

The Greatest Gift

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Chapter 1

Then and Now

Dusk was rapidly settling over the lands like a cool blanket calming the sun-warmed hills, plains, and forests and beginning to croon its soft lullaby. Across Equestria the creatures of the woods and fields, streams and skies prepared their nests and caves. They gathered their kin close to bid another day farewell and huddle close before drifting off to sleep. The handful of nocturnal animals, on the other hoof, blinked their sleepy eyes and stretched. The song of the coming night filled the air like a gentle nudge of wakefulness in their ears. Where the denizens of the day left the darkness silent of their calls those of the night would fill the air with their languages. They would sing of the moon as their brethren did of the sun.

Far off in the distance two sisters stood side by side on a wide ledge of stone. They overlooked an expansive vista of Equestria high up on the side of a mountain as the sun slowly sank to but a sliver of cherry-orange light. The taller of the two was a brilliant and flawless pearl with a mane of pastel colors. She was fixated on the bright sliver on the horizon. Her alabaster horn glowed softly and pulsed, the delay between each gentle flash growing increasingly longer as the sun drifted downwards. The golden sunburst that adorned her flanks glowed and softened in rhythm with her horn. Next to her was another pony, smaller and darker but very clearly related. Purple infused with gray, like a dark cloud on a moonlit night, flowed across her hide. A mane of a light blue fell gently over one eye and shifted in the windless air like the other's. Standing two full heads shorter than her sister she was still only a filly. It was the way she carried herself that made her look every bit as regal. Still, the shifting of her hooves and constant glances belied a sense of anxiety and apprehension that was absent in her sibling. When the final ray of sunlight washed across the ledge and the glow in the sky began to fade from orange to red to violet the elder Princess turned to her sibling.

"Luna, are you ready?"

The filly's nervous glances quickly turned into a defiant grin and something glinted in her eyes. She tossed back her head to clear a stray lock of mane from her face and nodded curtly. The older sister smiled.

You look so much like I did at that age. Amazing how those days seem to slip by more quickly as time passes.

"Of course I am. You just stay right there and I'll show you how it's done." She marched to the precipice of the rough stone and marked a place on the dimming horizon in her mind. Closing her eyes she took a deep breath. It seemed as though the rest of the world held its collective breath with her. A moment paused and nothing happened. An eyelid opened just a fraction and Luna glanced behind her.

"Well, maybe you could stand next to me. Just in case." Her sister smiled warmly.

"Okay, but just in case. Don't let me get in your way." She sidled up close and brushed a wingtip across the younger one's back.

If only there had been someone to tell me the same at your age. Sometimes, little sister, I envy you.

A brief smile of gratitude was lost when the eyelid shut tight and Luna grew tight-lipped with concentration. Reaching out with her powers her horn began to radiate with a dark energy. Then she sensed everything. The solidarity of the stone beneath her hooves, the pulsing hum of thousands of heartbeats from animals, and the slower tune played by the plants. The capricious currents and eddies of the winds and weather, a feeling soft and silky from the streams and brooks, and the cloying heat left by the final rays of sunlight also. Her sister was a blinding force of warmth and love that almost drown out the one thing she was seeking. Then she found a touch of coolness neither cold nor warm, but rather like the lingering feeling of a loved one's embrace. Another feeling, of willowy down stained in shades soothing and calm, filtered up through the touch. Finally...there! An anchor of light less brilliant than the sun but with radiance far more personal materialized in her mind. The warmth of the daytime spread to all creatures beneath the sky but this light shown down on only the few that were open to its touch. It wrapped those few in an intimate embrace that the sun could never rival. Luna took hold of this feeling in her mind, pulled it close to her chest, tensed her legs, and leapt into the air.

Immediately she felt a tremendous weight tugging at her, clawing at her back and legs, and threatening to bring her to ground. The feeling was an intense sensation she had never imagined or expected. It felt as though she were trying to swim up to the surface from the deepest depths of the ocean with a stone held in her hooves while the water turned to sludge. Celestia looked on.

Keep going! I know you can do this.

One, two, three, four desperate strokes of her small wings and she felt as though she could not carry the burden any higher. She thought of her sister, of the looks of approval that accompanied every accomplishment. Her determination hardened and she pushed onward. Giving a forced grunt of exertion she released the weight into the air, felt the heaviness lift from her shoulders, and opened her eyes. Hanging in the pristine night sky was the moon; full, bright, and more beautiful than any sunrise or sunset she had ever seen. It had worked! She had done it! And in the joy of the moment she forgot to flap her wings. With a startled yelp Luna dropped out of the air, bounced once, and landed perilously close to the edge of the ledge in an ungraceful heap. A sound like the chirping of songbirds filled the air.

"Are you okay, Luna?" her sister asked trying in vain to suppress her giggling while pulling the filly away from the edge.

"Celestia! It's not funny," Luna began, intending to berate her sister for laughing. She couldn't in light of the accomplishment and joined in, the pair sharing the laughter.

"Don't worry. I did the same thing the first time I raised the sun. It gets easier with practice." She looked down at her sister proudly. "You should have plenty of practice from now on too. You're going to be responsible for it every night."

"Huh? You mean it!?" Luna's eyes were as bright as the moon she had hung.

"I do. The night is now yours, *Princess* Luna. Oh look there. It seems you made more than just the moon appear tonight." Celestia bent down to nudge her sister's flank and Luna turned to look. She gasped in surprise at the crescent moon over a swath of black sky against her coat. Her cutie

mark! She jumped up and turned in circles trying to get a better look, prancing and laughing as she did.

"I did it, I did it!" she kept repeating cheerfully.

Such joy from so simple a thing; doing what was always yours to accomplish. Hold on to these moments, Luna; they are so fleeting. Celestia cleared her throat.

"So...no stars tonight?"

"Huh?" Luna ceased her circles and looked up at her older sister then at the sky and her ears drooped. Though the moon blazed brightly it was alone in the vast, empty sky.

"The stars? Do I have to make them every night?"

"Yes."

"All of them?" Luna seemed to shrink a little more.

"Most nights."

"But there's only the two of us to watch them." Luna shot her sister a disbelieving look. "They don't have to come out all the time. Right?"

"You can trust me, dear. I would never lie to you. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know."

"Then trust me when I say you'll need the practice. There will be others soon." Celestia knew the look that spread across her sister's eyes and on her face. She nuzzled Luna affectionately.

"Tell you what, little sister. If you'll help me with the dawn tomorrow I'll take care of the stars tonight."

"You really mean it?" It was as if the yet unseen stars all seemed to shine on Luna's face at that moment.

"I do. Come on."

"Okay." Luna smiled so warmly that Celestia felt as though the sun were still out. "Hey, Celestia?"

“Hmm?”

“I love you, big sister.”

“I love you too. Someday soon there will be others like us to admire your beautiful night sky too.”

“I’d like that.” As Luna looked upward to watch her sister work Celestia cast a wary glance over at the granite face of the mountain behind them and frowned.

What is he doing here?

Perched between two wedges of stone, peering down intently from a vantage point above and behind the two sisters, another creature listened and waited. It was small; as small as the filly that had just coaxed the moon into the sky. Large eyes with pale amber irises stared unblinking through the entire event. They drank in every movement, every breath, each word and detail. The eyes grew wide and intense when the dark little pony first leapt into the air and came close to tumbling off the ledge when she forgot to beat her wings. They softened to a shimmering liquidity when joy overtook her and she began to excitedly bounce around the other one. Squinting in the illumination of the moon the being tried hard to make out what had to be a cutie mark newly appeared, but could see nothing more than a dim blur. When the sisters embraced the amber eyes cast their gaze aside and quivered, a single sparkling tear welling up in each corner. As the older began to breathe life into the featureless sky, calling forth tiny balls of fire to hang like a glittering tapestry, he crept forth from his nook.

Ivory light washed over him and cast his features in muted tones. Vermillion turned to crimson and a wisp of a slate mane darkened to coal. Against the backdrop of the granite mountain one would have to be looking for something, or somepony, in particular to spot him.

Quietly. Carefully. Just like the rock lizards. One step, two steps. A shadow in the night. A single hoof at a time the little pony crept forward, pausing every sixth step or so to freeze and wait muscles tensed should he need to make a quick escape. Another step forward, then another. In the sky more than two dozen stars already burned and still more were beginning to show. He could hear the elder sister pointing out shapes made

by the stars and the younger begging for a chance to try her hoof at creating a few herself.

Faster, before she finishes. Need to see for myself. What does it look like? There was a scraggly mountain shrub made of nothing more than a few stunted sticks with thin waxy needles clinging to a meager existence a short dash from the pair. Hugging the stone he scuttled quickly up to the shrub and hid behind it as best he could. Peeking around a ragged clump of green his amber eyes roamed over dark filly till he found what he sought.

A crescent moon. Beautiful, like her. The object of his attention laughed at some quiet joke and silver bells filled the air. He smiled and closed his eyes letting the music of her laughter soothe his nerves.

Her name, I should know. Remember. He looked up at the moon.

Moon. Then he returned his gaze. *Moon? No.* The memory was a tiny insect flitting through his mind refusing to let itself be caught.

Moon. Another name, like that one but not. Luna? Yes! Her name is Luna. The one called by that name gave a small grunt and he saw her horn glow with an aura of tiny sparks. He gasped and made himself crouch lower, huddling against the rock and bush. Up in the northern part of the sky amid a void patch a single faint point of light flared into existence. It grew steadily in intensity until it outshone every other star. An amazed squeak escaped his mouth as the single star held him captivated. In spite of his earlier caution he slunk out from behind the shrub. The sky was almost filled now but it was this one creation that held his rapt attention.

She made that. Can I go there? It would be a nice place, I know. One step towards the star then another. He felt the stunted wings on his back unfold and give a weak flutter. A minuscule swirl of dust kicked up but he gained no altitude; the bent angle of his right wing with its matted feathers ensured he never would either. He did not remember taking that many steps but when another laugh, this time from the pearlescent pony, broke his entrancement he found himself mere feet from the pair.

Run! The instinct tugging at his legs told him to flee to the safety of his crevice and wait for the morning to return. Though his head said go his heart bid him stay and this time he did as his heart commanded. This close to Luna he could see her in full relief against the curtain of the sky. Again

he was struck by her fragile beauty and the simple joy of hearing her voice. He felt like parched earth soaking up a cool spring rain.

I never knew. Too long. Should have come sooner. He reached for Luna, his tiny hoof trembling mightily, when an invisible weight closed around him and gripped his body in a vise. Unable to move legs, neck, head, or tail he rolled his eyes upward and looked into the hard stare of the elder sister. She was glaring down at him even as she continued to carry on a conversation with Luna. Another name came to his mind, one that he knew to fear.

Celestia! Run! Celestia held him tightly in her gaze and narrowed her luminous eyes to menacing slits. Those eyes! They seemed so kind, yet all he wanted to do was run as far and as fast as his legs would carry him. Nothing in her poise suggested any malice or danger but the contempt and judgment held in those eyes ran deep and strong. The weight on his body abruptly lifted and he had not the will or the desire to stand his ground. Tears in his eyes and choked cry in his throat he turned and galloped for his hiding place among the rocks.

Run, hide. Stay away! Cripple, outcast, ghost. Never return. The words were his own in his mind but he had not thought them nor had he spoken them. They can unbidden and drowned out all other thought. Glancing back he saw Luna turn her head to look behind her, but Celestia moved to shield her sister from him. As she did her eyes glared at him, burning a hole in his heart.

You love her. I love her. Love me? A wave of resentment and anger broke over him and despite himself he cried out softly, a wordless sound that was more emotion than language. Finally reaching the rocks he scrambled upwards, legs slipping on loose gravel. Several times he lost his footing and earned himself many new bruises, scrapes, and shallow cuts. Breathing heavily, bleeding, and shaking from fear he crawled back into the little wedge that sheltered him. Celestia turned from him then and began speaking to Luna. In moments they had spread their wings and plunged off the cliff edge and rising back into view moments later on feathers of light and darkness.

Banished. It was the final thought that entered his mind before losing sight of the sisters. Only when he was certain Celestia was gone did he relax. The pain came first, sharp and fresh, but he did not cry. Rather he

licked his wounds clean and shifted in his tiny space until he could lie down and still see the moon.

The little pony watched the heavenly body for a time thinking back to the sound of Luna's laughter and her new cutie mark. What passed for pride and happiness gave his heart a little tug before weariness set in and his eyelids drooped. He lay his head down but winced when he scraped his head against the granite. Rubbing the jagged edges of a stump where once proudly rose a spiraled horn, just like those of Luna and Celestia, he resituated himself, closed his eyes, and slept.

"I beg to differ."

The sound of Luna's voice broke in on Celestia's thoughts and shattered her far-off look. She had noticed her older sister wearing that look more and more over the past few weeks. Celestia's eyes refocused and she jerked a little in her seat.

"I'm sorry. What was that you were saying?"

"Actually it was you saying that I can't hide up here in Canterlot forever."

"Oh yes, of course I was and I do mean every word." Seated on a quiet balcony clinging to the southern face of the Royal Observatory two sisters looked at each other from opposite ends of a low table. An assortment of delicate pastries, tart fruits, and freshly brewed tea was laid out for them. They argued. Over a thousand years of accumulated age, experience, and wisdom ran through each of them. Still, the bonds that urged siblings to squabble held as strong as ever. Even with the return and subsequent defeat of Nightmare Moon, now almost a year in the past, the former bearer of that title found reintegration into pony society far from easy. So also she found rekindling the relationship with her sister somewhat strange. Celestia had insisted they pick up right where they left off as if nothing had happened.

"Are you feeling okay?" Luna inquired. "I've noticed that you have seemed more distracted then usual as of late."

“It’s just my concern for you. How will our subjects come to know you, the real you, if you lock yourself up in the palace all the time?” Celestia presented the question while balancing the acts of nibbling on a petite red citrus and taking small sips of a hot mint tea.

“Perhaps I’m waiting for the day when our subjects want to get to know me also,” Luna retorted while attending to her own tastes, a cup of blackberries drizzled with sweetened cream with a chilled white tea.

“They do! Don’t you remember the welcoming party in Ponyville? That was in your honor at the insistence of the residents not to mention to reception following your reinstatement. I thought they would never stop cheering.”

The younger sister snorted and looked out across the view the balcony offered. Pink clouds floated overhead so close to the peak of the signal tower that one could almost imagine reached out and taking hold of them. Winter was still upon them and the snow-capped peaks of the nearby mountains glowed orange in the waning light. The evening air was still and a chill hung from every rooftop. Though Luna did not mind the cold her sister had requested a slight bit of spell work that kept the balcony warm. Dusk was upon Equestria and far below the shops and kiosks would be closing down for the night. Further off banks of lights began to wink on as home hearths were lit and street lamps illuminated. Once Luna would have felt slighted by the glow of those imitations of her sister’s sun. Now she felt a clinging curiosity as to why the ponies hung on to every bit of yellow light they could find. She took another sip of tea and met Celestia’s eyes.

“I suppose you did see what you wanted to see but I saw the truth in every pony that smiled or bowed to me. They did it for you, to please you, because they knew it was expected. And they cheered for the demise of Nightmare Moon, not the return of Princess Luna. Can’t you still feel the resentment or the fear or the anger?” Luna waited for a response, but Celestia betrayed nothing in her expression. She simply placed her teacup and fruit gently back onto the table.

You’ve gotten too good at this good, Celly. All those politics and endless conferences have changed you. We used to be open books to one another; now I can never tell what’s on your mind. I guess you and I have both changed more over the years than I thought.

“They’re all just nervous because-“ Celestia began.

“-of Nightmare Moon.”

“-they don’t really know you. Yet.”

Luna glanced back down at the streets and houses. Did the cool gaze of the moon not comfort the faces of those that looked upon it the same way the sun did? What was so wrong with her creation? What was so wrong with *her*?

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Trust me Luna. I think I’ve spent enough time around our little ponies to have a good idea what is on their minds.”

“Your ponies, not mine. Not anymore at least. Then again they were always more attuned to you than me.”

The impassive visage of an ageless ruler broke at the comment. Where she usually wore a graceful countenance of wisdom now she looked as though something had just jabbed her in the leg. Luna smiled a little on the inside.

Aha! There you are.

“Please don’t say such things. You promised that we would put all that behind us. They will feel the same way about you that they do about me in time, but you have to meet them halfway. Or at least be the first to extend a hoof.”

“Maybe it’s because I’m that much more...acquainted with things such as fear and anger. I know what it is they hold in their hearts away from your sight. I can almost smell it coming off of them when I walk through the halls or gardens. Who can blame them? Sometimes I wonder if releasing me was a prudent choice after all.”

“Never! Never again say something like that. It was all I could do to wait as long as I did. You will never be made to suffer like that again, I promise.” Celestia’s hurt look changed into one of dismay. Luna puzzled over this.

So the guilt runs deep. I knew you hated yourself almost as much as I...as Nightmare Moon hated you, but this is something new.

"Careful, big sister, that you don't start promising that which you can't deliver."

"Luna! Every day you were gone was...I never thought that I would be able to forgive myself. I'm still not sure."

"You did what needed to be done; I left you no other choice."

"I know but that first year was very difficult for me. You don't know how close I came, and not just once, to throwing the fate of Equestria to the winds by breaking the spell. I learned that many pieces of one's heart can die while still leaving the body untouched. Do you remember that night on the ledge when you first raised the moon by yourself?"

"I remember I couldn't even bring out the stars afterward." Luna looked momentarily reminiscent but shook her head soon after. "Don't change the subject and don't be so overly dramatic. It was no picnic for me either. Moon dust is a poor substitute for blackberries and cream, though I doubt anything would have tasted as it should."

"So you've told me. It took a long time for me to move on and settle in to ruling our nation by myself. Keeping everything running as it should did not allow me time to properly...mourn for you." They sat silent and still for several long minutes with the hands of a clock ticking loudly in the background. Neither seemed to care anymore for their meal or their teas slowly cooling or warming to temperatures wholly unsuitable for their tastes. Luna struggled to find something to say.

Say something, you who would rule next to your sister!

"Is this how our conversations are going to play out from now on?"

"I really think that is up to you," Celestia retorted.

"Does it? I think it all depends on whether or not you persist in your nagging."

"I'm only trying to think about what's best for you."

"Wouldn't I know what's best for me?" Luna asked.

“You didn’t even attend the Gala. I had planned for you to be with me the entire evening so you could personally greet everypony that entered.”

“Half would have suddenly remembered a pressing engagement at the door, I’m sure. And I’ll have you know I didn’t attend because you told me how awful it is every year.” Her tone shifted to something a bit more playful. She saw Celestia breathe a sigh of relief.

“Not this year. You really should have seen the look on all those stuffy faces when their pomp and prestige came crashing down.”

“So I heard but still I-I blame you. You, um, clouded my judgment.”

Really?! Is that the best I can do? Think...oh yes!

With a deft nudge of magic Luna levitated a blackberry that was only partially drenched in cream and flung it at Celestia. The look of surprise as she barely managed to nudge the incoming berry aside set Luna to giggling.

“It’s good to see you smile, though I see your manners still haven’t improved,” Celestia chuckled.

“Stick in the mud,” Luna whispered too loudly before sighing. “Oh, very well! What would you have of me?”

“The Turning of the Year celebration is approaching and-“

“-I was already planning on attending. It’s been ages since we’ve made an eclipse together.”

“Regardless of your reasons I’ll be happy to have you next to me.” Celestia took a sip of her cooling tea and leaned inward. “So...um, what did you get me?”

“Celly! You know I can’t tell you.” Luna could not help but smile bigger, inwardly and outwardly.

This is how it should always be; I miss the old days before all this happened.

“Oh please. Just a little hint?” Celestia pleaded mockingly.

“A thousand years and still just as impatient.” She giggled again as her older sister openly pouted.

“I had patience enough for the both of us when you needed help with your stars.”

Again with the memory. Has something about that been what's been bothering you?

“You always were the more generous one.”

“Oh alright.” Celestia dramatically threw her hooves in the air. “I guess I'll just have to wait till we exchange gifts at the ceremony. How about just where it's from?”

“Actually I haven't picked it up just yet. It's...difficult to find but I know exactly what I want get for you. I think you'll be impressed if I can manage to get them.”

“Them?” Celestia gave her little sister a conspiratory look. “Oh my. I suppose I'll have to rethink my gift to you to ensure it will be suitably spectacular.” A polite knock at the large double doors came as one side cracked open just enough to admit the head of a white unicorn. He smiled sheepishly and, perhaps a little too loudly, cleared his throat.

“Begging your pardon, Milady, but the emissary from Drakkehor has just arrived. I have seated him in the foyer outside your audience chamber. Well, actually it's just his head that can fit into the foyer. I have also sent for a small repast to be sent to the space you've set aside. He awaits your pleasure.” Both sisters sighed.

“The treaty between the dragons and the griffins?” Luna asked as she dabbed at the sides of her mouth with an embroidered napkin, wondering what would entail a small repast for a dragon.

“I expect so.”

“Do the negotiations go well?” Luna asked sincerely.

“As well as can be expected. What is that look for? Have faith in me, sister. You used to trust me completely. That's all I want.”

That was before you locked me away in my own moon. Luna did not speak her thoughts; she knew they were only a fleeting trace of annoyance. Still, they tended to come at the most inopportune moments.

"I do trust you. Thank you for always being honest with me, even when it was painful." The grateful smile that Celestia gave Luna helped to put her mind at ease.

"Duty calls. Please consider what I've said; I'd like to hear some suggestions from you tomorrow. It wouldn't do for me to have to order you to go out and make friends. I made that same request to another that I care about a year ago. It almost took a royal decree to get her to agree. Now look at her. Please think on that. I'll see you in the morning."

Taking a final bit of fruit Celestia rose from the table and followed the unicorn out and down the stairway, the clattering of hooves slowly fading away. Luna tossed aside manners in this moment of privacy and finished her meal in two large, slurping bites. A none too polite burp followed. It felt good to not have to act like a princess if even just once in a day. Setting the dishes on a tray outside the door for the servants to pick up later she retired upstairs to her study. It sat in the upper portion of the observatory. Upon entering she lit the oil lamps with a spark from her horn. On a wide table lay a pile of astronomical charts and reference books, some with dog-eared pages that numbered in the dozens. Nearby sat a few blank scrolls next to an ornate writing quill and unfinished chart of the various formations on the moon. Luna removed her crown, necklace, and shoes of obsidian, onyx, and sapphire. She placed them in a rosewood box before settling down at her desk. Quill clutched in the invisible hoof of magic, she pulled the topographical chart over and studied the features already present. After only a few minutes of staring and pondering she shoved the scroll aside and replaced the quill in its inkpot.

"You really know how to get under my skin," she said to the night air, hoping that it cared to listen. Something tickled the back of her mind and she knew the time to raise the moon was near. She attended to the matter but without the usual bravado that came when Celestia was around to watch. It seemed that no matter her age Luna still felt the need to impress her big sister.

Always looking for approval.

Quietly and with no fanfare the night's sentinel rose from its daytime resting place to take its position looking down upon Equestria. The same peace was not shared by Luna. Her sister's words kept playing over in her mind and try as she might she could not ignore them. A thought entered her mind, one that had plagued Luna before whenever she considered her options. She had tried to dismiss it as asking too much but the thought proved too stubborn for that.

"Twilight Sparkle, Celly's own protégé. I had hoped it wouldn't come to that, but she and her friends may be the only ones left that can help me. Again." Going back to her desk she took out a fresh piece of parchment and set her quill to work.

Dearest Sister,

I do not wish to impose upon you or seem as though I am attempting to shirk my duties, but I must ask you to once again handle the load of work you've seen fit to give me since my return. This is a temporary request and one that should last for less than a week if everything goes well enough. I have something special in mind for the Turning and my gift is not only meant for you but also for all of Equestria. The nature of this gift is such that I need help in obtaining it, and to that end I have decided, as per your suggestion, to go out and enlist some help. I'm sure you'll be able to guess whom I am referring to when I say that Ponyville is my first destination. This is going to be an unofficial trip so I will not be making any announcements nor will I be taking my retinue. Please don't worry as I'm confident that, should they accept, the lot of us will be more than capable of taking care of ourselves. I hope this will be a short trip so I can return and ease your burden of office. Understand me when I say that this is something I need to do for myself just as much as I want to do it for you. What I have in mind will be the greatest of all gifts and perhaps then I can begin repairing the relationships I broke those thousand years ago.

*Your Loving Sister,
Luna*

Carefully she melted a few drops of wax and sealed the scroll with her personal signet: a crescent moon. This was placed on the table they

had eaten at along with a second note to the cleaning mares: the letter should be delivered to Celestia just after sunrise tomorrow morning and no sooner.

"I should have done this sooner. I've waited long enough," she said to herself while floating a pair of saddlebags from one of her closets. Into the bags went everything she had thought of ahead of time: a carefully copied map, a handful of small notebooks with charcoal sticks, a warm blanket, several food items chosen for their hardiness, and a pouch of coins. Last of all she pulled a small gilded book out from behind one of the bookshelves and looked at the cover. Across its face were no letters but six strange symbols. She ran a hoof across the cover and felt a twinge in her heart. Taking a purple satin pouch she wrapped up the book and stuffed it in the bottom of one of the bags. These she secured to her back and fastened the straps. Certain that everything was snug she approached the low stone railing of the balcony. The crisp night chill made her shiver delightfully. She blew out a fine steaming breath, watched it slowly disintegrate, and gave Canterlot a final sweeping look.

No parting words. I hope she'll forgive this sudden disappearance. I hate having to keep secrets; Celly's always been completely honest with me. Luna shook her head.

"This has to be done and if I manage it then they'll all have to forgive me for everything. No pony will be able to doubt my heart then." With a short hop into open space and three full beats of her dark wings Luna was already leaving the observatory behind. Banking around she glided over the tops of the palace apartments, unseen and unheard against the backdrop of the night sky. *Her* night sky. The flight would be a short one and, she hoped, the beginning of the end of her old life. She took no notice of the dragon with its head and neck stuffed into a building below.

"If you are attempting to stall the treaty by playing me false you could have chosen something less far-fetched than this fantasy." Celestia gestured a hoof at several thick rolls of crude parchment and a couple of rough clay tablets. She sat atop a great marble couch piled high with soft pillows and velvet blankets in her audience chamber. Surrounding the two occupants were tapestries depicting great moments in Equestrian history. Though the room was less opulent than her throne room it served its

purpose of entertaining visiting dignitaries and guests far better. She and her guest looked squarely in each others eyes. The dragon, a great copper-scaled presence whose head and neck were the only parts of his body able to comfortably fit in the chamber, returned the look with a rueful smirk.

"This is why your doubts should not trouble you. I bring no ruse to your table but merely honest news and the regards of the Council of Clans, as is befitting allies. What Your Highness does with the information is, of course, your prerogative. I believe your ageless wisdom will know the right course of action."

"Your given name should have been Silver Tongue. By all reports from my staff you have already charmed your way into several courts but do tread lightly here; flattery will only reward you with the same. Now, *if* I were to believe you how certain are you of the accuracy of these reports?"

"Most certain, Your Highness," the dragon responded with a quick directness.

"Please, Ambassador, we can dispense with the formalities when speaking on such topics. More to curb your honeyed words too." Celestia offered a politely inviting smile and levitated a scroll over to her to glance over its contents once more. The dragon returned the smile and nodded.

"Our sources are well paid for their services and it is understood that trickery or deception is a most abhorrent crime."

"No doubt examples can be cited," Celestia inferred, her smile fading just a bit.

"Words without action are hollow and powerless," the dragon chortled.

"It is so but I wonder about your timing. With the negotiations near to a close what you offer comes at a time most fortunate for your interests."

"A mere coincidence, I assure you," the dragon offered. He tilted his head in as best an imitation of a shrug as he could.

"Very few events happen that are simple coincidences. At least in my experience which is, I assure you, far greater than your own."

"How then may I set your misgivings to rest?"

“Tell me how you came into possession of this information and what you hope to gain by bringing it to my attention.”

“Your words sting me like a hundred barbs!” The dragon’s sigh of exasperation was heavily embellished. “I have told you that the Council expects nothing in return; it is a gift. However...”

“Go on.”

“Should you find it in your heart to consider keeping the Highland Pass open year round instead of adhering to those outdated expectations of annual seasons the Council would be most appreciative.”

“Those ‘outdated expectations’ are the natural order of the world and not something to be placed on a bargaining table.” Celestia’s warm smile chilled a few more degrees. “To do so would run the risk of irreparably damaging the area.”

“Yes, yes. Wheels within wheels, harmony and balance.” The dragon waved his snout dismissively. “I hear enough of that from certain members of my own kind. Balance and harmony will not fill the Council’s hoards with trade goods and gems.”

“But it does keep you alive, to a degree.”

“We can sit hear till the end of time discussing the merits of this and that or we can conclude the business at hand, or hoof if you prefer.”

“Very well.” She nodded for him to continue.

“Naturally, our informant’s identities are a Council secret that even I am not allowed to know. Such is the ways of a government but I can tell you that if the Grand Sire and the Platform sent me to share this knowledge, they themselves are convinced of its authenticity.”

Celestia looked out one of the large windows of her audience chamber and found the moon. In early days the sight of it would have filled her with a bitter sadness. To a degree this still held true, but now every time it rose without her intervention she smiled. It meant her sister was free. Celestia took such great comfort in bathing in the soft, silent glow that the peace she felt was almost as great as that which her own sun provided. The dragon cleared his throat.

“Is something amiss?”

“No... yes... maybe. I’m not sure.” She turned back to the ambassador. To have not one but a score of elder dragons agree upon a single issue was a feat not to be ignored.

“It pains me to say this but on the count of your information being accurate at least in that regard I believe you.” She produced a much smaller scroll with its golden wax seal broken. “Not two days ago my own couriers brought me tidings of a similar nature. I am inclined to agree with your sources but the ramifications have yet to be made known. Any concessions you wish to ask for will wait until such time as more information is uncovered. This could become a very dire matter or it could end up as dust in the wind.”

“Dust in the wind can still blind and choke one if one is not careful. Still, I would expect nothing else. I *will* admit that a bit of an explanation would go a long way towards satisfying the Council’s appetites. They are curious as to what prompts your interest and, should events play out for the worse, why hasn’t something been done already.”

“I’m sure such answers would go a long way.” There was a long pause.

“But you will not be offering one.” The dragon’s smile also faded.

“You are correct.”

“Very well.” A curl of smoke escaped the dragon’s nostrils though he quickly sniffed and reigned in any further clouds. “The flight was a long one and I would rest before discussing the latest treaty revisions.”

“An excellent idea. You will find a suitable space has been cleared for you and my staff is at your disposal, Ambassador.” The resumption of titles signaled an end to the meeting.

“Your Highness is most generous. I will await your summons in the morning but think on this tonight: secrets can be slippery bit of prey at best. Sooner or later questions will be asked and answers demanded. The answers that come may not be the ones you had wished to be made known.” Giving no reply except a curt nod of her head Celestia pulled a tasseled bit of rope with a pinch of magic. A pair of Royal Guards flanked

by the same pony that brought news of the dragon's arrival appeared. They escorted the Ambassador away. When the doors were shut Celestia let out a long breath and slumped in her couch. Again she reached out and brought the scrolls and tablets closer to be inspected. Though vague in some areas the rest of the descriptions and accounts were almost mirrors of her own informants' reports. Celestia felt her head and ears droop, a hard grimace spreading across her face as a touch of anger mixed in with the apprehension. She looked upon a hastily sketched rendition of what her couriers had seen. Though the sketch was drawn with a charcoal stick she knew the colors that should have been there: vermillion and slate with the eyes pale amber. Stunted and twisted wings were crude jagged lines on the parchment but there was no mistaking the stump of a broken horn. He was grown now.

“So you're still alive after all these centuries. You just couldn't have stayed away from her like I told you that night so long ago.” Celestia crumpled the drawing in a magical fist and fed it to one of the torches along the wall.

“You'll not have her,” she whispered coldly. “Not then and certainly not now.”

Chapter 2

Best Laid Plans

Blinding brilliance. That was everything that could be seen in all directions. There was more white from horizon to horizon than could be thought possible. It was cold too. The wind made everything worse. Blowing from a single direction for only a short while it would suddenly shift, sometimes even blowing in more than one direction. Loose snow whipped through the air turning even the sky into a wild froth. All of these and more made life miserable for the two scout ponies bunkered down in a shelter of ice.

“Hey Fuzzy, are there any of those carrots left?” An earth pony with a maroon coat and close-cropped white mane rubbed his fore hooves over a small fire. He looked over at his partner and waited for an answer. The orange pegasus with a yellow mane shifted under a thick blanket draped over his back. He sighed and looked over the fire.

“For the last time, my name isn’t Fuzzy. It’s LongWing.”

“Could have fooled me,” the earth pony shrugged. “Should have been LongCoat or something. Just look at all that extra hair! Besides, Fuzzy has a better ring to it.”

“So what if my coat a little long?”

“A little long?” the maroon pony snickered. “You could braid that stuff.”

“If that’s how it’s going to be, no, we don’t have any more carrots.” LongWing flicked his tail over a burlap bag. “Want some of the dried apple slices?”

“Those tasteless sticks?” the earth pony complained. “Don’t tell me that’s all that’s left?” He looked pleadingly at his partner who only scowled back.

"Maybe *your* name should have been Filly, because that's what you've been acting like." The earth pony snorted at the comment and poked at the fire with a stick.

"It's not my fault my parents weren't expecting a colt."

"Cherry Tart! They named you Cherry Tart," LongWing laughed. "You're one to talk about names."

"Yeah, yeah. Keep laughing Fuzzy. Just pass one of those sticks posing as apples. I have to try to figure out what our superiors were thinking when they sent us out here. Can't do that on an empty stomach."

"Are you questioning our orders?" LongWing looked up from his musings.

"No. I'm questioning the *sanity* of our orders. Just because a routine patrol happened to spot a strange pony heading this way doesn't mean a thing."

"From the way the Captain acted I'd say Princess Celestia was plenty interested," Longwing warned. "That should be enough."

"That doesn't mean he's still coming this way. If he's that important they should have just sent some Royal Guards to arrest him or something. We can hardly see a thing out there anyway. How are we supposed to see or hear anything?" He pointed to the entranceway. The outside scenery was almost indistinguishable from the featureless white walls of their shelter. Only the occasional gust of wind that sent their fire flickering marked the transition point.

"We're not the only ones out here," LongWing reminded his partner.

"Yeah but we *are* the only ones on top of a blasted mountain! The Captain could have at least chosen somepony that blends in around here. Just look at us. We stick out like a cockatrice in a hen house."

"So who would you have sent?" the pegasus asked.

"I don't know. Maybe Ice Lily or Skybolt; their coats are at least white." The earth pony smirked. "Wouldn't mind pulling watch with Ice Lily out here. I bet I could keep her warm enough."

“Watch who talking about or you’ll end up on latrine duty. Lily is the Captain’s daughter after all. Remember what happened to the last buck that asked her out? I didn’t know a unicorn could be tossed that far.” LongWing shuddered and it was not because he was cold.

“Can’t I simply admire a pretty mare?” Cherry looked abashed.

“Not when her dad is your boss.”

“What about...oh what was her name?” Cherry scratched at his chin. “The one with the dandelion puffs on her flanks. Or were they heads of lettuce?”

“I have *got* to get you a steady marefriend. Maybe then you’ll shut up.”

“No can do. Don’t want to break all those hearts by sticking with just one filly.”

“Okay, time to come clean. Just how many have there been? I’ve heard the rumors but I want to know straight from the pony’s mouth.” LongWing stretched his neck to work a kink out of the joints. “And I want numbers, not your usual bluster.”

“A gentlecolt never discusses his conquests,” Cherry sniffed. The charade lasted all of two seconds. “Good thing I’m as far from one of them as possible. Listen closely, my young student, and I’ll tell you the tale of how a filly’s name can get a buck all the tail he wants.”

“Young student? I’m a year older than you.”

“Whatever. Just take notes.” LongWing rolled his eyes and adjusted his blanket. They hunched over closer to the fire. There was little enough heat to share but it was as large as they dared to make it inside a shelter of snow and ice. Cherry’s story lasted what seemed like hours, though it may have just been all the times LongWing interrupted.

“That’s impossible!” the pegasus exclaimed. His expression was one of shock.

“Ha! I wish I had a mirror to show you your face. It’s true enough, if there’s an ample supply of wine or spike punch or something with a kick. Now, that was only by the time I was...” The stories continued for a time.

“So we’re talking not one, but *two* dozen?!” LongWing was leaning so far forward now his blanket was almost dragging into the fire.

“Yep,” Cherry proclaimed proudly. “And counting.”

“I...I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it buddy.”

“No,” LongWing shook his head. “I mean I don’t believe you. Word would get out, mares would avoid you like a parasprite.”

“Not if they were all looking for the same thing that I was; it takes a special kind of mare to catch my eye.”

It was a change in the pitch of the howling of the wind that broke the conversation. What had been a constant high whine moved into a low growl. The two scouts ears twitched and they cast quizzical looks across the fire. Rather quickly the growl became a hum and then ceased altogether. There was silence. The world framed by the doorway was still a stark white but no sound issued forth.

“What in Celestia’s name just happened?” Cherry wondered aloud.

“Sounds like the wind stopped.”

“You think? I’m asking why it stopped. It hasn’t stopped since before we got here. Why now?”

“You think every pegasus pony is supposed to have the weather schedule memorized. That’s not my department.” LongWing threw off his blanket and the pair donned their gear before venturing out into the snow. If the glare had been near blinding from inside the shelter then outside was beyond even that level. Even with their eyes tightly shut the brilliance invaded their sight.

“I can’t see a blasted thing!” Cherry exclaimed.

“Hold on and give your eyes time to adjust. Just don’t go wandering off.”

“I’m going to grab our goggles.”

“Think you could find the shelter while blind?” LongWing asked. Cherry stopped and snorted. The ponies stood there in snow past their ankles with the deathly quiet all around. By the time their eyes could register anything other than the piercing brightness the silence had become a near deafening ring. Their ears twitched again as a new sound reached them. Snow crunched under hoof as Cherry turned and attempted to track the noise.

“You hear that?”

“Shhh!” LongWing hissed. They waited but only heard the grinding of the earth pony’s teeth.

“Can you see anything yet?” Cherry winced as LongWing’s hoof poked him sharply.

“The end of our careers if you don’t shut up.” It became less like gazing directly into the sun and minor details began to emerge. There was the turquoise sky and the entrance to the igloo that stood out like a gaping maw against the perfectly smooth landscape.

“There it is again.” This time Cherry whispered. “Sounds like something walking through the snow.” They listened more intently. “More like stumbling. They’re making an awful lot of noise now.”

“So are you,” LongWing groaned.

“Come on, back inside. It sounds like they’re getting closer and we don’t want to be seen just yet.”

“Weren’t our orders to observe only?”

“Are you kidding? If this is our pony and we bring him in we’ll have our pick of assignments. And think of the mares; they love a hero.” Cherry turned and ducked back into their shelter. LongWing began to protest but quickly assented. With eyes and ears forward and say near the entrance. Cherry looked at his partner and grinned.

“Now let’s see if maybe this trip wasn’t a complete waste of time.”

Pulling his cloak further down over his head he trudged through fields of endless snow and ice. For more than two weeks, or more if the sun were lying to him, he had walked. Hobbled would have probably been a more apt description of his movements. While three good hooves forced themselves through drifts and over rocks one hung near useless. His front left hoof was canted at an odd angle and he held it above the snow and terrain. It twitched with each step. Days ago the cold had blessedly numbed the injury so it did not pain him as much as it had the day he slipped. Two days into his trip over the mountains a shelf of ice had shifted unexpectedly. Only by wedging his leg into a fissure of rock did he avoid following the sliding mass down into a ravine. The pain had been fantastically sharp with the sound of fracturing bone mimicking that of shattering ice. He had cried out then. No real words came; only the sounds of anguish and frustration. Without any supplies to treat the wound he gritted through the pain until the cold worked its magic. He had known much worse after all.

Now the pain was only a memory and the incident another lesson and reminder. Cresting a minor peak he paused and took in the sights that lay before him. In every direction he looked there stood proud mountains with their white peaks thrust above the clouds. All around them ragged whipping froths of whitened wind. He thought it curious he had not encountered any of those storms during his trek. Off to one side, on the verge of slipping below the horizon, was the slimmest slice of blue. It was a sapphire shard against the lighter turquoise of the sky.

The ocean. Endless and serene in the songs. I would like to see it one day. I wonder what stories it would tell me?

His gaze and thoughts moved from the far away seas to the direction he had come from. Much closer lay a stretch of endless plains covered in yellowed grass. Further off a hodgepodge of rocky hills in every hue and shade of brown. If he squinted he could imagine the shimmering waves of heat rising from the ground.

Empty. I will never return to that place. There is nothing there.

Other than more mountains there was only one other sight. It lay directly before him. At the base of the range was a wildly verdant forest; thick and teeming with life unseen, even in the grip of winter. He had never been there before but like so many others its name called to him.

Everfree. Forever free. Free from what?

Beyond the forest were picturesque hills, a distant smudge of a town or two, and something else. Though barely visible he knew what the place was and felt the need to avert his eyes. Clinging to the side of a cliff was a shining castle. Even from so far away he could tell how magnificent it would have looked up close. There was a presence that oozed from that palace and sent his flesh crawling. It felt prickly and flushed his coat with an unnerving heat despite the chill.

Celestia. Get down or she'll see you! No, not from this distance. Canterlot is the name. So pretty. So false. Go away, go away!

He shut a pale amber eye against the sight and the clinging voice of the past. The left eye had long since clouded over to a hazy gray. A knotted scar of pink flesh sealed most of it shut but the pupil continued to dart around, as though still possessing sight. It hurt even after all of the centuries. In those days he would have shed tears, turned, and run away. He had been a foal then. The last time he saw either of them he had ran and hid. There were times when the old urges would press strongly against him but he did not run today. Today he would stomp his hoof and press forward. Unfortunately the hoof he stomped was his lame one and the pain sliced through his shield of numbness. Star patterns burst in his head and he chanced putting weight on the throbbing bone to steady himself. Swimming up through the liquid static he began to see the faces of ponies long past.

From the ether came an earth pony couple, stallion and mare, with gentle smiles. They looked down on him with warm sympathy and caring in their hearts. He felt safe. Whisked away too soon from his sight the faces were replaced by a filly. She also smiled at him and motioned for him to come and join her in a game. He felt joy. The mists darkened, his vision blurred then refocused. The little filly lay dead on the ground. Hovering over the body were the stallion and mare. They breathed hatred and loathing upon him. He felt crystalline tears fall. Monsters swept through his vision and swiped their claws at him as they passed. Manticores, chimeras, celestial beasts, and ponies twisted in his mind by their disgust for him.

Please. I was wrong. I am wrong. Please. Never on purpose, I never hurt on purpose.

The pain began to subside and the visions faded with its passing. His eye no longer saw the past, but the mountain and its snow again. In the place of the aberrations stood two ponies he did not know. One was a maroon earth pony and the other an orange pegasus. He squeezed his eye shut and opened it again. The ponies were still there. They were not of his mind like the others. Each wore coats with a symbol emblazoned upon the sides: a sun rising over a tree. A sun. *Her sun!*

No! They will tell her. Go away! Make them not see me anymore.

"You! Stop right there," the earth pony shouted at him.

"He wasn't moving," the orange one quipped. An annoyed glance passed between them.

"State your name and reasons for being here. You are commanded in the name of the Princess." Yellow nudged Maroon.

"Princesses," he corrected.

Princesses! I knew she was back! The moon felt different. That is why I felt the need to walk here. She was calling me. Where?!

He moved forward, oblivious of the pain in his hoof now. The amber iris glinted with a gleeful light. He approached the others at as close to a trot as he could manage. They could tell him where she was!

"Whoa there, I said stop. Halt!" the earth pony insisted.

In their name. She's free, she's back! In their...wait. Her name too. Celestia. No!

The glint in his eye and the hopeful grin that had started to form turned instantly to stone.

"I don't think he's listening." The pegasus took a step back.

"Draw!" The pair reached to their sides beneath their coat and grasped something with their teeth. Steel scraped loudly against wood and they held short blades by the hilt bits. The amber eye widened.

She has sent more against me. They will keep me from the moon!

He lowered his head and moved into as close to a full gallop as he could manage. The hood of his cloak whipped back to reveal the shattered stump of a horn. Regardless of its inadequacy he leveled the jagged edges at the two ponies, barreling into their midst. They dodged to either side and the earth pony swung its neck in a wide arc. New pain blossomed along his right side as the steel bit into him. The cut was shallow, most of its force having been spent on the cloth of the cloak. The cloak fell away from his body and crippled wings flashed in the sunlight.

"That's him!" the pony who had wounded him shouted from around the weapon in his mouth.

"Hold him here while I alert the others." The pegasus took wing and hovered while sheathing his blade.

"Once Celestia hears of this and word gets around I'll have mares flocking to the hero. I'll have my pick, captain for a father or not." A smirk crossed the maroon's face.

They're going to alert her. No! Stop! Please.

The orange pegasus made to dash away. He felt it again right then and saw it happen all over. The world melted away and he saw what he had done so long ago.

The little filly had a woodland friend, a pretty green bird that trilled the sweetest of songs. He had been thinking of another little pony from his past and wanted some comfort. So he went to the bird for a song but the bird would not sing. Pleading wordlessly with it yielded nothing. Prostrating himself before it as he has seen other ponies do to the sun was as fruitless an attempt. Sorrow mixed with anger and he shook the tree. The bird fell and he tried to force a song from its beak but something bad happened.

I didn't mean for it to happen.

The sweet little bird had burst into writhing flames of gold, copper, and rust. It would sing no more. She found him standing there, shaking and rooted in place, next to a tiny pile of still smoldering ash. Her cries and tears had driven the spike of sorrow deeper into his heart. She had once called him friend but now came the insults and curses. He had wished he would immolate right there too. Then she said something to him.

“You’re as bad as that wicked Mare in the Moon! You should be banished like her!”

She is not bad!

He had wanted to shout it at her, to tell her that it was Celestia that was bad not Luna. He never had the chance. When the shouts in his mind ceased the filly lay in a pool of her own blood at his hooves. There had been more shouting, more tears, and running after that. He had run till he collapsed. When he woke the next morning he ran further until he could no longer recognize his surroundings. There he hoped to die. He did not die and today he would not be captured.

Inside him he felt something well up and bring a fire into his chest. There was great pain in the fire but also a great strength. With desperation born of the thousand years of life that had been denied to him he grasped that flame and drew it into his throat.

STOP!

The voice in his head was not what issued forth from his mouth. What erupted was the wordless language of raw emotion. It was a primal force that seared his throat, tongue, and lips. Both scout ponies froze where they were as the sound rolled over them. Neither uttered a word for their own voices caught fire in their mouths. The pegasus fell from the sky and the earth pony stumbled and collapsed. They writhed in the snow making coughing noises and gasping for air. As they did a great rumbling shook the snow and ice. He felt the slab shift beneath his hooves but knew he was in no danger. Sounding like the descent of thunder itself an ice shelf slipped free and swept away the two ponies in its relentless embrace.

It was over. If the two still lived they would never be able to tell the others of him. Breathing heavily he felt his stomach heave and he retched in the snow. The bile stung his blistered throat and mouth but it was not nearly as bad as the barbs in his chest. He had done it again. He did not want them to die but they had to be stopped. All he had done was tell them to stop and they did. Blood oozed from the gash in his side and stained the fractured snow a bright scarlet. Where it fell tiny wisps of steam rose and left little melted pockets.

Why couldn’t you have just stopped? Why did you make me yell at you?

It hurt. The hurt brought back the voices that told him how bad he was and fresh tears froze to his face

No my fault. Not my fault.

Snow dulled the wound in his side and cleaned the blood from his mouth and coat. Picking up the largest piece of his torn cloak he draped it over his back. The way down the mountain had now become steeper after the small avalanche. He winced at thought of the walk ahead. Choosing what looked like the less treacherous path down he hung his head and pushed onward. In time he knew the ice would consume all the evidence of what had happened but he would remember. The faces of the two ponies taken would join those that haunted him day and night.

Step by step, one hoof after another, the lone pony shuffled through the snow and ice as the sun began its descent to the horizon. As he walked he thought of the moon.

*"This year is coming to an end
It's time to say goodbye.
We'll miss you lots but its okay
No need to frown or cry."*

"Um, Pinkie?" Five pairs of eyes watched as a bouncing pile of pink hide and mane hopped up and down in time to the tune it was currently spinning.

*"Another one is coming soon
If you want to have some fun
Stick around I'll tell you how
When this song is done."*

"Was she ever on any kind of medication?" Twilight Sparkle asked. Eyebrows cocked as the brains beneath them tried in vain to understand the the spectacle they were witnessing. It was a common occurrence that never failed to confound. That fact had never stopped them from at least attempting the seemingly impossible feat of understanding. The song

continued and began to include references and verses that seemed to have progressively less to do with the original subject.

“That one didn’t even rhyme,” Applejack noticed.

“Rarity, was that a real word?”

“I don’t know, Fluttershy, but I do think it’s appropriate to sing about the Princess’ sock collection.”

“She has a *sock* collection? Who collects socks?” Rainbow Dash wondered.

*“It’s time to put away the old
So come along with me
And since now this song is done
It’s time tooooooo.....”*

Everyone held their collective breaths knowing what was most likely to come next.

“PARTY!”

“PINKIE!” The five voices together did the job and Pinkie Pie ceased her antics and stood there with an ear-to-ear grin.

“No no no. It’s not Pinkie. Its party! Oh wait it is Pinkie because Party Pie is just a silly name for a pony.” She put a hoof to her chin. “Or is it?” Everyone rolled their eyes except for Rainbow Dash who just shook her head.

“If she starts calling herself Party Pie I’m blaming all of you,” Rainbow promised. She flopped back onto a large conveniently placed pillow and stretched out her legs. “So I’ve always loved the party for the new year but I never really understood what the big deal was.”

All six all them were gathered together at the library in Ponyville. They had been discussing their plans for the upcoming festival celebrating

the end of the current year and welcoming the new one. Across Equestria every pony young and old were making plans on how they were going to spend their time during the two-day long celebration. Twilight gave Rainbow's comment a moment's pause before her horn lit up and a volume floated over from off of the many bookshelves.

"I think this is the one."

"Gettin' Down With It: A How-To Guide for Parties." Applejack screwed up her face as she read the title aloud. "Wait just an applepickin' minute. Pinkie?! You wrote this?"

"Oh yeah but that was back when I was just a filly." The pink pony hoped up and down gleefully. "Those were my *crazy* days when I did all sorts of weird things."

"As opposed to now?" Applejack did not look convinced.

"Well of course, I – wait, *gasp* twitchy tail. Heads up Twilight."

"Huh? What - OUCH!" A massive tome landed squarely on Twilight's head and sent her to the floor.

"Told you."

"Next time warn me faster," Twilight moaned as she picked herself up off the ground and shook her head clear of the throb the book had given her.

"Sorry about that Twilight. It slipped," came Spike's apology from atop the highest bookshelf in the library. "I think that's the one you're looking for." She picked up the book and placed it on a reading stand. Rarity approached and read the front page.

"A Complete History of Equestria: Customs and Traditions. Oh my, I didn't realize there was so much history to read."

"This is just a single volume, Rarity," Twilight said as she flipped through the pages. "There are eleven others just as big. Some are even bigger." Dash gave Twilight a knowing look.

"And I bet you've read all twelve."

“Don’t be silly. Of course I haven’t.” She gave them all a sheepish grin. “I only got through ten before I came here. After that it’s be one thing after another and sometimes this stuff can get a little dry.”

“Tell me about it,” Rainbow agreed.

“Okay!” Twilight perked up. Her horn glowed and the pages began to rapidly flip through the volume.

“No I meant-ah, never mind.”

“Here we go. The Turning of the Year Celebration dates back to the early days of Equestria’s founding when ponies first realized that once the new year had begun spring was just around the corner. With spring came an end to the snow and a chance to replant crops and fix any damage caused by winter storms. Each celebration is unique in that no two towns will celebrate it in the same way. The events of the past year and the hopes for the upcoming year make up the theme of the celebration which begins on the day before and continues until the night after the turning of the year. The height of the celebration is an event that only occurs this one time during the year: a solar eclipse. At the exact moment when the night of the ending year concludes and the first day of the new year begins both Princesses gather their powers and send the moon down at the same time the sun comes up. This causes the two to cross with the moon eclipsing the sun for a full minute. In that moment when the two pass and day and night exist at the same time everypony makes the one wish that they most want to come true in the new year. The sun is said to encourage the pony to strive for that wish by day while the moon sends good dreams of fulfilling it by night. Thus the circle is complete and a new year is born.”

Twilight looked up from the pages ready to answer questions or provide further insight, but she instead found a less than appreciative audience. Applejack and Rarity were discussing something in hushed tones while Fluttershy’s attention was centered on a moth. Pinkie was swaying back and forth with her eyes closed to an unheard tune and Rainbow Dash was asleep. Even Spike had drifted off leaning against the bookshelf from his perch on the ladder. Twilight put a hoof to her face.

“All my friends have attention disorders.” No one appeared to have heard her comment but as her annoyance grew a thought occurred to her and she smiled slyly. With barely a glow from her horn she gently plucked

Spike from his slightly precarious napping spot and deposited him gingerly on the floor next to Rarity and Applejack. Shifting her focus she levitated her trusty owl feather quill from its place on one of many study desks and brought the plumage end down to tickle Spike's nose. The little dragon twitched and tittered a bit but remained fast asleep. Twilight laid on the magic a little harder and was quickly rewarded when Spike began to chuckle. His eyes popped open as his nose twitched, his face scrunched up, and the force of the sneeze lifted him off the ground.

"Aaa-choo!" Green flame shot out and parted the two conversing ponies.

"Whoa nelly!" Applejack yelled and backpedaled furiously.

"Not the hair, not the hair!" Neither was paying very much attention to where their movements were taking them. Applejack tripped over one of Pinkie's tapping hooves and Rarity's attempt to swing her hair away from the flames swatted Fluttershy's moth out of the air. Fluttershy gasped in concern and chased after the displaced moth that settled on Rainbow Dash's nose. The noise woke the pegasus at that moment and she jumped as her eyes focused on what seemed to be a massive insect invading the library.

"Monster!" she yelled. In the blink of an eye and Rainbow was off the ground, in the air, and crashing into Pinkie and Applejack. As Twilight rolled on the floor in fits of laughter everyone recovered and composed themselves except for Pinkie Pie who looked at the two ponies sprawled across her in confusion.

"Hey! This isn't how a group hug is supposed to work." Neither chose to comment as they pulled themselves apart. A realization dawned on the pink pony and her eyes lit up.

"Twilight! That was hilarious! Hey, wait. You know what would make it better?"

"HA! No I-hehe-what?" Twilight laughed. Pinkie crouched down, her tail lashing wildly.

"PONY PILE!" Once the dust had settled and the books ceased falling from the shelves all that was left was the echo of laughter coming from the multicolored tangle of legs, manes, and hooves on the floor.

“Now this is a group hug,” Dash chuckled while pinning Twilight to the floor. Pinkie beamed. It was then that there came a knock at the door and every head turned as the laughter quieted. Twilight squirmed out and walked over to the door.

“It’s getting pretty late. I wonder who could be coming for a visit at this hour.” A gentle nudge with magic and the door of the library swung open to reveal nothing but the black of night beyond the threshold. Twilight cocked her head and frowned at what must obviously be some sort of prank pulled by some wayward youth.

“Hello? Is anyone out there?” There was no answer. She was about to close the door when a piece of the darkness shifted and detached itself from the black curtain outside. It moved forward into the glow of the doorway and took on the shape of a figure they all knew very well.

“It’s her!” Rainbow shouted as Twilight shrank back from the door. The pony in question, standing a full head taller than the rest of them, lifted a hoof and shied away from the shouting.

“Please,” she spoke calmly in a silken, cool voice with none of the malice that it once held. Twilight noticed it sounded a lot like the voice of Celestia only much softer.

“I’m not the mare you think I am anymore.” She cast down her eyes and did not meet the stares of the six other ponies that were looking at her with a mixture of fear and surprise. Rainbow Dash readied her wings.

“What are we waiting for?” she said, making as if to charge the dark mare. That move skidded to an abrupt halt when Twilight’s shout shook them all.

“Wait!” They all froze and said nothing. Twilight made a noticeable effort to stand up a little straighter and took a step forward. She then bent at the knees, inclined her head, and bowed.

“I’m sorry Princess Luna. Please forgive our rudeness.” Princess Luna wore an expression of complete surprise. The others hesitated, torn between protocol and Rainbow’s reaction. Twilight gestured with a hoof.

“She’s not Nightmare Moon; she doesn’t even look like that anymore.” The realization of their grievous error slowly dawned on the rest.

One by one they followed Twilight's example and bowed low except for Rainbow Dash. She kept her eyes on the mare that had once been the greatest enemy of Equestria. Luna regained her composure and nudged Twilight back into a standing position.

"Thank you. Please rise, all of you. It's quite alright. I seem to get that reaction from many ponies no matter where I go these days. Then again." Her ears and mane drooped slightly. "I can't blame them after what I tried to do to everypony." An uncomfortable silence sat in the still air for several tense moments until the unlikelyst of voices spoke.

"Um if you like, that is if you want to, you could come in...I mean if it's okay with you, Princess." Fluttershy's voice, barely above a hushed tone, seemed to be far louder than usual in the quiet but it cut through the moment all the same.

"Of course. How uncivil of us," Rarity added. "Please do come inside, Your Highness." Twilight moved aside and gestured in kind. Luna looked back at the darkness, looked up at the stars, and bit her lower lip.

"Yes," Luna finally said, bowing her head. "Thank you. I hope I'm not interrupting anything." It was Rainbow Dash who answered as Luna glided into the foyer, the darkness of her hide taking on a silky sheen in the warm glow of the library's lights.

"Well as a matter of fact we-mmph!" Applejack grinned with one hoof planted firmly against Dash's mouth.

"What she was meanin' to say was that we was just talkin' bout our plans for

the-

"-most super-duper awesome fun party there ever was! Except maybe the Summer Sun Festival or the Grand Galloping Gala or the Running of the-OW! Um...watermelons? Watermelons don't have legs." The book on fruit farming slid off Pinkie's face and from his perch Spike suppressed a chuckle when Twilight shot him an appreciative wink.

"Plans for the festival? I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"It's no problem," Twilight assured. "There's just times when some of us forget you're not the Mare in the Moon anymore." She shot Rainbow Dash a look. "A thousand years is a long time and, well, last time we met you were..." They all searched for the right words, if they even existed at all. After the pause started to become unbearable Luna dismissed the attempt.

"I was who I had been a thousand years ago and you know nothing else of me except for that day. I wasn't much for talking even at the party that was thrown for me. Thank for that, by the way."

"It was our pleasure. It just might take time for us to adjust." By this point the initial shock of Princess Luna's visit had worn off and the room had noticeably settled down. Applejack no longer needed to restrain Rainbow Dash. After a moment Twilight managed to clear enough books off of a table to make room for Luna to sit.

"Spike? Being out some refreshments for the Princess."

"There's no need, really. I don't want to be anymore trouble than I already am or have been," Luna insisted. "Or might be." Her head sagged with her mane and the previous looks on the other pony's faces turned to concern.

"I...I don't understand, Your Highness," Rarity offered. "What do you mean?" Luna did not immediately answer nor did she raise her head. A wintry chill seemed to settle in over the mood.

"If there is anyone in Equestria who knows me, it's you," the princess said at last to Twilight, her voice as quiet as a snowfall on a winter's midnight. Twilight looked noticeably taken aback.

"Celestia told me you alone among all our subjects learned of my prophesied return and that only you had the understanding to stop me when I..." She seemed to bite back something at that moment and took a deep breath before continuing.

"I vowed that morning to my sister, to all of Equestria that the mistakes of my past would not happen again. Ever. Not to anypony if it was within my power. However I am but one. It took all six of you to stop me and...I may need your help to stop me again if what I have in mind goes poorly."

“Our help?” Twilight repeated. “Princess, if there is something we can do to help you all you need to do is ask. We’ll try our best to-“

“Please stop.” The word, spoken quite firmly, struck Twilight and the others like a frozen gale. Dark energy coalesced around Luna’s single horn and her drooping mane whipped back into its normal flowing pattern. She seemed to notice the change and took another deep breath, releasing the energy slowly. “You sound so sincere that I almost believe you, but do not go and promise something which you may not be able to deliver.” There was silence and she looked away.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped like that but I’ve been promised many things in the past. Very few have ever delivered on those promises. I’ve been a little stressed as of late.” Before Twilight could reply Applejack tapped her hoof on the floor.

“Excuse me Twi, but get your rump over here right now. We need a word.” Applejack corralled the other ponies away to the other side of the library and, hopefully, out of earshot of Luna. About that time Spike returned with a silver platter of chilled fruit drinks and a bowl of apples fairly fresh from Sweet Apple Acres itself. Luna nodded her thanks but touched nothing while the others conversed quietly.

“Now what in the hay is a goin’ on in that head of yours?”

“I don’t know what you mean. You heard the Princess. She needs help.”

“Yeah, help overthrowing Celestia and bringing that whole eternal darkness thing back,” Rainbow Dash commented. Fluttershy was constantly glancing back over her shoulder to the dark mare.

“You think it would help if I sang another song?” Pinkie asked with no attempt to regulate her volume.

“You need to stop right now, Rainbow. This is Princess Luna, sister to Celestia and co-ruler of Equestria. She’s not Nightmare Moon. Show some respect.”

“Even so are you seriously considering offering her all of our help without consulting any of us first?” Twilight glanced at Rarity and hung her head a little.

“Oops. Sorry everyone. I guess I just thought you all would share my feelings. I guess you’re having more misgivings about it than I thought.”

“It ain’t like that, we do want to help. We just want to talk it over for a spell.”

“Talk it over?” Dash exclaimed a little too loudly. “This is the pony who was Nightmare Moon that we’re talking about!”

“I see that I have wasted my time.” The silken voice had lost most of its smooth caress and taken on a honed edge every bit as sharp as a griffin’s talon. Everyone cringed. They turned to see the princess already halfway out the door and almost hidden completely by the darkness beyond the frame. She stopped to look back over her shoulder. An expression of dreadful shame covered the half of her face not hidden by her mane.

“I guess it’s my fate to forever live in the shadow of the moon. I’m sorry to have disturbed you. Goodnight.” The door slammed shut and she was gone.

“Princess, wait!” Twilight ran to the door and flung it open. She cast a worried glance back at her friends. “Oh no, no, no, no. This isn’t good. Wait here.” Without waiting for an answer she lit her horn with a quick bit a magic and plunged into the darkness.

“What?” Rainbow Dash suddenly felt the eyes of her friends on her. They were not approving looks either.

“Is it possible for you to be any more ill-mannered?” Rainbow turned away from Rarity and returned to the pillow she had been occupying. She flopped down.

“I was only saying what we were all thinking. Right?” The others only glanced at one another. “Come on! You can’t tell you weren’t.”

“That ain’t the point. You can’t go shootin’ your mouth off at a Princess.” By now Rarity, Applejack, and Pinkie had gathered around Rainbow. Fluttershy chose to look out of one of the front windows.

“Be glad she came alone,” Rarity continued for Applejack. “Remember the guards that Princess Celestia travels with? If Princess

Luna had brought her own I dare so you'd be in chains or something equally dreadful."

"Why so worried Dashie?" Pinkie asked, somehow managing to suspend herself from a bookcase above Rainbow's head.

"I'm not scared of her or any guards. I could take her myself."

"What in tarnation are you talking about? That was a year ago. The Princess went back to normal and those Element thingies up and skedaddled afterwards. The fight's over." Rainbow turned away from her friends.

"For you maybe." Her friends looked at each other, confused.

"Whatever do you mean, dear?"

"Stupid Shadowbolts," was all they got from her; Rainbow refused to answer anything further.

"I hope Twilight they be okay out there," they heard Flutter murmur as she turned from the window.

Outside of the comforting warmth of the library Twilight found the night cold and bleak. Snowfall this winter had been light due in part to the breakdown of a few cloud factories in Cloudsdale. That didn't keep the ground free of a thin layer of frost that crunched under hoof with each step. For a moment Twilight considered hurrying back inside and forgetting what was in all likelihood the most foolish thing she'd ever done. A warm cloak at least would have been nice, but her stubborn nature resisted and she trotted onward. Though she had left only seconds earlier there was no sign of Princess Luna in the street or anywhere that Twilight could see. It was as if she had simply vanished.

"Princess Luna?" she called out. No answer. Trying every corner, turn, and alley that she came across the continued lack of a response began to make her worry. Maybe their actions had caused more harm than they realized. After searching what felt like half of Ponyville she stopped and breathed a heavy sigh. Her breath billowed into a heavy fog in the crisp air.

"I'm not going to enjoy writing this letter. Dear Princess Celestia," she began aloud. "Today my friends and I learned that I doesn't take much effort to run off your sister when she comes asking for out help." Something heavy and warm fell across her shoulders and back and Twilight nearly fell over when she jumped in surprise.

"Sure you want me to write that down?" Turning around she saw Spike staring up at her. "Come one, you're going to catch a cold out here without something to bundle up with." Spike planted his little fists on his hips and shook his head. "And here I thought you were the smart one."

"Thanks Number One Assistant." Twilight smiled sheepishly. "I was in such a hurry I didn't really think about the weather until I was already out here." She shifted the woolen blanket to better fit and motioned for him to climb aboard.

"No luck then?" he asked as he seated himself.

"None. She just disappeared, and I guess I can't blame her. What happened was pretty awful."

"But she was Nightmare Moon!"

"Yes, 'was' is the word that everypony seems to be forgetting here but she's not anymore. She's also a princess. That alone is deserving of more respect than we showed her tonight. Are the others still at the library?"

"Yeah. They all seem pretty worried too."

"About the Princess?"

"Yeah, but also about you." Twilight gave no answer. She walked and Spike rode in silence for most of the way back until the lights of the library came back into view. They stopped.

"What are we going to do, Spike? We messed up big time. I doubt the Princess would have even stopped and given us a second chance if I had found her."

"And why should I have?" The soft voice that spoke seemed to float in on a gentle gust of wind. Try as they might the startled pair could not locate the source of the voice.

"We...we were hasty with our words," Twilight answered

"And a little scared," Spike added.

"I'm really sorry but you must understand. This all came as a big surprise. I can't apologize for Rainbow Dash but we all know better."

"To be honest I was quite surprised that you even invited me in at all. Though I did not quite expect the outright hostility from your friend. Actually it was of second chances that I wanted to talk to you all about."

"What do you mean?" A pale glow pushed aside a curtain of darkness near a large house and illuminated Luna's face. In that silvery light so much like that cast from a full moon Twilight did not see a princess. Instead she saw Luna, younger sister of her mentor, and a pony longing for someone to listen to what she had to say before casting judgment.

"I mean that am I willing to give you and your friends a second chance if you will do the same for me and hear me out. If what I have to say is too much to ask of you then I will leave and never speak of it again."

"It sounds important," Spike commented.

"To me it is; very much so." Luna looked at Twilight. "Tou six may be my only chance." Twilight trotted over to the other pony, bowed, and met her gaze.

"Let's go back inside where it's warm, and start over."

"I'd like that but there's something I'd like for you to find and read to everyone before I begin."

"Let me guess," Twilight droned. "It was under E."

"Nope. W." Pinkie bounced happily. "You know, as in, what was it doing under W and not E? Being kind of a librarian you'd think you'd have figured out where your books should go." Twilight stuck her tongue out.

"I'll put it on my to-do list. Along with asking who stocked this library. Okay here it is...The Elements of Discord." Twilight floated the book over to

a stand and began flipping through the pages. Applejack caught sight of a few of the illustrations as they whipped past as shook her head.

“Obviously not the sorta thing you’d want to read to the little’uns before bedtime.”

“Wait,” Luna commanded. “Go back a few pages. Right there.” She shuddered noticeably as Twilight began to read.

“Almost nothing is known about the Elements of Discord, even less, in fact, than the fabled Elements of Harmony. The circumstances and reasons for their creation have never been discovered. Neither have they been known to be located in specific area for any great length of time. Rumors and legends that have arisen seem to contradict each other almost as a rule in all ways except for one: the composition of the Elements of Discord. It has been assumed from their natures that these Elements were created to be the opposites of the Elements of Harmony. Harmony is made up of Honesty, Kindness, Generosity, Laughter, Loyalty, and the unknown sixth. Discord is comprised of Deceit, Cruelty, Greed, Fear, Betrayal, and another that has been the subject of debate. The exact nature of the sixth has never been decided upon by scholars, as they do not have a sixth Element of Harmony for comparison. It is speculated that once combined the resulting power would instinctively seek to destroy the harmonious Elements, turning all day into night. This has led to the belief that it was these powers that transformed the sister of Princess Celestia, Luna, into the terrible Nightmare Moon.” Twilight paused, unsure if she should continue reading.

“Go on,” Luna encouraged.

“Despite the raw power of Discord each Element is individually weaker than its Harmony counterpart. Without the sixth Element of Harmony, however, Nightmare Moon’s imprisonment in the moon has been prophesied to be only temporary. After a thousand years the very stars that she created are said to aid in breaking the bonds of the five remaining Elements, thus releasing her from her prison. Only the combined power of all six Elements can truly banish Discord from an individual but even then one must be wary. Discord’s power is great and easy to obtain. Its hold can never be completely erased from one who has given themselves over to its influence completely. The remnants will forever tempt them to embrace the power once more.”

There was silence in the room, no one knowing what to say until one voice cut through the air like a knife.

"It's all true." All eyes turned to Princess Luna. "Just as the Elements of Harmony were able to imprison, and later purge, Nightmare from me those of Discord gave me the power to...to..." The words stuck in her throat and her eyes moistened.

"But all those things sound so..."

"Repulsive," Rarity finished for Rainbow Dash. The others nodded in agreement. "Why on Equestria would anypony want to fill themselves with such horrid emotions?"

"Why not ask yourselves?" The regret in Luna's eyes turned to sad sympathy. "You've felt them before. All of you have. How did you feel when you let one of those Elements into your heart if even for just that moment of weakness?"

"Like there was somethin' t'weren't right."

"Yeah! We don't enjoy feeling like that," Rainbow retorted.

"Really?" Luna's bemused chuckle was devoid of any mirth. "You have much to learn about the power such emotions can hold. Rarity, when you chose to compete against your friend at Cloudsdale to selfishly pursue attention instead of supporting her did you feel bad at that moment?"

"Well I, uh...no actually. Not until after I realized my mistake."

"Fluttershy, you claim to love and care for all animals. So how loving were you when you cruelly tried to force their affection and scare them half to death at the Gala? For heaven's sake you had a squirrel in your teeth near the end." Fluttershy meekly hid her head beneath a wing and sniffed.

"How did you...I only wanted..." Her voiced trailed off into a squeak.

"So the ends justified the means. Very well."

"Now hold on just an applepickin' minute," Applejack interjected.

"Wait. First tell me about the time you shunned your friend's trust and refused their help and counsel during the harvest season." She continued

to each one of them in turn, pointing out failings and times in their lives they held a piece of Discord in their hearts. Not even Spike was spared for his deceitful actions when he feared Owliscious might claim the position as Twilight's assistant.

"In all those times you felt that what you were doing was not wrong, or was less of an evil than whatever the alternative might have been. You felt justified in your actions." Luna looked up at the ceiling with a far off look that seemed to focus on something very distant that made her confused and afraid.

"Can you imagine for one moment how it feels when all you have done, the very reason that you exist in this world, is cast aside and shunned by those your work was meant for? I created the night, the moon, and the stars. All of it I made and guided for the ponies of Equestria. And what were my thanks for my devotion and labor?"

"We slept through the night and forgot about its wonders and beauties," answered, ashamed. Luna frowned and nodded.

"I tried everything I could think of: meteor showers, the aurora, constellations. Nothing worked. So in my desperation, and to my everlasting shame, I turned to the powers of Discord. The Elements had already taken root in my heart. I did this in order to accomplish that which I couldn't by my power alone. And they consumed me utterly." Twilight closed the book once Luna had finished speaking and floated it over to Spike for reshelving. Under the letter E this time.

"I had no idea," Twilight said. "Nothing in the prophecy I read said anything about a second set of Elements."

"Nor would they. Most history books are written by those in power at the time and many change the facts slightly so that future generations remember only what they want them to remember. Luckily it mostly only happens to facts that most ponies would rather not know about anyway, such as the particulars of my fall from the thrones."

"So what does all this have to do with us?" Rainbow Dash asked. "Besides how much we rock for defeating these other Elements before."

“You said that you had all been planning for the Turning of the Year celebration, right? What is one thing about this festival that many ponies are most interested in?”

“Oh my! It has to be the wonderfully colorful themes. It such fun to design new ones each year.”

“It has to be the culturally unique take on the past year. There’s so much source material to draw and interpret from.”

“I like it because I can start thinking about all the animals waking up soon.”

“Nu uh, it’s those big ‘ol feasts. Why I make a cartload every year from all the sales.” Luna shook her head in turn at each guess and, for the first time since she arrived, looked at Pinkie Pie.

“I’ll be you know what I’m talking about,” she said, smiled coyly. Pinkie was literally shaking and twitching from holding in her guess till she was called upon. She suddenly sprang into the air as though propelled by a catapult and somehow managed a cartwheeling backflip.

“PRESENTS!” The pink pony landed lithely on her hooves and her friends all landed on their faces.

“Presents?!” said Rainbow Dash picking herself up off the floor. “You’re here about presents?”

“Simply put...yes.” Luna looked pleased with herself.

“My dear, if you were looking for shopping ideas there was no need to go through all that melodrama.”

“It’s for my sister.”

“Oh marvelous. I have a splendid selection of the finest-“

“I don’t think that’s what she means, Rarity,” Applejack commented.

“Maybe a new little friend for her phoenix?” Fluttershy timidly offered. Twilight shook her head as Luna pawed at the floor.

“It’s something very difficult to get. No, difficult doesn’t even begin to describe the dangers that might be involved. And it’s not just for Celestia but all of Equestria. A special gift to them, to you all, from me.” It was then that Twilight understood what the Princess had been hinting at, why she seemed so on edge. She knew then why she had asked her to read the book on the Elements of Discord to the group. So great was the magnitude of what Luna was proposing that Twilight’s hind legs buckled and she flopped down on her haunches.

“I know what it is,” she said in a half daze, heady with bewilderment. “I know what it is that you want to give to your sister and everypony else.” A knowing look crossed Luna’s face and she nodded, drawing herself up.

“I can’t do this alone; the temptation would be too great for just me, but I have to do this. This may be the only chance I have to finally redeem myself and at the same time remove the threat of another pony taking the path that I took.” To the amazement of all present Princess Luna herself bowed down till her horn touched the floor.

“Please, Elements of Harmony, I need your help.”

“To do what?” Spike asked, voicing the question the other ponies were still asking themselves. Twilight turned to look at them.

“To stop her from possibly becoming Nightmare Moon again.”

“What?!” they all blanched.

“She’s going to try and find the Elements of Discord.” Luna rose from her bow and her voice was devoid of anything except determination.

“I will present their shattered and destroyed remains to everypony as my gift, my penitence, and my pledge. This I swear if you will help me.” Nothing in the room stirred except for a lock of Pinkie’s fluffed hair as it abruptly deflated and fell limply across her face.

Chapter 3

After the Light

One day. They had been given one day to come to a decision regarding Princess Luna's request for help. The task: recover and destroy the Elements of Discord, the powers that transformed Luna into Nightmare Moon. There had been a long and painful silence that followed her plea before the library erupted into a chorus of questions, concerns, and disbelief. With such a burden to consider the Princess had bid them farewell for the night. Before she left she explained that should they agree to assist her they were to meet outside of the city limits tomorrow evening. They were to tell no one about her visit if they disagreed or their activities if they did agree. Regardless of their decision Luna made it abundantly clear that she would be leaving to find the Elements tomorrow with or without their help. What had been intended as a pleasant night of planning for the celebration turned into a heated discussion on what, if anything, they should be doing. Not surprisingly Rainbow Dash was quite vocal about denying the request and added that they should be alerting Princess Celestia and Royal Guard that Luna was up to something "fishy." Rarity was of the opinion that they had an obligation to Her Majesty in whatever royal affair she requested. Applejack had little to say on the subject other than stating the whole "shindig sounded mighty peculiar" and Fluttershy had nothing to say at all. Pinkie Pie managed to get her stray lock of mane under control and offered that if they succeeded the resulting party would probably be recorded in one of those history books Twilight had been reading. Or something similar to that.

Twilight was thankful that she was not the odd pony out in the discussion. Of the six of them she was the only one that had immediately decided to say yes. Just like the books on debate she had studied in speech class instructed she quietly listened to her friend's comments and weighed their opinions. Yet when it came time for her to voice her feelings Twilight found herself at a near total loss for words.

"I just could...see that she genuinely needs our help. It feels like the right thing to do, I think."

“You think?” came Rainbow Dash’s suspicious reply

“There’s nothing to explain. It’s not exactly that I trust her, but I can feel something sort of tugging at the back of my mind. She needs to do this and we need to help her.” No pony was in a state to think very clearly so they agreed to table the subject till the morning and start again after having slept on it and had breakfast. Twilight saw her friends to the door and blew out the lamps on the ground floor before carrying Spike, who had again dozed off again, upstairs. She tucked the baby dragon into his own bed and he mumbled something that sounded like “ninja bunnies” before turning over and starting to snore. Twilight smiled.

“Sometimes I envy you,” she whispered. “I’m not sure but I think I’ll be leaving on a trip soon. You’ll have to stay here and look after things while I’m gone. I know you can do it.” Climbing under her own covers she doused the bedside lamp and lay staring up at the ceiling. Constellations made up of tiny star paintings reflected the moonlight streaming in through the window. Their glittering bodies worked a subtle magic to calm her racing mind. Long before she thought she would have Twilight fell asleep.

“Will there be anything else?” the waiter asked.

“I think that’s everything. Thank you.” Placing the last plate of breakfast in front of Twilight the earth pony waiter, dressed in a simple green vest, nodded and excused himself. Around the table sat Twilight and her friends in various stages of awareness and disrepair. Every pony except Rarity and Pinkie Pie looked like they had just rolled out of bed. Rainbow Dash was still nodding off even after three cups of the restaurant’s strongest morning brew. They sat outside despite the clinging chill. Thankfully the sky was cloudless and the sun was warm on their coats. In front of them lay a selection of fruit pastries, muffins, winter cherries, and rolls stuffed with hay and aromatic flowers. According to the waiter these last items were a specialty grown in a greenhouse behind the establishment. Pinkie spared no time in snatching a tongue of muffins, four in total, and somehow managed to fit all of them in her mouth at once. Applejack reached for a hayroll and nudged Rainbow. She opened her eyes and proceeded to plunge her face into a fresh cup and gulp greedily. Rarity grimaced.

“Please Rainbow; if you’re going to completely ignore all sense of manners at least have the decency to be quiet about it.” Dash lifted her head and licked pungent brown drops from her lips.

“Is she talking? It’s too early to talk.” Her face went back into the cup.

“*Well*,” came the haughty reply. Fluttershy made a grab for one of the remaining muffins but a pink tongue beat her and pulled the rest into Pinkie’s open mouth. The pegasus instead grabbed a fruit tart and chewed on it while glancing sadly at the empty muffin basket. Rarity and Twilight both selected bowls of cherries and sipped at cups of spiced tea. The silence was uncomfortable and long. The air warmed noticeably in the time they sat. In fact it warmed to such to a degree that other patrons began to also dine outside before somepony spoke.

“How is everything?” The waiter’s approach had gone unnoticed but served to jar the table awake from its awkward stupor. Rainbow sputtered in her drink and Twilight dropped her bowl of fruit. Between the rolling cherries and flying coffee the waiter decided all was well enough and gave a placating smile as he backed away, claiming to return with fresh napkins.

“Well this here is mighty nice.”

“If by nice you mean a disaster then I agree with you. Do you know how difficult it is to get stains out of a white tablecloth?” Rarity gingerly prodded at the brown spots on the cloth while Twilight gathered up the escaping cherries. She dropped them back into their bowl and looked around at her friends.

“Somepony needs to say it so I guess I will. What are we going to do about the Princess?” There was no immediate answer. “Didn’t any of you think about it last night?”

“I still say we should turn her in,” Rainbow gurgled as she finished her fourth cup.

“Truth be told not thinkin’ about it t’was the only way I got any shuteye.” Rarity and Fluttershy echoed similar sentiments.

“Oh, oh! I thought about it a lot last night,” Pinkie chimed. Twilight raised an eyebrow.

“Really?”

“I sure did and I got it all figured out.”

“That’s great. So what did you find out?”

“Well the reason why we should all be worried is...the trombones are planning to rebel.” A snowy tree cricket chirped in the stillness that followed.

“What?!” five voices rang together.

“Pinkie, what does that have to do with Princess Luna? What does that have to do with anything?” Pinkie’s eyes narrowed.

“Princess Luna? Who said anything about-“ She gasped. “Is she the head trompony? We have to warn the banjos before it’s too late! No wait...that was just a dream. Wow that’s like the weirdest dream I ever had, but what a dream!”

“I was wrong,” Rainbow began. “It’s not too early for talking, it’s too early for Pinkie Pie.”

“Some of us folk start the day before the rooster crows, y’know,” Applejack retorted. “There’s a few ponies around here might do some good to try it sometime.”

“I’ll be sure to ask them how it goes,” said Rainbow, waving a hoof dismissively.

“I usually let my rooster sleep in late. Angel wakes me when it’s time to make breakfast.”

“Girls!” Twilight shouted while planting her hooves on the table. The waiter returning with a stack of clean napkins stopped and performed an about-face maneuver that would make any member of the Royal Guard proud. Ducking her head in apology when she noticed the stares of the other patrons Twilight continued more softly.

“We can’t keep ignoring the issue. Something needs to be decided and we need to talk it out.” She shot a look at Rainbow. “No matter how early it feels to some.”

“Very well dear.” Rarity finished her cup of tea and primly returned the cup to its saucer. “What do you propose we do about all this?”

“My choice hasn’t changed. I still think we should help the Princess. Not only do I feel it’s the right thing to do but there’s something else.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I wish I knew but whatever it is I felt it when the Princess was talking to us.” Twilight shrugged. “She just feels so genuine.”

“Be that as it may I think we’re all going to need to agree unanimously before anything is done. Agreed?” Each pony nodded their head.

“Good. Now that Twilight has cast her vote why don’t you go next Fluttershy.” The pegasus pony suddenly looked like she had been caught with her hoof in the cookie jar.

“Oh well, um whatever you think is okay. I guess.”

“Nuh uh, sugarcube. We all decide together.”

“Be more assertive. Remember?” Rainbow added, looking like she was finally waking up.

“Assertive. Right. It sounds way too dangerous. I mean just from what Twilight read, those other Elements haven’t been found for a good reason.”

“That’s right! Why should we-“

“Wait.” Fluttershy’s insistence made Rainbow’s mouth snap shut.

“I wasn’t finished. It sounds really dangerous but I think we should help.” The yellow pegasus smiled and sat up a little straighter. “Assertive.”

“B-but why would you...it doesn’t...Fluttershy?!” Rainbow’s eyes twitched a little.

“I just think she might get hurt if she goes alone and I could never forgive myself if I let her go off and do that.”

“You’re up next Rainbow Dash though I’m certain we already know how you feel,” Rarity said before nibbling on another cherry.

"It's a trick! I feel it just by how she looks. Any of you feel like helping bring back Nightmare Moon? She's after those things for a reason. A bad reason." She folded her forelegs over her chest and snorted. Twilight looked openly dismayed and sighed. Applejack spoke next.

"It don't sit right with me. Her asking for our help outta nowhere is a mite funny. But shoot, we was all acting impolite last night. If she's being honest I think we owe it to her to help."

"Owe it to her? Are you kidding? She's the one who owes us for saving her from..." The unspoken words hung above Rainbow Dash but she refused to say them. "It doesn't matter what she is it's what she could become. I mean, how do we know she isn't already into trouble?"

"All the more reason to help her."

"No way, Twilight. I know you have your magic tingly feely thing but I go my own gut feeling that says stay away." Apparently deciding courage is the better part of valor the waiter cautiously approached the table and cleared his throat.

"Can I bring you anything else? Some more tea or...miss, are you okay?" He was looking down at Pinkie who had arranged muffin and pastry crumbs into several rows and columns along with condiment bottles. She was moving the sections in turn back and forth and in wheeling moves while quietly muttering.

"If they bring up the tubas then I'll charge with the 34th Flute Brigade. Then I'll move my harps to the right flank to try and draw off some of those xylophones."

"Is she...um, miss? Excuse me. Can I help you with anything?" Pinkie diverted her attention long enough to answer the waiter.

"I never got to finish this really cool dream last night. I have to figure out how it ends."

"Just the check please," Twilight called to the retreating waiter while giving Pinkie a look. "What about you?"

"I'd be the biggest, judgmentallyist, um...I ran out of 'ists.' Everypony deserves another chance." They waited for more but the simplicity spoke for itself. That left Rarity. The white unicorn looked thoughtful for a moment.

"I can not ignore Rainbow Dash's arguments, however ill put they may be. Nor can I forget what we went through. I aslo can not forget all that the Princess has done since then; she is not what she was. What remains is how that event brought us all together. Without Princess Luna we may never have met." From the look on the other pony's faces only Applejack seemed to have considered that point.

"That is what we owe her, Dash: our friendship," continued Rarity. "Who can put a price on that? I say we accept."

"Well Dashie?" Pinkie asked having successfully brought the trombone rebellion to heel with the timely arrival of the Kazoo Corps.

"Fine but I'm telling you we're going to regret this." Rainbow put her chin in her hooves.

"It's settled then." Twilight pushed back from the table. "Everypony pack of a couple of bags and put your affairs in order. We don't know how long we'll be gone so we'll need to be prepared. Just before evening we'll meet outside the city like the Princess asked, but don't go together. I think it's best if we aren't asked too many questions. Okay?" Five heads nodded. A slip of white paper drifted down and landed on the table. The check.

"Um...who's got this?"

"Why is it every time something dreadful happens we have to go in there?" Rarity cast a look of displeasure in the direction the path they were following took them: the Everfree Forest.

"Will you stop whining already?" Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes. "We haven't even started."

"Whining? I wasn't whining, I was complaining," Rarity said imperiously. "Now if it's whining you want then-" Applejack wedged herself in between the pair and gave each of them a stern look.

“Simmer down now gals. This ain’t no way to start things off.” Fluttershy cringed as the argument continued and Twilight gave Luna an apologetic smile.

“Are they always like this?” the Princess asked.

“Sometimes we get in each other’s manes,” Twilight shrugged.

“It’s...not what I had expected from the Elements of Harmony.”

“We’re no different from any normal ponies,” Twilight explained.

“But you’re the Elements. You’re supposed to be, I don’t know...more. At least that’s what I imagined.”

“Friends don’t get along all the time.” Twilight’s smile was both sympathetic and knowing. “We argue, we disagree, and sometimes we even fight but it doesn’t mean we aren’t still friends. We forgive each other and talk through our differences. That’s how it works. That’s what makes us strong.”

As Luna watched Applejack, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash continue to verbally spar she noticed what the other three did not: Pinkie Pie slowly creeping up from behind so close to the ground that she seemed to almost be slithering. Silently she slipped in next to the trio, waited, and...

“Honk!” All arguments stopped when Dash and Rarity found their snouts being gently poked by a pink hoof. Applejack found herself nose-to-nose with the culprit, a huge grin on Pinkie’s face. They blinked once, twice, and then broke into fitful laughter, as all ill feelings forgotten. Not one to leave out a pony Pinkie recovered, crouched, and pounced on Fluttershy to tweak her nose too. The yellow pegasus squeaked and giggled along with the other four while Luna furrowed her brow.

“What just happened?” she asked Twilight.

“Pinkie Pie just happened. Sometimes a little bit of random laughter is all it takes.”

“I see, I think,” Luna responded. She seemed to be puzzling out the situation when a purple hoof surprised her by appearing on her nose.

“Honk,” Twilight chuckled.

"It seems I have much to learn from you." Luna could not help but smile and blush a little.

"And we have a long way yet to go." Twilight waved at her friends. "Saddle up girls. Let's get moving!" With spirits buoyed the ponies fairly leapt to their hooves and arrayed themselves to be led by Twilight and Luna. Moving at a quick trot the group moved from their meeting place on the outskirts of Ponyville to the tree line of the forest in short order. Though still of lighter hearts than before the shadows cast by the wild trees marked a sort of line of demarcation between the safe, civilized world and one full of danger and uncertainty. It was there they hesitated while memories of hydras, cockatrices, and manticore filled their minds. Luna looked down at Twilight impatiently. She nodded.

"Just one small step at a time," Twilight agreed. She lifted a hoof to step over the shadowy boundary when she was nearly bowled over by a blur of pink.

"How about a giant leap instead?" Pinkie Pie shouted as she bounced into the forest. That broke the shell of doubt and worry.

"Yee ha!" Applejack reared up and plunged in after Pinkie.

"Hey Rarity!" Rainbow Dash called back, hovering just inside the shadows. "What are waiting for? The way your mane looks today it'll scare off anything we come across."

"What?" The white unicorn's mouth dropped open. "That can't be right. I spent an extra hour..." She frantically began to inspect herself before the realization dawned on her. Rarity snorted.

"Oh. It. Is. On!" She dashed in after her friend who had barrel-rolled in, laughing the whole way.

"Hey, wait for me. Girls! Not so fast." Fluttershy pleaded as she followed Rarity. Only Twilight and Luna remained as the princess looked on with an expression of wonderment.

"Amazing."

"I'm sorry. What was that, Princess?"

"I said we should catch up."

“Right.” Together they galloped after the other five into the Everfree Forest. Once they caught up to them the energy level settled down and they set an easy pace. They had not walked for even a mile before the forest began to seem to move in, crowding the dirt path. Overhead the canopy grew thicker and fewer rays of the evening light were making it to the ground below. Strange plants cast dim glows in the shadows and faint animal noises could be heard off in the distance.

“Why do some of the plants glow like that?” Applejack asked. Twilight opened her mouth but it was Luna who answered.

“Bioluminescence.”

“Biowhoisutwhat now? Mind explaining a tad more?” Luna nodded for Twilight to answer.

“Bioluminescence is a natural form of light given off by certain plants and animals. Chemicals inside them make them glow. Princess, did you study biology too?”

“I suppose you could say that,” Luna chuckled. “The way the patterns came out on the cave caterpillars are nice but they weren’t what I was going for.” Fluttershy perked up at the mention of the fuzzy little insects.

“I always thought they had the prettiest colors right before they come out of their cocoons. And their wings are just so soft.”

“Too many pinks in my opinion,” Luna said. “I had hoped for more blues and purples but the evenshade lichens they like to live around made up for that shortcoming. The way they gradually change color was really an accident but a little good luck goes a long way.”

“I think I remember reading about those in - wait a minute.” Twilight gave the alicorn a bewildered look. “What do you mean you had hoped they would come out different?”

“Oh.” Luna looked genuinely surprised. “We all have our talents and interests and one of mine is that I like to paint. I just use a different type of brush and my canvas is somewhat...unique.” One by one the others reached the same conclusion that was playing across Twilight’s face.

“Y-you made them?” she stammered.

“Not exactly but the night sky isn’t the only thing I enjoy tinkering with. The whole story is a very, very lone one.”

“We have time,” she blurted out.

“Not that much time, trust me. Besides I doubt Celestia would want me giving away all of our family secrets.” Try as they might none of the ponies could coax anymore stories or information from Luna so they settled into an easy quiet. It was well that they focused on watching their step as the path grew more and more cluttered with stones and roots. To try and break the silence Twilight would occasionally point out different plants and small animals they encountered and share what she knew about them. Luna looked impressed.

“My sister has bragged about the pace of your studies. Not to mention your abilities as a scholar. I’m beginning to see she wasn’t exaggerating.”

“That’s kind of you to say.” Twilight smiled politely. “I’ve always wanted to study a little bit of everything.”

“So much so that it took a royal decree to get you out of the libraries?” An amused look crossed the Princess’ face.

“Get her out? She lives in a dang library,” Applejack added. “Holes up in there sometimes when she ain’t feeling too social like too.”

“Yeah I guess I still do sometimes.” Twilight gave them a sheepish grin.

“Well it’s obvious you’re thoroughly studied biology. Ancient history too. Oh don’t give me that look; I’m tired of seeing that face. Everypony who even mentions the word ‘Nightmare’ or ‘Moon’ suddenly acts like I’m about to disintegrate them.” Several pairs of wide eyes looked up at her.

“C-can you d-do that?” Fluttershy squeaked.

“Er, well...yes but that’s not the point. The point is I’m not going to but ponies almost expect to act like that all the time.”

“Imagine that,” they heard Rainbow mutter.

“Never mind,” Luna snorted. “Tell me what else you have studied.” Twilight pursed her lips and thought.

“I never thought I’d have two Princesses interested in my studies.” She laughed nervously. “Magic has been my main focus ever since I learned its basics, but I would have say that my hobby subject is astronomy.”

“R-really? You like astronomy?” Luna faltered for a step as she spoke.

“Yeah.” Twilight shrugged. “I mean, who doesn’t like looking up at the stars or watching a meteor shower?”

“Remember that marvelous little picnic Spike assembled for that centennial shower?” Rarity asked. “It went perfectly with such a beautiful display.”

“And the Apple family orchard looks plum nice under a full moon.” Luna felt herself beginning to blush.

“I don’t think there’s anypony who doesn’t like a pretty night,” Fluttershy added.

“There’s more than you think,” Luna sighed.

“I’m sorry, what was that Princess?” Twilight asked.

“Oh nothing. Just a random thought or two. Have you found your studies to be useful?”

“How do you mean?”

“One who devotes so much time in pursuit of a goal should be getting something useful in return.” Luna cocked her head. “What has all that studying gotten you?”

“She figured out that ornery Ursa from those books. Said so herself.”

“And was had a positively fabulous sleepover, after the tree incident of course. I recall most of her ideas came from a book she was reading.”

“They brought her to Ponyville! If Twilight wasn’t such an eggy egghead she would have had friends in Canterlot and never met any of us,” Pinkie added while hoping up and down.

“And don’t forget Rainbow Dash’s sonic rainboom. One of Twilight’s spell books let you four come to Cloudsdale,” Fluttershy offered.

“I have one,” Rainbow said. “She found out about the Elements of Harmony. Her studies helped us beat you.” She punctuated her statement with a hoof pointed at Luna.

“Stop it Rainbow,” Applejack commanded. “I ain’t heard nothing but neighsaying outta you. Lay off it already.”

“It’s okay. You’re right,” Luna said to Rainbow Dash. “I know I thanked you all afterwards but I don’t think I explained myself.”

“We understood perfectly, Your Highness. You were recovering from quite the ordeal. Persaonly I’d like to know how you manage to keep your mane in such good condition.”

“Perhaps another time. Regardless, I want you all to know a few things.” They continued to walk as Luna gathered her thoughts. And her courage. As they did a breeze rustled the leaves of the canopy and sent a few dead, clinging leaves spiraling downward. Tracing lazy circles that occasionally swooped upwards the leaves almost seemed to be trying to return to the branches. Their dreams ultimately unfulfilled they alighted in the dirt and were trampled, unnoticed, under hoof.

“I’m grateful, truly grateful. If nothing else please remember that. I...I wasn’t myself but at the same time I was. When I turned to the Elements of Discord I thought I knew what I was doing; I thought I understood the dangers. What I didn’t expect was how good it felt. Finally, I had the power to make ponies everywhere respect me and my creations. I finally had my sister’s power.”

“Your sister’s power?” Twilight looked puzzled. “You mean you could raise the sun?” Luna shook her head.

“Raising the sun is Celestia’s purpose, among others, but her power was what I was after. I wanted to be just like her for so many centuries. Everypony loved her; she could do no wrong in their eyes. I had always

imagined that whatever power she had must have allowed her to be so loved. Never was I more wrong.

Contrary to what you may have read I did not immediately refuse to lower the moon. I can remember still thinking that all I had to do then was make the night as wonderful Celestia did the day." Her look grew thoughtful.

"You should have seen the sights I came up with that first night. The moon shone as brightly as the sun; the stars danced and moved in tune with the music of the twilight winds. I created a symphony of the night for all the ponies." The group was silent as Luna's face turned from thoughtful to distressed.

"They were afraid. Everything came so suddenly and was so different. They ran inside their homes and hid. None of them understood and in their fear they called for the day to come. That was..." The distress became an angry panic.

"Running, crying, eyes wide with fear. I remember it all. It was the same when I refused to lower the moon. I did lower it the first night after my transformation but I hid myself away; refused to see Celly or anypony else. The next night I decided that if they could not appreciate what I had done for them then I would make them understand. I believe you know the rest of the story."

"That's..." Twilight began after some time walking in silence. Others echoed her attempt to say something, anything that would convey their feelings. They could not and the quiet continued for some time. It was finally Rainbow Dash who changed the subject and asked the question that had been hanging in the air since they entered the forest.

"Hey Luna."

"Princess Luna," Rarity corrected.

"Whatever. Where exactly are these pieces of the Elements of Discord? We all kind of took it on faith that you knew where you were going."

"And we've been a'walking for hours now," Applejack noted.

"I'm sorry Princess but they have a point; you haven't even looked at the maps I brought. You just said that we were going into Everfree. I have almost enough to cover of all Equestria for you to use. So where exactly are the Elements?"

"Where are they? I have no idea." That brought the whole group to a screeching halt.

"What?!" they all said together.

"You heard what Twilight read the other night. Those Elements have been lost for a very long time. Before I gathered them together I don't think they had ever been in the same place at the same time except during their creation. After my banishment I felt them disperse and fade from my senses. Whether they were moved purposefully or somehow managed it another way is a mystery to me. I never claimed to know where to find them."

"Then how in the hay are you supposing we get'em?"

"You see? She tricked us! I'd bet my left wing she lured us out here with that story on purpose."

"But Rainbow she's not like that anymore."

"No Twilight, let her speak. Before you do, Rainbow Dash, I want you to consider something." Luna scowled. "If I wanted revenge, why would I be so foolish as to gather you all together? I could much more easily deal with you as individuals. Of all ponies I know how strong you are together."

"I don't know why. You're the evil mastermind, not me."

"I won't make you pay up on the bet you just lost. Just be sure to recall that only Nightmare Moon was vulnerable to the Elements you once carried with you. Against *just* me they are powerless." The forest seemed to grow even darker then and the ensuing silence thickened the air. The tension and anxiety was almost as tangible as the cold. Rainbow Dash still looked as though she were ready to charge Luna at the first sign of treachery. The alicorn remained perfectly still and held the pegasus' gaze. It was Fluttershy that broke the stalemate.

“Then if you don’t mind me asking where, um, are we going?” Luna seemed reluctant to take her eyes off Rainbow but did so before answering.

“I said that I didn’t know where the Elements of Discord could be found but I know somepony who might.”

“You mean it’s not just Zecora living out here? Oh the poor thing! If I were forced to live out my days in this...mausoleum, I would simply faint and never wake.”

“There are plenty of ways in here to never wake again, Rarity, and none of them involve fainting,” Luna warned.

“Well there’s a pleasant image,” Twilight laughed nervously. “So who is this pony?”

“Actually I don’t even know what they are; I always just assumed they were a pony. For all I know it could be a dragon.” A terrified squeak drew their attention to a shivering yellow pegasus that was now cowering between Applejack’s front hooves.

“Good job. Now you’ve gone and scared Fluttershy.” Rainbow had to cut off her next remark when Pinkie’s face, somehow suspended upside down, filled her vision.

“Come on Dashy; don’t be rude.” Letting go of the tree branch she was clinging to Pinkie hopped over to Fluttershy.

“Do I get to sing the song again?”

“A dragon’s not a ghost,” was Fluttershy’s response. Luna turned to Twilight.

“Um, what song?”

“Shh!” Twilight hissed. “She’ll hear-“

“When I was a little filly and...”

“Tell me she isn’t,” Luna pleaded. Pinkie would have had she not slipped on a patch of partially frozen mud halfway through the second

verse. As she was muttering something about her “Pinkie Sense” failing her Luna approached the quivering Fluttershy.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. I was just exaggerating. The place we’re going to is much too small for a dragon to live in so there’s no reason to be afraid.”

“A-are y-you sure?” A single eye peeked out from behind a pink mane. Luna offered a smile, perhaps the warmest she had given since meeting her traveling companions, and nodded.

“Yes I’m positive. And if there does happen to be something big or nasty in there I remember how you tamed that manticore. You’re a lot braver than you think.” She winked and Fluttershy picked her head up off the ground and returned a tiny smile.

“Sure ‘nuff, sugarcube. You turned that critter into a house cat. I’d feel safer with you hanging around.”

“Oh, really? You’d feel better? Well, then I guess its okay.” Possible desertion avoided the seven quietly rallied and continued on their trek albeit with Fluttershy safely in the middle and Rainbow and Luna on opposite ends. As they walked Twilight pulled a map from one of her saddlebags and levitated it as they walked.

“Here.” Luna indicated a spot on the scroll. “It’s a couple of days journey from Ponyville to the cave. It’s called Ruby Falls.”

“Rubies?” Rarity gushed.

“It’s not what you think. Supposedly there is a waterfall beneath the ground near the end of the cave. I recall hearing about natural quartz channels that cut through the layers and not only circulate the air but also reflect sun and moonlight down into the water. The light casts the falls in ruby light. That’s where she lives.”

“Where who lives?” Rarity asked.

“Virlym.”

“Dun, dun, DUN!” Everypony looked over at Pinkie who had assumed the same pose she used for her song about Zecora. “What? You have to have dramatic sound effects and all I brought is a kazoo.”

“Pardon me for saying so, Princess, but aren’t you a little under prepared for all this?” Twilight asked, ignoring Pinkie. “I understand your motive but it doesn’t seem like you have thought this all the way through.”

“On the contrary, I have given this much thought and study. My sources are much more detailed and accurate than the passage you read aloud. That was for the benefit of the rest of you.” The other ponies gathered around Luna, each listening intently. “While mostly accurate that book left a great deal of information out and made many incorrect assumptions.”

“How do you know that?” Rarity wondered aloud.

“Because I read the first edition, when it was originally published a little over a thousand years ago.” There came the sound of mouths hitting the ground just then.

“You’re tellin’ us that there book is that old?!” Applejack was still trying to wrap her head around the thought when Twilight waved a hoof at her.

“No, that edition is only a decade or two old. The previous editions were starting to decay so they printed the latest one to replace them. The Princess means she saw the very first of its kind printed.” She put a hoof to her chin. “I had no idea the original could be that ancient.”

“What sort of details did Twilight’s version leave out? Perhaps those omissions could help us.” Rarity offered.

“Not in finding where the Elements are now. Most of what was left out is...difficult to explain in laypony’s terms. Even then the scholars didn’t get it all right.” Luna took an involuntary step back when she suddenly found Rainbow Dash hovering a mere foot from her head.

“So what are you keeping from us? Who exactly is this Virlym, and how would they know where to find the Elements?” The questions hung in the air, and silence accompanied them. Luna did not answer.

“Princess?” Fluttershy took a hesitant step forward.

“There’s something you ain’t tellin’ us,” Applejack commented.

“Please.” Twilight’s look was pleading. “You can trust us; we’ve trusted you by coming along. The least you can do is return the favor.”

“I...” Luna looked around at the six ponies staring at her. She felt like the time Celestia had caught her rearranging the constellations. “I...I’m sorry. I haven’t been completely honest with all of you.” She cringed a little at the smug look Rainbow Dash shot her. The pegasus alighted on the ground and took her place with her friends. Luna noticed that none of the others wore the same look; only inquisitiveness was reflected in their eyes. That fact alone dispelled a bit of the shame that weighed on her shoulders. Her eyes flicked back to Rainbow and she thought of herself, only older, but just as suspicious of her sister. Celestia had repeatedly told her not to worry so much when Luna felt their subjects were shunning the night. She had not believed her sister’s insistence that there were many who loved the night just as much as the day. That suspicion had helped nurture the growing seeds of discontent within her. She would not let the same happen to these young mares if she could do differently.

“There’s more to the story. I believe that Virlym knows where the Elements of Discord are because she, he or whatever it really is, told me where to find them the first time. I know, I know I should have told you sooner. I was afraid.”

“Afraid?” Pinkie sat back on her haunches. “You don’t have to be afraid.”

“I suppose, but I was worried what you might think if you knew.”

“We would have found out eventually.” The pink pony scratched at her head. “Itchy mane. You’re scared of something.”

“I wanted...I’m not sure what I wanted, but I had no ill intentions. You have no idea how much I need to see this through. I just don’t think I can do it alone.”

“So how do you know this Virlym?” Rainbow asked. “You said it told you where to find the Elements.”

“Virlym knew somehow; it knew where to find them. It whispered the locations to me in my dreams. They were...nightmares, actually, filled with the Elements: deceit, cruelty, greed, fear, betrayal. I was so angry back then that I never questioned who Virlym was or how it knew me. Or even

how it could invade my dreams. The voice led me to this cave with an underground waterfall.”

“Ruby Falls,” Twilight offered.

“Yes. Virlym was there but remained in the shadows. It told me of the power of the Elements and how to acquire them. It also told me many other things.” From out of one of her saddlebags Luna levitated the small book she had packed. Carefully unwrapping it she held it aloft for all to see. “I kept notes of my nightmares and wrote down what Virlym told me. Later I studied what scholars thought they knew about the Elements. When I found them I realized they were wrong about a great many things. So for a time I studied each one, before using them on myself.” She gazed at the book with a look that was both forlorn and longing. “This book and what Virlym can tell me will, I hope, help me figure out how we can destroy them.”

“So what makes you think this Virlym fella is just gonna up and tell us all that?” Applejack’s sentiment was echoed by the others.

“Because Virlym only wanted one thing in return and I never did get around to that payment. I happened to be trapped in the moon at the time. You see, Virlym can’t leave the Everfree Forest; Celestia banished it here even before I learned of the Elements. It wants its freedom.”

“What in the-! So this thing’s old as dirt too? That don’t make no sense.”

“Like I said,” Luna continued. “I don’t know exactly what kind of creature Virlym might be. All I know is that it is very old and powerful. Only I or Celestia can grant it what it wants. We are in a good position to bargain.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” Twilight said.

“I agree,” added Rarity. “If Princess Celestia saw fit to banish this creature then she must have had good reason. It should most likely remain that way.”

“Really?” Luna’s question was more of a statement and Rarity realized just what she had implied.

“Oh, good heavens! I didn’t mean you, Your Highness. That was a special case.”

"I intend to determine if perhaps Virlym is a special case also. Supposedly it was sent here because it was trying to convince ponies that Celestia was a poor ruler. I recall reading something about unrest in a history book several months back. The point is individuals can change over time. Not once since I have returned have I had those nightmares. Something has changed. Besides, my sister never told of Virlym and professed to have never heard the name when I mentioned it to her. I would rather see for myself what she thought was so important as to hide the truth from me." Luna dug at the ground with a hoof. "We should get going."

"Not until you give us the whole story." Rainbow Dash planted herself firmly on the ground.

"Do you really want to be sitting in the middle of Everfree when night falls?" The looks of apprehension the six suddenly wore gave her their answer. "This place is beyond my sight. I can't see it the way I can the rest of Equestria. I promise I will explain everything later but we need to get moving. Come on." She started back down the trail. At first she walked alone but quickly the others accepted her promise of more information later and trotted after Luna. Rainbow was the last to follow.

"So how far is it to the cave?" Twilight asked once she caught up.

"We should reach it by dawn if we keep stops to a minimum. My memory is a little unclear but there should be a large enough break coming soon. We can post a watch and rest for a few hours."

"And how far were the Elements last time you found them?" Twilight's tone sounded hopeful.

"Much, much further away," was Luna's answer.

"Oh boy." Twilight rubbed her temples with a hoof. "This is going to be a long trip."

"Don't worry Twilight. We can play a game! I spy with a little Pinkie eye something that's..."

"Dirt," Rarity said sullenly.

“That’s right! Wow that’s like fifty times in a row. You’re all really good at this game.”

“Pinkie, there’s nothing but dirt and trees around here. The answer is always dirt and trees,” Twilight replied testily. It was difficult to tell by the amount of sunlight filtering down through the leaves and branches overhead, but the growing dimness hinted at the onset of night. The air temperature was dropping noticeably.

“Oh oh! There’s another one. I spy with my little Pinkie Pie eyes something that’s black. And kinda blue-ish. And a two bits of red.”

“Pinkie! That’s a terrible joke,” Fluttershy said. “All those poor little injured animals in those cruel jokes about blenders are...are, no joke!”

“Huh? Oh, no I was talking about him.” They all followed the pink pony’s gesturing hoof to a parting in the trees and saw the faint outline of something large in the shadows. A pair of crimson orbs blazed unblinking in the gloom as a purring growl shivered the foliage. No pony dared move or speak. Well, almost no pony. Pinkie Pie smiled, hopped up to the silhouette, and looked up at the orbs.

“Don’t worry girls. I’ll handle Mr. Scary McScaredypants.” She cleared her throat.

“Ha, ha, haaAHHH!” She was yanked back by her tail just as a thick paw covered in coarse black hair slammed down on the spot only recently vacated. Thick claws tore deep furrows in the cold dirt as they raked back.

“Run!” Luna shouted and barreled down the path at a full gallop. Trees and undergrowth exploded in a shower of kindling and earth. The forest trembled as the shadow bellowed and emerged onto the path behind the fleeing ponies. In the failing light the beast was mostly visible despite being wider than the trail itself.

“Oh no,” Luna gasped.

“What in tarnation is that thing?”

“A Lupus Major!” Twilight yelled, her breath coming in shallow, rapid plumes of steam. She was immediately concerned for them all: only Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and possibly the Princess were fit enough for a

prolonged sprint like this. She was certainly no athlete and felt certain at least Rarity and Fluttershy would tire just as quickly as she would. The Lupus howled a mournful cry that sent smaller creatures scurrying for cover. They all felt their blood ice over. Off beyond the trees more howls answered the call. They sounded weaker and further away but were no less terrifying. One, two, three...it sounded as if an entire pack had been alerted and was now converging on their position. In full flight now the ponies put their heads down and pushed forward as fast as their legs could move. None dared spare a glance behind. The ruckus the Lupus made as it charged after them, like that of a slaving mountain crashing through logs, was enough of an incentive to run faster. Luckily its size meant that the beast had to muscle its way down the trail. Every branch that reached out into the path had to be torn away and shoved aside. Smaller trees had to be knocked aside when a thicker trunk had to be dodged around. This kept it from reaching a full sprint. Headlong they plowed through reaching branches, gnarled roots, and jutting rocks that encroached upon the path and threatened at each step to snag a hoof. Even the forest seemed to be trying to deliver a panting meal to the ravenous monster. Faster and faster they pushed themselves, taking their bodies to the limits of their abilities. Luna, Rainbow, and Applejack hung back with the slower members of the group.

“Go!” Twilight shouted to them, the effort costing her a ragged breath. “You’re faster.”

“Ain’t nopony gettin’ left!”

“Rainbow! Fluttershy! Fly!” they heard Luna suddenly order. “Take Rarity.”

“No way!” Rainbow Dash yelled back. “I’m not leaving.”

“Do it!” Twilight snapped, the tone in her voice wiping the snarl from the blue pegasus’ face.

“I *pant* can’t,” Fluttershy cried.

“Yes you can,” came Applejack’s encouragement. Thankfully Pinkie was looking like she was having little trouble keeping up with the more athletic ponies. Rarity, however, was already faltering. Luna glanced back and locked eyes with Fluttershy.

“Go, help her,” she commanded in a far gentler voice than the situation might have demanded. With a reluctant nod from Rainbow and a less than mighty squeak from Fluttershy the two pegasi beat their wings, took hold of Rarity in their hooves, and smashed through the canopy into the bleak evening sky. At the same moment that the Lupus tracked its fleeing prey upwards Luna twisted and dug her hooves into the dirt. She skidded to a halt and brought herself about. Her eyes never left the monster even as the other ponies whipped past her and around a bend. The lope of the beast faltered just a hair. It could not seem to decide whether to leap after the escaping trio or gather itself to pounce on the pony that had stopped in the middle of the trail.

“Gotcha,” Luna muttered. A tight fierce grin spread across her lips. She dug deep down into a pool of substance that ebbed and flowed within her and without. Threads were drawn and woven together in a wordless spell that was formed from will alone. Dark energy danced across her horn and a glittering mist the size of a small boulder coalesced in the air above her. Pouring the strength of her desire to stop the Lupus, to live, even to....to what? Spare the lives of those that had fought against her? Those that even now put more trust in the intangible gut-feeling of Twilight Sparkle than in her own word? Yes. In spite of it all that was what she wanted right now. With a final grimace and glint in her eyes the power of the spell was released.

Something happened. As Luna felt the spell ignite and leave her control a queerness seemed to interpose itself. It was as if an invisible hand had jerked the spell from her grasp and twisted it up just before letting it loose. She felt the orderly, controlled forces quiver and warp. The mist ripped through the air leaving behind a wake of deep blue and green auras. Less than a second later it impacted against the Lupus’ chest and erupted into a flash of ethereal purple fire. It sounded as though a great set of bellows had been crushed by something heavy as the beast’s legs collapsed and its eyes rolled up into its head. It bounced, skidded, and rolled while taking several small trees with it but eventually caught in a V-wedge between two larger ones. The Lupus Major did not stir. Surprise and confusion almost rooted Luna to the spot but the nearing growls and snarls of other creatures pulled her away. With little time to consider what had just happened she wheeled around to dash after the others. She caught up with all six a mile or two down the path as she emerged from the forest into a wide clearing. The space had to easily be as large as the Grand Mall

outside the Canterlot Palace. Ringed on all sides by trees its distinguishing feature was a fast-flowing river that cut through the northern portion and disappeared back into Everfree.

Everpony was panting heavily, the combination of fear and exertion rapidly pulling exhaustion down on each of them. After a minute of catching her breath Luna spoke.

“Are you all okay?” A chorus of acknowledgments followed. Twilight was the first to ask.

“What happened back there?”

“A spell. It was supposed to be a simple forced repulsion, like being kicked in the gut.”

“What do mean *supposed*?” Twilight continued.

“I don’t know. Something went wrong and the spell triggered with much more power than I put into it myself. I don’t think the Lupus Major survived.”

“Y-you...you killed it?” Fluttershy squeaked.

“I think so, yes, but it was either it or us. It’s not what I intended but what’s done it done.”

“He might have just been hungry.” The yellow pegasus’ lower lip trembled. “Now he’s dead.”

“It was going to kill us.” Luna was openly surprised. “How can you waste tears on that monster?” Rainbow Dash put a wing protectively over Fluttershy who hid behind her bangs.

“Hey! Maybe you think its okay to kill but not us. If you can’t control yourself then me and you are about to more problems.” A series of howls cut through the argument and brought all the ponies back to their current predicament. “There’s another one?”

“Naw listen...there’s more than one over yonder. And from there too.”

“Those would be Lupus Minors; they always follow a Major around looking for scraps,” Twilight said.

“Well I don’t intend for anypony here to become dinner,” Luna growled.

“Nor do I wish to become a meal but I simply need more time to rest. My legs feel like I’ve just trotted through fire. Plus I’m sure I chipped all four hooves back there.”

“We don’t have that much time.” Twilight looked around the field. “Princess, can you and I combine our magic and maybe build a wall around us? If your last spell was more powerful than you intended we could use that to our advantage.”

“It might be possible but I had no control over what happened with the Lupus. Whatever I do could very well turn out the exact opposite from what we intended. I really don’t understand what’s going on here.” Another series of howls, these much closer and more forceful, echoed across the clearing. There seemed only one other option.

“Across the river; it might buy all of us enough time to escape.” Luna gestured to Applejack. “Quickly, the rope.” Applejack pulled a long length of rope from one of her saddlebags. “Secure yourselves on the line. Rainbow Dash and I will be the rear and lead anchors.”

“That water’s running awful fast for a swim. It ain’t gonna be bubble bath temperature neither.” Applejack eyed the waters with worry while she worked.

“That’s why I’ll be in the lead to help pull you across faster and the trailing anchor will keep everypony from drifting too much. Are you finished yet?”

“Done.” Although they all looked at the rope skeptically and at the cold waters the sounds of crashing trees and hungry howls overcame their reluctance. They gathered at the river’s edge and Luna and Rainbow hovered a few feet overhead.

“What are you mumbling about?” Rarity asked a distracted Twilight.

“Oh! Just calculating how long we can stay in water of this temperature before hypothermia sets in and we pass out.”

“Almost the optimistic one, I see.” Rarity’s comment seemed to confuse Pinkie.

“That wasn’t optimism. That sounded more like-“

“Jump!” Rainbow Dash’s cry and the sudden sight of a dozen slavering Lupus Minors emerging into the clearing was all the urging they needed. Taking a deep breath the five ponies leapt into the river. The water was so cold that the initial shock caused their leg muscles to seize up and cramp. That second of inaction allowed the swift current to grab hold of them and began dragging them downstream.

“Pull!” Luna shouted as she strained.

“I am!” Rainbow shouted back.

“The other way! Upstream. I’ll pull towards the shore. The rest of you keep your legs moving.” Legs pumped and hooves paddled while wings struggled against the strain. Skin numbed, muscles screamed, and breath fogged into crystalline mist but still they moved. The river continued to tug those in it downstream but the two in the air kept the rope taut. Very slowly the raft of ponies crept across the river towards the opposite bank. Lupus Minors scrambled and jostled amongst themselves as they reached the water’s edge. They snapped their teeth and growled as they watched a meal swim away but would not pursue into the river itself.

“Keep moving. Don’t stop,” Luna urged as she gritted her teeth. The rope was digging into her back and sides with each straining surge forward. She could feel the other ponies being pulled away despite Rainbow Dash’s efforts. The pegasus pony herself was tugging upstream to counter the current but for every foot gained two were gradually lost. A large wave splashed over Applejack’s head and she went under. A breathless second later and she resurfaced coughing up water.

“Hold on!” Twilight urged in a weak voice.

“I’m s-so c-cold,” Rarity stuttered with her teeth chattering.

“I can’t...feel,” Fluttershy sobbed. Applejack snorted water from her nostrils and swam harder despite the burning cold that brought a deadly numbness to her insides. In a halting voice Pinkie was singing a song

about cupcakes to herself, eyes shut tight, and she was certainly not smiling.

Back on the bank the Lupus Minors paced back and forth while watching the ponies with jaundiced eyes. There were eight in all, each with indigo fur and drooling jaws. Of them all one was slightly larger and stood in the center of the pack. With lashing tail held high he gnashed his teeth at any of those who drew too close to him. A tussle broke out between two of the smaller pack members and they rolled in the dirt. The pack leader took no notice of the snarls and bites they traded. His eyes remained fixed on the escaping prey and they continually flicked back to Rainbow Dash's dangling tail. A barking growl cleared the pacing Lupus from the shore and their leader tensed his muscles. With a howl that silenced even the squabbling pair he sprinted forward. Claws dug and tore into the ground as a pink tongue lolled around in a fog of steaming breath. He built up speed quickly as the smell of fear coming off the ponies drove him wild. Hunger and eagerness for the kill kicked his system into overdrive. Harder and faster he ran, eating up the distance between him and the shoreline. When he reached the water's edge the beast kicked off with his hind legs and sailed into the air.

The wicked howl caught Rainbow Dash's attention and for a second she stopped pulling to turn and look. She tried to scream but the air fled her lungs. Moments passed as heartbeats and the world slowed. Almost seemingly suspended in the air was the largest of the Lupus Minors. Its jaws were open wide. Spittle trailed from its gums. The yellowed eyes were aglow with savage hunger. Those eyes were locked on her and the prodigious leap was carrying the beast right to her. On instinct she twisted and kicked out with her legs. She was rewarded with a satisfying crunch beneath her hooves as they connected with the beast's chin. An arrogant smirk was starting to appear when the Lupus' jaws continued forward and clamped down on her tail.

The sharp pain that spread across her haunches was amplified when Rainbow Dash found her voice and screamed. A tuft of tail was torn from its roots as the Lupus drug Dash down into the river's embrace with him. The weight of the Lupus pulled them pull underwater with a terrific splash that sent a wave cresting over the other ponies. Luna felt her end of the rope abruptly jerk and bit back a cry. A trickled of blood slithered down her side where the course fibers bit into her.

“What are you doing Rainbow D-“ Her mouth dropped when she saw the other end and a flick of rainbow colors slide beneath the surface. Panic twisted her face into a grimace and she pulled even harder.

Beneath the surface, predator and prey trashed blindly. The Lupus reached out with claws but found nothing at first. Rainbow twisted and kicked for what she hoped was air. A stream of bubbles accompanied her gurgling yelp as one claw raked across a wing. It tore flesh and feathers and tinted the water pink but did not hold. A chorus of screams and yells accompanied the resurfacing of both Rainbow Dash and the Lupus. The monster released Rainbow’s tail but was paddling hard to reach the tangle of tethered meals. Other members of the pack were making mock charges to the water’s edge and yipping furiously. The current had other plans for the larger Lupus and quickly drug it past them and downstream into the forest.

“Help us!” one of them shouted to Luna. She pulled and tugged but the weight of an extra pony and the speed of the waters was too much. By herself she could not win.

I-I can’t,” she yelled.

Rainbow Dash cleared her head of water and spared only the briefest glance at her mangled tail. She gritted her teeth and kicked her legs in a frenzy. Her efforts succeeded in raising her wings out of the river. Droplets sprayed in all directions as the pegasus fanned her wings.

“Gah!” she cried as a sharp twinge brought her right wing back to her side. Even through the cold she could feel a throbbing heat.

“It’s no good,” she squealed. “M-my wing.”

“A spell,” Twilight sputtered. Luna bit her lower lip. After the unexpected results of her last spell she had not intended to try another. Who knew what might happen. The sight of the six ponies slowly freezing and being washed away broke her heart. They had placed their trust in her and followed her. Now their lives were in danger and she had a choice: attempt another spell or try to figure something else out and possibly endanger her life too? Yet she felt like they still did not trust her; one at least had made that clear. Might the others be harboring feelings they were expressing? Were their kind words simply a mask? The stakes of what she was after was worth so much more than a few lives. Wasn’t that true?

Besides, if she went down there would be no way to save any of them. Maybe she could cut them loose and find a way downstream to help.

No. She couldn't just abandon them. The conflict must have been apparent on her face because the others began to plea fervently.

"Please don't leave us!" Fluttershy cried.

"Help Princess!" Twilight called out.

Luna began to weave another spell together. She gathered her strength and power, funneling it through the pain of the rope and her fear for the others. Teleportation was usually a very simple feat for some unicorns, and almost no problem for an alicorn of her skills. The problem came when trying to teleport multiple objects, or ponies, that were not physically touching. She was sure this would sting more than a little bit but pain was fleeting; death was permanent. As she built the spell up to its climax the same queerness began to seep into the magic. She felt it and tried to filter it out of her spell but it was malignant and persistent. Then she heard another cry.

"Don't you let go!" Rainbow shouted. Luna's breath caught in her throat and the world seemed to shrink. The cries below and the howls of the Lupus' faded. No rope cut into her sides and the queer feeling that was starting to feel like it radiated from Everfree disappeared. Then the real world vanished and she found herself in an old nightmare.

Lightning ripped open the sky above and bathed the world in harsh yellow light. Luna saw her sister. Celestia stood with her head high and hooves solidly planted. Luna also saw herself but it was not as she was now. Staring across at her stoically regal sibling was Nightmare Moon. The arrogant poise, the obsidian armor, and those eyes; it was all there. Above them angry clouds boiled and traded webs of lightning. The world was dark save for those brief flashes and glimpses of the moon and stars through the rare break overhead. It was night in Equestria, she recalled. It had been for days. The pair stood atop the atrium of a castle already decimated by the signs of battle. Whole pieces of several walls were missing. Windows were shattered and the wind howled through numerous holes. It had been their palace, Luna remembered. The Castle of the Royal Pony Sisters it had

been called. Nightmare Moon sneered and stomped a hoof as thunder echoed her movement.

“Your persistence is most aggravating. It has been three days and still my night reigns. Give up the fight Celestia. You have lost.” Nightmare’s voice dripped with hatred but Celestia’s, while firm, still held a gentle touch.

“What would you have of me if I did as you asked? I can not allow you to continue like this. Surely you don’t believe we could coexist.” The dark mare uttered a mirthless chuckle and her sneer became a cruel smile.

“You have the right of it, dear sister,” she mocked. “If you surrendered to me I would spare you life. You would be imprisoned but allowed some visitation and treated well enough. In time you might even come to understand your follies. That is my offer.” Nightmare Moon’s tone chilled. “It is the last time I will offer it to you.”

“Such generosity from one who would destroy everything.”

“All that has befallen Equestria has been because of your selfish pride. It is past time our subjects to revere me as they have you. They have loved you and your sun for too long. Now is my time I bring them the glorious night. It is you who have brought destruction.”

“Without the sun there will be everlasting winter and no food. How will they survive?”

“There are ways.” Nightmare waved a hoof dismissively. “I am prepared to accept certain levels of survival. The question is will you accept them as well or risk losing everything?” Luna continued to watch as her stomach turned. She remembered how it felt to speak without really trying to form the words. They came almost of their own volition and sometimes she felt more an observer in her own body. Yet she knew they came from her own heart. It would have been a terrible feeling if she had not enjoyed it so much at the time. The cowering pony crowds and the look on Celestia’s face when she refused to lower the moon had been delicious. And the power! They all looked at her in a new light and it had been intoxicating. Now the sight and sound of it all over again filled her with shame, but there was something else too. Did she miss that feeling? Even just a little? Was it so wrong to want to be respected, even feared?

"I don't believe you," she heard Celestia say. At that Nightmare threw back her head and cackled. Her starry mane whipped and billowed with energy.

"At last, sister, you show some wisdom." Dark power gathered around her horn and with a flash she vanished. Celestia gathered her own strength and wheeled around. Now facing the other direction she came face to face with a charging mare. The grounds shook and several more stone blocks fell from their perches as the two immortal beings collided. They were each frozen in a forward leaning stance with the tips of their horns almost touching. Wild magic burst from the mere inches of space in between. It was a bright star pitted against a black hole. The very air seemed to twist and warp around the embattled magic. Nightmare's lips curled back over her teeth and her eyes shown with green fire. Celestia remained as impassive as before. Her own eyes gleamed with the light of the spells.

"Can you feel it?" Nightmare Moon said through clenched teeth. "Your end is near. Magic is the source of our immortality and all magic can be broken." She bore down harder and with each word was rewarded with a step forward. "I. Will. Break you."

"Luna," Celestia whispered.

"Luna is gone. She gave herself to her desires. I am she now. We are one."

"I don't believe you." Celestia's stoic face softened. "I don't believe that my little sister is gone. Listen to me Luna. Come back to me. Come back to us all. I know you're still in there." She took another step back as Nightmare's wrath poured over her.

"Foal! This is what your little sister wanted. She was shunned and forgotten. How long did you ignore her concerns? How many times did you call her a silly filly for worrying? I wonder if you were ever listening. That weak thing cried herself to sleep so many nights it's a wonder she didn't realize the truth earlier. Now all of Equestria will bow to the moon. Bleat like a goat all you want, it makes no difference. The night will last forever!" The clouds roared with thunder and black lightning lanced down from the heavens to strike Celestia. Indigo snakes crawled down her back and exploded. White singed to black and Celestia cried out as her muscles twitched and spasmed. Her hind legs buckled and her concentration

faltered. It took only that instant and Nightmare shoved. Darkness burst against the light and flung Celestia back in an explosion of magic. She impacted against a tower and brought it crumbling down around her. Stones bounced off one another and dust gathered in the air. Luna watched as her sister rose from the settling rubble. Physically she looked no worse for wear but the pain inside was evident on her face. Nightmare slowly advanced.

“Say goodnight Celestia. It’s time to put you away.” Luna flinched at the words but her sister did not.

“Don’t do this. Don’t make me do this to you. Please Luna, not to you.” A soft ringing began to sing in the air.

“What, do you think your precious little gems can help you? Harmony is for the weak and the scared. There is no Luna! There is only Nightmare Moon!”

“Don’t let go!” Celestia had tears streaming down her face now. “Stay with me. Come back. Fight her! I love you.” Something below them started to shake the atrium’s roof and the tiles began to quiver. Iridescent light began to stream through cracks and holes in the roof. Nightmare was so focused on her goal that she did not seem to notice. Dark magic coalesced to form a shape in the air above her. When it solidified she swung the resulting form down to point at Celestia. It was a blade of pure midnight energy.

“It doesn’t have to end this way. You can still stop all this. Let me help you. You can bring the moon down and they will love you. Please don’t let go. Don’t let go of me, of us.” The light became brighter as Celestia’s crown began to glow with a myriad of colors.

“Enough! This is your fault. All of it. Everything that has happened to me, everything wrong with her, is because of you. We hate you!” The dark sword plunged towards Celestia’s heart.

“NO!” Luna heard both herself and Celestia sister cry out. Every color the mind can imagine erupted from Celestia’s crown. The dark blade shattered and dissolved as it struck the light pouring from the crown. Multifaceted gems could be made out against the glare of the light and Luna saw the dark mare’s eyes grew wide and...afraid. Then the atrium’s

roof exploded, Nightmare Moon's cry mingled with Celestia's, and the world was washed away in a rainbow of color.

Luna's shrill cry swept over the forest and river. She loosed the energy that had been building when she had been engulfed by her vision. The uncontrolled wave washed over the Lupus Minors on the bank, driving them to the ground. Shrubs flattened and tree branches bent. Yet even as it left her body the queerness of Everfree twisted the magic. The force rebounded upon itself back towards the origin. Her body was suddenly assaulted by a rippling heat and Luna doubled over. With the air driven from her lungs she uttered a pained squeak before plummeting from the air. The shock of the icy water, along with the pummeling magic, fried her senses. As Luna's eyes rolled up and she lost consciousness beneath the water's surface she had one final thought.

I hope Celestia doesn't mind raising the moon again.

"Grab her," Twilight weakly shouted. She had seen Luna tense up after Rainbow Dash had tried to get back into the air. The cry and almost overwhelming pulse of magic seconds later came as a complete surprise. Now she paddled furiously to the spot the Princess had fallen. Applejack was besides her and together they managed to pull the mare's head above the water.

"Now what?" Applejack's question was almost lost to another wave. They were growing more frequent as the ponies were swept downstream and back into the forest proper. Darkness closed in around them but thankfully also removed the pack of Lupus from sight. Faster and faster the river flowed. The water became rougher and here and there rocks jutted above the surface. Too tired and half frozen the six did not even try to paddle to the shore rapidly moving past them. Instead they clung together and silently wept or murmured quiet encouragements. A sound began to grow as they neared a bend. No pony had even the strength to ask aloud what the noise was. Rounding the bend the silent question was answered. White frothing waters kicked and sprayed in all directions as the sound of rapids increased to a roar.

The sight of the tumbling waters and looming stones renewed a modicum of the vigor in the group. Churning their leaden legs they made

for the shore. A rock dashed the hopes of their first attempt. Luna almost slipped away during their second and it took three of them to retrieve her. By now the eddies and whirls of the river were tossing them about. Coordinated efforts were all but useless now as the ferocity of the rapids intensified. Thoughts of reaching the safety of the banks were replaced by the increasingly difficult task of keeping heads above the water. The friends uttered little cries each time they collided with a half-submerged rock or slipped under a trough of whitened water. Huddled together for marginal comfort and to help keep Luna from drowning they held each other. Their world shrank to include only the seven ponies and the all-encompassing cold. After an indeterminable amount of time a voice cracked.

“What...what’s t-that?” Groggily everypony lifted their heads at Twilight’s question. Up ahead there was an odd swirling of water that reached into the center of the river. It pulled water into a crook of rocks to one side with a gurgling sound. They had barely the time to consider anything before the swirling current plucked them from the rapids. A multitude of watery hands latched onto their legs and everypony suddenly found herself being pulled down.

Darkness closed in all around. The air vanished. Icy claws pulled downward, ever downward against rough stone as it swept past. A twist, a turn, and a tumble in the suffocating blackness. Lungs burned for air as instincts tried to overwhelm rational thought.

Take a breath. Just a quick gulp and it will all be okay. The tiny voice kept repeating itself as they were tugged deeper and deeper into the hole, and still the water rushed faster. Even the darkness seemed to be growing and deepening. Hooves scrabbled against worn stone and bodies bumped into each other. One found another and they held themselves close. Very soon they all felt each other close by and embraced one last time. The darkness closed in and the water felt like a warm summer’s breeze. A dim light filled their vision and slowly brightened. Then they were falling...falling. One final impact and their last dregs of air were driven from their lungs. The last sound they heard was a fading roar.