

My Little Alicorn

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Chapter One

Princess Luna sat in her bedchambers, pondering over her latest scheme. In front of her sat a large, dragon hide-bound book, one of the oldest remaining magic tomes remaining in the Canterlot Royal Library: the Arcanus E Draconus. Inside it were the foulest spells known to Equestria, forbidden magic long since outlawed by Celestia herself. It had taken all of Luna's cunning just to retrieve the thing and even more to translate its long-forgotten tongue into a language she understood. And now, it was going to pay off.

The princess could not help but smirk at the magnificence of it all. For too long, she had suffered under Celestia's hooves. Only a year ago, when she had finally been released from Nightmare Moon's control, she had hoped power would be shared more evenly between the sisters. Every time she tried to invite herself to one of Celestia's countless meetings and audiences, however, her sister turned her down. And on the few occasions she *had* to be there, it was *Celestia* who fielded all the questions, *Celestia* who talked over her sister, *Celestia* who got all the praise, *Celestia Celestia Celestia!*

Instead, she was given her own little court of assistants and servants during the night, working behind the scenes to fix her sister's little mistakes and keep Equestria running smoothly. It was a full time job, between her sister's apparent inability to do long algebra and most of the nobility's reluctance to even acknowledge her. Even worse, Celestia was just as terrible as ever. Luna had been forced to endure one indignity after another. That was about to change. With but one spell, she would finally be free of Celestia's madness once and for all.

She had arranged her room to sequential perfection. A pentagram was drawn on her floor and hidden underneath a throw rug. A large mirror was tucked into one corner, its surfaced polished to a glistening sheen. Next to her bed sat an ancient oak chest, inside of which the penultimate step in Celestia's doom sat. And most importantly of all, she had requested that her sisters' prized pupil, Twilight Sparkle, come to her chambers for an

“informal meeting”. She had even set up the usual bureaucracy so that she’d arrive just in time to watch her beloved teacher’s final humiliation.

At long last, she would have her revenge.

Princess Celestia wanted to be doing something, *anything*, besides holding court today.

Normally, this was the highlight of her day. Here, for a few short hours a day, she could interact with the common ponies. The usual protocol still had to be upheld, of course, and the pegasus guards tended to make things a tad more intimidating, but at the very least it was someone outside of the usual power circle. The nobles were an insufferable bunch, to put it lightly, and most of the official business had worn out its welcome over the millennia. Even if her subjects feared her, and she knew they did, she could at least pretend they were being completely honest and open with her.

Not today. This was just another very long day in a very long month. First, there was the fire in Stalliongrad. A week later, half the grain in Trottingham spoiled. And last week, the cost estimates for rebuilding the palace ballroom and gardens came in, strapping most of the already-dwindling treasury. And tax season was coming up, meaning any minute now everypony in Equestria would be lining up with a reason why they can’t pay.

There were no more marriages to bless, or businesses to help finance, or schoolfoals to entertain with Equestria history. Those were but relics of happier days. Today’s court was just like every other in recent memory: one long series of disasters.

The forepony of the Cloudsdale Weather Service was the next-to-last pony on the list today. She followed the ritual every step of the way: walk forward with your head low, stop ten feet from the first step, bow, raise head, and start pleading for your life. The last step wasn’t technically in the rules, but was usually how every meeting of this kind went.

Celestia nodded her head, acknowledging the pony's ability to rote memorize. "Please, introduce yourself to the court."

"R...Rainy Days, your Majesty."

"There's no need for formalities, Miss Days." Her horn glowed, levitating up a rather large scroll of all of today's agenda. "Let's see...you are responding to the errors in the national weather schedule. Is that correct?"

Rainy Days' eyes were starting to water, her front legs shaking in fear of her approaching doom while her wings stiffened as a "fight or flight" response. Once again, Celestia had seen it millions of times, and quite frankly she was getting very frustrated by it.

"I'm sorry, your Majesty! We had assumed the planned drought in Appleloosa was going to last another two weeks! We've already dispatched our weather teams, and there should be enough water for the town within a few weeks."

"By which point the town's water supply will have almost completely dried up. Crop estimates are already down twenty percent, not including the tribute to the Buffalo in the region." She shifted the scroll up slightly, mostly to keep from seeing Rainy Days' ever-increasing agitation. "And what's this about flooding in Fillydelphia?"

"Well...that's why we had the problems in Appleloosa. They were supposed to get the rainclouds and Fillydelphia..."

"...Was supposed to be bone dry until we've finished moving out every last parasprite in the region. There have been three recursions in the last year, we can barely keep everypony fed, and now they're neck-deep in water?"

"We're in the process of drying the city! I swear, this will never happen again!"

"I'm sure it won't. Still, at least you are remedying the situation. I want a full report when the job's done. Okay?" Rainy Days nodded in response, gave a rehearsed "thank you for not banishing me" farewell, and trotted out of the throne room, the door closing behind her. The suffocating air of

tension gradually lifted as Celestia facehoofed. “Okay, one more today. I just have to last a little...”

There was a sudden crash in the next room, followed by the most terrifying voice in all of ponykind. “Augh! A common workhorse dares to speak to Princess Celestia before me?! Guards! I demand he be removed from the castle immediately!”

Blueblood.

Celestia leaned towards her nearest guard. Her normally serene face was now a mishmash of unfiltered frustration and complete astonishment. “I thought I told you never to let him in here again.”

“Princess Luna rescinded the order, your Highness. She wants the court open to all ponies.”

“That’s because she doesn’t have to deal with **him!**”

The doors slammed open, and Blueblood strode into the room, acting like he was the single most important pony in the world. Celestia shot back into position, putting on that queenly mask only a saint would wear in the company of someone like her nephew. The stallion noble performed the same ritual as Rainy Days; this time, however, there was a sense of arrogance about him instead of fear. The tension from before was now so thick it could be cut with a knife.

“Hello, Blueblood. How lovely of you to come to *my* palace and order *my* guards to throw out one of *my* guests. It makes me wonder why we don’t meet up more often.”

“I am just looking out for your best interests, your Majesty.”

Celestia’s face was as serene as ever, refusing to betray the intense loathing she had for this creature, the very embodiment of everything she hated about ruling. “Let’s see what you want, as if I had to even look.” The scroll unrolled to its very bottom. “Hmm, so you still want us to raze Ponyville?”

“Why, of course, your Majesty. We’ve tracked those impudent commoners that dared to disrupt the most respectable of social gatherings, the Grand Galloping Gala. The entire town is guilty of harboring fugitives. Certainly you can see the need to restore order.”

“And you think slaughtering an entire town is going to restore an order that, as far as I can tell, is not in need of any restoring at this moment?”

Blueblood was stunned; Celestia’s nonchalant response was the same as the last fifteen hundred times he’d made the same request. “But, your Majesty! That unicorn, the dressmaker, she dared to sully my royal lips with carnival fare, and when I gave her the honor of saving my luxurious self from another one of these devils, she dared to act offended! These monsters stripped me of my honor, destroyed your entire ballroom, and even now run free!”

Of course they did. I was ready to knight all six of them on the spot.
“Blueblood, your request is denied. Please, if only for your sake, let this go.”

There was more she could have said, like how his ancestress was adopted, and how she once almost swapped him and Nightmare Moon’s places. Those were not the thoughts of a princess, however. She had often told Luna, “A princess may be stern, but can never show anger,” and for her sister’s sake, she had to keep it up. Even if it meant dealing with a pony she would rather swallow paint than talk to.

Blueblood huffed and puffed, but didn’t blow any more hot air that day. He simply stood, bowed in a rather insulting fashion, and stormed off. *Until tomorrow, that is. He’ll just keep coming back. Better step up those land acquisitions. The sooner we can buy his entire estate out from under him, the better.*

With the last of her business for the day concluded, Celestia stood and stretched her legs. Her walk down the steps was slow and uneven, her muscles sore and exhausted from sleep deprivation. A dark part of her mind wanted to just blow off her last obligation for the day and just get some sleep, but she was able to suppress that errant thought.

Her sister was the most important pony in the world to her, and she would not leave her waiting.

It was an endeavor just to climb the steps to Luna's room. Her sister had been insisting she drop by at "exactly three-o'clock" so she could show her some new book she found. And considering the Arcanus E Draconus, the most forbidden and dangerous book of spells in existence, had vanished from the library only a few weeks prior, the princess found herself harboring uncomfortable suspicions about her sister.

There was little denying the difficulty both sisters were having re-adjusting to a co-rulership. Luna was all too eager to resume her duties over the night, but getting her back into the government was another can of worms. She certainly had the brains for it, and made more progress readjusting to the modern world than Celestia would have, but there was another side to leadership she lacked.

Over the last thousand years, Celestia had built quite the rapport with her subjects, as well as the charisma needed to keep a court of self-serving nobles in line. Luna had the handicap of, more or less, ceasing to exist for a thousand years. Celestia had aged and matured in that time, but Luna was still more or less a socially awkward teenager. (Well, not technically, but the sisters counted the years quite differently from just about everything else, save perhaps dragons.) In many ways, she was still the pony she used to be before her transformation.

By the time she reached Luna's door, she was ready to collapse right at her doorstep. Her hoof knocked, ever so gently, on the wooden door. Luna's small voice shouted back. "Come in!"

It was right then that she noticed the first real sign something was wrong: Luna's personal guards weren't at the door. In fact, no guards could be found anywhere. Still, her affection and duty to her returned sister overrode whatever alarm bells were ringing in her head.

As Celestia stepped inside, a niggling, nagging feeling forced its way to the forefront of her mind. It was the same savvy that had saved her many a time from the countless dangers being a princess usually brought. She

was half-expecting a net to fall, or spikes to pop from the ground, or Luna to suddenly shift back to the Mare in the Moon. But no, the room was completely normal.

Well, save for the rather ugly, out of place throw rug, but neither sister really had a knack for Feng Shui.

What was I thinking? Nightmare Moon was defeated. Luna may be difficult sometimes, but she would never do something so horrible.

Luna herself was seated on the edge of her bed, directly across from the door. Her eyes showed no signs of anger, resentment, or hatred, just the kind of sisterly affection Celestia always hoped for. All it did now was make her stupid assumptions seem even more horrible. “Good afternoon, sister! I hope you’re ready for a big surprise!”

Celestia stifled a yawn, her brain still in a self-defensive shutdown from Blueblood’s audience. “Hello, Luna. What’s so important that you called me up here?”

Luna hung her head over the bedside, seemingly hurt by her sister’s tone. Celestia immediately realized her horrible, impulsive mistake. “Important? Why does everything have to be business to you? Isn’t it enough to just visit your little sister?”

Celestia took a few steps into the room, closing the door behind her. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...”

“I missed you those thousand years, even when Nightmare Moon took over. I knew you would find a way to save me, and that you’d accept me when I was normal again. And what do you do?” Luna began to sniffle and whimper, a tear streaming down her left cheek. The sight would be heart wrenching enough to affect even an Ursa Major. “You...stick me with a bunch of busywork while you get to act like you’re a queen! I...I thought you loved me.”

Once again, that little, reasonable, genre-savvy part of Celestia’s brain began to chime in. *Don’t fall for it. It’s an act. She’s barely even trying.* But alas, her big sister instincts took over. “I do love you, Luna. I always will. I just don’t want you to face the same...”

All this time, she had been slowly making her way closer to the bed, walking onto Luna's strategically-placed throw rug. When her whole body was within its center, a burst of magic erupted from the ground itself, burning the rug away in a pillar of red light. Celestia reared back in surprise, only to slam into the back side of the pillar. The light had solidified into a tube of transparent steel, reaching all the way to the ceiling before coming together in a makeshift top.

Luna mood pulled a complete 180. The tears stopped flowing, instead replaced with a maniacal laugh. Celestia beat vainly against the steel, but her hooves couldn't even make the thing shudder. She tried to shatter the tube with a burst of magic, but her horn refused to light. The panicked princess finally cast her eyes on her treacherous sister, who even now approached with a large, dragon hide-bound book. *The Arcanus E Draconus!* "Luna! What are you doing with that?!"

"Doing what I should have done a long time ago." The sister's evil glee was almost insatiable. The tome flipped open to another page, one clearly earmarked from earlier.

Celestia pressed herself against the steel, staring her sister right in the eyes. It wasn't too far from the pleading stares she often got from her subjects. "Luna...please don't do this. Whatever I've done, whatever you want, we can work it out together. Don't do this. I-I'm sorry..."

Luna's lips pressed into a cold, blood-curling sneer. "I remember saying those exact words a thousand years ago, before you banished me from my subjects, my sister, and my birthright! Where was your forgiveness then? No, you have had this coming for far too long!"

A few small tears crept from Celestia's eyes. "Luna...I'm sorry..."

"It's too late for apologizes," shouted Luna. "For all you've done, there can be no forgiveness!" The book floated over the younger sibling's eyes. If anything, it was a very dramatic spell. "Don't worry, EX-Princess of Equestria. This won't hurt a bit..."

Luna's horn glowed brighter than ever as she read the finishing blow. The floor underneath Celestia lit up yet again, this time in a light green light. The princess futilely pounded at it, but all this did was tire her further. A

green, mist-like snake coiled from the pentagram, wrapping itself tightly around the princess as she let out a muffled, hushed scream.

Celestia's slowly forced her eyes open, the alicorn groaning from a massive migraine. Her vision was still blurry, but she could still make out the familiar sights of Luna's bedroom. The spell that had imprisoned her mere moments ago was gone, leaving only a small trace of magical energy in its wake. Luna was sitting in front of her, a grin of triumph on her face. "Aw, you're up already? You look so cute when you're asleep."

The princess was back on her hooves in moments, her body still shaky but seemingly unharmed. "Luna? What did...you...?" Celestia froze, her mind registering the change in her voice. Whatever Luna had cast knocked her pitch up a few bars. Her vision had cleared up enough to see her crown and other ornaments lying next to her, each quite a bit bigger than before. Then she got a better look at her sister.

She now towered over her.

A thousand thoughts ran through Celestia's brain. Oh my gosh, what is this? What spell was that anyway? Did she shrink me? Make her grow? Maybe it's an illusion. She's just messed with my depth perception. Yeah, that has to be...no, that can't be it. She...She wouldn't go through all this for something that small.

Luna trotted past her dumbstruck sister, stopping in front of her perfectly prepared mirror. "Oh Celly, you really need to take a good look at yourself. You'd be amazed what a *little* magic can do."

Celestia dug her hooves into the carpet in response, while her eyes darted left and right in search of an escape. No luck; the room's one window was barred, and Luna was between her and the door at the moment. In any case, she wasn't willing to look herself in the mirror right now. Whatever Luna had planned, it was obviously a revenge scheme, and if she was getting back for her banishment...

Luna could see her sister's fear-induced paralysis. Her voice practically oozed patronization. "Oh dear, is Celestia too scared to move? I never

thought anything could make her shut down. Well, leave it to big ol' Luna to keep this show moving along!"

Her horn lit up yet again. A small cloud formed underneath Celestia's hooves, and she soon found herself being telekinetically hoisted through the air. She didn't struggle or squirm; she just lowered her head and closed her eyes.

Even Luna was taken aback at just how subdued she was. *Maybe the spell worked too well. This won't have the right effect if she just sits and takes it.*

The princess was gently set in front of the mirror, next to her overly eager sister. Luna wrapped her foreleg around her sister's neck, grinning from ear to ear. "There, all better. Now, let's take a good, long look at the new you."

Celestia's eyes were fidgeting to stay closed; one side of her wanted to see the truth, the other to just hope this was a bad dream and would end soon. Luna scowled at her continued indifference. "Aw, come on. Do you know how hard it was to come up with this scheme? I promise, it'll make you feel like a whole new (giggle) mare!"

The sun princess continued her struggle, even as her eyes began to water in pain. At long last, however, there was no more fighting back. Insatiable curiosity had worked its way through Celestia's brain, forcing her head upwards and her eyes open. She gazed into the mirror's surface.

A very cute, white alicorn filly stared back at her. It was significantly shorter than Luna, maybe about half as tall, and looked the equivalent of a young foal, complete with a few obvious pudges of lingering baby fat. Its tail and mane looked like a rainbow, flowing independently of any wind. The colors didn't stay still, but shifted and blended into each other in an erratic, and yet strangely beautiful, pattern. A sun-shaped cutie mark adorned both of the pony's flanks, a surprising trait for one so young. It was a dead ringer for Celestia as a filly.

In fact, it *was* Celestia as a filly.

Celestia stared at her new reflection, her jaw half dislocated from such a sudden drop. Her eyes had receded almost all the way back through her skull, while every muscle twisted and tightened in horror. There was no more denying it; her sister had somehow made her regress thousands of years, all the way to her earliest memories. They weren't exactly happy memories, either. In fact, the first time she saw this face was when she was shouting at some frogs to start evolving already.

Her head turned towards Luna, her voice creaking and cracking from a mortifying horror. "L-Luna, what did you do?"

Luna gave her sister a quick, rather forceful hoof to the head. "Oh, you know, I just age regressed my little sister using one of the most forbidden spells in pony history. It's not too different from what we usually do."

"B-But why?"

Luna jumped away from Celestia, her eyes narrowing as her face scrunched into her sister's. Celestia reared onto her haunches, just trying not to make an embarrassing scene even worse. "Because I'm sick of being the little sister! I'm sick of everypony looking over my work and giving you all the credit! You, the pony so coldhearted she sent her only sister to the moon for a thousand years!"

The sheer terror in the filly's face was quickly noticed by Luna herself. The rage in the princess' face gradually dimmed to a smirk. "You know, at first I didn't think it would work this well. I mean, I was a baby when you were this young, so I never really got a good look at you. But now that it's all said and done, I have to say..." She grabbed the unwilling Celestia in one foreleg and started rubbing the top of her head vigorously with her free hoof. "I never expected you to be *this* adorable!"

As the humiliation conga continued, Celestia felt something she hadn't experienced in many, many centuries. For the first time since she could remember, her body seethed with raw, unfiltered **anger**, and all of it was targeted at her current tormentor. The very sister she regretted banishing, the same one she had risked her favorite student and closest thing to a real friend for, had not only turned her into a small filly, but was now *giving her a noogie*.

She threw up her hooves, fighting back against her sister's seemingly-increased might all she could. She managed to push away the offending foreleg, or more accurately Luna got tired and decided to stop. Unfortunately, that still left her in a bear hug. All four hooves pushed against Luna's body, but the force of Celestia's body wasn't enough to dislodge the leg.

"Let me go this instant!"

Luna responded by tightening her death grip on the filly. Celestia's face was starting to turn a mishmash of red and blue. "Look at you, still acting like you have some kind of authority. That is the most adorable thing I've ever seen."

Celestia continued her futile struggle, pushing against Luna's grip with all her (substantially reduced) might. Her commands were gradually turning into pleas. "Luna, please stop this! I'm your sister! Sisters don't hurt each other!"

Luna chuckled at Celestia's words. "Ah yes, you are my sister. My **very** little sister, far too young to be worrying about all those big pony worries. Don't worry; you'll be out of that nasty old throne room soon enough."

Celestia immediately ceased her assault. She looked up at Luna in puzzlement. "What...?"

"My little spell has made a complete joke out of you, sister. Once I show you to Equestria at large, they will laugh you right out of office! And with you out of the way, I can take Equestria for MYSELF! And there will be changes, I guarantee you. First thing I'll do is finally get rid of that blasted sun once and for all. All will hail the new Empress of the Night!"

The last words were punctuated with a laugh that may have lacked Nightmare Moon's overwhelming ham, but nonetheless echoed the cries of a tyrant in the making. Celestia grit her teeth together, her body shaking with righteous fury at being tricked for so long.

THAT'S IT!

Celestia dunked her head down and back up again in one swift motion, effectively head butting Luna right in the nose. The blue alicorn yelped and let go of the squirming filly, clutching her stinging muzzle while muttering some very inappropriate curses for a princess.

“You...you stupid little filly! I should have known you’d be a brat as a kid! When I get my hooves on you, I’ll...”

Celestia spun about in midair, landing on her hooves. Her horn was aimed squarely at Luna’s face in a manner of moments. The filly’s body shook with a terrible fury as the horn’s tip began to glow. The moon princess’ eyes grew two sizes in an instant, her horn throwing up every magical defense she could think of. She wasn’t lying about not knowing Celestia at that age. If she even had a small percentage of her former power, it would definitely be enough to at least blast her across the room, if not through the wall.

Celestia’s horn began to spark...and then died out. The sun princess grimaced and tried again, throwing every bit of energy she had into one giant burst...only to have a tiny light fizzle out before dumping the exhausted filly on the floor.

Luna strode back forward, tapping Celestia’s miniscule horn with her hoof. “Awww, what’s wrong, Celly-Welly? Is your horn too whittle to do big pony magic?”

Slowly but surely, Celestia pulled herself back up. Her eyes were burning with a passion neither had seen nor felt for a thousand years. “I don’t care if my powers are gone. I don’t care if I’m half your size. I am still a Princess of Equestria, and it is my duty to protect my subjects from all threats. Even if it means harming my own flesh and blood, I will live up to my obligations! Now, surrender!”

Luna wanted to burst out laughing at the ridiculous sight. Celestia’s miniature height, pudgy body, and squeaky voice certainly didn’t add much to her supposed threat. She slowly walked over to her sister, staring her right in the eyes like a disapproving mother.

Luna let out a small sigh. “I’m sorry, sister. I had hoped to raise you as *my* little sister, maybe let you be a co-ruler again someday. But I can now see

you'll be a problem. You could raise an army and have me overthrown, or go complaining to the Elements of Harmony and re-banish me for another thousand years. No, you're just another problem I need to solve."

As Luna continued her advance, Celestia could feel her resolve slipping. She lowered herself as close to the floor as possible. "No, Luna, please! I promise you, I won't do anything to upset you. Just let me go!"

By now, Luna was directly in front of Celestia, glaring over her like a vengeful demon. She raised her right hoof, angling its edge right over Celestia's head. "There's no other way. We knew it would come to this the day we met. And with your death, Equestria will finally be mine!"

The princess' strength broke completely; she curled herself in a small ball, ready for whatever fate her now-evil sister had in store. "No," she whimpered. "It can't end like this. Not like this..."

Luna's hoof plunged downward...and honked Celestia on the nose.

"GOTCHA!"

Chapter Two

Twilight Sparkle was *not* having a good day.

Princess Luna's request couldn't have come at a worse time. Sweet Apple Acres had just had one of the biggest harvests in Ponyville history, and Sugar Cube Corner had celebrated with a huge bake-off of apple-themed goods. In other words, there was quite the sale on baked goods, including those apple fritters Twilight loved so much. And *just* as she's gearing up to go to market, Spike belches out a letter from Luna herself, requesting a little get-together. So, in the name of serving royalty, she had to take a bath, brush her mane and tail, whiten her teeth, and do everything else that comes with being presentable. And what happens when she makes a quick run to town? All the fritters are gone. She only managed to grab a small apple pie to split with the princess.

And now she was stuck in the castle foyer, while two of the most stubborn pegasi to ever guard a princess blocked any further access to the palace. The pie was getting cold, but Twilight's nerves were heating up. "Excuse me, sirs, but I have been standing here for *thirty minutes!* I have business with Princess Luna, and I must see her immediately!"
"We understand, Ms. Sparkle."

They weren't catching on. "It was a long flight from Ponyville to Canterlot. That obviously means it will be a long flight back. If I don't get a move on right now, I won't make it back before dark."

"We understand, Ms. Sparkle."

These two are as stubborn as a mule. "May I speak with Princess Celestia, then? Maybe she can let me through."

"Sorry, miss, but Princess Celestia is not receiving any visitors today."

"But I'm her personal student!"

"No visitors."

The argument would have continued from there, had a clock not suddenly chimed three times. The two guards nodded to each other before turning their gaze back on Twilight. “Miss Sparkle, we thank you for your patience. We will take you to Princess Luna now.”

Twilight raised an eyebrow, her front temple suddenly hurting something fierce. “What’s with the sudden change of heart?”

“Please follow us, Ms. Sparkle.”

A part of Twilight wanted to let out the biggest groan she had ever made since she learned of The Egghead’s Guide to the Egghead’s Guides’ existence, but wisely decided to keep her mouth shut and just follow the two.

Celestia’s eyes slowly opened, her body gradually loosening up from the supposed near-death encounter. Luna was staring at her, no longer showing the grim superiority of just a few moments ago. In its place was the same warm, motherly smile she herself had given Luna many times in their youth. “Gotcha?” Luna, if this is some kind of trick...”

“Isn’t it obvious, *little* sister? This isn’t a real coup, it’s a joke!”

Celestia climbed back on all four hooves, her body still a little numb but otherwise unharmed. Her eyes were still stinging, while her mind was begging to just let out a scream. Only her very willpower kept her from acting just like she currently looked. “A joke? You think doing *this* to your sister is a joke?”

“Oh, don’t act so surprised. It’s not that different from the little gags *you* throw when you’re bored. Remember three weeks ago, when you dumped itching powder in my sock drawer?”

Celestia’s eyes jumped wide open.

“Or two days after that, when you turned off the hot water while I was in the shower?”

The filly's eyes were as wide as saucer plates by now.

"Oh, and how can we forget a week later, when you pasted those fake boils on me and told me I had the Alicorn Plague?!"

"You mean...this was all about those little things?! Those were jokes, Luna. I was just trying to have a little fun with you!"

"That's right, they were jokes." Luna smiled. "And that's what this is, Celly. Just a *little* joke."

"Very funny," Celestia grumbled. She looked a little more relaxed than a few minutes ago, but her face was still locked in a perpetual grimace.

The blue alicorn recognized Celestia's concern almost immediately. "I'm not going to keep you like this, if that's what you're worried about. The spell wears off pretty quickly. In about...oh, an hour or so, you'll be right back to normal, none the worse for wear." A shining light emerged from Luna's horn, followed by the dragonhide book gliding from under her bed. "I've been planning this for a while now, and every bit of research I did said the spell only existed in this book. I even had to translate the whole thing from Middle Equestrian. Now that took a while, let me tell you..."

Celestia's face was flushed a deep crimson, both from her seething frustration and her embarrassment. "You mean, you went through all this trouble...just *for a joke?!?*"

"I couldn't settle for some run-of-the-mill 'fake out the tea service' gag, could I? Besides, you've been on the prankster warpath far longer than I have, haven't you? Even a thousand years ago, you were pulling the same stunts. But you never targeted me. You never made *me* the butt of your cruelty. For the last three weeks, it's just been one prank after another, and all of them on *me*, your sister. The one you apparently missed so very much these thousand years? The one who missed you, even when she was inside Nightmare Moon? The one who doesn't need to wake up thinking she's got less than six hours to live?"

Celestia's face stayed red, but not from anger. Everything Luna had just said was right. The last three weeks had been some of the worst in

centuries, just one crisis after another, and the stress was bearing down on her from all sides. All the jokes she pulled weren't out of malice; she just wanted something to ease the tension. She never meant to really hurt anypony...and had driven one of the only two ponies whose opinions she cared about to turning her into a very little pony as a prank.

Even worse, she knew that, had she learned of the spell first, she would have used it on Luna at the first opportunity. She was just so darn *cute* as a filly. *And less emo, come to think of it.*

She looked at Luna, unwittingly unleashing the saddest puppy dog eyes ever seen outside of a certain yellow pegasus in Ponyville. "You're right. I've been a horrible sister this last little while. It's just been so stressful lately that I needed a release. I guess I didn't think how it would hurt you."

For the first time in her long life, the moon princess had been hit with the most powerful double whammy possible: the puppy dog eyes of a younger sibling. Luna's heart threatened to melt in her chest, travel up her esophagus, and puke itself on the floor. So great was the assault that Luna actually felt a warm, happy tear slide down her face. "Listen, let's call this my payback. Just promise me you won't get me with anything else for a good while." She reached a hoof out. "Truce?"

Celestia slapped her hoof down on top, trying hard not to acknowledge just how much bigger Luna's was right now. "Truce." The two hooves returned to under their respective owners. "So, what do we do now? Talk over the last bits of business before your night begins? Trade stories until the spell wears off? Just sit perfectly still and have a long talk about stealing illegal books from royal libraries?"

Luna's smile returned, resembling a murderer just before they gutted their next victim. "Do you really want things that boring, little sister? I have sooo much planned for today. The fun is just beginning!"

Celestia chuckled nervously, a renewed sense of raw fear coursing through every fiber of her being. Luna walked over to the nearby trunk and popped the lid. Inside were dozens of the most humiliating outfits and costumes she could scrounge up on such short notice. Everything from frou-frou party dresses to those checkered scarves from the '80s could be clearly seen, even from Celestia's low-angle position.

The filly gave a relieved sigh at the sight. "I get it now. You're getting back for all those times I made you pose like a mannequin for the royals."

"That's...part of it, yeah." Luna's grin was threatening to consume her whole face by this point.

"I suppose there's no harm in that." *Might as well get a little fun out of this. It can't get any worse, anyway.*

Luna very slowly cocked her head back towards Celestia. Her hooves were already buried deep in the chest, stopping only when the two heard them clank against something hard. The clothing dispersed as Luna pulled out a large box with a single glass lens. Celestia knew what it was. It was the one thing she had wished they had invented back when she would make Luna do this.

A camera.

"Ready to do a little modeling?"

When Twilight started following the guards, she had assumed they would take her directly to wherever Luna was. Instead, they seemed to be doing everything in their power to accomplish the exact opposite. The guards took her around the east castle courtyard, pointing out such sights as "Celestia's Statue," "Celestia's Other Statue," and "The Fountain with Celestia's Statue." None of it was new. Everypony who had ever grown up in Canterlot spent their whole foalhood around these things.

After that came the tidbits of Canterlot history. All of it was the touristy stuff, like how Canterlot was founded by unicorns only a few years before Nightmare Moon's defeat, how it became the capital of Equestria once the Everfree Forest devoured the old palace, and why the water always tasted so foul on the south side of town. (Not a thing most ponies would ever be comfortable learning.)

And then it happened. Once all the history was gone, the guards shifted to talking about the local baseball team, the Canterlot Comets. It was right there, when the two were swapping batting averages and Manehattan's

cheating ways, that Twilight Sparkle knew she had been had. The twitchiness in her right eye returned, threatening to push the whole eyeball right out of her socket. Her teeth were clasped so tight she could have shattered them without a moment's hesitation.

"LISTEN, GENTLEMEN! I have had a very long day, and your showing me a bunch of things I already know isn't helping! I have business with Princess Luna, and if you don't take me to her this instant, I promise you both she and Celestia will know what you've been up to. And by the time they're done with you, the two of you won't be able to find a job shoveling *fertilizer* in this kingdom!"

The guards quickly shut their traps, trying to shuffle away from the enraged unicorn as quickly as possible...

The camera's shutter snapped yet again, barely covering Luna's incessant giggling. "Oh, you are just so adorable, Celly!"

"Um, yeah, cute." *Screw the truce. Tomorrow morning, you're getting hot sauce in your oatmeal. And not the wimpy kind, either. I mean the kind Spike used to use on his rubies.*

Celestia was on her fourth outfit: a pink princess costume with matching pointed hat. It was only slightly less denigrating than the baby bonnet and bib from the last picture. She did look rather cute, but there was no way Celestia was going to give Luna the satisfaction. She just wanted to this nightmare to be over with.

Despite her best efforts, the filly's apprehension was obvious to her tormentor. Luna literally leaped to her sister's side, grabbing her in the same running tackle the sun goddess had used many a time. Celestia yelped in protest, trying to break free from Luna's patented kung fu grip, but nothing doing. "Oh, don't take it so hard, Celly. There's nothing wrong with a little practical joke, right?"

"Yeah, of course there's nothing wrong with this," she lied. Her thoughts turned to the camera, still sitting on the side of the bed. "Say, what are the pictures for, anyway?"

“Oh, you mean the blackmail photos?” Celestia began to mouth the word “blackmail,” but was far too frustrated by this point to care. Luna finally released Celestia and gave a friendly punch to her shoulder. “I’m kidding, sister. I figured you would at least look passable as a filly, so I wanted some pictures for posterity sake. I mean, I doubt you would be willing to do this again.”

You’re absolutely right we’ll never do this again! Celestia still managed to give a small, incredibly obviously fake smile. “Well...if it makes you happy. At least nopony else is here.”

Luna started on her way back to the chest, still grinning like a maniac. Everything was going according to plan. “Now take that costume off. We still have so many things to try on.”

Finally, *finally*, the two deposited her at Luna’s door. The pie, which had survived the entire trip on Twilight’s back, was now far too cold to really enjoy, and the unicorn’s temper was far too heated for a civil discourse. The two guards quickly bowed their heads and hurried back to their posts.

Twilight took a moment to regain her composure before knocking...

Celestia pulled the ridiculous costume off, tossing it aside like a used rag. Luna was reaching into the chest for a new outfit when she heard a knock on the door. The filly’s fur practically stood on end. Luna, on the other hand, knew exactly who it was. “Drat, she’s late.”

Celestia felt a cold shiver run down her spine. “Who’s late?”

“Well, I thought you might be a bit uncomfortable like this, so I invited one of your favorite people for a nice, little visit. I’m sure your faithful student won’t think less of you after seeing you like this. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Celestia's entire body locked up, her jaw dropping halfway to the floor, eyes shaking in blind terror. *Faithful student... Twilight Sparkle... No... Can't.... No....*

"You didn't think I was just going to keep a little beauty like you to myself, did you? I bet she can't wait to see your new makeover!"

There was another knock. Luna was as giddy as a schoolfilly by now, happily skipping to the door. "I'll be right there!"

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Celestia threw herself in front of the door, pushing against it with all her tiny weight. All Luna had to do was telekinetically scoot her aside and, as gracefully as possible, pull it open. On the other side stood Twilight Sparkle, personal protégé to Princess Celestia and one of the most powerful non-goddess ponies in Equestria. The purple unicorn bowed before Luna, her flustered expression quickly relaxing into one of refined serenity. Celestia decided to go the opposite direction, planting herself against the wall and trying to be as tiny as possible. It was working, too. Twilight didn't even seem to notice her ruler and teacher was even in the room.

"Princess Luna, I apologize for my delay. I had some trouble with the guards."

Luna put on her best princess face, while Celestia finished her transformation into a white, furry ball. "No, don't worry about it. Security can be a little overzealous sometimes. If they had their way, Celestia and I would only walk around in full plate. Please, come in."

Twilight rose on all fours and walked inside, the door closing behind her. Luna levitated the pie off her back, setting it on a nearby dresser. The mere smell was enough to delight the princess; it reminded her of that party in Ponyville, on her first day as a free mare in a thousand years. It was almost enough to make her forget her evil scheming, if only for a few brief moments. "I do thank you for coming. I know it's quite a trip here from Ponyville, but Celestia talks about you so much, I just knew I needed to know you better."

Twilight gave a quick bow, trying her best not to show her frayed nerves. Luna might not be powerful enough to send her into orbit by herself, but finding herself teleported a few thousand feet off the ground was a scary enough thought. “It’s no problem at all, princess. I mean, we didn’t get much of a chance to talk at the Summer Sun Celebration, and I didn’t see you at the Gala, either.”

Of course not. You were taking my place. “No, I suppose we haven’t had much of a chance to be acquainted, you being in Ponyville and me in Canterlot and all. Still, you are my sister’s student, and as co-ruler of Equestria, it is my duty to assist you in whatever matters, academic or not, you request my help with.”

“Thank you kindly, Princess Luna, but I’m sure your sister is all the help I need.” She immediately caught her slip-up. “I didn’t mean to say she was better than you, or anything. I just meant, eh, she’s been my teacher for so long. I don’t think anypony really knows you- CRAP THAT’S NOT WHAT I MEANT!”

Right now, Twilight’s chances of survival were sinking faster than a raft carrying a thousand grand pianos. Luna facehoofed at her sister’s protégé’s stammering. “Don’t worry so much. I won’t banish you for a few little mistakes.”

Twilight was still breathing like a leaking air pump, but seemed to calm down at least a little. “Th-Thank you, your Highness. I’m just a little worried about Princess Celestia. The guards at the front said she wasn’t taking any visitors, and she usually has enough time to at least let me say hello when I come by. Will she be joining us today?”

The blue alicorn did her best not to seem upset at Twilight’s unwitting insult. *Doesn’t matter the millennia, all they ever care about is her.* “Oh, you know my sister. Sometimes she gets a...*little* too involved in her work. And then sometimes, she procrastinates like a *foal* until the deadline. You know, like those *fillies* in school.”

If Twilight was getting any of Luna’s puns, she sure wasn’t showing it. Her expression was more of concern for the former Nightmare Moon’s sanity than anything else. She was getting ready to say something else when her

hoof got caught on the discarded princess costume. "Where'd this come from?"

Luna let out a small sigh. *Better now than never; the spell's going to wear off soon, anyway.* "That? It's just part of a little fun I was having on my sister." She reached over for the discarded camera. "Speaking of which, I have a few pictures I'd like you to see..."

"LUNA, STOP!"

Just as planned.

Possible humiliation at the hooves of her own student was enough to break Celestia out of her fetal position and into action. She galloped from her side of the room, jumped onto Luna's bed, and charged for the camera. Sadly, she wasn't used to running so fast with such small legs; she tripped on a fold in the bedspread, flew over the side of the bed, and crashed headfirst into the dresser. The impact knocked the pie over the edge, sending it crashing upside-down onto the alicorn's face.

Twilight leaped to the filly's side, pulling the pie pan off her face. Beneath the sugary, gooey remains of the dessert was a white filly with a rainbow mane. She didn't even have to see the little pony's sun-shaped cutie mark to know who this was. She turned back to Luna. The other alicorn was making her way to Celestia's other side, her bemused expression having shifted to one of pure horror. "Pr-Pr-Princess Luna, is...is this...?"

Screw decorum. She wasn't supposed to get hurt...like this, anyway. "You mean my sister, your teacher, the one you all adore so very much?" said Luna. "Yes, of course it is. How many other goddesses do you know?" She crouched on all fours and brought her face right next to Celestia's. "Are you all right, sister?"

Celestia didn't respond at first. She was still dizzy from the concussion, but that wasn't what was troubling her. The mere fact she *had* a concussion was the problem. She had faced her fair share of emotional torments over the years, but real, physical pain? The last time was a lucky shot from Nightmare Moon, and that only stung a little. Now her head felt like a thousand tiny hammers were chipping away at the inside of her skull. Even worse, she was covered in apple pie, in front of the same unicorn she had

once been a mentor to, the only pony besides Luna whose opinion mattered to her.

Why is she doing this? I tried to be a good sister. I just wanted to be a good sister. I...I just wanted Luna to have some fun. Does she hate me? Does Twilight think I'm a joke, too? I...I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE...

Any sense of her former maturity, the countless millennia spent inventing court protocol and royal etiquette, finally collapsed under the torrent of emotions attacking from every corner of her being. The alicorn filly burst into a wailing, sobbing mess, burying her face in her hooves and trying to look as small as possible.

Twilight was stunned at first, still trying to come to grips with what she was seeing. Princess Celestia, the most kindhearted ruler anypony could ask for, the very pony she had idolized her entire youth, was right now crying louder than any filly she had ever heard before. She couldn't even imagine either of the goddesses as anything other than their current, seemingly eternal forms.

Even so, a hurt little filly was a hurt little filly. She reached over a hoof, stroking her teacher's shoulder in an attempt to reassure her. "Don't worry, princess. It's okay. We're all here for you." All her condescending words accomplished was making Celestia sob even harder.

Luna's sense of victory, the warming mirth of a prank done well, crumbled around her as reality set in. "Sister, I didn't mean for it to go this far."

The frank admission of guilt snapped Twilight's face towards the moon princess. Her face was twisted into something almost completely unponylike. "You mean *you* did this?"

"It was supposed to be a little prank! I make her a filly, dress her up in some costumes, and invite you over for a visit! We share some laughs, she turns back to normal, and we all put this behind us!"

"So THAT'S why you dragged me here?! So I could help you humiliate your sister?! I lost my whole day so you could pull a mean-spirited joke?!" The edges of Twilight's mane and tail began to flicker and smoke, the same way Celestia's did when she was well and truly angry. Right now, she

didn't care that said princess could probably grind her into paste at a moment's notice.

She leaned back over to the still-crying Celestia and started to nuzzle her softly. Her eyes were still locked on Luna, giving her a stare that would have made Fluttershy proud. The blue alicorn was busy making herself as small as possible, feeling less like an immortal goddess and more like a foal about to receive a time out. "There there, it's going to be all right. I'm sure that big meanie Luna's very sorry. She's going to make everything better. Just you wait."

Luna limped back to the Arcanus E Draconus, feeling about two inches tall. The book was still opened to the spell's page, its text still from a period of history she had skipped. Reaching out with her horn's power, she pulled a small notebook from under the bed, containing the translated text. She had already rote memorized the spell, but at least this would help her translate a counter spell out.

It was that moment she noticed something she had missed before. On the very bottom of the page was a small footnote, half-faded but still legible. Luna quickly went to work, flipping between the various pages of notes and the tiny footnote.

Several minutes passed, and Celestia was finally starting to calm down. Her eyes were still red and puffy, but she wasn't throwing fits or trying to fight off Twilight's advances anymore. Instead, she was just looking at her student. If anything positive could have come from this, it was proof that alicorn were still larger even as foals; she was maybe a head or a head-and-a-half shorter than the full-grown Twilight.

The unicorn gave a reassuring grin, one that Celestia slowly flashed back in return. She was busy levitating a towel around Celestia's body, wiping up as much of the pie mess as she could. The rest of the stains would come off in the bath, at any rate. "Feel better?"

"Yeah, I guess," Celestia sniffled. That sense of royal refinement was gradually returning to her voice at least. "I apologize. You shouldn't have

to see me like this. I understand if you are a bit puzzled by my recent behavior.”

Twilight barely contained a giggle. Any attempt at sounding authoritative and regal just sounded ridiculous with her high-pitched voice. Celestia’s face fell for about the twelfth time that day. *Not even my own student takes me seriously anymore.*

“OH NO!”

The two turned back to Luna. The princess was frantically switching between reading the book’s pages and her own little notebook. She glanced back at the still upset duo, her face betraying her “I’m so dead” mentality. “Um...Celly? You remember when I said the spell wore off?”

“Yeah?”

“I... may have mistranslated that part of the spell.”

Both ponies were back on their hooves and next to Luna in an instant. Neither seemed particularly happy with this turn of events, either. “What do you mean, mistranslated?!” shouted Celestia.

“Well...it’s not two hours like I thought it was.”

“How long?” asked Twilight.

“Um, this footnote says, ‘Do not cast this spell on Princess Celestia or any other alicorn. Their divine biology will resist the magic’s natural ebbing effect. Any casting of this spell on such a being can only be dispelled or destroyed by a counterspell.’”

Celestia’s jaw went slack, mumbling some of the most unladylike curses imaginable. Twilight was seething, but at the very least somewhat calm. “What’s the problem, then? Just use the counterspell!”

“THERE IS NO COUNTERSPELL!” gasped Luna. “At least, there’s not one in this book! It’ll take forever to find one to undue something this big! I... I think we’re stuck.” She gathered her courage and looked back at Celestia. The filly was gritting her teeth, her right hoof pawing the floor. As for

Twilight, she would probably let her go ahead and charge if she wanted. Another trip to the moon was probably the best case scenario right now.

“Um... gotcha?”

Chapter Three

“N-N-Now girls, there’s nothing to get excited about. Just...give me a little time, and I will fix this.”

Luna very slowly backed away from the vengeful duo. Her brow was sweating like a whole row of leaky faucets, while her eyes darted back and forth for something, anything, she could use to get out of this predicament. Unless she could come up with an appropriate counterspell in the next ten seconds, however, there was none to be had.

Celestia was still rightfully livid; her normally regal and forgiving eyes were giving her sister a stare so powerful it could melt steel. Twilight was still fuming, her anger gradually turning to discomfort as she witnessed the filly’s transition from “motherly” to “must kill.”

“A little time? *A LITTLE TIME?!*” growled Celestia. “You stole one of the most forbidden spellbooks in all of Equestria. You never finished translating the whole page before deciding to use it. You cast a spell on me without knowing how to reverse it. And all you can say is ‘Give me more time?’”

By this point, Luna had reared herself all the way up against the far wall. Celestia had yet to move a step, but she didn’t have to. Her very demeanor was enough to frighten the nigh-invulnerable moon princess into a pleading wreck. “B-B-But... I didn’t mean to hurt anypony!”

“Then why did you do it?” snapped Twilight.

“B-B-Because Celestia started it! She got a little stressed at work, so she just...she just...made me the target of her little jokes!” Luna was halfway between hysteria and sobbing by this point. “I just wanted to get back at her. I wanted her to stop picking on me!”

By now, it was a miracle Celestia’s teeth hadn’t ground themselves into stubs. “And that made you think something like *this* was a good idea? Really? You humiliated me in front of my student! You made me think my

little sister, the same pony I had to banish for a thousand years, was trying to conquer Equestria again! Do you have any idea how much your little bit of fun has hurt me?"

Something snapped inside Luna. Her self-pity and shame at the situation gave way to deep wells of resentment and hushed scorn. "Hurt *you*?" She pushed herself off the wall and into the air, wings extended, gliding forward and landing right in front of Celestia with a loud stomp. The filly's willpower began to crumble as her now-older sister leaned towards her, the two touching nose to nose.

"Let's talk about hurting others. How about the way you've treated me since I came back? You talk about how you missed me so much and all this...this *manure* about us ruling together, and what's the first thing you do? You stick me in the background with all the *real* work while you get to attend tea parties and galas!"

Celestia's footing gradually returned. She anchored herself into place with all four hooves, while a sneer of uncontrollable and probably unpleasant fury contorted itself across her face. "You think that's all my job is? I have meetings around the clock with the dullest, most insufferable ponies to ever walk Equestria! Everything that goes wrong on my watch is my fault, whether I could prevent it or not! And at least I don't spend my whole day wallowing like you, Luna!"

"*Wallowing?!*"

"I mean your ridiculous self-pity routine. 'Oh, I got jealous because everypony loved my big sister and then I tried to bring about eternal night and nopony will ever forgive me, boo hoo hoo.' Yes, what you did was wrong, but you spend all day moping in your room about it. And whenever I try to get you to loosen up, you act like I'm some sort of monster!"

"You call *your* jokes 'loosening up?' They were something a schoolfoal would think of! I don't think I even needed the spell. You never grew up anyway!"

"I'M MORE OF A GROWN UP THAN YOU, AND YOU ARE GOING TO FIX THIS NOW!"

“So says the pony throwing a temper tantrum.”

“I AM NOT THROWING A TANTRUM!” Celestia was howling by now; it was a miracle half the palace hadn’t heard her screaming. She would have continued to scream had a zipper not suddenly appeared over her mouth.

Twilight walked between the two, the last shimmers of light dimming from her horn. A combination of shock and horror had kept her quiet the last few minutes, while the two most powerful beings in all of Equestria seemed poised to reenact a long-settled battle. These weren’t the ponies she knew and loved. They were *both* acting like spoiled brats.

With a great deal of effort, Twilight pushed her personal feelings aside and let out as insincere and fake a grin as one would ever see. It was time to play peacekeeper. “Well, it seems we have some issues to work out. First things first, I think you two need to apologize to each other.”

Luna glanced briefly at Twilight, a look of cold indifference in her eyes, before turning her sneer back on Celestia. The filly just kept staring the other princess down, looking for any possible sign of weakness before attacking. Her hooves were trying to fiddle with the zipper, but fortunately for all the ear drums in the vicinity, a single flat digit was far less effective at the task than Spike’s claws.

Twilight sighed in frustration. This was not going to be easy. “...Look, I know you’re both upset. You’ve all said and done things you shouldn’t have, but you’re sisters, remember? Even more, you’re the Royal Pony Sisters. You’ve known each other since before Equestria began, or at least that’s what Princess Celestia’s told me. Can’t you just put this incident aside, just for the moment?”

Luna’s eyes softened, but only slightly. She was still angry at her sister; both for her apparent second banishment and for the whole run of practical jokes. Even so, she could see the pain on her sisters’ face, and could feel they both feared just how powerful this spell was if it could make Celestia act like such a foal. All her life, Celestia had been the bigger of the two, the strongest and wisest of the two. Now she looked so small and helpless. Her words still hurt, sure, but the situation *had* been tough on both of them. Maybe they could work together...

Celestia stared up at Luna (*up* at Luna) as she grappled with her student's words. Her sister had much to answer for, and most definitely needed a refresher course in the difference between an innocent joke and public humiliation. At the same time, however, she couldn't help but feel somewhat intimidated by her now-older sister. Luna was not only now bigger, stronger, and more magically inclined than Celestia, but also possessed the same refinement and inner strength she seemingly lost two hours ago. If anything, her crying and tantrum were proof positive she wasn't quite the adult pony she thought she was. She *needed* her...

The two cautiously walked towards each other, each half-expecting the other to send them to the moon at any given moment. A few tense moments later, and the two cautiously raised a hoof to the other. The zipper finally came undone in a flurry of purple sparkles, while the Sparkle behind the sparkles around the zipper smiled at another crisis averted. The two hooves touched in a slow, quiet shake. The air was still far from calm, but at least nopony was going to end up face down in a sewer ditch anytime soon.

Twilight let out a relieved sigh. She had at least bought herself a brief moment of peace. "Now that that ugly business is out of the way, let's try to get this spell countered. Luna, do you have a copy?"

Luna nodded and lit her horn, raising the Arcanus E Draconus and dragging it towards the three, along with her translation notebook. "This book has some of the most powerful spells ever recorded by ponykind. It's some very complicated magic, I know, but if you're half as good a student as Celestia claims..."

"She's that and more," said Celestia. For just a brief moment, Twilight could pick out a small trace of her mentor's soothing voice and loving aura. It was enough to calm the unicorn's nerves, giving her a little hope that maybe she could single handedly reverse this and save the day.

Then she actually *looked* at the book.

It terrified her.

Were it any other situation, reading such an ancient, forbidden tome would have filled Twilight with feelings of danger, excitement, and a fine

educational afternoon. Not this...abomination. Despite the book being just over five hundred years old, its pages showed no sign of aging. The ink was not real ink, but rather had the consistency of griffon blood. The dragonhide was not the faux kind used in some furniture and clothing; it was a dead ringer for how Spike's skin looked under the scales. The pages were bound together with glue, *real glue*, the same kind other, more barbaric species used to make out of dead ponies.

Before her was the most heinous sight she had ever seen. It was almost enough to drive her running back to Ponyville in an instant, chattering all the way about the return of the Great Old Ponies. Celestia and Luna, on the other hand, seemed completely unfazed with the book. If they had even noticed the disgusting ingredients in its creation, they didn't care.

Luna's hoof pointed to a full page of archaic writings. "There. This is the spell." She then pointed to the right page in her notes. The three peered over the notebook...

Youth Restoration Spell

The Youth Restoration Spell allows the caster to transform the spell's target into a past version of their selves, no further than their birth and no later than the exact minute the spell was first cast. The spell may also be combined with a barrier or seal spell to hold unwilling targets.

The spell's first effect takes the form of a green, mist-like snake. The construct will surround the target's entire body while bombarding them with mind reading and possession spells. This will allow the caster to shift through their memories until they have found the perfect point in time which to bring them back to.

Next, the caster orders the snake to collapse in on its victim, condensing and shrinking them until they are proportional to their size in that period of time. This stage is quite exhausting on the target, and it is likely they will pass out. The third and final stage is the magic's natural exhaustion and cancellation, no more than two hours after being cast.

During this time, the victim will be an amalgamation of their present and past selves. While their memories and personality will remain intact, their physical and, in the case of adults becoming children, emotional selves will still behave much like they did during that period of time. Unicorns have also shown a tendency to lose their ability to control and manipulate their natural magical abilities. The regression also impacts a pegasus' wing strength, and depending on the age victims may be physically unable to fly.

The magic may also be dispelled before its natural expiration. Doing so, however, will require an extreme amount of magical power, as well as the correct spell to disrupt and remove all of the enchantments involved. Failure to dispel even one piece of the spell's components may have a disastrous affect on both the caster and their victim.

Twilight's mind raced as she took in the book's words. This was some of the most complex magic she had ever seen, even more than giving a pony butterfly wings. It was not just one straight blast, but a whole chain of sustained, interlocked steps. Most counterspells were built to dispel simple enchantments and (if one believed in them) curses, not something this intricate.

Even worse, the book's warnings about the victim's behavior were already proving true. If she looked hard enough, she could still make out the Princess Celestia she knew and loved. The same pony that had taken her in, trained her to control her immense power, and then sent her out into the world to discover the magic of friendship. All that clashed with her recent behavior.

This was Celestia, to be sure. She just wasn't sure it was *her* Celestia anymore.

Luna closed the two books, setting them back under her bed for the time being. "So, you see our problem. This...isn't a very easy spell to fix."

"You should of thought of that before you cast it," muttered Celestia. Luna gave her a quick glare, and Celestia quickly turned away.

“In any case,” the princess continued, “I...want to ask for your help. I need somepony who understands ancient magic to research a counterspell. Once we have that, we can start working on restoring Celestia to normal. I know, I have no right to ask you to stay any longer, but I need all the help I can get, and you’re the only pony I can trust.”

Twilight mulled Luna’s request, hoping to find some way to back out of it. She was none too happy with Luna at the moment, and would gladly take her leave back to Ponyville, at least for the moment. Her eyes, however, drifted back to Celestia, and all that frustration melted away. She was upset over apple fritters and lost time she would have spent studying something she already knew, while Celestia’s whole world had been ruined because of a prank gone wrong. She was (perhaps) the second-oldest pony in the room, but for that moment, felt like the smallest, whiniest foal to have ever walked Equestria.

She turned back to Luna. “All right. I’ll get to work right away.”

Celestia let out a great sigh of relief. Inside, she was fighting the urge to run up and glomp her in gratitude. “Thank you, Twilight Sparkle. A pony of your intelligence will figure this out in no time.” Twilight couldn’t help but blush from the praise, even if it came from something that sounded more like a chipmunk than a goddess.

Then Celestia remembered one other, little detail. “Oh crud, the sun! It’s supposed to set in a few hours! I can’t move it anymore!”

“And what about the rest of your duties?” Twilight chimed in. “I mean, you’re still technically a princess. Who’s going to run Equestria in your place?”

Twilight came to regret her words immediately. Luna leaned into her personal space, looking the unicorn right in the eyes. “Excuse me, *she* runs Equestria? Last time I checked, the land had *two* rulers? One of whom just came back from the moon only a year ago, and yet everypony keeps forgetting exists?”

“I-I didn’t mean anything like that, your Highness. I just meant...well...”

“What she means, Luna, is that Equestria sees me as the face of the royal family,” said Celestia. Despite the filly’s best efforts, there was a plainly obvious layer of smarminess in her voice. “If I were to disappear for even a day, everypony would know in a matter of moments. And then what?”

“We’d have a repeat of the Summer Sun Celebration,” said Twilight.

Celestia and Luna both nodded. “And that is why I should continue my old post. My mind is still intact, after all. I can still be the wise old leader I’ve...”

Celestia stopped as Luna began laughing like a hyena, stomping one hoof in an uproar. Twilight’s eyes were watering, her face visibly turning red from trying to hold back the hurricane of laughter she was feeling inside. The sun princess’ face drooped into a sad pout. “I’m not joking. I can still do this. Twilight! Fetch me my crown!”

Twilight walked over to the crown. Her steps were uneasy from her suppressed giggling; she had to levitate the crown on the way back, lest she open her mouth and upset her princess even more. Luna, meanwhile, was finally beginning to regain self-control, wiping a few happy tears from her eyes with one foreleg. Celestia sat on her haunches, head upturned in preparation for her return to glory.

The crown levitated onto Celestia’s head, slid down her face, and settled down on her neck. The weight of the crown’s gold body and encrusted gemstone pulled the filly forward, sending her crashing face-first into the floor. The sight reignited Luna’s uncontrollable mirth, and before she knew what she was doing, the moon princess was already on her back, rolling around on the carpet in agony. Twilight let out a small laugh, the most she dared to give, before levitating Celestia back to her hooves.

The filly was disoriented, humiliated, and above all else, feeling rather small and helpless. “I...I can still do this. I’ll just need some smaller jewelry.”

Luna finally stopped laughing, mostly because it was becoming too painful to keep it up. She trotted up to her sister and grabbed her in another, more friendly bear hug. “Don’t worry, Celestia. I can take care of both sun and moon, like you did for a thousand years. And Equestria will be in good hooves, I can assure you. I know everything there is to know about

managing a nation.” She finally released a shaking, afraid-for-her-life Celestia. “That way, you and Twilight can spend your days finding a cure. And once everything is back to normal, you can resume your normal responsibilities, I can go back to mine, and we can all pretend this never happened.”

“That’s a great idea!” said Twilight. “We can sure use the extra time, right, Princess Celestia?”

Celestia didn’t respond. Her face was drooping at the news, while Luna’s previous “playful” threats played through her mind. *Was this all a part of her plan? Did she really miss such an obvious footnote? I can’t let her get away with this! Doesn’t she realize I kept her out of this mess for a reason?! But...*

She sighed, completely defeated. “You’re right. You’re a smart, capable pony, Luna, and I’m sure you’ll do fine. Just...come to me if you have any problems.”

Luna let out a big grin, nuzzling her sister in gratitude. “Oh, thank you, sister! I promise, I won’t let you down!” *“Come to me if you have any problems?” Does she really have that little faith in me? Well, I’ll prove her wrong! I’ll be the best princess Equestria has ever seen!*

“We can probably pass off my disappearance as a vacation,” said Celestia. “It’s been over a thousand years since I last took one, in any case. But that still leaves the palace staff...”

All three drifted back into quiet contemplation of the latest predicament. There were hundreds of ponies working in the castle, from the guards to the maids to the gardeners, and all of them expected to at least catch a glimpse of their most beloved princess once a day. If this spell was half as complex as it seemed, it was going to take several days at least just to find a cure. Celestia’s disappearance would be noticed very quickly, and once word got out, would no doubt lead to widespread panic and disarray over the missing sun personification.

She couldn’t exactly hide anywhere else in Equestria, either. If it were anypony else, she would have been able to hide this out in Trottingham or Manehatten until things calmed down. Even Ponyville would have made a

good spot, although whispers of favoritism and Twilight as a spy were already circulating. Unfortunately for them all, Celestia wasn't a normal pony, and anypony who got a look at her would immediately recognize the unusually large, white-coated foal with a horn and wings as the missing princess. Like it or not, she had to stay in the palace until the counterspell was discovered or created.

There was only one realistic solution...

Every single member of the castle's vast staff crammed into the palace's East Ballroom, also known as the only ballroom left standing after the Gala. The only exceptions were the guards by the entrances; they weren't exactly in the "need to know" right at the moment. The nobles were especially right out; no good could come from one of *them* knowing about Celestia's situation.

It was still more than the three wanted at the moment.

In the center of the room, in the small stage area, Luna stood behind a small podium. Her front hooves rapped nervously on the stand, the one barrier between her and what she feared would become an all-consuming, vengeful mob. Twilight stood behind her, eyes shuffling back and forth, a fake grin glued to her face. Celestia stood behind her student, her coat freshly cleaned and free from any signs of the offending pastry. She was nonetheless struggling to keep out of view.

Once everypony in the castle was accounted for, Luna cleared her throat and levitated up a small speech. "G-Good afternoon," she stammered. Twilight could already feel another facehoof coming on. "I have, er, called you here today to discuss a rather, uh, dire situation."

The crowd was muttering among themselves. Not a thing they said was good for Luna. She wasn't exactly a *bad* public speaker, but she did get flustered on occasion. And given the gravity of what she was about to say, she had every right to be and then some. It wasn't every day you told a country its beloved ruler was now a temperamental, ill-behaved brat.

She cleared her throat yet again, regaining a small shred of self-confidence in the process. “This afternoon, Princess Celestia, my sister and fellow princess, was in conference with Twilight Sparkle and I over some of the new edicts we’ve passed. During that time, a currently unknown assailant managed to infiltrate the castle, ambushed all three, and used a spell from what we believe to be the Arcanus E Draconus on Celestia.” Of course, she made sure a few of the facts were kept well hidden. There wasn’t any point in making everypony think her *fake* coup was a *real* coup.

An exceptionally loud gasp emerged from the crowd. Luna paused a bit, her confidence waning, before continuing. “W-We are currently searching for this pony and the accursed book as we speak. Until then, I feel it is my duty to inform you of her...condition.” She turned back to Twilight and the still-hidden Celestia, the latter shaking with incredible apprehension. “Come on, Celestia. Let’s get this over with.”

Twilight turned about, giving the filly a gentle nudge towards Luna. Celestia grimaced at her student briefly before heading to the stage, making sure to stay behind both Twilight and Luna’s bodies all the while. Once she was safely behind the podium, she climbed up on Luna’s back (a rather new sensation) and poked her head up just enough so she could be seen.

There was a stunned silence. Many a pony found their face twitching in unnatural ways as their brains struggled to process this new information. Celestia tried her best to smile, even as she wished she could just jump from the stage and hide under her bed until this blew over. She could already see a few ponies in the corner snickering.

Both hooves nervously tapped together as she began to speak. “My subjects, as you may have surmised, I am indeed Princess Celestia. My body might be different, and certainly a little smaller than usual, but I can assure you, I am still the pony you have known all your lives. Whatever this spell is, it has not impacted my memories or...my personality.” *First bold-faced lie I’ve told in a century.* “In spite of this, I fear I have no choice at this time but to turn the daytime ruling of Equestria to my sister, Princess Luna. She is wise and capable pony, and I am sure you will offer her your full support.”

That low murmuring in the crowd had turned into a cacophony of voices. Twilight couldn't make out too much in the crowd, but the sisters could. They could already hear the worried tones in each pony's voice, the low mocking from those who thought nopony could hear them, even a few whispering about "Nightmare Moon's return." Luna craned her neck up to her sister, both exchanging a sad glance.

Finally, Celestia slammed both hooves on the podium, and the assembled ponies turned back to attention. She glared at the crowd with her best "I am disappointed in all of you" face; all it accomplished was bringing out a few giggles. Defeated, she jumped off Luna's back, while the purple alicorn stood back up at the podium.

"Thank you, Princess Celestia. Now, until we have found a cure for my sister's condition, I am placing a gag order on the whole palace. Nopony is to breathe a word of this to anypony, be they the press, the nobles, even your own family. If I learn that anypony outside of this room knows of Celestia's curse, I will make sure it's the last mistake you make in Equestria."

It was no idle threat, and everypony knew it. The very light and color of the room was seemingly drained as Luna spoke, replaced by an unholy coldness and the pure, unrestrained agony that awaited anypony foolish enough to oppose her. The laughter immediately ceased, while the whole of the ponies involved started to shudder slightly at Luna's voice.

"So, does everypony understand?" The whole crowd nodded in response. The room's vibrant colors and atmosphere immediately returned. "Good. You may return to your duties now. If anypony needs us, we will be retiring to Celestia's chambers for the time being. Thank you."

The minute the conference was over, all three made their exit out the back, both for Celestia's sake and to keep the crowds from asking too many questions. The palace's staff was either too shaken or too scared of Luna to make much of a scene. In any case, one problem was out of the way, at least for the time being.

Celestia was now lying on her now-massive bed, head buried in a pillow. Twilight was looking over the princess' reference collection, hoping to find some place to start her research. Luna, meanwhile, was struggling to keep her eyes open, the day's events finally catching up to her.

The filly was still visibly shaken by what just happened. "They laughed."

"I'm sure they didn't mean it," yawned Luna. She slowly walked to her sister, her steps rather uneven from fatigue, and tried to lay a hoof on her sister's back. Celestia's wings snapped up immediately, blocking her advance. "Look, I know you're upset, but we didn't have a choice. We can't hide somepony of your stature."

"What am I gonna do?" Celestia whined. "Even if you make me big again, I'll just be a laughingstock."

"I'm sure you'll think of something. You are the oldest pony alive in Equestria, after all," said Luna, in between another yawn. "Ah, excuse me, but I...really need to lie down for a while. I've got a moon to raise in a few hours." The alicorn paced her way out of the room, barely resisting the urge to just fall asleep on her hooves.

Twilight, meanwhile, levitated three books onto her back, balancing them perfectly before shutting her horn's power off. "These will do nicely." She turned back to Celestia. "Would you like to join me, your Highness?"

Celestia didn't even pull her head out of the pillow. "Join you?"

"You know, study together, like we used to do before I left Canterlot. With our two brains working together, I'm sure we'll have you back to normal by dinner!" She walked to the bed and gave Celestia a playful nudge on the shoulder.

The filly raised her head, eyed her student suspiciously, and promptly hid her face yet again. "I...don't feel like it right now. Sorry."

Twilight's face fell. "Oh, I see. Well, can I at least get you some dinner? I'm sure the chef's heart attack was only a small one."

Celestia finally moved her face out of the pillow, giving her student a sad, pitiful stare. "Twilight...I would much rather be alone right now."

Twilight sighed. "Very well, your Highness. Still, with your permission, I'd like to use your study to begin my research. It's the most private room in the palace, and I have to write a letter to Spike anyway. Oh, that little fellow gets so worked up when I have to leave..."

"Knock yourself out."

"Well...I'll see you later, then." Twilight quickly backed out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Celestia stayed in her position for some time, thinking about her horrible, horrible day. She had little doubt Twilight would find a counterspell given enough time. But Luna...that was a different story. She acted apologetic now, sure, but just a few hours ago she was posing her like a doll, holding her like a pet, and treating her like, well, the way Celestia would treat Luna long before Nightmare Moon.

Come to think of it, I was doing all this back then, too. Inviting ponies to parties just to wreck them, showing Philomena to veterinarians at the end of one of her life cycles, you name it. Luna seemed to enjoy herself so much back then. It was really the only time I could get her to smile after she realized how little ponies appreciated her nights. How little I appreciated her nights.

It was a sobering revelation. She covered her stomach with the pillow, her face caught in a perpetual frown. *I hate this. I hate looking like this. I hate being reminded of how horrible things were back then. Luna got to have fun as a filly. She got to play with all the early creations and the first ponies. I spent my foalhood on an empty planet just waiting for mother and father to come back, or for something to evolve beyond single-cell organisms.*

A small tear streaked down the corner of her eye. *I just want to be normal again.*

Once inside Celestia's study, Twilight closed the door, trotted to the nearest reading pedestal, and floated the books off her back. "Let's see...there's Enchantments and You, A Detailed Examination of Possession Spells, and..."

The last book had no title. It only had a simple orange cover, its edges frayed from constant use. Twilight would have simply left it as-is, except it had been sticking out on the bookshelf, and if Twilight was known for anything, it was intellectual curiosity. Even so, a lot of Celestia's books had either never been named, or had their titles fade away with time, so there wasn't anything *too* unusual about it.

"I guess I'll start with this one," she sighed. "It can't be any worse than that...thing, anyway."

She set the orange book on the pedestal and flipped it open. Her eyes immediately leaped open at the sights within, her lower jaw trembling with growing horror as she turned page after page. Finally, she could take no more, and blasted the thing into the fireplace. Her horn's light intensified, and a small fire quickly consumed the book into ash.

Twilight just stood there, gasping for air while trying to calm her rapidly-beating heartbeat. "Okay, lesson learned. Don't open any more untitled books without asking the princess what's in them. It's not every day you run into a royal porn collection."

Chapter Four

By the time Luna had reached her room, she was halfway between “very tired” and “a medicated coma.” She had already been up for nearly a full day by that point. Her plan required her to begin the night, hold her own little court, end the night, and then try to get some sleep before Celestia could fall for her little prank. And even then, she was so excited about the fun she would have at her sister’s expense that she barely got any sleep at all.

She floated her small crown over to the nightstand, resting it neatly in an ornate, gem-encrusted wooden box. Celestia’s own vestments had been laid out on the same stand, awaiting their owner’s return to normalcy. The clothes chest still sat next to the bed; Luna hadn’t the heart to throw the whole thing out, not after all the effort she took to find the costumes to begin with. Now, she wished she had tossed the thing out the window, preferably taking out a few aristocrats on the way down.

Luna flopped on her bed, exhaustion overtaking her in a manner of moments. Even in her sleep, however, her thoughts kept forcing their way to the forefront. *It’s my fault. I should have known better. I should have done all the research before I used that blasted spell. I...*

The echoes gradually dimmed as she fell asleep, her doubts replaced with her usual dreams...

Twilight slammed the Enchatments and You book shut and tossed it aside, a snarl on her lips. Her small piles of note pages were almost completely blank, save for a few scribbles on how the spell shouldn’t even work under any known magical laws. In fact, the only thing she *had* written all day was a quick letter to Spike, and she still didn’t have any idea how to send it. “Gah! This thing is impossible! Who wrote that spellbook anyway, a gibbering lunatic?!” Then she remembered the book’s materials. “Oh...I guess that makes sense.”

In any case, her research was getting her nowhere. The same books that had served her so well in the past were obviously no good here. This was ancient magic, the kind that ponies only spoke of in hushed whispers. The kind that tended to attract attention from unworldly, unwelcome creatures. Even now, while the book sat underneath Luna's bed, she could feel something cold creeping over her. It was a presence she had only felt once before, when Nightmare Moon challenged her and her friends in the Everfree Forest.

It's getting closer.

Twilight's fur stood on end, her tail and mane straightening into perfect right angles. She could hear, no, *feel* something approaching her from behind. She tried to turn, but her terror was so great that her legs refused to move.

Oh Celestia I don't want to die I don't want to die I don't want to die

“BOO!”

Twilight's jump was one of the most impressive jumps in the history of Equestria. She managed to clear a good twenty feet straight up before grabbing onto a ceiling beam and hanging on for dear life. Beneath her sat Celestia, giggling up a storm. “Oh Twilight, you are just so adorable!”

Twilight slowly released her grip, using her magic to slow her fall below break-leg speed. The sight of a laughing, happy Celestia filled Twilight with two conflicting emotions. On the one hoof, this was a bit closer to the princess she knew. Although she still lacked the sense of awe and wonder she possessed as a grown mare, there was something overwhelmingly joyful about her smile. It was the same loving expression she had given Twilight during her studies, from when she got her cutie mark to her graduation. Even coming from a pudgy foal that should be younger than Apple Bloom, it was practically infectious in its mirth.

On the other hoof, the same little snort had just startled her worse than a cave full of snakes.

Twilight took a moment to compose herself, something that was rather difficult since Celestia was still in the midst of the latest round of rolling

laughter. "Your Majesty, don't you know better than to sneak up on ponies?"

If Celestia had heard her student, she wasn't showing it. "I'm sorry, Twilight Sparkle, but you were just (snort) standing there looking so serious I (giggle) had to do it!" Before long, even Twilight couldn't resist laughing her flank off, and the two clung together in the happiest scene all day. Finally, several minutes later, the two had tired themselves out enough to subdue their glee to a few coughing giggles.

"Thank you, your Highness," said Twilight. "I needed a good laugh right about now."

"So did I." The two slowly regained their footing, returning to the same standing positions as earlier that day. "I just wanted to see how your progress is going. The sooner I can grow up again, the better."

Twilight's heart gave a quick yank. Her face was practically hidden behind a wall of sweat as she spoke. "W-Well, none of the books I've checked have anything we can use. Not yet, anyway. The spell Luna used was just so...complex. Every book I've read said something like this shouldn't even be possible."

Celestia's face fell in an instant. Twilight's trusty panic reflex, the same one that had led to Ponyville's near-destruction by Parasprites and covering up Fluttershy's birdnapping, kicked right back into gear. "I-I'll have something soon, I promise! It's just...magic like this hasn't been used in so long, there's almost nothing on how to reverse it."

Celestia looked back up at Twilight, giving her as reassuring a smile as she could right now. "I'm not worried. I didn't think you would have a counterpsell ready in one day."

Another awkward silence passed a few seconds longer. "So...are you feeling any better?"

Celestia sighed. "A little."

"Oh?"

“Well...I guess it’s really not *that* bad.” Celestia rubbed her right foreleg over her left and tilted her head slightly. The next few sentences weren’t going to be easy. “I’m not quite ready to forgive Luna, but it could be worse. It’s just...being a foal again is so, well, demeaning.”

Twilight closed her eyes and raised a hoof. “Really? I think it might actually be a little fun.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“I do, your Highness.” Twilight smirked and rolled her head back, reflecting on that ever-lovely sack of lies called “nostalgia.” “I was a little filly once, too. I would just sit in my room all day, reading and studying every book my parents had about magic. Eating up every little bit of knowledge I could find, always testing out the new spells I learned, getting grounded after launching mom’s new vase into the stratosphere...Oh, those were the days. No bills to pay, no baby dragons to raise, and all the free time you could ask for.”

Celestia groaned at her student’s reminiscence. Obviously, Twilight had quite the privileged upbringing, being her personal student and all. *Her parents spent time with her, taught her everything they knew, sent her to the best magic school in Equestria. My parents just dumped their foals on a lifeless planet in the middle of nowhere – a planet without a working ecosystem or even a sun and moon – and told us to make something out of it.*

“...Anyway,” said the princess, “are you hungry? It’s almost time for dinner, and I’m sure the cooks have prepared something wonderful tonight.”

Twilight’s stomach rumbled at the thought of food. “Well, I guess I am a little hungry. I was *really* counting on that pie. So, where is the dining room anyway?”

The question made Celestia cringe. The closest dining room was closed for cleaning and renovation; in other words, to repair the damage from the last trade negotiation with the griffons. No pony dared speak of what happened, but the rumor was it involved a very peeved Celestia, an outspoken anti-pony ambassador, and a rusty tin can. The only other

dining room was on the other side of the palace, and was more for formal parties and events than casual dining.

In any case, Celestia wasn't in any mood to cross the entire palace just for some dinner. She was already incredibly self-conscious of her new situation, and had used up all her courage just making her way to the study. Scaring the daylights out of Twilight was the only thing she could find to relieve her apprehension, if only for a few minutes. *There is no way I'm going back out there. Not now, not ever...*

"Well...we could eat in here tonight," she stammered. I think we could use a little privacy, in any case. The servants can fetch Luna once she's finished with the moon."

"Those roses are for me? I'm your favorite princess of them all? Oh, how I love you, my little ponies! I-"

Luna's dreams suddenly came to a crashing halt as her internal alarm clock jolted her awake. The moon princess jumped to the floor, stretched her legs, and walked over to the nearby window. The clear blue sky had given away to an orange haze as the sun, its momentum spent, locked itself onto the western horizon. To the east, Luna could feel moon, her most beloved possession as well as her former prison.

All right, let's go over this again. I just have to lower the sun completely, then raise the moon right after. This should be the easiest job in Equestria. Celestia did it for a thousand years, I can certainly do it for a few days.

Luna threw on her crown and vestments and glided out of her room, slamming the door and scaring quite a few guards behind her. She zoomed through the palace until she reached the highest balcony in the tallest tower. From here, she could see nearly all of Equestria, and more importantly, she was at a good enough position to both move the sun *and* revel in the glory therein.

The moon princess' wings unfurled and spread to their full width. She closed her eyes and lit her horn, her mind focusing on the giant ball in the distance. The wings began a steady beat, gradually generating enough

force to lift Luna vertically. A feeling of intense warmth hit her as she finally connected with the sun, a far cry from the soothing coolness the moon offered. Gritting her teeth, she willed the sun downward.

It was a struggle almost immediately. The sun wasn't at all like the moon; instead of a simple rocky surface, it was a ball of gas held together by gravity alone. There was no real surface to grab, and her magic struggled to hold the thing together. Her face grimaced as the sun seemingly refused to move. Finally, and after several minutes of struggling, the yellow ball finally slid out of view, coating Equestria in an impenetrable blackness. The moon quickly slid into place, lighting the land with a soft glow.

Luna's wings gave out from the exhaustion, and cruel gravity quickly pulled her gut-first onto the balcony floor. The moon princess was shaking, sweaty, and tired, but otherwise quite happy with herself. "Did you see that, Celestia? Your baby sister can do *anything* you can-"

Then she noticed something missing from the sky.

The stars.

Luna growled to herself before flying back up...

If the ponies at the palace could be credited for only one thing, it would be their swiftness. No sooner had the call been given than a half-dozen ponies rushed into the study, a small, low, rectangular table on their backs. They sat the table down without it so much as tipping and trotted to the side, allowing another pony to lay out three pillows just underneath the table's edges. A last pony ducked ahead of the others, laying out a tablecloth and setting the table in a flourish.

Celestia nodded in appreciation. "Thank you, good ponies. Please fetch Princess Luna and tell the kitchen staff dinner will be in the study tonight." The other ponies quickly bowed before filing out single-file, leaving virtually no trace of their ever being there.

Twilight was dumbstruck by the sheer efficiency of it all. "Wow...I never knew you had your staff this well-trained."

“I’ve had a couple thousand years of experience,” said Celestia. “Luna and I practically invented every management technique on Equestria.”

The two took their seats at the table; or rather, Twilight took a seat *at* the table while Celestia’s was almost *under* the table. Even with the lowest possible eating surface they could find, the table reached all the way up to the princess’ nose. All this earned was another grunt of dissatisfaction from the filly before moving on. “Twilight, about your research...”

Twilight’s panic button went off yet again. “O-Of course. I know I promised I would have a counterspell by dinner, but...you see...”

“Twilight...”

“A-A-And the books! Almost nothing they say is any good for us!”

“*Twilight...*”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll figure something out soon! I mean I hope we will because Equestria won’t-”

“TWILIGHT SPARKLE!”

Twilight immediately went quiet, slumping down as low as she possibly could. “Um...I’m sorry, your majesty. I just...I thought I would be farther along by now. These books are some of the most comprehensive theses on magic in existence, and not a single one even mentions something like the spell Luna cast. I think we’re at a dead end.”

Celestia *had* to let out a chuckle at that. “I told you, I don’t expect a cure in one day. I was suggesting you see somepony tomorrow. You remember your old Advanced Magical Theory professor, Frosty Gaze?”

Unfortunately for Twilight, she did. “You mean ‘The Abominable Snowpony?’ The biggest, meanest, most incredibly cruel and merciless teacher Canterlot had ever seen? Why would you want me to see a monster like him?”

“First off, he’s not a monster, he’s just...very big for a stallion,” said Celestia. “Second, he’s one of the greatest scholars in Equestria on ancient magic. And third, just because he doesn’t grade on a curve doesn’t mean you have the right to call him names.” Her eyes then darted back to the small book pile. “Speaking of books, didn’t you take *three* out of my room?”

If Twilight was panicking before, she was just now preparing for cardiac arrest. She had forgotten all about that...book. “Well...you see...”

“And did you light a fire in here?”

“Um...Ugh...Your Majesty, I can...”

Celestia leaped from her seat and galloped to the fireplace. There, still sitting in a pile of ash and burnt wood, sat the charred remains of an orange book. The sun princess very, very slowly turned about to face Twilight, her smile replaced with a deep, dark frown. “Twilight Sparkle...did you just burn one of my books?”

Twilight started backing away from Celestia, trying to make herself as small as possible. She could only manage a small, pathetic whimper. “Y...Yes, your Majesty. I was just...so shocked that I...well...”

The change in the princess’ mood was almost immediate. For the first time in her many years of knowing her, Twilight could feel her teacher’s genuine rage. It just made her shrink back farther. “I thought your parents and I taught you better than this,” Celestia scolded. “You don’t go around destroying other pony’s property. What were you thinking? For that matter, *were* you thinking?!”

“I...I didn’t mean to,” sobbed Twilight. “It was...I didn’t...I couldn’t think of you...reading something like that!”

“Something like that? What could possibly be so bad that you...”

Wait...does that mean that book was... She sighed before addressing her cowering, prepared-for-a-trip-to-the-moon student. “Twilight Sparkle, I am very disappointed with you, and we will discuss your punishment after I have returned to normal.”

Twilight's ears flattened as she barely resisted bawling like Celestia had a few hours prior. "Princess...please don't..."

"And no, it will not involve dismissing you as my student, or sending you to a celestial body, or banishing you and then throwing you in a dungeon in the place that I banish you to. There will be no dungeons, or torture, or anything else of that nature, so just put it out of your mind for the time being and focus on the problem at hand."

Twilight dared to raise her head, meeting her mentor eye-to-eye. "Do you mean that? Please, I promise I won't do it again! I...It's just..."

"I promise you, nothing is going to happen. You just have to learn not to overreact so much. I am, or rather was, a grown mare, and sometimes I just have...physical needs. Can you honestly tell me *you* haven't looked at such material before?" Twilight blushed like a ripe tomato. "In any case, that wasn't actually one of my books. One of the students at the school was found with it, and since I am technically the principal, it was my responsibility to keep such things away from the student body. She never tried to get it back, and when the school year ended I took it back to the palace by mistake."

Twilight sat up and raised both front hooves. "I...think I understand. So...just out of curiosity, whose book was it?"

Celestia raised a hoof to her mouth, her eyes shifting about in thought. "I don't really remember. She wasn't the best student, but she did well enough. I heard she got married not too long after graduating and had a filly. If I recall, she had a white coat, with a striped purple-and-white mane."

As Celestia walked back to her pillow, Twilight squinted and tapped her chin. "A white coat and purple-and-white mane? That sounds an awful lot like...like..."

Twilight's brain quickly entered a self-preserving shut-down, leaving the unicorn's body to tumble onto the floor. A quick glance was enough to establish she was still breathing. Celestia smiled at her student's exaggerated reaction. *Sorry Twilight, but you should have thought of that before you burned it. I'm sure your mother will understand...*

It was another thirty minutes before Luna arrive, her body still shaking from her exertion outside. Accompanying her was one of the palace chef's, a brownish-yellow unicorn mare with a salad and spoon for a cutie mark. Behind *her* was a large dinner cart, with three covered plates on top and a small curtain covering the bottom. Twilight was already back in her seat, having filed her newfound information deep in the recesses of her mind. Celestia was still sitting there, both forelegs wrapped on the table in a look of absolute boredom. The combination of the day's events and her current, foal body was taking it out of her; she looked almost as tired as Luna felt.

Luna gave a quick, acknowledging nod to her sister and her sister's protégé before taking her seat. "I...apologize for my delay. It seems the...sun doesn't quite agree with me."

"That will happen," said Celestia. "I remember the first time I moved the moon....well, let's just say Nightmare Moon almost came back a thousand years ago, and a few million tons heavier at that. You'll get the hang of it."

Luna frowned. "I didn't vaporize anypony with a solar flare, if that's what you mean."

"Wait, you can *do* that?" gasped Twilight. "I mean, not that I'm saying you ever have, but-"

"A-HEM!"

The three quickly turned towards the chef. She looked stressed, frustrated, and in no mood to hear of the horrible fate that awaited anypony that displeased their princess. "Apologies, your Majesties, and to you, Miss Sparkle, but your dinner is ready. Should I begin serving?" All three quickly nodded yes. "Very well. I fear tonight's dinner is nothing special. I fear the rest of my staff didn't take our princess' condition very well." She flashed Celestia as reassuring a smile as possible in this situation. "In any case, we've prepared a basic salad, along with a tomato-and-basil soup. And for dessert, we have carrot cake with vanilla icing."

The chef levitated the three dishes to their respective owners and floated the lids back to the cart. On each sat...a plate with a standard lettuce,

tomato and cucumber salad, a bowl of tomato soup with a lot of green basil shavings floating on top, and a small dish with a chunk of cake on top. The whole thing looked more like something from a corner café than the food of the gods.

“Thank you, Leafy Greens,” said Luna. “I’m sure it will be...magnificent.”

Leafy Greens gave another bow, gripped the cart’s handle in her teeth, and wheeled it out of the study. The three ponies were left to study their meals. “Well...it’s not as grand as I thought it would be, but it still looks delicious,” said Twilight. Luna was too tired to say much of anything, instead opting to immediately levitate her fork, impale some defenseless vegetable, and eat it. Celestia, meanwhile, was far too busy salivating over the cake.

It wasn’t a byproduct of the spell, she did that even as an adult. She didn’t actually drool over it, but the feelings were the same. She just loved cake.

The princess managed to peel her eyes away from the dessert long enough to see what the others were doing. Luna was still acting like a princess, using over a dozen utensils in the course of a single bite. Twilight was following suit, if only to keep face in front of royalty. *This shouldn’t be a problem. Levitation is one of the easiest spells a unicorn learns. I can’t blast my sister out of the palace right now, but I can still use a little magic.*

She turned to her fork and mentally willed it to move. It didn’t. She threw more effort into it, her horn lighting up like a sparkler. It still wouldn’t move. Frustrated beyond measure, she just resorted to grapping it with her hooves, but the thing was cumbersome and, surprisingly for a nation of ponies, completely incompatible with their particular style of feet.

Twilight set her fork down and looked at her struggling mentor. “Um...do you need any help?”

“No...I...don’t!” grumbled Celestia. Despite her protests, however, the utensil refused to stay in her hooves long enough to grab anything. Finally, she just gave up, planted her hooves on the table, leaned over, and grabbed a slice of tomato with her teeth.

She spat the thing out almost immediately, coughing and gagging all the while. The other quickly set their things down and darted over to Celestia,

Luna wrapping her in as much of a hug as she dared to give. “Celestia, what’s wrong?”

“The (cough) food. S...Something’s wrong with the food!”

The currently-bigger princess and Twilight looked the plate over. Nothing was obviously out of the ordinary. Luna bent over and grabbed another tomato slice, chewing it slowly before swallowing. “I don’t taste anything. It’s actually pretty good.”

“Pretty *good*? It was so...slimy and, it tasted so...ugh!” The tiniest bit of Celestia’s fillyhood seeped through before she could regain her composure. “Never mind, I will just eat around them.”

Celestia leaned back to her plate and grabbed a lettuce leaf, ripping it with her teeth and swallowing. She immediately groaned with disgust. *So...bitter.* “Okay...I can settle for cucumbers.”

Another bite, and another moan. *Even these taste horrible?*

It didn’t take long for Twilight and Luna to realize what was going on. The former could feel her lungs starting to collapse from fear, while the latter quickly let her sister go and backed away. Celestia, meanwhile, could feel that panic welling up inside again, as her mind actively fought against the cold, inevitable truth. *No, no, no! This isn’t happening! Luna’s spell couldn’t have done something like this! I’m supposed to stay the same, so why? Why is this happening?!*

Twilight quickly assumed a “calm the child down” position. “Princess, I don’t think there’s a problem with the food. It’s...well, the same gag reflex we all had as fillies.”

“B-But that’s not possible!” screamed Celestia. “I really like all of these! I shouldn’t be having a problem with them!”

Twilight moaned. This wasn’t going to be easy to explain. “I read something about this. Apparently, very young ponies have extremely sensitive taste buds. Things like lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, rutabagas, daffodils, alfalfa, and others can actually taste worse for them.”

“It still doesn’t make sense,” Celestia grumped. “Luna and I are not normal ponies. We never had this problem before.”

“Oh, REALLY?”

Celestia and Twilight could *feel* the life drain from the room as Luna stomped back to the table, sat right back down, and stared her sister straight in the eyes. “Because I can remember a certain pony sitting her young, helpless sister down every night and **forcing** her to eat one disgusting meal after another. ‘Hey Luna, I just created these red berries! Eat them, or I’ll make you sleep outside!’”

Celestia slammed both hooves onto the table, shaking the entire surface and everything on it for several seconds. “I never said anything like that! Vegetables are good for you! As your big sister, it was my responsibility to make sure you grew up right!”

Luna’s sly smile, the same one she wore when she thought this was just going to be two hours of fun, returned. “You are absolutely right. It is the big sister’s responsibility to make sure their little sister is on the right track in life. And that includes a healthy diet.”

Her horn quickly lit up, while an aura of energy appeared around Celestia’s piece of cake. The filly immediately realized what was up and leaped towards the thing, only to get pushed right back down by Luna’s magic. The cake floated towards the blue alicorn before setting itself next to her plate. “Do you know how many calories are in one bite of these things? A lot, I can assure you. *Far* too many for growing ponies.”

“THAT’S MY CAKE!” shouted Celestia. Luna was still keeping her pinned, and for all the filly’s struggles, she couldn’t even budge. “I WANT MY CAKE BACK NOW!”

“And you will have it back,” said Luna. “But first, you have to finish your dinner.”

“But it tastes terrible!”

“Then you’ll just have to go hungry.”

“Um...Princess Luna?” Twilight interjected. “Maybe we should just...ask them to make something else?”

“No!” said Luna. “I had to deal with this for who-knows-how-long. I’m certain Celestia can put up with it for a few days.”

Celestia’s little hooves shook. Her self control evaporated against the overwhelming frustration she felt towards her sister. Easier than before, she slipped right back into that same unwise, irrational filly mindset. “I am not going to eat this, and you can’t make me!”

“And who says I can’t?”

Before Celestia could mutter out another comeback, the room was filled with a blinding light. When it cleared, Twilight was now standing between the two, her face facing Luna. If there was any emotion besides rage, it wasn’t showing. “I do! If Celestia doesn’t want to eat this, she doesn’t have to!” She turned back to Celestia; the filly was cowering under the table, seemingly scarred for life from having a unicorn’s...plot appear right in her face. “Your Highness, if you want my piece of cake, you can have it.”

Celestia poked her head out of hiding just as Twilight levitated over her own dessert. Her eyes practically bulged at the sight; were it not for her royal fiber rapidly rebuilding itself, she would have probably broken out into cartwheels right then and there. “Thank you, Twilight Sparkle. It’s...lovely.”

Luna quickly tapped Twilight on the shoulder. “Miss Sparkle, may I please speak with you in the hallway.” It was most certainly not a request.

The minute the door closed behind Twilight, Luna was right on her. “What were you thinking back there?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, undermining my authority in front of Celestia!”

Twilight winced. “Your authority? You turned your sister into a foal as a joke! I think that disqualifies you from anything remotely resembling ‘authority’ over her.”

Luna started to mouth a response, no doubt akin to the lavender pony learning her place before she found herself on the sun, but no words came out. She started shifting nervously, keeping her eyes away from Twilight’s. “Twilight, I’m sorry. It’s just...whenever Celestia starts talking like that, I can’t help myself. Somehow, she’s gotten it into her skull that my foalhood was nothing but games compared to hers.”

Twilight’s brain suddenly had a storm. *Of course, it’s so obvious. Why didn’t I see it before? Oh, way to put your hoof in your mouth, Twilight!* “Princess Luna, what was Celestia like as a filly?”

Luna sighed. “I can’t tell you too much about when she was that young. Our memories don’t degrade as much as a regular pony – no offense – but even I can’t remember everything from when I was a baby.”

Twilight couldn’t help but laugh a little. “*You?* A baby?”

“Yes, yes, we all started like that, but can we get back to the topic at hoof?” Twilight nodded. “In any case, Celestia...well, as far back as I can remember, she was my size right now or bigger. She taught me how to fly, use magic, and even taught me how to begin the night. And all this was while she was helping develop the first city-states in Equestria, long before anypony thought of a single ruler.”

“But...what does that have to do with her foalhood?”

“During that time, I was pretty much free to do as I pleased. I spent my time visiting the villages and towns of Equestria, and being still technically a filly at the time, mostly just goofed off with some of the other fillies and colts. I got to enjoy parties and games, while Celestia kept herself working. And when she tried to join, the other ponies were scared to be around her. They were afraid that if they did something wrong, she would destroy their whole village out of spite.”

“And what about before then?”

“Celestia never really talked about then, and I doubt she will now,” Luna lied. Celestia *had* told her many times about her past, from the giant monsters trying to eat her to licking algae off walls to survive. By the time she had discovered magic, most of the world’s inhabitants had more or less taken form, and she had to spend the rest of her days just keeping everypony in line long enough for civilization to take hold. It was safe to say she never really *had* a foalhood. “In any case, you can’t keep treating Celestia like she’s really a filly. If we do, it’ll only reinforce her split personality, and quite frankly, I don’t want a hyperactive filly alicorn running through the palace.”

Twilight turned her head towards the door. She could imagine Celestia still sitting there, worried about what Luna would do to her student. “I know you’re right, but I can’t help it either. She’s still a princess, no matter how she looks, and I just want to make sure she’s all right.”

Luna groaned. “Miss Sparkle, until about five hours ago, that filly was the single most powerful pony in all of Equestria. She has thousands of years of experience and knowledge, invented nearly every form of magic known to ponykind, and by all accounts was almost a surrogate mother for you here at the school. The best way to help isn’t to coddle her; it’s to get her back to normal as quickly as possible.”

It took Twilight a few moments to nod an agreement. “Very well, your Highness. I’m sure I can find a counterspell soon. In the meantime, may I ask a favor? I need to send a letter to Spike, and...”

Luna raised a hoof. “Say no more. I’ll send it for you before I attend to the rest of my duties. In any case, we should go back in. Dessert looked so good.”

Twilight smiled as she opened the door. “Really? Because last time I checked, you had to finish dinner before you got dessert.”

For the first time in a while, Luna let out a genuine smile in return. “A wise pony once said, ‘Do as I say, not as I do.’ Besides, I’m sure Celestia would-”

Both ponies stopped and gasped at the sight before them. In the approximately ten minutes they had been outside, Celestia had managed

to eat all three pieces of cake, knocked over her soup bowl after trying to support it with her bare hooves, and somehow embed her horn into the table itself. Her coat was stained with red and green, while her mouth was surrounded by a shaggy beard of crumbs and icing. Her eyes shot open as she heard the two enter. "Oh...Twilight Sparkle! Luna! I...wasn't expecting you back so quickly!"

Twilight was preparing to laugh out at the sight, until a piercing glare from Luna promptly shut her up. The moon princess quickly turned her attention back to Celestia, who was busy trying to pull herself out of the furniture. "Sister, I think it's time you turned in for the night."

Celestia finally pulled herself out of the table, a few small pieces of scrap wood and splinters following in her horn's wake. She slowly walked to her sister and student, her eyes dropping, her steps uneven, and her mouth barely stifling a yawn. "You're right, Luna. I...really need to get some sleep if we're going to find a counterspell tomorrow." She nuzzled up to her sister's chest, smearing some of the soup and basil off of her coat and other Luna's. "Good night, sister."

Luna did her best to smile, even as she agonized over how to explain her stained coat to her normal court. "Sweet dreams, little sister. I'll see you in the morning." She turned to Twilight. "Now, you said you had a letter to send?"

"Yes, it's right over there." A quick burst of magic, and a scroll floated from the desk and into Twilight's mouth. Luna's horn flared up, and the scroll instantly turned to smoke and flew out through a window towards Ponyville. The rapid succession left Twilight rather surprised, not to mention the bitter aftertaste of magic in one's mouth. "So, that's how you two transport scrolls?"

"Anypony with enough magic ability can do something like that," said Luna. "One day, I'm sure you will as well. Now, do you mind escorting Celestia back to her room? I have my nightly duties to attend to. When you're ready, just ask one of the ponies to escort you to one of the guest rooms."

"It'll be no problem at all, your Highness," said Twilight. She lit up her horn, levitating a half-asleep Celestia off the ground and onto her back. The filly's weight caused Twilight to buckle a small bit at first, but before long

the two were wandering towards Celestia's bedroom. Luna couldn't help but smile at the sight, before turning her mind back to other, more pressing matters...

Spike grumbled as he finally put the last book back into place. The library had survived yet another one of Twilight's impromptu studying marathons, and it had only taken eight hours for the baby dragon to put all the books back by himself. It was supposed to be a team effort between himself and Twilight, but no, *she* had to get the big summons to Canterlot while *he* stayed behind and did all the work. Even worse, she still hadn't returned.

Before the dragon could say anything, though, he felt that uncomfortable feeling in his gut. He let out a loud belch, accompanied by a large green flame. From the fire emerged a scroll, the kind only Princess Celestia used. He grabbed the tube with both claws and unfurled it...

Dear Spike,

As you can probably tell, I haven't been able to make it home just yet. Princess Luna's summons was far more imperative than I first thought.

Princess Celestia has decided to take an impromptu vacation, and is out of Equestria at the moment. Before you worry yourself, Princess Luna is taking over both sun and moon during this time, and will rule Equestria in her place. Because of my connection with Celestia, she has asked me to assist her with tasks around the castle.

I am asking you to run the library in my stead. I promise I won't be gone for more than a few days, but I trust you to keep things working. You are my number one assistant, no matter the distance between us, and I am certain you are up to the task. I have some bits stashed underneath my bed just in case, and if there's an emergency, don't be afraid to ask any of our friends for help. Just make sure I come back to a clean library, okay?

*With much love,
Twilight Sparkle*

As Spike finished reading the scroll, his very complexion turned deathly pale. “Twilight’s helping Princess Luna? Princess Celestia has gone on vacation? But...the princess has never taken a vacation in her life! And Twilight should have asked me to come over and help, not stay here in a crummy old library. She must want me to stay *away* from Canterlot. That can mean only one thing: Princess Luna has turned evil again, banished Celestia, and turned Twilight into her slave! She must have made her write this to throw me off-track! *I’ve gotta get the others!*”

The purple dragon dropped the scroll on the ground and darted out the door. A few seconds later, he darted right back in, ran upstairs, grabbed the bag of bits, and rushed back outside. If he was going to Canterlot on a rescue mission, he was going to need a *lot* of gemstones...

“How dare she deny my request! Does our beloved princess no longer care for civility and order?”

Within his private estate, Prince Blueblood paced about, still fuming over his royal snubbing from earlier that day. His attendants tried to make themselves as scarce as possible, lest they attract the wrath of their vain, temperamental, self-centered employer. “How can she not see that an injustice has been committed? That mare dared to think she was on the same level as I. Making me eat common swill, ruining my perfect coat with that other commoner’s cake, and willfully destroying the most important party in Equestria! The charges are as plain as the day, and yet Aunt Celestia still won’t properly respond.”

Only one pony dared to speak, although it was more like a whisper. “M-M- Maybe she was just tired today. You were the last pony she was able to see in court this afternoon.”

Blueblood paused, his mind rapidly altering events to serve this new idea. “Perhaps. Aunt Luna has told me things have been difficult lately.” A light bulb, highly oxidized but still functioning, turned on in his brain. “I shall see

her first thing tomorrow morning, after the sunrise. I am certain she will be more receptive to my requests then.”

Chapter Five

Luna's nighttime court was already in full swing by the time the princess arrived, her coat still showing smudges from Celestia's soup accident. The meeting chamber was more or less a converted banquet hall, same furnishings and all. Celestia had suggested using the throne room, but Luna was far too hesitant for that much pomp and circumstance. In any case, she didn't want to hold her own court in the same place her sister held hers. All the ponies would ever do is compare the two princesses, and Luna knew in her heart of hearts who they would prefer.

The main members of her court, mostly representatives from the major cities and regions of Equestria, were seated at the table. Her attendants had already started going over last night's business, most of it concerning the expansion of Hoofington and changes to the proposed highway system connecting Manehattan and Trottingham. All of it was very basic. It started with drafting a proposal and sending it to Celestia's desk. There, it would be ignored for about two weeks, or until Luna reminded Celestia about its importance, and then it would either be approved or sent back for another debate. A few times, it was even brought up during Celestia's time of the day, where, of course, the older sister always got her way.

That's about to change.

Everypony immediately rose from their seats and bowed all the way to the floor at Luna's approach. The moon princess couldn't help but blush and hide her head at the sight. The constant bowing didn't quite bother Luna quite as much as it did Celestia; then again, Celestia had an extra thousand years to get royally sick of being treated like royalty. After a millennium-long banishment, a little respect was a nice change of pace.

Luna took her seat at the head of the table, smoothing out her still-wet fur with one leg. "Good evening, fillies and gentlecolts. I apologize for my tardiness, but a...number of situations have occurred so far tonight, and I would like to get through tonight's session with as little difficulty as possible. Is that all right?"

The others nodded in agreement. "Very well. So, what business do we have tonight?"

Twilight's restful slumber was interrupted by a peculiar hopping sensation on the other side of the bed. The mare yawned and rustled about, but stubbornly kept her eyes closed. "Egh, Spike? Keep it down, will ya?"

"I'm not Spike," chirped a very familiar voice.

Twilight's eyes finally popped, still groggy from last night. The books she borrowed from Princess Celestia lay on top of a nearby nightstand, along with a barely-touched notebook. The windows showed a still pitch-black Equestria; it was obviously still late at night. And there, standing on the edge of the bed, was a perky, wide-awake Celestia. "Come on, sleepy head! We have a lot to do today!"

The unicorn flattened her ears in a vain attempt to block out the incessant cheeriness in the room. She glanced at a nearby clock, confirming her woes. "Princess? It's 4:30 in the morning. Shouldn't you still be asleep?"

Celestia spat her tongue at Twilight's desperate plea for sleep. "Why should I be? We have a long day ahead of us. We are going to get up, have some breakfast, and remove this spell before things get any more complicated!"

"But...I was up all night reading," groaned Twilight. Her head fell back on the pillow with a soft thump, while her eyes failed in their quest to stay open. "Please princess, just a few more hours?"

Celestia groaned as her student fell right back asleep. *I didn't want to have to do this, Twilight. But you leave me no choice...* Walking on tip-hoof, she snuck up to Twilight's left ear, took a deep breath, leaned right in...

"WAKE UP!"

Twilight screamed and jumped right out of the bed, landing face-first on the floor with a heavy thud. Celestia leered over the side, saw that her student

was all right, and started giggling. This time, however, Twilight didn't feel much like joining in. In fact, she was still so tired she didn't really feel anything. "Now come on, Twilight Sparkle. We're having waffles!"

By the time Luna stepped out of the meeting, she was already feeling the pressure.

Most nights followed the same formula: bring up a problem, discuss it, ask why Celestia hadn't done anything yet, engage in playful banter about her sister's work ethic, and go home. Tonight was a different story. A few of the representatives had already gleaned from the nervous staff that something had happened to Celestia. She could feel the very sense of dread emanating from her own council, and in all honesty she felt the same way.

In any case, this led to a discussion of Celestia's massive backlog. Next year's budget had yet to be approved. At least six trade agreements were in hot dispute. Manehattan's citizens were complaining about higher food prices because of Fillydelphia's Parasprite infestation. Economic growth was slow across the country. The Cloudsdale Weather Service's attempt to fix the broken weather schedule had resulted in an overabundance of storm clouds, and the excess would be in Canterlot within twelve hours.

In short, she was already having a mess of a day. And she hadn't even raised the sun yet...

After breakfast, Celestia and Twilight made their way back to Celestia's room, the former's coat covered in syrup and the latter still feeling like a zombie pony. On Twilight's back sat the books she had borrowed the night before, with not a single burned copy to be found.

The two walked to the nearby bookshelf, where Twilight telekinetically returned the books to their proper places on the shelf. She then pulled down a few others and set them on the floor for Celestia. The filly sat in front of the pile, pulled down a book with her teeth, and forced it open with her hooves. She didn't even notice Twilight covertly pushing something out of her mane and onto one of the books. "Your Highness, I have a

question.”

Celestia looked up from her book, a big grin still plastered beneath the syrup stains. “Of course, Twilight. What do you want to know?”

“Last night, when Princess Luna and I went out of the room, she kind of told me about your foalhood, and...”

The filly’s eyes narrowed to almost perfectly flat line. Twilight suddenly found herself very, very afraid for her future status as Celestia’s pupil. “I see. Twilight Sparkle, I do appreciate your attempts to...interject yourself into my sisterly relationship, but I would appreciate it more if you didn’t concern yourself with my past.”

“But...I was being so insensitive,” said Twilight. “I never even thought you were ever a filly before this, and given your age...I mean...I never thought about how hard it must have been back then. So scared, so lonely, so...”

Celestia raised a hoof, stopping Twilight yet again. “Once again, do not concern yourself with my personal history. Yes, things weren’t perfect, but I was trying to guide the evolution of an entire planet and manage its stagnant ecosystem, all while a reality warper kept making things a living nightmare. My sister and I effectively created the three races of ponies, managed to build an entire civilization on the basis of order and harmony, and invented half those spells you so eagerly study. So, while I enjoy the occasional chat about how terrible things were, can we please get on to the problem at hand?”

Twilight smiled the fakest smile in the history of fake smiles and started sliding towards the door. “So, why do you want me to meet with The Abomi- I mean, Professor Gaze again?”

“Several years ago, long before you were a student, Frosty Gaze wrote a thesis on ancient pony magic. He came to me petitioning to read a few of the banned spellbooks we held in the library’s forbidden section. That included works by the same mad pony that created this spell in the first place.”

“You mean, he’s seen the Arcanus E Dragonus?” asked Twilight.

Celestia scoffed. “No, of course not! That book wasn’t the only one in the collection. The others were far less dangerous, but still had more than a few spells that would be best left forgotten.” The grim determination on Celestia’s face, the same Twilight had seen during Discord’s resurrection, was enough to prove the weight of her words. “It would be easier if we had the originals, but there was a fire in that wing of the library a few months after Gaze had finished his thesis.”

Celestia paused. She could already see the gears whirring in Twilight’s head. “And no, he had nothing to do with it. At the time the fire started, he was a week into a two-week vacation, visiting some friends just outside of Ponyville. In any case, only...that book survived.”

“I see,” muttered Twilight. “Well, I guess I’ll be going then! Just gonna visit the *alma mater*, catch up on the good old days, visit the cruelest teacher ever so I can find out about some evil pony’s dark magic and bring the most wonderful pony in the history of Equestria back to normal...Hee hee hee, this is going to be a very long day.” With that, Twilight slid out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Celestia stared at the door, unblinking, for several seconds. *I swear, that pony can make mountains out of molehills.* She then turned back to the open book in front of her. “Well, back to work. I have a lot of ground to cover today, so let’s get cracking.”

The sun rose over the horizon, bathing Ponyville in a blanket of warm, life-giving light. It struggled in place for a while, almost seeming like it was going to just fall right back out of sight, but after about ten minutes it finally rose and locked itself into place. One after another, ponies began to wander out of their homes, simultaneously ready to start a new day and curious about why Celestia was having so much trouble.

One pony in town did know, however. Or rather, one purple-and-green baby dragon.

Spike and Applejack walked out of Sweet Apple Acres’ apple cellar. Spike was still clutching Twilight’s letter against himself like a security blanket.

The workhorse, meanwhile, was still regarding him with more of a sense of skepticism than anything else. “Are ya sure that was what Twi’s letter

said?”

“Of course!” said Spike. “Princess Celestia never takes vacations, Twilight wouldn’t leave me here if something big was going on, and there’s no way anyone would let Princess Luna rule both day and night. I’m telling you, she’s evil!”

Applejack furrowed her brow at the dragon’s insistence of Luna’s wickedness. “Listen sugahcube, ah don’t know much about Celestia’s sister, but ah’m pretty sure she isn’t the monster ya make her out to be.”

The two walked through the apple orchards, their branches still budding with fresh fruit. By this time, Applejack would normally be halfway through the south side of the farm, a few dozen bushels already ready for the afternoon market. Not this time, however. Big Macintosh was already out there, giving the two a quick nod as they passed, and Apple Bloom was still finishing her morning chores before heading to school. AJ’s job today was far different.

As the two exited the farm and entered Ponyville proper, Spike finally spoke. “So, if you don’t believe this brilliantly-coded letter, why are you going to Canterlot?”

Applejack turned back to the farm. “Cause a certain filly flooded Ponyville with molasses last week!” she shouted.

“Ah said ah was sorry!” answered a filly’s voice.

“Ya’ll still grounded for a week, ya here! Come right home after school!”

She turned back to Spike, quickly reassuming her indoor voice.

“Scootaloo’s folks were flat broke, so Rarity and I had to cover the rest of the damages ourselves. But this means we won’t have enough bits to cover our taxes, so ah need to ask Princess Celestia for a - what’s the word Big Macintosh used - extension.”

Spike looked slightly confused at Applejack’s logic. “Then...why are you asking the princess? Can’t you just talk to the ERS?”

“And get trapped in paperwork for a thousand years? No thanks.”

“And what about Twilight?!” said Spike. “Aren’t you forgetting how important she is? Without her, we can’t use the elements to zap Nightmare Moon-”

“Princess Luna.”

“...Princess Luna back to the moon!”

AJ stopped and sighed. She could see the fear for Twilight’s well-being all over Spike’s face. She flashed a quick smile and prepared her trademark honesty. “Ah’m sure Twi’s all right. Ya’ll can’t keep rushing to conclusions like that. If ya want, ah’m sure we can take ya with us. I’m sure she’d be burstin’ to see ya by now!” Spike couldn’t help but give a childish grin at the words. “Now, we don’t wanna dilly-dally. That’s Rainbow Dash’s department.”

A quick breakfast and six cups of tea was enough to calm Luna down. As she started making her way to the throne room, however, those blasted nerves started acting up. Last night’s meeting was already a drain, and the sheer volume of work her loving sister had left behind was enough to stress anypony.

Walking alongside the princess was Ruby Dream, a crimson-coated pegasus and one of Celestia’s attendants. On her back sat a pair of saddle bags, bulging with various papers and bills Luna would have to review.

She occasionally gave the moon princess nervous glances from the corner of her eye, something Luna hadn’t failed to notice. It was the same fearful gaze she had experienced so many times before. “Is there something wrong, Miss Dream?”

The pegasus gasped and turned her attention towards the floor. “N-No, your Highness. I-I was just...surprised when you requested that I be your assistant. I mean, I just started, and I’m sure...”

Luna flashed as comforting a smile as she could. “I’ve read your file. Trust me, I know you’re qualified for this position. I wouldn’t have asked you to do this otherwise.” *And of course, you’re a new hire AND not from around Canterlot. Which means you don’t have a personal connection with*

Celestia. That way you won't go running to her if something goes wrong.
"So, what's on the agenda today?"

"Ah...well, you have a morning meeting with a representative from the Equestrian Revenue Service to discuss the upcoming tax season."

"Very good."

"The early afternoon will consist of open court, as usual. I have a prepared list of all appointments, but you should expect a few unannounced petitions as well."

"Obviously."

"And this evening, we will be setting up for tomorrow night's dinner party. It's nothing too important; mostly, you just have to say hello to some of the aristocrats and nobles from around Equestria. The menu is already prepared, the necessary furniture has been ordered, and I have already started preparing an excuse for your absence."

A blue leg shot up in front of Ruby. Both ponies turned on their hooves, the larger one staring at the smaller with enough force to burn the bark off a tree. "What's this about an excuse?"

"W-W-Well, that's what the other attendants told me to do," Ruby croaked.
"It's what Princess Celestia always ordered!"

Luna's face morphed into a low growl. "Princess Celestia, unfortunately, is still in no shape to rule. Until she is, I am in charge, and I will not insult our guests *or* our subjects by not making a personal appearance. Is that understood?"

Ruby let out an affirmative whinny, her eyes already welling up in fear. Luna's expressions immediately softened as she realized what she just did. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to yell at you. It's just...I'm sick of everypony comparing me to my sister, acting like she's the most perfect thing in existence and can do absolutely no wrong. I would just appreciate it if you would not simply do what Celestia would request, and instead bring any such information to me. Understood?"

Ruby quickly nodded. "Yes, your Majesty. I-In any case, the ERS agents will be arriving in about thirty minutes." A small bit of courage surfaced, enough to crack a small joke. "You know how picky those ERS guys are. Everything has to be right on the dot."

Luna smiled. "Indeed. You slip up just a little, and somepony can get hurt..." She suddenly didn't feel like laughing anymore.

Thankfully for both parties, their little downer session was interrupted by a loud clash from the other end of the hall. Both ponies galloped towards the palace doors just in time to see half a squadron of guards restrain a certain, familiar member of the aristocracy: Prince Blueblood. "Unhand me at once, you fools! I have urgent business with the princess!"

"The princess is not receiving unannounced visits at this time, sire!" shouted one of the guards. "Make an appointment, or leave the premises!"

"I will not! The princess must hear my..." The stallion finally noticed the stunned, slack-jawed moon princess staring at him. His courtly manners finally returned to the forefront; he immediately kneeled and cooled his temper. "Princess Luna. I'm surprised to see you at this hour."

"As am I, nephew," said Luna. She motioned to the guards, who quickly bowed and stepped aside. "Now, you said you had some urgent business?"

Blueblood pulled himself off the floor and shook his head. "I do, your Highness, but I must speak with Princess Celestia. It concerns a matter of our nation's very honor."

"I'm sorry, but my...big sister has decided to take an impromptu vacation," Luna lied. "For the time being, I am fulfilling her royal functions as well as my own." The shock on Blueblood's face was palpable. He obviously hadn't planned on this. "In any case, we can speak over this matter in private. Please, follow me."

Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns was just as Twilight remembered. An architectural marvel in the middle of Canterlot, the school

was always well-maintained by the small army of ponies it employed. The morning light reflected off the freshly-mopped floors, creating a marvelous cascade of colors as Twilight walked past. The lockers that lined the walls were all in remarkable shape for such an old object. Even the walls were completely bare, save for the occasional announcement or motivational poster.

As she made her way to Frosty Gaze's classroom, she occasionally stopped to peak into the classrooms. Each was filled with unicorn fillies and colts, all of them eagerly jotting down notes on every aspect of magic, from the abstract theories to the practical implementations. The whole thing was enough to almost floor Twilight with such carefree nostalgia.

That all came to a screeching halt the minute she reached Frosty Gaze's classroom. Her heart stopped dead as she looked through the door window. Inside the auditorium-style classroom sat about twenty of the most terrified fillies and colts in Equestria, facing one of the most fearsome beings this side of the Everfree Forest. Frosty Gaze was a mountain of a pony, a unicorn that stood just seven or so inches short of Celestia, with a muscled body that would make even Big Macintosh envious. His cobalt coat and ice-blue mane certainly lived up to his name, and the way his nostrils flared as she spoke only added to his menace.

Twilight's growing sense of dread was only stopped by a screeching, agony-inducing bell, followed by a herd of students racing out of one classroom and into another. By the time the bell echoed a second time, Twilight wasn't so much standing by the door as she was spinning on her back. She flipped back onto four hooves, shook her head until her eyes stopped derping, and started her way into the classroom.

Frosty Gaze was standing behind his desk, levitating his teaching materials into a black saddle bag. His eyes were facing away from the door, too busy cataloging all his findings to pay attention to the mortally-afraid mare. The rest of the room was empty; thankfully, this was an empty class period. Twilight took a few more steps down into the room, swallowing a lump in her throat. "Um...Professor Gaze?"

"Office hours are three to five. If you can't read a syllabus, I don't know how you managed to..." When he finally bothered to look at the speaker, his eyes narrowed even further. "Ah, Twilight Sparkle. It's been a long

time. What brings Celestia's golden filly back to my classroom?"

Twilight's anxiety was rapidly rising to Fluttershy levels. "Uh, you see, Princess Celestia said you, er, studied some ancient magic for a thesis, and I was..."

Gaze wasn't just looking at Twilight now; he was making his best "melt your face off" expression. The unicorn felt those last few bits of inner strength start slipping away. "If it's any business to you, then yes, I did write a thesis on illegal spells. And why is it so important for you? Does it have something to do with Princess Celestia's disappearance?"

There was an almost audible silence before Twilight spoke. "What do you...?"

"Do you really think the princesses are the only ones up at that hour? A few ponies saw Princess *Luna* raise the sun this morning; after failing a few dozen times, I might add. The *Equestria Daily* printed an emergency edition just for the news. Nearly all of Canterlot knows by now, and soon so will the rest of Equestria. I had to spend half of class telling everypony Equestria wasn't going to suddenly explode!"

Twilight's eyes shifted about in their sockets. "Er...Princess Celestia has...decided to take a vacation! She hasn't had one in a thousand years, so she asked Princess Luna to take on her responsibilities for a few days!"

"...Have I ever told you you're a terrible liar?" Frosty Gaze levitated the bag's zipper shut and floated it onto his back. He started his way towards the door, oblivious to his former pupil's shaking. "In any case, I have a very busy day, so if you will excuse me, *Miss Sparkle*..."

Gaze was halfway up the steps when Twilight finally found her last remaining nerve. "Sir...have you ever heard of the Arcanus E Draconus?"

The entire room went silent, so much so the two ponies could hear the clock ticking away. The stallion turned to the mare, his cold glare replaced with one of pure horror. "Wh...Why do you ask?"

Twilight now had the advantage, and she was ready to use it. She propped herself out of her almost complete melding with the wood floor and walked

right up to Frosty's muzzle. "Before Princess Celestia left for her vacation, she told me the book was stolen. She also said you read other pieces of the collection as a part of your thesis. I need to know as much about the magic this pony used as I can."

Gaze snorted. "And I assume this has the Princess' approval?"

"Of course."

The stallion sighed. "...Whatever Celestia wants, she can have. Wait here, I will be right back."

This morning, Celestia was sure of only one thing: she was bored out of her skull.

Not that work like this was ever the most exciting thing in Equestria. About ninety percent of her working day was spent reading the latest paperwork from Luna's own cabinet, as well as any other piece of royal business that worked its way into Canterlot. After some deliberations, a few counter-proposals, and a lot of hoofwork uncovering every last shred of information related to the problem, she would make some decisions, her loyal subjects would enact them, and all would be well.

Needless to say, the practice had worn itself out about seven hundred years ago. Making things worse was Luna; Celestia loved her sister dearly (even if she did just knock off a few feet from her height), but the moon princess was always trying to rush things through without as much as a second thought. Celestia knew it was just youthful impatience, coupled with Luna's own guilt over her past, and that she would eventually grow out of it. Still, it could be more than a little irritating.

Even then, however, she could usually just soldier through using her love for Equestria and concern for all her subjects. Now, she was so full of youthful energy and spirit it was a miracle she wasn't bouncing off the walls.

Celestia had to stifle another yawn as she clumsily turned a page with her hooves. Her lack of magic was already troubling, and was only made worse by having an entire palace full of things meant to be operated by

magic. Just cleaning her breakfast mess was a challenge-and-a-half. Her hair and tooth brushes were inoperable with bare hooves, the handles on the tub and sink were almost impossible to turn, and her first time trying to apply shampoo just about blinded her. If a cure wasn't found soon, she might have no choice but to actually ask her servants for help, something she really didn't want to do for such small things.

The book, Principle Theories on the Nature of Curses and Their Effects, was just as long-winded and dull as the title. "Every page is the same thing over and over again," Celestia murmured. "Who knew you could stretch 'curses are bad' over eight hundred pages. And nothing about *removing* them? Whatever I paid this pony to write this, it's too much!"

She slammed the book closed as dramatically as she could (which amounted to a very soft thud) and walked back to the bookshelf. She climbed up the stepstool, stopping on all fours at each step until she reached the top. Jutting out slightly was a faded brown-covered book simply titled How to Break Curses in Your Everyday Life. *A self-help book. Well, it can't be a worse place to look than anything else I've tried.*

Celestia clasped the book between her teeth and started pulling. Almost immediately, a small object rattled off the book's top and smacked the princess on the forehead. The shock startled her enough to release the book and topple backwards. She landed on the floor just as another, similarly-sized object landed next to her.

It was a pair of cheap, plastic toys. One was a barely-articulated pink pony, with a strawberry mane and tail made of course fiber. The other was some sort of soldier pony, with what looked like an automated crossbow strapped onto his back. Celestia stared at the two in dumbfounded confusion. "How did these get here? I never..."

It struck her like a bolt of lightning. *When Twilight put the books back...she must have snuck these on top of that book! Clever girl...*

"I-In any case," Celestia said to no pony in particular, "I'm much too old to play with dolls. Besides, I have a lot of work to do."

Her eyes naturally wandered back to her books, scanning the hundreds of tomes for anything that could possibly help her. Not a single title stood out.

Celestia realized there was nothing she could really accomplish without Frosty Gaze's thesis as a starting point. In her utter defeat, her mind kept wandering back to those two two-bit toys Twilight had brought her. "I guess I could use a break," she said. "Five minutes, and then these are going right back on the bookshelf."

A pair of dark-coated guards threw open the throne room doors, allowing Luna, Blueblood and Ruby to wander through and into the throne room proper. Besides the three and the usual guards, the room was completely empty. The cleaning staff had finished polishing the stained glass windows only an hour prior, adding a rainbow of colors to the room's already substantial majesty.

Once the two were about halfway to the throne, the guards slammed the doors shut. A loud bang rattled through the hall, causing all three to shake in surprise. Neither Blueblood nor Ruby had ever been in the room with the doors closed, and Luna was so nervous a crawling caterpillar fifty yards away would send her running. Fortunately for her, royal duty quickly outweighed her gnawing fear. "So...Prince Blueblood, what is this dire situation?"

Blueblood raised a hoof to his mouth and cleared his throat. "Your Majesty, are you familiar with a town called Ponyville?"

Luna couldn't help but smile. She could still remember her first day as a free pony after a thousand years. Just being so welcomed after a millennium of imprisonment was a wonderful joy for the princess. She had been meaning to make another visit, but her assimilation back into Equestrian society had proven a difficult process. "I am aware of it, yes."

"And you know of the disaster at the Grand Galloping Gala?"

"Of course I do," said Luna. "It was the talk of Canterlot for weeks. But...that was months ago."

Blueblood huffed. "And that is the problem! The ruffians that destroyed the Gala were all from Ponyville, and Princess Celestia allowed them to go free. They are responsible for destroying the entire ballroom, releasing all the animals in the garden, and insulting the honor of every pony in

attendance, including my own! And Ponyville's citizens still harbor these fugitives! We must show these ponies that any disgrace to the crown will not be tolerated!"

As she listened to Blueblood's spiel, Luna could feel the nerves in her forehead throb. She knew her nephew was vain and petty, the very kind of noblepony that made the Royal Pony Sisters regret ever making a ruling class. But this was a new low. "Are you telling me...you want me to destroy an entire town, simply because a few ponies crashed the Grand Galloping Gala?"

Blueblood and Ruby could almost taste the sheer anger Luna was emitting. The latter merely shrank back a few steps; while the former used his most prized asset (an ego that could swallow half a star system) to quickly regain his footing. "Your Highness, please be reasonable. Princess Celestia, as wise and gentle a ruler as she may be, is far too lenient on troublemakers in Equestria. If we do not take immediate action, there is no telling how far this chaos will spread."

Luna couldn't tell if it was the sleep deprivation, the insane amount of work that faced her, or her nephew's sheer audacity that got on her last nerve, but it was more than enough. "And you think this going to make things smoother?! Prince Blueblood, I will not turn Equestria's military against my subjects just because a party went badly."

Blueblood's mood immediately shifted, his mind formulating another plan. "Then arrest the ones directly responsible!"

Luna's anger cooled from "volcanic" to "significantly above room temperature." "Perhaps that would be a more...measured response. Do we know who these 'vile criminals' are?"

"The so-called 'Bearers of the Elements of Harmony.'"

And Luna's rage jumped right back up to "supernova." "The Bearers of the Elements of Harmony. The same six ponies that freed me from Nightmare Moon."

Blueblood snorted; either he didn't mind Luna's growing inferno, or was just too clueless to notice. "Yes, those same ponies. If we can have them

arrested, tried and sentenced before Celestia returns, I am sure we can prevent what could be a major disaster.”

“And what disaster would that be?!”

“Everypony’s reaction to you as a ruler, of course!”

Luna could feel the synapses in her brain snapping. She raised and slammed her front hooves so hard the room itself shuddered. “How dare you! I am your princess *and* your aunt! You will not- I repeat, NOT- speak to me in such a way!”

The prince briefly trembled from his sovereign’s fury, but his wounded pride quickly overcame both his sense of growing horror and any feeling of civility towards Luna. “What do you plan to tell them? Everypony in Canterlot can already see something is going on! And when they learn Celestia, the most beloved pony in all of existence, has completely disappeared, they **will** ask questions. They **will** think Princess Luna, the former Nightmare Moon that tried to destroy Equestria only a year prior, is behind all this! What do you think they will do then?”

Luna froze, Blueblood’s words working their way through her mind. Her voice became tinged with fear. “...And how will destroying Ponyville help me?”

Blueblood’s overconfident smirk returned. “As your nephew, I have considerable influence amongst the rest of Celestia’s court. Give me a chance to avenge my honor, and I will make sure they stay on your side. Refuse, and you will find your job far more difficult than you imagined.”

For the first time this entire meeting, Ruby finally managed to squeak out something. “You...You’re trying to threaten the princess!”

The stallion sneered at the pegasus; she responded by unfolding her wings and covering her face. “In any case, your Majesty, this is for the good of Equestria. Surely even you can see that.”

Luna was silent for several seconds, almost sweating from the sheer weight of Blueblood’s threat. *He’s right about my subjects. Everypony still hates me after what happened. I knew this was going to happen. Why did*

I agree to this? Even as a foal, Celestia would have more...

Her view gradually shifted away from Blueblood, going back and forth between the still-cowering Ruby Dream and the throne itself. She could feel her muscles tighten as she did so, a new vigor rushing through her veins. *No. It's my fault Celestia is the way she is, and I will be responsible for Equestria. No matter how many stand against you, a princess never betrays her subjects to anyone.*

She turned back to her spoiled brat of a nephew. "Prince Blueblood, I have reconsidered your 'offer.'" Blueblood could sense his imminent victory. "And it is my opinion that this matter...is to be dropped."

Blueblood's jaw dropped. "What? But...have you..."

"We will no longer discuss anything related to Ponyville's destruction, or the arrests of those responsible. I am certain Princess Celestia already saw to those matters."

The prince's reaction was swift and, in a word, stupid. "And you think the other ponies will just go along with you taking over? Are you so certain everypony will accept a known traitor? A pony that was willing to sentence everything in Equestria to certain death because nopony liked her nights?"

"Furthermore..." Luna leaned right into Blueblood's face. "Attempting to threaten a government official is a very serious charge. Trying to threaten me? That's not just criminal, that's plain idiocy. I don't know what happened to your ancestors to produce someone as stupid as you, but I can assure you, none of them would be dumb enough to even think about something like this."

All light in the room instantly vanished. In its place was an unrelenting darkness, chilling every bone in Blueblood's body. Ruby was nowhere to be seen, simply vanishing into the darkening ether. The prince hunched as low to the ground as possible, his eyes locked onto Luna's as if in a hypnotic trance.

Luna's voice boomed through the hall, betraying something fierce and terrible inside her. "You have insulted my sister and I, threatened the security of our nation, and *dared* to try and give me orders. You are a

petty, foolish creature, and I will not allow something like you to endanger my land and ponies. Mere banishment is not enough. I should have you destroyed for this!”

The prince’s entire body was drenched in terror sweat. “P-Please, Aunt Luna! I...I’m sorry! Just let me go! I’ll never do it again!”

Luna let out a dark, bitter laugh. “Let you go? What about Equestria’s honor? Wouldn’t that just spread more chaos across the land?” Blueblood could only whimper in reply. The princess’ mocking sneer slid into a deep, disappointed frown. “My duties include the execution of all of Equestria’s laws, and by right I shouldn’t let you walk out of this room alive. Still, you are family, as distant as it may be. That’s the only reason I haven’t winked you into a griffon banquet hall yet.” Blueblood’s whimpers and moans only intensified.

“However, you cannot go unpunished. I am placing you under house arrest. You are to remain in your home until I am satisfied you have learned how to properly treat your superiors. Until that time, I do not want to see you on the streets, or near the palace, or even speaking to a member of this court. If you do, I will make sure you suffer every indignity imaginable, plus a few ponykind has long since forgotten. **Have I made myself clear?**”

Blueblood quickly nodded. “Yes, yes! Just don’t kill me!”

The darkness melted away, revealing a completely untouched throne room. Blueblood was still drowning in his own perspiration, while Luna went from “horrific monster” to “cute blue yearling.” She whistled, and a pair of guards immediately rushed into the throne room. “Please take Prince Blueblood back to his estate. As of this moment, he is to be considered under house arrest, on my orders. I want a full squadron of guards placed around his residence at all times, and I want daily reports of his actions.” The guards nodded, lifted Blueblood to his hooves with their wings, and escorted him out of the room. The once-proud stallion made no attempt to resist, calmly accepting his punishment for the time being.

Once the doors were closed, and she had a few seconds to cool off, the moon princess couldn’t help but smile. She never planned to kill Blueblood, of course. All she had to do was show him a taste of her power

and make him fall in line. *No wonder Celestia has so much trouble with him. 'A princess may be stern, but can never show anger,' my hoof. That was so satisfying, I...*

It was right then that Luna noticed something was missing; Ruby was nowhere to be seen. The sound of shivering and clicking from behind the throne quickly revealed her location. Only Ruby's face could be seen from behind the chair; she was even more terrified than Blueblood. Luna started to say something, but at the first sound from the princess' mouth the pegasus immediately pulled her face out of view.

Luna's eyes drifted to the floor. "I'm sorry. I...Sometimes, when my sister and I get angry, we...I mean..."

Very cautiously, Ruby took a few steps from behind the throne and into normal view. "Princess...I apologize, but...what was that?"

"Something I never wanted to use," said Luna. "I was...just like her again."

"It was so dark...and so cold...and you seemed so angry."

Luna turned her back to the still-terrified mare. In her rage, she had forgotten what that spell did to anypony caught in it, as well as its effects on the entire room. It was no small wonder a normal pony would be terrified of such a power. It was the same kind magic she had used as Nightmare Moon. "If you are uncomfortable working with me, you are free to go. I won't blame you."

The attendant eyed the door nervously. Her brain and gut both told her to get out of there, before the possibly-not-former Nightmare Moon turned on her, too. When she glanced back at Luna, however, something made her stop. She had never seen anypony quite as miserable as her right now. A few clopping steps at a time, Ruby approached the softly weeping princess. "I...I...I'll stay, if you still need me. But...can we never do that again?"

Luna looked up at the pegasus in disbelief, before a small smile spread across her face. "I promise." The two finally let out a small laugh, the tension washing away. That incident behind her, Luna finished her walk to the throne, plopping her rear end on its lush cushion. "So, the ERS will be here in a few minutes. Once that's over with, I'll start knocking Celestia's

backlog. I'm sure this won't be so..."

She sniffed at the air. "Why does this room smell like bananas?"

It was about ten minutes before Frosty Gaze returned, a rather large tome on his back. He levitated the book over to Twilight, dropping it in front of her. On the front, written in gold ink, was the title A Study of Dark Magic and its Effects on Equestrian Law. "There it is. All that remains of the mad pony Kuchen."

Twilight batted an eyebrow. "Kuchen?"

"The unicorn that wrote the Arcanus E Draconus, as well as everything else in that collection." Frosty Gaze strode past the unicorn and took a seat at his desk. "He really was a lunatic, if that's what you're thinking. He theorized that, given enough magical power, anypony could actually 'ascend' and become an Alicorn, just like Princesses Celestia and Luna."

Twilight started leafing through the book. Sure enough, it contained several excerpts from a number of other texts, all of them written in a similar manner to the Youth Restoration Spell Luna had used. Frosty Gaze may have been a mean instructor, but he was also very thorough in his research. "If...If you don't mind me asking, what happened to him?"

Frosty Gaze sighed. He obviously wasn't keen on talking about something like him. "As far as I know, he never grew wings or gained an earth pony's strength and endurance. However, his research was so dangerous that Celestia had to take notice. You see, even the spells he pioneered that didn't drain the souls from ponies or summon demons were designed as actual curses. They may be an old pony's tale now, but back then they were very real."

He paused, collecting his thoughts for the next strike against Twilight's sanity. "The problem with curses is, they're designed to cause harm to ponies against their will. At first, they were just a few pranks, but after a while they transformed into something far worse. Kuchen was cursing entire villages for not serving him. He sank coastal towns and turned their inhabitants into sea ponies. He stripped pegasi of their wings and fed them to dragons. And that was his *good* days. When Celestia learned about this, she came to stop him, and needless to say he didn't survive the

encounter. After that, she ordered that all his books and materials be locked away, lest some other pony find them and, say, turn their sibling into a foal or something.”

Twilight giggled very nervously at the story. It was already difficult to imagine a pony that overwhelmingly evil, but the same pony making a youth spell was...bizarre. “Yes, well...I really do need to get going. Thank you for your time, Professor Gaze.” She immediately turned about and started towards the door, ready to hurry back to the palace. Frosty Gaze made no move to stop her. He just opened a drawer and levitated out a bottle of liquor.

He was finally free of that burden. It was time to celebrate.

Luna couldn't believe it. She was now sitting on Celestia's throne, ruling over the day as well as the night. In front of her stood representatives from the Equestrian Revenue Service, the same agency she had helped found only a few years before her banishment. All of them still wore the same black jackets, dyed their coats a solid brown, and had only their cutie marks to tell each other apart; a simple scare tactic to make sure nopony tried to actually skip on their payments. In the past, it was one of her prouder creations, a way to keep Equestria well-financed over the millennia.

And right now, she wished she could invent time travel, go back a thousand years, and smack her younger self upside the head for creating these buffoons.

The leader of the group, a unicorn, had just spent the last two hours reading a hundred-page speech, pausing only to replace “Princess Celestia” with “Princess Luna.” Luna simply sat on the throne, barely holding back her fifteenth yawn in the last forty minutes while the agent simply reminded her of the intricacies of the very system she had created.

Ruby was seated next to her, taking notes for the princess thanks to some very dexterous hooves and a quill in her mouth.

“...And so, the Income Tax Act of 938 can be clearly applied to those within the fifteen percent tax bracket, despite Princess Celestia's claims to the contrary. It is the opinion of our fellow auditors that any requests for an

extension or deferral using this act should therefore be denied in any such circumstance.” He levitated his speech into a nearby briefcase. “Do you have any comments, your Highness?”

Luna didn’t have anything to say. She didn’t know *what* to say. She had read and re-read said act dozens of times over the last year, and not a single thing that came out of the stallion’s mouth matched the law’s actual intention. “I...will take your legal appraisal into consideration. Is there any other business we need to attend to?”

“No, your Highness. We just wanted to inform you of some new changes to the tax codes,” the agent said. “We bid you a good day.” With that, the entire herd of ERS agents filed out of the throne room in a single file, the door closing behind them.

Luna stared at the door, waited about fifteen seconds for the group to be far, far away from the throne room, and finally turned to Ruby. “What was the point of all that?”

Ruby looked over her notes. “Well...it just looks like they wanted you to follow some specific acts more closely than your sister did last year.”

“Then why hold up *two hours* of my time?” said Luna. “We could have handled this over the mail. Do they really think so little of my sister and I that they have to set up this meeting months in advanced, just to tell us something we already know?” Ruby dared not answer. The princess roared from the frustration of it all. “Never mind. If you’ll excuse me, I need to speak with my sister for a few minutes.”

The great fortress stood in defiance of Princess Celestia’s wise and loving reign. An impenetrable wall of encyclopedias and reference books supported a roof made of atlases and thesauruses. Guarding it were two golden dragons, their fanged mouths perpetually opened to gobble up any ponies that dared to pass by.

On the other side of the room stood Princess Celestia and her two cohorts, Lady Pinkinstuff and General Smashemup. On Celestia’s head was a small pot she had snuck out of the kitchen, its handle facing her backside. “There it is gentleponies, the legendary fortress of Bookdor!”

She raised Lady Pinkinstuff with her right hoof. “Oh no,” said the lady, with about as much whimsy as Celestia could muster. “Whatever shall we do?”

She raised General Smashemup with her left hoof. “Grrr!” he said, sounding more like a troll than a pony. “I’m gonna crush those no-good bad guys!”

Celestia closed her eyes, trying to look as authoritative as possible. “A very good idea, General. And I’ll lead the charge myself.”

“Growl, no! It’s too dangerous! Such a perfect princess like yourself cannot possibly go into battle!” said Smashemup.

“Send your sister, Princess Luna. She can stop the evil of Bookdor!” said Pinkinstuff.

Celestia sighed. “Alas, my sister has been a very naughty pony and has to take a time out. We three are the only hope for Equestria. Are you ready?”

“Ready, my princess!” said the lady.

“Snarl!” snarled the General.

“Then **CHARGE!**”

Celestia reared up onto her hind legs, both toys still resting on her front hooves. She twirled and spun around the room, making wooshing sounds and explosion noises as she passed. When she finally reached the fortress itself, she set herself back on her haunches, placing the toys in front of the two dragon-shaped bookends. “Gasp!” she said. “If we are to destroy Bookdor, we must get past the dragon twins!”

“Let me at them!” shouted General Smashemup. Celestia grabbed the toy in her mouth and started smacking it against the two dragons, the chunk of plastic making a dull click upon impact. The dragons tried to fight back, using Celestia’s front hooves to shake and lunge about, but the General’s speed was just too much, and soon one dragon toppled over, slamming into the other one and sending it falling three inches to its doom.

Celestia spat out the General, rose to all fours, and pointed a hoof at the waiting fortress. “The path is open, Lady Pinkinstuff! Now to destroy Bookdor!” She grabbed the pink figure between her teeth and leaped into the air, wings extended. With a resounding flop, she landed belly-first onto the structure, sending it toppling in a dozen directions. When the smoke cleared, Celestia dramatically pulled herself out of the rubble, Lady Pinkinstuff still firmly caught between her teeth. Her pan was gone, having slid off during the initial assault, but it had served its purpose.

Before she could take the toy out of her mouth, however, Bookdor’s final revenge scheme began. A hoof slipped on an open encyclopedia, sending the foal tumbling to the ground. The sudden impact forced her to cough up the toy, which landed on her open windowsill. Celestia jumped after the thing, but she was still not used to grabbing things while moving with her hooves, and ended up only pushing it out the window entirely. She could only stare as her comrade in arms tumbled down the side of the palace and shattered on the stone walkway below. The last she saw of it was a pair of ponies, one white and one orange, picking it up before heading towards the palace entrance.

Celestia continued to stare out the window, her mind replaying the events that had just transpired. Behind her was a room in disarray, a far cry from the almost OCD organization she normally advocated. About half of the books she had used for her little play exercise were ancient and irreplaceable, even if the information inside had been copied to thousands of other titles over the millennia. The one surviving figure sat forgotten underneath a copy of Ponyland Tales. And now that her mind was free from building Pinkinstuff’s elaborate backstory as the daughter of the pirate king Captain Coltt, she could finally glance at the grandfather clock in the corner.

Two hours.

She had been goofing off...for *two hours*.

The princess sighed and walked back to her bed, jumped on, and curled up on her stomach. *What was I thinking? I’m a grown mare. I’m far too old to be playing with dolls. And Luna’s still out there, carrying out what should be my duties. It’s all her fault. Stupid Luna making me feel bad.*

As she sat there, wallowing in her own self-pity, Celestia remembered Twilight's little speech from yesterday. *She thinks this might be fun? Well...I guess I did have a little bit. That book fort was pretty cool, and I never really got the chance to actually play as a foal.*

Her head suddenly perked up. *Come to think of it, I really did have a cruddy foalhood. Maybe this is a chance to make up for that. That must be why Twilight left those toys there today. I really need to thank her when she gets back.*

The princess' head sank back into her front hooves. *Too bad she can't fix the one big problem...*

Rarity and Applejack brought the broken toy back to the others. Both hindlegs were completely shattered, the face was cracked in a rather unsettling pattern, and the whole thing screamed "fire sale" more than anything else. "Who do you suppose would dump their garbage right in front of the palace?" asked Rarity.

The other four party members looked at the thing with equal puzzlement. Spike gasped as he realized what it was. "That's one of my old toys!" The ponies looked at him with a mixture of surprise and gentle glee. Spike nervously rubbed his upper arm and shyed away. "I mean...one of Twilight's old toys. That she showed me once, and I certainly never played with. Heh."

"Nice save there, buddy," said Rainbow Dash. "Now how about telling us HOW you plan to save Twilight and Princess Celestia?"

Spike cleared his throat, straightened his spines, and puffed out his chest. "Very easy. We know the last time Luna turned evil, Celestia banished her to the moon using the Elements of Harmony. Now, the first thing we do is find Twilight. Then, we grab the Elements and use them to seal Luna away for another thousand years!"

The silence was broken by none other than Pinkie Pie. "Um, Spike? Are we *sure* Luna is a bad pony? I mean, what if she's really good and we banish her anyway, and then Celestia comes back and gets really angry with us and banishes us to the moon with her?" Her eyes suddenly lit up

as sugarcoated fantasies pushed out the bad thoughts. “But I’ve never thrown a party on the moon before! That will be the greatest challenge yet! And we’ll all be there together! Oh, I’m liking this plan! How about you girls?”

“Um...excuse me, Spike, but, um, how are we supposed to get to the Elements?” asked Fluttershy. “I mean, Princess Celestia keeps them under lock and key.”

“Which means Princess Luna can’t get to them,” said Spike. “After what happened with Discord, Celestia taught Twilight the spell to open the lock in case something happened to her. That’s why we have to find her first.”

“No, the **first** thing we’re gonna do is find Princess Luna and ask her what’s goin’ on,” said Applejack. “Pinkie’s right.”

“About parties on the moon?” asked Pinkie.

Applejack’s brain quickly flipped into safety mode, the only thing that allowed anypony to talk to Pinkie Pie when she was in one of her flights of fancy. “Um...no. Ah mean about findin’ out if Luna really is evil. So far, all we’ve got is Twilight’s story, and ah don’t really know if that’s a hundred percent accurate, if y’all catch my drift.”

Spike gave a resigned sigh. “Alright, if you really want us to get caught, then fine. We’ll first go talk to Queen Meanie...”

“Hey, I said that first!” said Pinkie.

“...And *then* we’ll go rescue Twilight. Happy, Applejack?”

The workhorse nodded in agreement, and all five ponies wandered into the palace. Spike waited until they were all inside before looking up at the sky. “Pink Pony Princess, I promise you, your death shall be avenged!”

There was a sudden knock on Celestia’s door, followed by Luna’s voice. “Sister? Can I speak with you for a minute.”

Celestia turned towards the door, but didn't move from the bed. Before she could respond, the door swung open. Luna stood on the other side, quite upset about something. "Celestia, I need to talk to you about..." Her eyes widened at the disaster in the bedroom. "What happened in here?"

"Just a little redecorating," said Celestia.

Luna telekinetically shut the door behind her and started slowly, carefully walking towards her sister. It was as she was sidestepping a pile of long outdated dictionaries that she noticed the little soldier figure. She willed the object into the air and floated it in front of Celestia. "What is this?"

Celestia looked back up at the toy, a small smile on her face. "That? It's just something I found. There was another one, but...it fell out the window."

"She...gave you toys." Celestia could see the anger and disappointment seething underneath Luna's blue coat. "You were supposed to be figuring out a cure, and instead you were playing with *toys*." She released the figure, causing it to plop right onto the bed. Celestia immediately grabbed it with both hooves and clung it close to her body, just in case Luna decided to finish the job that gravity began.

"I...I was just having a little fun," said Celestia.

Luna's frown only deepened. "Well, while you were having **fun**, I was stuck listening to the ERS talk about how we're a bunch of bleeding hearts for not twisting every line of the tax code against our subjects! They spent *two hours* lecturing me on the laws *you* passed!" Luna sat on the side of the bed, the impact shaking Celestia briefly. "And here you are, playing with toys."

Celestia climbed onto her feet, spun around, and looked Luna just a few inches to the left of her eyes. "What? Did you *really* think my job was just about 'tea parties and galas?' Half my day is spent in meetings, and the other half is just reading all the paperwork that passes my way. Princesses don't spend all their time at parties, you know."

"Believe me, I know," Luna growled. "I also know about you making up excuses to skip the monthly dinner parties."

“Of course I do,” said Celestia. “Do you have any idea how boring those things are? There are a lot better things to do with your time than stand around and listen to a bunch of silver spooned ponies stab each other in the back for your favor. So, what excuse are you going to use?”

Luna jumped off the bed and pointed an accusing hoof at Celestia. “I’m not going to excuse myself! As princess, it is my duty to attend to all formal functions, as boring as they may be.”

Celestia stared at Luna in utter bewilderment. “I’m actually kind of amazed you’d want to do this. I thought you hated parties.”

“I do. But I am still serving in your stead, and that means I have to go. And I want *you* to get back to studying. You’re a big pony, Celestia, and I don’t need you acting like how you look. I want a counterspell ready by tonight, understand?”

Celestia growled and trembled with pent-up frustration. That small mental switch that kept her real feelings in check snapped like a dried twig. She jumped from the bed, landing right in front of her big sister with a heavy thunk. “Let me get this straight. It’s a bad thing when *I* want to get some enjoyment out of this, but when *you* want to dress me up as a prank, it’s perfectly fine?”

“N-N-No, that’s not what I said,” said Luna. She was never expecting Celestia to react like quite this. “I just mean, you’ve been trying so hard to act like normal, and I just thought...”

“Yes, I tried to be my normal, adult self. But I’m not. I can’t stand my favorite foods, I can’t use anything in the palace, my horn and wings don’t work, and nopony takes me seriously!” She could feel another tantrum worming its way up, but Celestia didn’t care. “I tried to study, but it was pointless. If there was a way to reverse this in any of these books, I would know it already. So instead, I decided to relax a little. And you know what? I LIKED IT.”

The two stared at each other, both unsure of what to say next. Finally, Luna managed to intone something. “Are you saying...you want to stay like this?” she asked, more than a little afraid for her future.

Celestia shook her head. “No, of course I don’t. There are only two things that really matter to me: my sister, and Equestria. But right now, I just want to turn my brain off for a little bit, try to have some fun with this. I mean, this was supposed to be in good fun, riiiiiiight?”

Luna winced from Celestia’s accusing glare. “Um...yes, of course.” Her courage gradually returned, allowing her to at least calm down and walk a bit closer towards her sister. “Listen, I...I’m sorry I got upset with you. I’m still getting used to your job, and it’s not quite what I was expecting. I even exploded at Blueblood, can you believe it?”

Celestia’s eyes grew so wide they threatened to swallow her entire forehead. “Blueblood was here? Was this about Ponyville?”

Luna sighed. “You mean, about burning it down and arresting the same ponies that saved me? Then yes. Fortunately, he won’t be a problem for a while.”

Celestia didn’t quite know how to take Luna’s statement, but in any case, her curse had served one useful purpose: no Blueblood. “Luna...can I please go to the garden? It’s just so dull in here.”

The gears clicked in Luna’s head. *The garden...that’s in the back of the palace, away from the common areas. We have no tour groups today, and there shouldn’t be anypony else going back there. I guess it wouldn’t hurt anypony if she stayed out there for a little while. It’ll get her out of my mane, anyway.* “Sure, why not? I have to go that way anyway. Is it all right if your big sister escorts you?”

Celestia snorted and snickered. “Sure, *big* sister.”

The two walked towards the door, sidestepping the mess Celestia had made. Luna’s mind was wracked with worry about what this entailed, whether or not her sister was getting too used to the change, but she didn’t care. At least something slightly positive was coming out of this mess. *And once I work through the royal business Celestia left me, I’m sure it can only get better.*

The two stepped out the door and into the hallway.

And ran right into Spike and five bearers of the Elements of Harmony.

From within his house/prison, Blueblood fumed. Guards wandered every inch of his private estate, keeping tabs on his every move. The servants joined in his plight, weeping openly about their master's misfortune. For the prince, however, this was not nearly enough to soothe his damaged self-worth.

Within his study, Blueblood paced impatiently. "She's a monster. If I leave her on the throne, she'll drive Equestria into ruin! Any minute now, she could bring down the sun forever. This is about more than Ponyville now! I must save Equestria from Princess Luna!"

His eyes wandered down to a small sheet of paper, bearing the name of a few "private investigators" he had employed in the past. His lips formed a smile. "She said I can't talk to the court. She never said anything about...the lower classes of ponies."

The two groups stared at each other, their jaws hanging loose. It was Princess Luna who could finally say something. "My goodness, I...I wasn't expecting any visitors at this time. And five of the most important ponies in Equestria, too? This is certainly an honor. But...how did you get back here? And what are you doing here?"

The Ponyvilleians were far more focused on the small, white, rainbow-haired filly than on the moon princess at the moment. "Is...Is that..." Applejack started to stammer.

"P-P-P-Princess Celestia?" finished Fluttershy.

Rainbow Dash darted over the others' heads, landing next to the still-shocked mare and filly. Celestia tried to make herself as small as possible, her face blush with embarrassment. Dash glanced the filly over, pausing when she saw her cutie mark. "Yep, it's Princess Celestia all...right..."

The information finally clicked in Rainbow Dash's head, sending her screaming to the back row of the party. Right now, everypony else was feeling the same way, including Luna.

That is, save for Spike. The dragon was more dumbfounded than anything else. “Princess Celestia...who did this to you? What happened to Twilight? What’s going on here?!”

Before Celestia could say anything, Luna interjected. “If you’re worried about Celestia or Twilight, I can assure you they’re both all right. An evil unicorn managed to break into the palace and turned Celestia into the foal you see right now. That’s why I’ve had to assume her duties as well as my own. Twilight is researching a counterspell, and once that’s found, Celestia will be turned right back to normal.”

“Then...what about her supposed ‘vacation?’” asked Rarity.

Celestia managed to find enough nerve to talk. “We never said just what *kind* of vacation it was.”

“Well, it’s just great that you’re not in danger!” said Pinkie Pie. “You guys know what this calls for?”

“What’s going on here?”

“**A PAR**- huh?”

Everyone turned about to see Twilight, freshly returned from Celestia’s School for Gifted Unicorns. Her five friends and assistant all tackled her in a group hug, sending Frosty Gaze’s thesis flying into a wall. Celestia and Luna simply looked at each other, first in puzzlement, and then in joy at seeing Twilight with friends.

After about two minutes of this, the seven finally managed to stand. “So, what are you guys doing here?” asked Twilight.

“Well, when Spike her got yer letter, he was worried sick about ya,” said Applejack. “So we decided to come by and see how y’all were doin’ up here.”

“Princess Luna told us all about what happened to Princess Celestia,” said Rarity. “We are just so glad the two of you are all right.”

Twilight sighed in relief. “Good. If I had to hide the fact that she stole the most forbidden spell book in Equestria and turned Celestia into a filly as a practical joke, I’d probably go crazy!”

The six newcomers froze before slowly turned back to Luna. Gone were the warm, inviting looks of friendship; now, they only screamed betrayal and lies. Luna let out a mournful, defeated moaned. *Why is this happening to me...?*

Chapter Six

It didn't take Twilight long to realize she just made another mistake.

The baby dragon and five ponies made only a few steps towards Luna, as if afraid she was going to vaporize them all in an instant or wink the lot of them into the cornfield. "So...an evil unicorn did this, huh?" said Rainbow Dash.

Luna reared back a few steps, spreading her wings in case things got ugly. A part of her wanted to use the same magic she had used on Blueblood, terrify the Elements of Harmony into letting her go. It would be so easy; just inspire the fear-of-alicorns in them and they'd all go home, tails between their legs. Even as she thought this, however, the more decent part of her actively rebelled, telling her how giving in to the darkness of her past would only make things worse. All this inner turmoil did was made her outer self look even worse. "I didn't mean to lie to you, but I..."

"I bet that's why you asked Twilight over here yesterday!" said Spike. "You were using her as part of your joke!" The other ponies gasped in horror, their resentment towards the current situation and its instigator growing with every passing moment.

Fluttershy looked at the still-cowering Celestia. "Princess...is this true?"

Celestia was quiet at first, not sure whether to give a straight answer or lie to save Luna's bacon. Unfortunately for her sister, Fluttershy's kindhearted demeanor and sincerity overwhelmed her protective mindset. "Y-Yes, it's true, but..."

Pinkie Pie suddenly popped out of a vase behind Luna, her body uncompressing as it left its confines. Her eyes locked with Luna's almost instantly. "That's the meanest trick I've ever heard! You know how Princess Celestia feels about Twilight, and you embarrass both of them anyway just for a laugh. I mean, if you turned me into an itty-bitty teeny-weeny winkie-Pinkie, I wouldn't want you to invite my sisters over and make me your little joke!"

“Uh, girls?” chimed Twilight.

“What sort of ruffian would do such a thing?” said Rarity. “Reducing your own flesh and blood to a mere foal. How do you sleep at night?”

Luna winced. “I haven’t slept more than two hours these last two days...”

“Because you were too busy taking over Equestria!” shouted Spike. His confidence grew as he took a few steps towards the princess, still pointing an accusing claw. The princess could feel her control starting to slip, and that terrible power was calling to her, begging to be released. “I told Twilight she couldn’t trust you! And now, we’re going to...”

SCREW IT.

“I WAS NOT TAKING OVER EQUESTRIA, LIZARD.”

The force of Luna’s voice was enough to propel Spike into the other ponies, sending them toppling like bowling pins. The dragon’s impromptu flight stopped right next to Twilight with a resounding thud. The unicorn quickly dragged Spike back to his feet via telekinesis, and was preparing to help up the rest of her friends the same way, when Luna walked up to her. “I want an explanation.”

“I...I don’t know what’s going on,” stammered Twilight. “I just wrote Spike to take care of the library, and he...”

“Sister, don’t worry about it,” said Celestia. She wrapped one of her front legs around one of Luna’s front hooves and started slowly nuzzling. Even as a filly, she could tell when a situation was about to get very, very bad. “Twilight Sparkle, please explain to your friends they have nothing to fear. Luna...we need to get going. Now.”

Luna sighed. “Very well. Twilight Sparkle, I leave things in your hooves.”

The first thing to strike Celestia was the cool breeze. Free from the stagnant prison that was the palace, she could finally take in fresh air for

the first time in weeks. Even better, there were no outdoor meetings to discuss how Equestria was falling apart today, no schoolfoals wandering the hedge maze, and no urgent matters to attend to outside of Canterlot. For the first time in so long, the princess was actually free to enjoy the very gardens she had personally built centuries ago.

So naturally, her reaction was to run outside screaming before flopping on the cool grass. The princess rolled onto her back, unfolded her wings, and squirmed about like a lopsided worm. It was crass, it was simple, it was something totally unbecoming of both a princess, for lack of a better word, a physical goddess.

And she loved every minute of it.

From her vantage point at the door, Luna watched as her once-older sister frolicked about the grounds, taking in every sight and smell like they were brand new. In any other situation, she would have taken at least some comfort in Celestia's jubilation. At the very least, seeing the most important pony in the world to her being happy in her dire situation would give her a little bit of happiness. Not so.

They are the ones that freed me. They are the ones that saw the real me that day. And yet, the minute Celestia disappears, they all come to Canterlot just to lock me away again? Her thoughts inadvertently drifted back to Blueblood's earlier threat. That waste of genetics really was right. If even those ponies hate me...

"Luna? Are you all right?"

Luna broke from her self-demotivation session at her sister's words. Celestia was standing in front of the princess, her once-pristine white coat now covered with grass stains and splotches of dirt. The filly repeated her query. "Is something wrong, sister?"

"I-It's nothing," said Luna. "I was just...thinking about the rest of the day. I...I really need to get going. There's an awful lot to do today, and I've fallen way behind, so if you'll excuse me..."

Luna wasn't able to turn five inches before Celestia spoke again. "It's about Twilight's friends, isn't it? I have no idea where Spike was getting his

information, but I can assure you Twilight is going to get to the bottom of this.”

“It’s not that,” said Luna. “It’s just...if Twilight Sparkle’s assistant and friends could come to that conclusion, what can I expect from everypony else?”

Celestia paused for a few seconds, mulling over what exactly to say. “Luna...when you hold court, there’s a few things you need to know.”

Luna scoffed. “I’ve held court before, you know.”

“Not mine,” said Celestia. “This isn’t strictly business like yours. Here, anypony can come and voice their concerns about the land. And if you want everything to move smoothly, you have to watch yourself.”

“...Watch myself?”

“First, always smile.” Celestia’s mouth turned into a warm, friendly smile. “This will show the ponies how much you care for them and their problems.”

Luna was silent for several seconds, before finally giving a smile of her own. It wasn’t quite as motherly as Celestia’s, but it would do. “Great!” chirped the filly. “Next, make sure to listen to each pony’s problem, no matter how trivial it may seem to you. Remember, these are your subjects, and as princess it is your responsibility to listen to your ponies.”

Luna rolled her eyes. “I know that, sister. That isn’t the issue at hoof, however. How am I suppose to conduct something like this if everypony’s still afraid of me?”

Celestia sighed. “Luna...do you remember how scared ponies used to be of me, back in the old days? Well, it’s still true today.” Luna’s eyes widened at the thought, trying to picture anypony doing anything but praise and honor Celestia’s whims. “The bowing, the reverence, the insane lengths they go to please me; that’s not because they love me. It’s because they’re afraid that if their manners aren’t perfect I’ll send them all to the moon or something.”

“You mean...all this time, they were scared of you as well?”

Celestia nodded in affirmation. “It comes with being a princess. Things may be more relaxed than they used to be, and certainly a lot smoother on the larynx, but that doesn’t mean everypony has forgotten we’re in a position to affect the rest of their lives. Just...don’t think about how they’re afraid of you. What’s important is, they’ve overcome their fear enough to come to you with their problems, and you must respect that.”

“...Thank you for your advice, sister.” *Even if it doesn’t do me any good.*

Luna gave Celestia a farewell pat on the head and walked back inside, the guards closing the door behind her. The filly princess turned her attention back to the massive gardens that lay before her. The ground was still wet from the gardeners; many of the pathways were still quite muddy, the grass was soaked, and the flowers glistened like they were covered in morning dew. Most of the animals were still locked away in the most secluded part of the grounds, just in case somepony got some wild ideas and released them again.

Celestia’s mind reeled as she took in this moment’s ramifications. For the first time in over a millennia, she had *free time*. And with Twilight taking the bulk of the research duties, she didn’t have a whole lot to worry about afterwards.

With a squeal of glee, the filly leaped into the air and bellyflopped back onto the grass. She had a lot to accomplish, and only a short amount of time to do it...

“And that’s about it. Luna’s prank went wrong, and I’m helping her and Celestia fix things. Nothing more.”

Twilight had taken her friends to Celestia’s study, hopefully as far from Luna as possible at the moment. Spike was busy in the back, begrudgingly lighting a fire; his spines were still on edge from today’s earlier encounter. The others weren’t much better. Dash was ready to charge right back and take the princess on personally, Rarity looked more sassed than anything else, Pinkie was hoping mad, Applejack was sore at being lied to, and it

took the unicorn almost twenty minutes to calm Fluttershy's mama bear tendencies.

"Okay, let's say you are telling the truth," said Dash. "Why did you send Spike that letter, then?"

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "What letter?"

"You know, the super-duper secret spy letter!" said Pinkie. "Has anypony told you how *good* you are at hiding things? I mean, I'm the number one pony at hide-and-seek, and even *I* couldn't find your hidden message! Good thing Spike is a whiz at code breaking!"

Now Twilight was even more confused. "Code...breaking?"

Spike, now satisfied with the fire's roaring, rejoined the group. "You know, the one you sent me last night. You obviously had to write it in code so Princess Luna wouldn't catch you." He pointed a thumb at Applejack, eliciting a groan from the farm pony. "Applejack here, she didn't believe me. She thought you just wanted me to stay at the library while you helped Nightmare Moon rule Equestria! But now that we know the truth, we can grab the Elements and get to the banishing, right?!"

Twilight didn't know how to respond. Her brain twisted in upon itself trying to find her dear baby dragon's train of logic. She only stopped when the threat of an aneurysm became far too great. "Spiiiiiiiike," she said in a low growl. "I did not want you leading my friends on some sort of crusade in Canterlot just so you could play hero."

Spike was taken aback at Twilight's words. The others were more than a little confused. "Th-Then, what did you want?" asked Spike.

"I wanted you to stay at the library while I helped **PRINCESS LUNA** find a cure for Celestia's condition! In other words, **WHAT I TOLD YOU TO DO IN THE FIRST PLACE!**" She groaned from her *soon-to-be-former* number one assistant's crass stupidity. "I told you to stop reading those stupid spy books! They're rotting your brain!"

Her attention turned from the guilt-ridden purple dragon to the rest of her friends. The ponies drew themselves back as Twilight's frustrated rage

continued to take hold. “And you. What were you thinking back there? You know Princess Celestia and I are perfectly fine, so why all the hostility?”

“A-Are you kidding?” said Dash. “Luna lied to us!”

“As did you, dear,” added Rarity. “Or do I need to remind you about Celestia ‘taking a vacation?’”

Twilight shied away from the fashionista’s (rather accurate) comments. “That was the lie the princesses and I agreed on. We didn’t really have much of a choice.”

“Yah could have told us ta truth, sugahcube!” shouted Applejack. “Don’t ya see how worried we all were? You had us scared stiff.”

“About what?!”

“Um, about the princess, duh!” said Pinkie.

Twilight let out a deep, mournful sigh. “You don’t understand. How do you think everypony would have reacted when they found out the truth? In case you haven’t noticed, Princess Luna isn’t exactly the most popular pony out there right now. If anypony even *thought* she had meant to hurt Celestia...”

“But she’s a nasty-wasty!” shouted Pinkie. “Anypony that would do something like that to their own sister deserves to be tarred, feathered, and driven out of Equestria! Dethroning her sister, using the Arcanus E Draconus, *and* lying to everypony? She’s the worst pony ever!”

“NO SHE ISN’T, PINKIE!”

The entire room went silent, save for Twilight’s echoing voice. The unicorn coughed and cleared her throat before continuing. “What Luna did was wrong. I’m not arguing with that. But having you guys stand here and accuse her of being a monster isn’t helping. She’s committed to fulfilling both her own and Celestia’s obligations, not because she wants to rule Equestria by herself, but because she made a mistake and wants to make up for it. And it would be great if you gave her some support.”

The five ponies (plus dragon) looked about each other, trying to come up with a silent consensus. Twilight watched the group with a gnawing sense of dread, as well as a growing disappointment in her assistant's behavior. Finally, the group dispersed. "Are...Are you sure Luna is all right?" asked Spike.

"She's a good pony, Spike," said Twilight. "Just give her some time, and I'm sure she'll prove that to you and everypony."

"...Well, we *did* have an appointment already," said Rarity. "We...certainly do owe the princess an apology."

"Ah feel like a molded-up hay seed," muttered Applejack. Her declaration was summarily followed by a chorus of nods, shrugs, and agreements. Even Pinkie Pie, who had by now exceeded Spike in the hostility department, was looking rather ashamed.

Twilight sighed in relief. "Thank you. It means a lot to me, and I'm sure Princess Celestia feels the same way."

Luna strode back into the throne room, already pushing the memory of Twilight's friends' reactions out of her mind. Ruby was already seated next to the throne, reviewing the list of visitors for today's court session. The attendant tore her head up from her duties at her regent's approach. "Is everything all right, your Highness?"

Luna froze about ten feet from her seat, willing herself to put on that loving, friendly face Celestia had worn for so long. "Everything is just fine, Miss Dream. I just...lost track of time dealing with my sister."

She resumed her walk up the steps, seating herself upon the most powerful spot in Equestria. "Very well, court will begin shortly. How does Celestia do this again?"

Ruby shrugged. "Everypony is herded into a waiting area just outside the doors. I announce their name, and they come in. You listen to their concerns, and they leave."

“And...who do we have today?”

“Well, there’s been a lot of issues around Equestria recently, so there is a pretty long list of unannounced visitors today. As for the announced ones, a few farmers from just outside of Canterlot need to speak to you about the city’s water conservation efforts, the Astronomy Guild wants to discuss some issues with last night’s night sky, and we have representatives from Sweet Apple Acres and the Carousel Boutique requesting a tax extension. And then there’s the...”

As her assistant went over the day’s notes, Luna’s mind was already piecing things together. *This doesn’t sound too difficult. A few simple declarations, a few judgments here and there, and the day is done. I’ll be back to work in no time. I just have to handle this like Celestia, make sure everypony is comfortable, and I might even walk out of here with everypony loving me.*

“...And that’s just about everypony we have so far.”

Luna snapped out of her thoughts and quickly turned her attention back to Ruby. “Thank you very much, Miss Dream. Now, can you please assume your position? I would like to get this over with as quickly as possible.” Ruby bowed in acknowledgment and walked out the door. From the throne, Luna could see her take a position to the side of the doorway and start unfurling a scroll before the doors closed.

Luna gave the best smile she could at a time like this. *Think positive, Luna. You can do this. You can show these ponies there’s nothing to worry about.*

Celestia hugged the bush, her eyes locked on her target. The guard was a relatively recent addition to the palace’s security detail, his coat’s original color still peeking out from beneath the white dye the guards used to maintain their identical appearances. His attention was turned away from the princess, instead focusing on a nearby door in the palace walls leading to the city’s sewer system. The palace’s age made updating the entire structure rather difficult, and more than once an industrious thief, burglar,

enemy invader, spy, filly scout troop, and paparazzi had tried to sneak inside using the old tunnels.

Fortunately, only a few ponies still knew of the passageway, and fewer still were dumb enough to try and arouse their princess' wrath. Because of this, the post was used as a training ground for new recruits, something to cut their teeth on before moving onto the more pressing areas of the palace.

Today, however, Celestia had a different reason to be out here. It was almost lunchtime, and she wanted something sweet. Her target was inside a pouch hanging around the guard's neck, the sweet aroma striking her nose from even back here. She slowly snuck closer and closer to the clueless pegasus, her light hooves barely making any noise on the soft grass. Finally, when she was but a few feet behind him, she tapped him on the left rear ankle.

The pegasus snapped out of his dozing and spun about, wings extended and ready for a beatdown. Instead, he found himself staring at a cute, white-coated, rainbow-haired filly. The guard couldn't help but grunt in surprise. "Pr-Princess Celestia?"

Celestia quickly flashed a friendly smile. It was the same kind that frequently accompanied a knife in the back. "Hello, good sir. I was wishing to inquire about the contents of your bag."

"This old thing?" he said. "It's just some cookies. My wife baked some for me this morning." He shifted his eyes to and fro, as if some unseen and horrible force was about to jump him for admitting such a thing. "I...I apologize if it's not allowed."

Celestia continued smiling. *His resolve is weakening. Time to go in for the kill.* "I see. Well, do you suppose you could share one or two with little ol' me?" She fluttered her eyes and twisted her mouth into a cute little pout, amplifying her sheer adorability into a WMD.

The poor pegasus could feel his will faltering. "B-But princess, these cookies..."

Crocodile tears formed in both of Celestia's eyelids. "Wh-Wh-What are you saying? Are your cookies *sniff* so special you can't share them with your princess?"

"No, I didn't-"

"You're a mean pony," Celestia whined. "I'm gonna tell Luna on you!" The princess threw herself onto the ground, throwing the best hissy fit she could muster. She pounded the earth with her front hooves, bucked and kicked with her back, and wailed and screamed.

The guard's very sense of being crumbled to dust at the sight before him, and he quickly tossed the bag at Celestia's hooves. "Here, your Majesty. Take as many as you want! Just...please, stop crying!"

Celestia continued sniveling, if only to keep up the ruse, and flipped the bag open. Sure enough, inside were several round, chocolate-chip cookies, all individually wrapped in tissue paper and neatly stacked to avoid crumbling. The sun princess leaned in, grabbed two cookies with her mouth, and quickly ran off. The guard just stared, flabbergasted at what had occurred.

A group of five ponies unhurriedly walked into the throne room. The three Earth ponies and two unicorns had their heads hung low, peeking up only to confirm that the alicorn sitting on the throne was, in fact, not Celestia. Luna kept up her royal appearance, wearing that same queenly mask and flashy grin her sister always carried in public. Ruby was still stationed outside, keeping things perfectly organized. This left only Luna, the guards, and her subjects in the room.

The five ponies stopped and bowed, following the same traditions as during Celestia's reign. Luna acknowledged the five's reverence with a quick nod. "Please, stand and introduce yourselves."

The small group quickly rose, their eyes still locked on the floor. Finally, one of the Earth ponies spoke. "Your Majesty, we...really don't want to inconvenience you..."

“We run some of the farms a few miles out of Canterlot,” said another Earth pony. “Most of our produce is sold in the capital’s marketplace.”

Luna nodded. “Very well. And I understand you have some concerns about the city’s water conservation efforts.”

One of the Earth ponies took a step forward. His entire body was shaking with a growing sense of doom. “Um...yes, princess. We understand there’s been water shortages, but our farms depend on the runoff from the mountains, and the city is swallowing most of it.”

Luna hummed to herself, shifting an appropriate response. “I see. Well, we’re scheduled for some rainfall today. I’ll speak with the weather teams and see what we can do. Unfortunately, there’s not much I can do right now, not until I have a full idea of the city’s current water supply.” The five ponies nodded in semi-approval, their problem still unsolved. Luna tilted her head slightly and widened her smile, trying to match her sister’s sense of charm and grace. The look of horror on the ponies’ faces was evidence enough that it wasn’t working. “Don’t worry. I’m certain a solution can be found quickly. In the meantime, I just ask that you be patient. Now, is there anything else I can help you with?”

The five looked amongst themselves nervously. All five were terrified to say what was *really* on their minds. Luna was ready to dismiss them when one of the unicorn farmers stepped forward. “Y-Your Majesty, I have a question.”

“Of course, good sir. How can I help you?”

“Well...we were wondering about the schedule for the next few days.”

“You mean the weather? After today’s storm, it should be clear for the next few days.”

The other unicorn spoke next. “Wh-What my friend means is, what are the *daylight* hours tomorrow?”

Luna raised an eyebrow. She could see where this conversation was going, and she really didn’t like it. “Daylight hours?”

“You know...how long do we have to harvest before the sun vanishes forever?” asked one of the earth ponies.

“The more food we have, the better chance we can survive the eternal winter,” said another.

“I can’t let my coconuts freeze out there!” said one of the unicorns. The others just...kind of looked at him, their brains unable to comprehend the imagery he just suggested. The unicorn, for his part, just shrugged at their confusion. “What? Do you have any idea how hard it is to grow coconuts in this climate?”

Luna kept up that smile as best she could, even as she wanted to scream out inside. “If you think I’m going to just...rip the sun out of the sky or something of the sort, I can assure you that you are mistaken. I am serving in my sister’s stead, and I promise I will keep each day’s sunrise and sunset to the posted schedules. Now, is there any other business?”

The five workhorses dared not bring anything else up. They instead chose the safer, saner route; they bowed to Princess Luna, turned about on their hooves, and trotted out of the room single file. The very moment the door closed behind them, Luna dropped her guard. She slumped her shoulders, gritting her teeth as the meeting ran through her mind.

Okay, so far all the ponies I’ve seen think I’m unable to understand Equestrian law, or I’m an evil monster bent on taking away their sun. Still...the day is young, and I have a lot more ponies to meet. Things will get better.

It didn’t take Celestia long to find her second stop.

Nestled deep in the gardens, far away from the rest of the royal menagerie, sat the royal aviary. Beneath the glass and steel sat some of the rarest trees and plants known to Equestria, relics from the planet’s tumultuous past. And even deeper inside sat one of the most majestic creatures to ever grace Equestria.

Celestia nodded to the guards at the aviary's entrance, cookies still wedged firmly in her mouth. The two pegasi quickly pushed the door open, waiting until their miniaturized monarch was well inside before closing the door and exchanging perplexed glances.

Celestia saw her target almost immediately. Sitting on a lush, green-foliated tree in the cage's center, was the princess' pet bird, Philomena. The phoenix's feathers still glistened and glowed like a raging fire in the sunlight, and even from her low vantage point the princess couldn't help but be stunned by the sheer beauty of it all.

The fire bird paid no heed to the visitor, instead spending its time preening its left wing. Celestia carefully set the cookies on the ground and raised her head towards the treetop. "Philomena! Come down here for a second, please."

The phoenix's head perked up at the sound of her name. Her gaze drifted downwards until she saw the filly staring up at her. Curious, the bird spread its wings and glided downward, landing on a low branch just in front of the foal's face. Its beady eyes looked the pony over, finding something strangely familiar about the apparent stranger.

Celestia giggled at her pet's indecisiveness. "Don't worry, Philomena. It's me, just a little on the small side."

Philomena cooed and cawed in response, the bird's brain trying to figure out the whole spectacle. Celestia just kept on smiling before reaching for the cookies. "I know I haven't been able to visit you as often as I used to these past few months. Things have just been so busy lately that...half the time I can't even get out of the office before midnight. But look! I brought us some cookies!"

The phoenix turned its attention to the two lumps of bread and chocolate chips. She gave them a quick sniff before cawing in excitement and flying down, grabbing one of the cookies between one of her talons. With a caw of triumph, she began to dig into the treat, pecking off a piece at a time before swallowing it whole. Celestia had no idea how Philomena's digestive system worked, but she had seen her swallow entire three-course meals when hungry enough, and the bird could certainly handle something like chocolate.

Smiling, the princess held her cookie between her hooves and started digging in. "This is good," she said between mouthfuls. "Next time I see that guard, I have to get his wife's recipe. I should probably also throw in a few more bits into his next paycheck."

Luna's next guest was a green-coated, orange-haired unicorn mare. She carried herself with a demeanor not unlike that of a queen demeaning herself by hanging around the peasantry; an attitude that most top members of the Astronomy Guild shared, unfortunately. Behind her were a large tripod and several sheets of paper, levitating in an energy field.

Luna kept up the fake smile, a new hope burning its way through her very being. The astronomers were among the few ponies that actually cared for her nights, even if they never actually enjoyed them beyond a very professional level. Indeed, they were among the few ponies that had gladly taken Luna back. Her expression was forced, but inside she was cheering for the first good meeting of the day.

The mare stopped and bowed, her equipment still hovering behind her. She quickly stood before Luna could even mouth a word; instead, she unfolded the tripod and set the whole mess neatly down. Once that was done, the mare finally returned her attention to the confused princess. "Um...please introduce yourself," said Luna.

The astronomer cleared her throat. "Your Highness, my name is Starsign, and I am here today to discuss a matter of grave importance to the Equestria Astronomy Guild."

Luna nodded. "Very well."

The mare levitated up the first page of the presentation, showing several very familiar constellations. "As you know, the Equestria Astronomy Guild has devoted its entire existence to the study of the heavens you and your illustrious sisters provide us every night." Luna couldn't help but blush a little, even beneath her dark coat. "To do this, we have set up observatories across every corner of the country, recording the very motions of the sun, the moon, and the stars."

“That’s...very nice,” said Luna. “But I already know all this. What is it you wanted to address?”

The astronomer floated the page up, revealing an enlarged photograph of a night sky. At the very center sat *Canis Major*, one of Luna’s favorite constellations. “This picture was taken from our Hoofington observatory. Do you notice the problem?”

Luna stepped down from the throne and walked to the photo. A quick scan quickly confirmed her fears. “The topmost star...it’s too far to the left.” *I was so tired last night, I forgot to double-check my work!*

“Exactly. And that throws the entire constellation’s structure off as well. I’m afraid the guild has to make a formal complaint about your sister’s handling of the night sky.”

Luna turned to the mare, eyebrows raised. “My sister?”

“Well, this is her work, is it not? I swear, the millennia before your return were tumultuous indeed. Her Highness is a fine ruler and can manage the sun and moon well enough, but she never could get a hang of the stars.”

Luna raised a hoof. “Excuse me, but...why do you think my *sister* is responsible?”

The mare turned the page, revealing a heavily-distorted *Lupus Minor*. “This is a copy of one of our records, from roughly one thousand years ago. By all accounts, Princess Celestia mangled every single star’s placement, but this constellation here was considered the worst.”

Another page turn, and the two were looking at a giant happy face made of stars. “This was supposed to be *Orion*, until her Highness managed to somehow turn it into a caricature of our very science. She claimed to be pointing it at the moon, but I find that highly doubtful.” Luna couldn’t help but genuinely grin at the sight, not to mention feel a bit warmer inside.

“And *this* was the biggest affront of all.” Starsign turned to the last page. Luna held back a laugh as she looked at the image. Her sister had moved the stars out of position, wrecking every constellation Luna had designed,

so she could spell **KEYSORE SUCKS**. “This occurred after the princess had a falling out with Keysore, one of the founders of the modern astronomy guild. Fortunately, he was ill and couldn’t see the stars that night, or things would have been much worse.”

“This has all been very...illuminating,” said Luna. “If I am understanding you correctly, because *one* star was out of place last night, Celestia is to blame.”

Starsign nodded. “Yes, I’m afraid so. The lady outside, Ruby, told me she is on vacation, so I wish to bring this to your attention. As required by the agreement Princess Celestia signed approximately 517 years ago, we astronomers must report any and all deviations from the norm to prevent any future errors. We cannot allow such novice mistakes to besmirch our pristine heavens. Our night skies must be the very picture of perfection.”

Luna cleared her throat. The next sentence was going to be painful. “Starsign...I did last night’s sky.” Starsign’s eyes suddenly dilated into dots. “I was not at my best last night, and I do apologize for making a small mistake, but I fail to see how this meeting was beneficial in the slightest.”

“W-W-Well,” the mare stammered. She was really not prepared for this. “You see, the heavens are just so beautiful, we hate to see them besmirched in such a way. And after Celestia turned them into her plaything for a thousand years...”

“You have nothing to worry about,” Luna sighed.

“And...with the eternal night coming up, we want everything to make a good impression.”

Luna felt her right eye and both ears begin twitching. For the third time today, somepony had casually brought up the darkest period of her life, expecting her to be the exact same pony. It was all she could do to keep from repeating the Blueblood incident with Starsign right now. For now, she just limited it to some gritted teeth. “Miss Starsign, I can assure you, I will not make the night last forever anytime soon. As long as ponies are enjoying the sunshine, I will keep Celestia’s sun in its proper place. I thank you for your criticism, but I am fully capable of fulfilling my own responsibilities. Now, do you have any more pressing business?”

Starsign quickly shook her head, magicked the pieces of her presentation back into the air, and darted out of the room. Luna slowly returned to her throne, more defeated than ever. *Alright...two of my appointments went bad. The next one has to be it! This is going to be the best moment of my day!*

The princess closed her eyes, relaxing her mind for her next guests. She could already hear a small cacophony of hooves trot into the room, no doubt belonging to some of the best subjects the princess had. *According to Ruby, these are representatives from Sweet Apple Acres and Carousel Boutique. They sound so...professional. I'm sure nothing can go wrong with this audience.*

Filled with renewed confidence, Luna opened her eyes...and saw the same five ponies that had accosted her in the hallway, as well as that contemptible baby dragon.

Celestia had been out in the garden for hours, and was finally beginning to feel exhausted. Philomena had retreated back to her perch after finishing her cookie, leaving Celestia to wander out of the aviary and back to the garden proper. By now, her once-luxurious coat was covered with grass stains, mud, dirt, bread crumbs, and some rather unsettling assorted messes. Her mane and tail were frizzled and scruffy from all her running about, as were her guards' patience. She had to wrap this up, before one of them finally grew some nerve and sent the filly back to her room "for her own protection."

There was just one more thing she had to do.

Behind the palace, outside the royal hedge maze, sat a recently-replaced statue. Discord, the embodiment of the chaos that had once ruled Equestria, was once again on display, a birdbath held between his outstretched arms. The filly felt a knot of fear return as she saw him, accompanied by long-repressed memories of his mad reign. Her small size wasn't helping things at the moment, either; at this angle, he looked even more like the monster he was.

After a few moments of shuddering, Celestia's nerves calmed enough to talk. "Hello, Discord. Are you enjoying the view? I made sure they put you in the exact same spot as before."

There was obviously no response. Celestia smirked and began circling the statue, giving it the longest, hardest stare she had ever given anything. "I just wanted to see how you were doing this fine day. This fine, peaceful, chaos-free day. I can assure you, it will not be the last for a long, long time."

The princess parked herself at the statue's front. She leaned into a sitting position, turning her head upwards until she was eye-to-eye with the monster. "I lied, Discord. I didn't want to just rub your defeat in your face. I just wanted to let you know how wrong you were. Do you remember that time you burned Roam to the ground, just as we were getting things running again? You told me I would never know what fun was, that I'd be a grumpy old mare forever while Luna got to enjoy herself."

Celestia hopped back on to her hooves, filled with renewed purpose. "I almost believed you. I take Equestria's well-being very seriously. And that's why you had to go, why the Elements of Harmony defeated you not once, but twice. But today was the first real time I've had in centuries to enjoy myself. And with Luna running Equestria, I have all the time in the world to do it. I can attend parties without a mayor pulling me away to discuss corn production, I can wander the gardens without worrying about a thousand other commitments in the next hour, and best of all, I can actually have fun without everypony trying to lecture me about my indecorum."

"In other words," said finished, "Celestia rules, Discord drools! Oh, and..." She clasped her tongue between her teeth and blew a raspberry at the statue. Her thirst for revenge sated, the princess started towards the garden doors, pausing only to stomp in one last mud puddle.

The throne room was completely silent, the two sides engaging in an informal staring contest. Luna's queenly mask had deteriorated almost completely, leaving her to stare coldly at the ponies before her. The ponies and dragon simply stared back, afraid to break eye contact lest their next

breaths contain a healthy dose of moon dust. Even the guards could sense the terrible events that were about to occur.

Finally, Luna spoke. "Guards. Leave the room. *Now.*"

The two guards immediately turned to their monarch. Their faces were trembling with fear and confusion. "B-But we must not leave this post! Our orders are-"

"I am a very old, very powerful mare, gentlecolts," said Luna. "And a princess does not reach this position without learning how to protect oneself. Now, I wish to speak with these ponies alone. If I find that any of you were within ten feet of this door, I will personally oversee your termination from this palace's staff. *UNDERSTAND?!*" The guards quickly gave a whimpering nod and bolted out of the room. The minute the door slammed shut, Luna's mental focus returned to the ponies in attendance. "As for you, you have some nerve showing your faces here after what you did."

"Your Highness, we are so sorry about that," whispered Fluttershy. "We wanted to apologize for what we said."

"Twilight explained the whole situation," said Rarity. "And while we are still upset that you lied to us, we can understand why."

"Oh, *can* you?" sneered Luna. "Do you know what I've had to endure these last few hours?" The ponies took a few steps away from the princess. "Is it too much for ponies to just accept that their great and powerful Celestia might, just *might*, want to take a vacation once in her lifetime? Oh no no no, the first thing they think is 'Princess Luna did something to her! Well, we'd better enjoy these last few hours of sunlight before Nightmare Moon comes *roaring* right back!'"

The five non-goddess ponies glanced at Spike. The dragon was somewhere been terrified and genuinely guilty. "Y-Your Highness, I...We didn't..."

Luna angrily trotted off the throne and started pacing about the throne room, growing darker and more frustrated by the second. "And that isn't the most deplorable of it! Just this morning the ERS, the same branch of

government I founded, thought they had to lecture me like some schoolfoal on some tax law! I can read and interpret Equestria's laws just as well as Celestia, thank you very much!"

"Wait, *you* founded the ERS?!" shouted Dash. Applejack immediately clamped her mouth around the pegasus' tail, just as a precaution.

"And then the farmers! I try to handle the situation just like my sister, and what do they do? They ask me how many hours they have left before I push the sun out of orbit! Do they really think I don't know how plants grow?"

Once she was sure Rainbow wasn't going to make things worse by actually assaulting the angry moon princess, Applejack spat her friend's tail out of her mouth, coughing a little from the taste of hair in her mouth. "Your Highness...Princess Luna, we didn't mean ta say ya didn't..."

"And those...astronomers!" She hissed the title like it was some kind of curse. "They send their ponies over here to waste my time by badmouthing Celestia's work on Equestria's night. Do they have any idea how hard that job is? You have to get the stars just right, match their positions to the moon's orbit, make sure the moon is in the right phase, and keep it locked in the right trajectory so it doesn't veer off course and smash into the planet itself! And because I get *one little* star wrong, they feel they have the right to march in here and tell me how to best fulfill my royal duties?!"

"Um...excuse me, your Highness?" said Rarity. "As a fellow designer, I can assure you I know-"

Luna's rage was quickly reaching critical. She gritted her teeth and turned back to the ponies. "And *yooou*! You didn't even wait for an explanation before you came rushing in here! And do you really think so low of me that I'd willingly trap Celestia like that?"

"Wait a second!" said Pinkie. "You said you did it yourself!"

"It was a joke!" said Luna. She was exasperated from having to state the same fact a million times over two days. "And I only did it because *she* started pranking me first! I never meant any harm. I never wanted to

dispose her, even temporarily. And if I had a choice, I'd never set a foot on that throne again! How Celestia suffers these fools, I will never know!"

The princess turned her back to the other ponies, focusing her eyes on the overtly fancy chair at the other end. "I tried to make things comfortable, tried to be like Celestia. I only want my temporary rule over the daylight hours to go as smoothly as possible. But...everypony is so worked up over Celestia's disappearance. We all knew this was going to happen, but..."

Silence fell over the throne room. There was not much else that could be said. She had already said far too much. Luna just sat there, eyes closed, waiting for the five to leave so she could finish her venting in private. *Any second now, that door will open, and the ponies will go. They'll no doubt take Twilight with them and tell everypony the truth. My life in Equestria is over...*

Her self-pity session came to a sharp, pointy halt as a sharp, pointy claw tapped her back. Luna's head twirled about at whiplash speeds, causing Spike to hop back in alarm. "Man...did you teach owls to do that?"

"As a matter of fact, no," said the princess. Her voice was starting to crack from the sheer pressure of it all. "In any case, why are you still here?"

Spike nervously fidgeted with his tail, avoiding eye contact with the princess. He looked back at his circle of friends, all of whom were sharing the same look. "Princess Luna...it's my fault. I read too much into Twilight's letter, and...I kinda told everypony you were evil."

"You...what?"

"I don't know why I thought that was the case. Twilight told me how the Elements of Harmony saved you and everything while I was asleep that night. But...I've never heard of Celestia leaving her post here, even for a day. She's a serious workaholic, even by Twilight standards. I was afraid something had happened to her, and...I blamed you."

"You weren't far off," sighed Luna. She rose back to her hooves, turning to fully face the ponies. "Very well. I will accept the dragon's explanation, and will forgive you for your transgression. I just ask that you promise not

to mention what happened to Celestia to anyone. I fear they will accept my rule even less if they knew the truth.”

“You know what that means, girls?” said Pinkie. Everypony nodded and raised a hoof/claw.

“CROSS MY HEART AND HOPE TO FLY, STICK A CUPCAKE IN MY EYE!”

Luna stared at the sight of the ponies and dragon making the most bizarre swear she had seen since the days of the nomadic herds. When they poked themselves in the eyeball, she finally burst out laughing. The others quickly joined in, and for a few moments, something good had come out of the day’s mess.

Frosty Gaze’s thesis was the big break Twilight was looking for.

For all her teacher’s coldness and cruelty, his research was impeccable. He had transcribed entire pages from Kuchen’s works, including graphs and charts chronicling the relation between the different types of spells at work in his enchantments. There was even a section on desserts, for some reason. It was fascinating. It was breathtaking.

It was also making her head hurt.

The diagrams opened up whole worlds of magic she had never dreamed of before. Kuchen, for all his evil insanity, had a genius almost equal with Star Swirl the Bearded. The way his spells all interacted with each other was more like a series of building blocks, each reinforcing the other for a stronger whole. Sadly, this made it all the more difficult to think of a counterspell; as the long-dead unicorn’s one remaining book had said, attempting to remove the spells in an incorrect or improper manner could cause a serious backlash. *I need something stronger, something that will wipe out the whole thing in one shot.*

That was when she hit the killer paragraph:

It is also intriguing how Kuchen the Mad's entire spell body resembles those found in old pony tales, in particular those of the so-called "Mare in the Moon." While there's nothing to link Kuchen to cannibalism like in the old legend, his magic made use of illusions, curses, and offensive spells, all designed to cause harm to other ponies. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional theories of magic, most notably those of the legendary "Elements of Harmony" and their effect on modern magic. Were these elements real, it is highly doubtful Kuchen could have succeeded in his dark pursuit of power as he did.

"That's it!" said Twilight. "Kuchen was using the same kind of magic as Nightmare Moon! That means we might be able to save Princess Celestia the same way we saved Princess Luna! Oh thank you, you mean old stallion! You may have saved us all from the horrors of the Arcanus E Draco-"

"Anypony that would do something like that to their own sister deserves to be tarred, feathered, and driven out of Equestria! Dethroning her sister, using the Arcanus E Draconus, and lying to everypony? She's the worst pony ever!"

A terrible thought suddenly entered Twilight's mind. I never mentioned the Arcanus E Draconus to Pinkie, and I doubt Luna would have told them that much. She's not a unicorn, she's never studied magic, and I know something like this wouldn't interest her.

Then...how does she know where the spell came from?

Chapter Seven

Luna had lived for thousands of years. Over that time, she had been everything from a little filly to a goddess, a princess, an evil overlord, and finally a princess again. She had enjoyed countless triumphs and suffered numerous hardships, but there were three days in particular she could regard as her worst.

The first was the day Discord almost killed her older sister.

The second was the night she gave in to her jealousy and became Nightmare Moon.

And the third was today.

After Twilight's friends had finished their audience, she was certain she could easily handle the rest of her subjects and their requests. Unfortunately, she soon learned the first few appointments were the gentle ones. Pony after pony marched into the throne room and demanded that Celestia be released from the sun, or the moon, or wherever else she had shoved her. After all, why else would Celestia, that most wonderful and perfect of ponies, ever leave her post?

The breaking point was after once such meeting with the Orange family from Manehattan. Once the couple had left the chamber, Luna leaned over to one of the guards and whispered, "At least they didn't bring any pitchforks."

It's often said that humor was the first thing a member of the Royal Guard lost. What was less discussed was what went after that: tact. "The guards at the front gate have already confiscated seventy pitchforks, thirty-seven torches, twenty knives, and three apple pies."

Luna fell totally silent. She had meant it as a joke, something to alleviate the mood a little. Not only had her guards taken her seriously, they had confirmed that some ponies were indeed dumb enough to try and kill a goddess. When the next pony entered the room, Luna didn't even bother

to raise her head anymore. She ran the rest of the day's court with her eyes closed, mechanically listening and responding to a chorus of ponies all demanding the same thing: to know when Celestia would be back.

By the time Luna left the throne room, she was looking almost every bit as old as she actually was. Hearing her ruler and employer open the doors, Ruby finished her quick conversation with one of the guards and trotted up to her monarch's side. "Your Highness, I need to step out for a few minutes."

"What is it?"

"It's...a personal matter, Your Highness."

In other words, you don't want to be around me when I'm in a bad mood. Considering what she saw earlier today, I can't blame her. "Very well. I won't need you for the next short while. But do not take too long; we have a lot of work to catch up on today."

"Understood, Your Majesty," said Ruby. She turned on her hooves and started cantering out of the palace, breaking into a full gallop once outside the building itself. Luna shook her head at the sight and turned her attention back to her *other* problem: Celestia.

Luna could make out her once-bigger, now littler sister before she even reached the garden doors. Celestia's small, spunky form was recognizable from any angle, at any size. The mud-covered filly in front of her was a new sight, however. *I suppose one of Canterlot's many foals snuck into the palace. Oh well, just a quick lecture, and they ca-*
WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!"

The night princess' jaw went slack at the sight of her sister. Celestia was covered from head to hoof in mud and dirt, along with a few more pungent substances. Her mane and tail were both tangled in branches and bird feathers, and had lost much of their wavy consistency. Realizing how terrifying she must look, Celestia flashed her sister a grin, revealing a set of

cookie-stained teeth. Luna could barely mouth a response. “Wh-Wh-What happened to you?”

“I...had fun?” Celestia said incredulously. “That was the plan, wasn’t it?”

“I said you could play in the garden!” snapped Luna. “I never told you to splatter yourself in filth! Honestly sister, did you just turn off that sensible part of your brain today?”

Celestia gritted her dirty teeth. “For your information, I did have fun. In fact, I had more fun today than I’ve had in the last *century*! I’m sorry if my idea of enjoying myself isn’t as pomp and pristine as yours, but you have to get with the times already! This is what foals do all over Equestria nowadays. Have you even been reading all those reference books I give you?”

In truth, Luna *had* been reading said books. Unfortunately, she had never taken the time to put them into practice. In fact, the few times she did appear in public since her return, she had either devolved into a quivering mess of stage fright, or reverted to her old way of speaking as a sort of security blanket. Right now, though, was not one of the best times to push her buttons. “I am not going to take advice from a mud-soaked filly.”

Before Celestia could give a retort, she found herself being telekinetically hoisted onto Luna’s back. The aura of Luna’s magic refused to vanish, pinning her to the alicorn’s back. Luna whistled, and two mares in maid uniforms dashed to the princess in response. “Ladies, I want you to prepare a bath for our darling Princess Celestia.”

Luna’s stomps could be heard throughout the palace. Each step she took left a small crack where her hoof had struck, leaving the royal masons and carpenters sobbing at their misfortune. Celestia was still flung across her back, held down by Luna’s magic. Her sister’s mess was no doubt jumping from one coat to another, but at least it wasn’t getting on the ground again.

By the time they reached the bath, Celestia was squirming and struggling against her sister’s telekinetic hold. The glistening marble tub was already filled with steaming hot water, while a pair of attendants was ready for their

child-like regent's cleansing. The sight of the tub was bad enough; having other ponies in the room was more than Celestia could handle. "Listen, Luna, I can take care of myself!"

"Just like you took care of yourself outside?" said Luna. She started levitating the filly off her back, floating her over the tub. "You had your fun, now you have to pay for it."

Celestia looked down at the mass of water beneath her. At this size, it might as well have been a pond, another reminder of her tiny frame compared to an adult alicorn's. She looked pleadingly at her older sister, putting on her best sad expression and quivering her lips a little. "Pweeeeeeease?!"

Luna tapped her chin, not daring to take her eyes off the filly lest she break free. Celestia's heart burned with renewed hope, until she saw Luna's deadpan face. "Neigh."

The aura around Celestia vanished, and gravity finished its work. Celestia tumbled into the water with a resounding splash. The instant she submerged, several layers of dirt and muck peeled off and spread across the water's surface. One of the attendants immediately went at it with a net, pulling out the loose branches, leaves, and as much muck as she could. When Celestia reemerged, still soaking but otherwise fine, the other leaped forward and began applying shampoo. The filly struggled and groaned against the two, desperately pushing away in the vain hope of getting Luna to relent.

"Now remember, I want her coat and mane glistening," Luna laughed. "The guards outside will escort the princess back to her chambers once you're finished."

"Understood, your Highness!" the ponies said in perfect unison.

Seeing her sister turn to leave, coupled with the sheer agony and humiliation of having other ponies help clean her, set Celestia off yet again. Her thrashing intensified to a fever pitch, her tiny hooves splashing wave after wave of soapy water out of the tub and onto the tile floor. "Wait! I can clean myself! I don't need anypony to do this! I can-"

Luna didn't turn around. She couldn't risk letting Celestia see just how much she was grinning. "You're just a little pony right now, and little ponies need big ponies to take care of them. When you get a little older, I'm sure you'll be able to do this on your own, but until then just be a good little filly and get cleaned up."

With her vengeance complete for the moment, the princess resumed walking towards the door, ignoring Celestia's growing screams. "NO! Don't leave me here! I'll...AAGH! Not in the eyes!"

The guards quickly arched back to attention as Luna exited the royal washroom. Celestia's calls and groans for help echoed through the hall, even after Luna willed the door closed. The two pegasi turned their attention towards their other princess, a look of confusion etched across both ponies. "Gentlecolts, I want you to escort Princess Celestia to her room once she's finished her bath. Once there, you are to make sure she doesn't leave her chambers for any reason. Understand?"

"Understood, your Highness," the guards said in perfect unison. Even their head nods were in sync with each other.

Satisfied that her orders would be followed, the princess started trotting away, wanting to place as much distance between herself and her no doubt angry, vengeful sister. Her attention was returning to the rest of her day. Court had been a disaster, sure, but she knew that was to be expected all along. Even if she hadn't tried to bring about eternal night twice over, the fact remained that with Celestia gone, everypony was in a blind panic. Nopony was going to give her a fair shot.

Well, if I can't impress them in person, I'll do it through action! If I can get all of Celestia's little projects done, I'm sure I'll be able to win our subjects over!

"Your Highness!"

Luna's attention immediately shifted to the new voice behind her. Twilight Sparkle cantered towards the princess, stopping only when she was right in front of the alicorn. Every tiny little bit of her body was brimming with

newfound confidence and glee, something even Luna could sense.
“Princess Luna, I think I figured it out!”

Luna raised an eyebrow. “Figured what out?”

“How Kuchen’s spell worked!” gasped Twilight.

Luna took pause for a minute, searching her brain for any idea of who this “Kuchen” was. When she finally stumbled upon the answer, she couldn’t help but visibly gasp. “You mean, you’ve been researching the unicorn himself? I do not think this is a wise course of action, Twilight Sparkle. Some secrets are lost for a reason.”

“But it’s the only way to find a counterspell. The magic he used was lost five hundred years before his time.”

“Lost five hundred years before then...and it’s five hundred years later...”
As the fancy mathematics clicked along her mental abacus, Luna began to break into a cold sweat. “You mean...he used *my* magic?”

Twilight shook her head. “No, not yours...technically. According to Professor Gaze’s thesis on illegal magic, Kuchen managed to tap into the same dark powers you used as Nightmare Moon.” The unicorn nervously scratched her head with one hoof as she pondered what she had just said. “Um...sorry to bring that up.”

“You wouldn’t be the first today. Please, continue.”

Twilight’s anxiety calmed enough for her to stop scratching about and get back on topic. “If the magic is the same, we should be able to remove it in the same way: with the Elements of Harmony.”

“You mean...you wish to use the Elements on my sister?” Luna asked incredulously.

Twilight nodded in affirmation. “I know it’s a rather blunt way to do it, but if the magic is the same, it just might work.”

Luna’s mind twisted back and forth, putting all the variables in place. Her sister’s safety was of the utmost concern, and firing a massive rainbow of

light into her wasn't exactly the most pleasant of options. *Nevertheless, Celestia is getting too used to this situation. If something isn't done, she might decide she really does want to stay this way. I can't allow her to do that.*

Luna closed her eyes and raised her head high, portraying as much of a regal attitude as ever. "Very well. We shall attempt to use the Elements of Harmony. The sooner this situation is resolved, the better."

"I'll run it by the rest of the girls tonight," said Twilight. "We should have the princess back to normal in time for tomorrow." She turned to leave. "Well, I should go tell her the good news."

A sudden pain raced through Twilight's body as something stomped on her tail. She yipped and turned around, her wide eyes locking with a rather upset Luna's. "I am afraid Princess Celestia is bathing right now. It seems she decided that drenching oneself in a multitude of substances is how a princess is supposed to behave."

Twilight shuddered, both from the shooting pain in her tail and from her growing comprehension of what Luna was talking about. "Is this about those toys I left the princess this morning? They were some of Spike's old ones, and I thought..."

"I thought I made my position clear," said Luna. "You were to treat my sister like her adult self, not as a mere foal. Forgive me if I am out of touch with the times, but the last time I checked, grown ponies do not play with toys."

Twilight gulped as Luna released her hoof from the unicorn's tail. "I remember, but...after what you said about Celestia's foalhood, I thought she could use a little diversion. Besides, I didn't just push them in her face. I left them in there in case she *wanted* to play with them."

"And that's the problem," said Luna. "My sister is in a very delicate state of mind right now. As of right now, we need to keep a tighter leash on that filly. I've already ordered the guards to confine her to her quarters for the time being."

“You WHAT?” gasped Twilight. “Princess, you can’t do that! She should be enjoying this time off, not just moping in her room!”

Luna scoffed. “Are you trying to challenge my authority on this? I have known my sister for thousands of years longer than you have even *existed*. I believe I know what’s better for her than you do.”

Twilight couldn’t hold back any longer. Luna’s smarminess and self-conceit was insufferable right now. “You didn’t see her last night, at least not when I did. She was scared and embarrassed of being a filly again. I wanted to give her an idea of what a modern foalhood was like. That way, she would at least have some good memories of this experience.”

Luna’s reply was stern. “If you want her to be a sloppy, lazy filly, then it is my duty to stop you. She is mine to raise as I see fit.”

“*RAISE?* She isn’t going to stay like this for much longer!”

“No, she isn’t! And I would very much appreciate it if you kept her in the right mindset!”

“And I think she should be doing what she wants to do!”

“What she *wants* is to return to normal!”

“And we’ll do that! But in the meantime, she can make up her own mind what she does with her time! She’s a growing filly, and she needs to expand her horizons. And she certainly doesn’t need some bossy pony like you ordering her around all the time!”

“*HOW DARE THOU SPEAKEST TO THY PRINCESS IN SUCH A CRASS MANNER!*”

“Oh, I’m sorry, didst thou forget thy speech lessons, Your Highness?”

“MY SISTER IS MY RESPONSIBILITY! WE SHALL HEAR NO MORE OF THY INSUFFERABLE...”

The two stopped as a glass fell and shattered on the floor. An entire army of onlookers had gathered around the two, drawn by the sight of a pony

daring to argue with the former Nightmare Moon. The frazzled ponies managed to give a quick, weak giggle to the crowd before shuffling far, far down the hall.

The two came to a stop inside Celestia's chambers, the night princess figuring it to be the safest place to continue talking. The awkward scene and long walk had done wonders for each others' nerves. "Now, what sayeth thou..." Luna paused, reworking her brain back into modern linguistics. "I mean, what were you saying earlier?"

Twilight gulped. "I was saying I thought we should let Celestia have some more freedom. I didn't mean we should take her out of the palace or show her off to everypony. I just thought she might enjoy some time off."

"Twilight Sparkle, I'm not objecting to my sister having fun," said Luna. "I just want her to keep to the right mindset." The princess leaned in closer to Twilight, their muzzles and horns touching. "And do not dare raise your voice like that to me again, especially around other ponies. I am just as much a princess as your dear Celestia, and it is time you and every other pony in Equestria realizes it."

Twilight slowly stepped back, trying to keep as much distance between herself and Luna as possible. "I never said you weren't a princess. But Celestia..."

Their conversation came to a grinding halt at the sound of the door opening. The guards from the bath stood at attention, accompanied by a lump of towels that was, apparently, Celestia. "We have delivered Princess Celestia as orders, Your Highness."

Luna turned to the door. "Thank you. You are dismissed."

The lump of towels slowly shambled into the room, while the two guards quickly closed the door and started back to their post. Once she was in the very center of the room, the disgruntled filly shook the annoying cloths to the floor. In their place was the cleanest filly to ever grace Equestria. Celestia's coat was a bleached white, her mane and tail were combed and tied with little pink ribbons, her hooves were filed and mended, her teeth

were brushed until they were like a set of pearls, and her cutie mark was even shinier than before thanks to some makeup.

Twilight smiled. "Princess Celestia, you look beautiful."

"And how was your bath, *little* sister?" said Luna.

Celestia growled at her big meanie of a sister. She quickly started making her way closer to Twilight, just in case Luna got some more ideas. "It was horrible. Those two servants...they prodded every inch of me! I can still feel the brushes tearing into my coat, taking off more dirt than I thought possible! And then they started brushing my mane! I swear, they were trying to pull off my whole scalp! A-A-And then..."

Luna's hoof jumped in front of Celestia's mouth, stopping her complaining. It did little to stop her death glare, however. "It's your fault for making such a mess."

"You didn't have to have others wash me!" Celestia hissed.

Twilight could see where this conversation was headed a mile away. She loudly cleared her throat, ensuring the two would turn their attention back to her. It worked; both alicorns turned back to her, their faces perfect replicas of the ones they wore during yesterday's fights. "Princess Celestia, I think I've found a way to turn you back to normal."

The unicorn paused, expecting to be showered with praise from her mentor for her hard work and dedication. Instead, Celestia seemed more downtrodden than anything else, kicking at the ground with one limp leg. "Oh...I see."

"We can use the Elements of Harmony to turn you back to normal," said Twilight. "You see, the magic Kuchen used is the same as Nightmare Moon's, so..."

Twilight stopped as she caught Celestia's deflated expression. "You mean, you found a cure already?"

Luna glowered at Twilight, giving her a silent but epic "I told you so." Twilight looked down at the floor, trying her best to avoid any eye contact

with the upset princesses. “A-Anyway, just let me know when you’re ready, and we can have you back to normal in no time.”

“She’s ready right now,” said Luna. “Grab the rest of the bearers and...”

Celestia suddenly snapped back to attention. “NO! I am *not* ready! There’s still so much I want to do!”

Luna facehoofed at her sister’s declaration. “Stuff you want to do?”

Celestia perked herself back into a regal position: back straight, head raised, and eyes looking over who she was talking to. Or in this case, *trying* to look over. “Why, yes. While I was enjoying the fresh air, I found myself thinking about all the things I’ve never been able to do before without sending everypony into a blind panic. This may be the only opportunity I’ll have. I refuse to go back until I’ve done everything I can.”

“You...*REFUSE?*” shouted Luna. “You cannot refuse a direct order from your elder sister! I order you to get ready to...”

Celestia smirked. “What’s wrong, Lu-Lu? Is ruling Equestria’s daytime too hard for you?”

Luna froze in an instant, chocking back on her sister’s candy-coated venom. The memories of the day’s events crashed back to the forefront, and the princess found herself reliving every painful, agonizing memory of her court, the ERS meeting, Blueblood’s threats, and that contemptible sun. “...No, sister. I am not having problems. Tonight, once the daytime business is concluded, you are going back. And that. Is. Final.” With that, she stormed out of the room, telekinetically slamming the door so hard one of the hinges popped off.

Celestia and Twilight stared at the broken, sagging door, even as a new workcrew immediately arrived to fix it. Celestia turned back to the still-startled Twilight. “And what about you, Twilight Sparkle? You were the one who showed me how fun this could be. Do you think I should go back right now?”

Twilight was silent for several seconds, mentally weighing the pros and cons. She wanted so bad to keep Celestia happy, but between the incident

with her friends and the latest outburst, the right course of action was obvious. "Princess, I wanted you to be happy while we looked for a counterspell. But Princess Luna is downright miserable right now. Would it really be fair to her if you forced her to keep doing your job?"

Celestia pouted. "I did hers for a thousand years."

"And you were wonderful, princess. But that must have been a lot of hard work. Do you really want Luna to go through the same headaches and problems you did, while you get to have fun?"

The filly continued to pout, even as Twilight's words rang true in her ears. *Luna had all the fun as a filly. I never got to enjoy myself without an entourage wondering if I was laughing at their ensuing destruction or fearing I would slay them all for some minor inconvenience. But...Equestria has grown in a thousand years. I can't really expect somepony who just skipped all that time to be able to manage both day and night without problems.*

With a heavy sigh, Celestia stopped moping and turned back to Twilight. "You're right. It was selfish of me to want to keep this going while Luna's having so many problems. Prepare your friends for tonight. And Twilight..."

The princess was upon her student in an instant, warmly nuzzling the surprised unicorn. "Thank you for a wonderful time."

Twilight smiled and returned the pony hug. "You're very welcome, princess." The two slowly broke apart, still smiling. "Well, I need to talk to my friends. They need to know what's going on."

"That...would be kind of important," said Celestia.

"I was thinking of taking them to Pony Joe's. It's close to the palace, and we really enjoyed it the last time we were all together in Canterlot. Do you want me to bring you anything?"

Celestia shook her head. "No, no. I'm sure your flanks need the calories more than mine. Have fun!"

Twilight gave a giggly nod before trotting to the door. She stopped, listened to make sure nopony else was on the other side, slowly pushed the good half of the door open, and cantered off into the hall. Celestia watched her student with a mixture of pride, love...and envy.

Yes, you need to go back to your friends. Those friends I sent you to find in Ponyville. The ones that'll stay friends with you no matter what. The same ones that helped save the closest thing to a friend I ever had. The same sister who probably now hates me because I'm a fool who didn't know when not to prank somepony...

She was ready to fall back into her depression completely, had she not spied a small toy sitting on her bed. Celestia quickly galloped over and tossed the figure onto her back. "Come on, General Smashemup! We've only got a few hours to avenge Lady Pinkinstuff!"

Luna sauntered her way into Celestia's private offices, half-expecting a massive wall of paperwork to come crashing down at the sound of the door opening. Instead, it was neat, tidy, and impeccably organized. The books on the shelves were sorted both alphabetically and by category, as were the tightly-bound scrolls. A dozen ink wells sat next to a pile of purple pillows, along with several cups filled with rainbow-colored quills. There was still a massive pile of papers, scrolls, and books laying about, but the rest of the room was so relaxingly ordered that it almost made Luna forget just how terrible the day was going.

Then again, it made perfect sense. Celestia almost never used the old room anymore, preferring her old study or the throne room itself for any official business. The office was kept clean and dusted, of course; none of the cleaning staff would dare leave even the most miniscule of dust mites, lest it offend a royal's nostrils. However, over the years of Luna's banishment, her sister had transformed it into a place to store any and all official correspondence still waiting for approval and/or transit.

In laypony's terms, it was a place to dump all her work so she didn't have to be constantly reminded of it.

Luna's horn glowed, levitating a few pillows into the air. Within a few seconds, said cushions were fluffed and laid out on the ground in a straight line. Once her padding was secured, the princess lay herself upon it, stomach-side down, and telekinetically pulled up an eight-hundred page mound of papers. On the top page sat the words, "Equestria National Budget, Abridged Edition." And below, "Approval needed" was stamped in red ink.

Okay, first things first. It's been a thousand years since I finished a budget, but surely it's not that much different from how things used to work. This should not take more than an hour...

Blueblood's estate had been transformed into a fortress. An extra squadron of guards had been posted around the grounds, guarding the main building and any possible entrance or exit from the premises. Only a handful of servants were allowed in and out, and always carefully inspected at each checkpoint. The Captain in charge of the operation had gone so far as to procure a detailed map of the estate from the Canterlot Records Office, detailing every secret passage the imprisoned prince could possibly use to escape.

It was about four hours into the operation that a dusty brown Earth pony walked up to a side gate. His saddlebags were filled with several large brown loaves of bread, still bearing that fresh-from-the-bakery aroma. The two pegasi at the gate gave each other a sideways glance at the stallion skipping his way up the road towards them. He would have gone so far as to plow right through the gate had a pair of razor-sharp wings not appeared before him. "HALT! State your business!"

The stallion stopped and saluted. "Bread pony, sir! I'm here with the afternoon delivery for the master of the house!" he said in a very thick Trottingham accent.

One of the guards raised an eyebrow. "Bread pony?"

"We're a new service sir, straight from Trottingham to mighty Canterlot!" The stallion's exuberance was laudable, even if his accent was thick

enough to crush somepony. “Prince Blueblood here, he wanted to give our new bakery a shot!”

The guards were skeptical, but alas were also susceptible to the bread’s wonderful smell. A quick check of the bags, and the stallion was inside. He resumed his merry gait, hopping along the stone path until he reached the kitchen doors. One of the prince’s cooks was waiting at the window, as was expected during such things.

The bread pony flipped up on his front legs, launching the saddlebags through the window and onto a nearby counter. The cook quickly removed the good loafs, shoving them onto the various corners of the pantry. Once that task was done, she reached inside a cupboard under the shelf and pulled out a large, moldy dinner roll. “Would you mind disposing of this for me, please?”

“Sure will, ma’am!” shouted the bread pony. The cook took one last, deep breath and shoved the whole roll into the bag, along with a few bits for the delivery. She then grabbed the strap in her mouth and tossed it onto the waiting stallion’s back. His task for the day completed, he hopped, skipped and jumped his way back to the guards at the gate.

“HALT!” One of the pegasi pointed at the moldy bread. “What is...that?”

“I promised the cook I’d take it to the dustbin for her! Gotta earn a few more bits, after all!”

The guards pawed at the air with their hooves. The horrid smell assaulted all their senses at once; their eyes burned, their taste buds shriveled in fear, their sense of touch went numb, their ears rang in agony, and the less said about their noses, the better. “Fine! Take it out of here...now!”

The guards couldn’t open the gate and kick the pony’s caboose out of there fast enough. The bread pony didn’t seem to notice their relieved sighs when he left. He just kept skipping down the street, turned a corner, and kept going until he reached a sufficiently dark alley to finish his work.

After a quick glance to confirm the coast was clear, the pony stepped into one of Canterlot’s alleyways, right behind a Chewy Pony’s Amusement Center. A roll of his back was enough to send the saddlebags falling to the

ground. An additional smash from his hooves broke the bread completely, revealing the hidden note and two pairs of tickets. After once again assuring the coast's clearness, the pony picked up the note with the backside of one hoof and began reading:

"Princess Luna has ordered my unlawful arrest for speaking out against her most assuredly horrid reign. I will need some leverage if I am to both ensure my release and punish the ponies who ruined my best night ever. Attached are two tickets for a banquet tomorrow night. I want you and one associate to infiltrate the castle during the party and find something I can use against Princess Luna. If successful, I will pay triple your usual fee. – Prince Blueblood of Equestria."

The pony mulled over the assignment even as he was eating the note. Prince Blueblood was not his favorite pony to work for. In fact, the stallion was more like a foppish, annoying brat who threw violent temper tantrums when he didn't get his way. Nonetheless, he was a private investigator, and Blueblood's generous payments kept him out of the gutter.

The fear of discovery long since passed, the pony quickly dropped the obnoxious faked Trottingham accent and switched to his gruff, natural voice. "Guess I need to get fitted for a tux."

"Are ya sure about this, sugahcube?"

At Spike's request, the gang had decided to celebrate their reunion with another trip to Pony Joe's, Twilight's favorite late night stop. Given the circumstances of their last visit, the seven found themselves enjoying the place far more without a trail of destruction behind them. The donut shop itself was still dirty from the lunch rush, but with the exception of the Twilight, Spike, their friends, and Pony Joe himself, was now totally empty.

The six sat around a round white table, half-eaten donuts and quarter-filled coffee mugs before them. The only exception was Pinkie, who was barely visible behind the two dozen glazed confections she was currently turning into a pyramid. By this point, none of the other friends were really paying attention to her antics, especially Twilight. She needed to wait until the others were gone to find out why Pinkie knew things she shouldn't have.

"I know it sounds rather...drastic," said Twilight.

"No, dear, that isn't 'drastic,'" Rarity interjected. "'Drastic' would be like that time I had to use Rainbow Dash as a model." The blue pegasus yipped as Applejack reflexively stamped on her tail. "What you're suggesting sounds...how do I say this politely..."

"Totally *gack* insane?" grunted Rainbow Dash.

"Yes, that's it!"

Applejack, satisfied that Dash wasn't going to leap over the table and tackle Rarity for the not-so-subtle jab at her "brutish ways," finally lifted her hoof off the other's tail. The pegasus grabbed the poor clump of hair between her forehooves and stroked it gently. "I wasn't gonna do anything."

"Better safe than sorry," said Applejack.

"Um...excuse me, Twilight," said Fluttershy, "but what if something goes wrong? We certainly don't want to hurt the princess."

"And we won't," said Twilight. "If the magic is the same as Nightmare Moon's, then only the curse will be broken. Luna was fine when she returned to normal. At worst, all we'll have to worry about is a temporary loss in power."

"It won't work," Pinkie said, still hidden behind her donut pyramid of power.

Twilight raised an inquisitive brow. "Really? How do you know that?"

Pinkie shrugged, desperate not to drop her masterpiece's last donut. "I just do, Twilight. You know, Pinkie Sense and all." Her hooves gently placed the pastry on top of the others, creating the most gluttonous pyramid seen outside of a carriage stop in Bridlesville. The ponies and dragon admired the monument to all things fattening for the whole five seconds it took for Pinkie to swallow it whole, like some sort of all-devouring Elder Pony from on high.

“That’s...nice, Pinkie. Gross, but nice,” said Twilight. “But as I was saying, how did...”

Spike groaned. “Ugh, are we going here again? I thought you gave up on the whole ‘figuring out Pinkie Sense’ thing.”

“Please tell me we ya’ll don’t hafta go huntin’ fer hydras,” moaned Applejack. Fluttershy responded to the memory by squealing and ducking under the table. “Err...sorry ta bring that back up.”

The unicorn facehoofed. “I am not trying to figure out Pinkie Sense. I got enough broken bones and bee stings the last time I tried that. Pinkie, back at the palace, you said the spell Luna used was from the Arcanus E Draconus. How did you know that?”

“...The Arcany-Eh what now?” said Rainbow Dash.

Twilight sighed. She really didn’t want to get into this, but now it looked like she had no choice. “The Arcanus E Draconus. It’s the spell book that Luna used when she cast her spell. It’s one of the most illegal, forbidden tomes known to ponydom. It was apparently locked up so tight Luna herself had to steal it.” She turned her attention back to Pinkie. “So...how did you know?”

All eyes turned to the pink pony. Pinkie’s jubilation at her monumental meal eroded into a growing sense of fear. “U-U-Um, you see...” She looked to and fro for a way out, her pink coat slowly darkening from her sweat. Her friends regarded her more with curiosity than malice; even Twilight, the chief accuser, had visibly relaxed at seeing Pinkie’s growing anxiety. Nonetheless, she couldn’t tell them the truth. She wasn’t *allowed* to. No pony in the Pie Clan was allowed to. “I-I read about it in the *Equestria Daily*! Yeah, Mr. and Mrs. Cake were wrapping up some old lemon drops in newspaper, and I saw it on the front page!”

Everypony was silent for several seconds, taking in Pinkie’s obvious lie. Pinkie continued to tremble in the far seat, unsure herself whether the excuse would hold.

“Well, that answers everything!” said Spike.

“Sure does!” added Rainbow Dash.

“I’m so sorry we put you on the spot like that,” said Fluttershy.

A few similar apologies later, and Pinkie was back to her happy, perky self, bouncing around the table without a care in the world. Twilight was the only pony not satisfied with the answer. *Frosty Gaze mentioned the article in the Equestria Daily. But when I mentioned the Arcanus E Draconus to him, he was surprised that it was connected. Given the time it takes to walk from Ponyville to Canterlot, Pinke would have had to read the emergency printing. That means there’s no way she could have read it at Sugarcube Corner! Besides, everypony knows there are never leftover lemon drops, not when there’s a certain sugar-obsessed pony living...*

Out of the corner of her eye, Twilight spied a nearby clock. “Drat! Come on, girls! We need to get back to the palace and get ready!” *We’ll talk later, Pinkie Pie.*

Ruby stood outside Celestia’s office, watching the clock with growing concern. Over the course of the last two hours, her small errand had mutated into a very large, very big one. She could only hope the princess was forgiving; getting fired the same day you got promoted tended to reflect poorly on a résumé.

Princess Luna was still inside the office, obviously hard of work from the rhythmic scratching noises. It was with extreme trepidation that the pegasus knocked on the door. “Y-Your Majesty?”

No response.

Feeling a little bolder, the attendant pushed the door open. Her hearing immediately regretted it, as the loudest, most offensive scrapping noise the pony had ever heard. Her ears flattened on reflex as she walked into the room itself. The room itself was virtually untouched, save for one thing: the loudly snoring alicorn lying on a pillow bed. Next to the princess was what looked like the budget for the next year, almost completely untouched.

Ruby was ready to start backing out when her hoof scrapped against the floor. Luna's snoring ceased immediately, her eyelids opening like a window curtain. The princess sat up with an alarmed snort. "What? Miss Dream, when did you get here?"

"Umm...just a few seconds ago?"

Luna's head spun towards a nearby alarm clock. Sure enough, an hour had passed since she had first entered the room. "What? I...I could not have slept that long!"

Ruby motioned towards the budget. "Your Highness...is that the National Budget?"

The still very flustered Luna levitated the paperwork towards her face. "Why yes, it is. I was working on it before I..." Her eyes snapped even wider, threatening to devour her whole face. "Before I fell asleep. I fell asleep in the middle of my duties."

Ruby's "assuage the god-princess" mode kicked in immediately. "It's not a big problem, Princess Luna. I know you've been working day and night, and..."

"It's not that simple!" Luna snapped. "I am supposed to be Equestria's ruler, the Princess of the Night! It does not matter how much or how little I sleep, I must always put Equestria's needs before my own! I was supposed to be finalizing the national budget. And instead, I was sleeping!"

"Um, Your Highness..."

"And what if I had slept through the sunset?" Luna's panic grew a thousandfold as she thought of the ramifications. "The sunlight would throw off sleep cycles everywhere! The heat would bake crops and ponies alike! It'll be just as destructive as an eternal night!"

"But...it's still a couple of hours before sunset..."

"How could I have been so irresponsible?" The princess collapsed onto all fours, burying her face in her forelegs. She had already shown too much emotion twice today, and she certainly didn't need to add a third incident to

the list. *This was my one chance to show everypony I could rule just as capably as my sister. And what happens? I'm humiliated by one audience after another, almost lose my sister to this curse, and fall asleep when I should be working.*

"Couldn't you just...ask for help?"

Luna raised her head, her lips formed into a cruel sneer. "From Celestia, I presume? Yes, that would be *wonderful*." She jumped onto all fours and started pacing around the room, grumbling and groaning at everything she could see. "We can go right back to how it was before. She can be sitting out here, soaking up all the praise she gets from this nanny state she's formed, while I just languish in the shadows with all the real work!"

Before Ruby could say anything in response, Luna was back at the paperwork. Her eyes were beginning to water from her frustration. "I never wanted to rule Equestria by myself forever. I didn't even expect everypony to love me. I just wanted to prove I was as good as my sister."

There was nothing to say to that. Ruby couldn't find the words to comfort the despairing princess, and even if she could, Luna was in no mood to receive any pity sympathy. The entire room felt darker and heavier as the Princess of the Night slumped back on all fours. The pegasus was about to leave the room altogether when the door slammed open. The poor red pony yelped and jumped back as one of the unicorn guards entered the room, a letter firmly placed in his mouth. He looked genuinely surprised to see anypony, much less the princess, actually using the office like an office instead of an oversized sorting tray.

The guard spat the letter on the desk, bowed in apology, and walked out of the room. Once he was gone, all it took was a quick nod from Luna to give the order. Ruby instinctively snatched up the envelope, grabbed a nearby letter opener with her teeth, and started opening it for her princess.

"So, what did they send this time?" muttered Luna. "Threats? Demands for Celestia's release? A bomb?"

Ruby scanned the letter quickly; she knew Luna didn't have the patience right now for a formal reading. As its words rang through her mind, she

could feel her tension gradually lifting. “It’s from the Canterlot Medical Center.”

Luna rolled her eyes at the name. “Are they trying to bill the palace for all the widespread panic losing Celestia for a day caused?”

“No, it’s actually something better. Apparently, they were hoping you could make an appearance tomorrow.” Luna’s ears perked up. “It’s something about inspecting the recent renovations in the children’s ward.” The ears went flat. “And they were wondering if you would also stay to visit with the patients for a little while after.”

The letter suddenly found itself flying off the table, stopping in front of Luna. Her attendant wasn’t lying; it was indeed a request from one of the local hospitals, asking for her to come by and make a public appearance. “In other words, they want to use me as a public relations stunt. It sounds like something Celestia would do.”

Something Celestia would do...

A bolt of inspiration struck the princess the moment she reflected on her own words. She hopped back to all fours, her wings half-extended from surprise. “That’s it! Ruby, what is our schedule like tomorrow?”

The pegasus scrambled for a copy of the next day’s calendar. A quick flip through was enough to find some good news. “Tomorrow morning is open after an eight o’clock meeting with the Canterlot Royal Orchestra. Princess Celestia was hoping they would perform at tomorrow’s function, but...after the Gala incident...”

Luna shuddered at the thought of Blueblood’s crashed party. “Please, say no more. Miss Dream, take a letter.”

Ruby fired a quick salute and went right to work, grabbing a quill with her pastern and pulling out a blank scroll. Seeing her attendant was ready, Luna began to pace about the room in a far more proper, royal manner. “To whom it may concern: I have received your invitation, and will be more than happy to attend this function. Although I am somewhat distressed by the short notice, I am certain I can be at the appointed place at promptly

ten o'clock. Please make the necessary arrangements. Signed, Princess Luna."

Ruby's quill slid off the last "a" with a flourish, adding to the illusion that the princess herself had written the actual note. Luna's horn lit up yet again as the scroll folded and sealed itself. The finished document was then slit in front of Ruby's face. "I want this delivered immediately to the Canterlot Medical Center. Once you've finished with that, I want you to start supervising the preparations for tomorrow's party. I have some other matters to attend to in the meanwhile, and will join you there once I'm finished."

For the first time in months, Luna actually felt like skipping. The smile she now wore wasn't that of a beleaguered ruler trying desperately to stay presentable, but instead revealed her genuine glee. The whole day had gone wrong so far, but now there was a glimmer of hope. For the first time since her return, somepony had actually *invited* her to official business. It wasn't Celestia trying to drag her out of her room again, and she didn't have to dramatically fly in and crash whatever party was being held. It just felt great to be wanted.

And even better, Twilight Sparkle had finally found a way to reverse the spell. In but a few minutes, Luna's mistake would be fixed. And once Celestia was an adult again, she would take her old job back, and Luna would go back to just ruling over the night. That darling Celestia would get all the love and admiration that was rightfully due to both sisters, while Luna would be spoken of in hushed whispers for generations to come. Nopony would care that Celestia had spent the last two months taking out her work-related woes on her younger sister, or that said little sister was unable to actually accomplish anything because everypony regarded her as a horrible monster. Nope, she would go right back to being Nightmare Moon Junior while Celestia regained her position as the God-Empress of Ponies.

Luna's hoofs skidded to a halt. She hadn't thought this all through. *I can still do this. I just have to tell Celestia to hold off for a few days. By then, I should at least have enough of a hoofhold that I won't...*

She shook her head, angry at herself for having such thoughts. *No. I was just Celestia's steward in all this. There's far more to being a princess than popularity. Or, for that matter, having anypony actually like you.*

Luna gave a mournful moan at the thought. She knew what she had to do. *Celestia, it's time you came back.*

All six ponies were ready by the time the two princesses entered the throne room. The six bearers of the Elements of Harmony had their respective Elements on, the candlelight dancing off the exquisite gems like a thousand little rays of sunlight. The room itself was almost completely dark, the sun having been blocked by the approaching storm. The dramatic appropriateness was not lost on anyone involved.

Celestia's steps were slow and uneven, while her mind still tried to process a way out of this predicament. *There's still so much I never got to do. I wish I had just a few more days. I haven't had so much fun since...*

"Are you all right, sister?" asked Luna.

Celestia looked up at her sister, forcing a small smile. She had had thousands of years of practice, and was a certifiable master of hiding her real emotions. Granted, her sister knew her better than anypony else, and could easily tell when she was lying her head off, but that was beside the point. "I'm all right."

"Are you...sure you're ready to go back?" *Please say no please say no please say no...*

Celestia frowned. "How ready I may be isn't important. I am a princess, and I have my royal responsibilities to fulfill." *And the most important one to me is seeing you happy...*

Luna nodded. "Spoken like a true princess." *And just when I had something to look forward to...*

Celestia stopped halfway through the hall, about twelve feet from the ponies. The air was cold and solemn as the two parties looked at each other. "Princess, are you ready?" asked Twilight.

Celestia gulped. "R-Ready."

Twilight nodded to the others, and the process began. The jewelry glowed brighter and brighter, each intricate gem glistening with its own hue. The energy resonated off the necklaces like shockwaves, showering the chamber with afterimages of the cutie mark-shaped objects. All six pairs of eyes turned bright white, while an aura of brilliant light shined forth like several small lanterns. The powers finally coalesced into a massive rainbow, which shot to the roof, curved right back down, and struck Celestia dead center.

For all the times she had wielded the Elements, Celestia had never experienced being struck with the power of Harmony itself. Judging from the effects their power had on both her sister and Discord before her, she had expected something fierce and strong, possibly even cruel. Instead, it was warm and nurturing. She couldn't quite decide what it was exactly, but she felt better than she ever had before. It was like raw magical power was being pumped into her soul, or whatever it was she and Luna had.

Celestia felt invigorated as the rainbow continued to spin around her. She stretched out her wings and spread her hooves out, eager to finally be an adult again.

Then she felt a horrible coldness run up her spine. The same feeling that had hit her when Luna first cast the spell returned...

On the other side of the rainbow, Luna was keeping a close eye on the situation. Her eyes were locked on the external, focusing on both the Bearers and the rainbow they had created. At the same time, her horn was glowing with an intense light, her magic feeding her information on Celestia's condition. The princess herself was at the far corner of the room, anxious to see if Twilight's plan would actually work.

On the surface, it seemed that everything was going according to plan. The rainbow's appearance perfectly matched what she had seen over a thousand years ago, when she and her sister defeated Discord and became the nation's formal rulers. And yet, her horn was telling a different story. Celestia's heartbeat, brain activity, and general vitals were not changing. Even worse, the rainbow was taking far too long. It should have broken apart over a minute ago.

Then she felt it. It was like some invisible force had cracked a whip across her back. The layers of enchantments weren't just still there, *they were about to recast the spell **by themselves***. Luna tried to scream out a warning, but the rainbow suddenly exploded in a blast of white light. Her words were drowned out as the entire throne room disappeared into a white void...

Chapter Eight

The light faded just as quickly as it had appeared, taking the rainbow with it. Remarkably, the magic shielding along the throne room walls and windows held strong, and no part of the actual palace structure was harmed. The same could not be said for the candles; the rush of air from the explosion had blown each of them out, leaving the entire chamber shrouded in near darkness.

It took Luna's eyes a few moments to fully adjust to the sudden change in lighting. Heart pounding, she immediately turned to physically and magically scanning herself in case anything had changed. Fortunately, whatever the spell's effects were, it had apparently not been powerful enough to reach the princess. Her coat was the same color, her cutie mark was intact, her magic was still working, her wings were functional, her mane and tail still shimmered like stars, and a quick comparison to one of the windows confirmed she hadn't shrunk. Everything was all...

Oh no! Celestia!

Luna quickly cast a "light candle" spell, illuminating the entire room. Nonetheless, her brain was working far too fast to actually focus on anything. The spell was the same one she had used on Celestia to begin with, that much was sure. It might not have affected her, but if Celestia was at the center of the blast, there was no telling how much younger she might have gotten. *The Arcanus E Draconus said the Youth Restoration Spell could not regress a pony past the point of their birth. But...what if she's a baby? I can't take care of a baby Celestia by myself! I'm thousands of years too young to be a mother!*

"Ugh...Grah...Luna..."

The small voice broke through Luna's panic mode. The alicorn glanced towards the spot where her sister stood, and to her relief saw the same white pony lying there. Luna cleared the gap between herself and Celestia with a single bound, landing with enough force to shake a few of the items around the throne room. On the plus side, she seemed uninjured. On the

down side, she was still a silly little filly.

With a quick jerk, Luna flung Celestia into her upper barrel, squeezing her in a vice-like grip. Celestia choked and gagged against her sister's bear hug, wrapping one of her own forelegs over her neck and pushing back with all her might. "I'm so sorry, sister! I thought I had lost you forever!"

"Well, you haven't," Celestia croaked. "Can you please let me go?"

Luna quickly released her sister, the filly flopping onto the floor. "What happened back there?"

Luna shook her head sadly. "In all honesty, I'm not sure. From what I can tell, the curse was able to...recast itself."

Celestia yipped in horror. "Recast? Does that mean I'm even *younger* now?"

Luna's horn glowed as she went back to scanning Celestia. The enchantments from before were still there, but nothing had been added or subtracted to the mix since then. "As far as I can tell, no. You're the same size, your memories are obviously all there, and I can't really see any injuries."

"You mean, before or after the bear hug?" Celestia joked.

That was when they heard the other groans and moans.

Very high-pitched groans and moans.

Very *foalish* groans and moans.

Luna and Celestia both went stark pale with fear as they slowly turned their heads to where the other six had been standing earlier. In their place were a collection of little fillies, all of which bore the exact same coat colors and cutie marks as Twilight and her friends. The necklaces were still around their necks, while Twilight's tiara had fallen off her shrunken head and rolled onto its side.

The princesses galloped to the fallen heroes, prodding and muzzling the

pile in hopes of getting a response. After a few seconds, Twilight's eyes finally forced themselves open. Celestia jumped in front of her personal student's face. "Twilight Sparkle! Are you all right?"

"Mmnh, guh." Twilight cleared her throat and stared up at her mentor. A big smile registered across her face as she took in the new size difference. "Princess Celestia! It worked!"

"Um...Twilight?" Celestia scrunched her face as she tried to articulate the words. "The Elements...didn't work."

"What? B-But you're bigger!"

Luna stepped into Twilight's view. "Would you please stop avoiding the issue?"

Twilight gasped at the sight of Luna's massive form. The shock from the rainbow explosion had started to clear, only to be replaced by the horror of her situation. "P-P-Princess Luna? When did you get so big?"

"I'm the same size as ever," said Luna. "It is you that has changed, Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight groggily climbed to her hooves. Even she could not deny that something had gone horribly wrong anymore. She reached a trembling hoof to her forehead and tapped her little stub of a horn. Sure enough, it had receded back into her skull, far more than Celestia's horn had. "I-I'm a filly?!"

Celestia wrapped a foreleg around her student's neck. "It's all right, Twilight. It's not that bad being a filly, remember?"

Twilight still felt quite weak, and her horn was hurting something fierce, but she still managed to muster enough strength to stare at both princesses before letting out a long, soul-shattering scream. The instant her voice broke through the air molecules, the doors crashed open, revealing several dozen armed and armored pegasi and unicorns. They took one look at the two stunned princesses, another look at the panicking filly and her recovering friends, and a third look at the princesses. "Your Majesties!"

Luna quickly recovered in face of her protectors. "I will explain everything later. Just return to your post!"

"U-Understood, your Majesty." The guards quickly dispersed back to their usual posts in the palace, and the doors came back to a gentle close.

By the time the two had managed to calm Twilight down a little, the other ponies had begun to awaken. Applejack's head was buried in her hat, the brim of which sat around her small neck. Rainbow Dash's mane and tail looked like they had not seen a comb since the day she was born.

Fluttershy, despite apparently being one of the oldest ponies in the group as far as Celestia and Luna could tell, was now the same size as the others, with her hair parted over one of her eyes. And Rarity...had not changed much at all, besides the smaller horn and much larger eyes.

Fortunately, all the ponies still had their cutie marks, and the Elements of Harmony, now too large for their bearers, were still sitting on the spots where they had slid off.

It didn't take long for the four to realize something was very wrong. Seeing a gigantic Luna tended to have that affect on ponies. "Wh-Wha' happened?" asked Applejack.

Luna turned back to the spot where Celestia had been standing, her horn prodding for any magical interference. "As far as I can tell, when the Elements of Harmony interacted with the curse, it triggered a magical backlash. Instead of removing the enchantments, the rainbow caused them to recast themselves. Since there was nopony to focus the spell through a Possession spell, it instead reduced everypony affected to the point where they more closely matched Celestia's age. And because Celestia was the source of the blast, she was unaffected."

"But what about you?" whined Rarity.

Luna shrugged. "I've already scanned myself, and found no changes. The only explanation that comes to mind is I was out of the spell's range."

"Th-Then we're fillies forever?" sobbed Rainbow Dash. The other ponies immediately joined in the chorus of screams and moans. The guards were once again at the door, only to back down when Luna gave them a

Nightmare Moon-worthy glare.

"You need to calm down, my little ponies," said Celestia. "It's not as bad as you think."

"N-Not as bad?!" growled Applejack. "Look a' us! How can ah buck apples when mah rear legs ain't more 'an stumps?"

"Fillies can't join the Wonderbolts!" exclaimed Dash. "By the time I'm old enough to try again, they'll all be in retirement homes!"

"And what about my fashion career?" complained Rarity. "I can't run a business like this! I'll have to sell Carousel Boutique and move back in with...my...PARENTS!" The white unicorn filly swooned and hit the floor with a solid thud.

Twilight bit her lower lip to keep from crying any more.
"Magic...Kindergarten."

"I promise you, there is nothing to worry about," said Luna. "If the spell is the same one..."

The princess' logical musings were interrupted by frantic beating noises.

Dash was beating her wings together in a desperate attempt to gain some altitude. She was able to fly straight upwards and hover about six inches off the ground, but otherwise didn't dare to try anything else. In any case, that was all the height she needed for her next step. Pitching herself downwards, she charged right at the still-stunned purple unicorn. "It's your fault, Twilight! You did this to us!"

Celestia was at her student's side as fast as a pony could blink. The poor unicorn was absolutely terrified underneath Rainbow's hooves. "It's not her fault! She couldn't have known the Elements would have caused this!"

"I...I didn't mean to..." Twilight sobbed.

Applejack galloped up to the three, stopping to point an accusing hoof at her friend. "Whether ya meant it or not don't matter! Ya'll promised us nothin' would go wrong!"

From her vantage point on the floor, Rarity continued to moan. “No mother, don’t wear those pants. They don’t go with your sweater...”

“Um...excuse me, but we have a problem.”

Everypony’s eyes turned to Fluttershy. In all the confusion, the yellow pegasus pony had remained almost completely silent, making nary a squeak as her companions started tearing at each other’s throats. She didn’t seem overly worried or terrified about the current situation, which seemed rather surprising for a pony as easily frightened as her. Once everypony’s eyes were on her, however, she began to grow more and more self-conscious. “That is, I think it’s a problem, but have any of you seen Pinkie?”

All three normal fillies and both princesses gasped as they realized what she was talking about. There was no sign of Pinkie Pie, or of the Element of Laughter itself. Dash’s attention immediately returned to Twilight. “And now you killed Pinkie?”

“Wh-Wh-What?” Twilight gasped.

“Ya must’ve made Pinkie so much younger that she jus’ disappeared!” Applejack snapped.

Twilight’s growing fear and guilt were driving her to near-catatonia by this point. Rarity, meanwhile, was already there. “I am a lady, Father. I don’t want to be a hoofball star.”

“ENOUGH!”

The force of Luna’s voice was enough to send Celestia and Applejack toppling into Rainbow Dash. All three fillies rolled off of Twilight, collapsing in a pile of dusty, bruised foals at the far end of the chamber. Fluttershy sprinted as fast as her tiny legs could carry her behind the throne itself.

The acoustics of the chamber were enough to snap even Rarity out of her catatonia-induced nightmares, just as Sweetie Belle was preparing to earn her “Good Big Sister” Cutie Mark. Twilight was still on the ground, shaking with abject fear of her coming fate.

The princess took a few seconds to clear her throat before continuing. “As

I was saying, the spell wears off by itself in two hours. The only reason my sister has not returned to normal herself is because she is different from normal ponies. Furthermore, I do not know what happened to your friend, but she is still alive. The spell's instructions specifically stated it could make a pony no younger than when they were born and no older than when the spell was first cast." Her eyes locked on the still-cowering Twilight. "Or did Celestia's favorite student forget to mention that information?"

The entire room fell silent. After a few seconds, the noiseless atmosphere was broken by several sets of hooves clapping and scrapping along the palace floor, as three little fillies slowly walked towards Twilight. Being the closest to her, Rainbow Dash was naturally the first pony to reach her sobbing mess of a friend. "Um...Twi," she mumbled. "S-Sorry I flew off the handle back there. I was just so scared."

"An' me too. Ah was worried 'bout Apple Bloom an' Big Mac an' how they all would run the farm without me, an' ah guess ah overreacted."

"And I...suppose it wouldn't be too bad if I *had* to live with my parents again. I mean, they raised me wonderfully, and Sweetie Belle is turning into quite the mature filly, so...I apologize for my behavior."

"It's really not *too* bad," said Fluttershy. "And well, it's going to wear off soon, so we have nothing to worry about. And besides, I'm sure Pinkie is fine. She probably just ran off for some cupcakes."

Behind her shaking hooves, Twilight dared to smile. The good feelings only intensified as Celestia stroked her along the back of her mane. "You see, Twilight? Your friends may be upset, but they don't hate you. You just need to think things through a little better next time."

Twilight climbed back to all fours, her small filly body filled with a renewed sense of confidence. Wiping the few remaining tears from her eyes with one foreleg, she looked back at her friends and mentor with a guilty but still loving smile. "I'm sorry, girls. I didn't mean for this to happen to all of us. And Princess Celestia, I'm glad you're all right. I was so sure the Elements would work."

"Yes, about that..."

All six ponies turned up towards Luna. The princess' mood was still more than a little dark and angry, something that greatly terrified all six currently in attendance. The blue alicorn fixed her eyes on Twilight in the sternest, most chilling of ways. "You were supposed to research a way to break the curse, not spread it to other ponies. We were fortunate it only affected you and your friends, Twilight Sparkle. Had we performed this in a less fortified location, the spread might have been much farther."

Twilight's ears drooped as her eyes turned away from the princess' cruel gaze. The other Ponyville residents were still too frightened of the now much larger Luna to respond. Fortunately for all five, Celestia was still more than willing to stand up to her sister. The white alicorn stepped between Luna and the others and locked her eyes on the pony before her. "That's quite enough, Luna. Twilight may have made a mistake, but it was based on the information she had at the time. She was just trying to help."

Luna's eyes softened, but her voice remained firm. "And in doing so, she may have caused an even bigger disaster. What if the spell had recast itself on *you*, little sister? Who knows how much younger you would be right now."

"Th-That's true, but it doesn't mean you should be..."

Celestia's counterargument was cut off by a slamming noise from behind, followed by a familiar voice. "Hey, no fair! I was supposed to be back before you gals woke up!"

Everypony turned towards the now open doors and the pony that had forced them open to begin with. Pinkie Pie had an entire serving platter of cupcakes perched on her back, showing all the balance and expertise of a tightrope walker. Her mouth was twisted into a goofy, nonchalant grin, something that clashed with Luna's still-stern demeanor and the fear from the rest of the fillies in the room.

And then there was the strangest thing of all. *She was still a full-grown mare.*

The stares, slacked jaws, sunken-in eyes and low whinnying from her friends and rulers eventually managed to drill their way through Pinkie's

otherwise impenetrable giddiness. “Oh, you’re wondering why I’m still big and you’re all small now.” She quickly dashed underneath Luna’s head and politely closed her open mouth. “Well, except for you Princess Luna. You’re still as big as ever!”

“Wh-Wh-How-A-WHAT?!” Twilight shouted.

“How in blazes are ya still grown up, Pinkie?” Applejack stammered.

The pink one was quiet, almost contemplative, before she gave a response. “Well, when we were using the Elements to zap Princess Celestia, I got this *iiiiitchy* feeling on my crest! That’s Pinkie Sense for ‘Somepony’s gonna turn you into a filly unless you run away really fast!’ So I did! When the spell died down, I saw you were all such cuties that I *had* to get you some cupcakes but there’s no Sugarcube Corner in Canterlot so I ran all the way down to the kitchen where a nice pony called Greeny-something gave me some cupcakes she was making for a party tomorrow so I could give them all to you!” Pinkie huffed and puffed from her last energetic outburst. “And here we are.”

The six fillies looked about each other disbelievingly, quietly dissecting the holes in Pinkie’s story. Luna, on the other hoof, did not require that much time to figure things out. Her hoof struck the floor with enough force to shake the entire chamber. Pinkie reared back, somehow managing to not drop a single cupcake in the process. “I do not appreciate being lied to! You will tell us – *all* of us – what really transpired this instant!”

Pinkie went completely frozen in horror, both from the shock of Luna’s outburst and the growing realization that she was cornered. For the second time today, sweat poured down the party pony’s face as she squirmed underneath Luna’s terrifying gaze. Salvation came only when Spike walked into the room, carrying the chest holding Celestia’s regal ornaments. “Hey guys! Is Princess Celestia ba-”

Spike went stiff the moment he saw his friends’ current condition. The wooden box fell out of his claws and clattered on the floor. Twilight could tell this was not going to be fun, no matter how her assistant reacted. “Spike, we can explain...”

The dragon’s mind finally managed to focus on the most proper emotion in

such a situation. Spike sputtered and smirked before just falling backwards, barely managing to avoid landing right on his tail. The ponies crowded around their fallen comrade, echoing a chorus of questions about Spike's wellbeing and the like. Twilight in particular was blushing with a combination of embarrassment for herself and fear over her surrogate son/brother's brain freeze. She shook the dragon by the shoulders, desperate to rouse some sense of life out of him. All the small boy did was mutter something about Luna cursing them all before falling right back into unconsciousness.

Luna sighed. "He didn't know the spell wears off, either."

Twilight nodded, eliciting another groan from Luna.

"In any case, what's done is done. I will expect you to resume your research once the spell's effects are gone. The guards have already seen all of you, so I suppose there's no harm in letting you return to Celestia's chambers for the time being. I will have Spike taken to the infirmary for the time being."

"But he should go with us," said Fluttershy. "I mean, um, he's just a little dizzy, right?"

"He can join you once he's awake, but if he faints just by seeing the lot of you as fillies, I doubt he would be able to stand being in the same room as six of you. Even after a thousand years, boys are exactly the same."

Luna turned her attention back to Pinkie. "And seeing as how you're the only adult in the party at the moment, I want you to keep an eye on these girls until things return to normal. Consider yourself their royal *chaperone*."

"Oooh, that sounds all official and stuff!" said Pinkie. "I like that! I've always wanted to be called something like 'Pinkie Pie: Queen of Laughter!' Can we call me that instead, huh?"

Luna just had to facehoof to that. *Honestly, with this one, how can you tell if the spell did anything or not?* "Just...keep them out of trouble."

Pinkie fired a quick salute. "Okie-dokie-loki! Pinkie Pie is on the case!"

And just below the two, six fillies looked at each other with a growing sense of doom...

Celestia's room was still a disaster area by the time the fillies got back.

The doors had been fixed from Luna's earlier rampage, the broken hinges replaced with brand new ones that didn't match the other half of the door.

The same could not be said for the room itself. Her companions were shocked at the sight before them, save for the one pony that had actually been in the palace the whole day.

"Would you look at this place?" said Rarity. "I have never seen such a disheveled mess in all my life."

Celestia smiled. "I know. Isn't it wonderful?" Rarity managed to let out a few surprised gasps and jaw creaks before wisely deciding to drop the subject before everything she knew about the princess was dashed forever.

The fillies (plus one adult) quickly found their respective spots amidst the clutter. Twilight hopped onto one of the guest cushions and started for one of the books. Fluttershy and Rainbow Dash jumped onto Celestia's bed, bouncing slightly on the small cushion as they did so. Rarity sat in a corner and busied herself with straightening the messy bedroom, a fruitless task without either her magic or enough strength to lift the several thousand page tomes within. Applejack buried her head in her hat and leaned against the wall, eager to take a Dash-level nap. Pinkie Pie sat the cupcake platter down on top of a pile of encyclopedias and started munching away on her portion.

Celestia laid herself down next to Twilight. The adrenaline from earlier was wearing off, allowing the princess to begin assessing the situation clearly for the first time tonight. Here was Twilight and her friends, the very bearers of the Elements of Harmony and saviors of Equestria twice over, reduced to mere fillies before her eyes. They were still shocked and scared by what had just occurred, but were otherwise unharmed, like her.

And even more, these ponies had known and interacted with Celestia more than any other pony in the last thousand years, save for Princess Luna prior to her banishment.

In other words, this was an *opportunity*...

“Sooooo, what shall we do until the spell wears off?”

Everypony was silent for a few seconds after she said that, save for Pinkie’s gleeful munching. Rainbow was the one who finally broke the tension. “What do you mean? It’s not like we can do anything like this.”

“Sure we can!” Celestia chirped. “We can sing a song, or play a game, or just do something other than mope around.”

Applejack raised her hat enough to peek out from underneath. “Ah-Ah don’t know. Ah mean, it’s nice ya’ll are okay ’n such, but ta whole day’s ’en wasted on this.”

“And how are you supposed to function with a place like this!” shouted Rarity. “Books on the floor, bed unmade...UGH! It’s like Sweetie Belle’s room after one of her Crusader meetings!”

Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy remained silent, the former simply rolling her eyes. Pinkie was so enraptured in the last of her cupcakes that she wasn’t even paying attention to the others. Twilight, meanwhile, was busy looking through reams of books for some light reading material, no doubt hoping to find something that would help steer her research back on course after this latest blunder. Celestia’s hopes deflated like a leaky balloon, returning the princess to her dour, depressed self. “I...I see. It was a stupid idea, anyway.”

“Now wait just a minute!”

Pinkie, having saved her appetite from the scourges of hunger, hopped to all fours in a manner befitting a conquering hero. Everypony’s eyes were upon her as a beacon of light appeared to shine from behind. “Your princess said she wanted to play a game, so that’s what we’re gonna do!”

“But Pinkie, um, none of the other ponies sound interested,” said Fluttershy.

All this earned was a swift rebuke from the pinkest of ponies. “Nonsense, I say, nonsense! You don’t think Pinkie Pie, party pony *extraordinaire*, can’t recognize a room full of gloomy gusses when she sees it? Now, are you

gonna just sit there and moan like a bunch of babies?”

Pinkie’s frantic energy quickly spread to everypony in the room. All six fillies jumped up and shouted, “NO!”

“Are we gonna be lumps on a log and make Princess Celestia unhappy?”

“NO!”

“Or are we gonna get off our hineys and actually do something *fun* with all this?!”

The six fillies huddled together in one, unified mass of furry cuteness.

“YEAH!”

“Fantastic!” Pinkie’s voice dropped back down to normal levels in a desperate attempt to save what remained of her vocal chords. “So...did you have any ideas?”

The glee on the fillies’ faces fell as they came upon a horrible realization: not a single one of them had any idea what to actually do. Even Celestia had failed to think that far ahead. Within that period of silence, however, Twilight got to thinking. *Pinkie’s lying to me, I know it. If she knows anything about Kuchen and the magic he used, I’ll have to make her tell me everything.*

The purple filly’s hoof shot into the air. “I have a suggestion! Who’s up for ‘Truth or Dare?’”

By the time Luna arrived at the ballroom, preparations were already well under way. The room itself was still under obvious repair. Plastic tarps were tied across the floor and along walls and columns, and more than a few workponies had left their tools and painting supplies behind for the day. More than a few windows had been shattered in the animal stampede, and had instead been covered in the same cheap plastic sheets to protect against tonight’s storm. The stage had been reduced to splinters and scrap wood in the same scuffle, and the statues had yet to be replaced. It would be a miracle if the room was ready for the next Grand Galloping Gala.

Nonetheless, the room's size made it ideal for storing the supplies for tomorrow's formal soiree. Over a dozen ponies were busy unloading boxes from carts, inspecting tables and chairs for the most minute of infractions, and reviewing each part of the party step-by-step. Luna's presence was hardly noticed by the frantic workers.

It didn't take long to find Ruby. She was the pegasus flying just a few feet under the ceiling, a clipboard precariously held between her forelegs as she shouted orders. "Everypony, please make sure the chairs don't have any chips or splinters! The last thing we need is some duke getting angry about a wooden stick in his hind quarters! Elegance, please make sure the tablecloths match the napkins. If they have to be cleaned, send them to the laundry immediately! And if the food has to be chilled, PLEASE take it straight to the kitchens! We've already lost a whole crate of ice cream!"

The brief lull in Ruby's hysterics was enough for her to make notice of Princess Luna. She immediately dived to the floor and bowed. Her sudden movement clued everypony else in on the royal in their presence, and everypony followed suit. More than a few suddenly-dropped dishes and decorations crashed and shattered against the floor, further igniting Luna's flustered feelings. Nevertheless, she had enough time walking to the ballroom for her nerves to calm a little, enough at least to prevent another outburst. "I assume everything is in order, Miss Dream?"

Ruby rose to her hooves. "E-E-Everything is...fine so far," she stammered. "There's been a few problems, but nothing too serious."

Luna didn't buy the lie for a second. Ruby's very speech and demeanor was like a small child playing innocent after raiding the cookie jar, despite being covered in bread crumbs and standing right next to the broken jar. "And what problems have occurred?"

"Well...the seating chart has feuding houses right next to each other, the storm is going to make the entire garden too wet and soft for the guests, and somepony on the kitchen staff ordered *cran*berries instead of *blue*berries! And that's just in the last half hour!" She threw herself at Luna's hooves. "Please forgive me! It's my first time!"

Oh, for the love of Mom. "Miss Dream, your concerns are far from serious.

The aristocracy will have to stomach sharing space with ponies they dislike, especially if they wish to remain within Equestria's power circle. It should not take very long for a few unicorns to dry the grounds for tomorrow. And lastly..." She cocked an eyebrow. "What's wrong with cranberries?"

Ruby very slowly rose back up, still a shuddering wreck of a pony.

"Well...Princess Celestia specifically forbids them at all royal functions. I don't know why. As far as I can tell, none of the guests have any allergies."

Luna sighed. "It's because she hates them. And I swear the only reason she hates them is because I love them. Place an emergency order for the blueberries, but make sure the cooks incorporate some of the other berries into the cooking. I have had nary a one since my return."

Ruby grabbed a pencil from the top of the clipboard and furiously scribbled the note down before returning the instrument. "At once, your Highness.

And I also need to inform you of some changes to the number of ponies attending. Word of Prince Blueblood's arrest has apparently started to spread."

Luna groaned and hid her face behind one foreleg. "Let me guess, they all decided I was some kind of horrible monster and cancelled."

Ruby's eyes shifted to the left. "Actually...our attendance has more than doubled in the last hour alone."

The color flushed from Luna's face almost immediately, while a chill of surprise ran up her spine. "D-Doubled? But Blueblood swore the nobility would turn on me for daring to challenge him!"

Ruby turned back to her trusty-dusty clipboard, flipping through the pages until she found the right one. "According to this, most ponies actually started avoiding these gatherings once the Prince came of age. Last month, there were only six ponies attending at all, the princess and prince included. Now we're close to a hundred."

It took a while longer for the news to travel through Luna's ears and into her cerebellum. *You mean, they won't hate me on sight? They'll actually come to a party without Celestia?*

The self-doubt soon made its grand return. *No, they're just like the rest of the ponies. They'll spend all night asking me "Where's Celestia? What have you done with her? We can't live without the only princess in Equestria!"*

"Um...Your Highness?"

Luna snapped out of her stupor as Ruby's foreleg waved in front of her face. It took her a few more seconds to realize her wings were unfolded, and a few more than that to see that a few of the objects around the room were gently floating in a dark blue aura. The princess couldn't help but rub the back of her head and smile sheepishly. "M-My apologizes, Miss Dream, but I believe it's time to begin the night. I leave everything in your hooves."

The princess turned to leave, only to be stopped by a tap on one of her wings. "Your Highness, there is something else we need to discuss. It's about that errand I ran earlier."

"Ah yes, your mysterious disappearance earlier today," Luna said.

"Well...you see, tomorrow's 'Take Your Filly To Work' day at my daughter's school and...well..."

The princess groaned at the contrivance. *I already have one rambunctious foal to contend with, as well as five more that need to be tended to until they return to normal. And now my attendant wants to add another to the pile?* Nevertheless, she managed to maintain as much of her game face as was possible at the moment. "I do not suppose she has a father who can take her tomorrow? The palace is hardly a place for a filly."

"I thought about that, but her father's job is no place for a filly her age, and I had to fill out the security paperwork, and..."

Luna raised a hoof, silencing the mare. "Very well, if there is no other way around it, your daughter may come here tomorrow. Just make sure she checks in with security outside, is on her best behavior, and above all else, make sure she stays away from my sister!"

Having said her piece, Luna marched through the ballroom doors and started towards the stairs. Ruby waited until she was well out of earshot before turning back to her duties. *At least Lofty will...* “AGH! What did I tell you? You need to have horseshoes on at all times here! We can’t afford to fix everypony’s cracked hooves!”

Rarity stared at the glass before her, shivering slightly at the green bubbling liquid within. “A-Are you sure about this?”

“You picked dare, remember?” said Rainbow Dash. “You have to drink it down.”

Inside the glass was boiled apple juice, laced with pepper and seasoned with a dash of nutmeg. The noxious drink fumed and raged within its glass confines, just daring the white unicorn to take a sip. Rarity tried to think of a way out of this predicament, preferably one that didn’t end with her getting her stomach pumped, but the only way was to finish her turn and drink the garbage.

With a few loud moans, the filly grabbed the glass with both front hooves and brought it to her lips. The noxious fumes were powerful enough to peel paint, but the filly held on long enough for the apple juice to slide down into her throat. Once every drop was gone, she threw the glass side, her mouth puffed up like a squirrel from all the inedible stuff inside. Everypony watched with bated breath as the miniature fashionista slowly and painfully swallowed the mass down.

Five seconds later, Rarity was feeling more than a little queasy, but was otherwise still alive. A few more seconds, and she was pounding on the door, begging to be led to the nearest bathroom or outhouse. Fortunately, the same guard that had ordered the disgusting drink for the fillies was willing to escort the filly to where she could properly empty the contents of her stomach.

Rainbow Dash was already rolling on her back, kicking her legs in an uncontrollable fit of laughter. Applejack was snorting back a few giggles, but the other ponies were far more concerned about Rarity’s safety than finding schadenfraude in their friend’s misery. It wasn’t until the diminutive unicorn returned, still gagging but otherwise relieved, that they finally gave

in to the humor of the situation.

Rarity's eyes locked onto Rainbow Dash, as if she was trying to will an army of soldiers into existence who would punish that accursed foal. "I am so glad my *cough* suffering is making you happy, Rainbow."

"Well, it's your own fault!" Rainbow broke into another bout of giggles. "You didn't have to say dare, you know!"

"And you didn't have to give me food poisoning!"

Rarity gave a final "Hmph" before turning back to the rest of the crowd. In the last half hour or so, four of the seven ponies in the room had taken their turns in the game, and it had only taken that long because it took twenty minutes to calm Applejack down. Then again, admitting you had to use preservatives in last year's apple strudels, and still sold them as "all natural," was more than enough to make the proud workhorse break down completely.

Celestia's mouth was in a wide grin, despite having never been picked once so far the whole game. So far, this "Truth or Dare" had turned out to be one of the most hilarious things she had seen in a long time. The fact that such a game had eluded the princess for so long was slightly frustrating, but then again, even if she had known about its existence, there would be few to no chances to actually play it amongst the stuffy aristocracy she had unwisely surrounded herself with. The only thing that could make it better was actually being picked.

Once Rarity and Rainbow Dash had finished their little spat, the white unicorn turned her attention to her next target. "Twilight. Truth or Dare?"

By the time Luna reached her designated balcony, the first few drops of rain had begun to fall. The mass of clouds blocking her line of sight with the celestial objects under her control made things slightly more troublesome than before, but after a few tries, the sky was sufficiently dark enough to tell the moon was in place.

As much as she didn't want to think about it, her thoughts inevitably returned to her sister and the other fillies. *No doubt they're having the time of their lives while I have to endure another long night of work. Why does*

Celestia have to get all the breaks in life? I...

It was right about then that Luna noticed something was wrong with the clouds. It didn't take long to find one of the pegasi to interrogate. "Excuse me. May I ask who is in charge here?"

The mare froze in mid-air, her wings barely generating enough force to keep her from plummeting to the ground. "Um....that would be me, your Highness. Rainy Days at your service."

Luna eyed the ever-growing mass of clouds. "Just how large was your overflow? You have enough rain here to flood half of Canterlot!"

"We're draining as much as we can on the way here! And that's not to mention the lightning clouds!"

Luna's fur stood on end as she heard the word. *Lightning*. "Why did you not tell us this was a **THUNDER STORM?!**"

Rainy Days hovered back a short way, hoping to create some distance between herself and the rather peeved princess. "B-But that shouldn't be a problem! Canterlot is already magically shielded against lightning, right?"

"BUT YOU CAN STILL **HEAR** IT!" Luna's horn lit up with a teleportations spell, but it only sputtered and died. *Oh no, that blasted enchantment is still around Celestia's room! No pony but herself can teleport inside there! I'm going to have to run!*

"And that's how Spike takes his baths."

Just about everypony in the room felt like having an encore presentation of Rarity's gut movement. Even Celestia, a princess that had seen many a dragon take a bath, usually after she had tossed them into a lake, cringed at Twilight's sordid tale. The only pony unaffected was Fluttershy; she actually seemed more enthralled than anything else. "Wow, it must be a lot of work getting between all those scales."

"It all depends on how fussy my little assistant is. Usually though, all I have

to do is tell him it's for Rarity, and he'll go along with just about anything."

Rarity squealed in embarrassment, her face turning beet red under her coat. The other ponies shared knowing glances with each other, save for the rather confused Celestia. "I'm afraid I don't follow, Twilight. What's all this about Spike and your friend?"

Twilight blushed a little and scratched the back of her head. "Oh, you know, just a little childhood crush. I mean, I'm sure even you had a few of those in your time."

Celestia rolled her eyes. "Yes, I've had my share of lovers over my lifetime." *That's if zero counts as a share, anyway.* "But getting back on topic, I believe it is your turn."

Twilight grinned. At last, her diabolical scheme was coming to fruition. She turned her attention to the pinkest pony she knew. With a grand wave of her hoof, she exclaimed, "Pinkie Pie, truth or dare?!"

Pinkie was silent for a few seconds before shaking her head sadly. "Sorry Twilight, but I'm not playing."

Twilight's elation melted into a small puddle of disappointment. "Wh-What?"

Pinkie closed her eyes and rose onto her hind legs. "I'm your royal *chap-a-roni!* Princess Luna herself has trusted me with taking care of all of you, and that's exactly what I'm gonna do! I will keep an eye on the game *and* make sure you have plenty of fun and sweets, but I cannot actually play, no matter how much you or I may want me to!"

The purple unicorn was utterly dumbfounded. Pinkie was not only behaving like a grown pony for once, she was denying her from the truth! "But...I wanted to..."

Pinkie sat back down and raised a hoof skywards. "Sorry, Twi, but rules are rules. You have to pick somepony else."

Her scheme ruined, Twilight groaned and turned back to the others. "All right. Princess Celestia, truth or dare?"

The princess couldn't help but yelp for joy. "YES YES YES! I've been waiting all day for my turn! This is going to be so wonder-"

Twilight glanced at the clock. "Um...Princess. We're running out of time."

"Oh...right. Um...truth!"

Twilight froze up. She had picked the princess just to make her happy, but she hadn't thought through what she would ask. She didn't want to humiliate her like her friends were doing to each other, and she certainly didn't want to cause the princess any harm. Then she hit upon an easy question. "Princess Celestia...who is your best friend?"

Celestia scoffed. "Really, Twilight? Everypony knows my sister Luna is my best friend."

Rainbow Dash facehoofed at Twilight's simplistic question, as well as Celestia's equally simple answer. "Oh, puh-/eeze! The whole 'my sister is my best friend' thing? You must have had more friends than that!"

The princess could feel the fur on her neck starting to stiffen. "Um...Of course I've had friends. I've had a lot over the years."

"Really?" asked Rarity. "If you don't mind, can you tell us more?"

Celestia could feel herself starting to sweat. She hunched herself a bit closer to the ground, desperate to not let the other ponies see how obviously she was lying. "Well...there was that...one mare from six hundred years ago..."

"Are they famous?" asked Fluttershy. "I mean, you must have known everypony that has ever done anything to make Equestria a better place."

"And ya mus' have all sorts a' stories ta tell!" Applejack leaned her hat back enough to see clearly and walked closer to the princess.

Celestia's eyes began to quiver. "Oh...I have stories. Plenty of stories. But...I don't...I mean..." She gave a cautious glance to Twilight. The unicorn looked absolutely horrified at the inquisition she had unleashed.

“Twilight...help me.”

KRA-KOW!

The entire room shuddered from the sound of a gathering of fillies screaming in terror. Outside, the storm began to roar with full force, as flashes of thunder and arcs of lightning crashed along the sky. Even worse, from the palace’s high vantage point, the crashes and sounds were far louder and fiercer than in Ponyville. The filly parts of each ponies’ mind took the opportunity to seize control, sending the friends running into each other as part of a protective group hug. Even Pinkie joined in, her large limbs practically crushing the other ponies in the huddle.

Finally, after a few seconds, the thunder abated, leaving only the sound of rain water trickling down the window pane. The ponies sheepishly pulled away, giving each other confused grins. “W-Well, that was...intense,” said Rainbow.

“Even in Canterlot, those pegasus ponies sure do get carried away sometimes,” said Rarity.

“No way y’all gettin’ home tonight,” said Applejack. “Ah reckon we should try ta find some place ta stay the night. No sense getting’ all rained on-”

A sudden pain raced through each of the ponies, save Pinkie. The fillies felt every muscle in their body loosening and shuddering, as if they were being yanked at in a taffy puller machine. This was followed by a massive white light that engulfed the entire room, accompanied by almost electrical shocks running up each pony’s spine. Finally, the light faded away, revealing a ponypile of five full-grown mares.

It took a few minutes to fight out of the maze of limbs, tales, and necks, but the six friends were facing each other as normal ponies again soon enough. This was accompanied by a standard group hug session, along with the usual coos and shouts for joy and happiness.

And then Luna bucked the door open. There was a manic glint in her eyes as she approached the others, her wings extended. “Celestia. Where is Celestia?”

A few moans and whines from the bed answered that question.

Underneath the covers sat a big, shaking lump. Another blast of thunder blared from the sky, eliciting even more cries from the mysterious bed creature. It didn't long for everypony to realize what had happened to Celestia.

Twilight telekinetically pulled back the covers, revealing the sobbing princess underneath. Celestia's eyes were covered with her forelegs, while her hind legs were tucked underneath her barrel. The six normal ponies started to approach, mouthing concerns and offers to help, when Luna teleported in front of them. "Please...just leave this room."

"Wh-What happened to the princess?" asked Fluttershy.

Luna looked down at the filly. Behind her hooves, the princess' eyes looked up at her sister, silently pleading her not to tell the truth. Alas, there seemed to be no way out of it now. "She...When she was a filly, she was afraid of thunder," Luna explained. "And I mean, very afraid of it. Back before there were pegasus ponies, when storms were wild and spontaneous, she would spend every waking moment underneath a rock or in a cave somewhere, just cowering in a corner until it was all over."

Everypony let out a collective gasp, save for the clearly upset Celestia.

Twilight was the first to actually speak up on her monarch's behalf. "Then why do you want us to leave?"

Luna hesitated before speaking. "I cannot tell you. I just...want you to trust me for the time being."

The ponies gave each other confused looks as they quietly debated whether or not to go along with Luna's orders. Eventually, the six slowly shuffled out of the room, giving the princess one last glance before following the guards to some quarters for the night. Once they were all gone, Luna closed and locked the door before turning back to her still-shivering sister. "I'm sorry. Rainy Days said it was just a rainstorm. She never mentioned thunder."

Celestia sniffed. "Then why did you tell them all that? They probably think I'm a joke now."

“Because you’re scared of some loud noises?” Luna laughed. “Everypony is like that when they’re young. You’ll be all grown out of it once you’re back to normal.”

Celestia didn’t respond; in fact, she could herself dozing off. The blast from the Elements, her rampaging around the grounds, and the fountain of tears she had just let out all seemed to catch up with her at once. Sensing this, Luna gave the princess a quick nuzzle before heading back to work. Once she was sure they were all gone, the princess threw her head into the pillow and started to fall asleep.

If anything, I learned one thing from today. “Truth or Dare” is a dumb game.

Celestia was feeling far less energetic this morning. In fact, she was starting to feel like her old self on a bad day.

For a brief moment, this had awakened some hope that the spell was wearing off, and she would soon be back on the throne and ruling her fair country yet again. That little bit of joy vanished as she took a closer look at her current malaise. It was the same feeling she had endured for a thousand years before, the sense that no matter how many ponies she had surrounding her, and no matter how much her occasional personal students adored her, she was well and truly alone in Equestria.

The princess had sequestered herself on her windowsill, her body wrapped in a tight furry ball as she looked over what bits of the palace and city she could see. Beneath the palace’s marbled archways, Canterlot was bustling with activity. Celestia could see some of the fear and resentment towards Luna hanging on the faces of the ponies, but having two sunrises in a row under the no-doubt horrible tyrant that had replaced their beloved sun princess was lightening their spirits a tad.

In her own mind, however, she could already feel herself slipping back into the same melancholy from when this terrible experience first began. Last night had gone from her best chance at having somepony to interact with outside of any rigid social or educational expectations, to the still-a-filly realizing just how alone she had been her entire life. Not to mention how

she made a complete fool of herself with the lightning storm. It all served to make the princess more isolated than ever.

A gentle knock on the door was enough to jar Celestia out of her musing. In a soft voice she muttered, "Enter."

The princess could hear the door open behind her, the hinges letting a squeak so quiet only her trained ears could pick up on it. The accompanying hoofsteps were distinctively elegant enough to betray her visitor's identity. "Good morning, Luna."

Luna waited until the doors were closed before addressing her sister. "Good morning, sister. Are you feeling any better?"

Celestia let out a heavy, labored sigh. "Not really."

The Princess of the Night was understandably unconvinced of her sister's sincerity. She took a few small, cautionary steps towards the filly, being careful not to startle or agitate her more. "If this is about the storm, I can promise you there's nothing to worry about. All six completely understand what was going through your mind when it happened." She cocked her head slightly. "Or maybe there's something else going on?"

Celestia was quiet for a few seconds, contemplating whether or not to tell Luna everything that had happened last night. The desire to protect oneself from any further embarrassment was soon outweighed by the need to get all this off her chest. She raised her head from her hooves and looked Luna straight in the face, the filly's eyes showcasing her inner turmoil. "Last night, the six of us were playing this game, and...one of the ponies asked me to name any friends I've had over the millennia."

"Well, that should have been easy," Luna shrugged. "The entire country worships the ground you walk on, and you've had more than enough students over the millennia to have thousands of connections wandering around at any given time. It must have taken until the spell wore off to name them-"

Luna fell silent as she finally recognized the look on Celestia's face. It was the same withdrawn, depressed mask she had worn so many times in the past. "I...suppose I was mistaken?"

Celestia curled back into her near-fetal position. "My students were just that: students. As far as they were concerned, I was always in the right, always the master at all things pony related. Even after they stopped being my students, their entire careers were marked by a foolish belief that I would do something horrible to them if they somehow disappointed me."

Luna shook her head. "No, that's not it. Remember Star Swirl the Bearded? He may have technically been *my* pupil, but he was always so much closer to you. You're the one that convinced him to put bells on his clothes, remember?"

Celestia jumped to the floor, making sure Luna couldn't see her face. "He was also the one that told me I could use the Elements to free you from Nightmare Moon. After what happened, he was so afraid I'd come after him that he ran as far from Canterlot as he could."

The filly braved a glance at her sister's face, and saw everything she was afraid she would see. Luna was stone silent, her eyes quivering slightly as she learned of her first (and to date, only) student's fate. "...I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I was trying not to hurt you further."

"It-It's all right," Luna gasped. "But...what about Twilight Sparkle? She certainly seems more friendly with you than most other ponies I've seen."

"She also got her entire town involved in a brawl because she was afraid I'd punish her for turning in a minor assignment late," Celestia muttered. "The last time somepony misused the Want-It-Need-It Spell so flagrantly, it ended with an entire town destroyed and hundreds of homeless ponies. Not to mention how she tried to cover up Ponyville's Parasprite infestation. Relief could have been given much sooner if she hadn't been so certain I would hurl her into the sun because she had trouble fighting something nopony had ever seen before."

Luna sighed. "Celestia...I know what you want, but I can't let you leave the palace in your condition. Twilight's friends have their own jobs and lives to go back to, and Twilight herself must keep working on finding a way to make everything normal again. I myself have a full day today..."

"How about the party tonight? Are you still planning to go?"

"Of course I am!" Luna snapped. Celestia's eyes quickly flattened from her sister's outburst, something that the blue alicorn picked up on almost immediately. Sighing, she resumed in a more quiet speaking voice. "They may be petty or insufferable at times, but they are still our subjects, and I will not disrespect them by excusing myself from spending any time with them."

"Then...I'm just going to have to spend all my time in my room?" Celestia muttered.

The atmosphere was tense as Luna mentally weighed her options. *The garden is out of the question today. Everypony will be busy setting up for the party. And the grounds will be crawling with other ponies, none of whom can see the princess in this state.* "I'm sorry, but you'll have to stay in this wing of the palace today. There's just too much activity everywhere else."

Celestia sulked and kicked her forelegs against the ground at the news, but otherwise seemed to take it just fine. "A-All right. If it's just for today, I mean..."

Celestia felt something large and feathery crawl across her back. Looking up, she saw a large, dark blue wing draped across the entire back half of her body. The wing's owner, Princess Luna, gave the filly a warm smile. "It's going to be all right, little sister. Once the party's over, I'll see what I can do. But in the meantime, please just sit tight."

The sun princess wasn't quite sure how to respond. Luna's reassurances didn't solve any of her problems. They didn't make her an adult again, or get her any friends, or erase the memory of last night's disaster from her mind. But at the same time, there was something reassuringly calm about the way she spoke, and not to mention the way her wing carefully bent over the filly's body in the most loving way possible. It was the same gesture Celestia had shown Luna a thousand years before, and even a few times after her sister's return.

It didn't solve anything, but it was nice to have a sister that, at least on occasion, you could talk to.

Ruby was already at the palace's conference hall by the time Luna arrived, fresh from her latest business with her filly of a sister. Also waiting for them was a grey earth pony, wearing a pink bow tie and with a treble cleft for a cutie mark. To Ruby's side was a small, yellow pegasus filly, roughly the same age as Celestia right now. The filly was seated on the floor, apparently writing down notes for the homework assignment this trip entailed.

Both adult mares bowed upon seeing the princess enter. "My apologies, ladies," Luna stammered as she made her way closer. "There was some other pressing business I had to attend to, and I fear I lost track of the time."

"It's no problem at all, your Majesty," said the Earth pony.

Both ponies rose to their hooves, ready to begin official business. The filly, meanwhile, was too busy scribbling stuff down to even notice Luna's presence. The princess took one look at the child, cocked an eyebrow, and turned to the foal's mother. "I take it this is the daughter you spoke of yesterday, Miss Dream."

Ruby's eyes shrank back into her skull as she looked down at the little pegasus besides her. "Lofty! Why aren't you bowing?"

The filly jumped at the sound of her name, as well as her mother's harsh, reprimanding tone. Her eyes grew to the size of dinner platters as she recognized Princess Luna. She quickly threw herself into kneeling position; so quickly, in fact, that she conked the bottom of her head against the floor. "Oh, um...hello, your Highness!"

"I promise this won't happen again!" Ruby stammered. "She's still young! She'll learn!"

Luna facehoofed yet again; any more, and her hoof would be permanently imprinted on her face. "Miss Dream, how much court etiquette your daughter may or may not know does not matter right now. All I care about is..."

"Excuse me, your Highness, but I do not have a lot of time," said the Earth

pony.

Luby and Ruby returned their attention to their actual guest. Lofty, meanwhile, slowly knelt down to her notepad and kept scribbling things down. The Earth pony fidgeted uncomfortably, even taking a few chances to eye the door in case a certain...intruder happened to stop by. "After reviewing the details of our contract, I am afraid the Canterlot Royal Orchestra must decline your gracious invitation to perform tonight."

Luna groaned. "Is there anything we can do to change your mind, Miss...?"

"Octavia. And I'm sorry, but the situation has changed greatly in the last few hours."

Ruby raised an eyebrow. "Wait, this isn't this about what happened at the Gala? But...that was why you refused the first time. The only reason we had to come back was because the band we had was struck with Rockin' Pneumonia and had to be quarantined."

Octavia scoffed. "The Gala was an unfortunate event, but we have mostly gotten over that. And I can assure you, everypony in our little group is quite healthy. No, we've heard a certain pony is staying at the palace. Quite frankly, we would rather not-"

"OCTY!"

The color drained from Octavia's coat as a bounding mass of pink energy slammed into her body. The guards immediately followed her into the room, desperate to keep the pony from harming Luna's best chance at scoring some of the best musicians in Canterlot for tonight's party. The princess' horn glowed, and all four ponies involved in the scuffle were hoisted into the air and drawn apart before being set back down. "May somepony please explain what just happened?"

Octavia shot up a hoof, her eyes blood-shot with terror. "That's her! She's the one!"

Pinkie stared at the hoof for a second before giggling. "Oh Octy, you're so silly!"

“Do you...know each other?” asked Ruby.

Octavia set her hoof down and let out a labored sigh. “She’s my cousin. Unfortunately.”

“I would think having a hero in your family would be something to be celebrated,” said Luna. “After all, she has saved Equestria twice.”

Octavia’s eyes narrowed into a death glare. “She’s also responsible for ruining my Gala performance, as well as over a dozen other performances in my life. I will not perform while she is here.”

Pinkie’s giggling slowly stopped, only to be replaced by something far worse: sorrow. “You...You mean you don’t like me?”

The room was terse for a few moments, everypony afraid of what Pinkie would do next. The pony’s mane and coat darkened, even as her eyes began to water. Octavia’s eyes softened a little, even as the rest of her remained as confrontational as ever. “I never said that. I just mean, you keep trying to ‘help’ me out and just make things worse. I can’t have you here for something this important.”

Surprisingly enough, that was all it took for Pinkie to immediately pop right back to her old energetic, happy-go-lucky self. “Okie-dokie! Jeez, I was scared for a second there! Well, I gotta start getting ready to go back to Ponyville! Catch ya later, cuz!” And with that, Pinkie bounded off to party elsewhere.

All five ponies (plus filly) just stood there, too stunned by the mood swing to really do anything. The guards were the first to leave, slowly making their way back to their posts. Once they were gone, Octavia slowly turned back to Princess Luna. “So, she’s not staying tonight?”

“As far as I can tell, no,” said Luna.

“Then the situation appears to have changed. You may consider us ready and willing to play.”

“Of course,” said Luna. “Just remember, this is a slow, formal occasion, so you should keep to the standard pieces whenever possible. And in the

future, Miss Octavia..." She leaned in so close to Octavia the Earth Pony could smell her breath. "Do not upset your cousin in front of me."

"D-Duly noted, your Highness," Octavia stammered. "I...do suppose I should give the news to the rest of the orchestra. We shall see you tonight!" And with that, the grey pony was galloping out of the conference room as fast as she possibly could.

"...We were almost without a band because a few ponies don't like somepony else?" said Ruby.

"Because *one* pony didn't like somepony else," Luna corrected. "Still, everything appears to be in order right now. And now if you'll excuse me, I have a trip to prepare for." Luna's horn gave off a bright light, a trail of which broke away from the horn's aura and transformed into a small dark blue ball. The transparent orb then shattered, dropping a rather large scroll. "I want these tasks finished by the time I get back. We still have a lot of work to do and even less time today to get it done."

Ruby gulped as she scanned the list. Just about everything on it either bordered on the ludicrous or seemed downright impossible considering the sheer wealth of other tasks she still had to perform. "U-Understood, your Majesty."

Satisfied that her orders would be followed, Luna then turned her attention back to the filly. Lofty was still scribbling away on the notepad, but this time the princess had time to actually see what she was putting down. It wasn't notes like she had hoped; rather, it was a ludicrous drawing of a winged unicorn yelling at a helpless pony. "...And as for you, child, I hope you will actually apply your time here more wisely. It's not every day a filly is allowed to examine the inner workings of the palace."

Lofty dropped the pencil from her mouth and slowly raised her head, stopping when she was eye-to-eye with the princess. "I understand, princess."

Luna nodded and flashed a smile. All it did was make the filly dart behind her mother's legs. The sight was more than a little upsetting as far as Luna was concerned, but alas, there was still so much more she needed to get done...

Octavia had just turned the corner from the conference room when she heard a voice behind her. "Excuse me, can we talk?"

The Earth pony stopped and turned about, stopping when she saw the purple unicorn staring at her. It didn't take long to peg who this was. "You must be Twilight Sparkle, Princess Celestia's personal protégé."

Twilight gleamed with pride. It always warmed her heart to have others at least recognize her. "Why, yes. How did you know who I am?"

"You were with my sister when she destroyed the Gala." Octavia's teeth were clenched together so tightly they threatened to snap each other to pieces.

Twilight took a step back and chuckled nervously. She had missed most of the carnage thanks to Celestia's thankless job of greeting every guest, but she had seen enough of the damage to know that whatever happened in that ballroom, it was more than a little messy. "Well...to be fair, it was more of a group effort than anything else."

"I do not mean to be rude, Miss Sparkle, but I have a lot I still need to do. So if you will excuse me, I think I shall be departing."

Octavia started to turn, only to find herself facing the same unicorn again. The graceful, society-conscious mare immediately leaped back ten feet while giving the shrillest scream in the history of ponydom. Twilight, for her part, seemed unaffected by this. "Miss Octavia, I need your help. I was with Pinkie when she stumbled across you and Princess Luna talking."

Octavia lay on her back, her lower lip half chewed by its upper counterpart. "Wh-What does that have to do with anything?"

Twilight gave as cheerful a smile as she could. "I need to know some things about Pinkie..."

Luna's chariot landed with a soft thud and a few quiet squeaks of the wheels to a dead-silent audience. The ponies gathered outside the hospital gasped in surprise before falling on all fours, quaking in fear of the

night princess and her no doubt horrible plans for them all. Luna briefly flirted with the idea of just ordering the pair of pegasi to just fly her back to the palace, but alas, royal duty and all that nonsense persevered.

The princess slowly stepped out of the chariot and surveyed the building itself. From what she could gather, the Canterlot Medical Center was one of the oldest hospitals still operating in Equestria. The general belief was that the structure had been built by special order from Celestia herself in response to a Trots epidemic over two hundred years ago, and as a result the place was considered historically important to the ponies of Canterlot.

Unlike the common ponies, however, Luna had actually perused the old building permits and records involved, and there was nothing special about it. Some ponies saw that Trottingham was building a hospital, decided the superior ponies of Canterlot deserved an even better one, and borrowed money from the royal treasury to build it.

In any case, the building was a far cry from the original. Like nearly all of Canterlot, the structure itself had been radically altered over the years, both to repair natural degradation and to suit the changing nature of medicine in Equestria. In between the freshly-kept shrubs and gardens outside the entrance, the sticky white paint clinging to the walls, and the giant neon sign the board of directors had obviously spent more than sixty percent of the facility's budget on running, it was certainly an attractive sight.

The same could not be seen for Luna's welcoming committee. Luna had seen ponies huddle and cower countless times, but the last two days had certainly done their best to drain her completely. Sure, she had won a small victory just by being here, but would it be worth all the extra humiliation?

Her eyes finally caught somepony that at least looked a little official; a middle-aged mare in a nurse's uniform was huddled in front of the hospital doors, apparently in a feeble attempt to save the ponies inside from certain doom. Luna stepped towards the cowering pony and offered one of her forehooves, as was customary in the Traditional Royal Canterlot Greeting.

"THY PRINCESS-" Luna quickly caught herself, lowering her voice and assuming more modern language. "Your Princess has arrived."

"N-N-Nurse Ward, your Highness," the pony stammered. "I-I-I was sent

here to e-e-escort you.”

“Would it not be easier to do so if you were standing?”

Ward, unable to comprehend whether or not Luna was joking, slowly rose to her hooves. “I...I have been asked to show you the improvements we have made to the hospital. If it’s all right with your Highness, that is.”

Luna nodded. “That is why I’m here today. Shall we begin?”

Octavia regarded her coffee mug with much concern. Talking about her relationship with Pinkie wasn’t exactly her favorite thing in Equestria to do.

After giving the party pony free reign during their Gala performance, her friends and bandmates had all turned to her for an explanation. It was something she really *couldn’t* give because, frankly, there was no pony like Pinkie Pie in all of Equestria. For that matter, the entire family (the “Pie Clan,” as they called themselves) was amongst the most bizarre ponies to ever work the fields. Rock farming was far from the most lucrative occupation; in fact, it was an idea born more from lunacy than anything else.

And yet here she was, speaking with one of the most powerful unicorns in Equestria, talking about the very subject. She really did not like this at all.

Twilight levitated the mug to her mouth, took a quick sip, and gently set it back down. “Now, Pinkie said you were her cousin?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” Octavia murmured. “In exact terms, I am her mother’s sister’s daughter. And if I may be so bold as to ask, what is your sudden interest in my family tree?”

Twilight shifted about nervously. “Well, I’ve been a little curious about Pinkie lately. She’s been acting...kind of weird the last few days, and...”

“She has been ‘kind of weird’ the last few *years*.” Octavia raised her mug with both hooves and took a rather large, slurping sip. Twilight couldn’t tell if it was an honest slip-up giving the stressful situation, or that the classy pony really was just a bad drinker. “Then again, the entire Pie family is strange. Their...dedication to farming rocks is simultaneously endearing

and rather uncouth.”

Twilight could tell she needed to lead Octavia to her point. “What I mean is, do you know anything about the Pie family history?”

Octavia stared at the ceiling thoughtfully before continuing. “Well, when my aunt decided to marry into the family, I know the rest of the family decided it would be best to look into this farmer’s past. It was a fairly routine process to make sure nopony married anypony with skeletons in their closet.”

“Ah, I understand.” *Stupid custom, but I understand...*

Octavia took a deep breath. “I was a small foal at the time, so I hope you understand if this information is strictly secondhoof. I do remember there was a fight of some sort between Pinkie’s mother and my own a short time after Pinkie was born. Then again, I was more interested with blocks and sucking on my own tail than anything that adults concerned themselves with.”

Twilight giggled at the mental imagery. Octavia smiled out the side of her mouth, but otherwise kept her cool and class demeanor. “From what I understand, the Pie family spontaneously sprung into existence about five hundred years ago, after some kind of political dispute in Canterlot. They left the city almost immediately and branched off into all sorts of bizarre professions, from professional mud slingers to tattoo scrubbers.”

Twilight had to cock an eye at the last occupation. “What’s a tattoo scrubber?”

“It is best that you don’t know. Believe me, I wish I still did not.”

“But, the Pies had to come from somewhere. Do you know anything about what they were doing in Canterlot before they went into, for lack of a better word, exile?”

Octavia shook her head. “No. My parents never spoke to Aunt Sue again, and considered the whole matter dropped.” Her gaze suddenly drifted off thoughtfully. “Then again...there was one thing I always found rather strange.”

Little glistening stars shined in Twilight's eyes. She might finally be getting somewhere. "Really?"

Octavia shuffled slightly as she began organizing her thoughts. "It was several years ago, during Hearth's Warming Eve. I was visiting the Pies for the holidays, if only to keep an eye on what was going on in that dank household. I didn't know that Pinkie had earned her cutie mark that year, or that she was now obsessed with making the normally dour celebrations more lively and enjoyable than in prior years. Instead of the quiet ponies I had encountered years past, everypony there was lively and energetic. There was even actual fruit punch and cake, not just stale bread and hot water."

"...Stale bread and hot water?" Twilight mouthed.

"Getting back on track," Octavia continued, "Pinkie was surprisingly happy to see me. Getting her cutie mark had hardwired her brain into a permanent state of euphoria, it seemed. She was also...curious about Canterlot. She was so curious about our nation's capital that she barraged me with questions the whole day. She even managed to namedrop a few places, like the Nightlight Observatory, the Firefly Pegasus Academy, even The Fountain With Celestia's Statue."

"So what's so weird about that?" asked Twilight. "She could have just looked those up in a picture book."

"Not one place," Octavia said. "She asked me about the Heartstrings Royal Opera House. She really wanted to know how the old building was holding up, whether anypony was still performing for Princess Celestia there, if I had any dreams of holding a concert there, and things similar to that. I thought she was just interested in music, so I mentioned it to Uncle Clyde. Then..."

Octavia wiped at her eyes. The next bit was going to hurt to remember. "The entire celebration just stopped. Clyde asked me to leave, saying it was a Pie Clan matter and didn't concern an outsider like myself. I was understandably upset at this, you see, and I started to leave the farm and return to my hotel in Ponyville. But then I heard the shouting. They were furious with Pinkie for some reason."

“...Octavia, why would they be angry with Pinkie?” asked Twilight.

The gray pony took another massive gulp, the caffeine being the only thing keeping her going by this point. “The Heartstrings Royal Opera House burnt to the ground over five hundred years ago. It was only open for about five years before then. Virtually no pictures or records of its existence are still available, and the ones that are would have a difficult time getting out of Canterlot.” Another slurp. “That’s what they were yelling about. They were angry about Pinkie let out some secret of theirs, especially to somepony from Canterlot itself. They...said something about Princess Celestia never finding out, and mentioned something about a kuchen or whatever.”

Twilight spat out her mouthful of joe, splattering the floor in a cascade of dark brown liquid. Octavia jumped back to avoid getting anything on her coat before very slowly offering Twilight a few tissues to clean up. The unicorn gratefully pulled the scraps of paper to the floor with her telekinesis and began wiping away, even as the pieces were starting to fall into place.

If Octavia’s telling the truth, it means it’s not just Pinkie that knows who Kuchen is. No wonder she was dodging the question back at the donut shop. If her own family was willing to blow their tops over a few innocent remarks about an opera house...

By now, the pony was just rubbing the clean floor with soiled rags.

Satisfied that the mess had been properly handled, she turned back to Octavia. “Well...thank you for your time. I understand you have a concert to prepare for.”

“Yes, I do.” Octavia scooted out of her set, elegantly set her hooves upon the tiled floor, and walked up to Twilight. “It has been...nice to speak with one such as you. There are far too many irritable, frankly insane ponies in my life these days.”

Her lips dropped into a sour frown. “Please, tell Pinkie I’m sorry if I upset her. I do like her, despite her eccentricities, but she has made a mess of things too many times for me to

Before Twilight could say anything, Octavia was well out of the door, galloping away to prepare for tonight’s party. The unicorn, meanwhile, was

left to stare at her near-empty mug. *I'm sorry, Pinkie. But if you know something that can help Princess Celestia...I'll have to find out the truth.*

Chapter 9

The hospital's interior was a stark contrast to the drab, almost lifeless exterior. Every square inch had been washed, sterilized, and then re-dirtied just so it could be washed even finer the next time. All the furniture in the front lobby was made of the finest woods and metals that government funding could afford, excusing the bits the administration was scrapping off the top to buy their way into high society. And then there were the ponies, no doubt some of the finest medical workers in Equestria when they weren't cowering in fear from their nighttime master's visit.

It didn't take long to reach the Children's Wing. Sure enough, the entire area had apparently been recently renovated, with a few walls still sticky from the wet paint. The atmosphere was also far more relaxed compared to the suffocating fear of the front entrance and lobby, and Luna and Nurse Ward were able to wander the halls far more freely and comfortably than before.

"As you can see, we have completely redone the entire wing," said the nurse. She motioned a hoof towards one of the nearby waiting benches, all of them painted a dull green. "These seats alone cost over five hundred bits apiece. We're still waiting for them to be painted."

"Understandable," Luna muttered.

The two continued onwards, hooves clopping down the tiled halls of the hospital, until they reached an unoccupied examination room. Like everything else in the ward so far, the entire interior had been freshly washed, waxed, and refilled with the latest in medical equipment. Luna was especially proud of the sight of a glass jar full of lollipops.

"Everything in this room has been only recently purchased and installed," continued Nurse Ward. She motioned towards the nearby examination table, a flat piece of sterilized steel laying atop four sturdy metal legs. "I mean, can you imagine how much something like this cost?"

Luna eyed the table, but didn't find it all that impressive. Then again, after

a jar full of suckers, anything would pale in comparison. The princess slowly turned to the nurse, a look of resigned frustration on her face. "Miss Ward, I'm afraid I'm at a loss here. Your letter asked me to come and perform an inspection of your remodeling work, but so far nothing seems particularly revolutionary. Is there anything else?"

Nurse Ward sighed. "Well...we did want you to visit some of the patients here today. That is, we were..."

Luna groaned, mentally facehoofing herself for her stupidity. "You didn't want me originally, did you? You wanted Princess *Celestia*."

Ward took a few steps back, nodding nervously. "Um...yes?"

"Then why did your letter specifically address my office?"

"Well...when everypony learned that Princess Celestia had disappeared, well, the children were so terrified that something terrible had happened. You seemed like the perfect pony to ask. That, and...we wanted a princess to come here for so long."

Now Luna was officially confused. "Wait...you mean my sister never responded to your requests? But, this would appear to be the perfect activity for someone such as her."

Nurse Ward motioned towards a large set of double doors at the end of the hall, apparently some kind of assembly room. The two ponies began walking down the hall, continuing their conversation as they did so. "We sent her so many letters over the years, but we never heard a thing back. Then again, I'm sure Princess Celestia is always so busy."

Luna smiled. "That she is. Do you remember when you last sent a request? I might be able to tell you why she cancelled."

Nurse Ward was thoughtful for a few moments before answering. "A little less than two weeks ago, I believe."

Luna stopped dead in her tracks. She knew what had happened two weeks ago: her sister had pasted dried lumps of oatmeal to the night princess' face, painted them blue, and convinced her that she had a fatal

disease. Celestia was busy, certainly, but she was apparently not too busy to spend time tormenting her younger sister. The princess visibly grit her teeth as the thoughts spilled through her mind. "She was working on a pet project of hers. That is all I know."

The two stopped short of the door, the nurse pony looking more than a little nervous. "A-Are you ready, your Highness?"

Luna's face was cold and serene, not betraying the growing fear and concern welling up inside of her. "I suppose this is my first audience in this capacity. Care to fill me in on what is going on?"

Nurse Ward put a hoof to her chin, trying to think how to best inform the princess. "Well, we've never had a princess come here before, but I think we have everything set just right. The children are already waiting."

"Ah, the inspection was just a diversion to buy time, then?"

Nurse Ward nodded nervously, secretly afraid she was about to find herself on the far side of the moon. "Well, yes. It also gave the press agents enough time to interview a few of the children, just to get an early view on how they see you and all."

"And...what were the results of that interview?"

The Nurse shrugged. "About half the children they asked said you were going to gobble them up, and the other half were sad you weren't Princess Celestia."

Luna groaned and buried her face in one hoof. *That is not what I needed right now.* "Tell me, what am I supposed to do?"

"Like I said, you are the first princess we've had visits, so we had no real precedent to follow. So we set things up like when Sapphire Shores visited: you speak to the children for a while, get to know them better, then read from a selection of our donated books."

"So this is actually a glorified storytime hour?"

Nurse Ward shivered slightly, turning her eyes away from the princess.

“Ergh....let’s begin!”

And with that, the pony pushed her hooves against both doors, revealing dozens of tiny little eyes, all of them focused on the blue alicorn. There were ponies from all three races, although, like most things in Canterlot, a majority were unicorns. Standing next to the doors were a collection of reporters from the various newspapers, from the *Equestria Daily* to the *Manehatten Times*, and even a reporter from the *Hoofington Post*.

Nurse Ward cleared her throat before continuing. “My little ponies, we have a very special guest today. Please give a warm round of applause to...Princess Luna!”

The room exploded into a cacophony of half-hearted stomps, save for the ponies who couldn’t use their legs or were too weak to make any real noise. Luna gave a nervous smile and waved back. *This was a mistake...*

Twilight’s friends gathered one by one by the palace gates.

Applejack, being the most accustomed to waking up well before sunrise, was the first to be ready to go. It didn’t take long for Rainbow Dash to join her, eager to get away before Twilight got any crazy ideas about turning them into fillies again or the like. Fluttershy was next, albeit more out of a desire to get back to her animal charges than anything else. After a few minutes, Pinkie bounded up to the gates, a doggy bag of sugary treats and party decorations wrapped in her mouth.

Rarity and Spike were the last to join the group. The former was her usual fabulous self, her mane and coat’s natural shininess augmented by the royal shampoos and perfumes only the princesses and guests at Canterlot Castle were entitled to receive. The later was still scarfing down some of the old gemstones he had left behind when he and Twilight first went to Ponyville. He *had* tried offering them to his beloved first, but for some reason, Rarity didn’t find chipped, cracked opals to be worth much.

“It’s about time you got here!” Rainbow grumped. “Where’s Twilight?”

Spike shrugged between gems. “Last I saw her, she said she was going out to talk to somepony. Something about maybe being able to help the

princess.”

“Do you really think we should be leaving?” asked Fluttershy. “I mean, the princess is still in trouble.”

Applejack gave the pegasus a reassuring pat on the back. “Don’t ya’ll worry ’bout nothin’. We’ve got ta brightest unicorn in Equestria on ta case. And besides, if Twilight needs our help, we’re all just ah hoot and ah holler away!”

“GIRLS!”

As if following some cosmic cue, Twilight came galloping up to the gate. She barely managed to slow to a walk before slamming into her waiting friends. The others watched in shock as the purple unicorn panted and wheezed, her mane and tail a disheveled mess from the wind. Applejack was the first one to muster enough strength to speak. “Is-Is somethin’ wrong, Twi?”

Twilight waited a few more seconds, long enough for her lungs to start working. She may have been a fifth place sprinter, but the bookworm was far from a champion athlete. “I...I need to talk to Pinkie. It’s important!”

Everypony’s eyes turned to Pinkie Pie. The pink Earth pony carefully set down her doggy bag before responding. “Sure thing, Twilight! What’s up?”

Twilight’s eyes narrowed. “I think you already know.”

Pinkie stared at her incredulously, even cocking her head slightly. “Know what?”

“Pinkie...does the name ‘Kuchen’ mean anything to you?”

For the briefest of moments, Twilight could see something change in Pinkie. The moment the name left her lips, the pink pony’s mane and tail seemed to flatten ever-so-much, as if a balloon had sprung a leak. And then, just as quickly, her puffy hair returned to its natural, more chaotic flare. “Ku-what now?”

Twilight groaned. “Pinkie, please don’t lie to me right now. I REALLY need

you to tell me the truth.”

Spike smacked himself across the forehead, emitting a frustrated groan as he did so. “Twilight, I thought we were all done with this junk.”

The unicorn’s eye twitched as she turned to face her assistant. “Junk?”

“Ya know, the whole ‘solvin’ Pinkie Sense’ thing yer so worried about?” Applejack added. “Ah mean, I understand yer all book-learned an’ stuff, but ya gotta accept that-”

“THIS ISN’T ABOUT PINKIE SENSE! IT’S ABOUT PINKIE NOT TELLING ME EVERYTHING SHE KNOWS ABOUT THE PRINCESS’ CONDITION!”

Everypony took more than a few steps away from their friend. Twilight’s condition was falling apart faster than anypony had dared think possible. Even the raging unicorn herself was shocked at how labored her breathing had become, or how her mind seemed to turn and rage against itself as she tried to piece together a decent explanation for why she was so intent on proving Pinkie’s connection to all this. Pinkie, meanwhile, was starting to nervously twitch and shudder under Twilight’s intense scrutiny.

Rarity was the first pony to find the courage to speak. “Twilight, I think you’re letting the current situation get to your head. You really need to relax.”

“Relax?” Twilight asked. “I don’t have time to relax! Princess Celestia is depending on me to find a cure, and so far, Pinkie seems to know more about this spell than I do!”

“Oh please, Twi!” Pinkie’s laugh was getting more and more nervous, almost reverting to a deep, fearful stutter. “I’m an Earth pony, remember? I’m not a fancy-pants unicorn like you! I mean, how would I know the first thing about magic?”

“Come to think of it, you did know the Elements wouldn’t work,” said Fluttershy.

Pinkie’s eyes slowly shifted towards the yellow pegasus. “Oh...that. Well, it was my...Pinkie Sense!”

"You have a Pinkie Sense for 'The Elements of Harmony won't cure Princess Celestia and will instead make things worse?'" Rainbow Dash asked incredulously.

The pony shrunk back on her haunches. "Well...Of course I do! I have a Pinkie Sense for everything, silly filly!"

The rest of the ponies (plus dragon) shared bewildered, untrusting glances. "Pinkie, ah don't mean ta call ya'll a liar, but that's a tad hard ta swallow."

If Pinkie Pie was sweating before, she was now leaking a small lake from her sweat glands. "I...I mean...Look girls, I know it's a lot to take in, but please believe me. I'm telling the truth, I swear! No, I Pinkie Pie Swear!"

"And I know you were lying about the newspaper!" said Twilight. "The morning edition of the *Equestria Daily* never mentioned the Arcanus E Draconus! In fact, hardly anypony knows that book even exists!"

"Well...that was..." Pinkie was left dumbfounded to explain this discrepancy. Pinkie Sense generally didn't extend to the printed word, or to anything not involving falling pots, oncoming disasters, or the sourest of grapes. She mentally scanned every excuse her parents had given her, every reasonable explanation for the odd ways and powers the Pie Clan sometimes exhibited, but nothing matched with her current situation. All she could do was scrunch up in an ever-smaller ball and hope things would pass. "I...I can't tell you."

"Um...gals?" piped Spike. "Listen, I realize Pinkie's hiding something and all, but don't you think you're laying it in a little thick?"

"This is from the same dragon that wanted to hang Princess Luna only a day ago?" Twilight said with a wry smile.

Spike shrugged and fiddled his claws together. "Yeah yeah, I know. But still, maybe you should hold off for now?"

Twilight looked at the sobbing wreck of a pink party pony laying before her, and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Spike, but I need to find that counterspell as soon as possible. And if Pinkie knows something that will help, I have to

let Princess Celestia know.”

“Let Princess Celestia know.”

Somewhere inside Pinkie’s head, a tiny little nerve snapped. The pony leaped from her prone position and landed in front of Twilight, her teeth barred and ready to attack. The unicorn leaned back in shock, while her friends tried to make their way around Pinkie just in case. “P-Pinkie, I didn’t mean to...” Twilight stammered.

“SHUT UP!” The fury in Pinkie Pie’s voice pushed the volume up to Royal Canterlot Voice levels. All this accomplished was making everypony else even more terrified. “I don’t want to hear another stupid word out of you!”

“Um...Pink?” said AJ. “Ya’ll should just calm down...”

“I *have* been calm!” Pinkie growled. “I’ve sat here and let who was *supposed* to be the smartest pony in Equestria accuse me of trying to hurt the most wonderful, awesome, super-special-amazing pony in the history of ponydom!”

Twilight’s surprise quickly turned about to fury. “Then why was your family afraid of Celestia?”

Pinkie gasped. “What do you mean?”

“Your cousin told me everything!” Twilight shouted. “You mentioned something nopony like you should know, and your parents mentioned Kuchen by name!”

Pinkie dug in on her hooves, her body shaking with fear. Her eyes began to seemingly shift about in an unnatural, fairly unhealthy way, and from her vantage point, Twilight could swear the irises were changing colors. “How *dare* you talk behind my back!”

“Er...Pinkie Pie...” mumbled Dash.

“It was the only way I could find anything out!” Twilight screamed.

“Maybe that’s because there *wasn’t* anything to figure out!” Pinkie shouted.

“You mean, after everything I’ve dug up, you’re still going to keep quiet?”

A wave passed from Pinkie’s tail to her eyes, setting her fur on end. The tips of her tail and mane tightened and sharpened themselves as if through magic. Everypony took more than a few steps back, even the accusative Twilight. She spoke in a voice that was her own, and yet bore malice far greater than even her time under Discord’s influence. “You know what? You’re right. We’re all...friends here, are we not?”

Fluttershy yelped and darted behind a terrified Applejack. “P-P-Pinkie Pie! What’s happened to you?”

Pinkie’s eyes never left Twilight’s. The unicorn’s very body turned cold from the pony’s nonverbal onslaught. “You know what? I really *do* need to tell you something. Do you know what happened to Kuchen?”

Twilight gulped. “F-Frosty Gaze told me...”

“Ah yes, that nosey little unicorn,” Pinkie sneered. “He was the first pony in over five hundred years to track us down. He was a lot like you back then, always sticking his face where it didn’t belong. And he paid for it. Oh, how he *paid* for it.”

“P-P-P-Pi-Pinkie?” Twilight stammered. “Wh-What’s happened to you?”

“Kuchen was a lot like that, too. He thought he knew everything there was about Princess Celestia and the ‘Mare in the Moon.’ That’s why he tried to make himself to be the best unicorn in all of Equestria. And before long, he realized he really *was* better than everypony else. Certainly better than Celestia *the fraud*.”

“Fr-Fraud?”

Spike peeked out from behind Fluttershy. The pegasus, in turn, darted behind him. “Princess Celestia isn’t a fraud!”

If Pinkie had even heard the dragon’s protests, she paid them no heed.

“Kuchen developed more spells than any other pony in history. So what if he drove everypony around him to madness? So what if he used his own

family to test his possession spells? He was working for the betterment of Ponykind, after all! But no, Celestia didn't see it that way. She saw him as a threat. So one night, she came by and..."

Pinkie's head suddenly lurched to the left, followed by the pony making a cracking noise. "Just. Like. That."

If Twilight was afraid before, she was now about halfway to losing her faculties completely. "Wh-What does this have to do with anything?"

Pinkie slowly advanced on the unicorn, her head still tilted. Twilight responded by stepping back in equal measure. "I just thought you should know, before it happens to you."

"Pinkie, stop!" shouted Rarity. "Whatever's wrong, we can work it out!"

"Do you really think Celestia doesn't see the similarities, too?" Pinkie's voice was a mix of a mocking laugh and a thinly-veiled threat. "You can defeat an Ursa Minor by yourself, bring a town to war in an instant, and teleport yourself anywhere. What's to stop you from throwing an Ursa Minor *into* a city, or starting a civil war for fun, or teleporting yourself *inside* another pony?"

The edges of Twilight's eyes became hot. "I-I would never..."

"You're right, you never will. Because Celestia isn't going to give you the chance. She'll play you along until she's had her fun, and then WHAM! It will all be over. All your research on friendship? She'll bury it at the bottom of a library, claiming it to be cursed. All your friends and family? She'll hunt them down and throw them in the deepest prison in the land, just to make sure nopony ever remembers you. And you? Well, all she'll have to do is give it a little **twist**, and POP! GOES! YOUR! HEAD!"

"That's enough!" shouted Applejack. "Ah don't know what's gotten into ya, Pinkie, but we're gonna have ah few words!"

Pinkie didn't seem to care. Every fiber of her being was focused on the sobbing unicorn before her. "Look at you. You were oh-so confident when you came cantering up here! What happened? Did I scare you? Or do you know I'm telling the truth? You're just as crazy as Kuchen was. All you

care about is making Princess Celestia happy, and that's all well and good right now. But one day, she is going to disappoint you, and you will see she's just a pony like everypony else. And then you'll realize how much of your life you've wasted trying to please a nopony! Let's see how wonderful you are when you realize you're a worthless, scum-sucking, insane waste of a pony!"

There was a flash of purple light, and Twilight was gone, teleported to parts unknown. With the center of her rage gone, Pinkie could feel the terrible coldness leave her as quickly as it had appeared. Her mane and tail regained their puffiness, while her eyes shifted back to their normal hue.

The pony looked about, utterly perplexed by what was going on. She slowly turned back to her friends, her brain quickly digesting what had just happened. "Twilight? Where'd you...?"

She stopped as she saw her friends. All five ponies (plus dragon) could only stare at Pinkie like she was some kind of horrible stranger. "Wh- What's going on, girls? Where's Twilight?"

"Pinkie...what on Celestia's Equestria was that?!" gasped Rarity.

The pink pony raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Rainbow Dash fluttered down, stopping right in front of Pinkie. Her eyes glared down the pony like a pair of freshly-shined daggers, and the party master realized something was terribly wrong. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's the whole 'Snap your neck and scare the horse apples out of Twilight' thing!"

Pinkie took a few steps back, her ears flattening against her skull. If she was not feigning ignorance earlier, now she truly understood what had happened. "I...I didn't mean..."

Applejack walked a few steps forward, her hoof hovering above Rainbow's tail just in case. Her own demeanor was almost as cold and angry as the blue pegasus. "Jus' what were ya'll thinkin', Pinkie? Twilight's tryin' ta help the princess, and ya'll act like some kind of sociopath?"

Spike slowly walked up to join the others, Fluttershy still clinging to his tail. "Pinkie...Twilight's telling the truth, isn't she? You really *do* know all about

the spell.”

Pinkie raised a hoof to her quivering mouth, her eyes burning hot with stifled tears. “I...I wanted to tell you...” She shook her head, her eyes closed so tight it hurt. “I can’t! It’s a secret!”

“B-B-But Princess Celestia...” muttered Fluttershy.

“ESPECIALLY from Princess Celestia!”

Before anypony could do anything, Pinkie turned on her hooves and bolted out the palace gate. Rainbow and Applejack dashed off after her, but their close proximity and simultaneous start sent the two crashing into each other. Rarity’s own attempt to give chase ended when she ran into the blue-and-orange heap, adding a white unicorn to the pile. Spike tried to give chase, but Fluttershy’s panic mode kept her clinging to his back, her weight holding the baby dragon down. Pinkie was long gone by the time everypony was done fighting free of each other.

Rainbow panted and gasped in confusion. “Wh-What are we gonna do now?”

Applejack dusted off and adjusted her hat, shifting from “Apple Buck Mode” to “Apple Farm Manager Mode.” “Dash, you and Fluttershy go high. Rarity ‘n Ah will search from ta ground. Ya’ll keep an eye out fer Pinkie or Twilight!”

When Lofty had first learned her mother had found work at Canterlot Castle itself, she was practically jumping with joy. Now that she had seen what the job actually involved, the filly was less than enthused at spending the day here.

Luna’s list of tasks more or less amounted to, “Go here, look at something, talk to somepony, get frustrated, repeat.” Ruby and Lofty had only been at work for less than an hour, and already the child was getting frustrated with cantering back and forth from one room to the next, occasionally stopping for a quick breather and to make sure the little pegasus was didn’t have to use the little fillies room before continuing.

Ruby wasn't exactly having a ball, either. By the time she had left last night, most of the actual furniture and supplies for the party had arrived, and even now there were scores of ponies out in the gardens, all of them throwing the mish-mash of items together to create a semblance of order before tonight. As for Luna's list of duties, she had only been able to scratch off five or six items, nearly all of them assigning other servants to either help clean the debris from last night's storm, or to help with the rest of today's deliveries.

Having her daughter following her didn't make things any easier. Lofty wasn't a bad child by any means, nor was she making things too difficult right now. No, the problem was the insane amount of security detail she had to worm her way through just to get to the various tasks her princess had outlined. Every doorway, every hallway, every *everything* had at least two guards stationed nearby, all of them ready and willing to protect the princesses from the deadly assassination skills of a kindergarten-aged filly. Ruby had even gone back outside to get her daughter's pass attached to a chain necklace, and even that was barely enough to convince the guards that Lofty wasn't going to spread mass destruction throughout the palace.

It was almost two hours into their duties, and right after Ruby had confirmed that onions and artichokes do *not* go together, when the two finally decided to take a proper break. The two trotted from the kitchen to a small dining room frequently used by the castle's employees. A handful of ponies were still sitting there, finishing off a quick cup of tea or reading the morning paper before heading back to work.

Both mother and daughter slunk onto the wooden benches, their upper bodies laying against the tabletop. The filly in particular was close to exhaustion, having been hauled from one end of Canterlot's royalist of buildings to another several times in the last short burst of time. Ruby picked up on her daughter's plight almost immediately. "D-Do you need some water?"

Lofty rolled her eyes upwards, her head remaining motionless on the table. "Yes, please."

Bending over to her saddle bags, Ruby flipped the flap open with her nose and gripped a plastic bottle between her teeth. The water container struggled against the various items Ruby had stashed inside, but finally

yielded to the pegasus. Another pull, and it was opened and sitting on the table, in front of Lofty. Another flick of the adult's wings, produced a bent straw, which soon found itself sitting neck-deep in the liquid.

Lofty nodded and started taking a few sips. Her energy seemed to return as she did so, her body visibly relaxing against the table. Ruby and the other servants smiled at the child's joy. "So...how are you enjoying the castle?"

Lofty pulled herself away from the straw and shrugged. "It's okay."

Ruby had to cock her head at that one. "Okay? I certainly think spending the day at the center of Equestria's government would be more than just 'okay.'"

The filly sighed. "But it's so boring! All you do is work!"

Just about everypony had a good laugh at that one, save for Lofty herself. "Lofty, sweetie," said Ruby, "that's what adults do. We go to our jobs and work all day so you can have food on your plate. And how about those flight lessons of yours? Miss Firefly doesn't teach you for free, after all."

"Oh, that's right!" Lofty's eyes practically popped out of their sockets in glee. The filly leaped onto the bench, showing all the boisterousness and showmareship of a trained athlete. "Miss Firefly finally showed me how to do a 180! Wanna see, mom?"

The entire lunchroom exploded into laughter as Ruby leaped over the table and slammed both forehooves on her daughter's wings just as they were opening. The filly blurted out an agonized cry, both out of surprise and out of the pain on her sensitive wings. She slowly turned her head until she was at eye level with her mother, even as the tears began to water.

Ruby's stone hard gaze softened slightly, but her motherly instincts remained. "Lofty, what did you promise me before we left the house today?"

Lofty sniffed and sobbed, showing as much of a foalish front as possible. "N-Not to fly in the palace?"

“And where are we now?”

“Th-Th-The palace?”

Ruby let out a big sigh before releasing her daughter from the pincer attack. The other ponies were still in an uproar of laughter at the poor pegasi's expense, leaving the older of the two blushing beneath her red coat. The younger didn't quite understand what was going on, but could pick up that something was wrong. “I'm sorry, mom. I didn't mean to...”

“It's...all right.” Ruby shook her head vigorously, hoping to remove any lingering resentments towards the near disaster her daughter had unleashed. “Come on. We still have a lot of work to do today.”

In the time since Luna left, Celestia had discovered yet another fact of a filly's life:

Jumping on your bed is overrated.

The filly landed back onto the bed, the mattress depressing in just the right way to support her tiny weight. The bouncing was a little fun at first, but after the fifth hop or so the game became rather predictable. And then there was the time she fell over the side. She had already taken enough blows to the head these last few days, and burying her face in the royal floor was not her idea of a good time.

Sulking, the pony slowly stepped off the bed and spread herself out on the ground, completely drowning herself in her own self-pity. All her suffering this morning had confirmed that there was not a single thing for the filly to do in her room. There was nary a sight of Twilight all morning, and there was little doubt that her friends were well on their way back to Ponyville by now. Her servants would be of no use right now, especially with that contemptible party this very evening.

And Luna was no doubt hard at work, ensuring the continued prosperity of their fair nation...

Luna couldn't believe it.

One minute, she was afraid she would be eaten alive by a hoard of angry, prepubescent youngsters, and the next she was being greeted cautiously but warmly. Even the photographers and press agents, nearly all of whom had believed this to be the princess' personal buffet table only a short time earlier, seemed genuinely amazed at how well the normally awkward princess was handling everything.

And now...

"So Mr. Weevil said to Mrs. Butterscotch, 'What are you going to do with that shovel?' 'Why, I am going to dig for worms for my best friend's birthday cake!' she replied."

The entire room exploded in laughter and applause from the children, while the adults in the room just shrugged at the punchline. Luna was especially confused by the book's turn of events. *I thought the weevil was going to the store for some coconut milk. Why is he talking to a pony all of a sudden? For that matter, how is a weevil able to talk to a pony in the first place? And what can an insect do with coconut milk anyway? This "children's literature" genre will require some reworking before-*

"Um...Princess Luna?"

Luna broke free from her thoughts and glanced down at the little filly at her hooves. "C-Can you please continue? The story's getting really good!"

"Oh, of course," she said with a smile. "I was just...a little lost in thought. Now, where was I...?"

It took only a second to find her spot in the book again. The princess telekinetically turned the page, revealing the next paragraph of the weevil's grand adventures. "And so Mr. Weevil continued walking to the store, until he came across a very hungry pegasus." *And what does that have to do with worms in cakes? Mrs. Butterscotch's story would be more interesting than a bug trying to buy something he has no use for. How does a weevil earn money anyway? This story has so many plot holes.*

Celestia was about ready to go into another mope cycle when she heard voices on the other side of her door.

“All right, that’s another thing done. Now we need to head back to the gardens to help set up the chairs.”

“Again? But we were just out there, mom!”

The princess’ ear flicked up at the word “mom.” The tone, pitch and whininess all perfectly cross referenced with everything she knew about a specific subgroup of ponies: foals. In fact, it was a perfect match for those shown by the Bearers during last night’s incident.

Curious, Celestia crept closer to the door. She pressed her ear against the door just in time to catch the rest of the conversation. “I know, but there’s a lot to get ready before tonight! There’s going to be a party here, and I have to make sure everything is perfect for Princess Luna.”

“A party? Are we invited?”

“No dear. This is a very private party, and it’s very important for the princess that everything goes well.”

“Oh.”

“Come on, you’ll like...”

The voices faded off into the distance, but Celestia had heard enough. She couldn’t quite peg who was talking, but it was definitely a mother and child. More than likely, it was one of those “take your filly to school day” things teachers used for a cheap day off, a practice Celestia had all but given up on stamping out. In any case, nopony had ever brought their filly to the palace itself. The bureaucracy alone must have been an absolute nightmare.

Celestia waited a few more seconds for the hoofsteps to disappear entirely before she dared to open one half of the door. Peeking around the closed side, she managed to pick up a small, yellow pegasus filly wandering with a red mare. The two were carrying on a conversation, most likely the small

one complaining to the big one about how tired she was getting from walking around all day.

It didn't take long for the guards to notice Celestia was taking a few steps outside. One of the burly pegasus ponies stepped forward and bowed, both to show reverence to his leader and to reach eye level. "May I ask what you are doing, your Highness?"

The filly shrugged. "Oh, nothing of consequence. By the way, who were those ponies?"

The guard turned towards the small dots in the distance. "Those would be Princess Luna's temporary attendant and her daughter. They were attending to royal business with the Treasury just now."

A tiny little switch flipped in the princess' brain, causing a mischievous smile to spread across her lips. For the second time in as many days, fate had laid something glorious in her lap. And yet, something else held her back. This was her last chance to make this work, and she had to be prepared.

Celestia cleared her throat, taking on as much of a commanding tone as possible. "I need you to escort me to my study. I have some reading to do."

Celestia's study was just as well-kept as ever, save for the ashes of that book still sitting in the fireplace. Pushing the charred remains of the dirty pictures book aside, the guard dutifully lit a fire for his princess before returning to his post. Celestia gave the usual thanks, waited until he was gone, and then darted for a nearby mural depicting a sun and moon in perfect equilibrium.

The filly quickly pushed a small stool under the mural before parting the metaphorical curtain, revealing a fake portion of the wall. Celestia took a running leap to the stool, landing on top at just the right angle to slide the panel aside. On the other side sat a collection of the most precious parchments Celestia had ever collected.

Twilight Sparkle's Friendship Reports.

The filly regarded the bound scrolls with pride. For over a year, her pupil had dutifully studied and documented the magic of friendship. Things like slumber parties, races, and parties were old hat for many ponies, but for Celestia's prized student they were as foreign as being in another country.

Nevertheless, the unicorn had gladly jotted down every lesson she had learned with her friends, and then sending them via dragon to the princess to show the progress of her research. For most of the first year, Celestia had viewed Twilight's progress with a mixture of pride and more than a little bit of jealousy.

And then the Smarty Pants incident happened. Twilight had not only disappointed Celestia immensely, she had revealed the flaws in Celestia's grand plan. One pony was not enough for such a large project, and it was only good fortune that Twilight's friends had arrived when they did.

Otherwise...

Celestia closed her eyes. *No. Don't think about that. It was five hundred years ago. Twilight is not like...him.*

Shaking her head clear of such thoughts, she reached her head into the compartment and started pulling out the scrolls. It was right as the entire pile started sagging forward that the princess realized she *really* should not have put off actually organizing Twilight's letters. The mass of papers tumbled into the filly, sending her crashing down to the floor in a tangled mess of feathers, limbs, and parchment.

The dizzy filly climbed back to her hooves, throwing off the papers in about five different directions. Her eyes quickly caught one that had popped open; it was as good a starting place as any. *If Twilight Sparkle and her friends have been sending me lessons all this time, then I should be able to find everything I need here.*

She knelt down before the open scroll, unrolling it fully with her muzzle before reading. "Dear Princess Celestia: My friend, Applejack, is..."

"And so the dog found a new home on the bee farm, where she and Farmer Honeysuckle lived happily ever after. The end."

With a last quick burst of magic, Luna closed the book (A Dog Named Honey) and floated it back to one of the bookshelves. The fillies in the room clapped and gave as much applause as they could, while the journalists in the back scribbled down notes with their mouths and own magic. For a few moments, the Princess of the Moon felt her own spirits being lifted.

Then she got a glance at the clock. The morning was almost over, she had to get ready for yet another round of appointments all afternoon, and there was still tonight's little party to get ready for. She gave a nod to the waiting nurse on the other side of the room, who quickly returned the same gesture.

"I'm sorry, my little ponies," Luna said, "but I'm afraid I have to be going." The room erupted into a groan of disappointment. "I understand, but there is still a lot of royal business I have to take care of. And with my big sister on vacation, I have to finish as much as possible by myself."

"B-But you can come again, right?" asked one of the children.

"This was the awesomemestest thing ever!" said another.

"Yeah, you rock!"

Everypony's eyes turned to one of the reporters in the back. The unicorn blushed like a ripe tomato before hiding his face beneath his hat and coat. "Um...I mean...Wow, what a scoop!"

Luna turned her attention back to the fillies and colts, giving them a warm smile. "I cannot say when, but if the doctors and nurses find me agreeable, I will try to return. That is a promise, and princesses never break their promises."

And with that, as well as a few more well wishes and goodbyes, Luna's brief morning adventure came to an end. With a heavy sigh, she followed Nurse Ward back through the halls of the hospital, no doubt to the same chilly reception as before. And sure enough, cruel fate did not want to disappoint, as the front lobby was once again filled with ponies bowing in fear and reverence as Luna approached. In fact, she could swear a few of them had not moved from the same spot they were in when she first

arrived.

"I really do wish to thank you, your Highness," said Ward. "It really does mean a lot to these children to know that the princesses care about them."

"Even if it's not Celestia?" Luna said with a moan.

Nurse Ward paused by the hospital doors, raising a hoof back towards the Children's Wing. "Didn't you see them back there? You may not have rainbows for hair, but they still loved you."

The princess paused as well, reflecting on everything that had just happened. The room certainly didn't seem hostile, especially after she had a few minutes to warm up to the crowd, and the reception from the back was positive. "I...I suppose so."

"I can't speak for the administration, but if you can ever find time in your busy schedule to stop by for a few minutes, feel free. And Princess Celestia is certainly invited as well." Nurse Ward gave a last bow as Luna willed the hospital doors open. "Thank you for your time, your Highness."

"It is no trouble at all," Luna replied. "I'm honestly surprised Celestia never found time for this herself. I will deliver the message once she returns from vacation."

Now filled to the brim with some sense of self-confidence, Luna trotted back to her waiting carriage, where her two pegasii were busy staring at clouds and discussing life's innermost mysteries. The moment her rear royal hooves struck the chariot's floor, however, the two guards hopped to their hooves, reared up in a mighty whinny, and galloped ahead about ten feet before leaping up and flapping their wings.

From the ground below, a single unicorn reporter watched as Luna and her personal guards disappeared into the distance. Once he was certain they were well out of hearing range, he lit up his horn and began scribbling away on a notepad:

"Princess Celestia ducking hospital gig. Princess Luna responds. Possible story?"

After delivering a few dozen scrolls and letters to the various offices in the palace, Ruby and Lofty reached the garden doors. By now, the filly was panting in not-so-quiet exhaustion and frustration, something her mother had noticed. "Do you need to take a break, Lofty?"

"N-No, mom," said Lofty. "I'm fine. I'm learning so much."

Ruby smiled. "Really, now? So tell me, what pony's painting is hanging in the East Hall?"

Lofty's grin faded as she tried to mentally recall everything she had seen. "Um...Princess Celestia?"

The older pegasus laughed and gave her filly a friendly nudge on the forehead. "Lucky guess."

Her attention returned to the garden. In the short time between their last visit and the present, more and more ponies had arrived to help set things up. In particular, the construction teams had arrived to set up the stage for the orchestra, as well as a few perches for the visiting Cloudsdale delegation. Between the sheer mass of bodies running about outside, the ongoing construction, and the volume of things Ruby still had to accomplish, it was obviously no place for a child.

The big pegasus turned to the smaller one, giving her the usual motherly smile. "Lofty, I will need you to stay here for a little while. I'm afraid I can't have you running around outside right now."

Lofty huffed and fumed. "Oh...all right."

Still smiling, Ruby gave the filly a quick nuzzle on the top of the head. "I will just be a few minutes. Just stay here and keep working on that picture of Princess Luna. I want that hanging in the Canterlot Art Gallery by nightfall."

Lofty made a move to say something, but the mare was already out the door and in the garden itself. Sighing, the filly sat on her haunches, pulled out her notepad, and began drawing away, adding some flame breath to Luna's already frightening range of powers.

Celestia sat around the corner, crouched like a panther about to pounce on a bird.

The filly was sitting there, scribbling away on a notepad. Her mother had just stepped through the garden doors, unwittingly leaving her daughter at her princess' mercy. There were still plenty of guards, sure, but they would not dare interfere in their ruler's schemes. And "schemes" would certainly be the correct word to use for Celestia's plans.

Her own studies into the Magic of Friendship may not have been first-hand like Twilight's, but her student's letters were more than sufficient to close the gap. She had already read through them dozens of times in the past, living vicariously through the unicorn and her friend's triumphs and failures, but the last study session had given her the insight she needed to proceed.

At long last, she would have a friend. A playmate. Somepony she could spend time with and just enjoy herself, not as a princess, but as a regular pony. And best of all, Luna wasn't there to stop her. The foal was practically rubbing her hooves together in anticipation.

My research has told me everything I need to know. All I have to do is take a few steps into the room, say "Hello," and bam, instant friendship.

Twilight's reports make it sound so simple, I'm amazed I never tried it before.

Taking a deep, confidence-raising breath, Princess Celestia strode two steps into the room. The sound of her hooves soon caught the other filly's attention, the pencil ceasing its mouth-guided movements. The little pony managed to catch a glimpse of a small, pony-shaped blur darting back down the hall before losing interest and returning to her drawings.

Meanwhile, back at her vantage point, Celestia was in a sorry shape. Her fur was creased and messy, as was her hair. All of this was a result of the massive amounts of terror sweat that had just ran through every inch of her fur, the kind that a prisoner would feel before facing their execution. With trembling, fear-filled eyes, the princess looked back, saw that the filly was still scribbling away, and just as quickly darted her eyes in the opposite direction.

Celestia wheezed and heaved, her pupils dilating from the stress. The moment she saw that filly staring at her, everything had gone black. Her body was wracked with an unfiltered emotion she had not experienced in a long time: fear.

Coughing a bit, the princess tried to shake herself clear of those thoughts.

You are Princess Celestia, Steward of the Sun and Crown Princess of the Nation of Equestria. You have faced everything from dragons to griffons, defeated Manticores and Windigoes, and dethroned that monster Discord.

You have ruled Equestria for over a thousand years, and under you, the land has thrived into a paradise amongst the world. Why are you scared of a little girl?

Her newfound confidence quickly vanished as she took another look at the filly, still blissfully unaware of her royal stalker. "But...what if she doesn't like me?" she whispered.

Everypony loves you!

"And what if she tells everypony what happened to me?"

Do you want friends or not?!

Celestia shrank back even further. "I don't know who she is. How am I supposed to talk to her? What am I supposed to say?"

You command an entire country, you foal! Surely you can speak to one filly?

"B-But...What if I do something wrong? What if I'm a jerk to her, like I was to Luna? Wh-What if she's mean to me?"

You'll never know how she'll treat you if you just sit here and hide. And besides, you may have made mistakes with Luna, but she still...maybe...loves you. You'll be fine.

Celestia nodded to the vast empty space before her. "Yes, that's right. If I can rule a country, I can certainly handle myself around a filly. Thank you..."

Her thoughts suddenly trailed off as a realization struck her. She had just spent the last few minutes arguing with, for lack of a better term, herself.

The filly gave a deep, heavy sigh, her muscles visibly relaxing as the tension washed away in a great wave. *The situation's getting the better of me. I just have to walk up to her, say "Hello," and everything will be-*

"Hello."

The sound of the young voice completely shattered Celestia's concentration. The terror within her welled up yet again, sending the filly hopping straight up a good ten feet before spinning about and landing, her fur standing on end like a startled cat. The same little filly she had been trying to befriend was now standing directly behind her, looking almost as scared as the princess.

The two stood there, completely unable to move, for about ten seconds before the filly spoke up again. "Um...Hi. My name's Lofty. What's yours?"

All right, Celestia, you have your cover story. Your fake name is...

"HELLO I AM A PRINCESS ARE YOU A PRINCESS TOO!"

Celestia immediately covered her mouth with one hoof, her cheeks burning red from the nonsense she had just blurted out. Lofty took a few steps back, seeming very, very afraid of the strange child before her. The princess, for her part, was quickly reverting into a bowl of jelly. Never before had she been so, for lack of a better word, shy. "I mean, my name is...er...Sunlight." The princess began to bow. "And I am very grateful to-"

She quickly caught herself mid-curtsy and returned to her usual standing position. "I mean...it's nice to meet you."

Lofty's apprehension began to turn to befuddlement at the pony's awkwardness, before gradually turning into curiosity. She looked the princess up and down, taking in every inch of her being. In particular, she noticed two rather obvious things that should not go together. "How'd you get a horn and wings? I thought only princesses had both."

"Um...that is, you see..." Celestia's eyes widened as inspiration struck her. "I *am* a princess! You see, I'm Princess Sunlight, Royal Niece to

Princesses Celestia and Luna! I'm visiting my aunts so they can teach me how to be a better princess!"

As if to try and sell the ridiculous lie, Celestia clenched her teeth into a big, toothy grin, even as her shifting eyes threatened to betray her.

Unfortunately for the princess, they did. Lofty took a few steps towards Celestia, obviously incredulous at her story. "I've never heard of a filly princess before. Aren't they all supposed to be a bazillion feet tall, and weigh a hundred tons?"

Celestia's teeth were now gritting for a very different reason. *It's always the weight, isn't it? Just because I like cake doesn't mean I'm fat!*

"I'm...just a little kid, I guess. I mean, Aunt Celestia and Luna must have been fillies at some point, right?"

The filly appeared to give no heed to Celestia's nervous giggling. Instead, her eyes zoomed in on the other distinguishing feature: a certain mark on the pony's backside. Lofty's jaw hung in amazement. "You have a cutie mark already? And...it's the same as Princess Celestia's?!"

Celestia felt like bucking herself right now for forgetting that telltale giveaway. "Um...it's...fake?"

Lofty tilted her head. "Fake?"

"Um...yeah. You see, I love my cous- I mean, aunt so much that I asked her to...um...paint a copy of her cutie mark on! You know, just like at a carnival or something...um..." *Why is this so difficult?*

"I think they paint your *face* at a carnival, not your flank." Lofty shook her head sadly. "And what's with your mane?"

Celestia reached up and wrapped a lock of her rainbow hair around a hoof.

"Oh...well, Princess Luna let me use Aunt Celestia's shampoo. This is what it does to your hair."

Lofty did little else but grimace at the filly for a few moments, setting Celestia's nerves off even more. Any moment now, she could be discovered for the liar she was, and her hopes of ending this conversation gracefully would be dashed like a cruiser on the rocks. Her fears abated,

however, when the pony, instead of digging in deeper, gave her a smile.
“Oh, okay! So, do you want to draw?”

“DO I?!”

Celestia’s exuberance threw the filly off balance yet again. The princess quickly realized her mistake. “I mean...sure.”

If the scene inside the palace was a little crazy, the garden’s current state was a cacophony of chaos.

Pony after pony darted past Ruby, desperately racing to finish their assignments in time for someone else to begin theirs. The sitting tables were not in perfect alignment, an atrocious affront to the delicate feelings of the upper class. Any attempt to reshuffle the seating arrangement only ran into another web of old hostilities, family feuds, and fear of being placed farther and farther away from the princess. The plants and shrubs were still too wet to suitably decorate, which was fine, since they were short about two dozen roses. At least those blue plants the florists found looked nice under the lights.

Ruby was half-ready to just give up on the job, perhaps find a nice cloud for her family to crash on while Luna’s near-certain rage had run its course, when she heard another set of hoofsteps coming from the garden doors. The pegasus turned to the entryway, eyes clamped shut. “Princess Luna, I’m so sorry! I know everything isn’t done, but...”

“I...I’m not Princess Luna.”

Ruby slowly opened her eyes, taking in a very un-winged unicorn. Before her stood the purple unicorn she had occasionally glimpsed around the palace. The pony’s eyes were a light red, and when combined with the wrinkled bags under her eyes, it was obvious this pony had been crying her eyes out only moments before.

The pegasus cocked her head at the sad sight before her. “Um...are you all right, Miss...?”

“Twilight Sparkle.” The pony coughed a few times to clean out her dried

throat. "I...I'm sorry if I'm intruding. I just wanted to..."

"It's no problem at all, Miss Sparkle," Ruby said with the shake of a hoof.

"Things are just a little too chaotic over here right now, nothing more. I had no idea being the princess' personal attendant could be so...trying."

The pegasus' attention quickly returned to the still-ailing unicorn. "Is there something wrong?"

The unicorn hung her head aside, ashamed to let the other pony see her in this state. "Well...I was hoping Princess Luna was back. I needed to talk to her about some things."

Ruby looked up at the sun, trying to identify the time of day as best she could. "She should be back any minute now. She was hoping to get some paperwork finished before court this afternoon."

"I see." Twilight glanced back and forth, making sure no pony inappropriate was listening in before continuing. "And have you seen Princess Celestia anywhere?"

Ruby looked up from her scroll in confusion. "What? She isn't in her room?"

"One of the guards said she had gone to her study, but she wasn't there, either."

"Well, she couldn't have gone far. I'm just about finished out here. Let me give you some help."

Twilight nodded. "Th-Thank you."

Ruby waved a dismissing hoof before opening the garden doors. "Oh, it's no trouble at all. As Princess Luna's royal attendant, it is my duty to..."

It was at very moment, as the two stepped through the door, that Ruby and Twilight caught a glimpse of two small fillies. One was the attendant's precious yellow filly, and the other...

Twilight immediately slammed the door shut, getting the attention of both fillies. The yellow filly was especially happy to see the red mare. "You're

back, mom!"

Lofty jumped to her hooves and galloped up to her mother, her neck craning in preparation for the requisite nuzzle. All she got was a look of stunned disbelief.

Meanwhile, the pegasus' companion trotted up to Celestia, looking more amazed than terrified. "Wh-What are you doing out here, Pri-"

Celestia quickly shushed her student, her eyes still locked on Lofty. "Ix-nay on the Elestia-cay. As far as everypony is concerned, my name is Princess Sunlight, niece to the Royal Pony Sisters. Just play along with my brilliant cover, and everything will be fine."

"Wh-What are you doing?" Ruby stammered.

"I was just playing with Princess Celestia," said Lofty.

The entire room went quiet, if only so everypony could properly catalogue the filly's brazen confession. Sighing, Celestia slowly walked up to Lofty. "You mean you knew the whole time?"

"Well, you weren't very good at hiding," said Lofty. "I mean, how many rainbow-haired ponies have wings and a horn, anyway?"

"Th-Then why did you let me stay?"

Lofty shrugged. "I dunno. I thought it was a game." She looked up to her mother. "Why is she a filly, though? I always thought Princess Celestia was bigger."

Ruby didn't answer. She didn't know what to say or think right now. Her daughter and Princess Celestia had not only found each other, they had been playing together. All this spat in the face of Luna's orders from yesterday. *What am I worried about? I'm sure Princess Luna was just joking. She wouldn't really...*

Everypony's thoughts were interrupted by a sudden flash of blue light. Before everypony stood Princess Luna, in all her royal glory. And even more bizarrely, she was smiling. It wasn't the mocking smile of a victorious

prankster, nor was it a faked grin to hide her inner frustration. It was real, genuine happiness.

Once the light had dissipated, Luna turned to her still-shellshocked attendant and accompanying filly, completely oblivious to the two other ponies standing behind her. The blue alicorn could barely resist giving the pegasus a great big bear hug as it was. "Salutations and good morning, Miss Dream! Is everything in order around the palace?!"

"Um...I...gah..." Ruby wasn't quite sure how to feel about the visage of Luna standing before her. She had never really seen the princess, for lack of a better word, happy.

"Oh, do not worry if not everything was finished," Luna said with a wave of her hoof. "I'm certain you have gotten enough accomplished for us to finish today's tasks. And besides, I..."

It was right about then that she realized there were other ponies in the room. The princess slowly turned about, expecting to see her royal guards or one of the palace's advisors. Instead, she saw a Twilight that had apparently spent the last hour crying and her filly of an older sister. All the goodness that had filled the princess' very being dried up in an instant, only to be replaced by a mixture of ragged frustration and general ill-will towards Ruby and her daughter.

"Your Majesty," Ruby began, "I can explain..."

The alicorn spun about, her eyes alone expressing her great displeasure. "You promised me your daughter and my sister would remain far apart. What is going on here?"

"Well...I..."

The filly chirped up, still scared but desperate to save her mother from the fire-breathing princess of death. "I just found Princess Celestia wandering around. I just thought she was playing a game or something. I didn't know it was a bad thing."

"Just wait a minute, *little* sister," Celestia snapped. "I'm the one that started everything. I saw Lofty and her mom earlier, and I just wanted to hang out

with her for a few minutes. If you're going to punish somepony, it should be me."

Luna's attention shifted back and forth, from one potential victim to the next. Everypony stood in bated breath for her to pass judgment, while also planning out the fastest possible escape routes from the palace itself.

Ruby's wings were extended, earning a silent admonishment from her grounded spawn, while Twilight quickly levitated Celestia onto her back in case she had to start galloping for dear life. Even the guards, who had been viewing the events with quiet interest, found themselves preparing for the inevitable slaughter.

"...Very well," Luna said with a sigh. "What's done is done." The princess' death gaze drifted downwards, centering on the yellow filly's forehead.

"Just remember this, child. Nopony is to know about Celestia's condition. Your friends, teachers, and other relatives are to remain as oblivious as you were this morning. Tell anyone of this, and you may face severe consequences. Do you understand?"

Lofty's brain came very close to shutting down halfway through Luna's speech, and were Ruby not rapidly bobbing the filly's head, she would have been as motionless as a statue. "Sh-She understands, your Highness! She won't tell anypony!"

Luna facehoofed at her attendant's terror. *And I was just getting away from that, too.* "Twilight, take Princess Celestia back to her room. I want you to return to work finding a cure. Miss Dream, you and your daughter will accompany me to my offices. We need to finish reading over those briefings from the War Department. And I have a few words to say to the Department of Education about their book selection..."

Chapter Ten

The march back to Celestia's room went without incident. In fact, not a single word was spoken between the two. The filly was upset at Luna interrupting her latest attempt to make friends, and the less said about Twilight's current state of mind, the better.

By the time the two had stepped inside the room, Celestia could take no more. "Twilight, is something wrong?"

"Oh...it's nothing." Twilight turned towards the door, desperate to escape this awkward situation. "I...I have a lot of work to do. If you would excuse me..."

The princess jumped off of Twilight's back, landing on her bed with all the poise of a trained athlete. "Twilight, I have not lasted all these years without recognizing when a pony is troubled. Is there anything I can do?"

Twilight's lower lip was so deep into the top of her mouth that they two halves threatened to merge completely. "I can't tell you."

Celestia's eyes narrowed into thin slits. "Do not make this difficult, Twilight Sparkle. As your mentor *and* ruler, I demand that you tell me everything!"

"I can't!" Twilight gasped. Celestia reared up in surprise at her student's anger. "If I do, you'll kill one of my best friend's families!"

The unicorn squeaked and covered her mouths as she realized what she had just blurted out. Celestia, meanwhile, looked more horrified than anything else. "W-What?!"

"I-I-I said too much!" Twilight sobbed. "I should never have talked to you! I wish I hadn't even gotten into this crazy mess! I could have stayed stupid and happy and never know one my best friends actually hates me and-"

"Are you talking about Pinkie Pie?"

Just about every nerve in Twilight's body decided to shut down at that moment. The unicorn stared at her mentor, her jaw so slack it threatened to separate from the rest of the body entirely. "Wh-What? You mean you knew the whole time?"

"Did you really think I wouldn't? I've known about the Pie Clan ever since it came into being."

"Th-Then why didn't you say anything?!" Twilight gasped. "Why string me along for so long?"

"I was NOT 'stringing you along,'" Celestia reprimanded. "I honestly did not think you would learn that much about..him. Frosty Gaze's thesis made no mention of Kuchen's family, and I certainly wasn't going to tell you something like that. If Spike hadn't misread your intentions..."

"B-But that's not it! Pinkie knew the Elements wouldn't work, but we ignored her! And she apparently knows about long-gone opera houses! And just now, she told me how you were going to kill me and bury everything I've ever worked on in the basement of the Canterlot Library because apparently I'm insane but I'm not insane right I mean OH SWEET YOU I AM CRAZY!"

"TWILIGHT SPARKLE!"

Twilight immediately stopped panicking and fell to her floor, huddled like a small child. Celestia leaned over the side of the bed, her eyes still locked onto her student. "Now, tell me everything Pinkie said."

Canterlot's Central Park was one of the most luxurious parks in the whole of Equestria. After all, if you had to make a piece of greenery to surround the famed Yet Another Celestia Statue, one would make sure it was befitting the country's capital. The spending evergreen trees, the fresh mowed grass, and the numerous cobblestone paths all added to the area's grand charms.

All of this was lost on one particular pony. The pink mare from Ponyville had sequestered herself onto a park bench, content to just sit there until she starved or froze to death, whatever came first. Around her walked

scores of ponies, hurrying about to enjoy what could be the last day before Luna banished the sun forever. Only a few of these everyday folk gave the pony a brief glance before continuing on their merry way. The large trees also gave Pinkie some cover from any pegasus that might come looking for her.

The loneliness suited Pinkie just fine. It gave her plenty of time to reflect.

My friends saw everything. Twilight's probably running off to tell Celestia everything. They'll haul my whole family to a dungeon somewhere, and me with them.

"Now that's not how I taught you to talk, Pinkie."

The voice rang out from seemingly nowhere, but was more than enough to send Pinkie catapulting onto her rump. Her eyes darted about, but saw nopony besides the usual Canterlot ones. "Wh-Who said that?" she said in a hushed tone.

"Oh, Pinkie! How could you forget me?"

The pony's eyes burst wide so violently they threatened to swallow the pony's entire face. "Gr-Granny Pie?"

"The one and only!"

"B-But you passed away years ago!"

"Since when has this been a problem for this family? I'm in your head, silly filly!"

Pinkie shook her head violently, hoping to break loose whatever illusion was bringing her grandmother back from the dead. "Please, get outta there, granny! I already had one scary voice in my head today! I don't want *another!*"

"Well, that's too bad! I'm here now, and you're gonna listen!"

Pinkie flinched back in the bench, ears and eyes drooping from her own mental scolding. "Sorry, Granny Pie."

"Now, what is all this silliness I'm hearing about you not telling Celestia anything? The Princess of Equestria is in trouble, and all I hear my dear Pinkie Pie blabbering about is how the same pony that raises the sun every day is going to kill us all?"

"B-But Dad always said..."

"Your Pa was a right old sort, always worrying if you were getting too carefree or undisciplined. I mean, that's why you couldn't block his voice out, or any of the other Pies that listened to him. What he never got was, he was the one letting that little voice control his life. I mean, we listen to it, and we're perfectly sane, right?"

Pinkie's eyes narrowed into a dull, unbelieving expression of discontentment. "Granny, I just yelled at my best friend. How is *that* sane?"

"And how do you think she feels right now?"

"I...I...I don't know..." Pinkie's voice began to crack as she continued speaking to herself. "I'm such a stupid pony."

"You're only a stupid pony if you don't apologize."

Pinkie sniffed and wiped away a small tear. "Y-You're right, Granny."

"PINKIE! TWILIGHT!"

Pinkie Pie zoomed from the bench, hiding under a tree. Above her was Rainbow Dash, slowly flying over Canterlot while shouting for the two missing ponies. *I can't let them catch me first! I have to see if Twilight will forgive me before I do anything else. Now, what does the master of Hide-And-Seek do?*

Her eyes locked on a nearby manhole cover. She smiled as, for once, her ancestor's memories actually served a good purpose. *Princess Celestia showed Kuchen all the emergency tunnels that ran through Canterlot! All I gotta do is follow one and BAM, I'm in the palace! What could be simpler?*

“And that’s everything she said,” Twilight whispered.

Celestia was understandably quiet. Kuchen was a sore subject, to be sure. And yet, the despair in Twilight’s eyes was too much to bear. *She needs to know what really happened.*

The filly pointed a hoof at one of the bookshelves. On it sat a series of large, leather-bound tomes. The princess’ hoof was centered on one in particular, a faded brown book with frayed edges and yellowed pages.

“Twilight, can you bring me that one? I need to tell you something.”

The unicorn slowly nodded in agreement, her eyes still locked on her mentor. The book slowly floated off the shelf, flew over Twilight’s head, and opened up in front of Celestia. Carefully, the filly alicorn flipped through the pages, searching for the appropriate index. Twilight, however, was not as patient right now. “What is this?”

“Did you really think you were the first pony I mentored?” Celestia shook her head in mock disapproval. “No, I’ve had many students over the years. Who do you think first taught unicorns how to use magic? Or trained Star Swirl the Bearded?” She turned her head. “At least the second one. Stupid first one stole my lunch...”

“Huh?”

“Oh, never mind. In any case, I’ve always found time to help teach some of the most talented and gifted ponies in Equestria. They weren’t always skilled in magic, of course. Some became diplomats, others scientists or generals, and even a few artists and writers from time to time, but I had a hoof in teaching all of them. I like to keep a personal record, something to remember them by even after history has forgotten them.” The princess looked out the window with a forlorn expression. “I just wish they would stop forgetting them so quickly, sometimes.”

Finally, she stopped at the appropriate page. On it was drawn a picture of a pony the unicorn had never seen before. Twilight leaned over to catch a glimpse, only to be stopped when Celestia’s hoof rested itself on her snout.

“Now Twilight, before I tell you all this, I want you to promise me something. Nothing I say can leave this room. I have spent a long time making sure *everypony* forgot who Kuchen was, and I would hate to see all

that had work go to waste. Understand?" Twilight nodded in agreement. "Very well."

Celestia's leg moved out of the way, and Twilight caught her first glimpse of the deranged sorcerer himself. And...he looked absolutely normal. There was no disfigurements, no fanged teeth or enormous eyeballs or drooling expressions. Were she not already acquainted with his dark deeds, she would have mistaken him for just some other pony. Celestia caught her student's surprise rather quickly. "I know what you're thinking, and yes, this was drawn before he truly went insane. Although, looking back, it was rather hard to tell, even back then, that he was ever right in the head. But it was the good kind of crazy..."

Just over five hundred years ago, Canterlot's cobblestone streets were bustling with activity. Hundreds of ponies trotted and cantered down the alleys and byways of the capital city, while merchants peddled their wares in the central marketplace. The weather was the very picture of perfection, as it always was in a city that was 95% populated by unicorns. Which was wonderful, since the Summer Sun Celebration was forthcoming, giving everypony, noble and beggar alike, a reason to celebrate.

All activity in the East Quarter ceased, however, when a retinue of Royal Guards came marching down the street. And in the middle of their procession, nearly hidden beneath a shade-providing umbrella, was Princess Celestia herself. The common folk quickly bowed in reverence, something that only slightly irked the princess by this point. It was not like there was an actual purpose to her journey this day, either. She was merely wishing to see how her subjects were doing, especially with the festival coming ever closer. Granted, she could do without the umbrella, but her guards insisted that the sun she controlled was going to burn her unless she was protected at all-

"HOLD, YOU PUNY MORTALS!"

Everypony froze in midstep at the echoing, high-pitched squeal from the rooftops. There, standing on top of the local bank, was a small pink unicorn colt. On his sides sat a pair of hoofcrafted wings, obviously made of cloth and twigs. And standing next to him was a very humiliated blue pegasus colt, almost wishing he could just bury himself in a cloud and wait for this to be over.

A member of the guard's face fell in alarm. "S-Stormwind? What in Celestia's name are you doing up there?" He quickly turned to the princess. "N-No offense, your Highness."

"None taken," Celestia replied.

"He-Hello, father," said the pegasus. "Listen, Kuchen and I were..."

"WE ARE GOING TO DO THE IMPOSSIBLE!" the pink colt bellowed.

"TODAY, A UNICORN IS GOING TO PIERCE THROUGH THE HEAVENS THEMSELVES AND ASCEND TO TRUE GREATNESS!"

Stormwind rubbed his forehead with one hoof. "What did we say about the shouting?"

Kuchen turned to his partner, giving him a very annoyed glance. "I thought we went over this, Stormy. The bigger the presentation, the more ponies will watch. We want to go down in history, right?"

"As heroes, not corpses!"

"I have heard enough, boy!" Stormwind's father shouted. "Princess Celestia, with your permission, I would like to head right up there and give those two a lesson they won't forget."

The princess nodded. "Of course, Captain."

"FOOLISH PONIES! You shall bow before the might of Kuchen, the winged unicorn!"

Before Stormwind could catch him, Kuchen took a few steps back, leaned forward, and made a running gallop towards the side of the roof. The very moment his front hoof touched the last tile, he leaped forward, his hooves outstretched in an attempt to catch as much air as possible. His horn glowed with frightening intensity, his magic powering the frantically beating wings.

Unfortunately, all his little adventure served to prove was the unbreakable law of gravity. The wings tore apart mere moments after liftoff, sending the

screaming colt falling to the ground. Stromwind's father turned about in midair to catch the foal, but fortunately for him, something large managed to stop his fall, before buckling forward in the mud.

It was right about then that Kuchen realized just what pony he landed on...

"Wait...he *crashed into you?*" Twilight asked incredulously.

"Landed on my back is more like it," said Celestia. "Thankfully, he wasn't hurt. It turns out my body is the perfect cushion for mischievous little boys and their suicidal games."

"B-But what does that...?"

"You're the one who wanted to know about him."

"I-I mean, how does 'falling on the princess' equal 'becoming her student?'"

Celestia shrugged. "I was getting to that."

It didn't take long to apprehend the two colts, or to discern where the pink one lived.

The Torte Family Bakery was a long-established fixture in this neck of Canterlot. Even before the princess had arrived, there was a line stretching clear out the door for today's sale: a custard pie for one silver bit. The minute somepony saw the royal procession, however, the small bakery became the bustling center of activity for half the city.

Princess Celestia brought up the front, her coat still stained a splotchy brown from her latest encounter with dirt. Kuchen lay across her back, held down by the princess' magic. Stormwind was equally held down on his father's backside, the princess' power being great enough to restrain two little ponies at once. Both wore faces that clearly expressed their impending doom, whether it by at the hooves of their princess or their parents.

The bakery's inside was a simple affair. The wooden counter was

splintered and worn with age, not helped by the various hot pants and tins that regularly graced its top. Through a large window in the back, a pony could see the actual kitchen, where at least four other ponies were scurrying about preparing the various breads, pies, cakes, and other delicacies for the day's patrons. Out front, a teal Earth pony was busy helping the customers, striking up a friendly chat whenever possible, while a filly of about the same age as the two colts was busy cleaning a flour spill in one corner.

It didn't take long for everypony to notice Celestia. The pony behind the counter was especially aghast when he saw just whose colt was draped across her back. "Y-Your Majesty!"

"Are we speaking with Mr. Torte?" the princess said, her voice about as blunt as a wooden club.

"Y-Y-Yes?" The Earth pony fell to the floor like a sack of dried potatoes. "H-How can we help you on this most blessed day?"

The Captain stomped over to the cowering stallion. The moment the two locked eyes, their very demeanors became far harsher and more confrontational. It was obvious the two had butted heads on more than one occasion. "Your oaf of a son just assaulted Princess Celestia! And what's worse, he got my own darling boy involved with his criminal activities!"

The baker sprung back to his hooves, baring a set of rather unhygienic teeth. "Captain Ice, I would hardly consider your boy darling! In fact, my own son never got into trouble until he met that undisciplined runt of yours!"

"RUNT?! Stormwind's instructors have all praised him as the greatest young flier in Equestria! Your son, on the other hoof, is a common baker!"

"At least he will grow up to be something productive, rather than waltzing about like a pompous, overweight buffoon!"

"SILENCE!"

The entire building shuddered and rocked with Princess Celestia's voice. Everypony screamed and fell to the ground in mortal terror as a few pieces of the roof came tumbling down. Celestia placed a hoof on her mouth,

feeling rather ashamed at causing undue property damage. She had forgotten just how far the Royal Canterlot Voice had fallen into disuse the last few years. Once she was sure she wouldn't have to be rescuing everypony today, she removed her hoof and turned her attention to the two.

"Mr. Torte, earlier today, your son tried to jump from a roof." She motioned to the broken wings on Kuchen's back. "He seemed to have thought these would allow him to fly."

Torte angrily walked to his son, about as angry as a dragon finding a thief in his hoard. Kuchen tried to shrink back, but the princess' magical grip was impenetrable. "Kuchen...is this true?"

"Well...Well..." He glanced back at the princess. She, in turn, gave him a look that said if he didn't tell the truth, she was going to feed him to a manticore. "Yes. I...I thought it would work this time."

Princess Celestia raised an eyebrow at this. "What does he mean, 'This time?'"

"My layabout of a son thinks he's some kind of genius inventor. Two months ago, he tried to build a sub-something or other!"

Kuchen scoffed. "It would have worked if I kept the window closed."

"And before that, there was that spinning stick of his!"

"You mean my helicopter?"

Torte pointed a hoof right at Kuchen's eyes. "Listen here, young pony! You are a baker. Your father is a baker, and his father was a baker, and his father's mother was a baker." He pointed his raised hoof to his flank, which bore a picture of a sponge cake. "You see this cutie mark? One day, you will have one just like this on your own side. Ever since the invention of the cutie mark, every Torte has had a pastry on their side."

"W-Well, what if my special destiny does not involve bread and pudding?" Kuchen whined. "I want to be a scientist!"

"Um...do you really need us here?" asked Princess Celestia.

Torte made no move to acknowledge the princess by this point. “In the name of all that is good in Equestria, why are you unable to learn your place in this world?”

“JUST A MINUTE!”

The kitchen door came crashing open with a heavy buck. A bright pink unicorn waltzed out, her eyes burning with intense anger and rage at the Earth pony. “What’s all this I hear about our boy and baking?”

“This is none of your business, Toffee!”

“That’s my son you’re talking about, you dumb oaf! That colt knew how to read before he could walk! He’s far too smart to be stuck here running a bakery just because his father’s brain didn’t work right!”

“And just what do you have in mind for him? We can’t afford to send him to school, and even if we could, he’d just drive everypony in there bonkers!”

Finally, Princess Celestia could take no more. She let out a loud cough, immediately drawing everypony’s attention back to her. “My apologies, but we seem to have wandered into a domestic dispute. We merely wish to drop off your son.”

She turned back to the still-terrified pony on her back. “By the way, we would be most interested in seeing some of your work. Some of the experiments sound...intriguing.”

Kuchen’s eyes lit up in wonderment. Princess Celestia, the most powerful pony in Equestria and an actual goddess, had actually complimented his work. Granted, he would have been much happier if she hadn’t floated him off her back just then, right into the hooves of his waiting parents.

The Captain turned to his own, equally scared son. “And just wait until I get home tonight!” Stormwind cowered beneath his forehooves, enjoying the feeling of an untanned hide while it lasted.

Her business concluded, Princess Celestia and her entourage walked out of the bakery. The alicorn only stopped briefly at the doorway, looking back inquisitively at the still-scared colt. Perhaps something really could be

made of him...

Twilight sulked. "And that was it? He didn't have to get dragged to some big exam at eight in the morning and traumatize himself and his parents for life? He just became your student after smashing into you?"

"Oh, of course not," Celestia said with a wave of her hoof. "I was just curious about what the lad had thought up. Most of his plans were based around machines, and being quite young, most of them were either impossible or impractical at the time. But then there was something else..."

"And you say a child drew this?"

Starsign, Guildmaster of the Canterlot Astronomy Guild and great-great-great granddaughter of Keysore, stared in astonishment at the crude piece of parchment before them. A black circle was drawn on the paper, obviously representing the moon. Outside of the circle, four black specks were placed in near-perfect position in relation to the stellar objects.

Princess Celestia pointed a hoof at the four specks. "Do you see these stars here?"

"Y-Yes, those," Starsign mumbled. "So far, you have stopped every attempt to name them. And they do not subscribe to the same pattern as the rest of your night sky. We... We have been ignoring them for the last hundred years or so."

"A costly mistake," said Celestia. "If you would compare this chart to one of your own, we can assure you there is a significant difference."

Starsign quickly responded, levitating up one of the most recent charts with the four still there. Sure enough, the stars on Kuchen's drawing were closer than those on the official records. "It appears this child has made a mistake."

Celestia shook her head. "There is no mistake, I can assure you. The stars are drifting closer to the moon."

Starsign's jaw dropped. "Wh-What?"

"We just needed to confirm some things." Celestia rolled up the parchment and floated it into one of her attendant's saddlebags. "If you will excuse us, we need to finish some business."

Back in what was her sister's office, Luna paced back and forth, dictating a letter to her assistant. "And furthermore, Mayor Firebrand, I can assure you that the Equestrian Government is doing everything in our power to lower the cost of food. However, this season has been particularly rough, and until the incidents regarding Trottingham's grain supply and Fillydelphia's reconstruction have been resolved, our hooves are financially tied. We shall keep you informed of any developments in the situation.

Signed, Luna, Princess of Equestria, Steward of the Moon, and Mistress of the Heavenly--"

"Um, your Highness?" Ruby interjected. "C-Can you maybe shorten your title a little? There's only so much room on the page."

Luna sighed. "Very well. Signed, Princess Luna of Equestria."

Ruby finished her writing with a few quick strokes before wrapping the parchment together. Luna floated the royal seal off the desk and stamped the letter closed, silently prompting Ruby to throw the thing into her bags for mailing later. "Well, that is another task complete. How far along are we, attendant?"

Ruby glanced over another, unfurled scroll. On it was a long, long list of duties Luna wanted to finish before the night began. "Well, so far we've complained about children's books to the Educational Department, reviewed enlistment numbers for the military, paid an invoice for grain from the Griffon Kingdoms, and just now we've responded to the Mayor of Manehattan's concerns about food prices."

Luna smiled and nodded, silently congratulating herself on yet another small victory. Feeling more than a little smug, she turned to Lofty. "And you, child. Are you finally impressed with the outstanding work that goes on here?"

Lofty shrugged. "I guess."

Luna's mouth turned into a heavy frown. "You guess? We just answered the desperate pleas of half of Equestria. How is that unimpressive?"

"But you didn't really do anything."

"Did not do anything?" Luna could feel frustration welling up inside. "I just composed a string of official responses. Soon, the ponies that read them will enact the policy changes, which will make Equestria a nicer place to live."

Lofty was quiet for a few seconds. "But you didn't *do* anything. You just...stood there and talked."

Ruby quickly trotted to her daughter's side, giving her a gentle pat on the back with one of her hooves. "Princess Luna is, well, a princess. You see, Lofty, when you become a princess, there's a whole lot of rules that say what you can and can't do. And Equestria is a big place, so she can't be everywhere at once. That's why she asks other ponies to help her with her work." She flashed a smile at a rather miffed Luna, the kind of smile that screamed please-don't-kill-me-because-of-what-my-daughter-said.

"That...is a rather accurate statement," Luna replied. "And so you see, Lofty, that being ruler of all of Equestria is..."

Their conversation was interrupted when something began shaking underneath the floor. Before anypony could react, the royal carpet was thrown aside by an opening trap door. A lone pink pony, Pinkie Pie, emerged from the darkness below, covered in dust and cobwebs but otherwise unharmed. "Phew! I gotta tell Princess Celestia to get those things cleaned. No wonder nopony's used them in five hundred years!"

All three of the other ponies took a few steps back, eyeing the mass of pink fur with surprise and alarm. Pinkie quickly realized she was being watched, and smiled accordingly. "Oh hey, Princess Luna! I was wondering, could you tell me where Princess Celestia and Twilight are? I...I have some secrets I gotta tell them. *Secret* secrets!"

Luna took a moment to compose herself, wiping a few stray specks of dust

off her face with one fetlock before addressing her guest. "Miss Pie, I was under the impression you had left for Ponyville earlier this morning. Why are you back here? And more importantly, why are you tunneling underneath Canterlot Castle?"

"I didn't want anypony else to see me, DUH!" Pinkie said with an exaggerated gasp. "But we'll sort out the small stuff later! Right now, I need to talk to Twilight and Princess Celestia! I may have told some *teensy-weensy* lies yesterday, and-"

Luna's eyes narrowed in a flash. "Miss Dream, Lofty, leave the room." Her attendant was stunned, but nonetheless grabbed her filly by the tail and dragged her out of the office without a moment's hesitation. Once she was sure there was nopony listening through the door, Luna continued. "I assume this has something to do with your...immunity to whatever happened to the others last night?"

"Y-Yes," Pinkie sighed. "It's not like I wanted that to happen, but it's just who I am. All the Pies are immune to those spells. Well, except for the one that lets him talk through your brain, cause hey, we're all just a bunch of puppet ponies until he can return! But since that didn't work out, I guess we're immune to that, too!"

Any other pony would have been too bewildered or incensed to make heads or tails of what Pinkie Pie was rambling about. Luna, on the other hoof, could already see where the pieces were leading. "I take it then that you are a descendant of this 'Kuchen?'"

"Um...yes," Pinkie nervously answered. "That's why it's so important that I talk to them! Especially Twilight. I did something really bad to her this morning, and I have to..."

"You mean you lied to my face."

Pinkie's voice froze in its tracks. "What?"

"You said you dodged the spell when it was cast last night, but instead you were naturally immune. And furthermore, the same pony that created that spell is...in your head, you said?"

Pinkie shrank back. She had expected coldness from Celestia, but somehow Luna's gaze was a hundred times worse. "Well...yeah. I mean, every Pie knows at least a little about him. We even know a little bit about what kind of spells he used. That's the other reason I have to find them! I can help Twilight find a cure!"

Luna's eyes narrowed, as a terribly familiar echo intertwined itself with her voice. "So, you deliberately withheld evidence that could have helped my sister, lied to your princess, lied to your friends, and then broke back into the castle?"

Pinkie could feel her doom approaching, but was far too scared at this point to run. "Oh...yeah, I guess I did that. No hard feelings, right?"

A few weeks passed since the incident, and Kuchen's lot in life was no better.

He had sent a few of his designs to the palace. Most of them were scribbles, and even he knew more than a few were impossible, but Princess Celestia had asked to see them. He also didn't have Stormwind to play with anymore, ever since his father shipped him off to the Military Academy. Kuchen had thought about going there himself, but a scrawny peasant unicorn with no magic wasn't an ideal candidate for recruitment, so he found himself passed over time and again.

As the days passed, and the pain in his hind quarters ceased, Kuchen's life pretty much returned to how it always was. By day, he's help in the bakery, whether it be delivering to customers or helping one of the staff's fillies, Milky, clean up the shop. By night, he'd read through the books he "borrowed" from the local magic schools to study things such as astronomy, astrology, telekinesis, craftsponyship, and even a few courses in how to behave in social gatherings. He had no idea how you levitated your teacup was so important.

Then one night, everything changed. Kuchen and his parents were busy closing up the shop, and were almost ready to head upstairs for the night, when they heard the loud knock on the door. Torte groaned and started back to the door, shouting, "We're closed! No special orders today!"

"We believe you will have time for us, Mr. Torte."

Torte and Toffee gasped in surprise at the voice. It was the same warm, smoothing voice that had graced the bakery only a few weeks prior. Even Kuchen was shocked to hear that pony again. Gripping the handle with his mouth, Torte pulled the door open, revealing Princess Celestia and a few of her guards. Thankfully, however, Stormwind's father was nowhere to be seen.

All three ponies went straight to the bowing position. "H-How can we help you, your Majesty?" asked Toffee.

Princess Celestia took a few steps into the bakery, her guards immediately fanning out around her in case somepony came at her with some sourdough. Celestia's eyes locked onto the cowering parents. "We wish to speak to you about your son."

Even in the midst of his growing panic, Torte managed to eyeball his son with a gaze capable of peeling paint. "Wh-What did he do this time?"

"It is not a question of what he has done, but what he can do, given the proper training and motivation." The mother and father pony simply looked at each other in stunned confusion. Celestia sighed before continuing.

"What we mean to say is that your son appears to have a talent for scientific inquiry and study. However, without an actual education, we fear his natural abilities may go to waste."

Toffee's right eye twitched the princess' speech. "...We beg your pardon?"

Princess Celestia stifled an agonized groan before wandering over to the absolutely mortified colt. "Kuchen, we would like to enroll you in one of our academies in Canterlot. Work hard, and I am certain you will find your true calling within the scientific community."

The pink colt couldn't believe it. One minute he was afraid his head would be stuck on a pike outside the city gates (whatever that means), and the next he was inside Canterlot Castle, standing next to the princess herself. The guards surrounding the two were a little intimidating, flashing their

wings if Kuchen so much as glanced at Celestia, but other than that it was one of the most exciting times of his life.

The procession stopped at a large study, complete with a fireplace and everything. Books and scrolls were already piled up, ready for the eager student to look them over. The guards bowed to their monarch before closing the doors and returning to their normal duties. By the time Celestia had lit the fireplace, Kuchen was practically biting his hooves in anticipation. "Wh-What will be our first subject today?"

Princess Celestia, satisfied that the fire was officially roaring, made her way over to the great pile. "Let us begin with an assessment of your skills. We understand you have had no real school experience, so it is important that we know where the instructors and tutors are to begin with you."

Kuchen couldn't help but feel more than a little deflated by Celestia's remark. "In other words, I am too far behind."

"It is nothing to be ashamed of, Kuchen. Most ponies never even have the chance to attend a university, much less devote themselves to a course of study. We have been trying to make education easier for ponies across Equestria, but so far progress has been...slow." It would do the colt no good to hear how the aristocracy kept subverting or killing her proposals, all because they were afraid the lower classes would rise up or some nonsense like that. You could only terrify so many ponies into submission at a time, after all. "That is why we have brought you here tonight. Your year at the academy begins in a few weeks, and we must bring you up to the correct level before you begin attending."

Kuchen pawed nervously at the ground. "W-Well, when you say it like that, I guess it is all right."

Celestia gave as friendly and cheerful a smile as she could. "You are going to go far, my little pony. Just remember to work hard and keep up in your studies, and there will be no limit to what you can accomplish."

"...Wasn't that the same pep talk you gave me during my first lesson?" asked Twilight.

“Well, yes. It’s an old one, but it still works.” Celestia grinned and rolled on her back, shifting into the warm memories of Twilight’s tutelage. “I can still remember you coming to our lessons, fretting about some upcoming exam or homework assignment like it was an army of Parasprites marching down on you. Those first few weeks with Kuchen were much of the same, only with less patience and more...well...”

Twilight eyed her quiet mentor suspiciously. “Princess?”

Celestia rolled back onto her belly, looking about as shy as an introverted bookworm at a frat party. “You have to understand, Twilight Sparkle.

Things were much different back then. The language was much less formal, and the Royal Canterlot Voice was no longer the preferred way of speaking princess-to-subject, but there was still plenty of protocol to observe. Things like that have a tendency to separate oneself from the rest of the world. Perhaps that was why I threw myself into them after what happened to Luna.”

Twilight moved a hoof under the book’s cover. “Princess Celestia, it’s all right if you don’t want to continue. I’m sure if I read through enough books, I can...”

Celestia’s hoof stopped at Twilight’s lips. “No. I promised you I would tell you everything about what happened, and I will.”

The filly cleared her throat before continuing. “After a few weeks, Kuchen was well enough to start attending actual classes. He was sent to one of the best boarding schools in Canterlot, and after a few false stars, soon found his true calling...”

Kuchen didn’t walk into Celestia’s study so much as he bounced. The princess, already seated on one of the palace’s red cushions, stared at the sight in confusion. “My student, may I ask just what you are doing?”

Kuchen landed simultaneously on all four hooves, a proud grin on his face. He twisted his back side towards the princess, showing his last acquisition. “I finally have my cutie mark!”

Celestia jumped to her hooves and walked up to the colt. Sure enough, his

once-blank flank was now adorned with a cutie mark: a four-pointed star floating over a book. "That is...a very strange mark. Tell us, when did it appear?"

"During Magic class! I was sitting there, learning about Clover the Clever and the creation of the Resonating Heat library of spells, when it suddenly appeared!"

Celestia raised a dubious eyebrow. "Really? Because we have never heard of anypony earning their cutie mark through...studying."

"B-But it is the truth!" Kuchen bellowed.

Celestia wanted to push the issue further. A mare of her impossible age had heard every fib and lie ever conceived by pony minds. Unfortunately, their studies and workload came first. "Very well. No matter how you earned it, we are glad that you have finally found your special talent"

And perhaps, she thought, this will help my own plans.

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "What plans?"

Celestia was quiet for a short while, her mind weighing the pros and cons of telling her student the stupid, stupid thing she tried to do five hundred years ago. Nonetheless, the truth eventually won out. "Do you remember the prophecy of Nightmare Moon's return? What did it say about the stars?"

"That on the longest day of the thousandth year, the stars would aid in her escape."

"Do you know how those stars got there in the first place?"

Twilight shook her head. "I just thought they were part of the night sky. You know, like the other constellations and stars."

"It's not quite that simple," Celestia said. "When I first...banished my sister, I never intended for it to be permanent. I knew enough about Nightmare Moon to realize that her own power was mostly the same as Luna's, only

multiplied a hundred times over. My attempt to use the Elements failed to purify Luna, but it did weaken that monster enough that she couldn't escape. Still, I knew she would try over and over again to bring herself back to Equestria, and sooner or later she would succeed on her own. That was why I put those stars there."

Twilight's jaw almost crashed through the floor. "Y-You mean *you* released Nightmare Moon?"

"In a manner of speaking," Celestia continued. "I put the stars there, and Nightmare Moon took the bait. She used what remained of her power to draw them towards her, knowing that eventually they would be close enough for her to form them into a Focusing Circle. With that, she could easily channel all of her power, breaking free from the moon and returning to reap her revenge. What she didn't know, however, was the exactly halfway through the process, the stars would be at just the right position for somepony down here to help spring her out."

"Th-Then that was what this was about?" Twilight gasped. "That was why you made Kuchen your student? You were using him to try and free Princess Luna earlier than the prophecy had said!"

"Of course I was!" Celestia snapped. Twilight took a few steps back in alarm, and the princess quickly cooled herself down. "I knew that Nightmare Moon would not be at full strength when she returned, and even with my help she would have exhausted herself trying to break through my barriers. That would be my chance to finally destroy whatever it was that had possessed Luna, and perhaps even bring my sister back."

"And he agreed to all this?"

"Well...no," Celestia said. Her eyes drifted to the left in sheepish embarrassment. "You see, I had tried to keep what happened to Luna quiet. I knew I would be able to save her some day, but if everypony immediately connected her to Nightmare Moon, it would make things more complicated. It...obviously didn't work, especially after that spectacle when she first came back, but back then nopony knew there had ever been a Princess Luna. Nightmare Moon was a separate beast entirely, a monster that sprang up one night to gobble up foals. So, if everything worked out, I could have Luna back, we wouldn't need to find ponies that could use the

Elements, and everypony would be happy.”

Her face fell. “It was a stupid plan. I knew that the Elements of Harmony were the only way to truly have my sister back, not the jealous, twisted wreck she became before the dark powers possessed her. But you have to understand, it had nearly been five hundred years. On their own, that many years would be insubstantial, but I was so worried that I would never see Luna’s wonderful face again...”

Celestia’s door slammed open, revealing a perplexed Pinkie Pie trapped in a dark blue aura. Before Twilight could shout her friend’s name in surprise, the pony was thrust inside the room. Her captor, Princess Luna, marched in after her, closing the door on the utterly confused guards behind her.

Celestia hopped to her hooves in a rage, while Twilight Sparkle was more surprised than anything else. “Good day, little sister. I believe this pony has some things to answer for.”

“What is the meaning of this, Luna?” Celestia yelled.

“Miss Pie has admitted to concealing important information about the Youth Restoration Spell! Furthermore, she broke into the palace through a secret passageway!”

“We already know that.” Celestia motioned to the still-stunned Twilight. “In fact, I was in the middle of telling Twilight all about Kuchen.”

Luna glared at her sister. “If you knew all this, *then why did you not tell me?*”

“Because it wasn’t important at the time.”

“Um, princesseseses?” Pinkie mumbled. “Don’t want to be rude, but can you please let me go? I’ve got a lot of explainin’ to do, and I *reeeeeeeeeeeeally* don’t wanna do it while floating. Unless it’s on a balloon, ‘cause balloons make everything *AWESOME!*”

Luna sighed and powered down her horn. The aura around Pinkie dissipated, sending the pony plopping to the floor. Twilight galloped up to her friend, the same one that had terrified her only a few hours prior.

“Pinkie, are you all right?”

Pinkie looked up from the ground, her eyes locking with Twilight's. She could feel something warm welling up under her eyes, and it took all her self-control (what little of it she had to begin with) to keep from tackling the unicorn in the mother of all hugs. "H-Hello, Twilight. I-I just wanted to say, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

Twilight smiled as best she could right now. "Don't worry about it, Pinkie. I really shouldn't have gone behind your back like that. And I can understand you wanting to protect your family."

Luna glanced back at her sister. "Is there something I should know about this?"

"We were in the middle of story time before you barged in," Celestia said. "Would you like to stay, Pinkie? I think it might clear up a few things about what really happened."

Pinkie climbed back to her hooves. She didn't even dare look at the princess. "Oh, I know all about that already. I know how you walked up to my mean old ancestor and snapped his neck like a piece of celery. Then you banished everypony else in his family so you wouldn't have to be reminded of just how lousy a-"

Luna's horn began to glow, sending a not-so-subtle threat towards Pinkie. The Earth pony squirmed under her maleficent gaze. "I mean...sure, why not?"

"I...suppose I should know about this too," Luna said. "I have been wondering how a common unicorn managed to find the same magic I used as Nightmare Moon."

"Well then, everypony gather around and listen up," Celestia said. "Kuchen had been my student for a few years, and it didn't take long to figure out what his cutie mark actually meant. His brain was built for studying and research. He could read a few pages on somepony like Eclipse the Wise, and bring you back a whole research paper on every facet of how her spells worked. Which was why I needed him to help me research something..."

"You want me to look into Alicorns?"

Kuchen, now a young yearling, followed Princess Celestia down the steps of the Canterlot Library. The princess' face was solemn as they went farther and farther down, into the deepest and most forbidden sections of Equestria's oldest magic library. "That is correct, Kuchen. We wish for you to form a better understanding of our form, and how we embody the best traits of all three races."

"B-But what is there to know? You are our sun goddess, the winged unicorn, the only Alicorn to have ever lived. What else can I possibly tell you?"

The two finally reached the basement level, the stairs stopping just before a large, ancient wooden door. A pair of guards stood along both sides of the entrance, shying their eyes away from Celestia's light spell. Upon receiving a nod from their princess, the two pushed the door open, revealing what looked like an entirely separate library. Dust and debris filled every inch of the walls, while the actual books and their shelves looked like they had not been touched in hundreds of years. The only new furniture was a small table, centered just past the door.

Kuchen stared at the sight in stunned astonishment. "Princess, what is this place?"

"Not all the books ever written have made their way into circulation upstairs. This is where we store the tomes that can still have a use, but are far too dangerous to hold upstairs. There are some things ponies are just not ready for, we fear."

Kuchen didn't quite understand, but tried to keep the conversation going. "So...what am I to do?"

Celestia sighed. She didn't like having to tell anypony about this next part. "We need to know how magic affects ponies like us. As you have already surmised, we are not like normal ponies. The magic we command resembles that of unicorns, but its actual power is far different."

"And...why is this important?"

"We wish to publish your findings, to give other ponies a greater understanding of us. Perhaps then, they will not look upon us with such fear and dread." She was lying, of course; the real plan was to learn how Nightmare Moon managed to possess Luna. That way, she would know the spells to use when her prison door was opened.

Kuchen walked over to the table, setting his saddlebag full of materials onto its surface. "I understand, Princess Celestia. I will get to work right away."

The years passed, seasons changed, and Kuchen kept on working and learning.

In the time since he had been given his royal assignment, he had seemingly made tremendous progress. The forbidden little library had works dating back to the Pre-Classical Era, detailing ancient forms of magic unknown to anypony in the present day. Finding something that mentioned Celestia in any context other than "The greatest pony ever please don't kill me I have a family to feed" was another challenge, but the young stallion could feel things clicking into place.

At the same time, Celestia had allowed him to pursue his own experiments in his spare time. Before long, he had discovered both physiological and magical similarities between the races, something that greatly excited him for some reason. He was also hard at work developing his own spells, scribbling them down for inclusion in his very own spell book. Celestia was proud of his work, and that made him more than satisfied.

And then, on the very day he reached adulthood, everything began to fall apart.

"What do you mean, fall apart?" Luna asked. "It sounds to me like he was doing just fine."

"It was...more complicated than that," Celestia responded. "We were fast running out of time, and I was getting a little...anxious. And then there was Kuchen's home life. By that time, he was already married, with one

newborn foal and another on the way.”

Kuchen was seated on the ground floor of the Canterlot Library, reading up on some basic biology, when he heard the sound of heavy plate armor behind him. Before he could turn, a large, unfurry hoof clamped down on his shoulder. “Mr. Kuchen, you are under arrest.”

The pink colt spun about, only to find himself face-to-face with a blue pegasus guard. Fear soon gave way to surprise after he managed to get a good long look at the pony’s face. “Stormwind?”

“The one and only!” the pegasus shouted, eliciting a hush from the rest of the library’s patrons. “It has been far too long.”

“I had no idea you were out of school!” Kuchen exclaimed, bringing another round of hushes. “So, what are you doing here? I was sure you would be commanding your own battalion by now.”

“My father gave me a job on the palace guard. I was just trying on my armor today. Starting tomorrow, I will take up a post outside the palace kitchens.” He slapped his pink buddy on the back. “And what has been going on with you?”

“Well...I married Milky about two years ago.”

Stormwind gasped. “You mean, that same filly that worked in the bakery?”

Kuchen smiled. “Yes sir. Already have a little filly, with another foal on the way. And thanks to Princess Celestia, I have a stable job with...”

“Kuchen.”

Both ponies spun towards the library door, their eyes widening as they saw Princess Celestia enter. Everypony quickly fell to the floor as the alicorn slowly walked to her student. “Y-Yes, your Highness?”

“Kuchen, I need to talk to you at the palace. Private Stormwind, you are excused.”

Kuchen could tell something was wrong with Celestia. Any and all friendliness was gone, as was the patience she usually carried in all things. By the time the two had entered Celestia's study, he was feeling like he was just a little colt again, facing certain doom at the hooves of his ruler.

The minute the door slammed shut behind them, Celestia spun about, her eyes almost searing into Kuchen's. "You have not submitted any reports in months. We need to know what has been happening."

Kuchen gulped. "Well, your Highness, things have been much slower recently. I have looked through every single lead I can find, and I'm afraid I may be reaching a dead end. I have already given you everything I can about enchantments, curses, and how they can relate to a being like yourself. I have even included such findings in my own experiments. But there is only so much I can..."

"If you are having so much difficulty, then why are we seeing you in activities other than studying?"

Kuchen raised an inquisitive brow. "Your Highness?"

"What you are doing here is far more important than anything else in Equestria at this moment. You are delving into mysteries that have confounded ponies since our species began, and at this rate, you will never be able to give us the information we require."

"A-Are you asking me to separate myself from my family?" Kuchen said.

"Yes, and more," Celestia continued. "We are running out of time, and such...distractions will only get in the way of your progress. When we found you, we knew you would be destined for greatness. This is your chance to prove it."

Kuchen could feel something inside him snap. For the first time in his life, he felt well and truly angry at his mentor. "Do you mean to say serving you is more important than my own happiness? Your Majesty, I have done everything you have asked me to, but this is too far! I will not give up everything just so your little vanity project can be completed!"

“VANITY PROJECT?!” The entire room echoed and shook with Celestia’s voice. “You have no idea what your work is truly meant for, do you? With this, one of the greatest tragedies in Equestrian history will be undone. And you, my boy, were just gutter trash when we found you. We can easily send you back there! You have no friends, no family, nothing to distract you from your mission. DO YOU UNDERSTAND US?!”

Kuchen was silent, stunned, unable to process what he was witnessing. It was some time before he spoke again. “Understood.”

With that, he slowly walked out of the room. Celestia watched him leave, waited for the door to close, and then let out a deep breath. Now, after he had left, was the only time she could intone what she really meant to say. “I am sorry, my faithful student. I promise you, this will all be worth it once Luna is free. Just...please be patient.”

Celestia’s room was dead quiet. Twilight and Luna shifted their eyes uneasily to Pinkie, who was staring at the filly princess with unwavering certainty. Celestia herself didn’t seem particularly proud of what her past self had done. “Wait...this was all about *me*?” asked Luna.

Twilight nodded. “She wanted Kuchen to find a way to release Nightmare Moon early.”

Luna’s head flipped right back to Celestia. “Sister, of all the foalish things you have done, why would you want to do something like that?”

“I wasn’t thinking,” Celestia said quietly. “I wanted so badly to have you back that I tried to push Kuchen to work harder. But after that, it was different. My student locked himself in the library basement for a week straight, not even leaving for meals or to use the little colt’s room. When he came back, he was...different.”

Pinkie nodded. “Yep. Different’s the word for it. ‘Crazy’ and ‘Obsessed’ might work, too.”

“Anyway,” Celestia continued, “about a year later, Kuchen left the palace. He said he wanted to explore Equestria, as well as learn of the different kinds of magic used across the land. I let him go, on the condition that he

continue working on my project. He seemed glad enough to do it, so I didn't think twice about it. That is, until he stopped writing. That was when I started hearing about what he was doing. Ponies from every walk of life were reporting that an 'evil unicorn' was spreading chaos across Equestria."

"And so you hunted your wayward student down, stripped him of his magic, and banished him from Equestria," Luna finished.

Celestia shook her head sadly. "No. I made yet another stupid move and let Kuchen run free. I...I couldn't even bring myself to believe it was really him that was doing this. I had my guards split between looking for Kuchen and bringing in the evil unicorn. And then, it got worse..."

It was with great perplexion that Stormwind received Kuchen's letter. He had heard nothing from his friend in years, ever since he broke out to explore magic's secrets away from Celestia's guidance. The princess occasionally inquired if the Private knew anything about his progress, as some kind of deadline was fast approaching, but he could only tell her that things were quiet.

It was suspicious, however, how quickly Kuchen's disappearance coincided with the stories of mass magical misuse across Equestria. Ponies were disappearing under mysterious circumstances, sometimes whole villages at a time, and yet there was no sign of the perpetrator. Even attempts to follow the magic back to its source failed. Whatever was doing this was immune to even the most powerful of the Unicorn Council.

Still, neither Stormwind or Celestia could suspect Kuchen of any of this. He was a hard-working stallion, if a tad goofy in the head at times. Nothing could compel somepony like that to such wanton cruelty and evil.

And yet, just a few days ago, a letter suddenly appeared in his mailbox, addressed from Kuchen to Stormwind. With trembling hooves, the pegasus opened the envelope, revealing what looked like a normal letter:

Stormwind,

I am on the verge of something great.

I need to speak with you in person. I have something to give Princess Celestia, but I cannot leave my work unattended. Attached is a map to my house. Make sure to bring it with you.

Do not tell Celestia you are coming here. I want this to be a surprise.

**Hurry,
Kuchen**

Stormwind responded immediately, requesting leave from Canterlot under the pretense of investigating a possible clue in the Seapony case. Celestia appeared curious, even suspicious of such a request, but still allowed him to go. On his way out, he also stopped by to visit Kuchen's family. With their father missing for several years by this point, he was almost a third parent to the three kids. Milky was still holding out hope that her husband's delusions would wash away with time, even though Stormwind knew it seemed almost impossible.

His affairs around town finished, Stormwind flew off towards Equestria's countryside. It didn't take long to find the map's destination: a small cottage in the middle of a vast dirt field. Kuchen did say he wanted solitude with his work, but there wasn't a single living thing to be seen anywhere.

Kuchen was already standing outside, next to a small wooden crate. He gave a friendly smile as the pegasus landed, but even then, Stormwind could see something...off about him. His eyes were shaking unsteadily, and his voice had a small gravelly tone to it. "Thank you for coming, Stormwind. It has been far too long."

Stormwind's hooves made a heavy clomp as they touched ground. The pegasus nodded at his friend, his armor clinking and clanking as he did so. "Yes it has. I assume this has something to do with your work for the princess?"

"In a manner of speaking." He motioned to the box. "I've finished my latest batch of writings, and need them delivered to Princess Celestia on the double. I believe she will find them most interesting."

Stormwind took a few steps towards the box and reached out to open it, only to be stopped by Kuchen's own foreleg. "I implore you, do not open it. The contents are for Princess Celestia only."

"I...see." Stormwind took a few steps back, not wanting to upset his already disturbed friend. "In any case, I am certain the princess will be more than thrilled to hear of your progress. It has been some time since you were last in Canterlot." The pegasus' eyes drooped. "Milky wanted you to know she still wants you back."

"She worries too much," said Kuchen. "I am doing important work out here, things that will change the fate of Equestria forever." His face suddenly contorted as a whistling sound broke through the inside of the cottage.

"Drat! I forgot to reset that valve! W-Would you be kind enough to wait here a moment?"

The pink colt darted off into the cottage, leaving a trail of dust in his wake.

Stormwind stared at the spot his friend had just been standing on for a few more seconds before turning back to the box. His whole body trembled as insatiable curiosity worked its way through his brain. With one hoof, he slowly slid off the box's lid.

Inside sat a large tome, a perfect match for the spell books that dominated the Canterlot Library. The sight was comforting at first; after all, Kuchen's task was to study magic. It wasn't long, though, before the pegasus began to feel a growing uneasiness about the book itself. Stormwind traced a fetlock over the cover.

It felt like flesh.

"You really should not have done that."

Stormwind turned to confront the speaker, only to find his entire body suddenly paralyzed in a telekinetic field. Kuchen stood at the door of his cottage, eyeing the pegasus with glaring disapproval. "I did not wish for it to end this way. I wanted you to share this glorious dawn of a new Ponydom with me. But if you cannot obey a simple order, then what use are you to me?"

“K-K-Kuchen,” Stormwind ached out. “Wh-Why?”

Kuchen merrily trotted up to his captive prey, a gleefully twisted smile growing on his face. “If you want to accomplish something great, you need to show that you deserve your goals. And besides, you would have gotten in my way anyway, once Princess Celestia knew I know what she knows. And now, if you’ll excuse me...”

Kuchen grunted, igniting his horn even more. From inside the cottage, a large knife floated through a window and up to the two. “I do believe my work requires something extra.”

Celestia’s patience was wearing thin. Even amidst the blue daytime sky, the stars were already nearing their ideal position. If she was to free her sister, she needed Kuchen’s research right now. And yet, despite having some of the best trackers and guards in Equestria on the case, Kuchen continued to elude her. He had not even sent a letter in months. And now Captain Stormwind had taken leave for a personal matter, leaving the princess with no additional means to locate her wayward student.

She was about ready to go looking for him herself when her chamber’s door opened, revealing a unicorn servant. She bowed before the princess, her back falling slightly from the large crate she was carrying. “Your Highness, this package just arrived for you.”

Celestia stifled an urge to cheer and hop around the room in triumph. No doubt within this lay all of Kuchen’s research, and with it, five hundred years of torment would finally end. She waved her servant away, waited until she was completely alone, and opened the box.

Inside was a massive tome, the likes of which she had never seen. Curious, she traced a hoof along the cover. She recoiled almost immediately. “Is that...dragon skin?”

Next, she floated the thing out of the box and opened the book to the first page. She almost dropped it when she saw globs of something white sticking between the binding and the pages. “That...That’s real glue!”

And then she read the title page: “The Arcanus E Draconus, by Kuchen the

Uplifted.”

She blasted the book away, her breathing becoming slow and labored.

The letters were not ink, but blood. More specifically, it reminded her of dried griffon’s blood, a sight she had not seen in millennia. And then she glanced back down at the box itself. Shoved at the very bottom was a smaller package, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. On top of it sat a letter:

“Dear Celestia,

By the time you receive this, it will be too late. You made a mistake entrusting me with this knowledge, and soon, everypony in Equestria will know you as you truly are. But do not fear, I bear no real malice against you. After all, a pretender on the throne still has feelings. So, I left you a little something to remember me by. The first was my life’s work, the Arcanus E Draconus. The second is something to keep you warm at night.”

Celestia knew she shouldn’t look. She should have just hurled the whole package into the sun. Even so, she could not help but pull the string loose. The paper collapsed, revealing a blue, slightly furry blanket.

A blue, slightly furry blanket with a cutie mark...

“He...He...He sent you *what*?” Twilight gasped.

“I-If you wouldn’t mind, I do not wish to dwell on that,” Celestia said. It was obvious from the crack in her voice that she was holding back her own reaction to the event, an admirable feat considering how her filly brain kept pushing such things to the forefront. Pinkie shrank back into a corner of the room, looking rather ashamed of herself. Luna, meanwhile, felt her breakfast working its way back up her throat, and as it turned out, boiled cabbage and radishes do not taste all that good either way.

“Th-That is the most disgusting thing I have ever heard!” Luna gasped. “I mean, yes, what I did was terrible, but...but I never murdered a pony!”

“It was just then that I could not deny the truth any longer. Kuchen was the

evil unicorn everypony had been reporting. And even worse, he had left something attached to the bottom of Skywind's...remains. It was a map to his cottage. He *wanted* me to find him. So, I gathered a few of my best guards and headed out..."

The mad pony's little ramshackle cottage was a far cry from his luxurious quarters at the palace, and was even worse than the bakery Celestia had found him in as but a young colt. No trees or plants grew near the house, nor did any living thing dare set foot on the cursed soil. Even Celestia's royal guards were reluctant to approach the place, lest some terrible fiend emerge from the ground and devour them whole.

Celestia, however, was not afraid of Kuchen's dark sorcery. She had survived Discord and Nightmare Moon both, and her fallen student's powers were a far cry from those two horrors. In any case, she was certain he would do nothing to attack her, at least not before he could prove himself right.

The princess broke away from her cowardly guard, walking over the barren earth with all the menace of an executioner with an axe. She was only a few steps away from the door when she saw Kuchen's pink aura open the door. "You may enter, Princess."

Celestia froze. The cottage's interior was lit with only a few small candles, but they were enough to show her a sampling of what Kuchen had been up to. Wooden shelves were lined with skulls and bottled organs, both of pony and non-pony origin. The floor was covered with blood, grime, and other, thankfully indefinable substances. And sitting next to a mud-covered window was Kuchen himself, patiently awaiting Celestia's entrance.

The princess took a few steps inside, the door slamming shut behind her. Kuchen stared up at her, his mouth twisted into a gleeful, malicious smile. "Good evening. I hope you have not found my hospitality lacking."

"We know what you have been doing, Kuchen," said Celestia. "Whatever possessed you to drive yourself to such evil?"

"I was just working to improve everypony's lot in life," the mad pony said. He circled the princess, pointing out a few charts and graphs he had on

one of the shelves. "That research you had me do showed me connections between yourself and every other pony race. With my guidance, magic and flight will not only be the domain of a lucky few. Everypony will soon be able to become just like you, dear princess."

Celestia's eyes widened with shock. "You really think you can make anypony into something like us? Kuchen, we knew you were mad, but we never imagined you had truly lost touch with reality."

"On the contrary, I understand more than you realize." Kuchen levitated a nearby, leather-bound book. "This journal gave me the insights I needed. Another pony like myself sought the same answers, and suffered for it."

Celestia gasped as she took a good, long look at the book. It wasn't just any journal. It was Luna's journal. "Where did you find that?!"

"Do you remember that day, when you told me I wasn't allowed to have a life, because it might upset you? Well, I went back down to the basement of the Canterlot Library for a while, trying to calm down. And that's when I found this shoved behind some ancient periodicals, along with everything else you've been hiding from us. The so-called 'Mare in the Moon' wasn't just some ghost to scare foals. She was a real pony, one like myself in a way."

The princess gritted her teeth. "She was nothing like you."

Kuchen raised a hoof. "Ah ah, that is where you are wrong. The journal mentioned a means by which she could gain more power, even become a force to challenge one like yourself. That's when it hit me: Princess Celestia is a pony just like everypony else. She is certainly no goddess. By the journal's description, you do not even deserve the title of princess! You overthrew Equestria's standing ruler using those contemptible Elements of Harmony!"

"We did what we had to do," Celestia snapped. "You cannot conceive the horrors Discord inflicted upon Equestria!"

"Perhaps...or maybe you are lying about this, just like everything else." Kuchen continued to circle around the princess, her eyes never losing sight of him. "Once I realized this, I left Canterlot to discover the same

power as – what was her name – Nightmare Moon. I used what little I could find to reverse-engineer her spells, trying to figure out just what made them work. I even meditated in your old palace in the Everfree Forest, the same place you stashed the Elements of Harmony. And I succeeded. I finally figured everything out, and now, I am going to improve everypony's lot in life."

"You slaughtered entire villages!" Celestia snapped.

"I needed test subjects for my work! And besides, is that one village not happier as seaponies?"

"You murdered Private Stormwind!"

"Oh, you mean that stupid pegasus who thought he was my friend? You said it best, your Highness. I do not need friends. My purpose in life is to make you happy, nothing more. And besides, didn't he make an excellent blanket?"

"You think all THIS is making us happy?"

Kuchen feigned a wound to his ego. "Oh, my princess! Please don't tell me you've stopped caring for your subjects! It has only been five hundred years since you killed one!"

"I DID NOT KILL MY SISTER!"

Kuchen's grin quickly turned into a confused frown. "S-Sister?"

"Did your research not tell you the whole story? Nightmare Moon was my sister, Princess Luna. She was jealous not because I was more powerful, but because nopony ever appreciated her nights! And I did not kill her!"

Kuchen coughed under the severe mental strain. "T-Then where is she?"

"I attempted to use the Elements to reverse her transformation, but I was unable to wield all five by myself. When I tried to force their activation, I not only severed my connection with them, I also sent my sister into the moon itself! And just so you know, she and I were both born with wings and horns."

The mad pony's eyes began to dull as the truth weighed heavily on his shoulders. "Then...I was wrong? All those ponies I killed, my family, my best friend...they were all in vain?"

Celestia's eyes softened. Her former student began to slouch in defeat, and she could swear she saw a few small tears streak down his cheek.

"Kuchen, we...I did not wish this to happen. You have a brilliant mind, and could have been one of the greatest assets Ponydom had ever known. But I have no choice."

"Wh-What are you going to do?" he whimpered.

"I have to take you back to Canterlot to face justice. I can guarantee that your horn will be removed, and your works banned, but you will still be alive. I will do everything in my power to help you after that."

Kuchen was quiet for several minutes. And then that infernal spark returned to his eyes. "You want me...to give up everything I've worked for? No! My research has come too far to be nothing but lies!"

Celestia looked on as her student returned to his twisted self, fighting fruitlessly against the confines of her spell. "Kuchen, this is the only way."

"Just like how you banished your sister?"

Celestia's eyes narrowed. The force of her aura tightened in response to her rising anger. "I told you, I used the Elements incorrectly!"

"Another lie!" Kuchen coughed. "You wanted your sister out of the way, so you used the Elements to banish her to the moon! You wanted her to watch as you ruled what was rightfully hers!"

"I. Did. No. Such. Thing!" Celestia growled.

The aura from Celestia's telekinesis tightened, leaving the pink stallion gasping for air. "You...ruined my life...just like you ruined...hers! Everything...that has happened...is your fault!"

"SHUT UP!"

Kuchen could feel his life ebbing away. Even then, at his last moments, he managed to look Celestia straight in the eyes one last time. The pony that had taken him in, given him a life he would never have had anyway else, and then used him to her own ends. His voice was dry as he shouted one last curse. "C-Celestia...th-th-the....FRAUD!"

"SHUT! UP!"

There was a loud snap, and Kuchen's body went motionless. His eyes were rolled all the way back into his skull, while his tongue lay flapping out of his lips. The princess could feel the exact moment all life left his body, could feel his magical power fade back into the ether from which it came. Even so, Celestia threw the corpse into the wall a few times, the entire building shuttering with each slam. It wasn't until after the fifth crash that her rage lessened and reality finally took hold. The magic field levitating her student's body dissipated, sending it crashing to the floor in a heap.

Almost immediately, the very air seemed to become much lighter, as if a great weight had been lifted from the world itself. The guards, who had been sitting outside the entire time out of fear, burst through the closed door. Everypony's eyes were locked on the dead pony before them; the guards with their jaws open, and Celestia with the most stoic face possible.

"Y-Your orders, your Highness?" asked one of the pegasi.

Celestia's eyes never left the body. "We have seen enough. The candles should give us enough flame to start a fire."

"I had everything in that cottage destroyed," Celestia finished. "Kuchen's body was burnt along with nearly all of his research. All that remained was the Arcanus E Draconus and a few other works, all of which were still stored in Canterlot. I wanted to destroy those as well, but..."

"What stopped you?" asked Twilight.

The flight back to Canterlot was done in total silence. No pony dared to speak, lest they ignite Celestia's considerable wrath. The princess herself

rode in her chariot with a detached, remorseless expression, not even looking back at the smoldering remains of the hellish site Kuchen had left behind.

When the wheels of her chariot touched ground, the princess disembarked before the pegasi in front had even finished moving. She turned to her accompaniment, looking every bit the princess she was. "Gentlecolts, I want you to bring me the rest of Kuchen's family. Captain Stormwind's, too. They all need to know what has happened this night."

"A-Aye, your Highness," one pegasus coughed. The troop bowed quickly before flying off into the night. Once they were all gone, Celestia teleported herself straight to her chambers. She didn't know how much longer she could control herself.

Celestia reappeared in a flash of white light, landing right in her bedroom. Once she was sure nopony was listening on the other side of the door, she trotted over to her window and looked up at the moon.

Plastered on the lunar surface was Nightmare Moon's visage, still looking down on all of Equestria with barely-contained jealousy and wrath. The four stars, the same system Celestia herself had set up to free her sister, were almost in the optimal position. She still had a few seconds to make everything right, to undo the greatest mistake of her life and bring her sister back to Equestria proper. Kuchen's notes had told her the Elements could work better with one pony per Element, rather than one embodying all six. All she had to do was...

"No," she whispered to herself. "This is not the time. I...I cannot release you, sister."

The stars drifted on, passing the equilibrium point Celestia had waited for. The silhouette on the moon flashed in a rage, apparently having had the same plan as the princess, but without Celestia's power to aid her, the Mare in the Moon was still nothing more than an incorporeal mass of energy buried under the moon.

That left one more thing.

The Arcanus E Draconus still sat where the princess had dropped it earlier.

A few brave servants were willing to remove Stormwind's remains, and a proper burial and memorial was already in the planning stage. But the book itself was another matter. Celestia was the only pony alive and unbanished that had encountered something as disgustingly vile. The guards refused to come within ten feet of the tome, and the rest of her staff were equally terrified.

Celestia knew what she should do within moments. This thing is too dangerous to keep around. It should be destroyed. That would be the best hope for Ponykind.

And yet, curiosity took hold. She lifted the book back up, leafing through its skinned pages and bloody ink. Everything she read, from how to turn a pony into a manticore to ways to communicate with beings from beyond their own world, only cemented how absolutely dangerous this book was. There was no way she could allow this on any bookshelf.

But then somepony might stumble across the rest of her student's work. The same curiosity that drove Kuchen to learn about Nightmare Moon might possess them as well, and sooner or later history would repeat itself. She would have to destroy everything he had ever written, and just as with Princess Luna, she would have to suppress any knowledge of Kuchen's existence. She could spin the atrocities off as the works of a generic "evil unicorn," and with the passage of time, all would be forgotten.

But as for the texts, tomes, and spells Kuchen had developed...

"I had everything Kuchen worked on sealed in the basement of the Canterlot Library," Celestia finished. "I wanted to destroy them all, but I couldn't bring myself to."

Pinkie stared at Celestia incredulously. "But why? If you hated him so much for being a nasty-wasty, why didn't you just throw a nice bonfire party?" Her eyes lit up. "OF COURSE! Next Summer Sun Celebration, we're gonna have a bonfire!"

"No, Pinkie!" Twilight gasped. "Do you want to burn down half of Ponyville?"

“Hmph, party pooper,” Pinkie sulked.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about Kuchen, and how I failed him.” Celestia sniffed. “I was so obsessed with freeing Luna that I did things I should have never done. Because of that, so many lost their lives, from ponies to griffons and even dragons. I was his teacher, and I should have behaved like one. That’s why I couldn’t bring myself to destroy all his hard work, no matter how twisted it was.”

“But...what about your vendetta against the Pie Clan?” Pinkie exclaimed.

Celestia sniffled and coughed before continuing, a little bit of her old composure returning. “Well, it was a few days before my guards returned with the only member of Kuchen’s family they could find: his wife, Milky. Oh, she was a wonderful mare in her prime, so full of spunk and pizzazz. And she could bake a lemon pie that would...”

Luna raised a hoof. “Drool less, explain more.”

“A-Anyway,” Celestia said with a blush, “we found Milky hiding in an alley behind Pony Joseph’s Circular Cakes. When she was brought to me...”

Celestia couldn’t believe what had happened in just a few days.

Milky was a mess, a pony covered in who-knows-how-many-things. The pride she had once showed was gone, replaced with a blank stare that barely betrayed any life whatsoever. Even from her throne, Celestia could not help but feel mortified by the sight before her.

“Milky, we...have some bad news.”

“So, you finally went and did it, you liar!”

Celestia’s eyes snapped wide open. “Wh-What did you call us?”

Milky struggled against her chains and the guards, hoping against hope that she could free herself and gouge out Celestia’s eyes. “I know all about what happened to my husband! I know you stormed into his house and

snapped his neck! I FELT IT!"

Celestia took a few steps from her throne as the guards finished pushing the mare down. "What do you mean, felt it?"

"Did you really think he didn't know how this would end? The moment he left Canterlot, he knew he was a dead stallion! That was why he gave us a parting gift, in case somepony killed him!"

Celestia was taken aback. "Gift?"

"He lives on, in our heads! We know everything he did, every spell he ever created, every truth you tried to suppress!"

Celestia's face flushed pale as she realized what Milky was saying. "You mean...he possessed you?"

Milky nodded. "My children and I...he made sure we would never forget. One day, Kuchen the Uplifted will return in full, and he shall destroy you, Celestia the Fraud!"

Celestia looked up to the stunned guards. "Quick. I need you to start a search for Kuchen's offspring."

"You are too late!" Milky laughed. "I already sent them away, with their grandparents and uncles and aunts! They may not have the gift, but they will protect them from you and your thugs until the time is right! And then, Kuchen will be triumphant!"

Everypony turned to Pinkie. The Earth pony already knew what they were going to ask. "The Princess isn't lying. All us Pies have a little voice in the back of our heads, telling us everything about Kuchen. Well, everything that hasn't gone away, I mean."

"Gone away?" asked Twilight.

"Remember what Princess Celestia said? Kuchen was a *real* smarty-pants when it came to making stuff up, but actually having it *work*? That part he had trouble with. You see, all of his kids were Earth ponies, which meant

they couldn't use magic. And *their* kids were all Earth ponies, so the same thing happened."

"Magic Decay," Luna interjected. "A possession like what Kuchen used would have eventually worn itself down over time."

"Okay, I get that," Twilight lied. "But if Pinkie is descended from one of Kuchen's children, what about the other two?"

Celestia shrugged. "The possession spell did not work on them as well as Kuchen had intended. Within about two or three generations, they were completely normal. One even eventually moved back to Canterlot, found a music school, and has created some of the best musicians in Equestria.

But in Pinkie's family, things were different. They changed their name to the Pies and took up residence all over Equestria. They bred like rabbits, too, so by now there's a Pie or two in almost every village, town and city in Equestria."

"And that's why I couldn't tell any of you about this!" Pinkie said. "It wasn't because I liked lying, but I didn't want to lose my family!"

Celestia raised an eyebrow. "Lose your family?"

"You know, have them all put to death, their heads mounted on pikes like shish-kebobs, all that nasty stuff! I mean, you've been hunting the Pies for years, wanting to kill everypony that knew anything about Kuchen! And that's why I had to warn Twilight about what you'd do to her if she made you angry!"

Celestia was very, very quiet for a few seconds. Then came the small squeak in the back of her throat, followed by a low whimper. "Y-You actually thought I would do that?"

Pinkie was quiet. "Um...yes? I mean..."

"I-I never w-w-wanted to do that!" Celestia could feel the tears running down her cheeks, but didn't care anymore. "I never even wanted to kill Kuchen! Even after all he did, I wanted him to live! I almost raised him myself! I-I-I..."

The rest of Celestia's words were drowned out by the sound of her sobbing. Burying her face in her forelegs, she collapsed on the bed and started bawling like a wounded foal. Luna and Twilight both gave Pinkie some of the most admonishing stares in the history of Equestria, only serving to make the pink pony feel even more upset with herself. She slowly trotted to the princess, placing a foreleg across her back. "I'm sorry. I know you're not a meany or anything. It's just...everypony knows what you can..."

"And you thought I would?!" Celestia squealed. "I could just seal away Kuchen's memories, or try and cure your family! I would never have *killed* them!"

"I...I think we should leave Celestia alone for a short while," Luna said. Her voice was obviously strained with concern. "Twilight Sparkle, Miss Pie, I will see you in my chambers shortly. We have much to discuss."

Ruby and Lofty were halfway through supervising the polishing of the North Hall's suits of armor when Luna returned. "Miss Dream, I understand court is to begin in a half-hour's time."

Ruby could feel the urge to ask about where Luna had been, or who that pink pony was, but wisely chose to ignore those urges. "Why...yes, your Majesty."

The princess' eyes turned to Lofty. "I believe your child deserves a small break from palace procedures, and in any case the usual court activities would be far too boring for one such as her."

Lofty looked up in excitement. "You mean I don't have to listen to a bunch of stuffed-up snobs complain about everything you do just because you're in charge?"

Luna and Ruby traded stares; the former was accusing, the latter was apologizing. "I...do suppose that is accurate. In any case, I do think Princess Celestia could do with some cheering up. Recent events have been trying for her."

NOW Lofty's eyes really lit up. "You mean I can play with the princess

again?"

The night princess smiled at the filly, her eyes closed. "Why, yes. Miss Dream, would you be so kind as to escort your filly to my sister's bedroom? I will meet with you in the throne room shortly."

Ruby smiled and bowed, secretly happy that the day's earlier discretion was not going to lead to her standing in the unemployment line. "Of course, your Majesty! Come on, Lofty. We have some royal duties to complete!"

The mother and daughter cantered down the halls and corridors of the palace, vanishing from Luna's sight. The princess took pride in her latest work. *You've been through enough today, little sister. For now, you deserve to be happy.*