rather appropriately, dark blue landscape, was a river of teeming white luminescence, in an almost liquid state, appearing to flow at a consistent, if rather gradual, pace. Little reflected off the, for lack of a better term, one would call surface, save for the forms of a few distant blackbirds. Which, Twilight noted, were also flying across the light of the moon.

"It's so beautiful," Fluttershy's normally hushed voice was nearly inaudible as she spoke, quieted by her awe of such a thing. "I don't even know what to do with it."

"I don't think we should do anything with it," Golddusk speculated, casting a glance to Twilight, seeking conformation. "I mean, this isn't something you come across very often, and disturbing it might be a rather-" SPLASH.

The group at large, save Twilight, and more importantly, Pinkie Pie, the latter of whom had just jumped into the river, turned their heads rather quickly to stare at the pink Earth Pony, as she began swimming through the brilliant white substance. For about ten seconds.

"Coldcoldcold COLD coldcoldcoldcold!" Pinkie stammered, tearing out of the moonlight river and stopping just short of the group to stop and shake the liquid light out of her mane.

Twilight simply facehoofed. "Pinkie, why- no, you know what? Nevermind. We should really keep going. Let's just file the river under 'Do Not Touch' and why are you glowing?" her sentence derailed as she caught sight of Pinkie's now radiant coat, still the same pink, but casting a subtle yet beautiful glow across the field of dark blue grass beneath her. The mixture of colors was unique, and rather difficult to describe.

"Wait, I'm *glowing*?" exclaimed the party pony. "This is-"

"The best. River. Ever." Golddusk finished for her, staring into the luminescent substance as if he was considering throwing himself into it.

Near the back, and so far unspoken, Octavia and Artemare traded exhausted glances. And then traded exasperated sighs. "I do hope you're not thinking of just stopping here and giving up entirely, are you?" Artemare asked, walking up next to him. She cast her gaze across the scene before her. "It's entirely possible that we're going to see more impossibilities like this, the closer we get. And something tells me they'll all be right up your alley. So we might as well get moving."

The rest of the girls nodded their agreement, and set forward, a few of them casting glances back at the river. Gold looked hesitant to move, until Octavia whispered to him as she passed, "You know, if you leave and finish this adventure, then your first task as the Private Historian to the Lunar Archives could be to come back and document the wonders of Moonfall."

His ears perked at that, and he seemed to shake out of his reverie. "Right, going. I wonder how the others are doing. I mean, if we get rivers of moonlight, I can't imagine what they're doing."

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"*Why did you have to talk to it?*" Rainbow yelled, streaking through the forest and weaving between trees, trying to stay with her group. Unable to actually take her eyes off of the path in front of her without crashing, she simply imagined loads of daggers being stared in Stallius's general direction.

"How was I supposed to know cravens didn't like ponies?" he yelled, using a weaker form of telekinesis to keep himself light enough on his feet to not trip and fall back into the flock of enormous blackbirds raging after them.

"Maybe the fact that they were *feeding on the remains of an animal* was a good indication?" Rarity shrieked, keeping just behind Applejack. The Earth Pony did have a penchant for being able to cut a clear path in front of her, after all.

"Look, it's not like we can't lose them from here!" Applejack shouted over the commotion. "We can hunt down Zecora's place and try to hide there! Maybe she can be a bit more helpful in getting us through this blasted forest!"

As a general consensus was shouted through the group, Kwan Do thought to himself, *I do hope they're faring better than we are.*