



# The Son of the Emperor

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# Chapter 1

## The Prince Imperial

*"Behind or under every great man, there is a great pony."  
-Anonymous*

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*Strong, gloved hands brush against his hair, the fingers buried in his golden locks. He opens his eyes, a happy gurgle of malformed words emanating from his mouth at the sight of his papa. Papa looks down at him, his normally stoic countenance eroding slightly at the sight of his boy. He extends his hand up to papa, struggling to reach him, but failing. Suddenly, papa's free hand is around his! He giggles even more now, happy beyond all reason to see his papa play with him. But his happy cries end as papa releases his little hand, grabbing his body and putting him stomach upwards on the soft couch. He tried his best to lift his small arms up to reach papa, but he is too far away. "Is it time to leave already?" Papa asks someone he can not see at all.*

*"Oui mon Empereur," a gruff voice answers.*

*Papa hums softly, a tune which pleases him greatly, but it does not relieve his distress over being apart from papa. Papa gives him a forlorn look, but he doesn't know why. He doesn't care as papa lowers himself right next to him, staring at him with the most loving gaze imaginable. "Little one, I am afraid it is time for me to go," Papa tells him.*

*His tiny face scowls. What did papa mean? He just wants papa to be with him some more! He tries once more to reach him, nearly flipping his body upside down stretching as far as he can. Papa smiles once more, so he smiles as well. Papa is happy again! But the smiles fade when papa stands up once more, turning away from him. He cries out again, tears filling up his eyes. Why was papa leaving? Papa looks at a man he could not see. "Tell Marie to come. I trust him more with her than anyone else right now," papa tells the strange man.*

*What? What did papa mean? He cries more and does not stop until papa scoops him up in his arms. He mutes his wailing, preferring instead to look into the blue eyes of papa. "Oh mon petit aiglon," Papa says with a sigh. "You were supposed to be the Alexander to my Phillip. But I suppose it is too late for that now. For what it is worth son, I have always loved you. Stay strong, and make me proud. If your will is strong and your mind sharp, you will not make the mistakes I have. Who knows? When history refers to us, perhaps it will be you who it calls 'the Great'." Papa laughs bitterly after that uncharacteristically, scaring him.*

*His fear grows after papa's short speech. Cries begin to well up in his throat as he is deposited from papa's warm embrace into a new one. His eyes catch the soft gaze of his mama, a beautiful woman who smiles softly at her boy despite her unease. Although he is upset away from papa he takes comfort in mama's care. But suddenly another warmth covers him. It is Papa, hugging both him and mama. It is a short hug, but for the little boy it might as well last forever. But it is over soon, and without another word Papa leaves. As he sees papa exiting the room out of the corner of his eyes, he tries once more to reach for him, but no matter how hard he struggles, he can not. "Papa, Papa!" he yells out, but Papa is already gone.*

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*-Vienna, Austria. 1820.*

"Franz, Franz, wake up!" a harsh and bitter voice shouted, breaking him out of his reverie.

As his eyes opened, Franz acidly glared at the man who interrupted his dream, his hands tightening almost instinctively. The offender had a rather pudgy face and bulky body, and Heinz hated Franz as much as Franz hated Heinz. In the few times his grandfather had permitted him to leave his residence at Schönbrunn Palace, Franz was forced to be "accompanied" by a guardian. And this time it was his least favorite guardian, Heinz. They both knew it was to keep Franz from leaving Wien, though the prince had no clue how he could escape the city. The two traversed the streets of the capital in a small carriage sitting parallel to each other. The driver steered while two earth ponies guided. Franz couldn't imagine a more dull situation. He could not leave the carriage unless Heinz approved, and experience had proved that would never happen. So his

only option was to stare miserably outside through the open slots of the carriage, only observing the sights of the beautiful Österreich capital that he could not partake.

He would scream at the injustice, but that would be “undignified behavior,” as his mother oh-so-kindly put it. Instead he contented himself to stewing his thoughts and appreciating the city's architecture. Heinz snorted at him. “What's the matter boy, don't appreciate all His Majesty has done for you?” his guardian taunted.

Franz didn't respond. This proved a bad decision, and Heinz's face twisted in anger, his cheeks flaring red. He grabbed Franz's shirt collar, yanking him right up to his face. “Listen here Prinz, your father is the reason my brother's dead, and if you think I'm going to take this shit from you, you've got the wrong idea. Got it!?” he screamed, spit flinging out of his mouth right onto Franz's face, which betrayed a hint of fear, pleasing Heinz immensely. Still, Franz was as calm as a boy his age could be. “I'm not sure grandfather would approve of you manhandling me, brute. Especially if I tell him about your repeated infractions of court conduct,” he replied, staring Heinz down with all the strength his nine year old body could afford.

Heinz balked, realizing the ramifications if Franz's grandfather found out. He pushed Franz away with careful gentleness, but stared at him hatefully. “Fine Franz. But don't you think this means you can do what you want!” Heinz shouted once more. Franz resumed gazing outside the carriage and nodded subtly. Yet Heinz noticed the prince tensed his knuckles at the name “Franz.” “*Stupid brat, at this rate I should ask for a pension increase!*” Heinz thought. While Heinz mulled over his undeserved paycheck, Franz concentrated on a single thought. “*I've got to get out of here.*”

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*Happy. That was the only accurate description of the little purple filly that moment, as she dropped the letter she just received to the ground. She raised her forehooves and clopped them against each other briefly before standing on all four hooves once more. “Mama, mama, I'm going to Canterlot to be with the Princess!” she squealed in absolute delight, looking up to her mother with happiness sparkling in her eyes.*

*Mama smiled down at her with equal pride. She embraced her daughter, putting her forehooves around her neck and holding her baby tight. "Oh my Twilight, this is great! I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time at Canterlot," Mama said.*

*Twilight took comfort in the hug until a new thought deflated her mood. "Mama, is daddy going to see me before I go?" she asked, desperation obvious in her voice.*

*Mama's hold tightened, and Twilight could hear Mama muffle a sob. "Twilight, I've told you already. Daddy's going to be gone for a while," Mama said, pain lacing her voice.*

*Twilight broke free of her mother's grasp, tears forming out of the corners of her eyes as she does not dare to look her mother in the eye. "And when is a while?" she nearly screamed. She did not need to look to see that her words stung.*

*With regret she turned to mama, seeing that she was crying as well. Cautiously, she crawled back up to mama and rekindled the embrace. After a few endless seconds of tearful sobs, mama finally answered her. "I don't know Twilight. I don't know."*

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"Get up beasts! I paid good money for you lot, and I'm not going to lose it because of some ponies are too lazy to move!" an enraged voice shouted.

Groggily opening her eyes, Twilight slackened in defeat. She and several other ponies with varying looks of defeat on them were imprisoned in a small wooden box that barely left room to move. Not that the tight shackles around their hooves allowed them any freedom. It had been this awful way for a long time. She didn't want to get up, but she knew from experience that the price of disobedience was severe. Moving despite a complete lack of enthusiasm, she hoisted herself off the ground. The other ponies followed suit with equal vigor. Once all were roused a hatch opened at the end of their prison. Harsh sunlight spilled in, nearly blinding the ponies; some had not seen the sun for days, some for weeks. A coal-black

unicorn stepped in front of the portal, glaring at the ponies with equal parts anger and apathy. "Hurry up, I have good buyers waiting for you all! Get out!" the colt barked at them.

At first they refused to move, stunned and aghast that another pony could further their suffering, but he shouted again. "Scheiße, Hans! Get the men! If they aren't coming out, we'll force them out." Recognizing the implications of that threat, the ponies hastily hurried out. They marched out of their prison single file, eyes straining against the sun. A few more ponies and about a dozen or so humans dressed in rugged outfits surrounded them. The humans held strange pike shaped weapons with muzzles at their sides. From what Twilight had learned from a few scattered comments, these were called muskets. Some were fitted with a long, deadly-looking knife on the end. Twilight dared a glance at the colt out of the corner of her eye, confused as much as when she was first captured. "*Why had ponies assisted these humans? It makes no sense, ponies are better than this, right?*" she thought. Her assumption was proven wrong when the colt caught her stare and singled her out. "You, purple one, keep your eyes straight and keep moving!"

Twilight fixed her eyes straight ahead, heart racing. She hated this place, this unknown land they had dragged her off to. Ever since she was captured, waking up aboard a ship larger than any other she had ever witnessed, her life had descended into hell. She was hungry, even starving. The paltry sustenance the slavers gave sporadically throughout the trip was not nearly enough to keep her healthy, and definitely not enough to fuel her magical talents. These men, "*no, these monsters!*" gave her no mercy. She needed to escape. To run as far as possible, all the way back to Equestria, back to her mother, no matter the cost. All Twilight needed was a chance.

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The rest of their little trip through Wien was thankfully quiet. Besides the occasional glare Heinz shot at him, everything was as calm as Franz wanted. He would've preferred exploring the city, but he took what peace he could get instead. In his life he relished such small blessings; considering the misfortune that had plagued his family, Franz thought it more than appropriate to enjoy such things. Unfortunately, the verbal cease fire was interrupted by the sudden stop of the carriage. The jolt

nearly launched Franz and Heinz out of their seats. This did not please Heinz, and his cheeks flared red again. "Goddamn driver," he seethed, before throwing a harsh look at Franz, "Stay here boy, I'm checking what's wrong with the driver." With that he opened the coach door, stomping out and slamming the door shut behind him.

Franz was now alone in the carriage, and he smiled. This was *perfect*. Franz slowly inched his way to the door Heinz exited, peeking his eyes outside. What he saw surprised and disheartened him. A tan coated pony with a bent and misshapen hind leg writhed on the street while Heinz and the driver shouted at each other. From what Franz could hear, the pony had caught his injured leg on the carriage's front wheel, stopping it violently. The carriage could not be fixed for a while and they would need a new pulling-pony. Franz did not want to know what they would do to the poor cripple; he had heard enough horror stories from the palace staff and could picture some..disturbing...scenarios.

Moving to the other side of the carriage, Franz slowly opened the hatch. Poking his head out, he saw no one nearby. "*Must have left when the carriage stopped,*" Franz concluded. No matter the reason, no one would watch him escape. With Heinz and the driver occupied, he could be free "*for who knows how long!*" Franz slid out with obvious glee and a devious smirk on his face. His feet hit the cobblestone street with a soft thump, and he began to run the opposite direction. The consequences later might be severe, but for now, Wien was his to explore!

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"Faster, faster I say!"

The command deafened the ponies and resounded across the grassy plain the sorry procession had entered. Hans, the leader of the humans, had led the mob of ponies for about an hour. The black colt was at his side and Hans held a leather whip. Twilight had already seen him apply it to a few ponies unlucky enough to slacken pace. Bloody stripes marred their flanks. A loud grumble erupted from her stomach. Twilight was desperate for any sort of food, and she would have even eaten the soiled grass if the slavers would have let her.



She glanced at the human leader, careful not to appear distracted from the march. Hans and the colt were conversing inaudibly. Twilight tried to eavesdrop and tried to get close enough to decipher their words; she understood a few like “Wien,” “Royal Navy attacks,” and “last shipment,” but she had no idea what those could mean. She was lucky that these humans spoke the same language as the Knights of the Orden der Heiligen Sonne back home in Equestria. From what she could remember it was called “Deutsch,” and she had eagerly studied it back home, often looking up books in school and learning of the Knights and their holy order.

The two stopped talking, instead keeping a watchful eye on the ponies, and Twilight averted her eyes. She wanted to scream. So far she had found no way to break the chains that bound her hooves together. She needed to think of some way to escape! Twilight glanced up at her horn briefly, but another growl from her stomach reminded her why she hadn’t dared to perform magic. She barely had the strength to move, let alone the strength to cast a spell to break her bonds.

*“Forget the consequences!”* Twilight screamed in her head. *“I don’t care at this point! If I don’t escape right now, who knows what could happen?”* She started to formulate a plan. Twilight assessed the area around the sad group. They were moving through a large grassy field, and up ahead stood a forest which casted a huge shadow, large enough to hide a pony. *“If I can use my magic to break these chains, I could hide in the forest and easily evade capture!”* For the first time in a long time, the filly felt a glimmer of hope. But she knew the other ponies couldn’t help; most looked worse off than her, their ribs jutting against their skin. Their dejected dead-eyed looks sent shivers up her spine. There were no pegasi either, *“because capturing one is easier said than done!”* In fact, now that she thought about it, she was the only unicorn here besides the slaver colt. The rest were all earth ponies. A pang of guilt struck her heart at the thought of leaving them all behind with no means to escape, but she pushed it away. No, she had to do this herself. If she got away, she could help the rest of the ponies later, but for now she needed to focus on freeing herself.

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Some might think a nine-year old walking alone through a crowded city might attract some attention, even concern for the child’s well-being

from the local populace. Not in this case. Franz wandered through the sunny streets of Wien with ease, careful not to catch the gaze of wandering adult eyes, though that wasn't exactly a hard feat. The denizens of the city seemed apathetic if not entirely clueless to his presence, even when he wasn't purposely avoiding them. Franz noticed that they acted that way to other kids walking about as well, though those children were not nearly as well-dressed or hygienic. It confused him, but he would not look a gift pony in the mouth.

About ten minutes into his little expedition a loud shout rang through the air, nearly causing Franz to jump and shocking all that heard it. It sounded very familiar to Franz. Heinz must have discovered his escape. His bulky guardian was probably going to get some soldiers to try and capture the young boy. Franz's fist tightened at that thought. *"The hell if I will let that happen!"* He still had a city to see, and he would enjoy freedom to the fullest. Continuing his trek through the city, Franz walked as fast as possible to see as much of Wien as he could while he still had time.

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A pony fell. It was a brown-coated stallion, just a regular earth pony, emaciated like the rest of the captives and it collapsed just as they entered the forest. Whether it was from exhaustion, a lack of sustenance, or just not having the will to go on, Twilight did not know. Twilight tried to spot his cutie mark, but it was against the ground. The entire procession halted when he hit the ground, everyone frightened and focused on what would happen next. Hans and the black colt walked over to the fallen pony, standing right above it. "Get up," Hans ordered.

No response. If Twilight hadn't seen the slight rise and fall of the ponies chest, she would've thought it dead. "Get up!" Hans ordered once more, delivering a harsh kick to the pony's side for sadistic emphasis. The black stallion looked at Hans disapprovingly. "He's not going any farther. Just shoot him and leave," he stated without any trace of compassion. "Fine Helmuth, I want to get out of here anyway," Hans sighed. Hans looked toward Twilight's general direction. Her heart skipped a beat, and fear pulsed through her. "*Du*," Hans pointed, "Over here."

A guard passed by Twilight, walking over to Hans and Helmuth. Twilight let out a sigh of relief. She realized that the guard was the only

human who was near her; all the other guards were either spread out near other ponies or centered in the front and back of the group. A new plan already forming in her mind, Twilight lowered her head so her horn was touching the ground. She focused all her remaining magic, using it to apply pressure to the one of her chains. A small magical glow sparked from her horn, bright, but dim enough that it was barely noticeable. Two chains bound her, one each for her fore and hind legs. She needed to be quick. As she used her magic on the back chain, the guard found his way over to the two lead slavers. Hans extended his hand to the guard. "Your gun," he flatly ordered.

Wordlessly he handed Hans his musket, stepping back to form up with the rest of the spectators. Cracks began to form around the ends of Twilight's chain as the magical pressure grew stronger. Twilight restrained a smile and caught a few glances at the scene ahead of her. Hans started to aim the musket at the pony, lining the barrel straight at its head. His finger tightened on the trigger, ready to fire, until... "You know, I don't want to waste the ammo," he admitted sheepishly. He loosened his finger and lowered the musket. "Does anyone have a bayonet?" he asked the assembled guards. Helmuth had a look of grim annoyance on his face, his impatience obvious. "Oh I'll get it!" the pony angrily replied, and a magical glow sprouted from his horn.

One of the soldiers stood shocked as his musket, one of the few with a bayonet attached, was wrenched up into the air with magical force. Its bayonet ripped off the end, and the gun fell back to the ground. The bayonet flew straight toward Hans at a dizzying speed until it impaled into the ground right in front of Hans' feet. "Danke Helmuth," Hans said gleefully, reaching down to pick it up.

*Crack!* Twilight winced as the end of the chain snapped loudly, but thankfully no one noticed; they were too focused on the horror playing out before them. Twilight moved her hind legs experimentally, barely suppressing a victory whinny at their free movement. The cuffs remained, but escape was in sight! Keeping a watchful eye on the two slave drivers, Twilight worked on the last chain, the magical glow spreading over it. Hans deftly affixed the bayonet to his musket. It took only a few seconds, but Helmuth was angry at the delay. "Hurry up Hans, we're taking big risks as is. We don't need you to waste anymore time with this nonsense!"

Hans didn't answer and instead tightened the bayonet until it at last satisfied him. "Ausgezeichnet," Hans said with satisfaction before giving Helmuth a dirty look. "Now mein freund, you know we have to be careful here. If I shoot him while we're still too close to Wien, who knows who could hear it?" He shook his head disapprovingly. "Nein, we must be cautious." Twilight silently thanked her luck for the argument; it gave her more time to break the chain. She saw cracks lacing through its metal links. "*All I need is a little more time!*" "Now!" Hans' voice rang out, "where was I?"

Twilight tried to focus solely on the chains, on the imminent possibility of freedom. She didn't want to watch such a gruesome scene, but curiosity overwhelmed her. She stared in morbid curiosity at Hans. He leveled his musket with a grunt, gripping it tightly as he pointed the bayonet down toward the fallen pony. She hoped against hope that the man wouldn't commit such a crime, that he would show mercy, but he dashed her hopes. Hans pulled the musket back a few inches and then stabbed it forward, lancing it downward. It was quick, too quick for Twilight to avert her eyes as the bayonet pierced flesh. She could barely focus on her magic as disgust rapidly boiled inside her.

*Crack!* Twilight gasped as the final chain broke under her magical assault, sliding to the ground. She wriggled her hooves around, testing their reclaimed mobility. The cuffs still circled her legs, but she decided to remove them later. "*Right now, I need to get out of here, away from those murderers!*" "Can we go now?" Helmuth asked apathetically.

Hans grunted a bit before wrenching the bayonet out of the carcass with a disgusting gurgle. "Ja, ja, we can leave," Hans answered contently. He removed a cloth from his pocket and wiped the blood off of the borrowed musket.

"Gut, now organize the ponies. We need to leave so-" Helmuth paused and turned his head.

"Was?" Hans queried.

Helmuth galloped over to a nearby patch of grass and scanned the area for a few moments before answering. "I thought I heard something for a moment, but it was no-"

*Crack!* The noise echoed throughout the forest, and everyone stared at its source. A purple unicorn stood frozen, her chains were gone, and her hoof hovered over a broken branch. "Oh dear!" Twilight whispered, her heart stopped by sheer terror.

Helmuth pointed a hoof in her direction and shouted "Get her!"

The guards ran straight for her, and Twilight fled as fast as she could through the forest. She agilely meandered through the tangled trees, running and running, the ominous rustle of footsteps right behind her. Bullets whizzed by, one whistling through her mane and shearing off a few strands of hair. "Don't shoot her you idiots, it's coming out of your pay if we lose good merchandise like that!" Hans shouted after them.

Twilight couldn't hear him. She could only run on, racing to find a way out. She fled for what felt like ages before she was jerked to a stop. A vine had wound around her hooves. The footsteps grew closer. Twilight writhed away from the vine and hid in a nearby bush, the spiked barbs and branches scratching her hide. She ignored the discomfort as best she could and stilled her breath, the furious beat of her heart throbbing in her ears. Through the shrub she spied a few men passing by. She hoped beyond hope that they would not discover her. "Wo ist das Einhorn?!" Helmuth's rage echoed through the wood as the guards searched nearby.

Twilight constrained a frightened gasp as Helmuth and an armed man stood right by her shrub. Helmuth had a look of incandescent fury on his face as the guard desperately tried to explain himself. "Herr Helmuth, das Einhorn has escaped. We can't find her at all!" Helmuth growled viciously as he turned away from the guard and fumed. Twilight caught a look at his cutie mark, and it was a strange one to say the least.



*"Some sort of stylized black eagle, with... a crown? Is it a coat of arms, or some other sort of symbol?"* Twilight had dozens of questions to ask, but she'd have to wait for the answers. She heard a furious roar from the unicorn slaver, followed by a sigh. "Fine, call off the men and return back to the caravan. If she's already reached Wien we'll never find her." And with that they left. She stayed as still as possible for several agonizing minutes. Only small gasps of breath escaped her throat. Minutes ticked by. At last, she cautiously ventured out from the hedge and found no one around. With a huge smile on her face, Twilight stood on her hind legs and gave a delighted whinny. Victory and freedom were hers at last! Back on all fours, she looked around, seeing endless forest and no signs of civilization. Twilight raised a hoof to her muzzle in bewilderment. *"Where to now?"* she thought. After some deliberation she decided her best option was to go the opposite direction of the slavers. *"Who knows, maybe I'll find this place called 'Wien?'"*

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Franz always knew Wien was a beautiful city, but he had never experienced its beauty like this! More than an hour had passed since he had left the "company" of Heinz, and he had put the time to good use. There were so many glorious sights: The Theater am Wein, The Hofburg (he was very accustomed to it) and countless other places of learning and culture. The lively air of the city, the finely dressed people traversing the streets, and the carriages led by fine horses filled Franz with awe, and he smiled in glee. But one sight alone caught his attention above the others.

He glimpsed it as he passed by a quaint local museum. Normally such places did not entice him; they offered little compared to Wien's grander academies. But this place displayed an object that captivated his interest. A glimmer of bronze shone off a statue that jutted into the street in front of the museum. Looking closer, Franz was astonished by what he saw: A bronze eagle, perched proudly atop a bronze staff.



A crowd of people clustered around the eagle, and a well-dressed gentleman in a black top hat and coat made exaggerated movements and melodramatic speeches. His audience was enthralled. Franz slid his way into the crowd, careful to keep his eyes focused on the eagle while avoiding stepping on feet. As he neared the epicenter of the tumult he could make out the words of the speaker. "Come one, come all, see a highlight of items and memorabilia from the *Grande Armée*, plundered directly from the fields of Leipzig, Smolensk, and more! See this Imperial Eagle from the Armée under the tyrant Kaiser himself!" the speaker shouted emphatically.

All around Franz the people were intrigued at this collection, but Franz was so full of rage and anger he could hardly hold in shouts of frustration. These damned Austrians, they had stolen sacred relics from his country, proud monuments of Imperial glory, and paraded them about like common junk! He was glad his father was not here to see this travesty, this insult to his nation. Turning away from such offending sights, Franz forced his way out of the assembly.

Franz didn't want to explore any more after witnessing such disrespect. Rage boiled inside of him, a cauldron of hatred and helplessness churning in his mind. His fists tightened as he stormed

further away from the sickening venue, but the sound of running footsteps broke his focus. A look behind him confirmed his worst fears: several soldiers, dressed in standard uniforms of the Kaisertum Österreich, were questioning some of the patrons gathered at the museum. Franz's heart beat wildly, and in a sudden burst of panic he set off on his original path. However at the next city block more soldiers stood on guard, and one recognized him. "Da ist Prinz Franz!" the soldier shouted frantically. "Merde!" Franz swore, glad his mother was not around to hear him.

Dashing away from the advancing soldiers, Franz dodged through the throngs of street-goers with ease. The soldiers fell behind. Franz smirked, proud of his escape, and immediately searched for places to hide during this brief respite. He discovered a decent hiding spot soon: a small alleyway between two small brick-house buildings. Retreating there, he panted heavily, and the adrenaline boost passed. "*At least there's no one else here,*" Franz thought. But a shocked gasp caught him off guard.

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It was a lonely trot through the forest. No birds sung, the plants appeared faded to a drab green instead of the colorful hues she knew back home, and despite escaping the slavers Twilight was painfully aware that she was alone. The guilt of leaving all those other ponies with them gnawed at her young heart, but she persevered. She had to. She had come too far to give in to depression now.

Passing by endless trees, Twilight began to lose hope. "*What if I never find civilization? I can't live out here on my own!*" she thought. She had no experience in wild, untamed forests like these. But luck smiled on the young mare that day. Through the gaps between trees she saw it: a city, but unlike any cities back home. This place was huge, and even from this distance she could see humans crowded and walking on streets that looked like they were made of rock. Towering buildings rivaling Equestrian castles soared high above them.

The metropolis was closer than she expected, and Twilight excitedly galloped toward it. She soon reached its outskirts. Humans and ponies cavorted and strutted around her, dressed in varying degrees of sophistication, some casting intrigued looks her way. As she passed block after block of wonderfully strange sights she avoided crowds, trying to



evade unwanted attention. Endless questions and queries nagged her, but she was far too alone and had far too little knowledge of the city to ask them.

She noticed soldiers soon into her impromptu tour of Wien. They sported the same type of weaponry as the slavers, but their plain gray uniforms appeared much more professional. They obviously sought someone, or worse, somepony. "*Could they be working for those horrible men?*" Twilight wondered with great worry. Their eyes darted back and forth across the block, questioning passerby. Before she could sneak her way out of sight again one soldier looked curiously and advanced towards her.

Normally, Twilight might attempt to react rationally to such events, as was her nature. However all the terrible events played on her countenance: slavery, murder, pursuit, flight, magic, injury, strangers, buildings, people, crowds, disorientation... she could take no more. She galloped aimlessly toward a random direction. The guards noticed this abhorrent behavior and immediately gave chase. "Stehenbleiben!" one shouted, but Twilight had escaped the range of their calls.

Twilight's heart pounded with the same intensity as when she escaped the slavers earlier that day. Bolting through the streets with as much care to avoid civilians as possible (though a few shouted at her), Twilight looked for cover. She skidded to a stop as she spied more soldiers down the street. They appeared exhausted, but she had no time to guess why. Twilight decided to make do with a nearby alley between two inconspicuous brick buildings.

For a split second Twilight felt safe and relieved. But there was a boy in the alleyway *right next to her*. An unrestrained gasp of pure shock and terror caught his attention.

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Franz wanted to scream in exasperation. Someone had found him? Already? Cursing his abysmal luck, Franz turned to get a look at his undoing. Yet he was more than surprised. Seeing nobody for a moment, a soft whimper drew his eyes downward to the most amazing sight he had ever laid eyes upon. A purple unicorn, only a filly, stared back at him with

wide eyes brimming with terror. But she relaxed after getting a better look at him.

Twilight did not know how to react, so she tried to learn what she could visually. She noticed that the boy was not much older than she. He wore a black vested shirt with gray trousers and gloves as white as snow. His curly hair was so blonde that it was practically golden, and his brown eyes carried a great intensity in them that nearly caused her to back away in awe, such was the power of his gaze.

For many tense seconds there was a silence between them, and the strange quiet filled the lonely alley. At last, the human boy moved, but not how Twilight expected. He kneeled down onto his right leg, stooping to her eye level. He beamed the biggest smile she had ever seen on a human and extended a hand in greeting. "Bonjour! J'mappelle..." the boy hesitated, "...Franz. Et toi?"

Twilight was speechless and her face went blank. She had no clue what he just said, but his hand was up and waiting, so she assumed he was trying to greet her. Nodding her head slowly, she put a hoof in his hand. She felt relieved when he grasped it and shook it up and down. Although the boy--who she assumed was called Franz based his introduction--seemed perturbed that she did not answer him, he was absolutely delighted by her hoofshake. Twilight rarely interacted with people and ponies, but something about this boy seemed magnetic. Besides, she did not want to offend him, so Twilight ventured a few words in Deutsch, timidly smiling. "Mein Name ist Twilight Sparkle, Franz."

Franz's smile slipped at hearing her speak Deutsch. It saddened him that she couldn't speak French like the palace courtiers, but his mood quickly rebounded. "Ich Freue mich, Sie kennenzulernen, Fräulein Sparkle!" Franz released her hoof gently and cast a fascinated gaze on her mane and horn, poking the tip of the horn with his finger. "Magnifique," he whispered, suddenly realizing his offensive faux pas. Twilight felt uneasy as the object of his scrutiny, and withdrew. Franz put up his hands in a sign of peace. "Je suis désolé," he apologized.

Twilight's blank look returned, and Franz cringed, remembering that she did not speak Français. He didn't mean to forget, he just wished someone would speak with him in his own tongue. Franz knew he should

apologize, as was proper. "I'm sorry, forgive me, it's just I've never seen a unicorn before," he offered in Deutsch.

Twilight's eyes widened, and her worry quickly diminished at the sudden news. "Really? There aren't any unicorns here?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

Franz was pleased that she asked a complete question. He had worried that she only knew a few fragments and words like most other ponies. "Nein, it's just they're very rare around here. Only the really important nobles or officers have them. Which family are you from?" Franz inquired, excited to learn more about this stunning unicorn.

Twilight's expression scrunched in confusion. "Family...?"

"Ja, family. Unless..." Franz gasped, a beam of excitement in his eyes. "You're a free unicorn?" Twilight slowly nodded at the impromptu question.

"Um, ja?" She replied. Franz giddily interlaced his hands at the news. "Oh this is simply fascinating! A free unicorn, here in Wien. What are the odds? Now tell me fraulein Sparkle, are you from *Equestria*?"

The mythical emphasis he gave the name of her homeland piqued her curiosity further, and she supposed there was little harm in telling him. Franz had seemed nice so far, and Twilight hypothesized he was also on the run if his constant glances toward the end of the alley were any indication. "Yes, I am," she answered bashfully before a she had an epiphany. "Wait, we're not near Equestria, are we?!"

Franz's heart clenched at the question, and the adorable little unicorn looked up at him with big pleading eyes. The desperate hope in her voice almost made Franz lie to her, but he could torment her with false hope. "I'm sorry Twilight. But... We're an ocean and more away from Equestria," Franz regretfully admitted. Tears leaked from Twilight's eyes at the news. "An, an *ocean*?" the unicorn choked out. "Well an ocean, and if you include the mer Méditerranée and where Equestria is on the Americas, you..." Franz stopped as Twilight burst into full-blown sobs.

"There there, it's okay. I'm sure mein Opa can help you!"

"Your Opa? How can he help me?"

"Simple, he's the-"

"There he is!" someone interrupted. Franz cursed under his breath as he and Twilight saw several soldiers blocking the alley exit. The commanding officer, a ruddy-faced man with grizzled lines dug into his cheeks, strode forward. He cast a disapproving look towards Franz and a curious glance towards Twilight. "Prinz Franz, I am here to escort you back to Schönbrunn Palace. The Kaiser is very displeased at your behavior" the guard stated, stone-faced.

Franz sighed in resignation. He knew he wasn't getting out of this one. He looked at Twilight briefly and noticed her cutie mark: a fine red star orbited by numerous sparkles. It seemed appropriate. Focusing again on the officer, Franz gambled an exchange. "Fine, I will go. But this unicorn will go with me," he ordered. The officer snickered at the sight before him. "*A child, not even ten, issuing commands?*" he thought. "Prinz Franz, I am under orders to bring you back with all due haste, not take back some rogue family's unicorn as well," the officer retorted.

"That is where you are wrong, officer," Franz countered. "This here is a unicorn with no patron, and as such I am taking personal responsibility for her and taking her before the Kaiser to plead my case." Both the officer and Twilight's eyes widened at that. Twilight did not expect Franz would take such an interest in her so quickly. The commander was curious. "Fine, we will take her with us. You will be responsible for her behavior though," he relented.

"Gut, officer...?"

"Müller, Hauptmann Müller,"

"Ah, sehr gut. Now, shall we be going?"

"Jawohl Prinz Franz. Follow me," Müller answered, stepping to his right to reveal a large coach at the street. Twilight looked nervously at Franz. "Herr Franz, I'm sorry if I sound a bit ungrateful, but where are we going?" "Why, home of course," Franz answered casually.

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The ride to Schönbrunn Palace bored Franz and Hauptmann Müller, but it wracked Twilight's nerves. She had little idea where they were going and she was terrified beyond belief of what fate awaited her when she arrived. There was an oppressive silence in the carriage. Twilight laid in a space next to Franz, her small body fitting easily enough. Müller sat on the other side and kept a watchful eye on the young Prince. This also confused Twilight. "*Franz is a Prince?*" she wondered. "*Does this world outside of Equestria have royalty too?*" She yearned to have her endless questions answered, but she knew she had to wait until they met this "Kaiser." "We're almost there," Müller announced, rousing Twilight and Franz from their contemplation. Daring to steal a glance of where they headed, Twilight leaned outside the open window-slot and gasped in awe.

The building, clearly this Schönbrunn Palace that Franz mentioned, was unlike anything in Canterlot. It was one of the most beautiful places she had ever seen. The palace was so large that it dominated the area with its sheer presence. The light blue sky contrasted perfectly with its white exterior, shining in the sun, and all the surrounding buildings seemed only to heighten its glory. Throngs of people and ponies walked around it to admire its beauty.

Twilight became grim as she noticed who was pulling the carriage: two earth ponies, both with dull brown manes and even duller coats. She couldn't see their cutie marks from her angle, but that seemed irrelevant. What mattered were their vacant looks, as if they were drones mindlessly pulling for the coach driver. Twilight supposed it was just one more thing about this outside world that would need explanation, so she ducked her head back into the car. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" Franz's voice interrupted her brooding. There was a hazy tone in his voice, as if the young boy thought something entirely different, but Twilight couldn't tell what. "It is." she tersely replied.

They stayed quiet after that. Neither made a peep, and only the low rumbling of the carriage rocking through the street broke the silence. The carriage headed ever closer to the palace. When they finally arrived, Müller reached out and opened a door, revealing twin rows of armed soldiers that flanked both sides of the way up to the palace. "We have

arrived, Prinz Franz. If you would be so kind, you and the young fraulein unicorn here may proceed," Müller informed the young Prince.

Franz stepped down and out of the carriage, followed by Twilight, who glanced nervously at the lines of stoic soldiers. The Prince was oblivious to her apprehension as he strutted up to the palace with practiced ease. Unsure what else she could do, Twilight followed close behind to his left. They soon approached a large wooden gate flanked by two more soldiers. Instinctively they opened the door for the boy, and he walked in without so much as a glance at them. Twilight slowed down to get a close look at the palace wall, but a dirty look from one of the guards hurried her inside. What she found was even more extravagant than the outside.

Resplendent art and other treasures adorned the gigantic chamber. Paintings depicted titanic battles, their images sketched seamlessly into their canvases. Pillars and steps carved from the finest of marble defined every wall. To Twilight, this place was beauty given architectural form. She had heard stories of the beauty of Canterlot's palaces, but those were just stories. This was real and beyond comparison to anything she had ever seen. While Twilight was enraptured and absorbed by the sublime beauty of the hall Franz paid it no mind, instead continuing his walk. He looked back and saw Twilight's amazement. He flashed an amused grin. "You might want to hurry up, the Kaiser will not be pleased if delay our audience to stare at pretty pictures!" he gently chided the young unicorn.

Twilight snapped out of her daze, blushing in embarrassment. Nodding at Franz, she trotted forward until they walked side by side. After only a few minutes and beyond several elaborate doors, they reached their destination. They paused outside this final entryway. These doors had sculpted golden handles, and a large stylized eagle banner hung above. Twilight's eyes widened at the sight, but she did not let it break her focus. Another pair of soldiers stood outside it, and each opened a door as the two walked in. They were prepared to at last meet Franz's Opa.

The Kaiser's throne room was even more opulent than the rest of the palace. Finely decorated banners of beautiful eagles decked the walls, and an ornate throne stood in the center of the very far side of the room. Next to the throne stood a brown-haired man wearing an visibly uncomfortable puffed-shirt and pants, looking as though he was struggling not to sweat. But the man on the throne was the obvious central focus. Dressed in a

white cape and undershirt with a red and gold colored cloak, he would have given off every appearance of nobility even if a positively gigantic red and gold crown did not sit atop his head.

Twilight needed no introduction to know that this was the Kaiser. Age had etched his face with lines and wrinkles, his hair grew a deathly shade of gray, and he cast a hawkish gaze upon her as she and Franz arrived before his throne. But his eyes softened once they settled on Franz. The other man, who Twilight assumed was a court aide, began speaking. "Seine Hoheit, Durchlaucht Franz, Duke of the Reichstadt, has arrived."

The Kaiser nodded sagely. "Excellent. You may leave. I wish to speak with him and his... *companion*...alone," he croaked out in definitive French. The aide acquiesced and left, leaving the three alone. After few seconds of awkward silence Franz broke out into a huge grin. "Hallo Opa!" he cheered in Deutsch with more enthusiasm than Twilight thought possible from a young boy.

While Twilight's face underwent a series of spasms at the revelation that this imposing monarch was Franz's grandfather. The Kaiser smiled at his beloved grandson's greeting, spreading his arms wide as Franz rushed up to hug him. It was such a bizarre yet heartwarming sight to see the stoic prince hug the equally stoic looking Kaiser that Twilight was at a loss for words. The two royals separated and Franz returned to Twilight's side. Pleasantries concluded, the Kaiser's smile wilted into a narrow crease, and his friendly demeanor evaporated. "Prinz Franz, you have ran away from your guardian and caused a great many troubles throughout Wien. What's more, you've abducted a family's stray unicorn right off the street! I hope you have an explanation for this, young man." He chided the young prince in Deutsch so Twilight could understand.

Franz at least had the decency to look guilty and gulped before speaking. "Mein Opa, as you know, living in the palace all the time is... grating." He selected the word carefully.

The Kaiser appeared sullen at that, but he stood firm. "Nevertheless, there is no excuse for your actions. You have endangered both yourself and this fine unicorn right here with your recklessness."

"I will admit I acted with some degree of haste," Franz conceded, "but you must understand mein Kaiser, Heinz has acted with a severe degree of harshness. He is rude and has threatened me already, so I left in fear for my safety." "*That's somewhat true,*" he thought.

The Kaiser's eyebrows rose in disbelief, and a nasty look cast over his gaze. "Is that so...?" he croaked out slowly.

Franz almost pitied Heinz. Threatening a royal family member anywhere in Europe was strictly verboten, but Kaiser Francis II was notoriously protective of his family. Twilight was as befuddled as ever and shrank behind Franz while she tried to decipher the foreign terms the royals spoke. "If you would allow me to speak mein Kaiser, I would vouch for the boy," a new voice offered. A man entered from the far corner of the chamber. He wore a finely-embroidered black shirt and tan trousers that contrasted nicely with his graying hair, and he appeared as royal and elegant as the two other humans in the room. Franz's eyes narrowed at his presence. Twilight eyed him curiosity, wondering who the young stranger could be. The Kaiser greeted him with a dispassionately stern look. "Prinz und Kanzler von Metternich," he stated, "you may speak."

Von Metternich coughed into his right hand and began. "As you know sire, the palace funds have been depleted as of late. Someone has been skimming off the top of our treasury, and I believe Heinz is responsible. My sources are very reliable. If he is to blame, it would not be so hard to believe Heinz would grow bold enough to threaten the young Duke of the Reichstadt."

The Kaiser harrumphed haughtily. "Be sure to inform the Gendarmerie about Heinz's infractions. Be sure to punish him... *justly,*" the Kaiser commanded with the fury of an irked Emperor and a loving grandfather.

"As you wish, mein Kaiser" von Metternich triumphantly said.

Franz hoped this would be the end of inquiry, but alas, it was for naught. The Kaiser turned his eye to him once more. "Now Franz, you shall not be punished for this, but I warn you not to try a stunt like this again. I understand being confined to the palace is tedious, and as such I would be glad to give you more concessions to explore in repayment for



Heinz's inappropriate behavior.” Franz relaxed, but the Kaiser continued his spiel. “However, there is still the manner of the young unicorn in your company.”

Twilight nearly squeaked from her nervousness as she felt three sets of eyes lay on her. Franz turned toward her; there was nowhere to hide. Franz sighed lowly, giving his grandfather a conciliatory look. “Mein Kaiser, nein, mein Opa, this is Fräulein Twilight Sparkle. She is a unicorn... from *Equestria*” he added, knowing he would hook both their attentions.

Both his Opa and von Metternich's eyes widened at the news. “Equestria?” the Kaiser asked in excited disbelief.

“Ja, ask her yourself” Franz said.

Twilight flinched under the Kaiser's unrelenting hawkish gaze. A few moments passed as she shyly hung her head until the Kaiser spoke once more. “Speak little one, or do you not know Deutsch?”

Swayed by his gentle inquiry, Twilight looked up at the Emperor timidly. “Ja Herr Kaiser” she shakily answered.

Both the Kaiser and von Metternich smiled at her apparent intelligence, though the Kaiser was a bit peeved at her informal greeting. He would let it slide for now though. “Ausgezeichnet,” the Kaiser grandiosely exclaimed, “now, would you mind a few questions little one?” Twilight shook her head slowly. The Kaiser smiled once more. “Gut. So, my little pony, if you are from Equestria, how do you understand Deutsch?” he asked politely.

The simple question assuaged more of Twilight's worry; the Kaiser seemed to seek only simple knowledge. And Twilight relished knowledge, whether through learning or teaching it. “Oh, that's simple. In Equestria the Knights teach most ponies Deutsch,” Twilight answered with more confidence. Her words echoed through the room while everyone else tried to decipher their meaning.

Von Metternich asked the question on all of their minds. “The Knights?”

Twilight nodded happily, glad to explain. "Ja, the Knights of the Orden der Heiligen Sonne. They serve the Princess by guarding the borders and helping teach ponies. They have amazing armor, and are super smart and..." Twilight gushed for a few more seconds.

"I am afraid that is enough, Twilight" the Kaiser cut her off. A deep red blush spread across Twilight's face, and she mumbled an apology. "While I have a suitable explanation for that now, I'm afraid that leaves one unanswered concern: how did you enter our land?"

Twilight's head lowered as she remembered the awful events of the past few weeks. The assault of the caravan to Canterlot, awakening to find herself aboard a ship greater than any of her books described, and finally arriving at this strange new land. "I... I was captured, Kaiser. By awful people, people that wanted to sell me and other ponies into service, and, and, ponies and humans were both doing it and I was so terrified but I managed to escape and my mom's probably scared to death about where I am and-"

"That is enough, Fräulein Sparkle," Metternich interrupted. The purple unicorn shed several tears onto the cold floor.

The Kaiser sympathized with her plight, and closed his eyes for a few moments in contemplation before laying them on her once more. "Fraulein Sparkle, I apologize profusely for the behavior of these despicable men. I will ensure they will meet all due justice. Tell me, you escaped from them outside the gates of Wien itself, correct?" At her muffled "yes" he continued, "Gut. I will order several squads of men sent out immediately. Until then, I should ask you and my grandson to leave the room for a few moments while I and Klemens discuss these matters."

Twilight did not answer, the sadness and terror of the day finally overwhelming her. More tears flowed, and Franz stood awkwardly beside her, unsure how to soothe the sobbing unicorn. "Franz, if you would" the Kaiser told the young prince, pointing towards the door.

Franz obeyed, if only to aid Twilight. He patted her mane in a comforting gesture. Her sniffles subsided slightly, and she looked up to him. Franz frowned as her absolutely devastated face bored into his heart,

filling him with a surge of guilt. "Twilight, can you come with me?" he asked, motioning towards the door.

Sobbing less, Twilight gasped out a pathetic 'yes' that saddened the young prince further. Franz walked towards the door, and she sullenly followed. After they left the room, they stood outside the door, miserable and silent. Twilight's cried freely while the young prince waited awkwardly for his grandfather to beckon them back in. Franz tried to think of something to say to comfort Twilight, but only abrupt and personal comments came to mind. He had just met the unicorn, yet she had been entwined in his "home" "*if it can be called that!*" Franz judged that she must have come from fine stock and station. She seemed quite learned as well, and he wondered to what extent. But here she was a foreigner, and she barely knew how the outside world functioned. He mused about what his grandfather was going to do with her, "*hopefully nothing drastic...*" he thought. She intrigued him.

Her sobs continued. Franz began to grow annoyed, but he calmed himself, knowing that it paid well to be patient in such situations. He had a thought; lowering himself down to Twilight's eye level once more, he raised her head to meet his eyes with his hand. "Hey Twilight, I have an idea. Do you want to know what's going on in there?" he asked.

Twilight's quieted as the offer wormed its way into her head. "What, but how?" she asked, curiosity replacing sadness. Franz noticed her slight streaks of both pink and a darker shade of purple in her mane. "*Fascinating.*" He continued. "Here, just put your ear against the door, like this."

Twilight mimicked him. She could hear muffled speech, only a few clear words escaping the room. "Teutons...Royal Navy...still on Helena..." Twilight had no clue who was speaking or what context the words had. Her questions redoubled, but this served as a fine distraction from her woes. She looked at the marble floor quizzically. "What are they talking about? What do they mean by Teutons and Navies and Helena?" she whispered to Franz.

Franz removed his ear from the door, offering just a shrug in response. Twilight noticed that Franz's twitched at the word "Helena." She

wondered why it affected him so negatively, but she decided not to press the young prince.

“Franz, Twilight, you two may enter,” the voice of the Kaiser rang out.

Straightening up, all prim and proper, Franz entered again, followed shortly by Twilight. Metternich stood on the Kaiser's right side, and both wore stern expressions. The two youths paused in front of the adults, and looked up expectantly. The Kaiser spoke. “Twilight Sparkle, we know you are from Equestria, yet we are unable to return you to your home. Thus, we have come up with a solution.”

*“I’m not going home.”* Twilight wanted to spiral down in her sorrow, but she managed to keep composure.

The Kaiser continued. “For now and for the immediate future, you shall be a resident of the palace at my own patronage. You will be given lodgings, food, and whatever else you desire within reason at my own expense as payment for the wrongs done to you. Is this acceptable?”

Twilight was astonished by his generous offer. Just a few weeks ago she headed toward a palace in Canterlot, but now she was offered a chance to stay at another in Wien. She desperately wanted to go back home, but how? Contemplating for a few moments, Twilight finally answered. “I... I would be immensely grateful, Herr Kaiser.”

“Gut!” the Kaiser replied. Metternich appeared apathetic to the whole situation, but Franz was pleased that the little filly would be staying. He hoped it would liven up the place, though he wasn't sure if she understood all the consequences of accepting. “Franz,” the Kaiser called out. Franz stood proud as he and his grandfather shared a look. “Seeing as we have no available stables for Fräulein Sparkle at the moment, would you care to house her for a select amount of time?”

He couldn't finish before Franz answered with a joyous “Gerne!”

The Kaiser smiled. “Excellent. Now, you may leave and show her to your room. Food will be brought to you both shortly. Until then, I suggest you study, young prinz,” he advised. Franz nodded in delight and spoke to Twilight. “Come on, I'll show you my room!”

“Um, alright?” Twilight answered uneasily.

They immediately left, recklessly dashing into the palatial halls. Franz led Twilight through a series of fanciful corridors, each garnished with opulent décor. She wondered why they didn't find anyone else in the hallways. “Surely there are other people who live here?” she asked. “They're out at the moment,” Franz answered cryptically. Franz's door blended in among the countless others in the palace. It was only distinguished by its darker brown tone.

Entering his room, Twilight loosed a squeal at what she found. “Books!” she exclaimed. There were shelves full of them all around the room, and many of the numerous tomes looked ancient. However the vast space was otherwise sparse, save for a few paintings. She thought that this room alone could encompass half her house back in Equestria. It was fit for a royal; the bed was finely embellished with lush pillows, and velvet curtains hung across a sole window. “You like it?” Franz asked cautiously.

“It's amazing! The fact that you have a library in your room is just, well, awesome!” Twilight gushed in awe. Franz raised an eyebrow at her. Realization dawned, and he laughed. “Oh, this isn't a library! These are just the books that my family lent me or I acquired,” he explained. “The library is on the other side of the palace. I can show you tomorrow if you want.”

Twilight bounced in pure excitement, shocking Franz with her newfound joy. He considered how the unicorn dripped with depression just a few minutes earlier. Twilight pressed farther on into the room, inspecting everything with a sharp and mindful gaze. A few books titles interested her above the others. Franz noticed, and hummed in appreciation. “A fan of Voltaire?” he asked.

Twilight shook her head. “No, I've never heard of these authors back home. There are no books like these, and they all look amazing!”

“Well you'll certainly have something to spend your time, won't you?” Franz joked.

Twilight chuckled. It wasn't exactly a funny joke, but Franz was obviously trying to make her feel better about this situation, and she appreciated it. Twilight was struck by a beautifully detailed painting hanging above his bed. The other paintings before looked nice, but the artist clearly gave this canvas special attention. But what really captured her attention was the man in the focus of the painting. Although it was just a portrait, shivers danced down her spine at the look of the man. His exuding power and wisdom took her off guard. While she studied the painting, Franz wanted to sate some of his rampant curiosity about what Twilight had said earlier, and he proceeded to browse through his selection of books. He hummed quietly and picked out a "random" volume, flipping through the pages until he found out the desired passage.

"A certain splinter group of the Knights Teuton were rumored to have embarked on a mad journey across the Atlantic at the behest of the new Hochmeister at the time, who spoke of a dream in which the Sun itself asked him to. A group of about 200 Knights and an unknown number of other persons boarded a large fleet of transports, who left for the Atlantic, and were never heard from again" he read, whispering the words to himself.

Franz fell deep into thought at that news. Could these be the Knights Twilight described? *"It would certainly explain her excellent knowledge of Deutsch,"* but it seemed too far-fetched, more like the Iliad than serious historical truth. He wanted to ask Twilight more, but a pressing query from the unicorn derailed the thought. "Who... who is that?" she asked, still staring at the portrait.



Franz stood next to her and smiled haughty. "That, fraulein Sparkle, is my father."

"Ooh," Twilight mouthed out, "That's your dad? Where is he now?"

Franz's hands clenched into fists, and he hung his head. "Gone."

Twilight didn't need to hear more. "I'm sorry Franz," she whispered. She hugged his leg. Franz was a bit startled by the sudden contact, but accepted it tacitly. The warmth and contact of another living being was something he lacked on most days, and he appreciated her gesture. "Twilight, I'd like you to know something," he spoke out suddenly.

"What Franz?"

"My name...it is not Franz."

"It's... It's not? Then why does everyone call you Franz?"

"Because of my father," he spat out in anger. "They feared him. They drove him out of his position, took him from me, and placed me in this palace." He looked at her with eyes filled with a flame of passion Twilight knew a boy of his youth ought not have. "Understand me now Twilight, this palace may be my home, and a beautiful one at that, but it is a gilded cage."

A place designed to hold me in, and keep me in this country 'til the day I die. I may be young, but I know this much."

Every word Franz spoke was enunciated by ever-growing aimless rage. Twilight feared what Franz might do next, but he calmed. "They call me Franz, but that is only to hide my true name, to hide the legacy of my father. The name 'Franz' is not my own, only a replacement until the day I can reclaim what is mine." Twilight interjected, steering the conversation into safer waters. "But, what is your real name then?"

Franz's mouth twitched in anticipation, eager to speak the name which his father had bequeathed him. "My name is Napoléon François Joseph Charles Bonaparte." He paused for a moment, relishing in its sound, and continued. "But you may call me Charles in private. Franz must still be used in public. As of now I do not have the right or honor to use the first part of my name."

Twilight was not sure what to say, so she decided something to be positive and genuine. "It's a very nice name."

Charles eyed her weirdly before bursting out into a loud guffaw. "Oh ma petite pouliche, I believe this is going to be the start of a very beautiful friendship."



# Chapter 2

## The Gilded Cage

*"Whatever misanthropists may say, ingrates and the perverse are exceptions in the human species."*

*-Napoléon Bonaparte*

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*It was beautiful. The people, throngs of them in fact, cheering for him as if he were a God, and there by his side, his father, standing by his side with the proudest grin on his face! Soldiers of la Garde Impériale flanked the halls like stone sentinels of old, carrying Imperial tri-colour standards that gave the chapel the appropriate Imperial imagery a coronation deserved. It was everything he ever dreamed and more. Soon a courtier rose, holding in his hands a lush pillow with the crown of Charlemagne itself upon it! Slowly yet steadily the courtier walked, keeping a firm grip on the pillow as he walked up the aisle towards Charles himself. Finally he reached the son of the Emperor, and when he finally stopped in front of Charles, the room became silent in anticipation. Within a moment his father, dressed in full imperial regalia, took the crown, raising it above his head and touching it to his slowly graying hair. Then, he turned to his son, who knelt to the floor before him almost reverently.*

*You could practically hear the anticipation of the crowd build up like a volcanic attack, before Napoléon slowly laid the crown on top of his head. Feeling the full weight of his father's crown finally being passed down to him, Charles rose steadily, his robes and crown only slightly impeding his progress. When he fully rose, the people broke out into thunderous applause once more, as their new Emperor stood before them, Imperial robe and crown practically glowing in the chapel they stood in, as his father shouted triumphantly to the crowd "Vive la France! Vive l'Empire! Vive l'Empereur Napoléon III!"*

*As the crowd began to repeat the chant of his father again and again, Charles felt as if everything was finally falling into place. He could practically explode from joy! Finally, he had achieved his destiny, he had made his father proud! All he ever wanted was in his grasp at last. But*

*suddenly, it all ground to a halt. The cheering stopped, the guards dropped their standards, and the air of patriotism and glory that had saturated the air not moments ago had vanished in an instant. And just like that, it was all gone. The chapel, the people, everything was gone. Now, it was only him and his father, in a black abyss that seemed to go on forever. He turned to his father, desperate for an answer. "Father, what's going on?" he desperately pleaded.*

*His father did not answer him. Instead he gave him a piercing glare, one that struck hard against his very soul. Feeling his body quickly begin to drop in heat from whatever effect the endless abyss had on him, he asked again. "Father, please, answer me!"*

*This time his father did react, but in the very way he did not want. He turned from him, giving his son only a contemptuous glare as his parting gift. "Who would want to serve you, a man who cares not but for his own desires above that of his people?"*

*"What, what are you talking about? Father, answer me!" Charles demanded.*

*No response came however. Instead, he turned away once and forever more. Charles tried in vain to follow him, to grab him, catch up, anything! But it was a pointless gesture. He was getting farther. And farther. And farther. Till he was naught but a speck in the distance. Standing there, alone in the endless black pit, Charles screamed. But there was no response. Only his own screams, echoing in the darkness.*

Charles' eyes opened wide in pure shock, the morning greeting him with a fresh burst of sunlight straight through his window that sent a lance of pain straight to his eyes. He groggily refused to get up for a few moments, instead making sure he was where he was the moment he fell asleep. Still nine, still in Wien, still in his bed. Good. That was the fifth dream in the last few weeks, and that was the worst one yet. Charles sighed into his pillow, taking comfort in the soft sheets and fluffy pillows surrounding him, but it was a temporary comfort at best. He had to get up sooner or later, he knew this. Mustering his resolve, Charles rose out of bed slowly, his plain gray nightclothes still on from the night before. Shaking off the effects of a good night's sleep, he achingly tried to recall what happened the previous day. He had traversed the capital, he had ventured off for a while on his own and...

“Oh yes.” It all came back to him. The intriguing unicorn, Twilight, had come to the palace with him. They talked to the Kaiser, they went to his very own room, and ate a most excellent meal shortly thereafter. Charles filled up on delicious ham, and a large plate of alfalfa grass was laid out for Twilight. The prince had wondered how hungry the young unicorn must have been; she lunged into the food with such a wild passion. She even ignored the fine selection (in his opinion) of novels and dramas despite her previous excitement. He generously shared some of his Apfelstrudel with her once she was done, and Twilight appreciated that greatly. He didn't dare share the ham though; he knew enough about ponies to understand their aversion to eating meat. The two spent an hour or so talking some more, but soon they found themselves asleep.

Rousing himself off the bed and back into the moment, Charles scanned his room to see just where Twilight was. He remembered offering her some bed sheets--he had more than enough--but he couldn't find them or her. What he did find was a large structure made from his books right in the middle of the floor, stacked up to resemble a medieval castle. Stepping down to the floor, Charles approached it curiously, wondering just how in the world it had been erected. Charles found a large gap in the books that revealed a small purple unicorn covered in blankets and her head laying on an open text.

Uncertainty clouded his resolve. He had an urge to 'd'aww!' for reasons he could not fathom. “*Should I wake her up?*” he wondered. He quickly turned towards the window, catching the rays of light again in his face. The sun was just barely rising over the horizon; time was stuck between day and night. “*Twilight.*” A slight twitch at a corner of his lip betrayed his amusement. Charles decided it would probably be best to wake her, but he took one last moment to appreciate how the innocent beauty of the young unicorn. He always had a fascination with ponies, ever since his youngest days at *Tuileries Palais*. He supposed that was why he was so interested by her to begin with. Unicorns were rare after all, only living with nobles or serving with a select few lucky officers in the army.

Gently nudging Twilight's shoulder with his hand, Charles watched uneasily as Twilight only grumbled and mumbled under her breath in response, the pony rolling over to her side as much as she was able in the cramped book-fort. Words seemed to be the only weapon Charles had left, so he took a breath and spoke lowly “Twilight, wake up!”

Twilight shook a bit more, a few of her errant mumbles passing through Charles' ear. "You're the best dad..." slipped through her muzzle, paralyzing Charles for a moment. From the almost reverent way she said it, she seemed to care for her father deeply. Charles could sympathize greatly. It had been so long since he had seen him though, years in fact. His father was the greatest man he ever knew, but he was jailed and under arrest on some remote island off the coast of Africa. The very thought of it caused his blood to boil in seething rage. He was a prisoner for life once more after he had dared to defy the *Ancien Régimes* of Europe again and again!

Charles sighed morosely, lost in thoughts of his father and trying to cling desperately to the few memories with him that remained. He wondered if Twilight had similar fond memories of her father. If she was awake, he might have been tempted to ask her about him, let alone about Equestria as a whole, but such intrusions into her past were too rude and uncouth. They had only just met the day before.

Twilight stirred, her eyes briefly fluttering like butterfly wings. Charles brushed aside his idle thoughts. "*Now is the time for the present, not the past.*" Twilight's eyes fully opened and focused for a moment on the young human. "Fr-Charles?" she whispered.

Charles nodded. "The same."

Her head lifted an inch, taking a glum look around the small fort she constructed. "I'm... I'm still here" she choked out.

Charles bit his lip. Thankfully the unicorn wasn't tearing up like yesterday, but he could practically feel the depression oozing off of her. Now that she had time to fully appreciate the situation and understand the inevitability of never returning to her home, grief overtook her. Thinking quickly, Charles decided to distract her from her woe while answering a question of his at the same time. "Why are these books piled up around you?" he asked.

Twilight didn't respond for a moment, as if she didn't understand what he meant, but realization dawned on her quickly. A luminescent blush appeared on her cheeks. "Oh, this. Well... I was scared that those men were going to come back to me during the night. So I made a place to hide myself in as long as I needed to" she answered nervously.

The young prince nodded in understanding. He had no idea what horrors the young unicorn had endured, yet he was sympathetic to her plight all the same. And he had to admit, the sheer, he struggled for a moment to find the word, *innocence* of the act touched him for God knows what reason. "Oh, and I can read whatever I want while I'm in here too!" Twilight added.

That made Charles laugh. Not a loud laugh, or something bitter and sarcastic, but a small laugh of genuine mirth. "True, that does add to the charm of it I suppose," Charles coyly suggested, "But I'm afraid it's time to leave such an oasis now."

'Mkay' Twilight mumbled, attempting to escape the confines of her blankets now. However, one of her hoofs got tangled in the blanket, and as Twilight struggled to wriggle it out, she accidentally kicked one of the books supporting the makeshift fort up, causing it to fall all over her. Charles was a tad worried when nothing came out of now haphazard pile of books, until the little unicorn's head popped right out of the pile, staring right at him with an embarrassed grin. "I'm okay!" she assured him.

Charles let his amusement slip through once more as a grin. "Ah mon petite pouliche, rest assured I had no worries about your safety. You look like you're more than capable of handling yourself" he complimented.

Any rebuke Twilight might have come up with was stunned by the impromptu praise. Looking away from the human child, Twilight almost stammered out a 'thank you'. Charles was more than a bit confused at the behavior, but once more he decided not to press. As the saying goes, patience was a virtue. Charles spoke once more. "Now, I'm going to get dressed, and clean up the books. Just wait somewhere in here till I'm done, and then..." he paused, putting a hand on his chin in contemplation as he realized he had no idea what to do after that. Of course he could do his usual routine and go to his tutor, but what would Twilight do? He didn't think she would be content with just sitting in here sifting through books all day...

That thought got caught up in his head as several of the books suddenly floated up in the air, a glowing field surrounding them, as if they were held up by... "Magic" Charles whispered almost reverently.

Twilight, who's horn now glowed a bright pink, smiled at him. "Yep! I'm sorry about causing such a mess, so I'll just clean this up. I used to do this all the time back home after long nights..." she trailed off after that.

Charles was speechless as the books proceeded to twirl in the air, flying around wildly before being deposited in neat ordered columns on the empty shelves. The room was quiet for a few moments more before Charles clapped, a giddy expression on his face now. "Tres bien!" he shouted, "That was fantastic Twilight! The unicorns at court can barely even attempt to lift a few books, let alone all the ones in here. How did you do it?" he inquired.

Twilight was more concerned with what Charles had unintentionally told her than his question. "Wait, what do you mean most unicorns can't do magic like that? This is pretty simple stuff back home" she questioned.

"What? Magic like this has been gone for centuries now. I mean, it's been practically wiped out from," Charles paused for a few moments as clarity dawned on him, "*Europe.*"

"Huh?"

Charles did not answer her, instead going up to a shelf and browsing through his selection once more, until finding his choice. "Here's where it's explained" Charles said, laying the book on the ground and opening it.

Twilight sat on her haunches next to him as he flipped through pages, until he reached his destination. After a few seconds, Charles let out an 'aha!' as he found the page he was looking for. "Here," he began, pointing at a certain paragraph, "It explains it well enough."

Looking down at the book, Twilight began to read where Charles was pointing at, and very soon she was nearly in shock over what she saw.

*Ever since the foundation of the Imperium Romanum Sancrum Nationis Germanicæ (a.k.a Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation) under Emperor Charlemagne himself was created, and later solidified by the crowning of Otto I as King of Germany, the positions of unicorns and how they fit in compared to the other equine races grew even more controversial. Compared to the earth ponies, who served as dutiful cavalry and workhorses for the nations of Europe, and the pegasi, who kept mostly to themselves in the clouds above, unicorns and their magic have been a source of controversy and discontent throughout the realm of Christendom.*

*While the word of Christ himself contains no mention of unicorn magic along with the nature of pony in relation to man, his disciples had numerous opinions on the matter expressed in their various books. Mathew called for restrictions on unicorn magic lest they grow too powerful, while others like Luke called for the banning of all magic, claiming it was unnatural and against the very nature of God himself. This reflected the rather conflicted nature the Church had in regards to dealing with ponies, which was a reason for the numerous branches of Christianity later on, due to the indefatigable nature of the Holy See on matters concerning ponies. Many also claimed that magic was the downfall of the Roman Empire, due to it's increasing reliance on unicorn shock riders as it slipped further and further into decay. The Romans themselves had varying policies both for and against all equine races (Emperor Caligula to this day still being regarded as either a madman or a true hero among the brony community for entrusting the position of Consul to a trusted pony).*

*So it was that the Catholic nations of Europe convened on the matter in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. The discussion was immensely heated, the most notable event being the Pope himself hitting the King of France on the head with the Papal Staff, but eventually a consensus was reached. Unicorns would be limited to select magics they could use, with most of the more powerful spells being banned from being practiced or taught, and any written knowledge of them burned. The remnant pagan nations, mostly found within the realm of the Lithuanians and Cumans, kept to using unicorn magic against their foes, helping to ensure their independence. However, strong resistance from nations like Poland and the order of the Teutonic Knights subdued them in time or brought them over to the true faith.*

*To this day, most advanced magics are practically unknown save a few hermits who managed to escape centuries' worth of Inquisitioners and Armies of the state. Even when the Reformation broke out, the general attitude towards magic was one of the few things all the varying sects of Christianity agreed on (Orthodoxy in Russia taking it even further, threatening stiff fines and 'harsh' punishment for unicorns who dare to create anything more than a spark in public.)*

Half the words and terms used here were things Twilight had less than half an idea about, though she assumed they were nations or areas of some sort. What she did get though, was that magic was not nearly as advanced here as it was back home. She was worried as to just how bad it was here, but the general amazement Charles gave her at (what was to her

at least) a very simple display gave her a very grim idea. "That clear it up?" Charles asked her.

"Sort of..." Twilight replied. She got the general idea, she could fill in the blanks the more she stayed here she supposed.

A sudden knock at the door interrupted their research. "Franz, it's time for your studies. Get dressed and hurry up" a timid female voice said from behind the door.

"Coming," he answered.

Before Twilight could inquire more as to what was going on, Charles went up a the single large dresser in the room, pulling a cupboard out and taking out a plain black shirt and a pair of equally black trousers. He moved to take his shirt off, before shooting a look at Twilight. "Um, do you mind... looking away?" he nervously said.

Twilight scrunched her face up in confusion for a moment, before letting loose a loud 'oh!' in understanding. She forgot humans had their own concepts of modesty. She spent so little time around them back home that it was easy for her to forget. Nodding her head towards Charles, Twilight buried her head in the book once more, drawing up new questions and theories based on the text there.

*The New World also still contains a few sects of Aztecs who worship the fictional Sun Goddess of Ponies, Celestia, mainly the Aztec people.*

*Attempts by scientists to link the Aztec mythology to the Celestian and Lunanite religious sects have also prompted numerous theories regarding their origins. Speaking of Celestia, nothing needs to be said of the isolated land of Equestria that is not already common knowledge to the masses.*

*The Orient has also had experiences similar to ours, most unicorn magic there being little above Europe's own. The Ottoman Empire, while not kind towards unicorn practitioners, are noticeably more lax than their European counterparts, mostly due to the rather strict support for justice for ponies emphasized by the prophet Muhammad himself.*

*Regardless, the days of magic sweeping away armies by the thousands is long gone. Gunpowder has replaced magic, as is the wont of man, and humanity has proven it's natural place as the benevolent hand that must keep the reigns over ponykind, lest they veer off the course of the true*



*path, and become a pit of decay and isolation as Equestria has become to the Americas.*

The Americas? Charles referenced that place before, and now this book was saying Equestria was located there. In all her studies, Twilight had come across few maps, the general isolation of Equestria providing little mapping of the outside world. If possible, she really needed to ask Charles to get a map, or something to just understand how far she was away from home.

“Done” Charles spoke, knocking Twilight from her plots and plans.

Twilight gazed up and was surprised to see how Charles looked now. In his tight buttoned black shirt and trousers with strapped sleek shoes, Charles stood stiff and with his chest puffed out proudly. At this sight, Twilight did something completely unexpected to the young prince. She started giggling like crazy. Charles' eyebrow twitched rapidly as Twilight began rolling on the floor in thrills of laughter. “Why are you laughing!?” he growled out through gritted teeth.

Twilight managed to subside her laughs for a few moments, wiping a hoof over her eye to wipe away fake tears. “Oh, it's just you look so silly! I mean, you're just a kid, and it looks like you're trying to be a soldier” she explained through random bursts of giggles.

Charles resisted the urge to glare at her. Instead, he only sighed in annoyance. “Looking like a soldier is what I intended. I have to practice looking like a soldier if I can ever hope to be one, and that's before learning all the proper military history and strategy!” he rebuked heavily.

The amusement of the purple unicorn truly ended now, as only confusion filled her up now (an annoying trend to her as of late). “What, you want to be a soldier?”

“Because being a soldier is my destiny. I have to learn war if I'm ever going to accomplish anything in my most unlucky life” Charles explained as if that was all he needed to say.

“But that's stupid!” Twilight countered, “War's not necessary at all. You don't need to learn how to wage it to accomplish your goals.”

“What do you know of my goals? Of my life, which you seem to assume so much about!” Charles questioned her, walking steadily closer to

her with a look that wasn't angry, but demanding, "What do you know of this world besides the bits I have deemed to tell you? Of how the world works besides the peaceful little bubble you seem to live in!"

Words failed to escape Twilight's mouth as she realized he was right, if not on the topic of war but definitely on the rest of what Charles accused her of. Twilight stared at the floor below her for a moment in silence, contemplating what he said, before finally coming up with a decent response. "You're right, I don't know anything about you, or the world actually" she admitted meekly.

Charles gave her a semi-smug grin, assured of his victory in terms of wit, before Twilight spoke out again. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to just sit here and stay ignorant! If I'm going to be here for Celestia knows how long, I'm going to learn what I can about it, and you" she defiantly declared, giving him a look, as if to dare him into refuting her.

The stare Charles gave her after that was rather mixed in terms of look. He stared her right in the eye, but with something new in his countenance now. *'Is that... respect?'* Twilight wondered, not at all used to intuitively knowing pony looks, let alone humans. But Twilight could only guess, and that seemed to be the closest response she could posit it to. Charles broke the look suddenly, forming a smooth grin that Twilight couldn't see. "It looks like you're going to be a more worthy pony-" no, that word didn't fit at all to him "a worthy *intellect* to live with after all, Twilight Sparkle," he whispered to himself.

Turning back to Twilight once more, Charles didn't give any hint that he was grinning just moments before, instead giving her a bored glance. "If you so wish Twilight. Until then, I, no, we should head out."

"We?" Twilight asked, defiance forgotten temporarily.

Charles' mouth twitched, giving just the barest hint of a grin now. "Indeed. How else are you going to learn anything if you don't study with me?" he gave a mock sigh "I'm sure my tutors would be willing to teach you along with me, or at least let you listen along. Most of them are among the more pony-friendly crowd anyway, unlike the reactionary rule that dominates Österreich."

Twilight had no idea how to respond for a moment, before finally matching Charles grin with one of her own. "That sounds just great" she answered.

Interrupting what was proving to be a rather defining moment between the two, a new series of knocks pounded at the door, much harsher then before. "Prinz Franz, I demand you get out here right now and stop doing god knows what with that unicorn! Your studying cannot begin *if you are not actually there!*" a man with a thick German accent clearly raged.

Both of the young children jumped up in the air from the sudden verbal assault. Charles mumbled under his breath something about 'accursed rabid counts' before offering Twilight a conciliatory sheepish smile. "I'm afraid that's my tutor. Would you like to confront the grouch first, or should I?" he only half-joked.

Another surge of harsh knocking proceeded to shake Twilight of any thought of even accepting such an offer, so she quickly shook her head. Sighing, Charles proceeded to the door, opening it to reveal a tall black-haired man in a worn looking uniform, looking sternly down at the young prince. "Prinz Franz, what in the name of the Lord took you so long?" he demanded to know.

Charles looked up at him with an unbending gaze. "Simple. The unicorn, Fraulein Sparkle here," he motioned towards Twilight, "needed help getting up. I was helping her" he answered easily.

The man looked unbelieving for a moment, but soon decided to just go with it. "Fine, it's late anyway. Come on" he turned, moving down the hall now.

Charles smiled, glad that his studies would begin anew. As he began to walk the path the man took, he turned to Twilight. "Coming?" he asked in the form of a dare.

"You betcha" she replied.

Her strange vernacular caused some raised brows from the humans, but they decided to ignore it. Within a few minutes of following the tall man, Charles and Twilight found themselves in a small sparsely decorated room with a few seats located around a large desk populated by a plethora of books. Twilight was visibly piqued at more books to read, and Charles had

a pleasant smile on his face as well. The man proceeded to take a seat at the desk, shuffling through his books. "Now Prinz Franz, your studies for today will include..."the man stopped speaking as he noticed the small unicorn standing next to Charles.

"What is *she* doing here?" he asked, exasperated already.

Charles seemed to have no idea what he meant for a moment, till he noticed the man was looking at Twilight. "Oh, her. I didn't think she'd like to stay in my room without much to do besides read, so I offered her to come with me. It'd spice up the learning experience quite a bit I'd say" he explained thoroughly.

The man digested this news before sighing a bit. He should have known Franz would've tried something like this. Ever since he heard the reports of a purple unicorn living in Franz's room yesterday, he knew Franz would be all over her. The boy had a fascination with ponies, and numerous opinions even at his young age. Unfortunately, these opinions were contrary to the ruling regimes. The man could sympathize with Franz's view, especially considering the good amount of ponies he served over, but he couldn't just allow Franz to do something like this so easily. Even if he did speak of it in such a sensible manner. He cursed the boy for learning how to speak so well, especially at his age. It was plain unnatural that it was.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that Franz. For one, it's blatantly illegal, and two, the unicorn can probably not even count to ten!" he countered.

"What?!" Twilight shouted incredulously, finally entering the conversation, "I learned that before I learned to stand on my own hooves! And I don't know what" she paused temporarily, almost afraid to say what she wanted to say, but pressed on "*stupid* laws you have here, but I want to learn, and that's that!"

All the bravery suddenly left her as the man's piercing gaze fell fully on her, examining her as if she was an open cadaver. A sudden clapping surprised them both though. "Bravissimo!" Charles clapped excitedly.

Twilight blushed once more, but did a mock bow to Charles. "Danke" she said.

The man watched the glee at his students reaction to the unicorns little outburst, and sighed once more. He was going to get sacked for this,

he was assured, but he didn't know what else to do. "Fine, she may stay and learn here, but! Only if you take a renewed interest in your mathematics Your Highness. You've been slacking as of late, and if you want any future in the military you're going to need math!" he offered.

Charles considered this. In all honesty, he was much more worried about the possibility of not being in the military than not getting Twilight to work with him, but the offer was more than good enough for him. Nodding to himself, Charles gave the man a triumphant smile. "Perfekte."

Sighing once more, the man muttered "Damn kids" before giving Twilight another look "Just to let you know, I'm Count Mortiz von Dietrichstein, I've served in the army for more than a few years, and while in this class you will learn what I teach, and learn it without complaint. I have led men with more iron in them than you could ever hope to have, and ponies with a stronger will than the most incomparable of leaders. So do not think you can order me around. Alright?" the Count said.

"Alright" she answered.

"Fine. Now, let's begin..."

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A couple of hours later, and Twilight found herself in a position similar to where she usually found herself back home. Her muzzle buried deep within a book, ignoring the rest of the world save the idle comments of her teacher. Seeing as Count von Dietrichstein did not expect two students, let alone a pony, he had Charles and Twilight share books. Currently they were reading something called *The Republic*. The Count spoke fondly of the author of the book, Plato, and she found it intriguing to say the least. During her time in Canterlot, she found a variety of texts that imitated some aspects found in here, most from influential ponies or previous Hochmeisters of the Orden, but they had nothing on this! She absorbed every word the text had to offer her, almost salivating at the bounty of thinking and ideas it gave her.

Charles sat right next to her, his face as far into the book as her own. They were so close, their faces almost touched, but neither noticed this. The classics always interested him, and he only recently began his studies into them. Twilight seemed as interested as he was, which pleased him greatly. He needed someone to discuss the ideas of old with after all, and

he doubted his teachers or the other spoiled princes at court would be so knowledgeable. He went through the words with ease, and asked Twilight whether she was ready to proceed to a different page or not. Thankfully, they both kept up at about the same pace, so he did not have to deal with the boredom of waiting for her to keep up. Just another reason for him to like the unicorn he supposed.

Sitting at his desk still, Count Mortiz eyed the two of them warily while he prepared a few notes on his desk with a quill pen. Paying careful attention to the way Twilight was absorbed into the book, and the small body motions Franz would make upon reading a certain passage, he wrote all these notes down. This procedure continued since they started, with the only interruption being the Count randomly asking the two where they were in the book, and asking them questions depending on that. "Are you two done with the prologue yet?" he began.

Charles flipped a page for him and Twilight before answering. "We got that done 15 minutes ago."

The Count harrumphed. "And what do you think of their discussion on justice?"

Twilight chimed in now. "It's rather practical. Plato really seems to get into the idea of the necessity of justice and such. This is really fascinating."

Charles nodded in agreement. The Count did not speak after that, instead grumbling to himself once more. Listening to those kids was like listening to a trained philosopher, yet they were hardly over nine by the looks of them! He knew people in their fifties who barely got this into philosophy and reading, yet the two of them couldn't seem to get enough. The precociousness of the two astounded him. It was enough to make a man drink. Which he already did of course, but still.

Another hour passed by without alarm. The two children proceeded even further into the book, blazing through the pages at a speed that would make college students particularly envious. Finally, the Count spoke out "That's it, it's time for your next lesson. Hauptmann de Foresti should arrive shortly-"

A loud crash outside the room signaled that he was already there. Just a moment afterward, the door opened to reveal the Hauptmann himself, a thin-built wiry man, with a slick curved mustache and beady

black eyes. He brushed off his gray cloak and grinned sheepishly at the Count. "Sorry sir, slipped a bit on the floor! I'm fine though, in case you were wondering whether I was okay or not" he babbled out with an accent markedly different than the Counts.

"I wasn't, Hauptmann" the Count replied in a deadpan manner.

That didn't seem to damper de Foresti in the slightest though as he turned to Charles, only giving a slight raise of his brow when he spotted Twilight, both of them still buried in their book. He got the general idea of what was going on here, and was intrigued to say the least. "Now Prinz Franz, it's time to proceed. If you and, if she wishes, the young unicorn here would follow me..." he gestured towards the door.

While Count von Dietrichstein grumbled some more about annoying princes and weirdly colored unicorns, Charles acquiesced to the request and proceeded to leave, but not before noticing Twilight was still deep into reading *The Republic*. Suppressing a small chuckle of amusement, and a slight degree of sympathy as he wanted to read more of Socrates himself, Charles poked Twilight's shoulder. This caused the small filly to jump up in shock, her head moving in different directions. "What, who, where?" she chattered wildly.

"I'm afraid mon petite pouliche that it's time to leave for now. Don't worry, this is just the first lesson after all. You're lucky actually, we were just starting classics today" he informed her.

"Oh, okay. So where are we headed now?" she sheepishly asked.

Charles gave her a wicked grin that both creeped her out and made her all the more curious. "Language training, and then, the best thing! Strategy and tactics!" he could barely finish his words before he was practically shaking in excitement.

"Um, that's... fine" Twilight responded. Learning new languages seemed more than fine after all, but the second part of his statement... well it made her worried.

"Let's go then!" Charles finished, before running off wildly to the door.

Hauptmann de Foresti and Count von Dietrichstein, who were watching the two during this little exchange, had markedly different reactions. Foresti was amused and, although he would never admit this,

was a little touched by the enthusiasm the two had for learning. Von Moritz, meanwhile, was wondering where in the name of God was his wine. He swore he was not paid enough for this sometimes.

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The party of three proceeded through Schönbrunn mundanely with de Foresti at the head, with the two children of wildly different species and equally different backgrounds following quietly behind him. Twilight, while still sneaking glances at all the magnificent architecture and such around the palace, was notably less interested than before. To her, paintings and such were nice and all, but the opportunity to learn, that was worth far more to her. *'Perhaps Charles shares the same mindset?'* she wondered. Suddenly the silence was broken by de Foresti opening up a conversation. "So Prinz, I see you've met a nice little friend there" he began innocently.

Both Charles and Twilight had raised brows at that, before giving each other quick glances. Friends? They hardly knew each other for a day, yet he assumed they were friends? To Twilight, friends just weren't a necessity, the knowledge gained from learning offering a far more tempting palate to her tastes. Despite the best efforts of her mother and the Princess back home, she rarely came out of her shell. But Charles... she had to admit, his desire for knowledge and his obviously strong character despite his youth intrigued and fascinated her.

Charles was the same, while he deliberately cut himself off from most ties to the other youth in the court of the *Kaisertum Österreich* (Though admittedly there weren't many to begin with besides him), the purple unicorn genius tempted him to get closer to her. Technically, she was the closest thing he had to a friend, and vice versa. He wasn't sure if that was pathetic or not. "And?" Charles finally replied.

De Foresti shrugged innocuously. "Oh nothing. Just wondering, considering how you two were so close when studying under Count von Moritz..." he trailed off.

"Well seeing as the guy's such a grouch, we have to stick together and all" Twilight answered him.

"Oh he's not that bad. He's just a tad... old-fashioned" de Foresti said.

"I'd say he's more addled" Twilight whispered to Charles, earning a laugh from him.



The crew stayed silent after that, the only sound being the gentle clacking of de Foresti's boots and Twilight's hooves against the smooth floor. It was only when they passed by a series of clear glass windows. After taking a small look as to what lay beyond them, Charles let out an excited gasp, as he went right up to a window and pressed himself against it, desperate to look outside. Twilight eyed him weirdly for a moment, while de Foresti was both amused and delighted by his pupils interest. "What's going on?" Twilight asked.

De Foresti went up to the window himself, taking a peek before nodding to himself. "Simple. The soldiers are doing their routines."

Wanting to see just what was going on, Twilight went next to Charles, who kept an entirely focused look on what was going on outside. And what she found were soldiers. Dozens of them, dressed in black and tan uniforms, lined up in rows with the weapons the guards the palace guard used, standing straight each with a focused expression. Another soldier stood in front of them all, shouting orders so loud they could hear it all the way up to where they were two stories up. Within moments the soldiers moved in sync, as if they were one single conglomerate mind and marched to the beat of a lone drummer in the front.

All throughout this, Charles had the most serene expression his face. The beat of the drum was so addictive to him he almost marched in place right where he was, and the soldiers, how he wanted to march with them! Even Twilight was caught up in the bewitching spell of such a forceful show, nearly wishing she could watch them move in such order some more. It looked, neigh it was, *divine*! It... worried her, how beautiful it looked. De Foresti simply nodded before interrupting the twos pair's "day dreaming. "Yep, good man their officer is. Can't remember his name, but I think he served in *Preußen*. I thought about visiting their sometime, but sadly, ich bin kein Berliner!" he chortled a bit at his own joke.

He forced himself away from the window after that, causing the two children to look up at him with watchful eyes. "Now, we were headed somewhere I believe."

Charles and Twilight both found themselves blushing in embarrassment. "Es tut mir leid Hauptmann" Twilight apologized, with Charles following soon afterward with an apology of his own.

The Hauptmann however brushed aside their apologies with a wave of his hand. "It is no problem. I'm a man who can appreciate it when children are happy about something." *'Though I wish it was in something actually for children instead of the banalities of war'*; he silently added.

"Now then, we were headed somewhere, were we not?" de Foresti asked the two, continuing before the two could answer "Right we were. Let'sa go!" he clapped wildly.

Charles and Twilight shared a look. "Is he always like this?" Twilight questioned.

A shrug answered her. "When he wants to be" Charles told her.

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Soon the three found themselves in a library. This was no ordinary library though. Twilight was practically floored when de Foresti opened the huge oak doors leading inside the room, revealing swaths of books lining the room from end to end on countless shelves. It was almost enough to make her cry from sheer bliss. Sure the Royal Library in Canterlot was fairly sized, but this, this was-

"Truly fit for an Empire" Charles finished for her.

Indeed it was. The Hauptmann slid through the tables and chairs that dotted the floor of the library with ease, before stopping at a particularly large one. Pulling out a few chairs for them to sit at, de Foresti motioned for the two to sit with him. Charles and Twilight did so, but not before Charles had to poke Twilight, as she was still lost in how huge the place was. That earned him a glare, but it was worth it if the amused smile on his face was any indication. De Foresti only sighed ruefully at this. *'Such is youth. Better they hold on to it while it lasts'* he waxed poetically.

Seeing the two finally sit themselves down (Twilight climbing up on her seat before sitting on her haunches), de Foresti spoke to Twilight first. "Now Fraulein..."

"Sparkle. Twilight Sparkle" she happily told him.

The Hauptmann nodded. "Gut. Now, I have studied this with Charles here a few times now, but seeing as you are an... *unexpected* newcomer, I'm going to have to ask you this for my own benefit here. Do you know Italian?" he asked.

“... What's Italian?” Twilight asked after an awkward pause.

Charles almost laughed at what seemed to him a joke, before remembering that she actually did not know what in the world Italian was. By God, the unicorn probably didn't even know what country she was in right now actually! De Foresti simply nodded, before clasping his hands together in consideration. “Hmm, that is a problem indeed. Quick question Twilight, do you what country we're in right now?” a slow and hesitant shake of her head confirmed his fears, “As I thought. Here, I have an idea” he stopped to raise himself off from his chair, before heading to one of the shelves.

Both children watched the Hauptmann carefully as he pulled out a book seemingly at random, before heading back to the two and laying it down on the table, flipping through pages speedily. “Practically living here has some benefits you see” de Foresti said, his eyes not leaving the pages.

Finally his eyes fell on a certain page containing a large map. “Ah, excellent, here's a recent map! Made just this year in fact, and it's accurate enough for our purposes.”



Twilight and Charles leaned over the table to catch a glimpse of it, with de Foresti rotating the book to face them. Charles, having already understood the general topography of Europe, only took a quick glance

before returning to his seat. But Twilight found herself enthralled by the existence of actual context on where she was to Equestria. Hauptmann de Foresti then pointed to the yellow blob in the center of the map. “As you can see, we are here in *Kaisertum Österreich* (a.k.a the Austrian Empire)

led by the man you met just today, Kaiser Francis II. We're currently in the capital of the Empire, Wien (Vienna) around the center of Österreich.

Twilight absorbed this information with ease, soon proceeding to her next question. "And what's this country?" she asked, pointing to the gigantic green blob encompassing nearly half the map.

"Russia" both de Foresti and Charles answered at once, though Charles spoke with a hint of bitterness in his tone that made her a bit worried.

"And this one? And that one right there! And..."

And so it continued. For nearly a half an hour Twilight questioned and questioned the the teacher, who she learned from her questioning was from the northern region of this place called 'Italy', or in his own words '*Brescia to be specific*', and she happily accepted all the information he could offer her. Whether on the political systems of the most nations of Europe (She seemed a bit baffled at the ideas of positions above Prince or Princess, something which lead to a near face-palm from Charles) or the history of how they came to be, she inquired about them all. It was only till the reached that green blob on the left of the map that Charles interrupted her, having a strangely soft expression on his face. "If you would Twilight, I would like to speak with you about France on my own time."

Twilight almost couldn't believe it, but she could swear that Charles was *pleading* for her to accept the offer. Such a strange action from him caused her some concern, but she accepted when she saw the blatant want on his face. "Um, okay?" she tacitly accepted.

Hauptmann de Foresti eyed this with a hint of worry, though it quickly vanished from his face. Instead he put up a charming smile for the two, and began to speak once more. "Now you two, I'm afraid we dilly-dallied for too long. If you would, I would like to begin the Italian lessons now."

The two of them quickly quieted themselves. The opportunity to learn a new language seemed positively exciting to Twilight, knowing it would be necessary for the greater world she so recently found herself in. "Now Charles, we've already began your lessons a few weeks ago, so Twilight will have to catch up quickly" de Foresti noted.

Twilight was astounded that de Foresti so casually called Franz/Charles well, *Charles*. No one else had called him that yet, and the

apparent non-reaction from Charles told her this was a common thing, in private at least. It just added another layer to the growing mystery that was the nine-year old to her. But she was a pony of smarts, and she would unravel him. In time though. But for now, she gathered her bravery, so recently brought back after confrontation with Count von Dietrichstein, and she gave the Hauptmann a confident grin. "I'm a fast learner" she told him.

Her answer pleased both Charles and de Foresti, the latter cracking his knuckles in anticipation. "Let's begin then" he creepily declared.

For some odd reason, Twilight felt a shiver dance down her spine. From the wary look Charles gave de Foresti, she knew he had the same thing happen to him once as well. *'What have I gotten myself into?'* she worried.

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Despite his rather 'eccentric' behavior, de Foresti was a relentless teacher. After introducing Twilight to a few words, consonants, and pronunciations in the Italian language, he ruthlessly grilled her on them. Charles sought to cut short an attempted complaint from her about the difficulty of it by saying he had to go through the same thing, and without help from another learner at that! Speaking of Charles, all the while de Foresti was having Charles read through a book on relatively advanced Italian, a fact that privately astounded de Foresti since he had only just started a few weeks ago with the boy. And at the general ease Twilight seemed to be getting the introduction save a few mishaps, she seemed to be doing just as good, if not better. *'Children, so eager to grow up and escape their little seats!'* he mused.

So they read more, as they were wont to do, and while it was hard, Twilight loved learning as always, this new language in particular. The sound of it, so unique and oddly fantastical, made her want to learn to speak it, to write it, etc. Despite his harsh teaching style, de Foresti was in perpetual states of both joy and worry about his latest student. Joy for her craving to learn and his desire to fill it, and worry for how his employers would react to this. He was sure that Count von Dietrichstein had already had a report ready and submitted to Kanzler Metternich as he was thinking this very thought, and he would soon once their activities for the day were over, as they had done so every day since Charles had arrived in the palace those long five years ago.

The Hauptmann's lessons ended not long after that. In just an hour exactly, de Foresti received a note from an aide who walked into the library like a phantom, stalking up to him. Wordlessly, de Foresti accepted the note, opening it and reading it with slit eyes. Twilight and Charles kept a lone eye on both their work and another on him as he scanned it carefully. Soon though he crunched it up in his hands, putting the wad in his coat pocket. "It seems as if we will have to postpone our most excellent meeting here today. I shall be back shortly though, be assured!" he hastily babbled out, before retreating to the exit.

Both nine year-olds gave each other strange looks of befuddlement as silence reigned after the Hauptmann left. "Uh, what was that?" Twilight entreated.

"Most likely off to give his report to the Kaiser and his snake" Charles practically spat the last word out.

"His snake?"

"Kanzler von Metternich" Charles elaborated.

She guessed he was being metaphorical (Or was it a simile? It was a while since she read that up) but she wanted to know why. "And just how is he a snake?"

"Simple. He coils himself around mein Opa, whispering into his ear suggestions that are practically orders, spewing lies to dignitaries and ambassadors, and keeping me locked in here till I can waste away in the confines of this gilded cage!" Charles ranted, his hands twisted into tight fists now.

Twilight saw that she was entering a delicate topic here, and decided to proceed carefully. "It doesn't seem so bad here though. I mean, you've got teachers, and you're a prince too-"

"Prince? Ha! A title that gave me to mold me into a proper Austrian Prinz and toady, instead of a the heir to my fathers will and ambition," he said the words with a disgusted inflection, "Back home, I was the son of the greatest man who ever lived, my father the *L'Empereur Napoléon* himself, a man who had all of Europe on him at once and won! Now, I am practically a prisoner in the court of my mother's side of the family, allowed only to study what they allow me to learn, to act how I am supposed to act! Sure mein Opa, the Kaiser himself treats me with kindness, but it is only out of

pity, Metternich's words poisoning whatever other sympathy he has for me!"

Charles finally stopped to collect his breath. "This... this isn't my home. Do you know where my home is Twilight?" he asked her slowly, his voice nearly cracking on the last syllable of her name.

A cautious shake of her head answered him. "France, Twilight. France. A land with green fields, and the most joyous people you can imagine. With stunning architecture, with beautiful scenery! Oh what I would give to experience the warm summer's nights with my father once more..."

Twilight had no idea what to say. Charles had seemingly lost all will to continue, slumping in his chair and staring ruefully at the ceiling. There was a very awkward quiet that had descended upon them, and neither knew what to do now. That is, until an idea came to Twilight's mind. Charles was stunned to find the little filly jump off her seat and walk right up to his own, giving him a fearsome (at least to her) look. "Look, you said yesterday that we're both prisoners here now, right?" she said with great gusto.

His eyes narrowed down at her. "That is correct."

"Then we can't fall into despair! I remember my teacher, the Princess Celestia herself, telling me once that no matter what happens, we can't let our fears bring us down! That we have to keep going, no matter what gets in our way, to achieve our dreams. And your dream is to get out of here someday, right?"

"... You're right. And that's your dream now too, right?" Charles asked, catching on.

"Right! So we've got to stick together then, and work together till the day where we can go out to the world, when you can return to France, and I can go back home!"

Twilight froze up right after that long-winded speech, embarrassed and more than a bit surprised that she had made a speech like that. Charles however, had fire come to his eyes as a renewed determination set within him. If he was ever going to get out of here, it'd be in time, but until then, he had more to learn, centuries of knowledge for him to pour over. And, taking a glance at Twilight, a new ally to go through it with.

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De Foresti hated meetings. Especially this one. It wasn't so much the social interaction part of it that got to him, but the people who were with him at the moment. Mainly, Prinz und Reichskanzler von Metternich. Metternich stood with his face to the window, only showing de Foresti and Count von Dietrichstein, the only other occupant of the room. Metternich's hands were intertwined behind his back, his white gloved fingers tapping dully at his palms. "And you let the unicorn study with him, both of you?" Metternich neutrally began.

Dietrichstein spoke first. "I assure you sir, it took hours for me to finally agree to it. He was certainly stubborn over it."

De Foresti barely stopped himself from choking with laughter. Knowing Dietrichstein, he probably put up a mock protest at best before giving into Charles' demands. No matter how much Dietrichstein insisted to the contrary, he cared about all his pupils well, especially Charles. Though Charles was more suspicious of the Count, de Foresti trusted him implicitly, their long years of service together giving them a strange sort of camaraderie. "And you, Hauptmann?" Metternich interrupted his thoughts.

The Hauptmann kept his face blank, even though Metternich wasn't looking at him, he wanted to make sure. With that man, sometimes you could swear he had an extra eye in the back of his head, the way he just knew everything at once. "The same sir. He insisted, and I saw no other option but to give in" he lied smoothly.

"Most intriguing" Metternich spoke after a moments pause.

De Foresti and Dietrichstein shared a look. They both had a mutual understanding that neither of them spoke of, to at least make their students stay at the Palace less miserable then it could be. They had both grown fond of him over the years, and saw Twilight as an opportunity to maybe get the former Prince Imperial out of his impenetrable shell. Now they could only hope that Metternich would allow it her to stay for his lessons.

"Hmm," Metternich turned to the two, surveying the two with inquisitive eyes, "This could work in our favor. After the debacle with Heinz, Franz will be looking for a source to entrust. And who better than a new arrival from what just might be the most isolated nation on the planet, Equestria?"



Metternich considered these possibilities, a thousand variables running through his mind as the two teachers stewed in their boots. Suddenly he spoke. "I say we allow it gentleman, and see how it goes. Complying with his wishes will make him more subservient towards our goals in the future, and it'll allow us to hopefully crush any dreams of inheriting the dreadful ambition of his father" he decided.

If they could, the two would sigh in relief right now. They got what they wanted, and Metternich did as well, so he would not look their motives over. The Kanzler was a vicious man when needed, and would hound them relentlessly till they would spill all their secrets. "Yes, yes, this will work perfectly," Metternich continued, before his mouth twitched to a smirk, "If only the bronies could hear about this though. They'd be cheering all till the morrow with a German prince being taught with an Equestrian unicorn. God knows how the Russians would react..."

"Sir, are you sure this is the right course of action?" de Foresti interjected, hoping to make himself seem as adverse to the idea as possible.

"I'm positive Hauptmann. I mean, they're simply children, how much trouble can they cause together?"

De Foresti resisted the urge to grin just barely. Unknowing of this, Metternich continued. "Now de Foresti, return to Franz and Fraulein Sparkle now. I'm certain they're tired of waiting for you. Count, prepare for tomorrow's lessons, until then, at ease gentleman."

"Yes sir" they both said in sync, before leaving the room.

It was only till they were a safe distance from Metternich's office that Dietrichstein snorted. "Ha, we certainly got our way, haven't we?" he said with a toothy grin.

"Indeed Count. Plus we got rid of Heinz too, which is a plus in my book" de Foresti mentioned.

"Why did you hate Heinz so much anyway?" von Dietrichstein queried.

"He stole a piece of my cake once!" de Foresti said with all the rancor he had.

"..." von Dietrichstein suddenly had an urge to face-palm.

"It was my favorite cake!" de Foresti added.

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Returning to the two rather precocious youths, de Foresti was delighted to see the two studying more. "Good to see my little student and pony are still doing well. Anything of note happen while I was away?"

"Not at all" Charles answered with ease.

"Well that's just great. However, I believe now is the time to finish up before we head outside. Charles, I believe we're at your favorite part" the Hauptmann teased.

The young prince's eyes brightened just noticeably. "And that is?" he asked, already having a good idea of what was going on.

His next few words brought an immediate smile to Charles face. "Strategy of course."

The next hour or so was relatively simple. Charles and de Foresti talked quietly with each other over an open book, with de Foresti constantly questioning the young prince over what he read. Twilight sat at the other side of the table still, with De Foresti at one point asking her if she would like to join them, but she refused, looking away nervously as she spoke. Instead she continued the basics of Italian, with de Foresti occasionally going to help her, though it was rarely needed. The Hauptmann wondered vaguely if the two even needed teachers at all. At the rate these two were going, they'd be done in months with their current studies, if not weeks!

Twilight however, was looking increasingly nervous and worried as the minutes rolled on. A nagging thought nibbled away at her brain, making her more and more disturbed the more she thought about it. De Foresti, who kept a watchful eye on her the entire time even when he was with Charles, noticed this, and decided to nip the problem in the bud. "Something the matter Fraulein?" he cautiously began.

The unicorn fidgeted a bit under his gaze. "Nope." she laconically replied.

Now Charles was interested too, if the glance he sent her way was any indication. "Are you sure?" de Foresti continued.

Twilight looked down at the floor now, anxiously memorizing the patterns in it to avoid the question. "Hello?" he asked again when she did not respond.

Feeling increasingly guilty and curious now, Twilight found the courage to ask the question that had plagued her since yesterday now. "You know those guys, who I... was held by, right?" she tentatively began.

The two humans nodded uneasily, still unsure of how badly she was affected by that. After all, it was only a day ago, and Twilight had been thrust from one situation to another so quickly. They barely knew her, yet the two didn't want to hurt her or anything. "Yes. Why do you ask?" the Hauptmann responded.

"Well, I just wanted to know... if you found them or not..."

'Ah...' It all made sense now to the two. She was simply worried about the men that had captured her. De Foresti put on a grim expression as he answered her. "I'm sorry Fraulein, but from what I've heard we've found no men or pony out there. We did find... 'evidence' that they were in the forest though" he said, carefully not mentioning the 'evidence' was a corpse.

"Oh..." her muzzle fell to the floor once more, before looked up to the Hauptmann again with eyes still wide, the timidity obvious from her tone, "I was just wondering, because, well, I was scared I would be... sold."

Both de Foresti and Charles had a disgusted look on their faces at that. "Considering that in this day and age the Royal Navy would blast you sky-high for even thinking of enslaving ponies from Equestria, or anywhere, I doubt they'll find much help" the Hauptmann tried to console her.

"Despite being... *British*, they do good work" Charles said, almost forcing himself to actually be able to compliment the Brits.

"So... slavery for ponies is illegal then?" Twilight nervously asked, hoping her fears were untrue.

"Oh dear god, of course it is! Thankfully most nations have stopped that years ago now. You did not think we humans were that awful, right?"

Twilight's silence answered what words could not. "Oh" de Foresti drew out the word, not sure whether to feel insulted or not.

“It’s just... the way Charles said things, it seemed like things were really bad for ponies over here” she admitted.

“Well...” how the hell was he going to explain this? That things weren’t simply black and white over here, that centuries of tradition were only just recently being unwounded, and new schools of thought on just how in the world humans and ponies were supposed to interact were springing up everywhere? These two were smart sure, but they were still children. They had no sense of practical morality, of the complex nature that dominated society. As much as he would love to say ‘humans are evil!’ or ‘ponies are rightfully below man’ such things were both untrue and a gross simplification of the matter itself. Even he was unsure where he stood at times, the complex nature of the world over-whelming the simple duty he felt to his nation as a soldier.

“Things are... complex,” de Foresti finally spoke after a few moments pause, “Things here in Österreich are tense” to say *the least* “but things are much better for ponies in France and the British Isles. Certain rights are unavailable to ponies, but they’re certainly better then even a year ago. Teufel, even *Preußen* guarantees full citizenship for ponies that serve in the military at least. Civilian jobs... that’s another thing entirely.”

Twilight considered his words carefully, along with Charles, who was wondering just what Equestria was like for Twilight to form such opinions. So he decided to follow up on his train of thought with an actual question, if at least to distract her from the very awkward pace the conversation was going. “So Twilight, what’s Equestria like?” Charles spoke out.

If anything his question only raised the awkwardness further, as Twilight only gave him a slight glance before looking at the ceiling, the floor, anywhere other than him. “It’s beautiful” she simply said.

“And?”

No response. The next few minutes consisted of Charles trying his best not to glare at Twilight, as she refused to answer him. De Foresti was close to tearing his frazzled hair up at the rate this conversation was going. In just a few sentences Twilight had retreated into her shell, Charles looked incredibly ticked off and withdrawn, and de Foresti was assured he had just lost a few years off his life just from the nervousness he felt during this conversation alone. Twilight had just entered their lives, and he already swore they were going to be the death of him someday. “Perhaps it’s time

to end the day? It's getting rather late after all, and I'm sure you two need to eat dinner before you fall asleep" he tried in vain to bring some light-hearted joy to the mood.

He was only half-lying on the late part. From the few windows the library had, he could tell the sun was slowly setting beyond the horizon, as Twilight began. "Fine." Charles and Twilight said at once, briefly glancing at each other before averting their eyes once more from one another.

De Foresti sighed. He hated his job sometimes.

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The walk back to Charles' room was mercifully quiet, to all parties involved. At first de Foresti was thankful for it, but he could tell the tension between Charles and Twilight was growing every second from a mile away. Despite this, the Hauptmann had some hope for the two. They were obvious geniuses, already pouring over topics that had taken adults years to contemplate in just hours. Charles was easy enough to explain, what with his legacy and all. But Twilight... Twilight was something else. He had met enough unicorns to know that the ones that were not as snobbish as the nobles or as ignorant as the rest of the common ilk were rare indeed. Yet she, she had a certain fire to her, a passion for learning and understanding that was rare in even the most intelligent of man or pony. Now if only he could find a way to bring them out of their respective holes, then, by God, who knows what would happen?

Charles' path seemed set in stone. An officer in the K.u.K (Kaiserlich und königliche) Armee, and beyond that... who knows? Unless a revolt or something happened in France, Charles was doomed to be denied his birthright, something that de Foresti sympathized with. He had always liked Napoléon himself, L'Empereur being a good supporter of a united Italy, yet he kept these sympathies secret. In the land of the Hapsburg's, sympathies to the Bonapartes were kept quiet at best, and extinguished at worse.

Twilight however, was where his mind wandered. What would she do when she inevitably aged, and could not rest off the laurels of the generosity of the Imperial court? Work? She had no knowledge of the world outside her own, and unless she could learn enough (Which to be fair he supposed she could), the military seemed the best destination for her. He did not know why, but somehow he felt as if Charles and Twilight's destiny's were intertwined. He still had no idea why the Kaiser had allowed

her to live here in the first place, and while he was glad she would, it all seemed suspicious to him. Too convenient. But perhaps he was just being paranoid, and the wings of destiny had taken her here. Only time would tell.

It was only just when he finished his rather long thought process that they reached Charles' room. Opening it for the two, de Foresti wanted to sigh again as he saw they were still not looking at one another, purposely so in fact. Well, at least it seemed as if they were still children in some ways, no matter how petulant they were. "If that is all you two, I wish you, *adieu!*" he waved towards the insides of the room with a particular flourish.

"Merci" "Danke" was all that answered him as the two children passed by, Twilight still sullen, Charles still offended. Closing the door as soon as they entered, de Foresti sifted through his hair with a hand. He could only hope things would get better for the two, before they got worse.

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If ever there was a point in time where historians would look back on the beginning of the historic friendship between the son of L'Empereur Napoléon I and the student of the Princess Celestia herself, this day would be a key moment above all. When they entered Charles room, they wordlessly drifted apart, both focused on doing things that involved ignoring the other. However, they both wanted to do the same thing. That is, read a book. Charles was first, walking up to his shelf and pulling off a random book that seemed interesting enough from the title. Unknowing of which book Charles wanted to pick though, Twilight began to use her magic to pull a book off the shelf as well. This turned out to be the very same book Charles now had in his hand, and he held onto it tightly as a pinkish glow found itself around the book and attempted to wrench itself from his hand. He gave the unicorn a mildly annoyed look. "I believe I grabbed this one first" he said with more than a bit of stewing anger.

Twilight was not so much angry at this moment, more tired and fed up with how life had been treating her as of late. Pouting now, her magical hold on the book increased, the hardcover attempting to wrench itself free again. Still Charles held onto it though with a stubborn grip. "I wanted to read it too though!" Twilight whined.

"Too bad. I got it first, get another" Charles countered.

“No!” her frustration with how things have been going finally reached a boiling point, as she increased her magical hold over the book even more.

Now, neither side here meant much harm to the other. Charles was simply still angered that Twilight had dismissed his question so easily after all he had done to try and make her feel welcome, and Twilight was simply exhausted from the emotional stress of the last few days gone by. It is not surprising then, that this event would occur, or that injury would result from it. Injury that occurred when Twilight’s magic finally twisted the book out of Charles hands. This had the unfortunate side-effect of Charles falling forward from the sudden force, causing his forehead to fall right into the hard edge of his shelf.

With a small thud, Charles’ body went limp for a moment, his eyes closing as he slid nearly unconsciously to the floor. Twilight let out a horrified gasp, her frustration evaporating in an instant as a dreadful fear crept into her. Dashing right by his side, Twilight frantically babbled out “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” as she desperately tried to make sure she hadn’t caused him permanent damage.

“Prinz Franz? Your dinner has arrived” a voice called from behind the door.

Twilight’s heart went cold. ‘Oh no oh no oh no’ her mind went into overdrive as she fearfully tried to decide what to do. She had no medical knowledge, she didn’t know human anatomy, and the server was right outside their door waiting! All the while the horrible guilt that she might have done something terrible and permanent to Charles over something as stupid as a book made her want to just break down into tears. But as she tried to decide what to do as the seconds went by and the server was getting impatient, Charles’ eyes opened. “Charles!” Twilight said, delirious with joy now.

“Prinz Franz, your dinner is ready!” the server shouted, getting tired of this already.

As Twilight was relieved beyond belief that Charles was alright, the eponymous prince’s eyes focused on her once more as his mind became clear again after the harsh hit. “We were acting pretty stupid weren’t we?” Charles simply said.

Twilight wanted to cry. "Yeah, we were."

"Prinz Franz!"

"Leave it outside! I'll get it when I'm ready" Charles shouted, with no small amount of effort if the strained tone his voice took on was any indication.

A few grumbling sounds were heard beyond the door, as the sound of clanging plates were heard, and then nothing. Twilight's heart beat faster and faster, as constant worries continued to plague her, whether Charles was angry at her or not. Charles just forced himself off the ground, covering the huge bruise that now stained his forehead with his right hand. Twilight still practically hovered around him as he dragged himself over to his bed, climbing up on it and sitting down with only a mild grunt as his sole hint of any pain. Twilight stood terrified on the floor below still, thinking he would not even want her near his bed at the moment, but she was proven wrong when Charles looked at her with one eye, the other covered up by his hand still. Patting the spot to his side, Charles waited patiently for her to get it, until her continued terror forced him into speaking. "C'mon, sit here" he said through half-gritted teeth, patting the spot once more.

Slowly at first, Twilight jumped up to the bed, still shying away from Charles. Silence filled the room again, with only the mild pants of pain from Charles providing any sort of auditory sensation. "Are, are you okay?" Twilight stuttered out.

'AGH!' Charles cried out as a lance of pain went through the wound once more. Twilight attempted to get closer to him to see if she could help in any whatsoever, but Charles raised his free hand to stop her. "I'm fine..." he tried to comfort her, when he was obviously less than fine.

"But, you're hurt! Because of me..."

"Mon petite pouliche, I fear we are both at fault here" Charles whispered, wincing from the aftereffects of the pain.

Twilight whimpered in agreement. "I'm sorry."

"I'm... sorry as well" Charles said after some deliberation.

What happened next surprised Charles beyond all belief. Twilight... hugged him. And not a simple short hug too like the ones he received from his distant family, but a long and tight one, with her hooves attempting to



encircle him as her head nuzzled against his chest. To say he was astounded was an understatement, so much so that the little pain he felt now was quickly forgotten, instead replaced by a strange warm feeling within his heart. "What are you doing?" he managed to gasp out, staring down directly at the purple unicorn that was touching him.

Twilight looked up at him with wide and innocent eyes. "I'm hugging you silly! When I felt bad back home, my mom or the Princess would hug me, and I always felt better afterwards," she paused as a thought occurred to her, "You're feeling better now right?"

Staring down at the little filly as she still hugged him with all her might, Charles could only smile, brushing his hand against her mane. "Yes. I do now."

Sighing in relief, Twilight buried her arms into his sides, glad all was well now. "Yay" she whispered.

After that, the rest of the night proceeded smoothly. Following all that had happened, the seeds of a new friendship were planted, and the beginning of a quest that would engulf all of Europe and later the world in its scope and grandiosity. But for now, the two enjoyed each other's company as well as possible. The accident had, by chance, brought them together closer than before. Despite having met only the previous day, the two had found a certain camaraderie within one another. After they had eaten, they did some mild chit-chat, trying to get to know each other better, sharing interests and such. Twilight was still hesitant to speak of her home, but Charles was not insistent anymore. Instead, he asked her of what she studied and the things she had learned before arriving there, and she in turn asked him. It was a perfectly normal (relatively speaking), friendly chat. The first one either of them had ever had with someone their own age.

Within the hour, night had totally fallen over the sky, not too long after they had eaten at last. When Charles proceeded to sneak into his covers, he saw Twilight beginning to lie on the floor once more, bringing over the blanket she used yesterday over her with her magic. Having an unsteady look on his face, Charles called out to her. "Hey, Twilight!" he called.

Twilight rustled in her place, groaning a bit. "Yes?" she replied.

"I was wondering, um..." It was only now that he realized how awkward this sounded, but it was too late now he supposed, "If you wanted

to be, uh, warmer, that you could sleep... in my bed with me," he said the last part lowly.

"What?" Twilight asked, her head popped out of the blanket now.

Charles sighed. "If you... wanted to sleep in my bed."

"... Are you sure?"

"If you want! I'm not saying you should or anything, just-"

"Because I'd love too!" she interrupted with a gleeful voice.

"Oh. Okay then. Just... hop up then I guess."

Charles buried his head in his pillow as he heard the sounds of hooves pounding against the hardwood floor. It stopped for a moment, and just when he was about to call out and ask her where she was, he felt a small pressure added to the bed. "Is this okay?" Twilight's voice asked from right next to him.

He wriggled some more in his covers. "Yep."

"Gut," was all he heard before he felt a very small unicorn snuggle into the sheets, pressing against his back.

"Gute Nacht, Charles."

"Bonne nuit, Twilight."

And with that, the two children slept, still unsure of the destiny that awaited the two of them so far into the future. For now though they dreamt, awaiting new days that would come and go, as time passed by in Schönbrunn Palace like sand through an hourglass.

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*February 12, 1821, Anno Domini*

"Wake up Charles, we're going to be late!"

Opening his eyes with as much resistance as possible, Charles was greeted by the familiar sight of Twilight Sparkle, that little filly he had gotten to know so well the last few months. Wiping his eyes with his sleeve, he greeted her more then a bit tiredly. "Yes?" he practically moaned out, he was that tired.

She poked his forehead with her hoof. "We've got to get up and out of here! Count von Dietrichstein isn't going to wait forever you know" she said accusingly.

"Since when were you so eager to meet the grouch?" Charles said, finally getting up.

"I'm not. It's just we're finally moving on to a new book!" Twilight replied, as if this was the most important thing in the world. Which to her, it most certainly was.

"Sigh. Fine" Charles said, hurrying up now.

This was how everyday began lately for the odd couple of friends. Waking up, eating a small breakfast brought to them by a servant in the palace, studying with von Dietrichstein, and then de Foresti. Slight changes were made in their schedule from time to time, like Charles saying he had to go off somewhere on Sunday mornings, and the occasional dinner that Charles called 'a gathering of fools' that he was forced to attend by his Opa. After that incident with the book, de Foresti and the Count were suspicious of the bruise that appeared on Charles' forehead, but raised no questions over it.

Otherwise though, Twilight was adjusting well enough. The pain she had received from having to abandon everything she knew behind her was gradually outweighed by all the exciting things she could learn in the outside world. At least that was what she told herself when it started to bother her again.

"You know Twilight, if I didn't know any better I'd say the Count's actually sweet for us sometimes" Charles joked, a rare feat in of itself.

"Ha! As if, the old man's got it out for us I swear. But he is a darn good teacher."

"Agreed."

As Twilight proceeded to turn away from him as he began dressing, Charles thought of his plan for the day. From the random snippets of her past he had managed to ensnare from Twilight through either verbal manipulation or trickery of some other sort, he had managed to learn a few hints about what Equestria was. And the main thing on his mind, was that Equestria had an equivalent to the Gregorian calender. While the names

seemed to be different, Twilight taking a while to understand that Montag was not 'Solanus' or whatever it was she called it, the general pattern stayed the same. Add to that the references she sometimes made to the day her birth, saying it was during a cold month, he had narrowed it down to January, February, or December.

Again, when Twilight inadvertently told him her birthday was not on his equivalent to the twenty's or first ten numerals of the calender, he had managed to narrow it down to the twelfth. It was a guess, but the closest he had. Finally, to choose between the three months, he had insisted on knowing if her first few birthdays were followed by a warming period shortly there afterwards. He spaced all of these questions out within days or weeks of each other, all to formulate the plan he had in mind that would be implemented this very day.

The rest of the day passed as if it was an average one. Well, average to the two children at least. Twilight and Charles had practically mastered the basics of Italian already, and were starting to speak full sentences in it with de Foresti and each other for practice. Charles slowed down his own studies of the language after the first few days in order for Twilight to catch up to him, but he didn't tell her that. Lord knows how she'd react if she found out he was intentionally slowing himself down for her. De Foresti seemed to get it though. At least, if the sly winks he gave him as he ignored his Italian studies in favor of studying the closest pattern of the floor were any indication.

Putting on his last buttons, Charles stood straight as he prepared to leave with his unicorn companion. "C'mon Charles, the day's not getting any longer!" Twilight yelled out to him from the door.

"Go on ahead, I'll be right there."

After he heard the sound of the door closing behind Twilight (he remembered that time when she first opened the door with her magic well. It was while he was still on the opposite side and his reaction was, well... embarrassing) he checked to see if his item was still in place where he left it. Yep, right under the bed. He had to haggle de Foresti for a while to get it, but thankfully after a short visit to his Opa, he managed to acquire the funds necessary. It was a small enough amount that the Kaiser was happy to oblige him. The other item... well, that would hopefully come later tonight before they arrived. If not... well he was doomed.

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*Several hours later*

The small group of de Foresti, Charles, and Twilight were walking back from the library as per usual, and proceeded to reach Charles' room with ease. The Hauptmann opened the door for them with his signature flourish, a practice which had continued for them since their first day all those months ago. It made Twilight giggle everytime he did so, which was more than enough reason for him to do it. "Gute Nacht you two!" de Foresti cheered.

"Gute Nacht" the two replied, before entering. Charles seemed awfully insistent on entering first though, if the way he stuck himself in front of Twilight was any indication.

"So Charles, what do you want to read before we go to bed?" Twilight asked him as she tried to look around Charles' body to the inside of the room.

"Hmm" Charles non-chalantly hummed, his legs moving to block her view.

"Charles?" Twilight questioned him, curious now as to what he was hiding.

"Just trust me Twilight. Close your eyes, I have a surprise for you" he asked. He just hoped that didn't sound too creepy. He had to admit, what he planned seemed rather... forward or encroaching now that he was actually enacting it, but it was too late now he supposed.

"Ooookay..." Twilight was getting more than a bit confused now, but she went along with this. Charles had his quirks that she had gotten used to over time, but he never meant anything harmful from them.

She closed her eyes, and followed him. A few steps forward for his legs and her hooves, and suddenly she crashed muzzle-first into his leg. "Okay, stay there, I'll get it out..."

Twilight waited patiently for a few moments, the seconds rolling on as the sound of Charles rustling through sheets and pulling out something metallic. A sudden crash and a grunt of annoyance from him tempted her to open her eyes to see what was wrong, but she would trust him. For now at least...

“Okay, open them!” Charles commanded.

She could practically hear the smirk in his voice, so she opened one eye warily, and right after that they both opened in pure amazement. Right in front of her, stood a large dark-brown cake on a silver platter, topped with several strawberries. “Happy Birthday Twilight” Charles said with a smile.

“Wha, how did you, huh?” Twilight’s mind was boggling as she tried to wrap her thoughts around this turn of events.

“It was simple. Remember all those questions I asked you about the circumstances involving your birth?” a slow and unsteady nod answered him, “Well I pieced together the approximate date of your birth through that. The palace chefs were more than willing to offer their services in exchange for my favor, so,” he a mock sucking sound, “*Bon Appétit!*”

“I... I don’t even,” a new idea caused Twilight to veer into an entirely different line of thought, “Wait, why didn’t you just ask me when my birthday was, and we could have tried to figure out where it fit on your calender then?”

The smirk left Charles’ face, as he had no answer to that besides one. “... That would be too easy.”

“...”

“Just eat the accursed cake.”

“No, I’m not ungrateful or anything, it’s just that... Wow,” Twilight had to catch her breath momentarily, “You... did all this just for my birthday?”

“Yes” he answered as if that was all he needed to say.

Twilight raised a hoof to her eyelid. “Thank you. So much” she choked out, the tears coming now.

Charles certainly was not expecting this. Cheers yes, whinnies of joy, letting him ride her for a few minutes (Okay not that one, but he could dream!) and despite his general comfort he had gained in her presence over the last few months, he had no idea what to do. Taking a chance, he sat down next to her, and offered her his last gift. “Here” he said, pulling it out.

The unicorn's tears cleared enough for her to see the gift Charles had pulled out, and despite being smaller, it already mattered so much more to her. It was a book. A simple paper-back book, its edges slightly frayed and the cover worn a bit, but a book nonetheless. "I bought it, for you" Charles said, rubbing the back of his neck nervously now.

"...Thank you" was her lone response.

"It's just for you, you know?" Charles added, "So you don't have to borrow from me, or the library. It's all yours."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really."

An altogether familiar feeling of hooves around him soon appeared. Curses, she was hugging him again. This just got a lot more awkward. Tentatively patting her mane again, Charles whispered to her. "Somehow, I just knew you'd like Machiavelli."

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*March 20, 1821, Anno Domini*

"You're going to trip over something sooner or later with how much time you spend buried on that book alone Twilight."

Charles and Twilight were walking through the hallways of the palace, de Foresti not with them as usual. He had to do something about 'problems on the home front' according to his own words, and left early. While his presence was missed by the two, they could find their own way around, Charles already being familiar with the architecture, and Twilight gaining an increased knowledge from her past few months here. Besides, in the case of Charles, he was away from the library and the Count's room for most of the day, being summoned by the Kaiser. Twilight knew what it was for, which was why she was prepared with what laid in Charles' room.

Twilight was trotting ahead of Charles, her head in *The Prince*, being lifted in front of her muzzle due to her magic. She couldn't get into its seemingly cynical and pragmatic nature at first, but ever since Charles told her it was a satire of tyrants instead of a pamphlet of support for them, she found a huge passion for it. All throughout the novel, she was practically bursting with laughter as the satire seemed so clear to her now. She also loved it, because it was something *she* owned now, not a borrowed book

like the ones here or even back home, but something for her and her alone. Even now she couldn't make out her gratitude enough.

Despite their general calm since Twilight's birthday, Charles seemed rather distant save when Twilight forced interaction between them. He was rather withdrawn from most activities his family participated in, especially when he complained about that place he was forced to go to on Sunday. When Twilight asked him about it, he only said that it was 'a pile of hypocrisies piled on top of another!' and left it at that. Save studying and the occasional warm talk he shared with Twilight now, he was still rather distant from the rest of the world. Though to him, there was not much of a world to be distant to, the cold passages of the palace being the only thing allowed to him in most days.

Reaching his room at last, Charles raised a brow as Twilight used her magic to open the door slightly and dash right into it before closing the door behind him. "Dare I ask what you're doing Twilight?" Charles deadpanned, before putting his hand on the door handle.

"Don't open it yet!"

Charles sighed. "Fine." He could humor her, he guessed.

A few minutes passed, as Charles began to impatiently tap his foot against the ground. He heard a few clangs and small grunts from his side, along with the familiar clop of Twilight's hooves, yet he had no idea what she had planned. She couldn't possibly know what day it is, did she? "Okay, it's ready!" she called out.

"Finally" he muttered, opening the door, only to receive a big surprise.

Floating in the air in front of him, with a familiar magical glow around it, was the most delicious looking cake he had ever seen. Covered with a fine chocolate frosting and with a smudge of cream to the side. Charles could barely find the appropriate words to react. "Twilight, how did you make this?"

Twilight, who now lowered the plate holding the cake down gently, answered him with a nervous smile. "Oh, I asked the head chef here to make a cake for you, but... he told me to leave him alone. But then this really nice man, Franz Sacher he said his name was, offered to make this cake for you, with no charge! He called it, *Sachertorte*. I kind of let him name it after himself, for being so nice and all."



Feeling a bit curious as to how it tasted, Charles dipped a finger into the cake, licking the frosting. Immediately afterwards, his face exploded in delight. "By God Twilight, that's amazing!"

Twilight blushed, trying to hide her face in her hooves. "It's no problem. I just didn't have anything to give you as a gift, so I decided this might make a good substitute..."

"It's more than enough," Charles looked hesitant for a moment, before hugging the little unicorn, "thank you Twilight."

"You're welcome Charles," she replied, hugging him in return, "and happy birthday."

A question popped into Charles' head. "Wait, how did you know it was my birthday anyway?"

"I asked de Foresti."

"..." Charles' eye twitched ever slightly.

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*July 12, 1821, Anno Domini*

"-And that my dear students, was how the world was made!"

Twilight and Charles were watching Count von Dietrichstein with just a bit of caution as he went into a mild rant regarding the necessity of moral institutions in the fabric of a country's lifeblood, before going off-kilter about something else entirely. The Count occasionally got into rants like this, more the product of having no one to talk too most of the time save a Hauptmann he had a strange love/hate relationship with, and two children who only one of which he was actually paid to teach. Twilight stayed quiet, as Charles advised her to do when he got like this, saying that he just tired out after a while.

This was soon stopped though, by the timely arrival of Hauptmann de Foresti entered the private room, with a very strained look on him. "Sorry to interrupt you Count, but I'm afraid I have to take Charles away for now" de Foresti hastily explained.

The Count made a gesture of mock horror before responding. "This better be good Manuele, I'm in the middle of a very important lesson here."

“I can assure you sir, this is big [serious]” he replied, oddly serious.

Struck by the Hauptmann’s uncharacteristic behaviour, von Dietrichstein called him over. de Foresti obliged, with the two children watching them both with a small bit of worry all the while. When de Foresti finally came over to the Count, he whispered something into his ear, which caused von Dietrichstein’s eyes to widen in shock. Coughing fitfully into his hand, the Count looked oddly solemn as he addressed the Hauptmann. “You may leave with him Hauptmann. Do you think Twilight should go with you?”

“I... think it might be for the best.”

The Count nodded. “Charles, Twilight, follow de Foresti. He... has something to tell Charles, that is very important.”

Twilight gulped nervously, as Charles felt a chill go down his spine for whatever reason. Surely what he had to say couldn’t be too bad... right? Rising from their seats steadily, or jumping off in Twilight’s case, the two followed de Forest out of the room. Instead of traversing through the library as they usually did however, they went into an entirely different section of the palace, one that led outside. They were still in the shadow of the building itself, so the heat didn’t bother them, and so they continued on. Twilight enjoyed the brief respite to breathe in the rich air around her, not having much chances to visit the exterior of the palace. Within a few minutes, they had arrived at a large rectangular building within walking distance from the palace, with a large staircase and dual doors forming an entrance. Walking up the numerous steps, de Foresti pressed the two children on till they reached the door. “I thought this would be a better place to talk. More serene and all that gobbledy-gook” de Foresti attempted a joke, though it was obvious his heart wasn’t in it.

Pushing the doors open, Twilight was absolutely stunned by what laid beyond it. She knew the palace was a wonder of construction, but she never knew it had something so *natural* and beautiful inside it. All around in the gigantic room lay an entire cornucopia of flora and fauna that went on for what seemed like miles. A vast row of hedges were set off to the side, forming a gigantic maze, while the open roof allowed rays of nurturing sunlight to fall down on the enclosure. It looked amazing beyond all worse to the filly, especially since she had been here for months now, and knew nothing of it! “Barely anyone’s here today, so I thought now would be a good time to finally introduce you to this place” de Foresti explained.

Trodding through the lone cobblestone pathway that stretched through the gardens, de Foresti led the two to a small bench, underneath a small tree. Sitting on it first, de Foresti then patted the empty spots next to him. Wordlessly, the two complied, the moment of truth finally coming up to them. De Foresti said nothing at first, instead staring up at the tree branch that hung above them. "It's an olive tree" he answered a question no one had asked.

Both children were now confused on top of being worried. "You know, some men live and die in the shade of their olive trees. But some men... change the world. An old saying my family had," he paused briefly, allowing the saying to be processed by the young minds, "But despite this... death remains a constant. It's an inevitability in this world of ours."

"But sometimes we're not ready for death. Sometimes it comes too soon, or too far ahead, past the point when we've trailed past our glories, our triumphs. Do you two understand this?"

Charles did a slow nod, a hazy understanding coming to mind. Twilight only began to get more worried, the morbid tone of his speech making her fear for the worst. De Foresti tried to open his mouth, to speak, to tell the news he knew would make or break Charles but... he couldn't find the right way to put it. How to tell a boy such dreadful proceedings, when the boy himself was half-adult half-boy already. Finding his mouth suddenly dry, de Foresti put out the news as truthfully as he could. "Charles... your father... he's dead."

The world stopped. Time seemed to still for just a moment, between the point where the Hauptmann's words escaped his lips and when they finally registered within Charles' mind. When they did though, the boy froze. Nothing was heard from him. He was completely still, mouth hung slack-jawed as the shock of this event tore through him like a lightning pouring through a man. "When" was all he managed to gasp out.

"A few months ago" de Foresti spoke quietly now, ashamed for not being able to tell him earlier.

Charles remained quiet after that. It all seemed so surreal, so disgustingly fake to him. It couldn't be true... but why would de Foresti lie to him? During his emotional crisis, Twilight remained in shock. Till this point, Twilight was horrified at the news, assuming Charles' father was already dead, as he spoke of him in the past tense before, but now, the knowledge

that he was only just recently alive caused her heart to ache for her friend. She wanted to talk to him, comfort him, hug him, anything, but de Foresti sat between them still. Even if he wasn't, she wasn't sure if it would be appropriate or not. From what she could tell by glancing around de Foresti's body, Charles was in a state of near total paralysis, no coherent thought going through his head.

de Foresti coughed, the horrible silence of it all nearly choking him. "I would understand if you want to go back to your home" he consoled, though he knew it would do little. What could truly be done when a boy was told that his father had died?

The young prince nodded wordlessly. There was no point in staying here much longer. All he wanted right now... all he wanted was his father. To have the dreams of meeting the only parent he cared for come true, to meet the man who meant the world to him and more just one last time. But these dreams were long past expiring now. Instead, he would acquiesce, if only to distract his mind with the dull details of walking.

No one spoke as they proceeded outside. Twilight was still raging inside with conflict, about what words to say to Charles, what to do, but nothing seemed adequate. de Foresti just consigned himself to despising himself for such a cruel act, hating beyond all previously known hatreds that he was assigned the task of telling Charles his father's fate on St. Helena. And Charles was still in the same nigh-catatonic state, the reality of the situation refusing to meld with his own thoughts.

They entered his room not long afterwards. The palace halls seemed darker now, the shadows deeper and the color browner and less vivid overall. Maybe it was just a trick of the light. Maybe not. Regardless, the two children entered the den without a sound save the clacking of boots and hooves, with de Foresti providing his usual services, only with a stoicism he did not care for.

The former prince imperial crawled onto his bed, sitting down with the same frozen face he had since the dread news had arrived. The purple unicorn stood on her four hooves with a face betwixt sadness and helplessness. Charles could only bury his head into his hands as the seconds rolled on, his mind finally beginning to accept the words he tried beyond belief to suppress. A snuffle squirmed its way out of him, despite his best efforts to ensure it did not. Twilight, seeing the extent of his

depression now, steeled her resolve and did what she knew she should have done a while ago, and help her friend.

“Charles?” she began, hopping up next to him on the bed.

Charles struggled to respond, pacing his breath faster and faster as he fought to suppress any rampant tears. “Yes?” he choked out.

His attempts to hide his sorrow failed though, Twilight catching his misery with ease. “Charles... do you need to cry?” she asked kindly.

Eyes opened wide at the sheer thought of that, Charles glared at her. “I don’t need to cry! I am stronger than that...” he said.

“But it’s okay to cry. My mom told me that whenever I feel sad, I should just cry if I need to. It’s better then keeping it all walled up” she explained.

His face twisted into a grim expression, the very thought of it disgusting him. Instead, he settled on another course to vent his frustration. “I thought I’d see him again, someday,” Charles murmured, “That he’d get a chance to actually be my father. That I wouldn’t be trapped here, forced to serve as an Austrian prince. Less than one in fact.”

He laughed bitterly now, nearly choking on his own disgust at his weakness. “But... it’s too late now I suppose. It was for a while now that I think about it...”

The feeling of Twilight beginning to hug him did not come as a surprise. In fact, he almost expected it by now, and took his share of comfort he would not admit from it. “Charles, just remember. I’m... I’m your friend, okay?” she admitted the truth that had existed for a while now between them.

Considering these words, Charles’ eyes turned dark. “You are not ‘my friend’, Twilight.”

Twilight was struck silent, her heart nearly breaking in two.

“You are my best friend” he added not a moment after.

And with that he returned the hug finally, enclosing the tiny filly in his arms with the warmest gesture he could. Twilight was nearly awash in joy, the words the young human said touching her deeply beyond all her walls

of emotional resistance. Charles swallowed, then spoke once more. "Twilight, can you promise me something?" he asked.

"What?" she said, wondering what he would want her to promise after such a momentous event had occurred.

"Promise me," his voice turned deathly serious now, a dangerous edge that threatened to chill the very fiber of her being with its tone, "promise me that you will join me. Promise that you will work with me, serve me if needed, till I can return to France."

Twilight, stunned at the sudden turn-around in Charles' behavior, could only ask "Why?" in response.

His face became oddly calm now, the depression he felt before turning into something else now. Bitterness. Hatred. "Because you are the only one I can trust. de Foresti and von Dietrichstein like me, I know, but they serve the word of Metternich, even if they do what they can to help me. You, you are the only one I can rely on. To help me return to France. To one day reclaim the birthright that was stolen from me."

He pushed her away suddenly, grabbing her shoulders and staring her hard in the face. "Can you promise me this? Can you promise to help me, assist me, fight with me if necessary, till I am Emperor of the French one day?" he continued with a desperate tone, fearing now that she would reject him.

"I-I don't know, I mean, we're only ten!"

"That doesn't matter Twilight! We can wait, plot, think! We are already more knowledgeable than half the court of this *damned* nation, I can assure you of this! We can play along, act as if I am consigning myself to a fate as a prince of Austria, but we can fool them. Till the day we can escape, and return France to the glory days of my father!"

She hesitated still the prospect of what he was demanding of her seemingly too much, too great. At this Charles nearly fell into despair once more, shaking her in frustration, but not roughly. "Did you not just agree that you were my best friend? And you would deny me this, the help I need? Please Twilight, I admit, I am begging you. I need your help, your genius, for without it there will be holes, gaps in my plans. Please Twilight... I need you."

Her muzzle shaking as dueling answers fought within her, Twilight finally answered him as the mental battle inside her ended. "... Okay Charles. I'll, I'll help you."

In an instant his despair became joy once more, and he embraced her once more. "Thank you. Thank you so much mon petite pouliche."

After that, their day was quiet, peaceful indeed after the emotional turmoil the two had suffered through. But something had changed. A certain presence had grown between the two. When Twilight looked at Charles now, he had a certain... fire in his eyes. A passion that had escaped him before. For with his father now dead, Charles had gained the motive that would catapult him into the ranks of history. *Revanche*.

# Chapter 3

## Das Pony und der Prinz

*“What an excellent horse do they lose, for want of address and boldness to manage him! ... I could manage this horse better than others do.”-Alexander III of Macedon on seeing his future war-horse Bucephalas being led away for being ‘unfit.’*

*September 21, 1823 Anno Domini*

The last couple of years had been the same monotonous structure they had grown so used to. Despite their advanced minds, they were in the same positions they were usually in. Charles was going over a book about some man named Alexander, while de Foresti was talking with Twilight. It had come up to her through a comment on the status of the Americas, that there were in fact different types of governments out in this world other than monarchies.

Currently de Foresti had taken out a recently made map, describing the current status of the continent where Equestria was located, 'Nordamerika' as it was called. After he pointed out the significant portion of the continent her homeland inhabited, which she herself was a little bit astounded by, she asked about the other nations inhabiting the area. “Well, that right there are a bunch of British colonies and such. Down there, that's Mexico. Just got independence from the damned Spaniards in fact. Here they're having a lot of instability problems though...”

Twilight hummed at this info, glad to be learning more about the general area. “And that one?” the unicorn asked, pointing to the big blue blob to the right of Equestria.

“Oh, that's the United States. Former colonies of Britain, got independence a few decades or so ago. Recently had an election I believe, though I have no idea who won the bid for presidency. Don't care much myself honestly. ”



“They only won their independence due to French assistance” Charles cut in, his national pride flashing, before continuing his reading.

“Ah yes, with French assistance. I bet they won't forget that anytime soon.”

For some reason an awkward silence set in for a few moments, as if the universe itself was laughing at them while they could only just sit there and endure it. It ended when Twilight continued her perusal of the Hauptmann's vast stores of knowledge. “So what do you mean, a 'president?’”

“Oh, basically an elected official put in as head of state.”

“... What!?” Twilight was shocked at the very notion.

“Yes, it's very strange. It's pretty much based on the Tagsatzung of Switzerland, or the United Kingdom without the symbolic monarch,” at her blank look at this he continued, “Oh right, we didn't cover that yet. Well basically, in some nations the monarch is little more than a figure for the state to rally around, while in nations like the United States or Switzerland it's based on a conglomeration of the people, or a 'democracy'.”

“I know what a democracy is” Twilight answered, choosing not to be insulted at de Foresti's assumption.

She had read up on the idea numerous times back home and here in relation to the old Greek philosophical texts. But the fact that some nations had adopted it? Astounding. “So how well off are these nations?” she continued.

“Meh, the United States has got nowhere to go save the south or north, and I doubt they'd be willing to fight the Brits again after the whupping they gave them over a decade ago.”

“Switzerland is a small turtle that exists only at the behest of old tradition and the whims of other nations” Charles cut in once more, starting to get more interested in their conversation now.

Twilight raised a hoof to her forehead in askance. "So... no Prinz, or Prinzessin, or Kaiser, or whatever?" she asked again, still trying to wrap her mind around it.

"Indeed."

Twilight considered this thoughtfully. Princess Celestia was a great ruler, sure, as befit anypony who had the wisdom of centuries of rule to deal with. But she could see why the human nations would actually elect their own leaders. After all, none of the humans she had seen were Gods after all. Sure Equestria had its votes on local leaders and representatives to the court, but that was the result of centuries of tradition that came with their ruler. "Rule by the people... that sounds nice" she chose her last words carefully, hoping not to accidentally upset the two.

Charles huffed in disapproval, giving her a disappointed look. "Ah yes, it sounds nice, but like most things that sound nice, it works theoretically, but in practice it is a failure" he countered.

Twilight held his gaze with one of her own, while de Foresti looked at the prince approvingly. "How so?" she hounded him.

"Simple. The rule of many leads to the rule of idiocy. Tell me Twilight, did any of the common person or pony in Equestria share the same intelligence, the same passion for life as you?"

It was a bold question. They rarely shared anything involving their respective pasts, but the challenge was set. "I wouldn't say most people were as studious as me, but that does not make them stupid by any means. Saying that just because they don't have the same desires or interests as me doesn't mean that I'm better somehow! It's rather elitist honestly."

Charles' eye twitched slightly. "Is it elitist if it is true though? Most people are not nearly as smart as you or I even in the depths of age, and they could not care less. While we discuss the ways of old and how man or pony-kind works, they are content to labour in their fields, not daring to rise above their position. To think they are equal to us is simply foolish, and I expected better of you honestly."

“So that’s why we need to educate them, to build a system where everyone can be learned and make more of themselves. How else can we improve as species’?” Twilight paused, surprised with herself that she actually got that deep into the discussion.

“And you’re saying democracy would be better?” Charles said skeptically.

Twilight took a deep breath, considering things. She didn’t know how it would work exactly, but the idea seemed tempting a utopia of sorts that all creatures aspired to but could never reach. “No, but only for the flaws in it” she admitted against her own will.

Charles smirked triumphantly. “Exactly. And because of that, eventually someone with enough power will take autocratic rule, or the country will descend into anarchy. The British have taken a compromise, having a monarch keep the eye of the public while Parliament controls things from a less public eye. But even their Prime Minister, the leader of Parliament is basically a monarch with lesser titles at best. Every nation needs a man who is basically a King. Someone the people will want, no need to treat as if he was a God. They obey him, worship him, he would be practically a deity. Because the people want Kings and Dictators, not freedom. It is only natural for the powerful to eventually take over, and if not there will be two or more sides fighting to the death for power. I can only hope they both kill the other, so a proper leader can take power.” He spoke throughout with a rising voice, finally finishing his soliloquy with a few quick breaths to collect himself.

Twilight was struck silent by this, feeling a swelling anger over this. Well maybe anger was an excessive word, but still, his high-cynicism was getting to her slowly. The Hauptmann only nodded in agreement, before his eye caught how dark it was outside. “Forgive me, meine kleinen Schüler, but it's time to leave I'm afraid. Gute Nacht” he spoke, rising from his seat.

The two ignored him though, as they continued to stare at each other. Neither was exactly angry with the other, but more... stubborn. Defiant. The unicorn put her fore-hooves on the table, using the leverage to raise herself so she stood above her erstwhile friend. “There's one thing wrong with your little assumption Charles. It's that people, both pony and human, would be

awful enough, or hypocritical enough to actually betray such principals, to destroy what seems like a beautiful system” she told him off.

His mouth set into a grim line, before the edges of it twisted slightly upward. That was what he liked about Twilight. Her defiance. Her passion. Her devotion to the goodness of man and ponykind, so seemingly simple-minded yet on closer inspection rooted in a belief and experience of both races, despite the horrors she had endured. Her personality was... truly beautiful. But he would not let her win so easily.

“That may be true Twilight. But you seem to have so presumptions yourself about the inherent goodness in all sentient beings. Are we not all corrupt and hateful on the inside?” he spouted off some tripe he read from some philosopher he didn't care to remember, only using it to rail Twilight more.

“That is stupid!” Twilight now shouted, a feat which was astounding enough to almost knocking his chair back, “People are all good on the inside. But whether they make bad choices that lead them to doing bad deeds, or just are influenced to doing awful acts, they still are fundamentally good. If we are not good at heart, how can we have any hope for the future?” she asked the piercing question.

“If I may,” de Foresti finally interrupted the two, long since satisfied at how this was going, “Perhaps you are both misinformed or disinclined towards the truth. Instead, maybe people both man and pony are simply born as a 'Tabula Rasa', or a blank slate if you prefer. Instead of blasé assumptions about whether we are born good at heart or not, perhaps we choose for ourselves? Otherwise, what use is their in even discussing morality, if we have no choice in the matter at the heart?” he finished, fixing them both with a stern yet kind stare.

The two swallowed this new take on things, both willing and unwilling to accept it. They both were stubborn at heart, another reason the two 'fit' so well, yet they were still young, and predisposed to the nearest thoughts they were exposed too. Twilight, living in a place that encouraged the best in all of life, and the inherent goodness of all living beings, was optimistic yet not naive. Charles, having all his family and life taken from him at a young age, and forced to live a life he did not at all want, was pragmatic and bitter, but not descending into full blown cynicism.

The numerous complexities of their thought processes conflicted truly, but that was another reason the two liked each other so well. They were the only worthy minds for the other at their age, Charles having no one to discuss with before Twilight, and the young mare herself never finding any reasonable intellectual equal from ponies or humans her age back home. They were natural loners due to this, and it was a special irony that their loneliness would bring the two so close.

de Foresti took another look outside, whistling lowly at how dark it had gotten. "Now children, I'm afraid we have to leave. I trust you can find your own way back again?"

Both of them grumbled a bit at this news, finally getting into a good discussion, one that inflamed their passions and minds with an otherwise unknown greatness. Reluctantly, they rose from their seats, or simply hopped off in Twilight's case, hastening towards the exit, de Foresti staying behind to write in his small journal. When they were half-way there though, Twilight stopped, her eyes focused downward at her hooves as she tried to muster the courage for what she planned to do. "Charles, go on ahead. I need to ask de Foresti something" she began.

Charles was surprised by the request, prompting him to inquire further into what was going on. "Why? Can't you ask him later?"

"Please. It's important."

There was enough honest desperation in her voice to stall any further attempts to harass her. Instead, he grunted, continuing on. "Fine, I'll see you later" he spoke, and with that he continued on

She smiled back at him. "Thank you" she said, just loud enough for him to hear.

He paused just for a moment, giving no hint he heard this save a growing tension in his shoulders. He walked on without another word spoken between them. When he was gone, Twilight trotted over to the Italian Hauptmann. "Herr de Foresti?" she greeted him softly.

de Foresti was noticeably surprised at her return, nearly jumping when she spoke from behind him. After collecting himself, he answered her with a rushed attitude. "Ja Fräulein?"

It took a moment for Twilight to respond. The words were caught in her mouth, the fear of what his answer would mean setting a cold dread inside her, one she had not felt since she had been captured so long ago. But she had to be brave! How else could she find out or not? "I... I was wondering, if you could send a letter? Back to my home I mean" she asked, her hopes building up already.

de Foresti considered her words. "You made a letter?"

"Yes, I did! I got some parchment, and one of those little quills, and I used my magic to write it. I can show you it if you want, it's in our room and so-"

"Twilight," he cut her off, "I can't send a letter to Equestria."

If there was a single sound that could describe how Twilight's feelings were at the moment, it would be the crack of shattered glass, before it broke apart into hundreds of tiny, jagged shards that cut through her heart with a blistering precision. "Why?" she pleaded, her voice cracking against her will.

"Well, because I'm not a mail-mare or anything," he winced when he saw Twilight did not laugh at his joke. "Okay that was stupid of me. But Twilight... I can't send a letter to Equestria. No one can."

"Why not? You can just have a mail-mare take it, or send it by ship, or, or something!"

de Foresti paused, a guilt unlike any other setting in for him. The purple unicorns felt stung, as the fact that had secretly taken hold in her for a while now finally came to her fully. He would've made a joke to lighten the mood, but he knew he had tried too hard already. Instead he took a deep breath, preparing for the explanation he knew for awhile that he'd have to give to her.

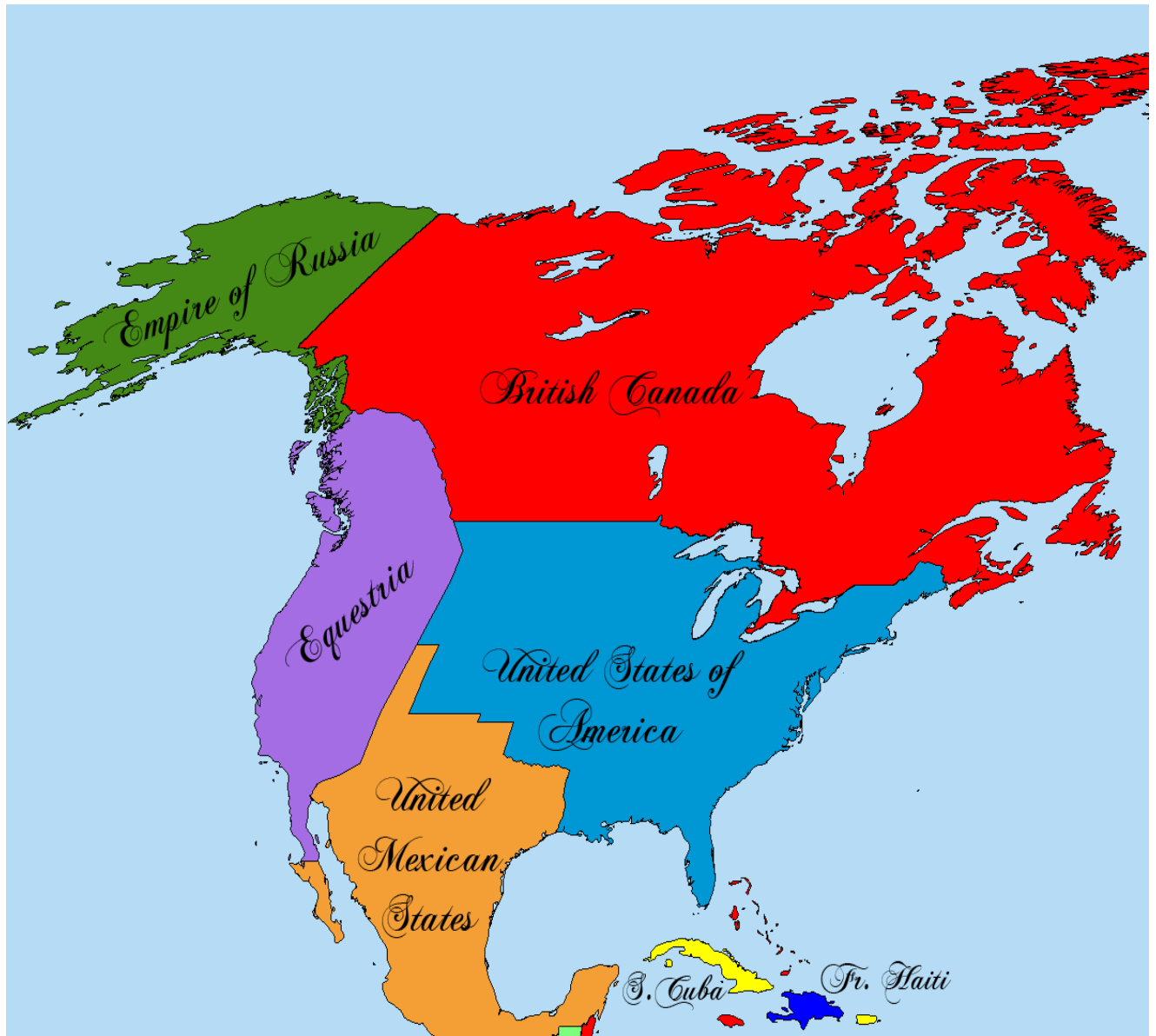
“Twilight... I don't even know how you got out of Equestria in the first place.”

“What do you mean?”

“Twilight... no one can get out of Equestria, it's impossible!”

Twilight was astounded by this news, trying to wrap her hooves around it.  
“What do you mean impossible?”

“Exactly that. Kind of at least. It's a phenomenon that's been studied for centuries now, and it's known throughout all the civilized world as the greatest of barriers, physical or natural. And it's been a mystery even longer then that I suppose. Here's the borders to Equestria itself,” he said, pointing towards the large and beautifully designed map on the table.



As he circled his finger around the borders, he explained further. “The border of Equestria has a, a field around it. It’s been described as bright as the sun itself during day, and then black as the darkest night. It is a barrier that defined Equestria’s borders and has proven the extent of any claimed land. One that allows anyone to enter, but never to leave. Countless search teams have entered it over the years, and none, I repeat none have returned. Honestly I’m astounded as to how you got out of there in the first place.” He was also astounded as to how she was not questioned about her home, but he suspected the hand of Metternich was involved in that matter.



He sighed, having said his piece. Twilight's reaction was rather unlike his expectations. She stood stoically stolid, no more tears dropping save the ones that had already fell. "No... no way at all, then?" she whispered, the words barely reaching his ear.

The Hauptmann answered her softly. "No. I'm sorry Twilight. I... I really am."

She nodded in agreement, a bitter agreement that eased none of her wounds, emotional or otherwise. "May I leave now, sir" she asked with a curtness that was unbecoming of her.

Hoping to get out of this incredibly depressing situation, de Foresti nodded, offering her only a strangled 'Yes'. It offered no comfort to either of them. Watching the mare trot out of the titanic room with a stone pace, de Foresti sighed. He was not paid enough for this, he swore.

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She entered the room with out any sound, any greeting or anything else that would tell Charles his unicorn friend had arrived. The only reason he knew she arrived was because the door creaked slightly as she used her magic to open it. The pink glow was somewhat hard to miss, too. Her behavior was enough to let him on to the fact that something was wrong. The problem was how to deal with it. Honestly, emotional torment was something he was not an expert at. The few times they had comforted each other, it was either on a whim from himself or the unicorn herself. And that was when he had an idea as to what the problem was. Right now, he had less than an idea. So he would wait. Patience was a virtue after all.

Her hooves clopping against the hard floor, a clip-clop sound echoing through the room, she circled around their shared bed, his eyes watching her the whole time. With a low huff, she jumped onto the bed, her added weight shaking him for a moment. "Hi" was all she muttered, before burying her muzzle into the soft pillows without a second word.

Laying on top of the sheets, he twisted to face her, his head resting on his crooked arm. Silence reigned, an occurrence which was usual in their more awkward moments. He took the time to admire her mane. It was a beautiful mane, he could freely admit this. Everything about Twilight was so... excellent. Her will, her passion, even in her somber moods such as

this, her looks were to be admired. Truly she was a being above many others of her race.

Minutes passed. He could hear the uneven breathing, the short choked off gasps of pure misery that made his heart ache for her. Words failed him. Finding a suitable solution was impossible to him at this point, so he did what he could. He waited. More minutes passed. She did not remove her muzzle still, and he was honestly beginning to worry more and more. He could hear the low, pained gasps of her breath from her, proving she had not done a most gruesome deed, but there were shakes in her body. Trembling shakes that came with soft breaths and muted sobs which threatened to leave her, but which she was too strong-willed to admit. She had cried too much already. Why should she continue now, when there was no point, no gain from it save her own humiliation.

Now this was getting annoying to him. He expected an explanation, a torrent of pleas and begs for comfort, which he would all too happily give her for both her benefit and his own. It was maddening. Silence, how he hated it! It left room for empty thought, all the alternate paths this situation could take, whether they end in his happiness or having his help forsaken by the only one he dared trust above all others. The only one he could trust above all others. Damn him for exposing himself so, damn the fragile mind and body he was forced to partake in!

This was madness. He could take no further ignorance to this situation. No more indecision that could only prove to be his inevitable downfall. Forcing himself ever so slightly closer to her, he forced himself up a tad with his bent arm, looking down at the purple mare in a quixotic manner against his own desires. His mouth was dry when he first began to speak, incapable of diving head on into the problems that encircled her with a dangerous grasp. Dear God, women, or rather, mares, were the hardest of all of natures' creatures to deal with, he realized.

But he would find no solution in just hovering over her with an indecision rivalling that of a writer struggling to find the perfect words for a single sentence in his foolishly hopeful magnum opus. No, decisiveness was what was needed now. After all, how could he expect to one day start a military legacy of his own, when he could not even offer aid to, arguably, the one closest to him? With his resolve tempered and found stiff, he began. "Twilight," he said, "do you... wish to talk?"

No spoken response was made. Instead, she shook her still buried head, causing much consternation within himself. He would have to press forward, he supposed. "There's something wrong with you right now mon amie, I can tell" he continued.

She sighed deeply into her pillow. "Just leave me be Charles. I don't want to talk about it. I want peace." She stressed the word carefully.

"And if I seek to continue my little inquisition?" he dared.

Mumbling something or other about over-inquisitive princes, Twilight turned to lay on her back, angled slightly so her eyes would meet his own. They stayed in contemptuous quiet for a few delicate moments as they examined and analyzed the facets and features of the other. Their eyes averted themselves from their companion when the awkwardness of the situation set in once more. "What do you want?" she spoke, suddenly taking interest in the portrait that hung over their bed every night.

"The problem. With you that is." Charles answered, inadvertently looking at the same portrait she was now.

"It's of no matter to you. I... I'm fine. There's no need to worry, see?" she tried giving him an overly large smile that reeked of secrets and lies.

He scowled down at her. Twilight had to admit, he looked older when he scowled, like a disapproving adult scolding a child for bad behavior. Memories of magic kindergarten flowed through her at the thought, and she barely suppressed a shiver of distaste. "You're lying. I can tell from a mile away in fact" he chided.

Thoughts of turning away from him once more crossed her mind, but she decided against it. Was she not trying so hard to act like an adult at times, someone worthy of listening to. Doing something so flagrantly childish would shame both her and make Charles think less of her. Neither of which were acceptable in any way, shape, or form. "Fine. I'll tell you" she at last relented.

Giving only a 'hmm' of approval, Charles laid down on the bed fully, waiting for her. Twilight in turn rested fully on her side, both of them down

lying down and staring at the other with thoughtful expressions. She told him everything. How she had spent the last few weeks gathering the appropriate materials. Writing out delicately worded sentences and paragraphs that would tell her mother, or the Princess, or whoever would receive it of her plight, how she missed them, how she hoped to come back to them one day, but to not despair. To not worry for her, to know that she had at least found a companion in this strange new land. And a request, if they were able, to find her, or to establish mutual contact with her in any way, to just let them know that she was safe, relatively speaking

He absorbed this news with a growing anger, not at Twilight, but at himself. He felt so stupid now! How could he have not known she would be sad in any way to not be able to return to her home? He was caught up in the pleasure of having a companion to share his thoughts with, an interruption of the droll tedium life in this nation brought him, a break from the constant hours of bitter brooding that were his only solace save his studies.

After she had finally finished her spiel, he considered an appropriate response, something that would actually bring some comfort to his most beloved friend. He agonized over this as Twilight looked expectantly at him for any sort of response, until a rather clever, in his own opinion, response came to him. "Do you need to cry?" he tread forward carefully.

The abruptness of the question knocked Twilight asunder. "What?" was all she could say.

"Remember what you said to me, a year or so ago?" he smiled playfully at her, "That it was okay to cry, when you need to for your own sake?"

Contrary to his expectations, Twilight actually started to laugh when he informed her of this, nearly tumbling off the bed in quakes of mirth. "I can't believe you actually remembered that!" she managed to speak through her guffaws.

While her behavior acted contrary to how she was before, he could appreciate the amusement it gave his friend, especially if it distracted her from the more depressing moods. "Ha, it seems I'm more observant than

you would believe mein liebchen. How else could I even attempt to decipher such a mind as knotty as yours?"

Twilight wasn't sure whether to get annoyed at his word usage, or blush at the sudden informality he has used. She was not sure herself whether he knew the word he just used or not was rather personal. Asking seemed like it would bring too many consequences and implications for her to bear, so she let it slide past any comments she could make. "I could say the same of your mind Charles. Sometimes I think you just have a different mindset then anyone else of your species."

His face became rather contemplative at that remark. "And are you not the same in regards to your own species?" he commented.

Pausing, Twilight considered it. As much as she, or her mother, or her most illustrious Princess would have it, she always was different from the other children, filly or human. Where they took the time to partake in child's games that gained them only scrapes and bruises, she partook in all the knowledge she could find, gathering it, absorbing it like a water to a sponge. "I guess you could say that" she admitted.

"Indeed" he replied, before putting a closed fist up to his mouth, coughing into it.

"You okay?" Twilight worriedly asked.

He coughed some more before answering. Removing his hand, he eyed her stubbornly. "I'm fine. What I would like to know, is if you're fine?" he rushed out, hastily attempting to divert her attentions elsewhere.

A little wary at his response, Twilight nevertheless smiled back at him. "Yeah, I'm fine now. Thanks a lot."

He gave her a smile of his own, the rare deed being rather appropriate in his own eyes. "Excellent. I can't have the smartest mare in the land being struck down by her own self!"

There he was again, making her feel all confused, split between having warmth flush her cheeks or rolling her eyes in mock apathy.

Hopefully it would go away soon. Until then however, she gathered herself, rolling over away from him. "So what now?" she queried.

He shrugged. "Would you like to read some Plato?"

"Definitely."

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*August 14, 1824 Anno Domini*

"... And that dear children was how Österreich was made!"

It was a simple day, at least for the now thirteen-year old human prince and purple unicorn. For numerous years now the two had studied under their tutors, confined to the grounds of the palace save for the few times they were allowed on special discourse to explore the capital itself, always with either de Foresti or von Dietrichstein or an unknown agent of the court on watch. Twilight had found a certain love of the city of Wien over time, and Charles could easily understand it. It was a center of a multicultural empire that spanned most of central Europe, and it showed with the beauty and culture of it's populace and architecture.

Right now though they were in the middle of an impromptu history lesson from de Foresti, as usual in the library where they had done most of their studying. Already on the cusp of puberty, Charles had grown a few inches, shying just short of the English 5', making him an average sized man. But it was Twilight who had truly grown a bit. Where before she had stood at half the size of a nine year old, now she was approximately 5'3, and growing day by day. Ponies generally had the same growth period as humans, save the differences brought on by being completely different in almost every way.

Concerns were raised by some of the palace staff as to if she should be allowed to continue to stay in Charles' room with how quickly she was growing, but Charles dismissed them all. For now, his friend stayed comfortably in his bed with him, and it was still more then spacious enough for the two of them. In the library at least, de Foresti had acquired a few pillows for her to lay on whilst they were studying, an excellent solution for the time being.

Charles was particularly happy through the past few months, despite these nuisances to his life. The reason being he had received a cadet's uniform, gray with shining buttons and trimmed white at the edges, and an unofficial rank in the K.u.K as an officer from the Kaiser himself a few months ago, for his excellent advances in his studies. To his own annoyance, he was 'advised' not to wear it every day as he wanted, instead still dressing in his regular black shirt and trousers.

While he was annoyed that he could not actually practice with the soldiers yet, he still took the uniform as a proud sign that he could go even higher. Twilight would swear that he practically glowed the day he got it, so high was his joy. The more the mare knew of him, the more she saw he was obsessed with all things military.

There were numerous events which showed this to her, the least of which brought her up each and every morning since he received the uniform. Every day, between waking up and going to their studies, he would actually drag her out of bed, almost pleading with her to come with him to see the soldiers march outside from the palace windows. She complied if only to see him, it being one of the few things that did make him happy strangely enough, but she had to admit it was an intoxicating sight, hearing the click-clack of boots against stone streets and the almost rhythmic sounds of the bugle boy playing in front of them. Twilight did not like to think about how she was slowly growing more inclined to the military tastes her friend had, so she did not.

Coughing into his gloved hand abruptly, Charles shot de Foresti an amused look. "We've read the books a dozen times now de Foresti. There's no need to worry about us learning."

"It was actually eleven, Charles" Twilight butted in, resting her head on one of her hooves.

"The point still stands."

de Foresti smirked at the two. Dear god, these children, no, these teens were always running circles around him. It was a wonder that he and the Count still attempted to hound them on their studies, the two of them breezing through all the important knowledge of everything they were brought with such ease it was if it was as natural to them as breathing. But

he could still surprise them from time to time. Not now though, not now... "While I can see what you mean Charles, I'm just making sure. Constant repetition is the only way to get such things into your heads after all" he only half-joked.

Charles brushed the comment off with a flick of his hand through his golden locks. Standing up from his seat, he stretched his hands for a moment before intertwining them behind his back, a sudden stoic concentration coming to his face. "True Hauptmann, true. However, I believe we've done enough here now. I think it's time me and the Fräulein here leave for the river. Care to join us?" he asked, a raised brow the only interruption of his calm face.

The Hauptmann's reaction proceeded to bewilder the two teens. For some reason de Foresti's mood had shifted noticeably, an almost... fearful expression on his face. Gulping he answered the prince with a nigh-trembling voice. "Yes, yes, that would be fine. Now if you'll excuse, I must do something... somewhere! I'll be there soon though" he hastily exclaimed, before heading off to god knows where.

Both the unicorn and the prince eyed this behavior with confusion. "What's up with him?" Twilight asked.

Charles put a hand on his chin, developing a perplexed expression. "No idea. Until then however, I believe it would be prudent to use this new found isolation to practice, ahem, certain talents" he mischievously told her.

Jumping off her seat, Twilight answered him as she tried to blow a few loose strands of her mane out of her face. "You sure? I mean, the last few times were rather close to say the least."

He grunted, shrugging her concerns off with ease. Proceeding up to her, he brushed the loose strands of hair out of her eyes, to look her deep in the eyes. "Trust me Twilight, I am assured nothing worse than what occurred at our last practice would happen. Besides, how else will you get the practice?"

Twilight sighed ruefully, giving him a bemused look. Charles had gotten awfully close to her face as he plucked the loose strands away,



neither of them taking their eyes off the other. Neither commented on this. "If you say so" she replied.

With a pinkish glow from her horn, Twilight concentrated her magic, building it up slowly. The prince watched this display with great interest, inching closer to her as the seconds rolled by. And then, without warning a huge blast of magical energy erupted, causing a pink field to surround the two. Before either of them could comment, they disappeared in an instant, the only traces left of their presence being a few black marks on the library floor.

Not a few moments later, just outside the palace enclosure but still within the grounds, a blast of pink energy appeared from out of nowhere. Disappearing within a moment, it left only our two protagonists standing there in a mix of apprehension and success as the bright yellow sun shone down on them. Thankfully no one seemed to be outside to take notice of them, which is what they expected. This part of the palace grounds seemed rather unused. Taking a moment to see if her friend had made it through or not, Twilight clopped her fore-hooves together when it all came together. "Success!" Twilight cheered.

"Indeed. And with less side-effects as well" Charles noted, clearing the trace amounts of soot that appeared on his gloves and shoes off with ease.

After cleaning themselves up, the two checked their surroundings to see if everything had proceeded as plan. "Let's see, decently-sized river, huge palace right next to us, Charles not being a heap of ash on the ground. Yep, I did it!" Twilight listed off in her head.

Charles nodded to himself. "Yes, much better then last time. And we won't have to come up with such excuses anymore as well."

The very thought of coming up with an excuse again made Twilight want to bury her head into the ground. It had all started a few months after the Twilight's first year at the palace. She had been practicing some of her more advanced magics for her entire stay at Schönbrunn in private, due to fear of what would occur after reading of the treatment of magic in this continent. However, Charles had found her once practicing teleportation,

and instead of being nervous or even fearful, it had fascinated him with an intrigue she had not yet seen from the prince, save in the arts of war.

And so they had begun a sort of routine. Twilight would practice any magics she remembered from her schooling days, with Charles doing his best to cover it up. It had not been easy. After their first and only attempt at joint-teleportation a few weeks ago had ended with Charles covered from head to foot in soot. They had nearly gotten de Foresti and von Dietrichstein on them for awhile, but all Twilight knew was that Charles managed to lead them off. When she asked him how he did that, all he replied was the he told them a story involving copious amounts of some fluids. the type of which he didn't elaborate on, a wheel of Swiss cheese, and twelve tonnes of steel. After hearing that, she was sure she didn't want to know the exact details. Twilight proceeded to not ask any further, unsure if he was even telling the truth and not really wanting to know.

Charles shot an annoyed look at the palace itself, starting to tap his foot impatiently. "Now all we have to do it wait for our most knowledgeable tutor to arrive" he said, the word 'knowledgeable' in a mocking tone.

He was given a disappointed look from Twilight. "Don't be so hard on de Foresti Charles, he's probably doing something important. While else would he look so worried?"

"Unless a Griffon or Dragon came down upon him, I'd say he has no eligible excuse."

That was another thing that got to Twilight. The knowledge that their were more sentient races in the world besides man and pony. From what she had read up and from her tutor's reports, their were a race of winged Chimera inhabiting the land known as Scandinavia, known as Griffons, mighty and fierce creatures. Charles had told her nigh-mystic tales of how Griffon troops under the Swedish King Gustavus Adolphus nearly conquered the whole of Germany almost two centuries ago before being driven back by his untimely death. Dragons were a far more mythical creature, known only to inhabit the Orient from what she heard, wherever that was. While their descriptions as gigantic winged-reptiles intrigued her, the fact that they were so rare in number fought off any chance of her getting to see them. But despite these woes of hers, there were far more pressing matters, mainly those involving the teen prince in front of her.

“Charles, do you really believe he would not be worried unless he had just cause?”

His annoyance would not be abated, but he could see her point. Sighing, he dropped his hands to his sides, interlocking them behind his back once more. He proceeded to pace back and forth across the soft grass that was bent beneath his boots, his head lowered so his eyes were focused only on the ground in front of him. Twilight had noticed he had gained a number of quirks lately like that. A variety of behaviors had set in over the years that grew and cultivated over time in the young prince. He would get a stone look on his face when he was in deep concentration, he would put his hands behind his back when he was thinking as well, and he would pace constantly, treading the same ground over and over again as if doing so would tell him the answers he so required.

Now Twilight, her behavior had little to change over the years. She kept up a good face for her friend, providing a helping hoof when needed, though he would never ask her. If there was one thing she knew about him, it was his darn pride. She had become almost used to the dull schedule that would take place everyday at Schönbrunn, the vivid memories of her home, the place she so longed to return to breaking down day by day. It made her want to cry. She wouldn't though. If Charles could have his pride, she could have her dignity.

The next hour or so took place with little to no excitement. The two talked briefly over small things, miscellaneous topics that would prolong the dull boredom that had come down upon them. Twilight sat beneath a large oak tree, the branches offering great shade from the sunlight, while Charles paced in the brisk sun as it boiled down on them below. With how thick his current uniform was, it was a wonder to Twilight that Charles wasn't sweating. Charles would comment at random intervals about how de Foresti was a 'lazy bastard' and Twilight would chide him at such coarse words. Finally, the Hauptmann arrived, looking significantly less troubled than before.

Sprinting towards them with a sluggish paced, he stopped himself when he finally arrived, taking a few key moments to collect his breath. After this short procedure, he greeted them with a rather forced smile. “Good news, my little prince and pony! The Kaiser has requested the

presence of both of you, and needs you to arrive at the throne room as soon as possible” he explained hastily.

“What!? We haven't even begun our workout yet, and now suddenly mein Op-” Charles paused the change his wording, “the Kaiser wishes to speak with us for whatever reason? What does he need?”

Recently, the teachers of the two teens had begun a steady workout procedure using a river that flowed next to the palace. Twilight was more interested in how the river flowed through the center of the city so well, but the most of an answer she got was something involving irrigation and architecture. Nevertheless, Charles took to swimming with ease, even if he seemed excessively tired after each swim. Twilight did not care for swimming that much, finding that every moment she got wet and cold was one she could use to study, but she went along with it, if only to spend time with Charles.

At Charles' question, de Foresti suppressed a gulp before answering his question. “He didn't say. Only told me, to tell you, to say that you were needed. Don't know why, don't really care. All I'll say is that I'd recommend following those instructions. Your Opa is not known for his levity in regards to his demands” the Hauptmann warned.

Behind his back, Charles' fists tightened imperceptibly. Only Twilight could see it from her position, so she rose from her seated spot, walking up to her friends side and taking up where he left off in the conversation. “We'll be there right away. Right mein freund?” she tilted her head towards Charles.

Barely stopping himself from rejecting this proposition, Charles nodded, giving de Foresti a crooked smile. “Fine. We'll be there right away.”

de Foresti smiled back at him, a real one this time. “Danke Charles. I'll see you two soon, hopefully. While I have no idea what's going on, I have an idea. And I'm not so sure you'll like it...”

Before either of them could question what he meant, the Italian sped off, running briskly off somewhere in the palace grounds. Twilight put a

hoof to her muzzle in perplexion. "He was acting really weird there... Well weirder then usual."

"True" Charles said nothing else.

Walking forward for a moment, Twilight then shot him a look, motioning him towards her with a single raised hoof. "Well c'mon then, he did say the Kaiser wanted to meet us, right?"

Charles sighed, before looking bitterly back at the river. It was so hot today, and he needed the practice. But, he knew she was right. "Fine, let's go" he said, walking with her now.

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The throne room of the Kaiser was as resplendent as when Twilight first arrived there four years ago. The only difference now was that there were a few more than well-dressed soldiers flanking the walls, and a couple a dozen or so other persons standing around in fine and puffy dresses and suits, all human. Charles had told her these people were courtiers, people who stood at court and 'basically were paid to look pretty'. The idea seemed frightfully familiar to her. But the epicenter of the room was still the same. The Kaiser, in robes as regal as the ones he wore any other day, sitting on a throne that almost shined in the light. The only difference to him from before were a few added crevices and lines that now dotted his face. The years were adding to the olden monarch, but he still had a decent life-span ahead of him.

But it was the figure that stood next to him that truly caught the eye of the teens. Kanzler von Metternich, in plain buttoned clothes and trousers that still looked amazing on him, only a few gray hairs added to his thin hair showing any signs of age at all. He stood next to the equally aging Kaiser, eyes low and set on the two as they entered, his mouth a thin slit that was prepared to enter a conversation at any moment, but none so daring as to begin it and insult the Kaiser.

Ever since she had arrived at Schönbrunn, von Metternich was one of those few people that Twilight, for whatever reason, had a natural dislike for. Maybe it was the shifty way his eyes moved, maybe it was the bony look his fingers had when you looked at them from anything resembling a distance, or the way he would sometimes appear out of nowhere, and ask her a seemingly innocuous question about how her and Charles' studies

were going. Either way, as much as she didn't want to think such negative thoughts, she had to echo Charles' assessment of von Metternich, or 'the snake'. He truly seemed to live up to the name whenever he came.

When the two entered, Charles still stuck with his hands behind his back, a few whispered gasps were heard from the courtiers, supposedly silent gossip that was loud enough to hear but not loud enough to make our. Even the guards seemed a bit tense today, their fingers holding their muskets just a bit closer to the themselves. All of it directed at Charles. He ignored this blatant insult to his honor, but Twilight had much more trouble keeping it in. Why was everyone acting so weird today? It was madness that was what it was. Ever since he had started these habits lately, the whole of the palace acted as if he had turned into a creature of unenviable terror. Even von Dietrichstein a few days ago gave him a horrified look when Charles began his practices.

Regardless, the Kaiser greeted them with a jubilant gesture, a kind smile meeting them as his wizened old face stretched and ached with a low pain. Ignoring it, he spoke to the two with a hollowed voice that echoed throughout the large chamber, the court silencing itself out of whatever groveling respect they had for their sovereign. "Prinz Franz, Fräulein Sparkle, excellent to see you once more! I trust your studies have been going well since we last met?"

They had both been ordered to the court of the Kaiser at numerous times in the past, always taking a keen and equal interest in his grandsons and his friends studies, but never so abruptly. It was the main reason the two were so confused by this sudden call. Bowing slightly, Charles answered him, Twilight not far behind in bowing. "All is well mein Kaiser. Ich lerne den ganzen Tag über, und Twilight ebenfalls. Although if you would be so kind, I would like to ask about the sudden nature of this visitation."

The Kaiser nodded sullenly, hands gripping the edges of his throne tight. His smile did not leave him though, as he spoke. "Simple. In case you have forgotten, we are having a gathering tomorrow, or a party of sorts if you prefer."

Charles' mouth twitched in abject misery. Forcing a smile, he replied "Ah, yes, I forgot. And you would like me to go I take it?"

“Indeed. However, I was also wondering if your friend would mind coming as well,” the hazy eyes of the Kaiser darted over to Twilight, “What do you say Fräulein Sparkle?”

Said unicorn suddenly felt like crawling under a bed and not getting out for a very, very long time. The eyes of the court fell upon her, as excited whispers and gossip passed on, about the rarely seen and beautiful unicorn from the far-off land of Equestria itself! And to have her arrive at rather prominent social gathering? Stupendous! As the words and whispers danced around her, Twilight timidly answered the Kaiser with a voice that shook admirably little given the circumstances. “Um, Herr Kaiser, I don't think I'd really fit in so well...”

More than a few stunned gasps emerged at her rather informal tone in addressing the Kaiser, but little reaction came from the man himself save a slight smirk. Metternich leaned over to the Kaiser now, whispering a few select words into his masters ear. The Kaiser nodded in approval, causing Metternich to lean back and address the unicorn. “Fräulein, you were a resident of Equestria, were you not?” at her nod to the rhetorical question he continued, “So were you not a patron of the government of the land? Of the court of the most mythical Princess Celestia herself?”

Twilight gulped. She had made a few references to her past, mainly to Charles or de Foresti, one of them telling of her few times at the Equestrian court. She knew Charles wouldn't tell Metternich anything, so that meant de Foresti... Her heart stopped momentarily. Facing no way out with the eyes of the court trained on her, Twilight answered to the best of her ability. “Ja Herr Metternich.”

Charles wanted to hit someone right now, preferably Metternich. He could see what the Kanzler was doing, leading her on with questions, and he couldn't do anything without being rebuked for speaking out of turn at court. The snake had once again coiled itself around its chosen target. “Gut, gut. Now, I think it would be just fantastisch if you were to come. After all, you would like to meet new people here, and since you were at a court before, you would be just fine at our own, correct?” the Kanzler led on.

Twilight tried to find the strength to resist the insistent questioning, but the iron gaze of the Kanzler gave her no pity, no room to retreat. “J... Ja

Herr Kanzler” she at last relented, speaking as little as possible on the hope that she could leave as soon as she could.

Metternich smiled. “Gut. Mein Kaiser, would you be against me ordering a suitable dress for the young Fräulein, to allow her to participate in all of her radiance tomorrow?” he turned towards the Kaiser as he spoke.

The Kaiser shook his head, now fully turning the situation over to the Kanzler. “Ausgezeichnet. Now, run along children, and prepare. We would not have you feeling overwhelmed after all!” he snidely chided them, flicking his hand towards the two.

It was a wonder that Charles kept his face so calm after all of this, and it was more of a wonder that he could bow to the two after that spectacle, the words 'Auf Wiedersehen, mein Kaiser' only just audible. Seeing his purple maned friend still stuck in a state between shame and embarrassment, he tapped her lightly on the flank with his foot, knocking her out of it and allowing her to bow as well. With that at last done they left as soon as possible, Charles only muttering '*Connard*' after he turned away from the throne, so lowly that only Twilight could hear the foreign tongue her friend used at times.

Once the two exited the courtroom and left the ear shot of the guards, they walked through the halls at a steady pace, before Charles suddenly finally hissed out “Damn him!” he added by smashing a fist against the clean white walls, bruising it slightly.

Twilight sighed, still hating herself for giving in so easily to the Kanzler. “I’m so sorry Charles, I, I shouldn’t have let him lead me on so easily” she apologized.

This only caused Charles to snap back towards her with an infuriated look. “What are you apologizing for? That snake was the one to put you on the spot like that before the whole accursed court, not you!” he shouted back.

Her ears lowered themselves against her head. “I know, but I feel like I should have... I should been more resistant, you know?”



“Ha, you can be made of iron and Metternich could still find a way to get into you! Like I said, he's a snake, a man who uses deception and trickery to get what he wants!” he ranted, the blood beginning to boil inside of him.

Twilight's ears perked up again as he spoke with what sounded to be a personal hatred of the man. Metternich seemed unpleasant sure, but Charles seemed to have some sort of grudge against him. The hate was practically rolling off of him in waves as his fist still contacted the wall, the prince himself staring down at the floor, lost in whatever thoughts plagued him now. She'd love to ask him what about Metternich troubled him so, but they were still very stand-offish in regards to their pasts.

They talked and discussed all the philosophy, the history, the mathematics they had picked up with a vigor unknown to most, but their pasts, they kept to themselves. The only thing Charles revealed was that his father was some great man who fought all of Europe once and beat them back numerous times, something that sounded almost like a fantasy to Twilight. But she did not outright dismiss such claims. In a world of magic and such, the impossible can be possible even under the most extraordinary of circumstances.

In regards to Twilight's own past, she told little save small references or unintentional slips of the tongue when with her tutors or Charles. Her tutors, they always glanced at her when she mentioned such things, before proceeding back to their main topics. Taking some time to think about it, she could see why Charles didn't trust them so much now. They were still in the service of the state, and by extension Metternich. But Charles, he seemed to take no interest in her past. It was a welcome relief to her. Every time she tried to think about her home, about her family, about the Princess... it hurt. She could not force it out of her mind even! She had, once, tried in vain to send a letter back home, but that had failed miserably to say the least. Even then though Charles asked her no questions save ones that had him genuinely concerned.

“Twilight?” Charles asked from her side.

Turning back to him, she saw his fist had left the wall, his body slumped to the floor. He looked up at her morosely. “Will you be fine going to the gathering tomorrow?” he said, the concern evident in his voice.

That was a good question. It was true that she had to endure some of the more eventful royal parties during her few-year stay with the Princess, at the Princess' own pleading to 'find some nice people to meet and be friends with!', it was a type of event she would prefer to never occur again. Snobbish nobles vocalizing all their complaints and claim of superiority, everyone else being too quiet or too apathetic to pay her heed, and the Princess herself always being overwhelmed with the hordes that came out to greet and/or unashamedly gain her favor. All in all, if this was anything like that, she was very, very nervous. But she could be brave she supposed, after all not going now would only provoke the wrath of the Kaiser and his Kanzler. "I'll be fine Charles. I mean, how bad can it be?" she confided.

For some reason they both had chills in their stomachs set in when those words were uttered. Strange. Charles pushed himself off the floor, and rubbed his still tender hand with the other. "I suppose we should get some rest then. We cannot be too restful for what tomorrow will bring. We might even have some fun!" he deviously said mostly for her own benefit, and with that he proceeded to continue on to his room.

Twilight followed close behind. While there was still a minute amount of dread left within the mare, she could persevere she supposed. Though she did not dare wonder just how they could possibly have any sort of fun there, perhaps she could at least stay in a corner and blend in with the scenery. That way she could at least survive it without much awkward social interaction that would surely come otherwise. Similar thoughts pursued her as she trotted with Charles back to their room.

A smirk found it's way onto Charles' mouth as a wicked thought came to him. "Besides, I am assured that you'd look absolutely beautiful in a dainty dress!" he joked.

He barely dodged the book that suddenly flew off the shelf and aimed at his head.

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*The Next Day*

"Do... do I *have* to wear this?"

It was the middle of the day, and Twilight was standing on a small podium in slightly larger room with rows of pony-dresses her size hung up on the walls, wearing a dress that could only be described as extremely gaudy. It rode high on her flank, was rather tight around the middle of her torso, and consisted of an array of colors that threatened to make her eyes bleed. The other denizens of the room were Charles himself, watching the proceedings with a not so honest attempt at being interested, Count Mortiz, there to escort the two through the build-up, and a single man, a court dresser, who shall remained unnamed. The dresser gasped in horror. "What do you mean my dear? That looks simply *fantastisch!* I mean, the contours fit perfectly against your legs, the colors match amazingly against your mane! It. Is. DIVINE!" the dresser exclaimed as if he had just eaten a particularly large ham.

Mortiz groaned, while Charles was simply happy he could forgo this idiocy. He had insisted, rather virulently, that he be allowed to wear the cadet's uniform he had received a year ago to the soiree, and by god he had put up an argument. Mortiz gave in just to hurry up, and at this rate he would have to do the same for Twilight if she harassed him with complaints. "But sir, can't I just wear something, I don't know, simple?" the unicorn tried to reason.

The dresser shook his head. "Nein, it cannot be! My job is assign the best outfit available to you, and by God I shall do it!"

Charles and Mortiz wanted to slam their heads against the mannequins. This man seemed to take his rather mundane job with a serious attitude that instead of evoking admiration brought only annoyance to them all. Twilight knew that dresses and suits were expected for ponies at events like this, it shared that much with the parties back home, and along with that it shared the painful and impractical looking clothing that looked as if it was sown by mad-men or mares, and intended for inmates at an asylum instead of high-born nobles and officers of the state.

"Please sir, I really don't mind what I wear, and it doesn't really matter what I look like so long as it looks decent, right?" Twilight pleaded, squirming in the awful attire..

“UN. AC. CEPTABLE!” the dresser enunciated each syllable in a drawn out manner, shouting with a decibel level that threatened to break each of their eardrums.

Twilight’s ears pressed against her head while Mortiz and Charles covered their own with their hands. “Is this really necessary?!” Mortiz roared out, the inanity of this situation finally getting to him.

Charles was tiring of this as well. Eyeing the row of clothes on the wall impatiently, his gaze caught something rather fetching to him. Ignoring the squabbling adults for a moment, he walked over to the outfit, picking it up and examining it thoughtfully. Nodding to himself, he interrupted the incessant yelling. “How about this?” he called out.

The three others in the room turned to him. He held up a dark-blue dress, with finely-trimmed edges with sharp contours. As an added bonus, it actually looked comfortable to wear. Twilight ‘oohed’ at the dress, remarking “That actually looks good!”

“Agreed” Mortiz added.

“Meh, it’s not tight *or* small enough” the dresser whined annoyingly.

Mortiz was getting tired of this idiocy, and it was only the presence of the two ‘innocent’ teens that prevented him from saying something along the lines of ‘Dammit, I am tired of this scheiße!’ “Too bad, I’m tired and the party starts in a few hours. We’re taking it” Mortiz said.

“Where’s it from anyway?” Twilight asked, curious as to how something actually decent got in such a miserly group of clothes.

The dresser harumphed, searching his memory for the answer. “Some place in *Toulon* one of our suppliers brought over. It was called Carousel Boutique I believe.”

Both teens kept this in mind, Twilight hoping to thank the owner for indirectly allowing her to wear something decent, and Charles to see if they made men's suits. He could not fulfill his ambitions without being well-dressed, correct? But now that this mess was over, and after a short spat ensued between Twilight and the dresser over her, in her own words ‘being

able to dress herself!' they left with all due haste, each of them vowing to never return to this man again.

Mortiz dropped them off outside the palace outside the Tiergarten of the palace, rushing off after explaining that he needed to organize some troops for the party. This left Charles and Twilight sitting by themselves waiting for the minutes to pass by, Charles on one of the marble benches that were spread evenly on the outskirts, while Twilight rested on her knees, neither wanting their clothes to get dirty. "So... how awful will this be?" Twilight only half-joked.

Charles shrugged apathetically. "As awful as any other in this nation. A bunch of boring nobles talking and gloating. I can only hope the officers will arrive though. Any such hope of actually interesting conversation brings a tear of hope to my eye!" he made a mock wiping gesture to accentuate the point.

Twilight rolled her eyes, smiling bemusedly out of his view. "Well you actually know most of the people there, right?"

"Unfortunately."

"So you can explain who they are to me? I don't want to be too much of a klutz after all."

He raised a hand to his chin, thinking over it and finding it an appropriate response. He probably should have done this earlier actually, teaching her the names and faces to recognize in court so she could manage in such a disgusting environment, but he could forgive himself easily. For him, talking about court was only one step away from actually being there. It could only be worse if *she* was there. Shuddering at the very thought of it, he answered her. "That seems fine. I'll be your eyes and ears you could say."

"Funny." she deadpanned.

"That's why you're the only one I dare even attempt a joke on" he replied.

“I love you too,” she joked, saying a rare non-sequitur, “But seriously though, how bad will this be?”

At her sudden worry, Charles sneered, casting contemptuous eyes towards the center building of Schönbrunn where the part would take place. “Don’t worry Twilight. I’m sure it will be the best night ever” he said in a tone that dripped with sarcasm.

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*Moments before the party*

“Perhaps you should have dressed more... *appropriately*, mein Prinz.”

Charles eyed the guide with a fearsome glare. The stout, shallow-faced hatted-man who was leading the two through the halls quickly backed off when the brown eyes of the Prinz bored into him, the Prinz’s annoyance at all these events finally seeping through. Twilight leaned over to him, dragging him down by the cuffs of his gloves with her mouth. “Did you need to be that rude?” she chastised.

“When he’s being a nuisance? *Yes!*” he venomously declared.

Twilight looked as if she would continue it, a scenario that Charles was more than willing to follow up on. While they were friends, they differed on key points on how to deal with people, like now for example. Fortunately for them, the guide interrupted any potential scuffles by announcing “We have arrived, sir and madame.”

Stopping, the two looked to see the guide standing in front of a pair of large oak doors not too dissimilar from the other ones in the palace. The guide pushed the doors open, opening up a madhouse. A cornucopia of persons, human and pony littered the great hall that revealed itself to them. Hanging over the incredible display was a humongous chandelier, with hundreds of clear glass prisms hanging from it, glistening from the last hints of sunlight shining through the clear glass windows that dotted the walls. As far as the eye could see were the most fanciful dresses and suits in the land, worn by human and pony nobles or the few non-noble-born officers that were permitted entry into the gathering. It was a harvest of the old world values,

Coughing into his hand, the guide winced as the collective eyes of the room fell upon the new guests, silence overshadowing the usually boundless chatter in a rare moment.. "Introducing, Seine Hoheit, Durchlaucht Prinz Franz of Österreich, und Madame Twilight Sparkle, of '*Equestria*'!" he shouted out, announcing the last word with a hint of an amused smirk.

A wave of polite clapping came forth from the human guests, as the few ponies clopped their hooves against the ground in their own mock version of clapping. Strangely enough, both parties giggled audibly on the mention of '*Equestria*.' Charles leaned over to her subtly once more, whispering just loud enough to hear over the debacle 'Just smile and wave' to her. The advice seemed rather prudent as Charles leaned back and proceeded to do just that, putting on a frigid smile that fooled the crowd easily. Anxious yet appeasing, she followed, slowly waving a hoof at the crowd with an out-stretched smile that would not fool anyone up close, but from a distance more than served its purpose.

The impromptu greeting ended as soon as it began though, as the guests turned back to their own things, only a few pairs of eyes keeping track of Charles at best, who kept up his recent hand behind back posture. Charles himself sighed in gratitude that the introduction ended quickly, while Twilight was left stumped as to what had just happened. Even back home, things rarely getting this hectic back home. It was unnerving to her, and from the way Charles looked the feeling was mutual. The guide proceeded to leave them, tipping his hat at them as he left.

"Now just stay by me, and have some general rules," Charles said, beginning to list off, "Don't look at anyone in the eye without greeting them. Don't greet them without them greeting them first. And above all, try for the love of Christ to not have someone greet them."

"Excellent advice" she grumbled.

"Hier, mein liebchen, it is," he replied with a smirk, "But for now, follow me. I know enough of this side of my family to understand who to avoid or not."

As they began to walk through the pure-white floor, Twilight was astounded at the number of guests and the implications of Charles' words. "These are *all* your family members?"

He took an eyeful of the patrons here before answering. "About eighty percent of them I believe. Otherwise it's just the odd Hungarian or Italian noble, or some other dignitary or officer. Not a diverse crowd, I know, but there's a reason my mother's side of the family gets around so much."

Easily dodging one of the larger groups of people, Twilight continued her questioning. "This is just your mothers side? I wouldn't even want to imagine the size of your fathers side!" she exclaimed.

"You would not be astounded by their size, nor by the composition of my family on my fathers side" he said darkly.

That turned her off further questions in that direction. Besides the fact that he was obviously uncomfortable with the familial questions, it was taking a while just for Twilight to comprehend this much family on one side. She would not dare delve further into his clan without sufficient knowledge on the current nobles here, and she doubted this would be a visit for knowledge.

They had just found their way through another clog of nobility before a high-pitched voice called out "Fränzchen!" and Charles found himself being accosted by a plain-faced elderly woman with graying hair, his face being grasped in a massive hug that forced him into her chest. "Mein Fränzchen, it's so excellent to see you again!" the elderly woman greeted enthusiastically.

"Grüß dich, Oma" he mumbled through her grasp.

'*His grandma?*' Twilight thought, taking a closer look at the plain yet kind-looking woman. Her dress was as splendid as the rest of the outfits here, even more so in fact considering who her husband was, yet she had a carefree attitude as shown by the fact that she was so openly hugging her grandson who was just a few inches taller than her. "Oh, and you have a little pony friend as well! Hello!" she continued, letting go of Charles to his not-so-secret pleasure, grasping one of Twilight's hooves with her hand and shaking it amiably before Twilight could even tell what was going on.



"It's so nice to see the pony who's been making Fränzchen feel so well since she came. He was so grumpy before you arrived, but now he's just a barrel of sunshine!" she cheered, leaving Twilight now to pinch one of Charles' cheeks in the way only grandmothers do.

As Twilight was left staring at her hoof, wondering just what in the world happened, Charles' grandmother was unknowingly causing said grandson massive amounts of both pain, embarrassment and annoyance. "Isn't that right Fränzchen?" she cooed.

Having to remind himself for a moment that his grandmother was one of the few relatives he didn't hate, Charles forced an arctic smile. "Ja, Oma. Now if you would be so kind, me and Twilight need to leave, we're meeting other guests later" he almost begged, hoping to get out of this as soon as possible.

Gasping in a thunderstruck manner, his grandmother let go and nearly wept in melodramatic sorrow. "Oh I'm so sorry Fränzchen! I'll leave you two be. Now, just don't get into any trouble!" she warned before at last leaving.

As Charles was nodding at her as she left, rubbing his still sore cheek, Twilight was staring absent-mindedly between her shaken hoof and where his grandmother used to be. "What just happened?" she asked blankly.

"Meine Oma" he said, simmering.

"Ah." she said, not really understanding yet not actually sure she wanted too.

There was a perverse silence for a few moments till Twilight spoke again. "So... Fränzchen?" she could only just prevent herself from laughing.

The way his face suddenly turned red proved to her the *heavenly* usage she would get out of that word. "Don't. Say. A *thing*" he ordered through gritted teeth.

She gave him an oily smile, trotting away from him a bit before calling back to him, making sure to draw out the syllables as much as possible, "Suuuure Fränzchen!"

With a series of giggles erupting from her mouth, Twilight trotted away in a mock dainty manner. Feeling cross, Charles followed after her, but to each of their dismay seemingly out of nowhere a new group of nobles seemed to spring out of their lines of sight, blocking their view of the other. "*Merde*" Charles cursed.

"Oh dear" Twilight said on her end.

Both tried to find their ways through the crowds, but by this point the swarms of feet and hooves were too tightly packed for them. Neither could see the other now, causing quite a dilemma. "Problem, Franz?" Charles heard from behind him, and his heart sank as he recognized the voice.

"*Prinz Metternich*," Charles said in a voice devoid of joy.

Turning, he saw the Kanzler himself, wearing what he could describe nicely as a 'devil's grin', or in more crass words, as a 'shit-eating grin.' He stood in his same old plain yet still fanciful suit, hands behind his back and looking approvingly at him. "It's so nice to see you here Prinz Franz. And behaving like a proper Prinz von Österreich too. How joyous an occasion for us all!" the Kanzler remarked.

Charles's hidden hand tightened, though from Metternich's view it simply seemed as if the prinz posture stiffened. Not noticeably enough for most eyes to see, but for someone with Metternich's experience in reading people, was easy enough. "Joyous indeed Kanzler. But dare I ask why you would deem to greet me, instead of staying at the Kaiser's side?" Charles asked innocently.

Metternich's mouth turned from a grin into a thin line, a fact which nearly made Charles replete with joy. It came back within an instant though, but that fact that he had irritated the snake was enough for Charles. "The Kaiser is at the end of the room, holding a small show for some of the guests," he raised an inquisitive brow, "Though I should ask where Fraulein Sparkle is. After all, is she not foreign to this setting, a delicate charm that should be properly handled with care."

*'You bastard, you practically forced her to come!'* Charles wanted to scream, but he did not. This was a public setting after all, and the only point of this verbal spar was to see who could incite who and make an arse out of himself in to the whole crowd. And he would rather damn himself than let Metternich make a fool of him! But that jab at Twilight was almost too much, even for his tempered patience. He could hold though. Metternich was a snake, that he could be assured of, but other then pokes and prods he could do nothing to him. "Fraulein Sparkle is perfectly fine. In fact, she assured me herself that she could handle herself, so confident was she of her own social grace!"

It was a outright lie sure, but it was told with a straight enough face that Metternich did not question it. At least, not externally. The Kanzler made a small humming noise before responding. "Well if that is the case, perhaps I should go find her? A young filly like her surrounded by such strange environments could bring disastrous results. It would be only my duty as a gentleman to ensure her safety." Metternich spoke with the voice of a saint.

Charles did not know how he prevented himself from strangling the man at this very moment. Probably because it was a public venue and nothing else, but it was still just an urge barely defeated. His passive smile became one tinged with a passionate anger, his eyes sharp and hateful now, an expression that almost forced Metternich back. The Kanzler vaguely wondered if he had tread too far at last with the young prinz. But what the former Prince Imperial said bewildered him with its almost playful tone. "If you would wish it Herr Kanzler. Until then though, I must be off. Places to see, people to meet..."

He began to step past Metternich, stopping just as he stood by him. Charles leaned over to the Kanzler, and spoke "If you dare hurt her, *I will break you*" with the enough audible hatred that Metternich did step back now, simply out of the pressure it put on him.

Right after that Charles walked away as if nothing happened, humming a delightful tune to himself. Metternich stood there, his skin shaking with chills now. A random patron of the party walked over to him inquiring as to his problem. "Is there a problem, Kanzler Metternich?"

Metternich breathed deeply before answering, casting a wary look at the direction Charles left through. "I don't know why, but that little bastard scares me."

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Scared would be too extreme a word to describe Twilight's condition at the moment. Despite the general unfamiliar atmosphere, she focused on the positives, as she generally did in bad situations such as this. But calling her unafraid was simply untrue, as she was anything but. Everyone else towered above her, even the other ponies being grown adults that stood even above the humans, and both sides treated her with a forced apathy when she tried to plead for help or some form of guidance. She would persevere though, she had too! *'I mean, I can't rely on Charles for everything here after all,'* she resolved herself.

Trotting forward slowly with her hooves clopping softly against the hard floor, head moving back and forth across the vast swathes of people that towered over her, looking for some sort of salvation. Unfortunately for her, salvation did not come. Instead, a well-dressed unicorn colt in a white suit and tie stepped in front of her, who was only just taller than her by a few inches. With shimmering white fur, a well-pressed cyan coat, and a golden-blond mane, he looked more a noble than anyone else here. Twilight hoped that perhaps this colt was a nice pony, one who could perhaps help her through this predicament. These thoughts were immediately dashed however when he stared down at her with pure contempt, grunting at the mere sight of her. "And just who are you, that would get in the way of the Prinz Blaublut himself!?" he screeched at her.

Her legs shivered slightly as the colt, whose name she hoped was chosen intentionally. Not backing down in the least, she stared back at him with all the courage she could muster. "Ich heie Twilight Sparkle, Herr Prinz. Didn't you see the whole intro thing a while back?" she explained, waving a hoof towards the general direction of their point of entrance.

The Prinz, who she could already tell acted nothing at all like the type of Prinz Charles as, snorted arrogantly. "Bah, as if it was worth my attention! Why would I even pay attention to the son of that Corsican tyrant, when it can be assured that he's little better by virtue of birth! That is how science works after all" he explained with total assurance in himself.

One of Twilight's eyes began to twitch almost sporadically, the words he said being understandable, yet not. How someone could say something so very unscientific and just plain stupid that it seemed surreal to her. Plus, no one ever insulted her friend. That was a stance she would always stand by. Gathering her bravery, Twilight stepped forward, getting dangerously close to the other unicorn. It was so unexpected an action that the colt backed up before he even realized what he was doing. "Listen here mister, don't you dare insult people like that, when you don't even know them! So you'd better stop right now, or else!" she threatened.

Blaublut was visibly shaken, perhaps pathetically so considering that the purple unicorn was smaller and not actually intending to hurt him, considering they were in a public venue, but nonetheless he was terrified. That terror was quickly replaced though with a furious scowl. "You insolent cur, I'll be sure to make you as miserable as possible when I'm-"

"What is going on here?" a new voice interrupted.

The two unicorns turned to the new arrival, a tan-coated earth pony who towered over the two, obviously an adult. He wore a gray buttoned uniform, similar to the other officers that were normally human. It wasn't that rare a sight apparently, as no one around them took heed of it, though considering the general crowds apathy to recent events save a few prying eyes perhaps this was understandable indeed. The earth pony sent a glare Blaublut's way, causing the arrogant noble to back off from the sheer intensity of it. "Well, what's going on I say?" he asked once more when no response came.

Blaublut gathered himself a bit, sucking up some air to make his chest seem puffed out and make him look bigger than he was. It did not work. "That little cretin over there disrespected me! I demand immediate compensation!" the arse complained.

The officer pony snorted, not believing this in the least. "Oh of course Herr Blaublut. Und Russisch sind intelligent" he sarcastically declared.

"But-"

“But nothing. Get out of here, bother some other person that actually deserves it instead of this fine girl” the officer cut him off, barely raising his voice above that of casual annoyance.

Blaublut looked as if he would offer some more of a protest, but another glare silenced him immediately. The Dummkopf trotted away in a huff, but not before giving Twilight a dirty look. One which he quickly stopped when she returned it in turn. “Scheißker!” the officer muttered.

“Excuse me sir,” the officer looked down to see that Twilight was now right in front of him, smiling upward gratefully, “Thanks for helping me with that bully!”

“No problem little one. Just doing a gentlecolts duty after all. What else could I do when a child such as yourself is in danger?”

It irked he that he called her a child, she was thirteen already darnit, but she would let it slide out of gratitude. “It’s just you really got into him. I can’t believe a jerk like that is a Prinz!”

The officer was astounded at what she said for a moment, before small bursts of laughter that threatened to escape his muzzle. “What, he’s acting like he’s a real Prinz still? Ha! It’s common knowledge he’s a Prinz alright. Prinz of a small town on the Russian border. Yet he still acts as if it makes him the Archduke himself, mostly to compensate for how small he is at this age. In both ways I hear. Makes him fit in rather well in this environment though I suppose...” he said darkly, a frown forming on his muzzle.

At Twilight’s confused look at this statement he stopped such dark thoughts. “Anyway, what are you doing out here alone? Not to be rude, but you seem a bit lost in this place.”

She blushed in embarrassment, beginning to explain things to him abruptly. “Well you see, I came with my friend Charles, I mean Franz, and we got separated so yeah...”

The officer was visibly interested at the mention of her friend, his ears perking up in surprise. “Prinz Franz, eh? So you’re a friend of his then? How is he?” he asked.

Twilight tilted her head to the side at the sudden interest in Charles, but decided there couldn't be anything too harmful in telling him such things. She hoped. "Oh, he's doing good. We're both progressing on our studies well, and he's generally been okay. Why do you ask?" she queried.

Giving her a pleased smile for her curiosity, the officer answered her question. "Simple. I take a keen interest in promising military minds such as his. Considering who his father was it's practically a guarantee for me to follow where his career goes," he paused to lean forward and take a closer look at her, "And from what I've heard of you Fräulein, you're one to watch out for as well."

Speechless was just one way to describe Twilight at this moment. She was astounded! He considered *her* a promising military mind? Was he crazy or something? There was no way at all she of all people could be anything at all resembling a strategist. Feeling anxious now, she decided to confront this assumption. "I'm sorry sir, but I don't really think I could be described as anything resembling a military strategist. I mean, I don't exactly care for war as is, why would I even think of fighting or even organizing it?"

The officer hummed lowly, thinking over that. "I suppose you could say that Fräulein, but I'm afraid it never matters whether you care for war or not. War has a habit of dragging the talented towards it whether they want to or not" he said, indulging in his own philosophic stance.

That thought scared Twilight more than a tad worried. If she was at all skilled in the art of war, would she be drafted into fighting? Would she have too? Charles made no secret of his love for one day starring in the field of combat, but would she go with him? She had promised him not long ago that she would follow him, help him through his trials until he had fulfilled his ambition, but could she do that? It was a sobering thought, one that threatened to destroy what little good mood Twilight had left.

Sensing the growing despair within the purple mare, the officer tapped her horn with his hoof, knocking her out of her spiral before it could descend further. "Hey, don't worry. We're in a time of peace now, so I'd hardly think you have to worry about matters such as this soon. Even so, you're still practically a filly after all. I doubt the officers would demand

someone of your size to even fight on the front lines, let alone be an officer.” he attempted to comfort her.

That was a very potent explanation, Twilight had to admit. It wasn’t as if there was actually going to be a war anytime soon, right? Though considering that Twilight herself had next to no knowledge of the diplomatic relations, territorial claims, and numerous other vendettas the governments of Europe had with one another this might have been an optimistic yet still impetuous attitude. Either way though, she was calmed. “I guess you’re right sir. By the way, what’s your name?” she asked, realizing she had spoken to him for a while now without even asking.

“Oh, my name?” the officer replied, a little astonished she was actually interested in knowing it, “Antoine de Prokesch-Osten. *Major* Antoine de Prokesch-Osten. Und I already know of you, Fräulein Sparkle.”

Twilight was a bit perturbed at his... *human* sounding name. Not that it bugged her or offended her anything, but it struck her as rather queer. But maybe they just had different naming standards over here? Who knew? There were a few other questions she would have liked to ask, like how he was the first colt with any sort of officer ranking among all the ponies she had seen so far, compared to the other ponies here who were at best rotten nobles. And what his cutie mark looked like, but that would be rather personal to just suddenly ask.

But in the end, it was no matter to her at the moment. She did a little curtsy towards him, or the best she could do considering she couldn’t tug at her dress what with her having hooves instead of hands and using her magic for the mundane task of simply tugging at her dress seemed both needless and lazy, but it was the gesture that mattered. Antoine smiled down at her once more as she spoke. “Danke Herr Antoine. I don’t want to impose on anything, but I was wondering if maybe you could help me find my friend... If it’s not a bother or anything to you!” she hastily added, not wanting to offend in the least.

He chuckled at her nervousness. It was rather endearing, he had to admit, to find someone so polite and thankful at these gatherings. But it was just improbable, not impossible he supposed. “Ja Fräulein, I promise I’ll help you. It’s no problem at all to me,” he agreed, “Where was your friend then?”



“Oh, over there” she pointed a hoof where they last met up, still swarmed by people.

‘*Well, that will be a problem*’ he thought dryly. There were a lot of people there, none of them the size of a thirteen-year old human. This was going to take a while, he could just tell. But he made a promise to this little filly. He couldn’t take that back now, could he? “Okay then, follow me Fräulein. We might have to circle around the crowds to find him” he told her, beginning to trot around some of the larger crowds.

Twilight began to follow him, but she couldn’t deny she was a tad worried. This was a simply huge room after all, who knows how long it would take them to find Charles? And maybe her friend was right now facing some dilemma or crisis, and needed her help!? These thoughts nibbled at her mind, making her several sorts of worried. But there was nothing she could exactly do at the moment save follow the helpful major. After all, even if she could bring out some spell that would allow her the ability to track her friend, she was told quite strictly by Charles every time she offered it in the past that it was a *very bad idea*. From what she read up on the rules of this land, she had to concur reluctantly. At least she could be assured her friend wouldn’t get into any trouble.

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“And these are the nephews of some of the court mares nephews, Silberlöffel und Diamantdiadem. Aren’t they just precious?”

“Um, yes, precious...”

Charles felt like banging his head against a wall. He had been trying to link back up with Twilight. Unsuccessfully considering where he was now. Every five steps, *every goddamn five steps*, he was interrupted by yet another member of his extended family, wishing to trade false pleasantries and such for valuable time. As much as he would like to stop his family obligations though, it would be considered rude in the least to bolt out of these talks. Besides, they were family, no matter how far off they were from him in terms of relations. Family loyalty was one of the first things his father and his grandfather had taught him, one of the few similar lessons in fact. He held true to it.

But he digressed. Currently he was being forced by *yet another* aunt or something into taking a good look at two small baby fillies in a stroller, both from two of the court mares. She was here to show off their 'absolute preciousness' and other such nonsense to the public, which is what they were doing right now, looking up at him with excellent facsimiles of happy baby faces. Charles was not convinced though. There was something almost off about the two. "Don't you just want to pet them?" his aunt cooed.

He could tell that was more of a demand than any sort of request, so he reluctantly complied. Taking a tentative hand and patting one of them slowly on the head, Charles could perhaps admit that they were in fact cute. If not for the fact that immediately after that, one of them, for he still could not remember which was which, bit his hand with a huge chomp. With a loud 'aargh!' Charles pulled his hand back, nursing it from the excruciating pain that now lanced through it. "What in the world was that?" he hissed at his aunt.

"Oh, aren't they precious?" she replied, seemingly ignorant of his pain and petting the young fillies on the head.

Charles wasn't sure if it was the after-effects of the pain, or his some hazy visions, but he could swear the two little demons were grinning at him. That couldn't be it though, they're only fillies, right? Awful, horrible fillies admittedly, but fillies nonetheless. Excusing himself wordlessly, Charles left out, still holding tightly onto the bitten hand.

He had next to no idea where Twilight was. He had tried to find some way through the absolute mess of the crowded room, ear-pounding at the incessant talking and conversation that went on around him. He could barely hear his own thoughts in this torrid mess. Trying to find some way to Twilight, Charles nearly bumped into the back of another person, a lady if the fact they were wearing a dress was any indication. "Excusez-moi madame" he said, slipping back into his mother tongue for a moment.

As the lady turned to him, Charles was stunned at what he saw. An absolutely diamond of a lady, dressed in the most stunning red gown he could see. Her every feature was practically glowing to him, her auburn hair, her oak eyes, everything called to him, such was her grace. He could feel his heart beating ever faster just as she gave him a small, curved smile. It threatened to make his face erupt into a molten mess of emotional

consternation. "There is no need to excuse yourself to me, young sir. May I have the honor of knowing your name?" she asked with an almost salacious wink.

Finding his mouth suddenly dry, Charles answered to the best of his abilities. "Prinz Franz, Duke of the Reichstadt, and your most humble admirer, Lady...?" he trailed off, almost slapping his own face at the incredibly obvious flattery.

Laughing politely at the not-so-subtle compliment, the lady took his right hand with her own left, leaning over it and kissing the knuckles of it softly. He could almost feel his heart stop as she performed this most dazzling feat on him. "Prinzessin Sophie von Bayern. And I have heard of you, Prinz Franz. I must say, you seem quite the mystery," she lifted herself from her leaned position, bringing her face awfully close to Charles' own and cupping his chin with her hand, "And I must say, mysteries appeal to me."

Now Charles might have been a thirteen year old, sure, but he had enough common sense to both know what was going on, and to ask her further questions before he proceeded. Besides, he could have sworn he had heard of this Princess of Bavaria before. He just forgot where. Inside his mind there was also the niggling thought that he was ignoring his best friend in order to cash in on the off-chance he could possibly get anywhere close to intercourse with this woman, who despite being slightly shorter than him looked much older, eighteen he suspected. "Well I would hope to be appealing to one as beautiful as you. I am amazed no one else has gotten the gall to approach you as of yet."

She smirked, for some hilarious reason she knew but he did not yet. "That would be because my husband to be, the Archduke Franz Karl, would not normally appreciate such attempts on my maidenhood. At least, if he had the spine to not differ any such responsibilities to me."

'*The Archduke?!*' he wanted to shout out in absolute horror. Suddenly it made sense now as to why this lady was not the highlight of every man in the rooms day. Archduke Franz Karl himself was her husband, second to the throne next to Archduke Ferdinand. She was set to be wed to a Prince of House Habsburg itself! Finding a very sudden urge to get the hell out of there as soon as possible, half out of a desire to find Twilight, half out of a

fear for whatever retribution might incur if he was caught badly attempting to woo a married woman. Yet... he could not exactly leave yet. There was something intoxicating about her presence, one that beckoned him to learn more. It was scary, yet oh so tempting. "And you would prefer to spend time with me then your own husband?"

"Why of course. Only thirteen, and you've already captured the interest of quite many people here. And with a tongue as rapacious as yours, I can see why!"

Fighting back a blush at the compliment, Charles smiled back at her. "You do me a good kindness with your presence madame. But, might I ask what you seek of me?"

"Simple," her tone was so innocent, yet it contained a lustrous quality that drew him in further to her, "You bely a certain... attractiveness, and I have had little fun with a man since I was set to be wed. And my husband to be is certainly less than willing to lay with me."

Sophie spoke rather bitterly, hinting at Charles the problem in their relationship. Feeling his heart beat steadily faster at what she was implying, Charles asked further. "And you would ask what of me?"

"Whatever you wish. I am an experienced woman after all, and I'm certain that a boy of your age could do with my experience. And I could use the time of a fine young specimen of manhood such as yourself."

As much as he wanted to be disgusted or turn away from this act out of some sense of morality, the offer was tantalizing. What remaining part of him that wanted to pursue Twilight was silenced dutifully, as his smile turned predatory. "You have a place I assume?"

Sophie looked wondrous when she smiled, he thought idly. Grasping his hand with her own, she whispered "I know a place."

Sophie leading the way for him, Charles felt a dark pit in his heart. While some would complain about such acts between a young man of his age and a woman, this was almost common in the Austrian court. It was a mark of pride of sorts to have bedded a lady, especially at his age. Particularly the Archduke's bride to be. That did not stop the growing self-

loathing at what could only be a betrayal of his friend and his own self-restraint. It was too late now though. Far too late.

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“So, where are you from?”

It was a sudden question, one the Major asked without turning back to her, still trotting forward with her behind dutifully. “Equestria.” she answered without hesitation, wondering why he asked when it was announced earlier.

“I see.” he replied with more than a little bit of doubt evident.

Twilight was put off by his unconvinced attitude, deciding to confront him about it. “What, you think I’m not from the place I was born in?” she said incredulously.

“I’m saying you came here at a young age, due to traumatic events, and thus might be more open to fantastical scenarios in order to explain them” he offered, deftly dodging past a particularly bulbous man.

“Fantastical scenarios!?” she with an even greater furor than before, drawing a few wandering eyes to them.

Nearly jumping at the outburst, Antoine turned to her and put a hoof to her mouth. “Don’t be so loud, okay?” he asked, and when she nodded morosely he moved the offending appendage.

“What I mean is, you’re young, and you were scared. I know horrible, horrible things were done to you,” he said with the deepest of sympathies, “But perhaps, just perhaps, you could admit that you thought some things up? Just to make the pain lessened? We all know Equestria is a fairy-tale at best, and an unknown hell-hole at worst. How a little filly like you could have ever gotten out of there is an explanation I’d like to hear, but you don’t have it, do you?”

“But I do remember!” she spoke quieter now, but with much less force, “I was-”

She stopped as she reminded herself of her own lack of reflection on the events that brought her here. The sudden destruction of her peaceful

life, the deaths, the large imposing figures that haunted her nightmares, even if she did not show it on the outside. Dear Celestia, she had almost told this man of things she would not dare tell her closest confidant here. And by this point, with her holding it in for years, it did not seem all that undesirable. Taking her silence as a gesture of recognition, Antoine continued for her. "You were scared, and so you made it up. I'm sorry that you had to deal with the mean-spirited laughs of these people to realize it, but hopefully you can get over it. After all, it's not everyday a filly of your station gets to live in what is practically the center of central Europe, am I right?" he said, raising her head to meet his eyes.

Dread seized Twilight, that even if she wanted to tell him now, tempting as it was, she had no proof of her claims. Sure, she could use her most advanced magics to prove she was not in fact a liar or delirious, but that would surely provoke a wrath unheard of to her. At least, that was what she feared. So, burying her own tearful protest, Twilight nodded, slow and sorrowfully. "Yeah... you're right." she lied, both to him and herself.

"Good to see you're seeing sense. Now, hopefully we can find your friend. He'll hopefully not have been nailed by the nobility of this place..."

Nodding slowly, Twilight complied when he sought back on his well-plotted path. Though his words seemed hazy in their intent, she could definitely tell he meant something bad by that. But what could possibly happen here that was so bad? He was among family and friends, was he not? She was in more danger actually, as shown with the jerk-face prince earlier.

"Fräulein Sparkle, guten Tag!" a familiar old voice called out.

Surprised by the sudden call, Twilight found the Kaiser and a large retinue of variously dressed individuals, most the same white skin as he, though there was a tan-skinned man among them, a fact which drew her curiosity due to the general similarity in the skin color of most humans she had seen here. It was not like back home where there were a variety of colors mixing together, Germanic Caucasian knights intermingling with red and tan-skinned peoples of various dress and status with good graces towards one another. She never asked why, mainly due to a rudeness inherent in asking questions based on race that both her mother and the Princess instilled in her, yet she found it strange nonetheless.

Nevertheless, the Kaiser motioned her over with a flick of his hand. Twilight complied readily, trotting away from Antoine, who it had took a moment to discover that his charge was now meeting the Emperor of Austria himself at the Emperor's own request. Nearly stunned into unconsciousness from the sheer implausibility of the situation he had found himself in, Antoine followed after Twilight, still having a duty to her after all. As they arrived before the Kaiser, who was standing almost hunched-back with his personal guests waiting by his side, a few guards circling them like vultures to a carcass, he greeted Twilight with a warm smile. "Fräulein, excellent to see you again little one. I trust the party is going well for you?" he greeted politely.

Bowing to him out of civility, Antoine doing so with her, her muzzle almost touching the floor, Twilight smiled at him in turn from her leaned position. Despite having a generally unpleasant time so far, she would not dare insult the monarch of this land in his own party. Socially awkward as she was, she could understand such basic concepts such as this. "Excellent mein Kaiser. Danke once more for inviting me" she said only a bit unsteadily, much better then she thought she would do, a fact which made her a bit proud.

Twilight and Antoine rose from the ground, awaiting his response. "Gut, gut," the Kaiser's croaked out, his spider-like fingers intertwining in a bony mess, "I am pleased you could come indeed. Though may I ask why you are here with this soldier, instead of my grandson?"

Antoine quickly stepped forward. "Mein Kaiser, forgive me, but I have sought to help this mare, for she and her friend have been separated. This is quite the hectic gathering you see, so sadly it would only make sense that such young souls would have trouble getting through the place. I took it upon myself to help her until we could find her" he explained.

The Kaiser hummed softly, placing one of his pale hands on his chin. "You are Antoine de Prokesch-Osten, are you not?" at the pony's nod he continued, "Ah yes, I've heard of you. Highest ranked pony in the K.u.K, are you not?"

Antoine's chest puffed out in a show of pride. He was suddenly very glad he had gotten his uniform cleaned before he had arrived. "Ja, mein Kaiser."

"Hmm, you're a credit to your race Major. We need more good ponies like you these days, especially with the growing subversive elements among the minorities in the state."

"Danke, mein Kaiser. Your words honor me."

Despite knowing it was a compliment, Twilight felt something terribly off about how the Kaiser had chosen his words. Perhaps it was the usage of 'your race', but whatever it was practically screamed of some sort of prejudice. And prejudice was something she cared naught for, remembering all her moral lessons especially. The Princess had always sought to teach her the goodness and kindness of all peoples, pony and human, even when it did not show itself, and to not judge others based on who or what they were. Such thinking seemed impractical in this land though, as while things were admittedly not nearly as bad as she had first thought all those years ago, it had dawned on her that it was a more morally gray situation here. And she did not like that in the least. Moral grayness, that was a tough prospect to swallow, considering her constant plain and simple logic before arriving here.

But nonetheless, during her off-topic tangent the Kaiser had focused on her once more. "Madame Sparkle," he spoke, surprising her with the sudden change in terming, "Seeing as my grandson is away as of now, I would ask that you stay here with me. He is sure to arrive here sooner or later after all, and I would love to have you by my side, understanding the way gatherings like these work after all." he offered kindly.

Despite the gracious nature of the offer, Twilight felt that she had to decline. "Forgive me sir, but I really do need to find Charles on my own. After all, who knows what he's gotten into while I'm away from him?" she joked.

"Ha, indeed madame, indeed. Nevertheless though, he needs the time to himself. You two are practically attached at the hip and flank after all, and besides, he needs to get to know the court better. If he is going to



be the Prinz von Österreich as we wish him to be, he must learn all the nuances on his own. And I'm sure the nobles love him, charming as he is."

While she could see the point in his words, Twilight felt they belayed a more sinister meaning. 'A proper Prinz von Österreich?' Charles made no secret of his displeasure of being at the palace whenever he felt possible, claiming they were trying to mold him into some Germanic toady, and when before she could pass it off as some more of his irregular bitter speakings, the Kaiser's words made her think otherwise. It was an almost chilling thought indeed. And she did not appreciate the comment about them being attached, but that was just another thing to keep hidden. Sullenly, she realized she was hiding a lot of things lately.

Forcing a smile, she answered the Kaiser at last after her deliberation. "Ja mein Kaiser. I... would love to. Your kindness is overwhelming."

That was another thing she didn't care for. The almost blatant flank-kissing that went on with the Kaiser. While she certainly liked him and his almost grandfatherly aura, she was told again and again by Charles and her tutors to act all proper and such with him, never acting informally. They told her just using 'Herr Kaiser' in her first meeting with him long ago was almost an insult in its forceful informality. Back home with the Princess, she always hinted at her always bowing subjects to not act so formally, to treat her as just another mare. One that could control the power of the sun itself yes, but otherwise just another mare. Twilight herself loved the Princess for this, her closeness with everyone and everything. It was a show to her of how Celestia was truly an exemplar of how a monarch should act, one that the Kaiser followed in some aspects, while overall lacking in many others.

The Kaiser nodded, pleased at her answer. "Excellent. Now, you and the Major stay with me. I have a decently-sized retinue due to arrive soon, and it would be splendid of you to watch us."

Twilight and Antoine both suppressed groans of irritation. The two were wondering just what in the world they had gotten themselves into, the unicorn especially. '*Charles had better be trying to find me right now*' she thought. But perhaps she was quick to judge. What else could he be doing besides be bored out of his mind while trying to evade the pressures of family?

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His uniform was still creased. That sent a jolt of annoyance through Charles, as he began to try and flatten the creases to the best of his ability with his gloved hand. Despite the hour or so it took to get through the 'activities' Sophie offered him, he came out rather unsatisfied of the experience overall, disappointingly enough. It wasn't that it did not feel good--dear god, yes it felt good--but more that there was this perturbed feeling he got by doing it with Sophie. Maybe it was the moral part of his mind preventing him from experiencing joy in laying with a set to be wed lady, or some other reason he couldn't fathom, but it was bugging him nonetheless. He set out to ignore it though to the best of his ability, he couldn't be too distracted by such rampant thoughts.

Damn, the creases wouldn't come out. That's what he got he supposed from doing it in a small hovel that barely enshrouded them from the prying eyes of the populace. He had to admit though, the danger of it did add to the charm. Otherwise though he and Sophie parted on mostly amicable terms, both of them promising to continue such meetings if they ever had the time, or to simply dine together on less erotic ventures. Despite her lack of interest in the same subjects he was keen for, a fact which led to some rather awkward questioning during the undressing portion of their arrangement, she was a sweet lady who he could not deny a certain attraction towards. Not that he had any foolhardy hopes towards this venture going beyond a mutually beneficial, if unattached, relationship, but he supposed he could dream at the very least. After all, were dreams not the sanctum for foolish hopes and whatnot?

His lungs began to feel irritated, a hot burning swelling up inside of them. It was a common phenomenon recently, one he dutifully ignored. The more pressing matter at the moment was finding Twilight, and leaving this accursed place. The hell for politeness and family civility, by this point he had grown far too tired of these petty engagements that only distracted him and Twilight from more practical and knowledgeable fields of action. He doubted anyone here had half a clue about the campaigns of Turenne or Gustav Adolphus, that he was assured of. A pity almost for their minds sure, as a lack of historical knowledge was one of the greatest sins to Charles, but even so he could not find it in his heart to care for these people, these foolish sycophants who spent half their days lording their wealth and status over one and another without making anything more of

themselves, and, more offending to him at least, their own nation.  
*Disgusting.*

A few polite '*Désolé*' and '*Es tut mir leid*' were enough compensation for the noblemen he had to rush through. He had enough civility in him for that gesture. After all, he was not some savage tribesman from the dark continent itself, was he? Of course not. His eyes scanned the environs thoroughly, looking all over for the purple mare, yet as the minutes dragged on he found nothing at all. Only more examples of the debauchery and such that pervaded the room, with flagrantly expensive clothes and fattened bellies all over that, combined with his growing lack of success, nearly drove him into a frenzy, such was his annoyance at this point.

This was getting him nowhere, he realized. Sighing disapprovingly at his own lack of success, Charles decided his best course of action was to find his grandfather. As humiliating as it was for him, his grandfather would surely have some guards that could find Twilight with ease. At least he hoped so. Far darker happenstances could have occurred, though such mellow thoughts were unwelcome to him at the moment.

It took him quite a while till he could circumvent the grand throngs of people here, but he was auspicious in that no one conceived to bother him once more. Even so, the room was huge, and the numerous stairways that led up to numerous balconies meant the Kaiser could be anywhere. Thankfully however, he finally saw the Kaiser and his retinue from afar after minutes of pointless searching, concluding in him trying to reach him. When he was in sight the Kaiser greeted him warmly, waving towards him and calling him over. "Franz, come here, I have someone who wishes to visit you!" the old man shouted towards him.

Glad to have found him at last, Charles hurried over to him. However, as he neared his grandfather, he saw a certain pony standing near the Kaiser that nearly knocked him off his feet. "Twilight?!" he gasped.

The mare was in hearing distance of this outburst, and turned to him with a look that crossed moderate annoyance and amusement. "There you are!" she greeted him warmly.

Reaching them at last, Charles was curious to know how this situation occurred. He greeted his grandfather first, mouthing an apology to

Twilight as a recompense of sorts for his dalliance, who at least seemed to understand his intent. "Mein Kaiser" he bowed slightly to his grandfather.

The Kaiser simply smiled at him in return. "Guten Tag, Franz. I trust you are enjoying the party so far?"

'*In a certain sense*' he thought, but did not dare say. He could have gotten annoyed over the usage of the name Franz once more, but he had long since learned to tolerate it in a sense. A fact which worried him slightly. "Indeed, mein Kaiser. As much as I would wish to speak with you though, I have urgent matters I wish to discuss with meiner Freundin hier. You understand, I hope?"

"Yes yes, indeed Franz. Go, leave if you must, the day is settling down anyway" the Kaiser conceded, looking eager to return back to his duties with his retinue.

Offering a muted thanks, Charles turned to Twilight as the Kaiser began to walk away. "Twilight, what were you doing with the Kaiser?"

"Well, he called me over. Simple as that. He wanted me to see the sights and sounds of his retinue for a bit. And it's been most... informative" she said in a voice that told him she meant 'boring.'

He crossed his arms, sighing to himself in displeasure. He spent God knows how much time screwing around, just to have her be in the place he last checked? Sometimes he thought the world was playing a cruel game with him, and moments like this heightened these thoughts further. Preparing to speak further, he was stopped by another tall uniformed earth pony coming into view, bowing slightly towards him before speaking. "Prinz Franz, excellent to meet you at last!" the pony greeted, raising a hoof towards him.

Charles grasped the hoof with one of his own hands, shaking the rough appendage politely. "I would say the feeling is mutual, if I knew your name, considering you seem to know mine." he replied, letting go of his hoof now.

Antoine made a mock gasp of horror before speaking. "Ah yes, where are my manners towards royalty? I am Antoine, Antoine de Prokesch-Osten. Major in the K.u.K" he said with more than a hint of pride.

The young prince's interests were now definitely stirred by that proclamation. A major, here? A non-noble pony one at that, if his memory served well? Now he was most securely interested in him, but he had more pressing matters, such as his purple pointy-headed friend. That didn't mean he could not ask a question or two though. "Excellent to meet you then. May I ask how you met my friend here?" Charles asked, motioning to Twilight.

"Ah, forgive me your grace, but after the young miss here told me of your separation, I took it upon myself to guide her as any kind stallion in my position should," he looked guilty for a moment before continuing, "Forgive me sire, but I must admit my goals were less than noble in their original intentions. I had a desire, neigh, a need to meet with you! To meet the son of the emperor himself. I've studied quite a lot about the campaigns of the Grande Armée in the last few years, and to meet you is a milestone to me. By god, this is a chance of a lifetime" Antoine said with ample pleasure in his voice.

Charles was blind-sided by the interest the stallion had in him, and nearly blushed in return. To hear someone who had studied of his father, who knew probably more about him than he ever did... The chance of a lifetime indeed. Smiling pleasantly he nodded back at him. "I feel no offense towards your motivations major. To find someone knowledgeable of my father is morale-boosting, really." he admitted truthfully.

Twilight was caught in a rather tight bind about just what the two were talking about. Charles spoke as if the fact that someone knew of his father was a surprise, a fact that he was interested in greatly. Didn't he know of him already? While he was rather predisposed to never speaking of his past along with her own in their silent arrangement, he did make vague references at times when he was tired or somber, to a titan of a man who stormed through Europe like a comet, who brought a new age into being through force of will alone. The imagery he prescribed was tantalizing to her in its scope, even if it seemed almost unreal. After all, how much did one man really matter to history at large?

“Your pleasure matches my own Prinz,” Antoine continued, “If you would, I would wish to speak with you more sometime. Perhaps, if I could plead with the Kaiser enough, I could arrange some lessons about your father as well.”

The very idea of that sent shivers of delight down Charles’ spine. “I would appreciate that greatly Herr Antoine. Until then however, I have a duty to my friend here. Danke again for your kindness, rest assured that I will not forget it.”

“You are too kind, your grace.” Antoine said with a bow, before departing.

“Dare I ask what took you so long?” Twilight asked him, both of them keeping an eye on Antoine as he slowly disappeared from sight.

Charles shrugged his shoulders, crossing his arms behind his back tightly. Trying his best to not break out any hints of what he truly did, Charles prepared his defense. He gulped only once, an action which Twilight did not fail to notice. “Simple. Family matters, brought forth by a few distant cousins of whose distance in blood towards me I am certain is fairly long. Nevertheless though, I found myself accosted by various persons in darkened situations that in hindsight I should not have gotten in, and I would like to express my most sincere apologies towards you.”

What he said was not technically a lie. Exact words and all that trickery. It made him feel a small bit of guilt, deception being one of the few tools in his arsenal that he did not enjoy using as much as others, but it was a necessary precaution after all. How could he explain what had happened to Twilight, who he was unsure even had a knowledge of the sort of events that had transpired. Thankfully, his purple friend seemed to have accepted his apology with ease, giving him a warm smile, her trusting nature showing through once more, a facet of her personality he found both beautiful, and morbidly easy to exploit in precarious situations such as this. “Ha, that sounds almost exciting compared to what I had to go through.” she joked, trying to bring back a warm atmosphere to the conversation at hand or hoof.

Charles raised a brow at that, looking directly at her now. “Oui? Dare I ask what took up so much of your time?” he said with a devilish smirk.

Amused at his choice of words, Twilight continued. "Well, the Kaiser, in all his infinite wisdom," at that they both chuckled, in hushed voices though, careful not to draw too much attention, "Decided it would be appropriate for me to escort him in all those mundane actions he partook in tonight. The least of which being discussing with a close associate of the political and economic situation in Saint Dominique for up to ten minutes!" she finished with an exaggerated wave of her fore-hooves in the air.

Charles shook his head in bafflement, wondering just how Twilight had withstood such trivialities. Though the name Saint Dominique seemed familiar to him. Wasn't it some island in the Caribbean where there was a failed slave rebellion, if he heard correctly? It was no matter at the moment though, seeing as Twilight seemed to have somehow lived through the boredom of it. They both feasted on knowledge for sure, but knowledge that interested them. Not boring wonderment that got them nowhere and achieved nothing! He almost pitied her, if he was not so amused by her situation to begin with. "As much as that interests me Twilight, I'm afraid we're getting rather crowded in here" he noted, motioning towards the still large crowds around them.

"Oh Charles, I thought you'd love to hear stuff like that. After all, you want to get into a position like the Kaiser's someday after all, right?" she joked.

His smile descended into a grim line at that, nodding slowly. "True. But come with me, I have an idea of where to go."

"Lead the way" she smoothly responded.

Taking one of Twilight's fore-hooves in his own hand carefully, something that Twilight was surprised by yet accepting, Charles smiled down at her once more as his free hand fell into his uniform as per his usual pose. "You said to lead the way fair lady, and after what has already happened, I'd rather be safe than sorry."

Twilight rolled her eyes at this gesture, but if he wished to be so insistent that was fine with her. "Lead the way Prinz Charming." she said with a mock bow.

As they left, the major that had just met them earlier kept a watchful eye on them from afar, before smiling to himself and turning away. The prince's pose, it was a familiar one indeed. "It looks as if you inherited more than one thing from your father." Antoine muttered quietly.

Leading the way for her, Charles slid through the large crowds, deftly ensuring that they didn't get into any more impromptu contact that would only serve to distract them. It took them more than a while to finally reach his destination of choice, taking only bare glances at some of the patrons and the ornate decorations that hung over and around them. Even so, they eventually reached a large set of stairs, Charles beginning his ascent with Twilight at his side. "Up here?" Twilight curiously asked as her hooves clopped forward against the hard stairs, not able to see what was beyond their ascent.

Charles looked down at her for a moment to reply. "Indeed. There's less people up here, and it leads right to where we want to go. I learned this route my last time he-"

He suddenly stopped as he caught something in the corner of his eye, a person he was dreadfully familiar with below his position. Caught off guard by his strange behavior, Twilight turned to look at what he was, trying to find it. "What's wrong Charles?" she asked.

Shaking his head, Charles tried to get out of his stupor, but his eyes remained fixed on the figure. "It's nothing, let's go."

He tried in vain to move, but Twilight remained firm. "No, what's wrong? Something's bothering you, I can tell."

Attempting to stare her down, Charles found that Twilight was an iron wall of defense, her desire to help him over-coming their usual boundaries. Sighing, he found that concession was the only option. "Meine Mutter."

*'His mother?'* She didn't know he had any direct family after his father, seeing as he never spoke of his mother. Twilight assumed his mother had died as he was in the care of his grandfather, with his father being in custody of some sort until his death from what she understood. It was another consequence of their relative lack of correspondence involving their pasts. As she attempted to catch who he was referring to, he pointed



her out. His mother's beauty astounded Twilight. Even from a distance, she could tell the vibrant face of his mother, and the gorgeous yellow blouse drew the attention of all near her. Twilight could tell from the woman's breathtaking dark-blond hair that she was from whom Charles had received most of his excellent looks.

The figure at her side however caused her great consternation. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a large nose and a black uniform with a white sash around it, and the way he got very close to her brought a tilt to her head. "Didn't you say your father was dead?" she asked him, taking what she could from the situation.

Charles free hand tightened out of her view. "He is." he answered simply, but with more than a hint of acid in his voice.

"But, she's with him-" realization dawned on her, "Oh."

"Yes."

They did not talk much after that. Instead, he silently led her forward once more, neither of them speaking out of mutual embarrassment and shame. When they finally reached the apex of the stairs, they found the area practically empty, only a few guests leaning over the right side of the balcony. Charles only nodded to himself, satisfied that his prediction came true. "Most people avoid these spots. It's too solitary and away from the festivities. Which is good for us. I want you to take a look at this place before we leave."

Interested at what he meant, Twilight made no complaint as he released her hoof and walked over to the left balcony, resting his arms upon the side and looking down. Following him, Twilight did the same with her hooves, though she only just managed to lean over it with her relatively small size. Though Charles seemed to not dare a look where his mother was, Twilight did not pry. Instead, he took a big glance of the entire room, looking down at the proceedings with a contemptuous eye. He raised his arms and spread them in the air, looking as if was about to grab the whole of the room in his grasp. "Do you see it Twilight?" he asked calmly, not taking his gaze off or moving from his pose.

Twilight tried to find what he was speaking of, but couldn't find 'it' in the least. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the people here Twilight, the humans and ponies. The air, a thick miasma crowded with the stench of their fetid decay. Look Twilight, and see the rotting corpse of a nation, an ideology, already dead but not even knowing it. Do you see Twilight?" he was on a roll now, feeling the power of his own words enhance him.

"What in the world do you mean by that? You're talking crazy talk" Twilight attempted to reason with him.

"No, Twilight, the world is crazy. Or at least corrupt. Take another look, Twilight, and see. Can't you see them, feasting on the spoils of their own wealth, content to do nothing more than rest on their laurels and do nothing to advance themselves, or their own country," he snorted derisively, "Does it not anger you in the least?"

Now that she knew what he was talking about, there were some rather painful signs of what he meant. The large tables filled with food, the fat-bellies only held in by their tight outfits, the gaudily expensive clothing. Twilight suddenly felt very under-dressed in her own relatively plain outfit, and Charles looked even more so in his plain uniform. And if what he said was true, they seemed depressingly similar to the nobility back home. At least there were some similarities, she supposed. "It doesn't anger me, but... it's disappointing to see people who've been entrusted all this power spend it on themselves." she admitted.

He grunted lowly. "Acceptable." he muttered under his breath.

Turning away from the offending scene, Charles walked towards the lone door on the wall at the end of the balcony. "Come with me, I have something further to show you" he told her as he walked further.

Complying more out of a desire to leave at this point than anything else, Twilight followed behind him as he opened the door. Behind it was the dark-blue color of the sky, the two now basking in the luminescent moonlight that shined down on them. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes, though I have always preferred the sun myself." she replied.

“No matter. Look over the edge if you could?” he asked of her.

Leaning over the edge, she saw the green grass that spread throughout the palace grounds, the Tiergartens not too far away. “And, what is there to see that we haven’t already?”

“Nothing, save a test of your abilities. I need you to teleport us down there.”

She gave him a skewed look. “You really want to get out of here don’t you?”

“And you don’t?”

It was a good point, she had to admit. “Fine, hold on.”

As he closed the door behind him, careful that no one could see their little show. “Go ahead.”

A bright and familiar pink glow erupted from her horn, and Charles had just enough time to admire the spectacle before him until they disappeared in a bright glow. Appearing in a bright flash on the grass below, Twilight and Charles were both very pleased at their success. “Now this is what I call a job well done.” the unicorn commented.

Charles nodded in agreement, taking a look at the night sky once more. He spoke nothing, causing Twilight to have to voice her qualms. “Just why are we out here?”

Taking his eyes off the vast starry visage that dominated the sky in a radiant field, Charles answered her handily. “Why, we’re going to look at the stars of course.”

“The stars?” she said with more than a hint of doubt evident.

“Why yes, the stars. And before you voice your displeasure Fräulein, let me explain.”

This was starting to sound a little silly to her, but the least she could do was give him a chance she supposed. "I'm listening."

"Excellent, now look with me." He looked at the sky above once more, only motioning Twilight with a hand to look with him.

Rolling her eyes, Twilight complied, silently admitting that at the very least the night was a work of art indeed, truly a master-piece of Princess Luna's design. "Do you see it Twilight? The patchwork patterns of stars, that form a natural art in of itself that triumphs what most of what man can build?" he took a deep breath, lost in adoration, "It allows one to think peacefully, to sink their minds in the greatness of it all."

While Twilight could point out the Princess Luna did such things as make the stars move and such, as the Royal Academy taught. After all, since when were they wrong? Never of course! But that did not hinder her appreciation for the view in the least. "It is beautiful. The stars, millions of them, sharing the same space. You ever think someone will go up there?" she dared to ask a question that had been bothering her a long time.

The question felt particularly poignant to Charles, who considered it thoughtfully. "Why not? One day, when there is no more territory left to govern on this soil, why not go into the depths of space? Perhaps a particularly bold Pegasus will try it, if most of them got their heads out of the clouds, or maybe somehow we'll make a giant machine that'll be able to do it!"

They considered that for a few moments, before bursting out into laughter. As if that would ever happen! Their mirth was so thick, they tumbled over, falling on the soft grass with Charles landing first and Twilight landing on his chest. They continued like this for several more moments until at last they stopped, and breathed deeply, their chests rising and falling in unison. "I swear Charles, sometimes you come up with the craziest ideas" Twilight rolled over to get a better look at him.

Charles lowered his eyes to see the unicorn that was now spread almost all over his upper body and smiled cheekily. "Ah, but is imagination not the second most valiant of traits?"

"That depends. What's the first one?" she pursued.

The mare put her head on her hooves, which were now bent on his chest, as she waited expectantly for him to answer. Charles was always more than a bit intrigued as to how dexterous ponies were considering their size and general body shape, which remained throughout most continents strangely enough. It was one of life's more flagrant mysterious though he supposed. "Ambition." he finally answered her.

Her expression became one of confusion, demanding further elaboration. And he was more than happy to accept. "Ambition, the most noble of traits. What is it that separates man and pony and the other sentient races from the barbaric traits of the rest of nature? Ambition of course."

"I'm not following."

"Ah mein liebchen, it is simple, but decisively so! Tell me, what is the purpose of a bird?"

*'Huh? What is he doing now?'* Deciding to go along with this more out of her own curiosity than anything else, Twilight answered his question the best she could. "To find food, survive, and feed its young, right?"

"Correct!" he replied before continuing, "And what is the purpose of a man?"

Twilight deliberated on this for a few moments before coming up with only one sensible answer. "... None. There is no set purpose."

His smirk had a victorious quality to it that was rare indeed to see from him. "Exactly! And is it not true for ponies as well?" her slow nod to this only enhanced his inevitable victory, "That, mein liebchen, is why ambition is a virtue above all. Where the animals are content in their positions, where the mechanical delirium of mutts and cats leave only patterns in behavior, we have something more! We have desire, we have feeling, we have the want, not the need, to make more of ourselves! Those who do nothing, like those fools back in there, who waste their time content with where they are instead of doing something with themselves are the epitome of all that is wrong with the system, and why ambition is a necessity instead of an evil as some would claim."

Considering this, Twilight found the answer suitable, but discomforting to her. "But aren't things like generosity and kindness more important in the end? To act as a decent person instead of advancing your own goals?" she countered.

The very question caught him off guard for a moment, but only so. "Generosity is a rarity in this world, and kindness almost as much. I would say they are to be admired, but in this world they are like diamonds in the rough. But nonetheless my point stands, that such traits you speak of can exist in animals, mainly to protect their young, but in the end it is ambition that can drive a being forward. To bring them to heights unseen save by the winged hussars themselves. Do kindness or generosity bring out the best qualities in a life like that, to make themselves all they wish to be?" he said, still staring at her and awaiting her response.

"How do you assume they don't, maybe, even matter more? If someone devoted their life to kindness and helping others, wouldn't that be a life more worth living instead of for yourself?"

He was surprised at her ability to reason with him, actually bringing some doubts to his mind. Was it worth more to help others then to advance ones self? It was a tough sell, but an idea struck him. "Why not both?"

"Huh?"

"Why not both mein liebchen. For example, my ambition is to one day return to my homeland, to bring France back to its days of glory. In that effect, I would seek to help the people of France, both man and pony, achieve opportunities and glory that would not be available otherwise," he considered this further, finding it more and more appealing the more he thought of it, "Yes, like de Foresti said once, an ample compromise that can fit both views."

The fact that he was compromising with her brought a smile to Twilight's face. "If you're going to fulfill that ambition for just reasons, I'm sure you'll do just fine."

Her words were a welcome boon to him. But another thought crossed him now. "Twilight, what is your ambition?"

It was a sudden question, such a divergence that Twilight was unsure of how to respond. Her ambition? To return home of course, but that seemed unlike whatever Charles wanted her to say. An idea, a goal, a destiny she set for herself, that was what he wanted to hear, she knew this. But... she had nothing. No idea of who or what she could become, what to do even if she did someday return home. Before she had aspirations to becoming a librarian, or a magician of the court of Equestria, but now that seemed so... minor. So wasteful, with how large the world was aiming for such pitiful goals had no more appeal to her. "I... don't know. I don't really have a goal I suppose" she admitted.

"No goal?" Charles said with honest surprised, disappointment leaking through his tone.

A memory struck her. "Wait, I do have one!"

"What, tell me" he urged, leaning his head forward out of dire anticipation.

"To help you. To help you achieve your goal. I made a promise, remember?" she said, amazed that he seemed to have forgotten about it.

There was a vast gap between her statement and Charles' response, until he finally broke out into fits of bewildered laughter. He shook so hard Twilight rolled off of his chest, ruffling her mane a bit to her own irritation. "Oh dear God, I did not know you would consider a plea made in the depths of rage and childhood loss with any sort of seriousness!"

Brushing a few strands of hair out of her face with a hoof, Twilight rolled her eyes but smiled at him nonetheless. "I'm a mare of my word, you should know that already."

Suppressing his jubilation, Charles shook his head at her fortitude. "Ah Twilight, you are too good for this world I swear. But even so, it will be a while before I can even think of returning to France. Mein Opa would be sympathetic to my pleas to go there at a later age perhaps, if not for the fact that Kanzler Metternich would be listening in at every moment to counter whatever argument I could make up" he sighed, his mind beginning to descend into depression.

The feeling of a hoof on his shoulder became known to him. Twilight had taken the time of his monologue to snuggle up to him, warming them both up as she patted him reassuringly. "Don't worry. I'm sure you'll make your father proud someday."

There was a slight tension in his shoulders at the mention of his father, that made Twilight think she had done wrong in reminding him. "Oh, sorry..." she apologized.

"No, there is no need. It's just sometimes I wonder how I will ever even get close to his glory," his voice became small for a moment, trembling ever so slightly, "I must admit... I do not know much of him. Only vague descriptions and such, the snake only allowing me that much in his attempts to mold me into a compliant toady. His portrait over our bed is the only visual reference I have of him left really, such is the decay of my young memories."

He sighed once more. "Do you remember your father Twilight?" he said suddenly, desperate to change the subject.

The daring of the question nearly caused Twilight to reply in an irritable cry that would have silenced him, but she would not do something so vain and childish. After all, had he just not shared secrets of his father with her? And was it not kind to do the same in return? "I... never really got to know him well." she admitted.

Charles hummed lowly, sympathy welling up in him. '*We have common ground indeed*' he morosely mused. "That doesn't mean I don't remember him at all," she hastily continued, not wanting him to get the wrong idea or anything, "It's just its been so long now, and I remember being so sad at the time. But my mom and the Princess helped me through that. It was amazing, going to Canterlot for the first time, because..."

She set off on a huge tangent, speaking fondly of past memories and experiences that she was lost in. After hiding them from everything save her own personal review for so long, it was liberating to open up at last. Charles was content to just lay there as his friend spoke, careful to focus on her speech as she lay next to him. It was a bonding experience to say the least, a great leap forward for the two, especially on a night that was



thought to contain naught but boredom and whatnot. After she had poured her mind to him for a good few minutes, Charles occasionally commenting or giving a similar experience. It was a fulfilling experience to say the least, one that gave them both a great deal of relief.

At last finished, they laid quietly with one another, staring up at the stars again. "You sound as if you've lived a nice life, Twilight." he noted.

"And you did not?"

"Hmm. I cannot say I have lived a truly unmerciful life. I have lived well, and mein Opa has treated me graciously, all things considering. The problem is I wish for more, I wish to escape this wretched nation, to speak in my own tongue once more with someone of equal knowledge and patriotism to do it with me."

"You mean French?" she asked further.

The question was unexpected, but welcome to him. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

Blushing a bit, she stammered slightly before giving her reply. "Well... I wanted to know, if, maybe you could teach me it? I learned Italian well, so French should be easy" she said with an easy-going manner.

Her suggestion both astounded him and made him immensely thankful, that she would ask him to teach her his mother tongue just so they could speak it with one another. Though he knew she would have probably liked to learn it for the sake of learning alone, the thought was still most welcome. "Uniquement pour toi, ma petite pouliche, uniquement pour toi." he answered.

Her eyes were crossed in bemusement at that. "I assume that means we're starting then?"

As the stars continued to shine down on them, Charles' smile was answer enough. "For you mon amie, anytime."

"That's great... Fränzchen!" she finished with a tiny giggle.

His left eyebrow twitched ever so slightly. "...Gottdammit."

In what she thought was at first a mild show of distaste, Twilight was shocked when Charles began to cough in a brutal sounding manner into one of his hands. Turning away from her to avoid accidentally coughing on her, Charles violently heaved and choked for a few minutes as Twilight tried to figure out the problem. "Charles, Charles, do you need help?!" she desperately pleaded, concern leaking through every facet of her voice.

He shook his head derisively, forcing through a few words. "No, I'm fine!" he attempted to console her.

"You're obviously not!"

"I'm fine!" he shouted back, the coughing at last subsiding now, but still coming up in small chokes.

Holding out his now dirtied hand, Charles shot her a knowing look. "See? I'm fine!" he replied.

Twilight was not so easily beaten back though. "That awful cough says otherwise. Shouldn't you check with a medical professional?" she reasoned.

"Now, can't you see, I'm fine!" he said, getting angry now.

"I'm just worried about you, that sounded serious."

He was getting a headache from this now, so he desperately attempted to stall her. "Look, I'm fine now. Okay? There's no need to worry."

"... Are you sure?" she asked, her voice getting deathly quiet now.

"I'm sure."

There was a dreadful silence now, one that made the previously jubilant air thick with miasma and worry. Charles suddenly felt a pair of hooves around his neck, and a purple muzzle buried in his neck. "Promise

me,” Twilight said softly, a worry setting in that she needed to solve, “promise me you won’t fall, okay?”

He was astounded by her boldness. And readily enchanted by it. “For you Twilight, I would give the world. My life is a rather drab offer in comparison, but acceptable nonetheless. I promise. I am a man of my word. You should know that already.” he said with a slight smirk.

They did not at all talk after that. There was no need, when so much had already been admitted and fought over and cheered for. The only option left was comfortable silence. Only to bask in the once again calm and peaceful air, as the white light of the moon shined on them in a perfect array of beauty that threatened to dwarf all the other lights in the sky in its embrace. The two below the white blotch in the sky did not mind such petty thoughts though. Their only feelings being the warm breaths of the other on his pale skin and her purple fur. It was indeed, eine perfekte Nacht.

# Chapter 4

## For Want of a Nail

*“Inactivity is death.”-Benito Mussolini*

*November 12, 1826 Anno Domini*

A flickering red flame lit from a wax candle was the sole source of light in the dark enclosure, save the few beams of precious sunlight that snuck in past the crevices in the wooden structure. Twilight nodded to herself as she studied the text, her magical abilities letting her flip through the pages of the booklet. All was peaceful for her, until a pounding knock at the door ripped through Twilight's ears, causing the book levitating in front of her to fall down on the hard and hay-covered floor. "Charles, is that you?" she said, all the while moving the book back into place on the shelf with her magic.

"The very same." the familiar yet certainly older voice called out.

Realizing that the cozy brown place she now inhabited was still in a mess that was usual for one who had no time for such things as cleaning, with the sheets spread over the floor, hay in every corner and in her hair, and with a few books spread out on the her lone desk. Ever since it was suggested by one of the staff that Twilight was too big now for Charles' room to hold her properly, she moved on her own insistence to a decently-sized previously empty stable on the palace grounds. Despite Charles' own resistance to this idea, he conceded over time, mainly by her telling him she was fine with it. She couldn't be selfish and just expect him to lend his room to her forever, right?

Even so, he did demand it was well stocked, and it was. He and de Foresti practically stole several pillows and sheets for her, and spent a good day smuggling items and furniture out into it. Even Count Mortiz lent her an old and unused bookshelf, telling her it was a 'strictly confidential arrangement'. Even if they were hired to watch over them when teaching, Twilight could still appreciate the niceties the two gave them both.

“Just a second!” she shouted worriedly back to him, hurrying to spruce the place up.

As she hurriedly attempted to use her magic to move the books, blowing the candle out, cleaning the hay and whatnot, the door creaked open by a small margin, an inquisitive brown eye peeking to see what lay in the room. Seeing the purple mare try and tidy up the place in such a rushed manner made him smile in the way that only she could, and that was at all. Sliding it open further, thankful that no large amount of noise was made, he snuck into the room as a sneaking shadow.

As a bonus, the relatively small space of the room ensured that he was close enough to Twilight, so as to proceed with his plans in no time at all. The fact that the mare was currently looking in the direction opposite him only enhanced his potential merriment. Slinking his way up to her by just a bit, so close now that he was right behind her flanks, he tapped her pointedly with a gloved finger right on the cutie mark, jumping backward right afterwards in order to stay clear of the results.

The ensuing large jump up into the air the mare did was quite impressive indeed, and so was the almost jubilant laughter that came out from Charles as a result. After she had landed, during which time a few of the floating books fell and her mane got even more out of place, Twilight shot him a dirty look. “I thought I said to wait.” she said, blowing a few loose strands of her mane out of her face.

He shrugged, uncaring, even with the fact that Twilight now towered over him by a few inches. Considering he was extremely tall himself now, at 6ft in fact, this was no small feat indeed. Though while Twilight was average sized for her age and species, Charles was practically a giant. “I believe you said to wait a second, and that was what I did. All a matter of proper phrasing.” he smirked playfully.

Despite her irked status at this venture of mischief, Twilight smirk backed at him. “Fine, but just remember, I’ll get back at you for that.”

“Why of course mein liebchen, what more could I expect from someone as devious as you?” he continued, his smirk growing just slightly more friendly.

“Nothing at all,” she remarked, before casting a sullen look over her small apartment of sort, “so what are you here for?”

He sighed in evident annoyance, crinkling his brows. “What, you don’t remember?”

Well this was awkward for her. “Um, well actually...” she was at a sudden loss for words.

That was evidence enough to him. Rubbing the bridge of his nose with thin-gloved fingers, he sighed once more. While Twilight was ingenious beyond compare, her ability to keep up with events was unbecoming of her to say the least. “Antoine is taking us to a play, and afterwards on a sort of tour of the city.” he explained patiently.

‘*Oh yes, that’s right!*’ it came to her with a sudden realization. Antoine, that stocky stallion major they had met a couple of years ago, had communicated with them that he had purchased some tickets for a popular play that was coming to Wien, and invited them to come along. It made the mare amazed at how much things had changed in the last couple of years. Charles and Antoine had kept in contact over letters, forming a strong bond that astonished her in the haste it built up. Charles spoke fondly of Antoine whenever the topic of the major came up, even if he drew into conflict with him at times.

Twilight supposed it was due to Antoine’s knowledge, however impersonal, of the young man’s father, a fact Charles eagerly shared with her when Antoine wrote back of scant details, not daring to write more from fear of reprisal from the ‘*Eisernen Kanzler*’. To her great sadness, de Foresti had left their company a year ago to a promotion to a position of some importance in *Venezia*, according to his own words, and due to worries over Count Mortiz’s growing age-related illnesses, a position had opened up to their tutor.

On Charles’ own insistence, Antoine had contacted Metternich by letter to request a position as their tutor. For reasons Twilight did not understand in the least, Metternich accepted, and Antoine had practically moved to Wien afterwards. The two had formed a quick friendship with the stallion, who proved charming and knowledgeable enough to keep them on

their wits. Twilight did still write letters to de Foresti nearly every month, detailing her recent experiments and experiences with the feisty Italian. She encouraged Charles to do so as well, though he gave her a half-hearted compliant 'yes' in response. It saddened her to see him so distant from people, but she wrote to de Foresti that Charles missed him as well. She was sure of it, even if he didn't admit it!

Mortiz, who still kept residence here yet met with them less, was still a virulent rant of complaints and grouchy speech of which she referred to as 'old man talk'. His hair was grayer, thinner, and the creases of age appeared all over his face, but he had the same countenance nonetheless. The Count was almost vitriolic at times, but he had a good heart she knew. He took great care to ensure they learnt well, and he always met with Twilight on his free days. She enjoyed the conversations that ensued often, him detailing some of his old days in training with a nostalgic expression that would be well-suited to any old tale.

And then there was Charles' new friend, Sophie. From what she knew she was a Princess of some sorts, and as of late an in-law of Charles, and they seemed to get along well. In fact, he often devoted a visit to her residence near the palace, ones from which he usually came back quite pleased with himself. While some would be envious of the time he spent with others, Twilight was happy that he was spending time with other people. She was not jealous or anything petty like that, and from what she heard of her she liked Sophie.

Though Charles was rather against the idea of them meeting, always insisting their meetings be private for some reason and never telling her Sophie's place of address and absolutely refusing to budge on the issue. While she could press him on the issue, she would rather he relent on his own terms. They had begun sharing each others secrets and lives before meeting more and more since the party two years ago, and she would not pressure him on such a thing unless he felt comfortable in doing so. It was no bother to her really what his issue was, and if he wanted to keep it locked up, so be it.

"Twilight..." Charles spoke suddenly cutting in to her idle thought.

She shook her head, clearing away the clutter in her mind. "Yes, I remember. We're going now, then?"

“Right away. If you would be so kind, madame.” he moved out of the way, motioning towards the door with a gentlemanly wave and bow.

Twilight shook her head again at his needless courtesy towards her, Twilight exited, her eyes squinting just slightly under the still blazing sun that had just risen over the horizon. Sure, winter was just beginning, but it was in it's infancy at best. At the very most there was a thin sheet of snow covering most everything, but nothing too thick yet. “Do you know the way to the theater?” she asked him.

She heard a haughty grunt from behind her. “I know the general area.” he attempted to reassure her, failing to do so.

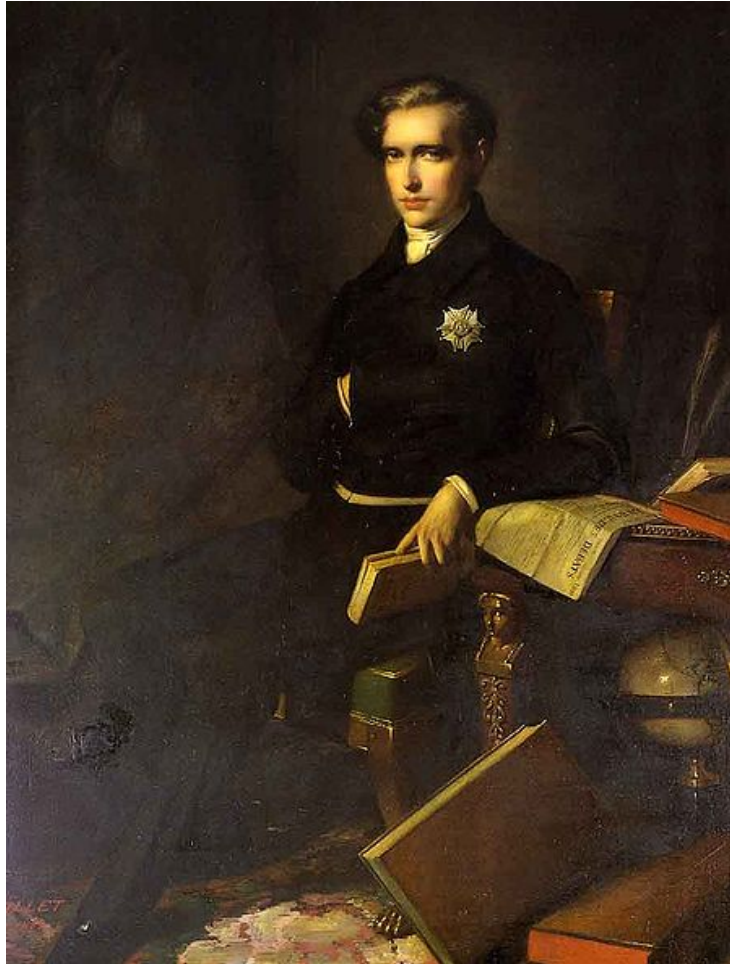
Though she rolled her eyes at his oblique answer, Twilight couldn't exactly blame him. They had both spent so little time outside the palace, only being allowed to see the core of the city, the richly made buildings and architecture that dominated the imperial capital. Always under guard, with several men of fine uniform keeping their watchful eyes on them at all times. Twilight would've gone mad, if Charles did not comment that this was actually an improvement from before. The very thought of it being more restrictive silenced any protest Twilight might have built up. Still, that did not mean she could not point his shadowy response out. “Tu as eu les yeux plus gros que le ventre, Charles. But you can't really back up your claims, can you?” she dared with a playful grin.

A budding smile crept up his face at her words, her glorious words in that language he loved so, bringing him the type of smile only that she could bring to him. But it quickly disappeared in an instant, his own pride and desire to prove himself right shining outward. “Antoine will most likely meet us in the general area anyway. I would not worry in the least for now, ma petite pouliche.” he attempted to reassure her, causing her to roll her eyes at the nickname she had managed to understand since their lessons in French began.

Instead a displeased hum sounded out as Charles circled around her, giving them both a good look of the other in the sun at last, instead of the shadowy hovel Twilight inhabited. He was truly a giant now, she realized, almost painfully towering over both de Foresti and Mortiz when they last met. It was a sudden growth, one that had accelerated in the past



few months, but even so it made him more striking than he already was. But his high cheeks, the tight-angled chin, his piercing brown eyes, the still curly dirty blond hair. Those were all the same.



The outfit he wore now though was recent acquisition, one he took great pride in. It was the tunic of the *Tyrolian Chasseurs*, its color so dark it was almost as if it was the color of the sky itself, without Luna's moon to give it some semblance of color. He had received it only a few months back, in fact it was a uniform for a lieutenant in the *Chasseurs*, yet he did not receive a promotion to such a rank along with it. This was a cause of great concern and displeasure from the prince, especially in his darker moods.

Not that these moods were ever directed towards Twilight, she knew he would not do such despicable acts towards her in the least, yet he took his anger out on servants at times, after which she chided him in a voice reminiscent of the fragments she had of Princess Celestia's own. He ignored her though, or gave her half-hearted apologies before turning back

to whatever he was doing before. His mood took dark turns at times, sometimes angry, sometimes depressingly sullen in nature, yet he usually had good days of contentment wherein he acted normal, for him at least.

But most visibly to the mare, even more visible than the not-black color of the uniform, was his reaction to the uniform and rank increase. His joy upon receiving it was a joy he had rarely shown outside of conversations with her. His elation, while not shown in great amounts externally, was shown in the smaller niches of his routine that she had noticed, whether it be a lighter step to his walk, or a prouder bearing when posing. To Twilight he simply illuminated with joy for a while now. If this told Twilight anything, it was the further evidence as to how much his passions in the art of war had meant to him. Truly, he was a military man through and through. When she felt particularly daring, she would wonder if it was in his very blood to study and feel the need to get as close to the military as possible, but always she would brush away those thoughts and consider them only idle nonsense.

Not all these changes were positive however. Not in the least. The most frightening addition to his body was one that was slow, yet blatant in its presentation, at least to her, who kept in good contact with him regularly. In the past few months, Twilight noticed the growing pallor in his skin almost immediately, a disturbing trend she had noticed over the last couple of years. He looked almost as if he was a ghost, such was the extent of his now milky white complexion.

The tired lines on his face and the slightly ragged sound of his breathing did not escape her notice at all. The worst part of it though was that it was a constant ill, one that had pursued him on and off since the night at the party. A rare occurrence, but an occurrence nonetheless, would have him gain sudden chills and a fever so intense that he would be out for a few days in some weakness of some sorts, always at his great displeasure at being weakened so. She voiced her worries over the state of his health whenever she could, asking him to visit a doctor or anyone that could help, but he insisted that it was a temporary thing. That was his response nearly every week since two years passed.

The knowledge that he would ignore her did not deter Twilight in the least. Even if it was futile, giving up on him would gnaw at her heart, as the

very thought of... *it* happening was almost too morbid for her to bear. "Are you sure you're up to it today though? I mean, you look a little unwell..."

*'Like you always look as of late'* were the unspoken words that were pretty much said nonetheless. Saying he looked cross at her insinuation was an understatement, as his breathing became faster, his eyes darkening while his mouth formed a dark line that held in any shouts of refusal he could have thrown back at her. She was almost worried that he would go into a great rage any moment now, such was the fury on his features, but instead he breathed deeper, closing his eyes sullenly. "I am fine." was his simple response.

There was no further continuation. She had tried, and if he would be the fool... so be it. Besides, perhaps it was just a minor illness, one that only hounded him for a while but even so was minor in its potential for harm. The thought calmed her by only a little, if that. Even so, they had descended into one of those unpleasant silences where they both only sent minor glances towards the other as they tried desperately to ignore the current problem at hand. "Do you think I need a dress?" she spoke suddenly, trying to shift the focus on some more boring but less dreadful.

Charles' annoyance was transfigured into an offended frown. "No, it's not formal in the least. Besides, you look fine as you are." he stated with an almost bored tone.

Trying hard not to laugh at that, she smiled vividly back at him. "Flattery will get you nowhere mon ami. Stop with the jokes."

"It is not a joke in the least. In the years I have known you, I swear to God you must have become more and more beautiful each year. Where most are soiled at this age, you are a blossoming flower of beauty." he spoke with all the assurance in the world.

Twilight had no idea how to respond for a moment, until she laughed nervously back at him. Sure, she had grown taller than him by a just amount, her frame was lean for her race, and her mane had grown a tad longer and smoother, she knew she was no apex of beauty by any species standards. It was a fact she had assured herself of since fillyhood. "Your sense of humor has grown well indeed Charles, but you can cut it with me, okay?"

“Ah, but it is not a joke in the least,” he countered, smirking now at her befuddled expression, “Trust me, you look perfect. You have something those other mares or even the human girls don’t. Intelligence, wit, a fact which sends you miles above them in my own eyes.”

He took a deep breath, almost regretting the words he said as they left his mouth. “Why, on occasion I play with the thought of taking up the art of painting in order to be capable of capturing an image of your greatness. This would be the eternal proof of this my poor, most likely lackluster attempt of capturing your excellence. Future generations might look upon the painting, wondering why this specific pink was used for your mane, or why the artist made you smile ever so slightly. Oh, what magnificence it would be. Alas, despite the inspiration you give me, it will never happen, for I am sure that I would be a complete buffoon when it came to capturing more than a circle or triangle. Oh, the joy I felt on the first day we met, the *hope* you give me constantly, wasted so.” He spread his arms dramatically, a smirk on his face, knowing just how ridiculous this little speech must sound. “What a shame that the world will never have such a treasure, this most splendid portrait of one of the, if not *the* greatest ponies to ever grace this nation. What a shame.”

He sighed once, ending his speech suddenly, before coughing once into his hand. Twilight did not catch this though, as she was absolutely floored by what he just said. His honesty was clear to her, that much she could be assured of, but his own apparent belief in what he said was what astounded her. Still trying to sort this out mess of emotions in her dazzled mind, she simply responded “That’s... nice?” in a manner befitting one who had no idea whether to be insulted or very, very pleased at what was just shared with her.

Shrugging his shoulders, Charles sounded off an affirmative hum. “I admit I can be overly dramatic at times, more akin to a playschool actor than an honest confession directed towards thee, but I do hope you appreciate the kind words.” he told her honestly.

Nodding, she brushed one of her forehooves against the cobblestone floor, feeling the general roughness of the stone but not much else due to the lack of nerves in that region of her body. “Well, we should probably go

now.” she muttered softly, finding the individual stones beneath her hooves strangely fascinating at the moment.

Charles was nothing if not keen to her moods, and nodded in assent. “Good. Now, if you would?” he turned, motioning towards the exit way.

As she cantered and he sauntered towards the exit with only a vague idea of where they were going at best, they proceeded into the greater part of the city of Wien. Large crowds of people, pony and human, came into view, and within a moment they were in the middle of the mess of bodies, in all sorts shapes, sizes, and stripes. They stayed close together in the cluttered environment, memories of their unfortunate expedition two years back still fresh in their minds.

Even though they had been outside the palace and into the city itself a few times by now, Twilight still loved every second she was out here. The sound of vendors hawking their merchandise with toothy smiles, roaming bands of small performers doing fantastic displays of acrobatics to large crowds, and the people, oh the people! It was a melting pot of culture at the very least. Sure, all the humans had the same skin color, seeing as far as Twilight knew humans were all Caucasian, but she did not fall into bias because of that. She could see the various differences they all had, some had moustaches, some had great hats that looked as if they would topple over, and everyone enjoyed distinct if similar styles of clothing.

And then there were the ponies. From what she had read up, the populations of ponies to humans were leaned towards the latter’s majority, and even the ponies consisted mainly of earth ponies. But she could barely tell from the conflagrant mixture of colors and cutie marks that were spread liberally throughout the epicenter of town. Red, yellow, green, brown, manes and coats of all colors and sizes were there, and cutie marks of all sorts of things that indicated their talents were visible to all that were curious. Though they were uncommon, she even saw a few unicorns, some in the troupes of players and performers, levitating small objects to the bedazzlement of the amazed eyes that watched them. While to Twilight it was foal’s play at best, it was still nice to see fellow users of magic here, however small.

A blazing burst of speed from above them drew their eyes and numerous others to the skies above. Twilight and Charles’ eyes widened at

the sight, that was heretofore unknown to both of them save now distant memories on Twilight's part. It was a lone Pegasus, performing a magnificent blitz through the sky, doing a sort of aerial acrobatic maneuver that left all the deficient ground-walkers below only the option of looking up at the winged pony with amazement beyond all compare. No one could get a good eye for the Pegasus, but even so they could tell by the way it almost danced through the November air that it was a skilled flyer indeed.

The Pegasus flew higher and higher, almost reaching the edge of the clouds themselves. Everyone below, both man and pony, drew a collective gasp as it grew in height. And at last, when it looked as if it could go no farther, the Pegasus dropped down like a ton of steel, falling and falling at ever increasing speeds, twisting and twirling rapidly in its descent. Someone cried out 'Help her!' when she looked as if she would land right on the cold, hard streets themselves, when at last an amazing feat occurred. The Pegasus did a complete 180 degree turn, speeding upward when it looks as if it had no hope left. Nobody was left unfazed by the daring maneuver, Twilight practically beaming with delight, even Charles had a pleased grin.

"Oh that one, always a show-off."

The two turned to see Antoine at their side, appearing as if out of nowhere from the vast hordes around them. Both glanced at him out of the corners of their eyes, still wanting to much as possible of the dashing Pegasus above them, who proceeded to do a smooth loop-de-loop to the joy of the crowd below. "You know him?" Charles questioned.

Antoine laughed jauntily, rising on his hindhooves for a moment out of his mirth. After falling to the floor with a large clip-clop of his hooves, the bulky earth pony replied "I don't know *him*. I know *her* though. I served a good few years in the field with Franciska. She nearly flew across the whole of the Alps from North to South once. Had to call it off when her

wings nearly froze in mid-air, but she still managed to make a perfect landing near Klagenfurt with ease.”<sup>1</sup>

The colt sighed deliberately as the nostalgia overwhelmed him, Charles’ eyes focused fully on him now. “During the war?” he entreated slowly.

“Ah yes, when else? Flew reconnaissance over Bavaria and Leipzig. One of the few Pegasi to sign up, God bless her. Let me tell you boy, I swear to God the Hungarian mares were as ferocious on the field as they were in bed, Franciska especially! That just made the after battle celebrations all the more worthwhile though. And the sex was nice too.” the colt boasted.

Twilight’s brain froze at the startling and frank innuendo of his words, her cheeks blushing a tomato red involuntarily. To say she was unfamiliar with such concepts was very harsh on her, books and a hasty and not at all fun conversation with Count Mortiz on her fourteenth birthday having filled her in on the more gruesome aspects of the procedure involved in those types of things. But since this was the time period when the best material on the subject are rather uninformative in the absolute kindest of words, and seeing as Mortiz is a paranoid old man with little to no experience at all in explaining ‘those’ concepts to teens, it did not help. At all. Thus ensuring that she would stay as far, *far* away from such practices.

Charles’ reaction was more along the lines of amusement though. “I would not or would not want to know that experience personally, but by the war, you mean the Great War? What was it like?” he continued, getting serious now.

Antoine stayed silent, his mind wracking at trying to find the right words to answer him. He wanted to tell the boy more about his father, but

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<sup>1</sup> *As an aside, it is curious to note that pony gender roles are much less muddled then those in human society. Due to the fact that humans had used ponies of either genders without so much as a care as to what it was, both because of the relatively small pony population practically demanding the usage of both genders, and for the long-standing tradition that mares served just as well as colts in all purposes, mares were treated with the same courtesy given to colts; especially those that served in the military. Ironically enough, this had given some mares more rights then human women of this time, a sign of the strange nature of the treatment of ponies in Europe and beyond.*

he was under explicit orders not to, and he himself was unsure if Charles was at all ready to learn more about his legacy. He was still young despite his attempts to prove otherwise, and Antoine was worried about his reaction or the effect on Charles' behavior if he wasn't careful. The teen had attempted ever since they started tutoring to learn more about his father, and he answered with veiled responses that gave the boy a hint and nothing more of the answer he desired. "It was a war, and it was rather great." he answered in a deadpan tone.

The former Prince Imperials near epileptic response left Antoine nearly shaking in delightful schadenfreude. When he had calmed down at last, and Twilight had at least escaped the embarrassed state she was in, he spoke more. "Though I've believed we've dilly-dallied enough. Now that dearest Franciska is gone, I'm afraid we've no choice but to head towards what will most assuredly be a boring and dreadful experience~." he said in a sing-song voice.

"You're really making me feel good about this Major." Twilight said, finding strength in sarcasm.

"Oh, I would want nothing less from my two shining stars! Ah, the day I received you two was a fine day indeed for me. Such starling young minds, so innocent and flexible in work and thought!" the colts grin was absolutely devilish by this point.

Shaking his head with a tired acceptance, Charles concealed his amusement with ease. '*Innocent indeed*,' he bemusedly thought. As much as he hated to admit it, he really did like the colt a lot. The very fact that he was a war veteran of the days of his father heightened his excitement further. Add to that his status as pretty much the only pony in the Austrian officer corps he knew of only added to his fascination. Antoine had stirred his curiosity, and drew him towards his presence and knowledge more so. The fact that he was a damn good teacher only added to his glowering appraisal of the colt.

But that did not mean he would put up with such nonsensical distractions. Coughing purposely loud into his hand, he directed the two ponies attention towards him, Twilight's with a fearful haste. "Pardon my interruptions good sir Antoine, but shouldn't you play the part of the gentleman and lead us 'young, innocent minds' towards the place where



we shall take our entertainment?" he said in a direct mockery of Antoine's earlier tone.

Antoine's amusement at Charles countering him was evident, and it made him like the student more. From what he had read up he was almost cut off from all the world, a cold ghost that only haunted the hallways of the palace with his presence and lineage. But he did not see that in the least. Antoine instead saw a fine young man, with a rapacious wit and a keen mind that hungered for all that was available to be learnt.

Twilight was much the same, though more reserved in nature, but this was made up for by her gracious behavior. While Charles was not rude in the least, she spoke with a more direct politeness. Alas, those traits were nothing compared with their humor... when they could find it at least. "Oh of course Prinz Franz, after all you did accept my invitation. *E tu*, Twilight, you wish to go right?" Antoine replied, switching his focus to Twilight within an instant.

Twilight's ears tucked down at his bilingual display. "You know Italian?" she asked, interested for an entirely different reason now.

"A bit. Learned a bit of it when serving in Lombardia. You know of it though?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow at her.

"I'm decent." she answered truthfully.

Though de Foresti's Italian lessons imparted well on the two, they rarely used the language outside of random conversation, and even then only to keep it fresh in their minds. The language, while a nice thing to know, did not particularly interest her, it being the worst of the Latin languages to her, with her only desiring to learn it in the first place due to Charles learning it when she arrived. When she informed Charles of those feelings once, he had smirked, saying something about irony before refusing to comment further.

"Sehr gut. An excellent thing it is to be multilingual, especially in this land of peoples diverse as can be." Antoine remarked.

"*Ahem.*" Charles coughed once more, causing Twilight to cast wary and worried eyes on him behind his back.

“Ah yes, forgive me. The theater is near the center of the city, just follow me.”

Thankful that they were finally getting somewhere, the two followed right behind him as he trotted through the crowd, who parted easily in the presence of the uniformed colt. Mercifully, they all proceeded through the crowded city with only minor interruptions, whether it be due to Antoine's majorly uniform and stiff stance, Charles' royal bearing, or Twilight's exotic coloring, they got through. “So just where is it that we're going Antoine?” Twilight asked as they passed another street.

“The Theater in der Josefstadt,” Antoine answered with a practiced smoothness, “It's an old place, one of the oldest theaters in all of Wien in fact. I know the current owner, J. von Scheidlin he's called, and he arranged this when he heard a member of the royal family would be visiting. Lucky folks you two are.”

Twilight nodded at the response, grateful to know more, while Charles rubbed his chin thoughtfully. ‘*Being a royal from the most prestigious family in Europe sure does have its advantages,*’ he judged with only a minute hint of sarcasm in his mind. No other words were spoken then as they walked farther. Deciding to fulfill one of his more minor curiosities, Charles took a look at Antoine's cutie mark, seeing as he had little else to do and he had only seen glimpses of it up till now.



The Hapsburg coat of arms, specifically his grandfathers, the symbol of the ruling family of the Kaisertum Österreich. It was a common feature for ponies that decided to serve mainly in the Reich, or some other symbol of military adventurism. He had to admit, it was an excellent mark. Serving one's nation always seemed as one of the most noble of goals to Charles, and Antoine served well, it seemed. Though he was baffled as to why Twilight shivered coldly when she saw a coat of arms cutie mark of any kind. It was an almost phobic reaction. He'd have to ask her sometime.

Suddenly they stopped in front of a building. "We're here." Antoine told the the two.

It was a gigantic white building, made of fine looking sturdy materials, with rows of windows in the front, and a large portion of it jutting out from the rest of it. A decently sized entrance on the side of that portion was where a large door rested, where numerous well-dressed humans in tuxedos and furs and all sorts of in-style fashions went in. "Just follow me meine kleinen Fische, wouldn't want you two getting lost or anything, and the blame falling on my head..." he said with a crooked smile that they could practically feel.

Both Twilight and Charles rolled at their eyes at his display. Antoine trotted forward, the crowd opening up to him as if they were the Red Sea

before his presence, murmuring amongst themselves at his sight. While only a few scattered whispers were directed towards the purple mare that followed behind him, the last member of their group, that scion of two very famous families, who struck a pose, the same one he always took as of late with one arm in his jacket, a pose that came to him almost naturally. Despite it's lack of severe intentions, the very sight of it brought back dark memories to the crowd, dark memories of a time when a young Corsican man nearly brought down the entirety of their familiar and traditional world order.

To these men and women, who had only just left the war that centered around that same man over ten years ago, their memories were as fresh as can be. And they, who knew at least the bare details of this teens lineage, began to darken the tone of their gossip. Charles paid them no heed, as if he would to begin with, the prince intent simply on watching this damned play as a chance to get out into the city life, even with his detest of actually meeting new people. Twilight was a little bit more observant though, she always had sharp ears, being a pony and all, and the few things she caught were... *displeasing*. She kept her acid-laced words hidden for now though, they were here to watch a play, not start a scene. Yet at least.

The walk in the theater hallways itself was pleasanter than the way in, with few distracting guests hurrying about, a few stage hands and assistants popping up now and then. Within a few moments after getting in though, they were ambushed by a mousy, thin-faced human with thick-rimmed dusty glasses, and an even dustier brown trench coat. "Antoine, mein Freund, guten Tag. Wie geht's dir?" the mousy man greeted.

"Ausgezeichnet Herr Scheidlin. Meine Fische hier sind sehr gelangweilt. You have a spot for us, correct?" Antoine greeted in turn, heading straight to business.

"Ah yes, yes. Good thing you've come when you did, some foul hebrew was attempting to get his way in here. If you didn't arrive when you did, I would've had to give up a fine spot to such a dastardly Christ-killer."

Antoine shuddered at the thought. "Good indeed. The very concept of it would make me ill any other day, and nigh fatally stricken when a Prinz

von Österreich and his most illustrious friend is here to view your most fine offerings here.”

“Oh correct. Now, just follow me then, and I’ll take you to your booth.”

“Um, excuse me sir...” Twilight’s voice rang out.

Scheidlin stopped his planned movement, looking at the purple mare quizzically. “Yes Fraulein?” he asked with a small snuffle.

Twilight gathered her resolve, preparing to voice her complaints. “But, why did you not want to give that seat up to that guy?”

Antoine and Scheidlin gave her a ‘huh?’ look, while Charles felt the urgent desire to sweat from behind her, as the awkwardness of this situation was fully clear to him. Scheidlin gave her a dirty look, that when combined with his dusty glasses made him look more hilarious than anything. “Well what do you mean child? He’s a Jew, why would I give up good seats to filthy rats such as them? He would insist of course that he was a decent citizen, but I knew better, I knew better all right! By the time I had him thrown out, he was pleading like a struck lamb that he served in the war, that he loved his country, but as I said, I knew better!” the keeper of the theater barked at her.

Twilight was ready to give the man a piece of her mind, until Antoine stepped in. “Forgive her mein Freund, she’s ignorant of the land and our customs you see. Do not feel mad at her for her lack of knowledge, blame me instead.” he spoke, stopping this before it got any further.

Now he was the focus of both Twilight and Scheidlin’s glares. The earth pony grinned nervously, backing up ever so slightly. “She’s from ‘Equestria’ mein Lieber. Remember, she’s the one I talked about a few times?” Antoine desperately continued.

Scheidlin’s eyes crinkled at that, and he sighed suddenly. “Ah yes, I remember now. Poor dear indeed. With her lack of a proper upbringing, it is no wonder she says such foolish things. Forgive me my dear, my apologies.” he said half-heartedly, before turning his back on her.

There were a few things that Twilight hated so much as the implication, or in this case blatant statement, that her homeland was false, or a place where none dared inhabited. Antoine only got out of her sights for that due to his status as a teacher, since she *a/ways* respected her teachers. But this mousy, irritable human who was rude enough to presume on her, without giving her a chance to defend herself? Oh no, *oh no*.

Twilight was about to bust a nerve at that 'apology' alone, ready to serve a heaping pile of magically raised objects the directors way, until the pleading eyes of Antoine stopped her just barely. He mouthed '*Es tut mir leid*' her way, which placated her, and gave her enough of a cool head back to realize just what the consequences of doing such acts to a physically infirm man might do to her life and her conscience. That still didn't mean she could not simply stick her tongue out at the old sod behind his back though, which she did with great gusto. Charles simply tapped his foot impatiently throughout the whole exchange, only thankful it did not escalate into something which would delay his schedule further.

Scheidlin hobbled forward, leading them further. All throughout their talk, Twilight had a worried and puzzled look on her muzzle. Waiting until Charles was at her side once more, Twilight leaned over to him without warning, his eyes widening as he felt the warm breath from her muzzle suddenly strike his ear. "Charles, just what were they talking about, with Jews and stuff? Why did he throw that guy out for being 'Jewish', whatever that is?" she asked, feeling the answer would not at all be pleasant for some reason.

Charles stiffened suddenly, gulping suddenly as his footsteps became noticeably harder against the wooden floor. "Twilight, it's rather complex."

"How complex can it be if they're just insulting some man? They sounded like they were insulting him based on who he is, and that's terrible!" speaking with a clear anger now, her rising voice drawing the attention of some around her, but thankfully not Antoine and his companion.

Debating just how in the world he was supposed to explain this, the young prince answered her the best he could. "Basically, Jews are a

certain... group of people. They are not well-liked by most people in this country, since it mostly is Catholic.”

Twilight suddenly felt very embarrassed, mainly because she had heard of the word before, but had no idea how it related to the current context. “What’s that have to do with anything?” she said with a slight blush.

He groaned, feeling a headache come on. This would not be a kind day to him, not in the least. As thankful as he was earlier that this discussion had not arisen until now, he knew it would come up sooner or later. The problem was he preferred later over sooner. Much later. “Look, I promise to explain further as soon as we get back home, but until then please for the love of God don’t incite him any further!” he said in hushed tones.

Nearly biting on her tongue, Twilight sighed. “Fine, I’ll appease you for now,” she said in a thankfully lower voice, “But answers. Later!”

“I would not think anything else mein Liebchen.” His headache lessened, if only by the tiniest bit.

The remainder of their walk up to the booth was a trek that while quiet, was fraught with tension beyond belief. Twilight seemed noticeably moody, casting hot looks at the back of Scheidlin’s head that were so fierce in their intensity the man had to take a look behind him just to see the source of rapidly growing discomfort. Seeing only an all too innocent purple mare did not lessen it in the least. Tensions were running high, and neither Antoine nor Charles wanted a slaughter in the middle of a public venue.

Charles was playing the part of mediator with Twilight, attempting to point out some of the more interesting pieces of art or some decently important person they came across, but she held as little interest in such nonsense as he did. *‘Another point to add in her favor,’* he supposed. Antoine kept Scheidlin at bay, eager as Charles to prevent a full-scale war from occurring right within these halls.

Within around five minutes, they reached the booth after climbing a small set of stairs. It was a precariously located resting point, offering a clear view of the titantic stage that dominated the room beyond it, with an

equally clear look at the dozens of already filled up chairs below them. "Here it is then Antoine. Hope you and the Prinz enjoy it." Scheidlin smiled, blatantly ignoring Twilight's presence.

"Yes. Well until we meet again, Scheidlin. Guten Abend noch." Antoine bid him farewell.

Scheidlin did so in return, casting a deep and respectful bow to Charles, that the prince did not at all return in any sort of respect, before leaving. Not without a painfully loud grunt when he passed Twilight though. Twilight was suddenly thankful her lessons in patience from long ago included breathing tactics, as they served a very good purpose in keeping herself from playing some very mean-spirited tricks on the old bat. "Well, might as well tuck in until the play starts. Shouldn't be more than a few more minutes in fact." Antoine noted.

Charles hummed lowly, a sound that combined with Twilight's recent annoyance nearly split her eardrums in twain. "Just what are we watching?" the prince asked.

"Oh, something from England I think. Richard III it was called."

Annoyance crept into Charles at the mention of that most hated nation. "How quaint." he said with a hint of iron.

"Right oh lad," Antoine replied, oblivious to his status, "But now that that business is taken care of, let's have a nice sit down now, shall we?"

Twilight and Charles eyed the seating arrangements. A few bolted in chairs. Not really the size for a fully grown pony. "Antoine, I believe you might have been mistaken as to our seats." Twilight deadpanned.

"Oh this'll be fine. We'll just sit on our haunches or just stand up, nothing too miserable. Prinz Franz here can meanwhile take a nice seat, and take a gander at the ladies while we're waiting." the major said with a deliberate husky voice.

Debating whether to pound her head against the railing or not, Twilight sighed sullenly. "Fine, I'll just stand."



“I’ll stand as well. Or lean, in any case.” Charles assuaged them by leaning on the wall to their backs, due to feeling a bit guilty about leaving them standing like this.

“Hmm, fine. Wait, I think it’s starting!” Antoine said, pointing a hoof towards the stage.

At first a horde of well-dressed men in fine black suits with white undershirts stepped out of the sides of the stage. Once out they took their places in a the lowered portion of the stage filled with various shining instruments and seats. “Oh, it’s just the musicians getting ready.” the major said, disgruntled.

The two teens shook their heads at this boring display, until the last musician appeared from beyond the stage, bringing both their attention to an apex. “Who is that?” Twilight said, leaning forward a bit to get a better view.

A gray mare with a pink bow-tie and an ever darker gray mane trotted out last, keeping a dignified poise as she took her place near a cello with the rest of the musicians. Her cutie mark was a pink treble clef, indicating her purpose there more then any words could. Intrigued whispers and queries over just who this mare was were so thick the three could hear it from their raised position above. *‘Surely she wasn’t going to do what it looked like she was doing?’* and other gossip was said as she took her place.

The gray mare put a hoof around the cello, before taking her free forehoof and grasping a large bow on a stool next to her with the space between her hooves. Everyone grew excited and bewildered now at just what this mare was doing, not the least of which were our protagonists up above. “She’s not trying to actually play a musical instrument with hooves now, is she?” Twilight inquired, echoing the general consensus of the crowd.

Antoine squinted, trying to get a better look. When he caught sight of the gray mare fully, he smirked instantaneously. “Oh dear, if she is who I think she is, I believe so.”

“Who is she?” Charles asked, getting interested now.

Antoine put a hoof to his muzzle, filing through his memories until he received the right information. "That, mein freund, is Octavia de Claro. One of the very, very few non-unicorn musicians to ever grace ponykind. She can move her hooves in ways most mares and colts can only dream, and can teach her human compatriots a thing or two at times as well. Strange, I thought she was from France though..."

Both of them were astonished at that news. A pony, capable of playing a very complex instrument, with only their hooves? Such a thing was unknown even to Twilight. The two of them were now and truly interested in what was going on below, though for very different reasons than the play that was set to stage. Charles was especially interested in a smaller tidbit of info that Antoine revealed. "She's French you say?"

"Oh yes. From Lyon I believe. Though she must be here on some sort of tour of the continent I suppose. Even so, she stands out greatly compared to the rest of the musicians, and the patrons in general. In certain other areas as well." he added lecherously.

The majors words, save that awful last sentence, were evidently true, as the only other musicians were the black suited humans, Octavia standing out like a diamond in the rough. In fact she, Antoine, and Twilight were the only ponies there, something that stuck out painfully to Twilight. "Interesting." Charles murmured, putting his arms on the railing, content to just watch up close now.

Within a few minutes the stage darkened suddenly, as shadowy figures appeared on it, moving props and whatnot. Music blared out, the dull tap of the conductors signal rod starting a cavalcade of lively and foreboding music. The blast of the trumpets, the blare of the violin, all of it formed an amalgamation of classical sound that reverberated throughout the large room. It was beauty to the ears, a true musical *force di triumphe*.

One mare's notes stood far above those around her though, even in this already proud display of dexterous skill. Standing on the hindhooves proudly, Octavia's cello stood out above all of these trained professionals though, playing with a practiced skill that drew the hearts and minds of the crowd further and further towards her. The subtle nuances in her movements, the slow strikes of her bow upon the strings that brought with it

a haunting melody that made all of those that listened yearn for handkerchiefs to dabble into their eyes, such was the force of her musical talent.

Twilight was left speechless. It was as if her ears had heard nothing until now, and at last the true sounds of the world were opened up to her now that this mare and opened the doors of auditory sensation to her. "It's... amazing." was all she could say.

Antoine nodded, dumbfounded at how good this had turned out to be. Charles found his mouth suddenly dry. He had only found love in the military marches he woke up too daily, never finding the likes of Beethoven or Bach at all as attractive as they were made out to be, but this, this! This was true orgasmic bliss to the ears, and even that was putting it lightly. That such a musician, a creature who was normally incapable by very birth from using such instruments, would create such perfection... It nearly brought a tear to his eye.

This intro ended after a delightful five minutes, leaving all who listened wanting for more, so much more. The players rose from their seats, or just stood in the case of Octavia, and bowed lowly, before departing. "Magnifique!" Charles shouted in an absolute roar, clapping wildly.

His impulsive gesture set shockwaves throughout all the room. Everyone rose, clapping fiercely with a fervor previously unknown to them. Octavia, being the last in line out of the room, caught the full brunt of this praise, and it was clear from even the distance of their sky-box that she was deliriously happy at this, a wetness coming out of her eyes. Taking a look at the source of the clapping, she sent Charles a thankful nod, and left. Charles suddenly added something new to his list of post-show activities.

Compared to that startling performance, the rest of the show was downright dull. A droll performance by a series of actors who were either not paid enough or just did not give a damn, as they performed Shakespeare in a manner that could be said to befit a dead penguin, but even they would probably be insulted by it. Any excitement that had come to them from the excellent display by Octavia and her *compadres* drizzled out into an apathy fit only for boredom such as this. The casting was poor, and the stage props so visibly fake it almost made their eyes bleed, which

was fitting considering they used what looked to be tomato juice in place of blood.

Charles finally sat down, as he stopped caring about the play the moment where the titular Duke of Gloucester, the only character that seemed at all interesting to him, became more and more comically villainous that it removed all joy he had, which was not helped at all by the almost stuttered performance by the actor playing him. Twilight and Antoine did not even get that far into caring. Antoine was looking rather sluggish, and Twilight had actually fallen asleep. The other two could only wish they could join her.

When it ended at last, a mercy indeed, there were only polite claps from the audience as the cast bowed once more. Antoine yawned slowly. "Well, that was a bust."

"Oh really?" Charles spat back, head resting on his arm.

Twilight shook slightly, having fallen asleep a while ago. "... Did it end?" Twilight grumbled, eyes opening at last from the slumber she found herself in.

"Ha, it never even began!" Charles complained, his nails digging into the armrest past his gloves out of sheer anger at all that time wasted.

"Well hey, it wasn't a total waste. I mean, the music was fine." Antoine reasoned.

"Oh yes! I mean, that Octavia was simply amazing. She did things with her hooves I've never seen a mare do before!" Twilight said with eyes that almost sparkled, to the bewilderment of those around her.

Charles and Antoine had to decide whether to inform her of the very sharp innuendo of her words, or let her stay as innocent as she was. A quick glance they exchanged leaned them towards the latter option. Coughing into his hoof, Antoine lent them a conciliatory smile. "Well I am truly am sorry this balls'd up so much, contrary to my own expectations. Want to rush out of here before the entryway really gets crowded?" he offered.

Charles shook his head, to the surprise of Antoine. “No, I’m interested in meeting that mare, Octavia. Do you think we could get a chance to meet her? I’d love to speak with her about her performance.” he asked, his words containing no obvious alternative motive besides such a desire.

Looking suspicious of this, Antoine gave Twilight a look. “Twilight, you want to meet her too?”

She shrugged. “Eh, it doesn’t matter to me either way. It would be nice, I suppose, just to thank her for the staggering performance.”

Muttering under his breath something about ‘troublesome kids’, Antoine flashed them a toothy grin. “Fine, see if you can find a way to the back stage. If you tell them who you are, I’m sure she’d love to meet you. I’ll meet you two outside.”

Nodding at him, Charles departed with a wave of his hand. “See you later then.”

Twilight followed close behind him, though yawning once more out of her latent sleepiness. “Bye major. When we get out, we better not see you seducing some poor innocent mare.” she threatened only half-jokingly.

“No promises!” he called after her as she left.

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Charles and Twilight proceeded through the hallways surreptitiously, careful to avoid all contact by any assistants or guards by doing the one thing that, according to Charles, would get them no attention at all. Acting as if they were supposed to be there naturally, and not as if they were most likely intent on trespassing or harassing one of the theaters performers. It worked well, the only annoyances encountering them being the annoying colored Flemish tapestries on the walls that were a grotesque collection of color that offended both their sets of eyes, but after a few minutes of progress they had found themselves in the back of the theater, seeing stage hands either moving things or lazying about.

Picking a random man, Charles tapped his back, causing him to turn towards him. “Excuse me sir, do you know where Madame de Claro is residing at the moment?” he queried.

Scratching his massive brown beard, the stagehand took a moment to respond as he tried to recall what the name. "Ah yes, the pony with the maddening talents on the cello? I remember her now. She went out back with the leader of her troupe, you can find her there." he replied, pointing towards said location.

"Merci."

Heading there now, it did not take the two long to find the illustrious musical mare. They found her in a small corner by the back of the stage, with a tight-lipped and sallow-faced old man apparently arguing with her. "I told you once, and I told you twice Octavia, you will accept your current payment and you will not complain in the least!" the old man shouted, unknowing or perhaps just uncaring of the new visitors that were literally right there now.

Octavia kept a calm and graceful look, responding in the same manner. "And I will tell you, as I have told you numerous times already, that I am the only thing keeping this troupe together. I have accepted my current working conditions for a long while now, and if I do not receive the same payment as my compatriots, who as you know support me fully in this endeavour, I will leave. Right. Now." she said, with more than a hint of iron showing.

The old man sputtered, astounded at her daring towards him. "You dare! You dare demand of me, the man who got you where you are today! Why, if it wasn't for me you would be nothing more than a speck of dirt on the streets of Lyons, and I would be all the better for it. The ungratefulness of you whelp, it cuts deep, it cuts deeper than any wound you could inflict." he spoke with a low and dark tone now, one that oozed ill intent.

"Excuse me sir and madame, is there a problem here?"

The musician and the manager turned to see a purple unicorn, and the source of the voice, a tall dirty blond man in a black soldiers uniform. The managers eyes narrowed at their presense. "No, not in the least Herr...?"

“Franz,” Charles said, for once relishing the chance to use that name, “And I do believe there is a problem, as this fine mare here seems to be on the receiving end of a rather unfair deal on your part.”

Octavia, recognizing him now, nodded at him. “You speak the truth Prinz Franz. For twelve years now I have been in service to this man, and he has treated me well enough. However, when I dared to ask for a modest increase in my conditions, so I could live a life of my own without being shackled by the need for his financial aid, he refused. After twelve years of making this troupe the best it could be, I believe I can demand that much.” she said clearly, eloquently, and with the same majesty in her voice that came out of her cello.

“It sounds to me like you’re not taking good care of your employees, sir.” Twilight spoke at last.

The manager nearly had a catatonic fit at her impromptu interruption, bringing him to address Charles once more, to find some form of sanity in this ever-growing pit of madness! “But sir, they’re ponies!” he declared, as if that was enough of a point to even constitute one.

A terrible quiet came over them at that statement, as the manager was assaulted by the very fierce glares of both Twilight and Octavia. Charles for his part looked almost amused at the hole the man had just dug himself in. “And just what does that mean sir?” the prince continued innocently.

Lacking gumption to even think of giving either mares a look, the manager pressed his suddenly dry lips together to formulate a response towards him. “Well... they’re not people. I mean, she couldn’t get anywhere in this world without my help, and it was my skills that molded her into the fine player she is. Otherwise she would just be another mare in the fields or the military. It’s the order of the land, we humans do what we can to turn these creatures into respectable members of society at large. Would you have me do nothing at all, and simply give in to her as if she was superior to me?” the manager ranted and raved, desperate to find some support from the prince.

Sadly, to him at least, Charles found no common ground with him, instead giving him cold eyes. It was better than Twilight’s at least, who was

looking almost murderous by now. "Sir, are you saying that even if she had worked under you for years, the status of her birth deems you fit to judge her on what she receives or not? That you may do as you please, as if you were some deranged puppet-master hanging strings into the skin of this fine mare, no, this fine musician! For she it does not matter her species, what she had done with her life, what she has created tonight, is proof enough that she is deserving of such minor generousities as a decent works pay. And you would say otherwise, just because?"

"I, I mean..." the manager suddenly turned very red, the assault snapping something within him, "You dare to demand of me! I'll tell you *boy*, I know people, and once I get this through the proper channels, I'll ensure you'll never get anywhere in this city!"

There was no sound for the next five seconds. Everyone became suddenly cool, so quiet you could hear a pin drop and the sound would echo all throughout the room. On the sixth second however, Twilight and Charles burst out into the most sudden and, dare I say it, mocking laughter they had ever performed. The man was flabbergasted as to why they were doing this, and demanded answers. "Stop laughing I say, what manner of tomfoolery is this?" he shouted rabidly.

Charles took a few precious moments to repress his rampant bemusement, and when he did so answered with a smirk, a victorious one, one that bode nothing but bad tidings for the manager. "Oh good sir, I'm afraid your threats are nothing to me. For you see, whatever friends you can scrounge up from whatever waste bucket of society you scrape them from, they would be as useless as sensibility to a poet. I, Franz von Hapsburg," his smirk grew almost wicked as the man visibly near shat himself at the name, "Have much 'higher' contacts, so to speak."

The prince stepped closer to the manager, so close he was almost hovering over him, his shadow casting a menacing darkness over the man that nearly made him run away on the spot in sheer fright. "Let me tell you what will happen next. I, in all my foresight, will be obliged to mention your troupe at the next family gathering. Whether this be positive, or negative, depends on what you! Do! Next!" he enunciated each word with extreme care.



He was nearly on the verge of breaking down into whimpers, Charles could tell. The smell of fear, the little cues on his old body, all of it. It spoke to him, gave him power. Oh it was seductive, this power over another man, to make him fear you. It sent chills of absolute delight down his spine, a welcome change from the chills he suffered from as of late. The manager did not answer him, only trying and failing to make some sensible reply. "Do you understand?" Charles spoke much calmer now, sounding as if he had suddenly coated his voice in a bucket of honey.

"Yes, I understand, I understand! I'll raise her pay, I'll give her all my pay if you want!" he babbled.

"That will not be necessary in the least." Octavia remarked.

The musical mare was not liking where this was going in the least. As tempting as it was to give in to the pleasure of seeing the manager squirmed, she had known him too long now, too long to indulge in such cruelties. And the prince's way of handling things seemed... excessive in their use. Twilight could only agree, without even knowing it, losing the similar desires she had had just a moment ago, and feeling very guilty with herself for thinking them in the first place. "I only ask for an increase in my pay, and to be treated as any other member of the troupe. I have grown now sir, and I only desire the chance to be treated like the rest of the men, for they treat me as one of their own already. Is it so much for you to ask the same of you Kellerman?" Octavia pleaded, finally showing how hurt she was at his earlier words.

The manager, who's name was now revealed, absorbed her words. They were so shocking and personal, that it made him think for once at what she meant to him and his merry band. And what he realized nearly made him burst into tears of utter despair. "... No, it isn't Octavia," Kellerman stated, deciding at last, "I've treated you like just another pony for so long now, and... I'm sorry. I just, I just don't know what to do sometimes, and you coming in and asking for more, it just set me off. I'm so sorry 'Tavi, I just was worried that you would barge out and leave me if I gave you more. Can you forgive this poor old fool for nearly destroying one of the oldest friendships he's had?"

Octavia laid her serene eyes on him, judging him, trying to find any hint of deceit. Charles had by now backed up to where Twilight was, a little

confused at just what was going on, but he said nothing yet. At last Octavia stood stiff, opening her mouth and taking in a deep breath before speaking. Kellerman, expecting only a verbal lashing, closed his eyes as he felt tears begin to well up in them. But at last, Octavia looked down at him with pitying and kind eyes. "Do you even need to ask?" she said, as if it was obvious.

Kellerman, who thought by now that he only deserved scorn from her, could scarcely believe what she had just said. "You mean that?" he said with eyes full of a futile hope.

Octavia smiled softly towards him. "Of course I do, you old coot." she declared, trotting forward and embracing him with both her hooves.

The brows of a certain prince were now definitely raised. "Just what is going on here?" he whispered harshly to Twilight.

"Decent people, that's what." she whispered back, smiling at the adorable sight before her.

That answer did not satisfy him in the least, but he would have to deal with it. This had already taken a huge chunk of their time away. And to think, he just wanted to say hi and thank her for the nice performance, and instead he was dragged into some conflict that ended as if it came out of some sappy English novel. It made his stomach quench at the mere sight of it. But asides from his distaste towards the current situation, Octavia and Kellerman were still enjoying their hug, only parting after a few more tearful exchanges and desperate apologies on his part were made.

"Oh thank you two! If you did not arrive, who knows what more I could have said, what worse things I might have done? Thank you Prinz Franz, thank you Madame, bless you, bless you!" Kellerman thanked them deliriously, heading towards them now to express his thanks.

Octavia watched the over-dramatic old man with a wistful smile on her muzzle, while Charles and Twilight were now backing away slowly from that same old man who was now getting awfully too close for comfort. "Uh, it's no problem Herr Kellerman." Twilight interjected.

*'What the hell have I stumbled into,'* Charles contemplated. Sure he was okay with putting that man in his place, but he had been dragged way too far into a situation he cared naught for at all. Seeing him bristle with displeasure, Twilight shook her head at him. Was he really not getting what was so nice about this? Kellerman meanwhile had grabbed Charles hand and was shaking it fiercely. "And you, good sir, you've snapped me out of my rage. How can I ever repay you!"

"... I just wanted to talk to Octavia." Charles said simply in a strained voice.

"Ah, of course! Right away. I'll be off now, I have to get with the rest of the boys, but you can be assured that I'll treat her right from now on Monsieur Franz, you can rest assure of it!" Kellerman declared.

Kellerman walked off then, leaving only two mares and a single prince in the room. "Well, I'm glad to see you two patched things up then." Twilight said with a smile Octavia's way.

Octavia returned it in a much more subdued manner. "Quite. I'm glad you two came when you did. Even if it was a bit... extreme. And I must say, it is an honor meeting you Prinz Franz. I've heard quite a bit about you." Octavia commented, bowing slightly his way.

Charles shook his head at this motion. "Ah madame, I demand no such pleasantries. Rather, I should only hope to act in such a way towards you, after your most magnificent performance. Helping you was, at best, only a minor repatriation for you adding life to an otherwise droll day," he stopped for a moment, before kneeling before her and circling his hands around her hooves, to both mares shock, "If I may?"

Amazed at what he was offering her, Octavia nodded slowly. Charles returned the gesture, before raising her hoof slightly, and giving it a single kiss on the tip. "For the excellent show." he told her.

"Merci your grace. You do me too kind a favor with your act." Octavia thanked him.

“The favor is given to me, for having the simple honor of hearing you play. But alas, I fear we have spent too long here now. We’ve gotten ourselves into a tidy mess, and we are lucky it turned out as good as it did.”

“Yeah, Antoine’s probably clopping his hooves out of boredom by this point,” Twilight added, before considering it further, “Or he might be bugging some poor mare. Oh dear.”

Charles rolled at his eyes at the very possible thought. “Aye, you’re right. Forgive me madame, but we must depart for now.”

“That’s fine, but if you would monsieur,” Octavia glanced at Twilight for a moment, “I would like to speak with you, in a more, private venue for a moment. If you would be so kind.”

Twilight took a moment to see that the implied question, and made a small ‘oh’ sound. Looking split on just what to do, she sighed when Charles nodded towards her, the prince looking quite curious at what the musical mare wanted. Twilight decided she could leave him alone for just a moment, and nodded towards Octavia. “See you outside then.” she said, before departing.

As she trotted away, Octavia looked at the prince apologetically. “Forgive me if I sounded rude towards her, but I would prefer I speak about this with you in private. I do not know of her political status here, and I’d rather not risk revealing sensitive information without knowing the consequences of letting her listen.” she explained.

Now Charles was more than interested, his curiosity was piqued beyond belief. Stepping closer to her in order to hear her better, he perused what she meant. “What do you mean? I thought you were a musician, not a political conspirator.” he spoke accusingly.

Octavia looked almost offended at his suggestion. Or at least, her eyes narrowed slightly, an expressive gesture from such a stoic mare. “To call me a conspirator is an overreaction sire, but I understand the misunderstanding.”

“Hmph. Even so, Twilight was no threat at all. She’s innocent beyond compare. I doubt she would even care about the political idiocies of

Österreich that you threaten to tell me now. And I can only care just barely more.” he said with a hint of obvious distaste.

“Trust me sire, I did not ask you to talk with me in some dusty theater corner after oh so conveniently coming to my aid. I was planning on finding you from the very start, as soon as I realized I was headed to Wien. I did not come just to speak of the nuances of the Reich. Instead, I wanted to tell you about the situation in *France*.” Octavia revealed at last.

Charles kept remarkably calm considering what was just said. And with his heart beating a mile a minute now, he felt very proud of himself for speaking his next few words in a calm yet inquisitive tone. “I’m listening.”

Octavia looked pleased with herself, glad that she had got him interested. “I know who you are, Prince Imperial Napoléon II, sole legitimate child of *l’Empereur* Napoléon himself.”

His eyes became cross at this, as he felt his blood boil a bit. “And? You know facts, what do they matter to me here, where I am a prisoner in all but name?” he said with great vitriol.

“Because the situation in France might allow greater opportunities in the future, for one who I can already tell is as ambitious as his father.” she hinted.

Despite being confused as to whether he should feel flattered or unworthy by being compared to his almost-mythical father, the only external sign of emotion Charles showed was a raise of his left brow. “How so?”

“Simple. The new king, Charles X, is as reactionary as they come. The Bourbons seek to destroy all your father and the Revolution created, and it is clear that the farcical body that passes for a Chamber of Deputies only bows its head to him save in the most insane of decrees. I and others in France wish for a return to the days of L’Empereur, and we are growing in power by the day.”

“What!? But I thought the people supported the Bourbon bastard for, well, God knows whatever reason, now you’re saying there’s a chance for a new revolution?” Charles asked, daring to hope for this chance to be real.

Octavia huffed in disgust at the very suggestion. "The few Royalists left among the common humans and ponies are rare in showing their support. Charles X has not been on the throne for only a few months, and already he wishes to push the rights of the average colt and mare down so far that we would basically be akin to the serfs in Russia, if it could be described kindly!" Octavia spoke with a much greater conviction now, a rare outburst of emotion from her.

Seeing that Charles was digesting her words, Octavia continued. "Napoléon gave the average pony rights, gave us the first taste of freedom since the general abolition of slavery more than a few decades ago. I am not passionate about most things monsieur, but the rights our great Empereur gave us once is one of them, and that is why I joined up with the Bonapartists, to see if I could bring this message to your place of exile. To see if you, should we ever work in force, would seek to find your way back to France and take the crown."

Charles stayed silent for a moment longer, before speaking again. "My father... did you know him?" was all he asked, almost timidly.

Octavia was surprised at the relatively innocent question, one that seemed so simple and... almost pleading in fact. It saddened her that she had to shake her head in response. "Non monsieur, I am afraid not. I reached my teens only after the wars ended over a decade ago. I only wish I could though." she stated with a deep regret.

Sighing at his foolish and pretentious hope, Charles eyed her sullenly. "There is no need for regret. The very fact that you seek to help me, and France, is enough to prove your sincerity. But tell me, would you care to tell me of what my father did for the ponies?" he asked further, trying to get some information about his father, no matter how tangential.

"Much. Oh the Council of Celestia, the integration of the educational systems, so much to tell and so little time to say them. I am more than sure your friends are growing further impatient at your absence, so I do not wish to take up more of your time. Just know that your father, l'Empereur during France's golden days, was a military man through and through, and the military of all nations have always been the best supporters of the equality of pony and man."

Charles could only agree with the statement. He remembered explaining it to Twilight, how strange it was those in the military were usually the main supporters of the equality of both species, but it actually made sense when you thought about it. Most ponies were consigned to the military, as it was one of the few career paths open to them. There, they served with, or usually under, men of various stripes, who formed bonds of camaraderie with them like any other soldier. It offered a surprisingly unbiased view of ponies compared to the view the archaic order presented, and made the humans more sympathetic to them in turn. It only made sense, that his father, a military man, would support pony rights.

Smiling a thin smile now, he said "Thank you madame. You've told me so much already, more than I ever hoped to know. But I ask at last, how do you expect me to ever escape this accursed state? Even if the whole of France pleaded for my return, I doubt the snake..." at Octavia's curious look he elaborated, "...Kanzler von Metternich, would be willing to let me leave, and mein Opa only just more so. How can I be expected to take the crown of Charlemagne without even being able to enter France proper?"

At this Octavia bit her lip, that part of the plan being unpolished at best. "I do not know monsieur. That part you would have to work out for yourself, unless we could sneak you into France through Sardinia-Piedmont, but I doubt the Kaiser would be pleased at this, and might send the whole of Europe after us out of spite."

"True. Regardless, if you and your fellow co-conspirators have no idea, I will work on that portion of the plot then. If France beckons for me, I will come to her. Until then, I shall work on a plot to gain favor in the eyes of the Kaiser, and perhaps even be allowed to serve in the army proper, instead of being hand ceremonial titles and ranks. It is a long plot, but it is the only plausible idea I have in mind, save the unlikely chance Metternich catches a ball made of pure idiocy and decides to hold onto it."

"That seems to be for the best monsieur. I take it you wish to leave now?" Octavia said, mainly out of politeness.

"Quite madame. Until we meet again, tell your fellow Bonapartists that I support their endeavours fully, and that if they ever fall into action, I will do everything within my power to support them and return to France, to

reclaim my legacy.” he spoke with a serious conviction, one that made the fur on Octavia’s neck stand up in wonderment.

“Merci monsieur. If you share the same conviction you have in your voice with your skills as a ruler, I can only hope you manage to run our great nation one day, before it is sunken into rot and despair.” she confided.

“Your faith in me does me great justice madame. Farewell then, and tell France that as soon as she desires help, I will be there to comfort her.”

“I shall. Au revoir mon Prince Imperial.”

He left after that, slinking out of the back and into the hallways of the rest of the building. Shadowing past what was left of the guests, he found the exit in a short amount of time. Back in the streets of Wien itself, only a few feet from the exit, Twilight and Antoine were waiting patiently, or impatiently in the latter’s case. At the sight of him Twilight shook her head ruefully, greeting him with a questioning look. “There you are! I was wondering what was taking you so long. I thought that me and the major here would have to storm the place and drag you out from whatever dastardly forces were going on in there.”

Shrugging his shoulders in response, Charles responded with a lackluster mood. “I was busy. She was rather insistent on talking to me for whatever reason, and I answered her to the best of my capabilities.”

Antoine grunted after his words, casting a deep frown his way, before it turned into a perverted grin. “Busy, eh? Ha, I wonder. You and that mare weren’t doing anything in there, that was, dare I say, improper?” he said, his tone implying more than enough.

Both Charles and Twilight shared disgusted looks at that, the mare nearly vomiting at the thought of it. Which had the adverse affect of dashing away her anger at the prince and aiming it towards Antoine.

“Don’t even joke about such disgusting things, Major. It’s sickening.” Charles reprimanded.

“Agreed. I mean, it’s kind of... gross.” Twilight admitted.



Antoine could only shake his head at their sudden anger. "Ha, you two cannot take a joke at all apparently. But even so, what took you so long, lad? Were you straightening her tie or something?"

Twilight remembered now that she was angry at Charles as well, and redirected half of her annoyance towards the prince. "I'd like to know just what was going on as well, if you wouldn't mind." she said in at least a calm and simple tone.

Charles crossed his arms in annoyance at their continued questioning. "No Antoine, in fact, we simply discussed culture and whatnot. Nothing dark or grossly perverted as you offered, to my own affront. Even so I apologize for the time of yours that I have wasted, I did not intend in the least for it to take that long."

Only finding the resolve to frown at him for a moment more, Twilight's friendship overwhelmed her temperament again. "Fine. I just want to head to where ever else we were headed today. I'd rather not spend half the day arguing, and the other half walking to destinations we'll have no time to spend in at all."

"I can only agree. What use is it in arguing over what has already come to pass, when we are wasting even more time that could be spent doing practical assignments." Charles reasoned.

Antoine, seeing he was cornered, sighed. "If you two must insist, but be forewarned, I'm not letting you two out of my sight so easily again. God knows what could have happened while you were away, and to my head as a result."

"Rest assured Major, we are more than capable of handling ourselves. Twilight especially." the prince told him.

The purple mare gave him a thankful smile at the compliment, one he truly meant. After all, all the words he spoke about her were true. And his explanation of what he was doing was true as well, if hazy in its description. He was only duplicitous when it would serve her better, was he not? Was it not better to simply smudge the truth, in order to ensure she remained happier? He thought so, and saw no reason to think otherwise. Revealing

more crucial information such as that and Sophie might threaten his relationship with her, and that was a possibility that could not be tolerated in the least.

As as an aside to his baneful thoughts, Antoine shook his head grimly. "That may be, but it is my duty nonetheless. And after all, is duty not the highest of a persons virtues?"

"I'd say it's decency." Twilight chimed in.

"And I'd say it's stalwart knowledge, but this is neither the time nor place for such debates." Charles informed them.

"True mein Prinz, true. Now then, should we head on?" the major asked.

At an affirmative 'yes' from the two, he nodded. "Alright then. Follow me, my Fischchen, I have a piece of Wien you can't truly say you have experienced the city without." he hinted, trotting through the street.

The two followed him, trying to catch on to his meaning. "And that is...?" Twilight drifted off.

"Why the bar of course!" he said with a laugh.

A tingle of cold fear lept into Charles at that. "Major, may I speak with you for a moment?" he spoke with a severe need to do so.

Finding his response off-putting, Antoine agreed with a 'Yes' as Twilight wondered just what it was he wanted from the major.

Hurrying over to the major with a deliberate haste, Charles leaned in close to him, walking side by side with him. "Antoine, I believe there's a problem with your little idea." he whispered.

Misinterpreting what he meant, Antoine crossed his eyes at what he thought the prince was suggesting. "Oh dammit, it's an upscale place, it's not one of those trashy places I assure you. I might be a lech at times, but I am not a fool kid." Antoine whispered back, though in harsh tones.

Charles shook his head in frustration. "Herr Major, that's not the problem. The problem is that I'm afraid Twilight can't consume anything alcoholic in nature."

As Charles shot back a glance at Twilight, who was still left behind the two, wondering just what the sudden rush was about, Antoine nearly passed out from shock. "What!?" he shouted, before Charles beckoned him to stay quieter, "What do you mean she can't? Gott in Himmel Charles, she's fifteen, and a mare her age can drink to her hearts content so long as it doesn't end in her purse getting lighter then it is supposed to, or other despicable acts committed towards her."

Charles felt an involuntary swelling disgust at the very thought of such 'acts' occurring to Twilight. Even if he knew there was less than zero percent chance of them happening due to his own faith in Twilight's cognisant functions and common sense, it was chilling all the same towards him, as shown when the majors words brought an acidic taste up his throat. "Even if she wanted to, I'm afraid Count Mortiz beat you to it. He gave her some Bayerischen wine on her fifteenth year on his own suggestion."

"And?" Antoine demanded more information.

Charles felt embarrassed just thinking about it, such was the severity of the situation. "Let us just say it involved her not being able to cope with her liquor, and me never being able to use the trousers I wore that day again. Okay?"

Antoine nearly burst into riotous laughter at that very non-descript, yet still humorous bit of information, before he was reminded once more he was in public. "Fine, we'll get her some, I don't know, fresh water or something? That's going to cost me more though." he said with a hint of distaste.

"You can rest assured I'll pay for it out of my own coin." Charles told him.

"Nah, I'll be fine. I just want you to know I'm doing you a favor, plain and simple, alright?"

"Alright with me then."

“Hello! What are you two talking about?” Twilight yelled, sure they were discussing something related to her.

The prince and the major looked at each other with a knowing look at her question. “We were discussing... Beverages.” Antoine said nervously.

Resisting the urge to slam his head against the very hard sidewalk at the very lame excuse, Charles nodded in affirmation. “Yes. Beverages.” he concurred with the veracity of a gambler with a very bad poker face.

Twilight could not tell whether to laugh or not? Beverages? They had to be messing with her... unless they weren't, which knowing them, was unlikely yet still a possibility. After all, Charles and Mortiz practically demanded an oath from her never to speak of what happened to her while she was out during her fifteenth birthday, to her modest, if understanding, chagrin. Could it be possible they were just worrying about her going to some upscale place? The mare didn't know just why her drinking would so bad. She had little to no memories of what had happened after she took a minor sip from the drink Mortiz offered her, passing out practically as soon as it passed into her muzzle and down her throat, but she doubted it was anything that bad, right?

Even if she did pursue what they wanted to conceal from her, she had severe doubts it was anything truly critical of her. Besides, Charles wouldn't seek to speak privately unless it was truly needed, and she was sure that if she asked later he would tell her. He was always truthful with her! Her internal debate mostly settled by now, Twilight gave them both a suspicious yet non-hostile look. “Beverages? You two really need something better to talk about.” she joked, flashing them an amused smirk.

The two males pushed away the urge to sigh in delirious relief, glad that they would not be hounded by her questioning. “Yes, well, now that we've got that out of the way,” Antoine's solace at that was almost palpable, “How about we stop such idle nonsense, seeing as we're here now?”

“Huh?” was heard from the other two as they finally took a look at just where they were now. It was a small, about two stories at best building, and had an almost quaint looking quality to it. It was coated a luxurious red on

the outside, and from the few windows that dotted the outside they could see only a few people inside. Despite being in a more well-off part of the city, it looked almost homely in its decor, something which gained the admiration of Twilight in particular.

“Wow, it looks nice.” Twilight appraised kindly, her excitement actually mounting now.

Charles shrugged his shoulders towards the building. “Eh, it’s fine.” he stated neutrally.

“Fine indeed my boy. I’ve frequented this place every time I’ve been to this city, and ever since I moved here, at least once a week. Finest damn brew in the Reich, if I do say so myself. And I thought to myself when planning the day over, ‘why not have meine Fischchen come with me, to share a nice experience together away from the incessant demands of acting as their tutor?’ The answer, as you could probably guess, was a resounding yes!” the major informed them with a special delight in his tone.

Considering these words, Charles put a hand to his chin in a thoughtful position. It only made sense he supposed that Antoine would want to get closer to them both. They had only really stayed a consistent amount of time with each other for a few months, their meeting a couple of years ago while being the building block of their current relationship still not offering enough of a personal connection to truly count for anything. And as dead-set as he was against actually having to know anyone besides his dearest unicorn friend, Antoine sparked an interest within him. Mainly for all the knowledge of his father that he hinted at yet never fully revealed to him, almost like some trapper setting numerous devices to lead a creature to its inevitable entrapment.

‘...*Actually, that was an awful comparison,*’ he realized. And untrue, at least he hoped it was. But still, Antoine’s intent was clear at the very least. He could credit him that much, he supposed. “Well then, if that is your wish Herr Major, then let us go in.” Charles told him.

“Right away Prinz, Madame.” the major replied, heading towards the door.

Charles opened the double-set door for them, waiting for them to pass before following them inside. It was a spacious, near-empty place of gathering, with numerous tables spread throughout the room with big wooden chairs sitting by them. The smell of excellently made alcoholic beverages of all stripes wafted through the air, along with the smoke coming from a few of the cigar-bearing patrons. There were only a few customers that sat in this establishment, a couple sitting by the counter where a balding, gray-haired man served drinks, and a few scattered guests with no real connection between them. The only really noticeable patrons were at the far end of the establishment, where on one side of the large table sat two bearded gentlemen, one with red hair and the other clean blond, in black top hats and equally colored waistcoats.

On their opposite side stood two ponies, taking the open space so they could stand. One was an orange-coated stout Pegasus, wearing a gray pony-sized uniform with fitting holes the its wings slipped through with ease, currently inert at its sides. The last guest was a cyan unicorn, wearing a large brown trench coat and sporting a large, bushy moustache, that was only a slightly different shade then the rest of the pony. The second pony also had a large, fat cigar stuck in his muzzle, inhaling it in deep breaths, which was most likely where the small cloud of smog over their table came from. Both the ponies trench coats blocked any view of their cutie marks, something which irked Twilight for her own reasons.

Cantering forward with a spring in his step, Antoine trotted towards the counter, a few of the patrons giving him waves or risen glasses as he passed by, which he returned with equal gestures. His two disciples stood behind him, Charles eying the distinct look of the place with a wary eye, and Twilight being much the same, save with a more inquisitive and less suspicious mind. Reaching it at last, Antoine placed his forehooves on the counter, giving the bartender a thin grin at his questioning look. "Grüß dich, Bernd. Zwei Ottakringer for us, und ein Wasser für das Mädchen." he ordered in a hushed whisper, without much in the way of a greeting, having been through this all often enough.

Bernd, sparing only a minor glance in the direction of the the two newcomers in his client's entourage, nodded, pointing them towards a table. Nodding in return, Antoine worked his way toward said table, his two students close at hand, or hoof in his case. While Bernd began work on their brew, the three took certain places at the table located next to the

wooden wall, one with two long benches on two opposite sides. It stood next to the table with the two humans and two ponies, who seemed to be engaged in some sunken conversation.

Charles sat down on the side closest to the entrance, while Twilight and Antoine debated over who would sit where, considering there was only enough space on the other spot for one pony to lie down. Twilight told Antoine to sit down, saying that he had done enough standing around waiting for them as is, but he refused verbosely, insisting she sit. After Charles' intervention for Antoine's case, Twilight complied, if only to not draw out an argument further, and lied down, while the major stood patiently at the free side of the table.

"So, Herr Antoine, any stories to offer us while we wait for whatever it is you've bought us?" Charles began.

"Not much unless you'd like my days in training as a standard member of the Dragoons. Oh there are stories, but none I doubt children your age would be interested in." the major answered.

"Major, I'm more than sure we'd be interested. You've lived a decently long life, so I'm certain whatever you would want to say would intrigue us decently enough," Twilight said, considering something for a moment before muttering her next words, "Though I do want to know what you ordered for us."

The major's ears rose at those last few words, catching them well, suppressing a smug smirk in response. He knew what Charles was fishing for, that was obvious to all their save Twilight, who did not or could not catch duplicity in her friends intents, whether out of ignorance and denial he did not know. What Charles wanted was information on the one item he valued above all other things, perhaps even over his own life. Information on his father. The boy was enraptured in his father's life, his deeds, his everything, and having only a scant few facts as a base upon which to build his view of him, he resorted to a nigh-mythological view of his father.

It made Antoine curse Metternich, who had arranged him to become their tutor and, as with everything around them, made it suit his own needs. His needs being the betterment of the Reich and its long-term stability, a goal Antoine felt concurrent to his own. He loved his country, the very fact

that he was in this position was proof enough for that, and he was sure that that, and his... unique status were reasons enough to assign him to the boy. With the reassignment of his first tutor and the growing disability of the latter, it only made sense. But back to his cursing of the Kanzler, he saw the problems he would have in molding Charles/Franz into a proper Prinz of the Imperial Court since his very first meeting with the boy.

Mainly, that in holding back all information on his father, only letting scant details pass by their scrutiny, they had planted the seeds of a much darker and more strong-willed belief that would make it all the harder for them to work with. In the absence of details, Charles had made his own facts about his dad, or over-emphasized certain details from his famished memories of times that seemed so distant now. Instead of telling him certain aspects of his father that they could use to turn his opinion against L'Empereur, they had allowed the boy to build his own conclusions, to instill within his mind the idea of the Corsican as an infallible figure at worst, and a deity at best. He damned Metternich, he damned himself for taking up the job, and he damned fate for doing the latter and ensuring Charles had lost his family, or the only family he cared about at least.

But he was thinking too deeply now. In his stupor, he had lost himself in his own idle musings. The two were looking at him weirdly now, Charles almost daring to snap his fingers in front of his muzzle to see if any sort of response would come out of him. Shaking himself slightly to lighten his now heavy eyes, Antoine answered Twilight at last. "Ah yes, I got myself and Prinz Franz hier something called 'Ottakringer'. Delicious beer, an excellent source of pleasure on even the darkest day."

"And you got me...?"

"Water."

"..."

"Oh don't give me that look Fraulein. This is the cleanest water in the city next to the palace water, which I, I assure you, is not so deep a difference as to actually matter."



“But why would the water matter? I mean, it’s going to be clean no matter what you do, right?” Twilight said, starting to get confused at his responses now.

“What, don’t tell me you’ve never had regular water before now right?” Antoine asked, honestly expecting a no.

At her bashful shake of her head, and Charles’ sudden gaze in the farthest direction from his position, Antoine was informed more than enough. It made sense, he supposed, considering that Charles never had unfiltered water till now, and wherever Twilight lived seemed to have it as well if her astonishment was any indication. He still refused to believe that whole ‘Equestria’ nonsense, and he never would if she brought it up again. “Never mind then. Hey, about I ask you what you’ve read recently? Surely you’ve looked at something at least halfway decent.” Antoine attempted to redirect the focus of the conversation.

A little off balance at the sudden question, Twilight tried to formulate a response. “Hmm, well. I’ve looked at some books of poetry recently. Fascinating stuff, and I really like some of the more modern texts. They just seem more... natural, more lifelike in their wording and imagery to me.” she wistfully spoke, getting lost a bit in her own recollection.

Antoine nodded politely, not at all understanding of what she was talking about, but listening intently all the same. He was not a rude bastard or anything, in fact he was always a bit of a romantic when it came to the chivalrous texts of old. Though in fairness those related not at all to the current situation. Charles however, huffed indignantly at her proclamation. “I don’t know why you enjoy such shallow texts Twilight. Poetry is a boring slodge of text, fit not for someone with more discerning tastes as yourself.” the prince said in a disapproving fashion.

“Just because it’s not in your tastes doesn’t mean it’s shallow by nature. It’s just different tastes.” she reasoned.

“Nein, it is me trying to get you into something more worthy of your intelligence. I’ve read poetry, and the only thing it inspired in me was a desire to bang my head against a wall.”

This was somewhere Antoine did not like, so he was thankful indeed when the barkeep came by them with their drinks. "Hey, drinks!" he informed them before Twilight could continue.

They stayed silent, thankfully, though Twilight still shot Charles a displeased look, one that he shrugged off without harm. Bernd the barkeep put their drinks down, and looked expectantly at Antoine when he did so. Realizing what he wanted, Antoine moved his tail and slipped it into one of his uniforms pockets, pulling out a few silver coins. Bernd put out his hand expectantly, and Antoine raised his tail over said hand, releasing his hold and dropping them on the appendage. "Danke for the service mein Freund. We'll drink to your health tonight." Antoine thanked him.

Nodding, the barkeep wandered off back to his stand. Charles watched the affair that just happened with some curiosity. "Nice movement there major." he complimented.

"Yeah, that was really cool there with your tail. I don't think I could do that in my dreams!" Twilight concurred.

"Ah, danke Prinz Franz, danke Twilight, but what might seem to be an amazing move to you two is simply another perk of my body." Antoine responded with a cheeky grin.

Charles shook his head at the major's cheerful attitude. It had always fascinated him, the differences between the pony races, and what had just occurred was a perfect example of them. While like many, he had dismissed earth ponies at first due to their lack of distinguishing features compared to the unicorns and pegasi, his assumption had been proven false after due research. They had many such bonuses the other two races did not have, only they were more subtle and/or less pronounced.

While unicorns and their magic, and pegasi their wings, the earth ponies gained a certain amount of strength and dexterity with their tails that the other two did not have. He had seen Twilight attempt to use her tail in such a way once, and it had proven a bust, with the appendage moving little if at all besides shaking back and forth slightly, nowhere near the type of movement he had just seen. Earth ponies could theoretically write with their tails as well, though usually they preferred to write with the utensils in their muzzles like most ponies that could actually write. He never

understood that queer aspect of pony behavior, but some things were just mysterious by nature he supposed.

Along with that, the muscle mass of earth ponies was superior as well, whether out of birth or by training he did not know, compared to the lighter bone structure of the pegasi and the relative lack of strength most unicorns possessed in exchange for their magical abilities. Truly he was thankful for the books he had read about the famous Renaissance personality Leonardo da Vinci, who had done several dissections on pony corpses along with human ones, which provided a helpful if disturbing look into the topic of anatomy. Charles prided himself on knowing all he could know after all.

And most of all, their advantage was numbers. The population disparity involved between earth ponies and the other two races was large, very large. There were some estimates among census-takers that the disparity was in most nations as far as ten to one, though there were other studies that leaned towards a lower or higher number. Though pegasi were hard to get accurate readings in terms of numbers, what with at least half of them living in the clouds above, refusing to interact in world affairs. This of course brought them a good amount of scorn from humans and ponies, especially the pegasi that served in any nations military. But even with that lack of data, earth ponies were still the majority, by far.

Shaking his head of his idle thoughts now, Charles decided to grab his drink, raising the large clear glass high above the table. "I call for a toast. How about you two?" he asked, feeling an odd desire to celebrate the occasion.

Antoine was visibly at his action. "Sounds great. To the Reich!" Antoine cheered, before biting on the rim of his glass, and raising it with his teeth up to meet Charles' glass.

"To good tidings!" Charles said with a smirk.

Finding a fondness for the ongoing situation, where they all just relaxed and shared a decent drink, Twilight raised her glass with her magic. As the pink glow overwhelmed it, it rose into the air, meeting the other two glasses with a loud chinking noise. "To friends!" Twilight graciously spoke.

Having done a good cheer, the three took a large gulp from their drinks, Antoine leaning his head back so the liquid would pour down, and Charles and Twilight simply raising their own to their lips. Right after their first sip though, a loud bang was heard by the occupied table next to them. "I swear Fellfohlen, if you keep up that idiocy I'm walking out of here with Johann!" a loud voice rang out, distracting the three from their merriment.

The three gave each other silent looks, a mutual understanding to just wait and not interfere with what was happening. A 'tsk' sound was heard from another person, male sounding. "Fine then, go! If you want to be an arse and go on with your damned 'integrationist' talk, then be my guest!" the second voice angrily bit back.

"Maybe we will!" a third voice entered the fray.

Sighing to himself miserably, Antoine looked over to see who it was. Yep, his guess was correct. It was the four patrons they saw on their way in, with the two humans and the two ponies sharing a glare-off, one that looked like it might turn violent if intervention did not occur. *'Why can't I just have a decent day with the fishes?'* Antoine wondered with another internal sigh, then mentally berating himself for doing that so much lately.

Trotting over to their table, unknowing or just uncaring that Charles and Twilight followed right behind him, finding this much more interesting than what was otherwise occurring, Antoine greeted the tense exchange with a full-on smile. "Guten Tag! Wie geht's den Herrschaften? Any problems?"

The major was very proud of himself, in that he managed to withstand the successive force of all their glares being transferred to him without breaking into chills, only keeping up his good-natured smile in response. "I'll take that as a yes then." he continued.

One of the humans, the red-bearded man, grunted loudly. "These two here are being fools, good sir. They're talking some nonsense about 'the Pony Liberation Front,' and ignoring all good values of common sense." he complained.

“It’s only nonsense to you because you’re a human Adolphe, and thus have a certain bias, to say the least!” the dark-coated Pegasi shouted back.

“It’s nonsense because it is, simple as that. If you want to separate from the rest of civilized society Himmelswächter, fine with me, but with the methods you suggest? No, not at all. I’m a fan of pony rights as much as the next common man, but what you’re saying is madness.” Adolphe verbally fought back.

“We only want the complete freedom of ponykind, whatever the methods may be. Integration with humans is akin to destroying our culture, and that must be stopped at all cost. If revolution must be used to do it, so be it!” the cyan unicorn at last spoke.

“But Fellfohlen, integration with the rest of human society is the only way that won’t end in defeat for ponykind! Even if some radical organization united all the Pegasi in the land, and about half the regular ponies rose up against the nations of the world, something which is already highly dubious in theory, it would be crushed with swift, and brutal harshness. It would only set your cause back further, and the cause of bronies in general!” the last human, who they assumed to be Johann, pointed out.

“Ha, bronies! They speak that they are for the good of ponies, but they simply sit on their asses and do nothing. Despicable.” Himmelswächter argued.

“Um, excuse me?”

All eyes turned to Twilight, though due to tensions being more focused on each other now, unlike with Antoine, it was not an insurmountable pressure. Twilight kept her cool well enough, though being the apex of attention was unnerving to her. “Just what is a ‘brony’?” Twilight asked tentatively.

All four sets of eyes turned dumbfounded at her question, until Charles spoke as well. “I’d like to know too. I’ve heard of them, but little can be found in terms of info on them in general. Care to explain?” the prince questioned.

Adolphe responded first, interlocking his hands in a thoughtful position. "Ah, that's right, you're children," he spoke, ignorant of their annoyance at being called that, "Well that explains it. Johann, you know a bit more than me, how about you explain?"

"Aye mein freund. You see you two, bronies are the followers of the famous human Polish writer, Bronisław Kowalski, born around a hundred years or so ago."

"Bronisław?" Charles confusedly asked.

"Yes. He argued for many of the principals of the modern Equestrian movement to this day, in a time when such thoughts were, how should I put this kindly, revolutionary at best."

"So I suppose you all take your name from him then?" Twilight guessed.

Johann nodded his head at her hurriedly. "Exactly my dear, right on the mark. In fact, before the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's sad end a few decades ago, a constitution based on his writings was fully passed by the Polish Sejm. But that didn't work well at all in the end. Long story short, her neighbors did not like that in the least, which is why there's no Poland today."

Adolphe looked saddened especially by this. "Ah yes, sweet Poland. Proudest people in all of Europe, you could call the Poles, especially that Poniatowski."

"Poniatowski! Oh dear god indeed, such a brave soul was not seen in Europe before him, and Maréchal Ney almost countered him in bravery!" Johann agreed.

That definitely caught the interest of the two. Twilight had barely known of Poland before, and Charles was simply uninterested, but that huge bit of knowledge had gained both their interest. The very mention of 'Marshal Ney,' a man who he knew from his scant info to be a servant of his father, kindled his interest from a small spark, into a blazing inferno. "So you're saying you prefer a more peaceful solution?" Twilight asked.

“Exactly Fraulein. Unlike these folk, who would rather all of Europe descend into rabid infighting between the two races, and stability shattered. Thank god they’re a minute presence at best...”

“Minute for now at least!” Himmelswächter continued, “But one day, the National Pegasi Liberation Front will-”

“Wait, wasn’t it the Republican Front for Pony Liberation?” Fellfohlen interrupted with a suspicious eye.

“Ah, yes, yes, totally! I mean, we wouldn’t want just Pegasi to be liberated or anything, right?” the Pegasus nervously answered.

“You’re already ‘free’ though, in that the decent pegasi that don’t serve in the forces spend their time in the sky. There’s nothing to be free from!” Antoine said with ragged breath.

“I believe these folks have trop de zèle.” Twilight whispered.

“I would say it’s actually trop d’audace.” Charles replied in the same hushed tones.

Himmelswächter glared at him darkly, especially when he saw his uniform. “Oh, of course a *neger-umwerbender Ziegenknutscher* like you would support the humans. What did you do to earn that uniform mule, screw a few nobles?” he mocked.

A hushed gasp fell on all listeners. Fellfohlen looked divided on whether to look horrified or triumphant at his comrades words, and Antoine’s students, well at least Charles, looked stunned. Twilight simply looked perplexed at just what that meant at all in this context, goat-cuddling especially. Antoine himself was stone-faced, before giving the pegasi the a look so threatening, tingles of pure, unbridled fear spread down the pegasi’s spine. “Bravery.” was all the major said, keeping his gaze strong all the while.

Soon though, Charles was boiling with rage at the gall of such words. “How dare you!?” he spat out, feeling disgust well within him, “How dare you insult this stallion, this stallion who has from all that I have seen of him served with honor and a special distinction to his nation. How dare you

make such claims when you are content to stand there and complain, how dare you act in a most uncivil manner towards someone who only wished to mediate between arguing parties, how dare you!”

His voice had an ever rising passion to it, and gained him approving looks from Twilight and the other two humans. Antoine ended his fearsome gaze, giving Charles a grateful look. “Danke dir, mein student.” he thanked.

Himmelswächter looked unsure of what to do for a moment, before looking indignant once more. “Just who are you to be talking back to me like that, boy?” was his reply.

“Simple,” the prince answered confidently, “I am Prince Imperial Napoléon François Joseph Charles Bonaparte, rightful heir to the throne of France. And unless you wish to earn my ire, and that of my dear friend hear along with my own, you *will* apologize to this colt right now.”

While his words struck a cord with his teacher, even if he was a bit scared by the usage of his given name, Himmelswächter looked only more angered by this comment. “Not at all. Why should I believe some spoiled brat who’s only talking big? No, you and the rest of these cronies will get out of here now, before I make you get out.” the pegasi stomped a hoof on the ground to accentuate his point.

Twilight was getting sick of this colts rudeness, and decided to voice her just complaints. “What? You want us to leave, because we’re not just letting you be rude to our teacher, and more importantly, our friend? Forgive me if that doesn’t make any sense at all.” Twilight said with biting sarcasm.

Fellfohlen felt Himmelswächter knock one of his forehooves with his own, a motion for assistance. “Whatever. But he means it though,” at Himmelswächter’s glare he changed his words, “I mean, we mean it, if you don’t get out that is!”

While his pegasi friend nearly banged a hoof against his muzzle in frustration at Fellfohlen’s inability to elaborate his point at all, Charles and Twilight looked prepared to argue against them further, with Johann and Adolphe growing more and more cross as well. Antoine silenced all their future protest though with a single comment. “Fine, if you’re going to go so



far to ruin an otherwise splendid day, I see no reason to continue making it more so.”

Turning away, he trotted towards the door, his students left dumbfounded at his action. “Come on you two, we’re leaving. The day’s nearly over anyway, might as well not waste it here where we’re not wanted.” the major called back to them without turning.

The two looked conflicted, especially so, exchanging a few muted and worried glances before following behind him. “Antoine, what are you doing? Are you just going to let him do that to you, let him insult your honor like that?” Charles said, demanding an answer from him.

Twilight, while less angry at him for leaving, was still aching to know what he intended. “I have to agree with him sir, we’re just letting him win. Shouldn’t we, I don’t know, *not do that?*” she questioned almost irritably.

Antoine stopped for a moment, just before he reached the door. He sighed sullenly, feeling a small headache come over him at their persistence, preparing to explain in detail to them why he was doing this. “And what would staying there do? It would only lead to an escalation of conflict, and at worst a fight that might end in someone, God forbid it be one of you two, being hurt. Seeing as that colt’s asinine behavior spoils the whole mood of the place, I felt no need to stay there any longer.”

They considered this carefully, a gesture that Antoine found very pleasing. It made him feel not so *scheiße* as a teacher, at the very least. “Just remember, sometimes it’s better to take a small withdrawal, to prevent bigger losses.” he elaborated further, putting it in terms he knew Charles would appreciate more.

A loud cough drew their attention to the bar stand, where Bernd looked at them apologetically. “Sorry about that major,” Bernd said, his voice raspy and hollow, “If you want, I can get those two out of here for you. I may be old, but I can deal with some troublemakers like them with ease.”

Antoine shook his head at the offer. “Nein, I’d rather not. There’s been enough trouble caused already, I’d rather not cause anymore. Especially when things seem to be getting hotter now.”

That last sentence was spoke as he caught sight of the table once more, seeing the two humans finally copy him and leave in ending tolerance, making the pegasi look awfully smug with himself. "Hmph," the barkeep grunted, "If you say so. But take this at least."

He reached behind his counter for a moment, before pulling out something concealed within a fist. Making a throwing gesture, Bernd tossed a few shiny objects towards him, which Antoine caught quite handily with his tail. "For not being able to finish your drinks." he told the major.

Angling his head to see just what he had caught, Antoine was pleasingly surprised to find that it was the coins he had given him earlier. "Danke, mein Freund." he told him, before leaving with students in tow.

They exited after that, out into the outside where an orange sky now resided above them. "It's getting late. Let's head back to the palace." Antoine said with no room for argument.

Not as if they would argue anyway. Instead they nodded in compliance, making him thankful that more stress wouldn't be added to his day. The three walked through the streets once more, but now they were more barren then before, the quickly ending day bringing many walkers and such other folk into their homes or whatever place of residence. There was a tense silence, a common occurrence between these folks, one that ended when Charles dared to ask a question that had begun to bother him. "Major, would you be offended if I press you on something?"

"That depends on what you mean good Prinz Franz." Antoine said without stopping or looking back.

"You are a major, correct?" Charles began with some unsureness.

"I believe I've told you this already, and even if I was not I do not believe I would be here at the moment." Antoine deadpanned.

"True. But I ask because, well, you are the only pony officer of such a high rank, if not the only officer as far as I am aware." the prince elaborated further.

“Well, you are correct on that point. I am.”

His steady response knocked Charles off-kilter in the plain sincerity of it, making him more unsure then before whether to continue or not. To say that he did this out of malicious curiosity would be a gross disservice to him, as he was only truly curious as to the answer to this conundrum. Thankfully for him however, Twilight picked up where he left off. “But, how did you get in your position though? I mean, you know about us. Is it not it fair that we know just that much more about you?” she questioned, earning her a thankful look from her friend.

Antoine seemed displeased at her questioning, gritting his teeth harshly and quietly, or as quietly as you could do such an act. After a moments hesitance though, he sighed, reluctantly answering her. “It was due to my birth, or the circumstances of it anyway.”

They continued walking, turning the corner on another building as the three neared further and further towards their destination. “I was born somewhere around Zürich, about 30 so years ago. During the War of the Second Coalition in fact. As far as I know, my parents served in the *k.u.k Armee*, and died during the siege of said city. On some good fortune on my own part, the commander of the force, Archduke Karl von Österreich-Teschen, took pity on my state, and gave me a decent education and a full military career based on his own recommendation. Seeing as he is the brother of our current Kaiser, his influence helped me greatly, and practically sent me soaring past boundaries no pony had ever even seen before. My skills have been recognized due to his endless generosity, something for which I am eternally grateful towards him. Yet, it has caused me some amount of criticism from certain members of both species, ponies for my support towards the current establishment, and humans for me being daring to ‘get out of my place,’ as it were.” he explained dutifully.

His words brought forth a wave of sympathy from his students, though only Twilight was caring enough to show it. “Oh major, I’m sorry for asking, I did not mean to offend you or anything...” she apologized.

“No apologies needed dear Fraulein. It felt rather decent to get that off my chest. Probably just like how Prinz Franz felt when he could say his real name.”

Charles instantly felt on edge. Despite his growing trust of the major, he still worked for Metternich. And if said Kanzler knew he was defiant enough to still use his regnal name in public, well, that would not be good at all for him. Or Twilight, causing an icy feeling to come over his heart. Antoine seemed to be knowledgeable about his woes, as he assuaged them instantly. "Don't worry, I have no intention of telling the Kanzler anything. After the balls you showed today boy, you earned that I think." he said with a boisterous laugh.

The prince felt rather... warmed at that, oddly enough. It was a kind gesture, one that promised much reward to the major if he turned him in, but instead he did not. It was strange as to why he would do it, even when Charles stood up for him, but then again Charles never considered himself an expert in reading human emotions. Or pony emotions in this case, but weren't they both the same at heart? That led to another line of deliberate thought, one that continued while the major spoke further. "And just for that act of graciousness, I have an offer you, and possibly Twilight, might readily like." the major offered with an unseen, slanted smile.

The curiosity of both of them was immediately piqued once more. "That depends major. What are you offering?" Twilight asked with a daringly cheeky smile from her.

"Oh, that spirit Twilight, I like it from you! Bring it out more lass and you could conquer the whole world with your will alone in a month!" he barked out a haughty laugh before continuing, "But you Charles? I absolutely know you will be interested, *very* interested."

The prince rubbed his chin in thought for a moment before responding. A second of this concluded in him shrugging his shoulders fitfully. "You sound almost salacious in nature major. It's kind of creepy in all honesty, but I shall bite on your bait all the same." he replied.

"Good that you should. It is a topic of great interest of yours especially Charles, and for good reason! After all, this topic is one of great personal value to you." the major almost teased with the playfulness of his tone.

Charles rolled his eyes, rightfully so in his own opinion, and pressed him further. "Your lures are starting to get old in usage major. Perchance

you can tell us both at last what it is you speak of, before the sun grows old and wretched and has the moon come to take its place.”

“I would love to Charles, and after that I shall bid you two adieu, seeing as we are home at last.”

Twilight and Charles saw that they were in fact ‘home’, the entrance to be more specific. So lost were they in the conversation they did not realize they had arrived in such short time at all. “You certainly know how to keep us interested major.” Twilight said with a hints of both snark and bewilderment.

Antoine smirked succinctly from in front of her, gazing upwards at the palace while he did so. ‘*These kids sure do add some spice to life, I do admit,*’ he thought to himself. Turning back to them at last, being almost blinded by the last vestiges of sunlight shining past the the large buildings in the city proper, he answered her. “That I surely hope I do dear Twilight, for if I do not what use am I as an educator of such starling minds as you two?” he put a touch of humor in his tone, in only good nature of course.

“As much as your humor may amuse me in practices such as this major, just what is it that you were talking about?” Charles asked again, feeling his patience run thin at last.

“Ah yes, I do suppose I should teach you a bit. But alas! it is too late for now. Do not fret though, I see you hasten in anger, but have patience dear Prinz Franz, for me even humoring what I have in mind has possibly dire consequences for all of us here.” Antoine warned him.

Charles nearly blew a gasket at his words, feeling a burst of anger rush through his almost-pallid frame. But the majors next few words stopped all his anger and possibly murderous plans in an instant. “Tomorrow though, I shall be sure to begin our lessons on your father. Would that be arousing to you my dear student, a valid way to gain your interest and plaudit?” Antoine temptingly spoke.

Any further barks or howls of disapproval died in his throat at that offer Charles imagined never would come to him so soon, and of his teachers own volition at that! Contemptuous illness took a horrid time to appear though, as he felt ill suddenly, cold as well, deathly cold. Taking his

silence as a most pleasing loss of words at this good news, Antoine began to leave, passing them by while whistling a delightful tune to himself, before yelling back "Goodbye you two! I cannot wait to begin our most glorious lesson tomorrow! And thank you for the, admittedly noxious at times, yet still splendid day! Gute Nacht!" he shouted, before departing at last.

Twilight watched him leave with a sallow expression, yet she found some joy from all this. "Wow, did you hear that Charles? We're going to learn about your dad! Isn't that just great?" she joyously proclaimed, hoping to share with him in his inevitable merriment.

Charles did not answer, strangely enough to her, instead only standing there. His breathing was slightly ragged in nature, and his skin has beads of sweat dripping off of it. A great pain ached in his forehead, and he pressed a hand to said place with a heavy pressure. "Charles?" she asked, getting worried now.

Swallowing a deep breath, he at last answered her, forcing himself through the aching pain that resided within every inch of his body at the moment. "Yes, wonderful indeed." he answered.

Oh it was not wonderful, at least not in the current circumstances. Here at last, he would have a chance to learn of his father, and his body had decided to slowly continue to destroy itself in a miserable haste. Oh dear God, how he hated his body. It was a slovenly mess of muscle that refused to grow, no matter his efforts. He hated it so! But he could save his hate for now, save it for when Twilight was not around, for she was nowhere near deserving of any scorn near her presence. Twilight did not look convinced in the least by this, and voiced her concerns. "Are you okay? You look a little... ill." she said with carefully chosen words.

A disapproving grunt told her enough of how much he liked that question. "I am perfectly fine mein Liebchen." he answered steadily.

She gave him a pointed look at that. "You don't look fine. Are you sure you don't want to talk to a doctor or anything?"

"I am fine."

Hateful silence dragged its way over them, as Twilight looked awkwardly down at her hooves, while Charles beat himself up internally for being so cruelly steadfast. A few memories of what occurred today reared its ugly head at the moment, giving him a thankful diversionary question. "Didn't you want to talk with me about some topics that came up today before we went our separate ways?" he asked just a bit hastily.

As tempting as that was to her at the moment, she shook her head to him. "We can talk tomorrow. I'd rather you get some rest." she replied honestly.

Her stout kindness, even in the face of his constant refusals, touched him. Though he would never admit it to anyone, least of all her, it warmed his heart ever so slightly at the decent act. Twilight was such a kind creature, too kind for this world he thought sometimes. It was a never-ending source of thought for him, how she could stay so deliberately perfect even in the face of all the adversity and ugliness the world offered her, and despite his own deliberations on this, he could never find an answer, to his own anger. When facing such a simple request from her, made only from decent intentions and goodwill towards him, well, he had no other choice but to accept. "If you wish Liebchen. Until tomorrow then?"

"Until tomorrow." she answered sweetly.

As they departed from each other at last, footsteps and hooves marching their ways up to their separate abodes. they stopped suddenly when they were more then a few feet away from the other. They turned, almost at the same time, towards their friend, and in the orange twilight of the sky, smiled at one another. Their expressions were full of nothing but understanding and caring for one another. And as they finally turned away, for the final time that day, they were content.

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*December 26, 1826 Anno Domini*

There was a warm feeling on his neck. It was a calming feeling, almost peaceful in fact. If it was any other day, he was almost sure he would rather enjoy that feeling, the feeling brought on by the warm naked body next to his own. Yet as it was, he preferred to read yet another book on Caesar then enjoy things as they were. That was how it was right now, when he still was irritable and quite angered from a another spat with his

grandfather. It had happened at a smaller family gathering yesterday, when he had brought up to his grandfather again the topic of his promotion, or more specifically, when it would come. He almost demanded an immediate transfer to the borders, somewhere he could escape the slow dullness of this palace, and even take Twilight with him, for surely she was as numbed to this place as he was!

His grandfather had other ideas however. Listening to his words carefully, save when Charles himself had to admit he had pressed too far, he had sharply declined his demands, and harangued him severely in private after it was over. It was a source of great discontent to him, and he had wanted to lash out his frustrations in some way. Twilight was obviously not the answer. Thankfully, he had found Sophie at that gathering as well, and after she had made up a plausible excuse, well, they found their way here.

Sophie shifted her leg next to him, putting her leg over one of his own. His eyes gazed with great annoyance on the added pressure to his body, and he shook it off roughly. This had the undue effect of waking the women lying naked on his bed with a low moan. "Franz?" she mumbled.

He flipped to another page before answering. "What do you want?"

To his own ever-increasing annoyance, she huddled up closer to him. "That was great." she mumbled pleasingly.

"I suppose so." he answered simply.

In all honesty to himself, he felt ashamed in taking such pleasure from such dubious acts. Not from the fact that she was already wed, oh he could not care less about that honestly, but from the rather carnal urges it aroused within him. He preferred constant control of his body, as much as he could control it in his sometimes wretched state at least, and her seductive qualities were hated by him severely, almost as much as he lusted after them. Truly they had worked at a mutually beneficial arrangement, one that they could both use to fix their own emotional instability while silently hating themselves on the inside. A truly excellent relationship.



“Would you kindly get off of me now?” he asked, still glaring at her offending presence.

She groaned loudly, shaking herself off of him and laying her head on her palm. Sophie stared at him wordlessly, though he did not return her look in the least. He had more important things than post-sex talk, thank you very much! It was only when she reached for a certain area that he put the book down at last and directed his attentions towards her. “Yes?”

“Where are my clothes?”

That was a very good question actually. He scanned the room, finding her dress and other objects of interest nowhere at all. Thankfully his coat was on the stand of his bed. His thankfulness of this fact grew tenfold when a large knock sounded at the door. “Prinz Franz, are you awake?” the unmistakable old croak of Mortiz howled from behind the door.

“Oh scheiße.” they both whispered at once.

*‘Damn, wasn’t Mortiz supposed to visit later?’* Charles cursed internally. He has scheduled a visit in his quarters with the Count a few days ago, at the Counts own insistence and Twilight’s due to ‘not spending enough time together’ in the latter’s own words. But it seemed the Count was a bit early, to his own bad luck. He would have to be fast if he did not want to get in deep, deep trouble for this misdemeanor. Quickly jumping out of his bed, Charles put on his black coat with all due haste, buttoning it with practiced fingers. “What do I do?” Sophie whispered worriedly while he did this.

Charles scoured the room once more, looking for someplace where Sophie could hide. If it was revealed he was having an affair to one of the current heirs to the throne, well, he would be fucked. More than he already was in fact. Thankfully he had moved to a slightly larger suite in the last year, to make room for his growing room of collectibles and weapons, including a fine set of Italian rapiers de Foresti had sent to him from his post, that now hung on the wall to adorn the place.

The main object of his interest though was a large chest at the foot of his bed, one that usually housed his spare clothing and such. Right now though it was empty, the clothes being cleaned by the servants, making it

fit his plans perfect. Buttoning his last button, Charles opened the hood to the chest, pointing at it for Sophie. "Get in!" he shouted as silently as he could in such relatively small quarters.

"What?!" she replied, having a certain amount of well-justified shock.

"Just get in, before-"

"Prinz Franz, please answer me, dammit!" Mortiz howled, this time with a series of loud knocks at the door.

"Coming Count, I'm just dressing!" Charles shouted back, motioning towards the chest in an increasingly worried manner.

Seeing no other option, and despite her own rather deep sensibilities, Sophie complied, almost rolling off the bed as she got off of it. Tip-toeing towards the chest so as not to alert the Count of another presence in his room, Sophie took one disgusted look at the inside of the chest before he gave her a rueful look, and she entered, fitting in the enclosure just barely due to her petite size. On the plus side, to Charles at least, he had gotten a good eyeful of her before he had closed the chest. Muttering a series of half-serious prayers, Charles opened the door to his room at last, showing him the sight of a very grouchy Count. "Prinz Franz, excellent to see you at!" Mortiz took a look downward before continuing, "Though I wish you had spent a bit more time dressing."

Blushing deeply, Charles was about to apologize before Mortiz shoved his way through him. "Ah don't worry, nothing I haven't seen before with the rest of the boys. Trust me lad, in the military you will see that a lot. A whole lot." Mortiz said.

Charles wasn't sure if it was his tone, or the actual content of what he said, but he was unnerved greatly by the Counts words. While he stood there, very disturbed by both his words and the sincere impropriety of the situation, Mortiz took a seat at the lone table in the room, a small oak thing with two chairs for guests. "Well come on boy, are you going to stand there looking at it all day or sit down and talk with the old man who spent his morning walking up to talk with you?" the Count asked in a fit.

Complying with him, Charles sat down on the other seat, but not before closing his uniform up a bit. Resting his elbows on the table, Charles greeted the Count with a forced smile. "So Count, what was it that you wished to speak about?"

The major shrugged his shoulders in apathy. "Things."

"Things? What things? What things need to be asked at this dreadful time of day?"

"Numerous things. Important things. Things that demand possibly a bit more of a welcome than your sergeant laid out for me when I entered. But I digress, yes I am here to converse with you about some delicate topics."

"Such as?"

"Twilight."

The prince's eyes were set low at that remark, earning the Count a low hum of unknown feeling. "What of her?" Charles asked further.

Mortiz eyed some of the weapons and books in the room, nodding approvingly at them. Charles tapped the table in an impatient motion, directing the Count's rampant attention back to him. "As I said, what of her?" he asked again with an angered tone.

The eyes of the Count, he noticed, were lidded, almost as if he did not have enough sleep in fact. The whole manner of the Count's body bespoke of endless woes and creeping pains that ached him constantly. It almost pained Charles to see that the effects of age were so visible at times, especially on this man who he had spent a better part of his life around. Then again, he himself was an example of the decrepit state of being that was life at times, with his on and off ailments. "Forgive me my errant student, these old bones get lost in thought sometimes. As I was beginning to say though, I am worried about Twilight's current abode."

"And? She's stocked up well for the winter, is she not?"

Charles thought that he and Antoine had made sure that Twilight was more than ready to stand up to the snowy days and nights that now pervaded the skies and ground of the city. Already a thick sheet of snow had covered almost all visible ground, prompting him into ordering several blankets and other supplies to ensure her safety and comfort during these times. He was sure that they had fully prepared for this winter, and he had heard no complaints from Twilight in the past few weeks about her residence. What could possibly be wrong? He voiced these complaints, and Mortiz answered them gruffly. "That's what I thought as well, but I believe the snow has become so dense around her place that it's almost choking in its density. Antoine voiced his complaints as well."

This was cause for much concern for Charles, who was getting deathly worried at this news. "I've heard nothing of this. Surely Twilight would've voiced some complaints if it was truly as offensive as you described?" he reasoned.

"Ah, but Twilight is a mare who doesn't care for troubling others with her problems. She's almost totally withdrawn save for her contact with you, considering the general disdain most of the household holds for her. A shame, she deserves better, though that could be said for most of her life." Mortiz admitted with a deep scowl.

The prince put a hand to his mouth, seeing the problem now. Twilight would surely insist she was fine, even when she was not. Another trait of hers that placed her on an even higher pedestal than he already put her. Action would need to be taken though, and quickly. Preferably on Mortiz's part, seeing as he had a not so little problem waiting for him to solve. "Confront her about this. No, wait, get some of the staff, order them to wait around, and when you confront her, get her to leave to talk inside, and while you talk the staff will fix up the place. Simple as that." Charles explained.

Mortiz nodded in approval, finding it a decent plan. There was another matter that bothered him though. "Sounds good then. Though speaking of Twilight, her behavior as of late is some cause of concern. I see her reading some religious texts, even the Holy Book, and she shakes her muzzle in disapproval or has questioning eyes when reading them. Do you know what has caused her into such acts?" the Count said, voicing his complaints.

Oh dear. He knew that would come back to bite him in the ass sooner or later. After their day on the town with Antoine, if it could even be called that, Twilight was quite keen on learning about some of the aspects of the spiritual nature of society, knowing only some bare bones facts before yet still intent to know. What she found... disappointed her. While some tenets of various faiths were pleasing in her eyes, she was disappointed to find no mention of her fair Princesses. As much as Charles ignored that complaint, she still took issue with all sorts of things. 'Why is this not allowed?', 'Why does this book call for war with different faiths?', and so on. Charles asked her if she was an atheist at her issues with theology, yet she ardently refused, stating she knew her God already. From experience in fact.

Deluded as she seemed to the prince at times, Charles could not help but find some degree of logic in her reasoning. She shared many questions he had brought up in the past, yet they were always hushed down or explained in ways he did not care for in the least. Catholicism was less of a choice of faith and more of a lifestyle in House Hapsburg, and it showed in their religious lifestyle. While he did not consider himself an atheist, the idea of no creator at all being both repugnant and terrifying existentially to his being, deism certainly held its temptations to him, though he did not dare show them towards anyone else. There was a time for bravery, and there were numerous times for keeping ones head down after all.

"I'm not sure Count. Perhaps she is just having some trouble understanding things? She is a relative stranger to our land, and even with her years of adjustment, certain things we take for granted would come off as downright queer to her."

Mortiz did not look all that appeased by that suggestion, but he did not feel the strength to argue anymore then what was necessary. "I suppose I will have to accept that. Nonetheless, I shall be off then-"

"Oh hi Prinz Franz, I was just here to... Count Mortiz?" a certain major spoke.

Looking at the source of the voice, the two found Antoine standing by the doorway, with a strange covered package on his backside, seeing the half-dressed Charles and having bulging eyes in response. "This is certainly an awkward situation." Antoine said to himself.

Mortiz could only laugh at that, while Charles groaned irritably. This was starting to get ridiculous now! "Major, what are you doing here?" Charles asked, letting more than a bit of annoyance slip through into his tone.

"Oh, me? I came here to deliver a package for you, one that just arrived today in fact. The servants were going to take it, but seeing as it was near the way I was headed, that is to Twilight's hut, I found it agreeable to take it for them." Antoine explained with no detectable hint of falsehood.

"Excellent. Just... excellent," the prince smiled as if it was made of cardboard, "If you could, please drop that package off here and escort Count Mortiz to his destination, which just so happens to coincide with your own. Would you kindly?"

"I would love to sire, but first I should probably explain to you what it is," Antoine eyed Mortiz warily before looking back at him, "In private."

Wanting to get this over with, Charles waved Mortiz towards the door. The Count grumbled for a moment before complying, giving them both a hasty farewell as he said so. "So just what is it you have that requires this interruption?" Charles demanded to know.

Antoine looked almost sheepish as he answered. "I'm afraid I do not have the specifics my student, yet if it's what I think it is, and I am almost assured it is that, then I believe you will be most pleased."

This had to be good then. Antoine never made such a suggestion without some meat lying behind the words. He could still remember their first lesson on his father after their day out, and by god. They had barely covered anything Antoine had mentioned having true importance yet, the time and nature of their of their dealings being considerably sparser as of late, but nonetheless what he had learned so far only made him want more.

Austerlitz. Marengo. Borodino. These names, being little more than locations earlier, had taken up a sort of quasi-life of their own, filling his mind with images of thousands if not tens of thousands of soldiers in combat, and his father at the apex of it all. The images alone his mind

conjured up were enough to make him nigh deliriously with a mix of nostalgia and burning curiosity that drove him to impeccable joy. A joy he had only truly found before in the presence of his books, or, more importantly, his dearest friend.

So if Antoine was suggesting what he thought he was suggesting, well, his curiosity grew tenfold in a moments notice, if it took even that long. “Bring it on the table then, I’ll have great pleasure in seeing just what this is.”

Antoine complied, stepping closer to the table, and, being careful not to accidentally crush anything under his hooves, shrugged his package off onto the table with severe tenderness. As Charles wrapped his fingers around it, taking note of its long yet abnormally thick structure and delicate wrapping. It was simple in structure, with creased edges, plain colored packaging and whatnot. As he delicately plucked it open, daring to try and find some peek as to what was his inside as it opened up more and more, Antoine launched some very important information his way. “It’s from your mother, you know.”

That bit of news almost immediately caused him to cease his assault on the packaging. His hands felt cold suddenly, and a blank expression crossed his features. “I see.” he said in a neutral tone.

“Is there a problem with that?”

“In a sense, yes.”

“Would you be offended if I asked further?”

“I would.”

Antoine sighed at the futility of it. “Fine, but just because you have certain problems with her does not mean you should not deny her graciousness. Especially concerning what’s inside.”

He had a point, Charles had to admit. While his fingers trembled with indecision, undecided as to whether to continue unwrapping it or throw it away in a fit of petulant fury, Antoine spoke further. “It’s from *his* company. I know that much.” he informed him.

That was all the push Charles needed. Grabbing it again, he shook off the last of the packaging, and was utterly blown at what he saw. There were two things lying under the hard wrapping. First, a collection of books, more collections of notes really, set in plain-colored covers with no distinguishing features on them. It was the visible title of the top one that truly gained his interest though.

*Recollections of the Emperor Napoléon*

By God. It was almost enough to make him tear at very sight of it. The thoughts and words of his father, translated into print... he nearly collapsed on the spot from the sheer excellence of the situation. But even joy was severely outweighed by the other item there. It was a blade, in a black sheathe that had several gold and brown patterns on it. Charles looked at Antoine in an almost pleading manner, and Antoine nodded at him. Finding that all the extra force he needed, he put his hands under the blade, lifting it up in a delicate manner that trumped any display of carefulness he had shown before.

Keeping one hand on the blade portion to hold it up, Charles used his other hand to grasp the golden hilt of the blade. He pulled it out slowly, taking care to deliberate on each second he saw more and more of the sword shine through. When he pulled it out fully, it was a sight to behold. The scheme of the sword was almost scimitar-like in nature, with a long, narrow and not so curved blade that was divine in every manner to him. "Was it his?" Charles asked breathlessly.

"Aye, 'twas his. It's a Mameluke sword, used during his campaign in Egypt." Antoine told him.

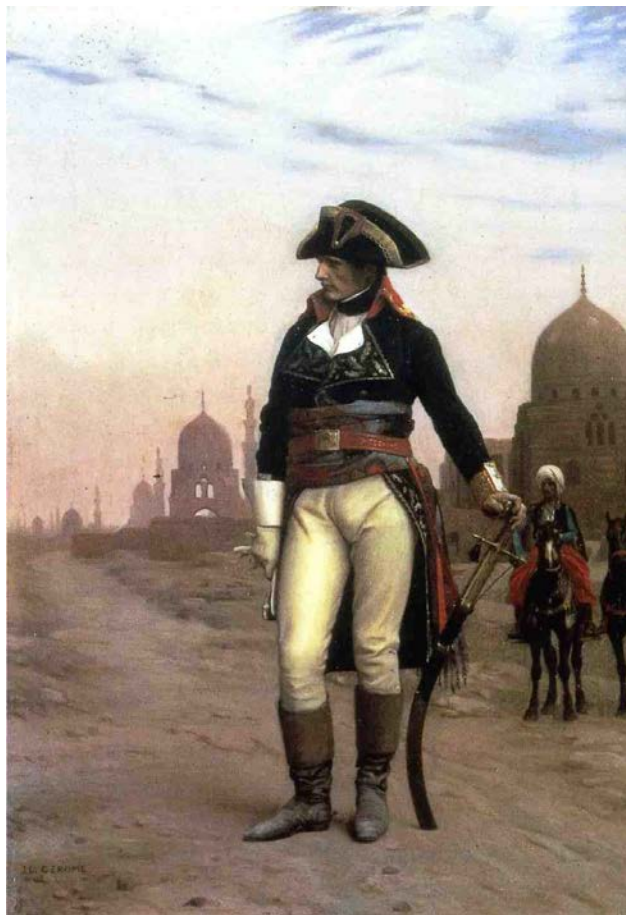
"It's beautiful." he whispered more to himself than to Antoine, studying every edge of the blade in mind-numbing detail.

He had meant his words too. While the books were a treasure he was joyous beyond words to receive, this, this was an object of even greater value. It was a living memory of his father, of the one man he valued above all others. He tenderly held the sword in an almost, nay, in a holy manner befit for a divine relic of bygone days. That this sword, that was in his very hands, used to belong to his father, used to be held at his fathers side,



used to pierce the hearts of his father's enemies! That was a fact that stormed all through the prince's brain, and made him all the more reverent in his treatment of the blade.

He could imagine already the details of wherein it was held, in the shining deserts of Egypt, hordes of cavalry coming his fathers way in an unstoppable wave. Then, with a series of ingenious commands he would have brushed them off as if they were nothing more then dust in the wind. A true triumph of force and intellect, one that appealed to his needy mind greatly. It was glorious, glorious beyond all known words to him.



“Your mother requested it be sent to you. She said you would appreciate it, and so she sent it over to you.” Antoine elaborated further for him.

A slight tremble in his smirk was the only effect that news had on Charles. He rolled his words through his brain, trying to find a decent response to that. Finally he thought of a suitable, if distasteful answer. “Tell

her... she has my deepest gratitude for this.” he forced out through gritted teeth.

“I’ll be sure to inform the messenger of that. Until then, do you wish to visit Twilight with me?”

It was a tempting offer, Charles had to admit. Especially after the decrepit state Mortiz described her quarters as. But right now, there was something far more desirable waiting for him, right in front of his eyes. No, Twilight could wait for another time. Right now, his father, or at least the last words of his father, were there waiting for him to read. “No major, I am content where I am currently. Give Twilight my best regards though.” he said with a small trace of guilt.

While he did have some remorse over this, he was confident in his decision. Surely Twilight would understand. She, after all, had little left of her parents, and she would know the need to keep them close in some form. They had spoken of their respective pasts numerous times now, and he had gained numerous sympathies towards her for what little she had left to keep her parents in mind. At least he had now had something. She, had nothing. But at least she cared for both of her parents. While the one he loved was dead, and the other enraptured within the arms of a new man before his fathers corpse was cold. The very thought of it made his blood boil.

Antoine seemed very displeased at his choice though, and let his concerns show. “Are you sure Prinz Franz? I’m sure she would love to see you again.”

“I am fine Antoine. Leave me, as I said already, I am content where I am.” he almost snapped back.

“... Fine sire. See you later.”

Charles could not hide the hurt feeling he held at the majors almost scornful words, while hearing the soft clop of his hooves signaling his departure from the room. Over the past few months, he had come to see Antoine as a respectable figure, someone to look up to. To Charles, with barely any reasonable and trustworthy authority figures that were not practically ancient in age, Antoine filled a decently-sized hole in his mental

needs. Antoine taught him with passion, with care, with a true love of what his students learned. And Charles loved him for it.

But now, he was alone. Again in fact. He took another loving look at his father's... no *his* sword. He had not taken any lessons in fencing or sword-fighting yet, but now he would have to. Simply to use this blade, to use this weapon as his father had. Oh, and he should probably get Sophie out of his chest as well. God knows how she was doing in there. Just as soon as he was done admiring the blade some more...

"Well well, what do we have here?"

A poisonous voice lurched out from nowhere, robbing Charles from his attentions. Slowly turning to the source of the voice, Charles' joy was immediately dismantled at the sight of Metternich, leaning on the doorway with an inquisitive look on his features. "Excellent sword you have there Prinz Franz. I must say, some quality craftsmanship there." Metternich casually said.

Slipping into a frown, Charles sheathed the blade, feeling almost offended that the Kanzler's eyes were looking at his blade, his fathers blade! "Kanzler. What brings you to my quarters all of a sudden?" Charles greeted in false kindness.

Metternich waved a hand in a playful manner, pretending to mull over the answer. "Oh, just making sure you are doing well. I heard you had a decent package come for you, and I must admit, it is a very delectable looking metal. Your mother brought it for you, correct?"

Charles tightened his grip on the hilt of the sword without knowing it. "That is true, she did. Now if you would be so kind, I am busy at the moment, and-"

Metternich ignored those protests, instead barging into the room and taking the seat where Mortiz once sat, sitting opposite him now. He eyed the books analytically, appraising them with a bemused smile. "Ah, memoirs from your father? Good reads most likely, I am sure that you will enjoy them thoroughly." the Kanzler's spoke with only good intentions visible.

Charles' suspicions were growing ever larger at this rate. "Forgive me for my forwardness Kanzler, but what do you wish to do here?"

The air of false civility was getting to him, but he could hold for now. He had too, Metternich was a veteran of one of the greatest arts of war, diplomacy, by many decades, so he had to keep a sharp mind to even think of besting him. Metternich though simply chuckled in a low tone, seemingly amused by his concerns. "Oh Prinz Franz, why must you think I have some nefarious plot in motion against you?" Metternich said after suppressing his mirth.

"One does not simply go into one's room without due cause. Whether it be good intentions or not, there are still intentions."

"Ah, but you assume I come here only to plague you, as it were. Do you know why you think that, Prinz Franz?"

Metternich seemed like he wanted him to question that, and despite the obvious lure, Charles answered the call. "What, may I ask?"

"Simple. I am an excuse for you. A villain to blame all your woes and problems on without so much as thinking it is your own fault." Metternich eyed him sharply, a gaze so sharp it nearly overwhelmed Charles in its intensity.

"While you may have certain ailments and problems in life, know that I do none of the things I have planned around you out of malice. I only do what is best for the Reich, and what is best for my liege. If that includes, say, doing my best to bring down a revolutionary leader who desired to destroy all order in Europe, and doing my best to insure said leader's son turns out to be a respectable member of the Reich's court after his fall, instead of simply leaving him to rot, well, can I truly be called a villain then?"

Charles was left speechless at the Kanzler's passionate speech, and while he had no words to say, Metternich spoke for him. "I know what I am to you. A bland, two-dimensional character to act as the villain in the absence of a true one like in your tales of valor and whatnot. Let me tell you young man, that nothing could be further from the truth. I do what is

necessary for my nation, as all decent men would hope to do. If my methods are dark in nature because of it, well, let it be then.”

Charles only digested these words. While his first instinct was to not believe them in the least, the Kanzler had a certain charm to him past the oozing snake-like behavior that came off from him, one that inspired listeners to consider his words. “Do you know who asked and permitted your mother to send you these items?” Metternich asked, motioning towards his dear treasures on the table.

At Charles’ tentative nod, Metternich continued. “It was me,” Charles nearly shouted a cry of derision at that sure falsity, until Metternich raised an open hand to stop him, “Do not cry accusations of derision to me young man. I thought you would be more interested in life outside of that unicorn if you had some items of interest outside of her presence and company, and so I, in an act befit of kindness, bestowed upon your mother the need to transfer some ‘family’ items towards yourself.”

“You surely lie. You king of lies, you Prinz of darkness!” Charles growled out, hands tightened into a deathly grip.

If anything his words seemed to amuse Metternich more so. “I am a Prinz alright, but not of darkness I’m afraid. Only one who seeks what is best for his nation, even if a few must be displeased along the way, no matter how much you do for them. It is simply a fact those in power must accept, when we are seen having only the worst aspects of tyrants, even when we do our best not to do so.”

Metternich’s last sentence almost had a regretful tone, an emotion Charles never expected to see from the Eisen Kanzler. The Kanzler shook his head in a small motion, putting his hands to the edge of the table before rising himself from the his seat. “I am afraid sire that I must leave now. Oh, and do forgive your Opa for his refusal to send you out to the border. He only has his best interest out for you after all.” at that Metternich could not resist sending him a cruel smirk, knowing his desires and current misanthropy at his situation.

What irked Charles the most was his inability to come up with a snappy comeback towards him as he left. Curiously, Metternich stopped once he reached the invisible line that marked the entrance to his room,

angling his head around to send him one last smirk. "Oh, and Prinz Franz? Do tell Prinzessin Sophie to get out of that chest. I doubt being in there is good for one as fair as she."

Charles was literally stunned at the Kanzler's apparent omniscience, as right after he left Sophie pushed her way out of her hiding spot. "How in the world did he know that?" she asked while breathing deep breaths.

Still troubled by this, deeply so in fact, Charles could not find a suitable answer. "Ich habe keine Ahnung. However, now would probably be a fine time to go." he said without any trace of sympathy.

Sophie sniffled and pouted greatly at him. As she grabbed her clothes, putting them on in a rather roughshod manner, she gave him a pleading look. "You would throw a lady out after forcing her into such miserable conditions?"

It took him less than a second to think up a response. "Yes."

She ceased her attempts at arousing sympathy within him, instead putting on the last button of her blouse. "Well, after such rude talk, do not expect me waiting on you for the next few weeks."

"Fine by me." he answered without looking at her, instead taking a long look at his sword once more.

Sophie stormed out in a fit. Not that he cared. He had far more pressing matters. Though as he reached out for one of his books, a troubled feeling came over him. Looking out the lone window of the room, he saw it was indeed quite snowy out. And assuredly cold along with it. Twilight would surely have been cold as Mortiz said, but it was only now that he thought over it fully.

Charles looked at his fathers, '*no, not his anymore, mine,*' sword again. It was truly a beautiful blade even when sheathed. He stretched his hand towards it, until that same guilt returned once more in even greater force now. '*These things will still be here once I return. And Twilight would enjoy my company...*' the more emotionally invested part of his mind reasoned.

That was true, but... Oh damn it, fine, he would leave for her. After these endless nuisances, surely Twilight would provide some comfort that not even these valuable objects could bring him. He pushed himself off his seat, heading towards the door till it came over him. *'Wait, trousers,'* he thankfully thought, turning back and putting his trousers on before continuing. Satisfied, he at last left his room, headed to Twilight's enclosure and hoping to make the most of his day with her. Yes, Twilight would make things better, she always had.

*'Besides, perhaps I could try persuading the Kaiser later. After all, he can not withstand my requests forever after all. I must only be patient. Even if it must take years.'* he mused, giving himself some confidence to be dispensed later.

After this thought passed, something welled up within him--A desire, a tugging feeling, something indescribable. The world was on the verge of a great upheaval, and he was sure that he was the one to lead it. The events of that morning had filled his mind with the faint threads of countless plans and plots with their implications. He shook his head abruptly, in need of clarity. If he wanted to get anywhere in life, he needed focus, constant focus. Some kind hand of fate would give him his chance, his chance to prove his worth to the world, and more importantly, to his father's name. And that was the start of how he accidentally invaded the Ottoman Empire.

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A/N-Well that's another one down folks. Thanks for reading as usual, and thanks to all my bros who helped me with this. You know their names by now hopefully, so I won't have to repeat them every chapter. Otherwise though, shoot me any comments in, well, the comments on the stories EqD page, along with criticism and whatnot. I hope you enjoyed some of the small things I did in this chapter, like the alternate usage of 'bronies.' Once again though, thanks for reading. See you all next time!

Also, holy scheiße! Someone actually made a TvTropes for this fic, at only 3 chapters at the time of its creation! It's right [here](#) in case anyone is interested. Thanks to all you guys for making this fic as popular, it's really great to see it get it's own page. I am ashamedly excited at this honestly, getting a TVtropes page for one of my works always being one of my goals.