



Administration is Magic

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Table of Contents:

Chapter 1	Mornings	3
Chapter 2	Dueling	13
Chapter 3	Panic	19
Chapter 4	Arguments	27
Chapter 5	Hysterics	41
Chapter 6	Trouble	57
Chapter 7	Slumber Parties	78
Chapter 8	Morale	89
Chapter 9	Giggling	105
Chapter 10	Dragons	119
Chapter 11	Viziers	147
Chapter 12	Balance	180

Chapter 1

Mornings are Magic

It was a beautiful day in Equestria. Not just beautiful at the royal palace and Canterlot, not just in Ponyville so near to the capital, but all of Equestria enjoyed the same, exact gorgeous weather and gorgeous day. Order: complete and perfect. It had taken a lot of work initially, Celestia reflected, and a lot of fragile ecosystems had been put to the test, but after more than one thousand years of reigning as the supreme god of all ponykind, the thing had become an art.

With a small glimmer of joy in the depths of her heart, Celestia allowed herself a moment of pride for her efforts. Complacency is a danger, and one learns more from enemies than does one learn from friends and one's self, but from time to time the sun goddess felt she deserved a pat on the back from somebody who actually mattered. This was no small feat, where she was today, what with her many and varied opponents still poised to take her land and power at a moment's notice.

To the south, in desolated tropical wastelands, in areas dotted with volcanic activity and ripe with precious minerals, lived the dragons and their vile king, Nyarlathotep. An antediluvian creature more ancient than Celestia and indeed the very thought of ponies itself, Nyarlathotep was a cunning, cold-blooded monstrosity with a tongue sharper than his teeth and wit of equal match. The magic of the dragons was very old, and they depended upon it to survive – after all, as with Celestia's pegasi, it would be impossible to fly freely through the air without it, and she suspected they'd be lucky to control the fire in their lungs if some mystical power were not at work. Their magic was more firmly intertwined with their beings than with any of Equestria's other competitors, and she understood they were very good at it.

Meanwhile, in Equestria, her own sister had returned from exile, and had Celestia's ancient detractors seen how simply Luna was transformed from the notorious "Nightmare Moon" back into her old self, Celestia's careful political image may have been obliterated right then and there. Nyarlathotep had wasted no time in sending a polite letter of

congratulations across the borders, reminding her of how distraught she had been over her loss and reminiscing about all the condolences that had been lauded on her throne after the imprisonment. He had commiserated that such turns of fortune are quite common to an immortal who bides her time, and wondered if Celestia still remembered the gift the dragons had sent her.

The offerings that had survived the test of time she had passed on to Luna. There were not many left, but the opulent Faberge egg sent by the dragons was among them. The judgement Celestia had doomed Luna to was difficult to pass, and seeing the young girl around the castle again had returned all the internal struggle to the pit of Celestia's stomach. Luna was free now, but the damage done to the girl's mind would take unknowable time to repair; Luna was behind the times by a millennium in terms of fashion, social acceptances, legal precedents, and political landscapes. Furthermore, she had always been an emotionally frail girl to some extent, constantly pining for attention and hoping to get noticed for her shy and gloomy magics. Being so detached from her people now more than ever was proving to be a personal devastation for her.

This morning, however, was a time for peaceful reflection. Celestia strode into her room from her marble balcony. Across the regal violet carpet lay a marvelous oaken desk, which Celestia opened with unseen mystical force. From within she drew a book and lay it open atop the masterfully engraved piece of furniture, flipping to the last page, whereupon the words "Dear Celestia," were emblazoned in clumsy chicken-scratch. Celestia had been meaning to read Twilight's latest addition to her 'Treatise on Friendship,' as Celestia jokingly referred to it, and had implanted it in this diary for that purpose the previous evening. It read:

Dear Celestia,

Today I learned that, although friends are great, sometimes too much of a good thing can eventually become a frustrating thing. However, it's important to remember that the purpose of friends are to look after each other, and that although we may sometimes wish they wouldn't drive us up the wall all the time, you'll always want them near you in times of emergency, like when you have to put out a gigantic fire accidentally set by the mailman.

Sincerely,

Twilight Sparkle

This one baffled Celestia just a bit. Often, Twilight's letters came to Celestia without any real context or explanation, so it tended to come as a bit of a guessing game what may have spurred Twilight to write the things she did. Celestia looked forward to these letters as a kind of weekday funny papers, looking for the little jokes that might be read between the lines. This one was obvious enough at first. Clearly Twilight had gotten in some sort of fight with one of her friends, but what of the remaining portion about the mailman? Was it some sort of metaphor, or an inside joke? Perhaps a letter had been sent around town that was causing a conflagration of sorts.

She sighed and put the book away. It was charming to read about Twilight's simple social life sometimes, but there was an important emissary coming to visit Canterlot today, and before then Celestia wanted to visit Luna and see how she was doing. To that end, Celestia exited her room at a brisk trot, her steps light and graceful from centuries of practice. Down the halls she went, past the hustle and bustle of the castle's servants, who bowed their heads or curtsied politely as she swept by.

She reached the doorway to Luna's room and drew to a slow, having found the entrance darkened by a hulking figure. A massive war charger stood at attention before her, a muscular specimen drawing himself to a full height over a foot larger than Celestia. His fur was a solid black, save for a long white scar drawn across his profile and an image of a great shield upon his flank. His brow was furrowed in concentration as he stared into space at a point seven feet above Luna's personal manservant, Alfred, an aging but thoroughly understanding and reliable pony who was loitering patiently at the entryway.

"Oh, General Bucephalus!" Celestia announced.

The charger, minding notice of his goddess, took a deep but militant bow before her, dipping his head with considerable reverence. "My Lady Celestia," he replied.

Celestia angled her body shyly to the stallion and gazed at him through fluttering eyelashes. "I see you are protecting our Alfred from goblin incursions," she teased, "I trust the campaign is going well?"

Bucephalus shook his head, face remaining neutral. "No, mistress. I haven't spotted any goblins yet, and I'm sick of waiting on the damned things," he said, punctuating this with the stamp of a hoof and a proffered smile for comical emphasis, "But truth be told, I was actually planning on paying my respects to Lady Luna."

He jerked his head at Luna's quarters, shooting a brief but accusatory glare at the servant below him. "Apparently the court is excited about her, and I didn't want to be rude."

"Oh," Celestia replied. She glanced at Alfred, who was staring impassively at Bucephalus's upper thigh. "Well, I'm afraid Luna is spending some time in convalescence. Her ordeal has been a harrowing one, I assure you, but I'm certain she'll be more than happy to make your acquaintance in the near future."

Bucephalus drew himself to attention again and stood aside to allow Celestia to pass. The trouble with this horse was that he was a very direct individual, and at times the words 'soon' and 'eventually' had a way of sounding like 'right now' or 'as fast as I can possibly manage' to him. Celestia had once posed a competition, wherein she tied a magical knot and challenged her numerous suitors to untie it. She had said the knot represented her delicate heart, and whosoever could untangle it would be given due consideration for their romantic advances, but of course the whole thing was a trick to keep the colts entertained.

For years the puzzle went unsolved. Colt after colt found it impossible to determine the beginning from the end of the twine, and in reality there was no beginning or end because Celestia had simply turned the knot into one continuous strand. The knot's natural state was just a knot – there was no untying it because there was nothing to untie, and no magic expertise could surpass Celestia's own to alter the thing. However, one day Bucephalus decided he could do what none before him could, and requested the right to take the knot with him during one of his trips abroad.

Celestia granted him the request out of a sense of personal satisfaction. The knot trick had been keeping her suitors so busy that she was eager to support any tale of trial. However, on the very first day it was in his possession, Bucephalus placed the knot on a set of railroad tracks and ran it over with a train. He then set his men to work seeking out pieces of the

knot wherever they had been scattered, berating them by shouting phrases like, "Do you want to lose a piece of Princess Celestia's heart? What kind of idiot lets a piece of the sun goddess's heart get lost!"

Any pieces he found to still be tangled or knotted were placed on the tracks and run over again, until at last the entire thing was in mutilated shreds. When Bucephalus returned to Celestia's court, he placed the destroyed mess on a golden pillow and laid it at Celestia's hooves. He had brought in Equestria's finest musicians to play a fanfare in honor of the event, and on that day he held his head high and proud, and announced with the triumph of a hero, "Objective completed, mistress." A light breeze through an open window had sent his mane flapping in the wind with the perfect timing.

Naturally, she had refused to accept him as a romantic partner on the basis that Bucephalus had annihilated her fragile and delicate heart in the process of untangling it. She would have laughed, too – the very idea that a colt would so valiantly destroy her metaphorical heart in a single-minded effort to achieve a literal goal was a thing that sent the fillies into laughing fits around the castle for days – but with the knot destroyed Celestia was forced to once again deal with her suitors, including Bucephalus himself, the old fashioned way. The single act had spoken volumes about the colt's personality and ambitions to Celestia, and now here he was with who knew what in mind for a meeting with Luna.

"Actually," Celestia ventured, "I'm glad that you're here, Bruce." Celestia ruffled her wings coyly at the stallion. She felt it helped to add a touch of tenderness to the use of pet names. "You see, there's a diplomat here to visit from Kadath."

Bucephalus glowered at the name 'Kadath' as it passed Celestia's lips. His stance took on a guarded aura of duty.

"And, well, do you remember the last time we had an important diplomat," Celestia continued, "and Incitatus was there, and he wore those..."

Celestia turned her head and blushed, but then glanced back at the war horse with eyes large and innocent. Bucephalus snorted and tumbled out of his tenseness with a grin. "On his dangly bits," he finished, "Yes, I remember that. Quite the fashion statement."

"Yes," Celestia replied.

"Pretty bold," Bucephalus pressed.

"Mmhmm," Celestia placated.

"Really did bring out the color in his -"

"I was wondering," Celestia hurried, "If you might be a dear and see to it that he doesn't do something like that again? I'd ask a servant, but you know how Incitatus can be."

Celestia flipped a wing bashfully at the colt. "I think he'd be much more likely to respect a gentlecolt of your stature. After all, if you can protect us from goblins, then I'm sure you can just as easily protect us all from Incitatus."

"From his dangly bits," Bucephalus tried, smirking ear to ear at his goddess's apparent embarrassment to the subject.

The truth was that Celestia was at least ten times older than even the wildest of most people's grandmothers, and by this time in her life she'd seen and heard just about everything from as far as innuendo to flat out sexual assault. Celestia was not one to wallow in ephemeral pleasures, but some foreigners did think that an orgy was a brilliant attempt to welcome visitors from afar, after all, and Celestia could probably tell Bucephalus things that would turn even his weathered and darkened face the color of a strawberry. Still, though, men like Bucephalus rarely changed even after a hundred generations, and they expected such daintiness and desired to protect it. So for him and his pride, Celestia squeaked a delicate and flustered, "Please."

"I'll see to it, you majesty," Bucephalus submitted. The stallion offered a polite bow, then took his leave.

"Heavens, I thought he'd never go," mumbled Alfred as Bucephalus vanished from earshot, "He'd been waiting for about a half hour now."

"I doubt he had any rash plans," Celestia speculated.

"Of course not," Alfred replied, "but you do have such a way with him. Lady Luna gave fright after merely laying eyes on the brute."

Celestia waved a hoof dismissively. "Ah, yes, but you know, Bucephalus is not of a unique sort. Show him the carrot and not the stick, as they say. With a colt like that, you could beat him with the stick, but he'd snatch it away from you and strike you in return. Toss the carrot off a cliff, on the other hand, and you'll never see him again! Always looking for the payoff."

"A bit austere for a suitor, if I were permitted to say," said Alfred.

"Dear," Celestia confided, "I have been courted by far worse suitors than Bucephalus. Besides, his confidence, however overwhelming, is good for the morale of our armed forces. Now if you would, please, I'd like to speak with my sister."

Alfred knocked at the door behind him with a hoof, then pushed it open and stepped inside. A few moments later he returned. "Lady Luna is ready to see you now, Lady Celestia," he reported.

Celestia thanked Alfred and entered Luna's room. Surrounded by beautiful portraits, lavish rugs, and one glimmering Faberge egg the size of a pony's head, stood Luna, her mauve hackles on end and her eyes sunken with fatigue. "Is he gone?" Luna asked from her sorry state.

"Who? Bucephalus? Yes, he's gone," Celestia assured.

Luna bounded to her sister's side and peaked beneath Celestia's wing at the doorway. "Oh, thank heavens!" She exclaimed, "I heard someone talking to Alfred about me, and when I looked out the door to see who it was, I saw a massive black stallion with a horrible scar on his face, and... and..."

Luna lowered her voice to a shouting whisper as Celestia craned her neck down to Luna's level. "And he was completely *naked*!" Luna cried.

Celestia snorted as she resisted a laugh. "*Really?*" she said in mock surprise. "Exactly how naked are we talking, here?"

Luna looked her sister in the eyes. "Celestia, it isn't funny!" She protested.

"But Luna! Most ponies spend most of the day naked, excluding a few ribbons and bows here and there. It's not exactly uncommon!"

Luna paced away, sulking. "Yes, but not around the castle! All the servants wear clothes! Alfred wears a butler saddle, and all the maids wear maid saddles!"

"You're being ridiculous, Luna!" Celestia chided. She struck a pose and spread her wings for the purpose of examination. "You and I wear scantily more than anyone else. You know how uncomfortable our regal garments used to be. These days, most ponies are perfectly happy with a more casual look, even around the castle."

Luna glared at Celestia, defiance still there but melting before logic and social progression. "Well you should make a law," she said. "Besides, he really was scary. I thought he was an executioner or something!"

Celestia frowned. Before Luna had been banished, there had been a great number of ponies calling for her beheading. The things Luna had done as Nightmare Moon were unspeakable. Celestia had done her best to burn the historical records and to force everything into obscure legend. Without that effort, even one thousand years later Equestria's ponies would still be living in mortal fear of Luna's return; an unhinged goddess was not a thing easily forgotten or forgiven.

"Don't speak like that," Celestia said, her voice softened by the sobering memory. "Nobody is going to execute you."

Luna appeared troubled. She looked frustrated, tired, and stressed. As the two fillies gazed at one other, Celestia couldn't help but feel there was an immense gulf between them. Luna's castle was in ruins, virtually nobody in Equestria knew who she was or recognized her divinity, and the poor girl was entirely without cause or confidence. For a millennium, ponies had simply allowed night to occur naturally and without guidance. There were no orchestrations of the stars and was no careful angling of the moon for certain holidays. The idea that the world even needed a Luna had been utterly lost to time.

"Have you been making any friends?" Celestia asked.

Luna nodded her head. "I'm friends with Alfred!" She said.

"I mean anyone closer to your... age?" Celestia tried again, "Or maybe a filly?"

It was difficult to place exactly who Luna should be friends with. Celestia still wasn't sure if Luna could be considered an adult, and she did not know how much Luna remembered about being Nightmare Moon or anything of the passing years she had spent imprisoned.

"Well I've been trying to stay up longer in the mornings so I can meet ponies," Luna began to fret, "but ponies are grumpy in the mornings and I don't want to upset anyone!"

It was an honest difficulty for any goddess of the night, especially if her potential playmates should really be in bed while she was awake.

"It's ok," Celestia soothed, "I just want you to try to make one friend. That's all. Can you do that for me, please?"

"I don't think they'll like me," Luna protested, dancing in place awkwardly beneath Celestia's concern. She evaded eye contact to the best of her ability, but it was hard to make believable excuses by staring at her own hooves.

"Luna," Celestia said, stepping forwards to nuzzle the poor filly, "Ponies have been looking up at the moon for centuries in awe. They write poetry about the moon, and in a way about our little Luna! I'm sure anyone would be excited to meet you!"

A dark fog rolled over Luna's face. "It's not even about the moon," Luna grumbled, "The moon's just a stupid rock. They write poetry about the sunlight reflecting off the moon."

Celestia exhaled a deep and sorrowful sigh. "Luna," she said, "If you make even one friend, I'm sure things will turn out alright. If you make friends with one pony, then that pony can introduce you to her friends, and they'll introduce you to other ponies as well. Just promise me you'll make one friend!"

"Ok," Luna agreed passively. "I'll try."

With that, the two sisters said their farewells for the day. Luna settled down to bed, and Celestia left for her courtroom. It was the eternal problem with their relationship, and the reason why Luna's suffering had slipped under Celestia's notice when it spiraled into jealousy and madness centuries ago.

Ever since Luna's rampage and the cries for the death of the throne in the streets, Celestia had been wondering how it all happened. How did everything fall apart for Luna the way it did? Celestia had her various theories, but above all else, she felt that the most important thing was finding happiness for her sister now. That, she suspected, must have somehow been one of the catalytic contributors to everything.

Chapter 2

Dueling is Magic

Celestia proceeded to the massive double doors of her courtroom. Waiting for her was a brown unicorn pony of frilly attire. He had styled a curt, pointed beard and thin, curly mustache, which he felt was appropriate for a prime minster because it was what the ponies expected. At times, he was also known to rub his hooves together and plot menacingly, but this only in public where it would be talked about, and often the vile plotting was about what flavor of jam he would choose for lunch.

"My Lady Goddess Celestia!" the minster announced, kneeling. "How are we feeling today?"

Celestia hesitated a moment. "Thoughtful," she decided. "Perhaps even a bit pensive. But not too gloomy!"

The minister rose to his feet again. "Ah, a wonderful choice," he said solemnly. "One of my favorites, you know. Cynical introspection is a forte of any good prime minister. Give me just a moment."

The minister gazed into space and allowed his eyes to glaze over. He released a great breath and furrowed his brow. The corners of his mouth sagged into a grimace. "Life," he mumbled. "What is its meaning?"

Celestia appraised the performance critically, scowling at the colt's acting. "A little too depressing, Cecil. We're worried more about the future than we are about the futility of life in general," she suggested.

Cecil's face brightened a bit. "The future is always uncertain," he tried, growing into a more optimistic mindset, "But with Princess Celestia at the helm, I am sure we will forge into new domains and do quite well for ourselves."

"That will do," Celestia approved.

"Wonderful," Cecil said, squinting his eyes and stroking his beard with his hoof, "Shall I now announce your entrance to the court, my Lady?"

Celestia nodded, and Cecil swung the heavy doors wide open to the throne room. As he did so, light cascaded in from the stain glass windows in a brilliant, dazzling, divine display. Every pony in the room fell to their knees, and a hush descended over the entire procession.

Cecil strode to the middle of the room, back straight and head held high. "Today," he announced, "Princess Celestia's court feels thoughtful, and perhaps even a tad pensive. However, we are hopeful for the future and confident in the strength of our ruler! We are not gloomy or depressing!"

Cecil then stepped aside, leaving the entire carpet to Celestia's entrance. "And now," he continued, dropping to his knees with the others, "Our beloved sun goddess and eternal matriarch, Princess Celestia!"

In strutted Celestia, and at her will the sunlight streaming through the windows moved and reflected from the stained glass, dancing about the mare and following playfully in her wake. Behind her, her illustrious multicolored mane billowed on unseen winds. Her various gold adornments shone brightly about her person, radiating like an aura of holy splendor. She took her place before a bejeweled throne of gold and ivory, and, with most having seen this display at least one hundred times before in their lifetimes, the court rose to their feet and resumed their various murmurings and bustle.

Prime Minister Cecil trotted to his place to the left of Celestia, because as it was the old term for 'left' just happened to be 'sinister,' and there he sat, twirling his mustache while he thoughtfully reflected on the future. Raspberry or strawberry jam? Yes, a delicate question indeed. How to pit them against one another, and what of marmalade? One must always see far enough ahead to correct for troublesome interlopers.

Pony diplomats from various locations around Equestria lined up to the throne in order to make grievances, requests, or to offer gifts to their sun goddess. Those few on their first pilgrimage to the capital of Canterlot appeared nervous and awestruck, having obviously heard about Celestia's various miracles and facades, but not entirely prepared to see them in person. However, before they could begin the tiresome work of begging, pleading, and flattering, a winged horse cantered jovially past the lot of them.

He was wearing an oversized helmet, pilfered, it would seem, from Bucephalus's collection of earth horse armors. As he bounded by, he shook his head about so the the bright blue crista waggled from side to side. His hooves were painted a speckled scheme of blue, like a robin's egg, and on his back was draped a flamboyant, silken, white cape with bronze tassels tied at the end like a curtain. It was none other than Duke Incitatus, and thankfully with no impolite dangling decorations as far as Celestia could tell.

"Mistress!" He exclaimed, "Your fur is looking the most marvelous shade of alabaster this morning!"

Celestia smiled, faintly. "And yours is looking a delightful shade of basalt," she replied.

Incitatus stretched out his body and spread his wings so as to look himself up and down. His wobbling helmet slipped to the side of his face, where he caught it and knocked it haphazardly back into proper alignment. "Basalt?" he said, "Well, I suppose I'd be a bit more fetching if I had gorgeous hair like yours, madam, but I should think that my fashion sense more than makes up for things."

He leaned in towards Celestia and opened his mouth, then glanced at the line of ponies he had just ignored. Without a thought, he unfurled his right wing and obscured he and Celestia from their visions. Incitatus then looked Celestia in the eye and said, conspiratorially, "Do you think the entire color spectrum of your mane might not go so well with my gray color?"

Celestia giggled. "Lord Incitatus, please!" she cried, "I have business to attend to."

Incitatus withdrew his wing, but maintained a reverential eye with the mare. "Of course, mistress," he said, "But I simply did not want our adorable Lady to feel even the slightest verge of pensive."

Prime Minister Cecil, all but lost in his reverie of fruit preservatives, snapped from his contemplation in a start. He looked wild-eyed at the two, as he had only just caught the last sentence of the conversation. When Incitatus and Celestia noticed him, they were so occupied with his behavior that they did not betray any emotions of their own beyond perplexity. Cecil began to panic, waiting for a cue of any sorts to his next course of action.

"We are still feeling thoughtful today," Celestia supplied.

Cecil appeared to relax. "Of course," he said.

Only with the universe back in order did he also notice he had attracted the stares of the entire procession of ponies in line with his behavior. He coughed, dismissively, and then began rubbing his hooves together malevolently. "Yes," he muttered, "Good."

Celestia rolled her eyes, then returned her attentions to Incitatus.

"Mistress," Incitatus said, "I did want to talk to you about something."

Incitatus glanced over his shoulder at the hulking equine form of Bucephalus, who was chatting with a young female soldier at the other end of the room.

"This morning, as I was dressing for the day's events, Bucephalus burst into my quarters demanding to know what I would be wearing!"

Celestia nodded.

"Of course, knowing he was after the secrets to my fabulous fashion sense, and not wanting to arrive in public wearing the same thing as a common soldier, I refused to tell him. You understand?"

Incitatus prodded a hoof in Celestia's direction. She nodded again.

"So he says to me that if I will not be candid, I will dress like a soldier and be predictable. *Naturally*, I behave in a completely agreeable fashion and put on the plate armor, but he!"

Incitatus pointed to Bucephalus, who noticed. The black stallion began stalking towards the throne.

"He snatched the chest plate away from me, naturally just after I figure out the perfect ensemble to finish the look! He said I was making a mockery of the army, and he tried to take helmet away too, but I ran!"

Bucephalus drew to within easy hearing distance of Incitatus's complaint, then stopped to burn holes in the back of Incitatus's head with his gaze.

"I had to complete the painting of my hooves in hiding! Can you believe that, Princess Celestia? In hiding!"

Incitatus was becoming excited. He pranced in place, raising one hoof after the next to show Celestia each at a time, gathering the focus of the entire courtroom, which was now watching the performance with rapt attention. Cecil was happy – this was much more distracting than the fool he had made of himself just a few moments ago. Celestia just nodded.

"It is deplorable! Truly, something must be done!"

A pale breath of amusement passed over Celestia's face. "I suppose I have killed ponies for less," she muttered.

Incitatus stopped his charade for a moment and stared. A grin crept upon Bucephalus's face, who, if not always capable of recognizing a subtle threat, necessarily, was still perfectly happy to interpret one against Incitatus in this case.

"Um," Incitatus choked out, losing steam for the righteousness of his crusade.

He lowered his head and cleared his throat, then noticed everyone was staring at him. It was definitely time to end with a joke and leave Celestia be. That would be the smart thing to do. On the other hand, of course, he could also try to leave with his pride! That could only end in one of two ways, Incitatus reasoned. Good odds there.

"I was wondering if you might permit me to challenge Bucephalus to a duel?"

Bucephalus snorted, and the filly he had been flirting with tittered in the background. Celestia was completely awestruck. "A duel?" she asked.

Incitatus was a horse, and generally speaking a horse's large size made duels unfair to the much more common individual of pony size. However, Incitatus was by all means somewhat slender of a buck, and compared to Bucephalus he was practically put together with dry noodles.

"Of course!" Incitatus said, gaining confidence again. "I'd really like to... I'd really like to kick that smug work horse in the chops."

Incitatus kicked at the air as he said this, but the delivery of the words came out sounding flat, and the kick was halfhearted. Bucephalus's was aglow with smug self-assurance. Everyone in the courtroom knew how one sided the fight would be, including Celestia. The important thing, she thought, was to simply diffuse the situation without giving either colt ammunition against the other.

"You've already been placed on house arrest twice for dueling," she said to Incitatus. "I don't see any reason why I should promote such useless and mindless violence between two high ranking government officials."

Incitatus flashed an apologetic smile at his goddess, failing to notice as a servant scampered past him to the prime minister. He turned to look at Bucephalus, who held his head defiantly towards the other stallion. "I guess you lucked out this time!" Incitatus taunted, pressing his luck. "You – you scoundrel!"

The servant finished a hurried report to Cecil and the prime minister swiftly dismissed him. "Lady Celestia, our guest," he implored.

Celestia motioned for him to go, and Cecil jogged to the courtroom's double doors. He disappeared behind them, and a hush fell over the crowd. Incitatus, realizing he was no longer the center of attention, took this opportunity to slink back into the crowd. He tried to keep his helmet from rattling all over his head this time. Several minutes passed, and the crowd began to grow impatient. Ponies began to chat in low tones, a few making audible scoffs about the importance of being on time to a meeting with the sun goddess.

At last, Cecil returned. His trip to the center of the room lacked enthusiasm, and where he stood he was visibly shaken, his knees wobbling just in the slightest. "Presenting," he announced, "Viscount Hastur of Carcosa."

Chapter 3

Panic is Magic

The creature that entered Celestia's great hall most closely resembled a velociraptor. Its body was yellow, but had an unusual chemical sheen that gave it the appearance of illness. Its massive, leathery wings were tattered and sinewy, veins protruding from the skin in grotesque patterns. Worst of all, however, was the thing's disfigured crocodilian head and mask-like expression of absolute indifference.

The reptilian emissary plodded forward on two muscular, taloned hind legs in deliberate, purposeful movements, as if the inner workings of the creature's muscles and bones were not quite in tune with its own mind. Its eyes swiveled around the room independently of one another, casting looks at the various frightened and bewildered ponies one at a time, absorbing each and storing them away in its memory for later.

It clutched in its claws a plain leather-bound book, which the beast held to its chest. When it reached Celestia's throne, it swung its body low to the ground in a single jerking, aggressive movement. This elicited brief cries from a few of the worried observers, and Bucephalus stuttered in place as he fought the urge to confront the thing and its weird mannerisms. It remained there for a few seconds, then dropped the book unceremoniously on the dais of Celestia's throne. Just as abruptly as it had assumed its position, the creature rose and retreated backwards several steps in a manner that implied the book had a lit fuse and was about to explode.

Celestia stared, mouth agape, at the lizard now standing awkwardly before all of Equestria's most important political personalities. She had met dragons before on numerous occasions, as it was not unusual for them to stray into the borders of Equestria. They tended to like the temperate and predictable climate, the clear rivers, and above all else the limited dragon populations. However, the inner reaches of Azathoth, the sovereign nation of the dragons, was yet untraversed territory to Celestia and many ponies. There, the sentient creatures were bitter, powerful, and competitive, and would gobble up anything that wandered into their domain. There were no maps of the land, and many beasts from the region were completely

uncatalogued. This, which she assumed was some rare species of dragon, was one of such unfamiliarities.

The creature, sensing that its offering alone did not seem to be enough, bowed again to the ground with the same jerking and unpleasant manner. "Nyarlathotep sends his regards," it said.

Its voice had the quality of sand paper, as if more suited to guttural languages, and it possessed a peculiar but unplaced accent. "I have presented a gift," the thing hissed, "It is poetry from the great one. The subject is of arcane knowledge."

Prime Minister Cecil lifted the book from the ground with magical forces. "Shall I place it with the other gifts, Princess?" he asked.

"Please," Celestia confirmed, her eyes not leaving the tattered yellow figure.

"I was not aware that dragons wrote poetry," Incitatus quipped from the crowd. "I know some are quite emotional, but some breeds are basically just like clever insects, with no desires beyond eating and reproduction."

The lizard blinked one eye, then the next out of unison. "Poetry is easy to remember," garbled the thing, simply. It had been holding the same position low to the ground without fault for at least a minute now. "Do you not wish to inspect the gift?"

Celestia did her best to smile sweetly. "I have numerous gifts still to receive and inspect. If we are to be done before the late afternoon with official business, then I'll have to examine them all later."

"This is good," said the creature with a dissolving trace of accent, "Then now, the great one has demands."

In that one couplet, Celestia found herself astonished to hear the being's speech melt into a perfect resemblance of Canterlot's usual phonemes. It was as if the creature had just been feigning its dialect all along and had suddenly resumed the comfortable verbal nuances of its birth land. It was not often that Celestia found herself off-footed, but this diplomat was not at all what she expected. From dragons, she anticipated a great deal of pride and personal honor. They were jealous things, and they conducted

themselves with the utmost focus on posterity, which made them quite easy to flatter and beguile at times. This, however – she didn't even know what this was.

The nerve, too, of presuming to make demands of Celestia in her own court after such a display. Surely Nyarlathotep knew better than this! The important thing at this moment, Celestia decided, was to remain in control of the situation. She was not sure how to deal with this creature, but she could still certainly run her own court, and if nothing less she could buy herself time to regain composure. Among all things, she desired to make her job look easy, and such would not be the case if she found herself stumbling over a confusing foreign representative.

"I'm sorry," Celestia said, gesturing to the line of wide-eyed, gift-bearing ponies in front of her throne, "But in my court it is customary for diplomats to wait patiently until I have addressed them directly. If you would kindly find a place behind them, I will listen to your requests in turn."

The lizard rose again to a standing position and, without a word, stalked its way to the back of the queue. It took its place behind a bright blue earth pony, who cringed and whimpered a bit about her new neighbor. The court held its breath for a time, but finding no further distractions, all members eventually descended into low conversation about their offensive new guest. Celestia addressed the next pony in line, who happened to be a lobbyist pushing for Celestia to legally mandate the growth and subsidization of apples and apple farms throughout all of Equestria. It was a perfectly good idea, he had insisted, and there were already orchards being grown in the badlands with no problem, so there wasn't any need for the energy-efficient crops naysayers believed thrived more easily. Just think of all the horsepower that will be saved by not transporting apples across long distances!

From the back of the line, the dragon peeked its head out over the crowds and ogled the ponies. Its eyes wobbled around wildly, the thing trying to see and hear everything at once. After a while of this, some ponies began to poke fun at the dragon. It looked like a big, stupid chicken, staring in confusion at something it was trying desperately to understand. That it walked on two legs like a chicken was no help to its image. A few ponies speculated that its wings were probably useless, and in fact maybe it wasn't a diplomat from Azathoth at all. Maybe it was just the real diplomat's

lost farm animal running amok about the capital while the real Viscount Hastur found himself detained by an accident somewhere. Then somebody asked what a dragon who ate creatures like this one must look like, assuming one were to arrive, and suddenly it wasn't funny anymore. Another rather clever pony noted that, based on the defensive spines protruding from this diplomat's body, there probably were things in Azathoth that would devour something the size of Hastur whole, and then it was even less funny.

No other ponies dared to stand in line behind the sickly looking monstrosity, and so the day dragged along from diplomat to diplomat, each presenting Celestia a difficult choice between satisfying the people or running the country effectively, until at last all that remained was Hastur himself. When his turn finally came, he approached with none of the awkward or unusual movements he had displayed on his arrival. He bowed, politely, at a proper pace, as if he had been rigorously practicing the etiquette for hours.

Celestia pursed her lips. She didn't know what to make of this swift and complete change in her guest. It seemed recalcitrant in some ways, like Hastur had been mocking her all along to see how much he might get away with. She supposed the dragon could have simply figured out how to perform this gesture respectfully just by watching, but by the relative smoothness on this event compared to the last, it implied that Hastur was certainly a bit smarter than a lost farm animal.

"Lady Celestia," it said in perfect Equestrian, though its voice was still low and raspy.

Celestia tipped her head towards the beast, motioning for him to continue.

Hastur rose again, polite not to engage direct eye contact as he did so. "I am Lord Viscount Hastur of Carcosa, representative of our capital of Azathoth, Kadath, and of my master, King Nyarlathotep. I come requesting the audience of the Sun Goddess."

In front of everyone, Celestia felt it was not in her best interest to express incredulity or even surprise at this total transformation in behavior. To maintain the illusion of absolute knowledge, that was the key. "You have my attentions, Lord Hastur," she replied, as if she were speaking to one no different than the mundane aristocrats that came before him.

As one strange quirk he seemed to maintain, Hastur appeared to have a habit of standing perfectly still while he spoke, and he stared off in the distance as he did so, like he was thinking about something else entirely. "A foolish upstart, Duke Nodens of Sarkomand, has made himself an enemy to the rule of Nyarlathotep, and therefore the whole of Azathoth," he said.

It didn't help things much for Celestia that she had no idea where Carcosa, Sarkomand, or even the dragon's capital of Kadath was in relation to Equestria. Still, she waited patiently to hear the rest.

"Nodens is very powerful and knows much in the way of magics." Hastur rasped, "Though weaker than Lord Nyarlathotep, our king cannot be in all places at once, and many of our kin fear Nodens' allies. Hence, we seek the aid of Equestria, which does not know Nodens' allies and thus does not dread them so."

"You want us to go to war?" Celestia demanded, aghast. This day was becoming a thorough outrage.

"If Lady Celestia pleases it, we will be most appreciative," said Hastur. His tone matched his placid and inflexible expression. "But we only hope for what assistance you can provide. Your pegassi that control the weather would be a valuable asset to us, and we are sure that knowing we can call on your land to raise or lower the sun at will might surely be desirable. We also know your magics are different from ours, and we seek to exchange knowledge."

All else seemed of little profit to Equestria, but Celestia hesitated at the offer of information. Though they had nothing to gain from fighting a battle they had no stakes in, countless scholars and adventurous young ponies had begged for sanctioned forays into the country of Azathoth. The siren call of a new land was powerful, as were the rumors that the area was hopelessly rich in precious gemstones. Still, though, there seemed to be a catch. Unless there were one, the only motive Nyarlathotep had for believing Equestria would help him was arrogance.

"Why does Nyarlathotep think we should partake in his conflict?" Celestia asked. It was best to get this part over with, she thought.

"Because," Hastur replied, "If we are driven from Kadath, we will be forced to move northward, into Equestrian territory."

Ah, and there it was, Celestia resigned. Do what we want or we'll invade you. She hadn't been disappointed after all. Even if this Hastur was a bit strange, dragons are still jealous, prideful creatures prone to underestimating anything smaller than them. She looked at her general, who was observing this meeting with apprehension. She could tell from the pleading look in Bucephalus's eyes that he was eager to step in and take control. No doubt he had thoughts about taking Equestria to war, but what thoughts they were Celestia wasn't certain. She was sure, however, that their standing army would not be sufficient to combat anything as large and as magically formidable as organized dragons.

"We know that there are few precious minerals in Equestria, but our kin will need to eat," Hastur said. "Even if Nyarlathotep ceases to rule and his parliament falls to ruin, his subjects will still be starving and driven by hunger. Our most fortunate scenario is that the great one maintains cohesion of the dragons if they are driven from the capital. Otherwise, there will be no accounting for the actions of individuals."

The court began to bustle as a wave of fear swept over Celestia's subjects. If dragons began making large scale incursions into Equestria, organized or not, then life as the ponies knew it was likely to collapse. It was bad enough when just one dragon moved in to a nearby mountain and kept to itself; the air pollution was a nuisance among other things, and often they played havoc on the nerves of the local wildlife, but the thought of a starving mating pair taking residence anywhere near a pony civilization was just too much to think about for those living near the southern border!

What started as a bustle drew to a crescendo as ponies raised their voices to talk over one another. Those diplomats from similar regions drew together and began to lament their fates. How would they protect their cities? What about crops and food? There was just no way anybody was going to be able to grow apples in an inhospitable environment with dragons flying around, setting everything on fire! Even Prime Minister Cecil had to admit that he was probably going to see a lot fewer jam varieties in the future if Dragons developed a habit of snatching them out of the sky in transit to Canterlot, and Cecil was still trying very hard to be thoughtful about the future without being too gloomy.

Celestia rose from her seat, and the excitement died down. "We will do our best," Celestia rang out, her person radiating confidence, "to see a swift and beneficial resolution to this conflict!"

A few ponies exchanged worried glances. Bucephalus forced himself not to rear up in the air and announce a call to arms right then and there. If there was to be war it would be on his terms, and there was much to talk about at this moment.

Celestia's voice fell to a normal speaking volume. "For now, Lord Hastur, I need to discuss this situation in detail with my advisers. We will provide you with lodgings, and I trust you are capable of keeping Lord Nyarlathotep updated."

Hastur gave no affirmation or even any indication that he was paying her his undivided attention. Rather, his eyes were on the swivel again, darting about the courtroom from pony to pony. Celestia was almost disgusted. However, she had never taken Nyarlathotep for a fool during any point in her reign, and was not about to dismiss Hastur's appearance as a sign of incompetence. It was a very old trick indeed to behave like an idiot to hide ulterior motives. A typical con might show up, acting like he didn't know his head from tail, and a pony would be sucked right into his game because they never guessed such a dimwit could secretly be stealing everything they owned. Politicians played this game all the time as well, and Celestia was certain there were cards here that she couldn't yet see.

Of course, Nyarlathotep was not the only royalty who was capable of hiding his intentions with an apparent blind of stupidity.

"Incitatus!" Celestia, summoned.

Incitatus came bounding to Celestia's throne, grinning and gazing out to the crowd to make sure everybody noticed he was being called forward during such an important crisis. He pulled his muzzle in close to Celestia's ear. "Mistress," he hissed, "I am flattered that you should call on me, but I really know next to nothing about warfare."

"Incitatus," Celestia whispered back, "I want you to take our guest and keep him entertained. Take him drinking. Learn whatever you can about him."

Incitatus seemed pleased to be asked to act in his element as an order. "As you wish, my goddess," he said.

He pecked Celestia on the cheek, then turned and trotted to Hastur, whose eyes were still spinning around the room. It gave him the look of a googly-eyed muppet to Incitatus. "Please, with me, Lord Hastur," Incitatus sang.

He led the dragon to the double doors and shoved them aside. "You know," Incitatus began, "I think it must be terrible to be a shade of yellow like yours. Not many colors go with yellow, but I'm sure we could think of something. How do you feel about purple?"

Still in the courtroom, Bucephalus, dumbfounded and mouth slightly ajar, wore the longest look on his face possible for a horse to make.

Chapter 4

Arguments are Magic

Celestia strolled through her private gardens, Bucephalus in tow and Cecil tagging along at her left, jogging to keep up with the long strides of the larger horses. Bucephalus was a storm cloud of indignation, the white scar on his black head like a lightning bolt of betrayed anger. He had said nothing since the moment Celestia had adjourned the court and asked him to come with her, and for the time being Celestia was enjoying the quiet. She often came here for peace and for opportunities of clear thinking, and typically the grounds would be closed to visitors while she took her walks. She was not about to spoil the sanctity of the moment by trying to argue with an irritable war horse.

The small group found their way to a pond in the center of the garden. Mallards paddled about lazily on the surface, occasionally dipping their heads under water to scuttle for food or to do whatever it is mallards do. Celestia found them adorable, and she looked forward to the seasons when the waterfowls would have ducklings to follow them around in lines. Bucephalus, personally, would have liked to believe they were trying to drown themselves, and he figured they'd succeed, too, if not thwarted by their malevolent buoyancy. Cecil attempted to reach out and pat one on the head, but it shrank beneath his hoof and nervously kicked its way to safety.

"Well, what do you think, Cecil?" Celestia asked.

Bucephalus glared at his princess. Cecil stared back at her for a second to make sure that he was the one definitely being addressed. "Oh, well, I think that the mood of thoughtful about the future and almost pensive turned out to be a very good mood today," he said.

Celestia gently laid her eyes upon Bucephalus. He had her most fluttering and indifferent of attentions.

"I think we have about a fifty percent likelihood of survival," he remarked.

She looked at him more directly now. "Really," she stated in disbelief. What on earth was he sulking about?

Bucephalus cocked an eyebrow at Celestia. He didn't like being second-guessed. "My goddess," he began.

Celestia turned her head from him. "My general," she interjected, "I'd be cautious about your tone. Historically speaking, wartime is when it is most likely that a high-ranking officer should lose his job."

Bucephalus sighed, then briefly ducked his head in a cordial manner. "My Lady Celestia," he continued, "Before an army commits itself to war, the general has to know two things: itself and its enemy. All I know is our own army! I can only plan half of any battle!"

Celestia glanced back to the war horse again. Her eyes informed him that he was on probation.

"I'd like to impose a draft," he said.

Celestia groaned. Bucephalus shook his head and stamped his hooves on the ground. "Aren't you taking this seriously?" he demanded. "One way or the other we're going to war!"

"I haven't made that decision yet," Celestia replied, calmly.

Bucephalus began to pace up and down the bank of the pond. He did this two or three times before stopping. "The fact is," he snarled.

He waited, took a breath, and began again, this time calmer. "The fact is," he said, "That the decision has been made for us. Even if we hold out hope for the best, we still need to prepare for the worst."

From the corner of her eye Celestia watched him. The tips of her mouth turned to a vague, modest smile. "General," she said serenely, "We have been presented with two options. The first of which is that we assist Nyarlathotep in a conflict we know nothing about. The second is that we defend ourselves from Nyarlathotep, who we also know almost nothing about."

"So you can see-" Bucephalus tried.

"I can see," Celestia went on, "That both of these options have been presented to us by Lord Hastur, and by extension Nyarlathotep. They're

naturally weighted so that the most preferable route is the one where we send him assistance. However," she waved her head haughtily about, "I haven't presented us with any options yet. I still need to draw my hand from the deck."

Bucephalus grunted. He didn't seem to know quite what he should say to this.

"I agree with Lady Celestia," Cecil piped, quite certain of his stance on things. He was just happy to be here. The prime minister's job is to help mediate conflicts.

Bucephalus thought something the temperature of liquid nitrogen about Cecil and his opinions at that moment. "Still," Bucephalus said, "I feel that it wasn't the best idea to send the dragon diplomat away with the duke. There are a lot of questions that need answering, and this will only put a hold on things!"

Celestia placed a hoof beneath her chin and gazed expectantly at the war horse. "Don't you think the diplomat is odd?" she asked, conversationally.

Bucephalus balked. "Yes!" he cried.

"I think he's odd," Cecil, added.

"Well what do you think he's here to do?" Celestia asked.

"I-" Bucephalus stuttered, "He's here to coerce us into joining a war!"

Celestia shook her head. "I'll be honest," she said, "I'm not entirely sure what is going on."

"Yes," breathed Cecil. He was completely on the same track as Celestia, here!

"I'll tell you a story," Celestia continued. "Only about a century ago there was a con pony on the loose who went by the nickname 'Marigold Foal.'"

Bucephalus sighed. "Is this going to be a long one, milady?" he asked.

"Only if you interrupt!" Celestia snapped, and then she began.

The Marigold Foal was a pony notorious for brilliant and sometimes elaborate schemes that often claimed millions from wealthy aristocrats. Celestia's people chased him for years without gaining any ground, typically due to the methods he used to make his living. He would leave his targets feeling foolish, and if not that, they were sucked into plots that were illegal and thus couldn't be taken to the proper authorities. As a result, even when Marigold struck somewhere and came away with outrageous sums of money, it would go unreported.

He would sell fake counterfeiting machines to otherwise honest ponies, would trick ponies into handing money over to him to bet on supposedly fixed races, or would even convince them to invest money into nonexistent businesses he claimed to have insider information on. On some occasions, he had the audacity to rent old banks or gambling lodges that had been shut down, and he would use them as a front to run scams. In these cases, ponies would deliver money right into his hooves, thinking they were dropping off their wealth at an honest establishment, only to find the entire place abandoned the next day.

One particular example stood out in Celestia's mind, when Marigold set up a trick with so many layers that nobody figured out what he had done until he himself revealed it. As it started, Marigold spent some time studying a retired tycoon by the name of Sprinkles. Sprinkles had settled down on his millions and was living off of interest and various royalties that were still paying dividends into his old age. However, having worked all his life to amass his fortune, Sprinkles found he was missing the excitement and stress of business dealing. He felt old and out of the game; everything was coming too naturally, and Sprinkles wanted a little excitement back in his life!

Enter Marigold, who had recently introduced himself and made friends with one of Sprinkles' butlers. Marigold, seemingly unaware that the butler was working for a pony of any monetary pull, remarked to his new friend that he knew of a beautiful mansion on sale for next to nothing, but Marigold wasn't sure where he might find a buyer with enough money to want the place. As low as the cost was, Marigold admitted, the down payment was still well beyond what the common working pony could afford, and Marigold only knew of the mansion because his uncle was one of the accountants involved in putting the place up for sale.

Marigold explained that the cheap price was a vengeance being perpetrated by his uncle. His employers treated him and all of his uncle's co-workers with disdain, and they worked them like slaves for very little pay. How fortunate for his uncle, then, to find the job of selling his employers' old property falling into his lap! Marigold's uncle thought he might be able to toss the property for a third of what it was worth, and then the buyer could turn around and resell everything at a more competitive rate. His uncle hoped he might get cut in on the profits from the new sale, and to this end the uncle had contacted Marigold to see if he would help out.

The butler, after being promised a small part of the money, agreed to set up a meeting with Sprinkles as soon as possible. Sprinkles, taken in by the story, agreed to meet Marigold, and soon he was caught on the hook. Marigold was a vivacious and congenial individual, Sprinkles believed, but fundamentally Marigold seemed to be an honest country colt. At last, Sprinkles agreed to help with the deal – his blood was running again with the hopeful joy of making fresh cash, discretion completely blinded by the fantasy of tomorrow.

Marigold introduced Sprinkles to his uncle, but also to another individual: a prize fighting pony that Marigold was managing. Marigold was a fight promoter, Marigold explained, and as long as they were taking a long trip he wanted to make sure his fighter stuck with him and got some good training. Sprinkles thought nothing of this, and the four colts took a train northward to meet with the businessponies and to make the crooked deal.

The arrangement was set to take place at a hotel room Marigold had purchased for the stay. Marigold's fighter was staying with them, so of course the businessponies saw him. One pony remarked that he, too, was sponsoring a fighter, and he began to critique Marigold's athlete. This touched a nerve with Marigold, and the two ponies had a heated disagreement right there in front of Sprinkles even as he prepared to hand over his money for the mansion. Eventually, the businesspony challenged Marigold's fighter to a match and placed a substantial bet on his own fighter. Marigold agreed, and afterward all the paperwork was signed.

Once the businessponies left, Marigold's uncle was furious with Marigold for throwing his money away like that. Marigold was not a bad trainer, but his fighter was on an amateur level, and the businesspony's fighter was a

professional athlete! Marigold felt awful about the whole thing, but then came to a decision. They were already about to con the businessponies once. Why not con them twice? Marigold would fix the fight! Of course, for that he'd need a little more cash.

He begged Sprinkles to loan him just enough scratch to bribe the professional fighter. At first Sprinkles was reluctant, but once they met the professional, they found him compliant and willing to take a dive. After this, Marigold was able to convince Sprinkles to throw his hat in the betting ring too. Why not get a good deal out of it? With a bit of prodding, Sprinkles contacted the businessponies and agreed to pay twenty percent more on the mansion if Marigold's fighter lost, and he'd pay twenty percent less if the fighter won.

When the ponies met for the event, Sprinkles brought everything. The paperwork, the money for the mansion, and the extra twenty-percent. Everything rode on the the businesspony's fighter taking a dive, but if that pulled through, Sprinkles, Marigold, and his uncle all stood to make a fantastic sum of money. The fight started off at a reasonable enough pace; the match looked believable, and indeed, Marigold's fighter revealed that he was by far the inferior opponent. At some point into the third round, however, a terrible mistake occurred. The professional fighter misjudged one of his kicks and delivered a bone-crushing blow with his hind legs to the face of Marigold's competitor.

Marigold's fighter collapsed to the floor without offering a hint of resistance, his body flopping ominously to the ground like a sack of manure. Blood began to pool around the fighter's head, where he lay unmoving. Marigold himself checked the colt, and announced that he was dead. The businessponies, with the horror of realization dawning on them, began to panic. They were very influential around town, and this entire fight was an illegal, unsanctioned event! It was unlikely they'd survive an arrest for this sort of thing, and it was quite possible, they cried, that they may well be tried for murder!

The businessponies gathered up everything and fled the place. Marigold and his group ran as well, and once back at the hotel, still in a fit, they agreed to part ways as swiftly as possible. Marigold had never been to the city and he had never met Sprinkles, and the uncle would go back to his usual work without a word. Sprinkles agreed, and the very next day rode a

train home without stopping to look back. Sprinkles had left all his money behind, he realized, but he was not about to return to beg for it. In any case, he didn't even know how to get into contact with the businessponies who had taken it, and he would rather lose his cash than his freedom.

The death of that fighter haunted Sprinkles for some years afterward, and he no longer craved excitement or sought to make another devious dollar. That had certainly been shaken out of him, and he passed away without ever knowing that Marigold's fighter had survived and was still quite healthy. The blood pooling at the floor had been fake, from a packet lodged in the pony's jaws before the round began. In fact, Marigold, the uncle, who was not actually Marigold's uncle at all, the professional fighter, and all the businessponies were also doing perfectly well. They had all been cons, it turned out, and they split Sprinkles' money up between the lot of them.

"It was almost like a theater performance, some of the things Marigold did to ponies," Celestia wrapped up. "In this case, he was a con pony playing as a con pony. The epitome of hiding in plain sight!"

Cecil was positively enraptured with this tale. His eyes were wide, eyebrows raised. "My word, Princess Celestia," he asked, "What happened next?"

"We caught him, eventually," Celestia replied. "A lot of ponies came forward in secret once Marigold was apprehended. They wanted us to have him put to death in the most gruesome of ways. No pony likes to be deceived and betrayed like that. For their benefits, I told them I'd see it done."

"Heavens," Cecil whispered.

Celestia bent low to Cecil's level. "Can you keep a secret?" she asked him.

Cecil nodded his head emphatically.

"I actually hired him on as a foreign negotiator," she mused. "Oh, he was a difficult one to keep reigns on. I never knew what he was planning, and there were one or two times he nearly slipped away from me. The trouble was that he was always thinking a step or two ahead, expecting what you expected, then using that as a smokescreen to do something else entirely."

"So what you're saying," Bucephalus grumped, "Is that our dragon diplomat is actually a diplomat just pretending to be a diplomat so he can use that as a smokescreen to conduct an entirely unforeseen kind of diplomacy?"

Celestia laughed a little at this. "I'm only saying," Celestia corrected, "That when considering manners of the state, if ever I am confronted with something that seems confusing to me, I merely assume that I have too little information. Hastur's strange behavior has piqued my interest because it was not what I expected, so before I make a decision I will be looking into things."

"I think that's rather clever of Our Lady," provided Cecil.

"Cecil, I swear to Celestia," Bucephalus said levelly, "that if you interject in this conversation one more time just to agree with Celestia, I will kick you so hard that you'll travel back in time. Dazed and confused and robbed of your memories by a concussion, you will meet your own mother and fall in love with her. Together, you will give birth to yourself, and then we will finally have a plausible explanation for what, exactly, is wrong with you!"

Cecil prepared a rebuttal and opened his mouth to deliver, but then a thought struck him. "Lady Celestia," he asked, thoughtfully. "Could Bucephalus actually do that? I only ask because in retrospect, my father does look an awful lot like me."

Celestia shrugged. She'd tried to make Bucephalus understand through reasoning. She could probably argue for hours, and in time he'd even agree with her on the surface, but he'd go on thinking his own plan was best and he'd be itching to see it through. It was a behavior that came naturally to a lot of ponies, not just Bucephalus alone, and one of the major hurdles of her position was to always make her subjects think she was on their side and working for them. If she proved him wrong he would just get frustrated and resent her for it.

"Well then, General," Celestia offered, "I'd like to hear what you intend to do about things."

Bucephalus seemed to lighten up a little. Finally he was getting an invitation to do his job. "For starters, I think we need to sit down and look at our southern holdings. Obviously, we're not worried about the folks up in

Stalliongrad at the moment, so we may want to reposition our military presence."

He sketched a few crosses and lines in the dirt with his hoof. "We need to look at which places have a large number of open supply lines and which don't, and we need to concentrate our defensive forces where we can most easily send provisions. We may want to consider evacuating any city on the border that can be easily cut off from fresh food and water."

Celestia frowned.

"The trouble is that ponies can be meals to roving dragons, and the cities themselves aren't assets to them as far as I know. It would be worse for us if they start using our citizens as livestock than if we just deal with the financial burden of refugees."

Celestia bit her lip. "Is there any way we wouldn't have to force our ponies out of their homes?" she asked.

Bucephalus weighed the idea in the air. "Maybe, mistress," he said. "I don't know anything about the enemy army, and I'm just assuming that they're better suited for war than we are. Before we make any drastic measures we're going to need to send some scouts over the border to see what they can find out. Among other things, we need to find where both Nodens and Nyarlathotep are even stationing their troops."

"Ah, so then," Celestia said, jabbing Bucephalus in the side, "We can both agree that we need a lot more information before we start doing anything drastic!"

Bucephalus shuffled away from her prodding. "Reconnaissance in battle and reconnaissance in politics are not the same thing," Bucephalus replied, stubbornly. "They don't have equivalent value where I'm concerned."

"Where do you see the difference?" she demanded.

"For one, you're sending a foreign diplomat on a pointless drinking binge when we really should be finding out who our friends are and what they have to offer us," Bucephalus complained. "You're trying to figure out who he is and what he wants. All my position is concerned about is what he intends to offer us and how we can use that."

"I've heard this more than enough times before," Celestia said, rolling her eyes. "You're almost quoting the legendary tactician Sol Bin. 'Sometimes an effective general must ignore the leadership's instructions,' he used to say. If I can't justify the politics at home and rectify our actions abroad to the ponies, then everything will start to fall apart. You'll be left in the cold by your own country when they turn on us, Bucephalus."

The war charger's eyes narrowed. "We're ruined two ways, then," he said. "The first is that we wait for disaster to hit and we'll be taken flat footed. We may see an important city raised to the ground and eaten, and that will motivate the ponies to fight properly. The other is that we mobilize and protect ourselves before we're drowned in conflict, and we make the ponies angry. One way or the other, our problem is that Equestria's ponies have been enjoying a wide breadth of peace and prosperity in their time, and it's led to a lot of complacency and entitlement."

Celestia shook her head. "That's quite an interesting sentiment from a horse with such a well-to-do family background," she remarked. "You know, when your father was my general, he was a great deal more subtle."

She placed a hoof on her chest and lowered her dulcet voice as well as she could to match the father's. "A society that makes a fetish of weapons and warfare is one doomed to handle combat incorrectly. A weapon is just a tool and so is a breastplate, and a carpenter does not fall in love with his hammer."

"My father was a drunk," Bucephalus sneered.

Celestia smiled sympathetically. "Only after he got married," Celestia confided, "but I hope you know he was a good father. I still remember how things were when you were just a little foal!"

"Oh for heaven's sake!" Bucephalus cried, throwing his head back in disgust.

"Your head was enormous!" Celestia teased.

"I can see that we are done discussing official business," Bucephalus conceded.

He bowed, then tried to leave, but Celestia pulled along beside him and cut him off. She looked him in the eyes and plead with her own. "Bucephalus," she said, "I've seen a lot of little foals grow up into adults in my time. All my little ponies are like my children to me, you included."

Bucephalus said nothing. He merely stared back into her with all the sternness his personality demanded. To Celestia it was like trying to pluck the heart strings of a disobedient teenager.

"I want you to prepare scouting teams at our border," Celestia said. "Send pegassi into dragon territory and do your best to find out the most preferential move if worse comes to worst. Once you have your information and I have mine, we'll talk about this again."

The stallion agreed, bowed a second time, then left Celestia's gardens. Alone, excluding the company of Cecil, who had been gazing intently into the pond since Bucephalus' threat and who was beyond lost in his own little world, Celestia couldn't help but feel she had handled the situation inexpertly. She always found herself at impasses with generals when Equestria found occasion to defend itself from foreign invasions. It came from the mutual interest in protecting the lives of the ponies and the division of interests in how to achieve that goal. War was deleterious to culture, finances, and national happiness, but all the same it was sometimes frustratingly necessary if one wanted to have a chance at those things at all.

Time was descending into the small hours of the day, and Celestia proceeded to carry out the remainder of her various duties as sun goddess. Among other things, she collected the small black book that had been delivered by Hastur. During dinner, which she ate alone this evening, she studied, discovering the tome to be full of mysterious rituals and spells. Many of them seemed archaic, and some were downright barbaric. They often involved drawing strange symbols or praying to otherworldly spirits with difficult names. Some required blood to be performed correctly, but the poetry outlined that a death was not strictly necessary, though a user may find the spells most easy to cast with the "aid" of an enemy.

From what Celestia could tell, nothing in the book seemed particularly useful in comparison to the magic her own ponies could perform. In fact,

more often than not these spells would be slower to cast and had significantly more restrictions. Of course, she'd never seen a dragon actually using magic before in quite the same way as would a pony, so she found herself, once again, quite unsure what to think, other than that this was probably just a token offering.

If anything was for certain, however, it was that the gift, especially coming at this time, was going to need to be reciprocated. If she accepted the book without sending something back in thanks, she would be indebting herself, however modestly, to Nyarlathotep. If she attempted to return the book, she would be tacitly refusing the lizard's request to help him in his war. The fact that Nyarlathotep himself had written the prose made the matter no easier.

She continued reading until late, picking at her meal of imported fruits and vegetables, until a scroll burst out of the air in a tongue of green flame and fell into Celestia's wine. Frowning, Celestia levitated the letter out of her drink and shook alcohol off the end of it. She set it aside, then, remembering she wanted to get this done before going to bed, flew a pen and parchment to her table and wrote:

Lord Nyarlathotep,

I find my court has been greeted by a somewhat offensive new guest. He reports himself as the Viscount Hastur Carcosa, and is a diminutive yellow dragon with crocodile head.

Celestia paused at the choice "diminutive". Hastur was roughly the same size as she was, which by pony standards would be considered large. However, she had met Nyarlathotep and recalled his impressive stature, and decided that she was probably diminutive as well by his perspective.

He delivered a book of poetry to me, written by you it would seem, and for your gift I must offer my thanks. He also brings news of war to our borders, and we are currently taking your requests with the utmost seriousness that they deserve. However, Hastur seems unfamiliar with etiquette and has thus far caused quite a stir, and I thought I might inquire as to why you chose to send Lord Hastur to our doorstep if he is not well versed in Equestria's customs.

Sincerely,

Sun Goddess Princess Celestia of Equestria

She reviewed her letter to ensure it was satisfactory, then sealed it. Through force of her will, the letter vanished in a puff of purple glitter that scattered into the air and gently cascaded onto Celestia's dinner plate. A servant fetched the dishware from beneath her to have it cleaned, and Celestia unfurled the first scroll, still soggy from its damp landing. It was from Twilight Sparkle, sending another report on friendship. Celestia read to herself.

Dear Celestia,

Today I learned that sometimes friendship can be complicated when we find we have strong emotions for one another. Just because you feel a certain way about someone does not mean they do or will feel the same way back, but that doesn't make them any less valuable of a friend. We should be willing to accept our friends' feelings, no matter what they may be, and make the best out of any situation.

Sincerely,

Twilight Sparkle

Today's letter seemed mundane, Celestia reflected. She was sure she had already received letters like this before, but then there were only so many general things that could be said about an average person's social life, and sometimes Twilight phoned her letters in as if she were writing an essay. Celestia found herself feeling a little disappointed. She had hoped that, after such a long day and after so much fuss, she might see a few hints about Twilight's latest escapades and live through them vicariously.

Celestia stared glumly at the message for a while, then pulled another scroll to her dining table. She'd been forming an idea ever since Bucephalus told her she ought to be looking for Equestria's friends, though she'd like to think she would have thought of this anyway. She wrote:

To my most brilliant and wonderful student, Twilight Sparkle,

Some time ago you complained that your dragon, Spike, had a strange habit of being attracted to your classmates. I understand you have come to accept his peculiar behavior, but that he is still doing this with your friends

in Ponyville. I was wondering, do you think you could explain the exact cause and nature of his attraction? Ask him if you must; this is rather important.

Sincerely,

Sun Goddess Princess Celestia of Equestria

Chapter 5

Hysterics are Magic

Alfred rapped modestly at Luna's door with his back hoof, his front legs occupied with balance and holding a tray of breakfast. Hearing no response, he quietly crept inside. Alfred gazed around cautiously, careful that he not disturb Lady Luna at an embarrassing time for them both. However, spotting that a giant lump still protruded the covers of Luna's lavish bed, Alfred walked to the left of the room and, gripping the tray with his teeth, set it down on a nightstand.

"Lady Luna," he urged as he pulled a match from his coat and struck it.

He lit a lamp hanging from the canopy of her resting place. The lump squirmed and grunted, then went back to being still.

"Young Mistress Luna," Alfred tried again, softly, "The sun will be setting soon, and you and Lady Celestia were both quite insistent about you waking early tonight."

The lump wriggled again. "Nooo," it whined.

"Now Mistress Luna," Alfred plied, "I should say that is no sort of attitude for Equestria's moon goddess. Better to meet the new night head on, you know."

Alfred waited at the side of the bed for a response, but received none. "I've brought you some chocolate milk and some wonderful oatmeal," said Alfred, "and it's going to go cold if you lay in bed all night. There's also a delightful little article in the newspaper today. I thought you might like to read it, and then we could discuss it together."

He waited a few more minutes, but was beginning to believe Luna simply would not be coaxed this night.

"I'd rather be dead," the bed complained, bitterly.

"Well!" Alfred announced, "That simply will not do at all, Young Mistress!"

This time the response rose at once. "Go away, Alfred!" the bed demanded.

Alfred sighed. He surveyed the room for any stray garbage he should pick up on his way out, but saw none, and could think of no other services he could offer as long as the Young Mistress refused to start the evening.

"Very well, Mistress Luna," Alfred replied, "I'll see to it that the maids do not disturb your sleeping."

He left the way he came, closing the door gently behind him and locking it. Usually the Young Mistress was quite sweet with him, so perhaps, Alfred thought, she may have been overdoing things recently. Luna most probably deserved a little extra rest in any case. He did wonder, however, how the Mistress went about raising the moon and stars while she was sleeping. Alfred always thought the jobs ascribed to Lady Celestia and Mistress Luna sounded like such a chore.

Luna awoke in her room beneath the dim, flickering torchlight of an abandoned candle. Night had already descended on the capital, perhaps hours ago, and long shadows stretched away from the glimmering lantern. Her breakfast, still sitting where Alfred had left it, was cold. Her hair was a mess, and Luna felt awful. She wasn't ready to spend another lonely night presiding over an empty throne room.

She rolled out of bed in a frump and trod her way to her nightstand. She levitated a brush from one of the drawers and began to comb her mane into place. Nothing complicated – it wasn't like anybody ever came to see her – she just straightened it out and let it fall into a natural shape about her head. She read the newspaper sitting in front of her. Albert had chosen a page with the headline, "Postal Worker Delivers Hazards", which was some kind of pony's interest piece about Ponyville.

She flipped through a few other pages. There were reviews on Celestia's beautiful day yesterday and forecasts for tomorrow's weather, a few blurbs about celery stocks here and there, and some opinion thing about griffons. Nothing very interesting to talk about, in her outlook. She set the paper down and spaced out gloomily over the silver tray. She felt bad for sending

Alfred away and wondered where he was at the moment, but on the other hand, he probably got tired of looking after her.

"Oh well," Luna thought, *"No time like the present to do the same thing I did all yesterday."*

She finished getting ready, putting on her crown and other familiarities, then pushed her way outside into a dark, empty hallway. She created a faint purple glow at the tip of her horn so she could see where she was going, hung her head low, and began to trudge to the courtroom. Her glass horseshoes clicked against the bare, stone floors.

"What's the point of this?" A little voice asked her, *"Why do we keep holding court every night?"*

Click, click, click.

"Tradition," decided Luna, *"Because we're royal."*

Click click click.

"Well if we're royal, why don't we just abdicate for the night? Let's do something fun," the voice suggested.

Luna perked up at that. Fun sounded good. Why not do something fun? Then reality burst in and spoiled the party.

"Because nobody likes us and we don't have any fun ideas." She thought, and then tried to hate the little voice to death.

Click click click.

"We could prank Celestia," the voice offered, innocently enough.

A chord of guilt resonated through Luna's body. She was sure that's how the entire Nightmare Moon thing started. A little envy here, a few attempts at giving Celestia what she deserved there, and in no time at all she was... not even going to think about some of the things that had happened.

"No," Luna declared.

Click click click.

"Why?" the voice demanded. *"She could prank you."*

Click click click.

Luna felt hot tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. She blinked them back forcefully, but they gathered again without remorse.

"Because!" Luna shouted at her inner self. *"Celestia is just prettier, friendlier, and more magical than we are, and we just need to deal with that!"*

She tried not to sob. Luna was no goddess; a real goddess wasn't this pathetic.

"That's stupid!" decried her little voice. *"If the ponies had ever just stayed awake and paid attention, you'd be just as good as her!"*

She couldn't believe it. Even after one thousand years she was still having these thoughts! She was still being *ignored*! Of course important diplomats couldn't stay awake twenty-four hours to beg from both princesses, and the fact that Celestia was still in charge after all that had happened was only proof she was right for the job, but still!

"She defeated us!" Luna proclaimed, her head spiraling with hopelessness. *"We lost control and we did everything we could, without scruples, to get that respect. We turned day into night. We had the element of surprise! We did everything, and she still beat us!"*

"Well she didn't-" the voice began.

"With friendship, of all the ridiculous things!" Luna shrieked, *"She beat us with the power of hanging out together and braiding hair! How sad is that?"*

Luna tried her best not to cry. She didn't want her mascara to run, in case Alfred popped in to see how she was. Sometimes she asked him to pretend to be a prime minister, or a courtier, or anything at all to make her feel better. Luna treated it like a game, but she got the feeling Alfred knew what it really was. He was always very kind about it, though, and he did his best to act his parts. Once he asked for a giant carrot. Luna told him to ask for something a real courtier would want, and he reproachfully informed her that he could feed his nephew's family for a week with a giant carrot.

That had made her laugh, but it was kind of sad, though. Somewhere in the world there probably really were families that were starving and just wanted a giant carrot to get them by for a few more days. She knew that Celestia was busy and probably couldn't help everyone's needs. If just one pony would come by in the evening, Luna would do everything to get that family the giant carrot they needed.

Luna managed to stifle her tears, but the voice came back. *"It wasn't friendship, it was the elements of harmony, and we were a schizophrenic mess of chaos,"* it said.

Luna guessed she could agree with that. It made sense that the elements of harmony should be a bane to somebody wallowing in a fit of disharmony.

"Besides, you have to remember that back then, we -"

A flash like an electric shock passed through Luna's body. This happened sometimes when she tried to think about Nightmare Moon, but she wasn't quite sure what caused it. She stood, blinking in the darkness, her magical light having gone out.

"Um," the voice stammered, *"What were we talking about again?"*

Luna couldn't remember. When this occurred it was frankly an unpleasant sensation, and it played havoc on her mind at times. She tried to think back to what she was focused on just before the upset, but it was like a strand had been cut from her grasps. Had she kept walking during the flash? Her kinesthetic sense felt off.

Luna was about to relight her horn and get her bearings, but she became aware of something moving in her periphery. It appeared she had reached the double doors to the court room, and standing before one of the hallway's long windows was a figure. At first she had mistaken it for a sculpture of some kind, but it had taken on life. The thing was stretching out its upper body in a way that no pony possibly could, and the surface of her mind raced desperately to tie this silhouette to anything in her ancestral memory.

Luna thought to scream, to run, or at least to relight her horn so she might get a better glimpse at what she was looking at, but terror froze her in place. The thing slowly ducked low, as if to charge.

"Lady Luna," came a low voice of rich baritone, "I am Lord Viscount Hastur of Carcosa, representative of our capital Kadath, and of my master, King Nyarlathotep of Azathoth. I come requesting the audience of the Moon Goddess."

Luna choked. She stumbled uncertainly backwards into the wall, then steadied herself there. After catching her breath, she lit her horn and yelped in fright. Within easy snapping distance was what appeared to be the maw of a yellow crocodile, the sight of which sent shivers down the bones of her parents' parents. It was bowing, politely, but something about the creature gave it a very definite look of springiness, like it could probably pounce on a moving object from a very great distance away.

The lizard was wearing a purple and silver cape with black lining, draped elegantly over its back in quite tasteful style. It held one clawed hand to its chest and placed the other behind. All things considered, the beast looked like a perfectly terrifying but remarkable gentlecolt. It seemed to be waiting for a response from Luna.

"Um... uh..." she babbled. The beast just went on patiently standing as she clumsily gathered her composure. "I'm Luna," she finally quavered. "Lady Luna. Moon Goddess."

Hastur rose. "I am sorry, Mistress. Did I startle you?" he asked.

From this length away from him, Luna could smell copious amounts of alcohol on Hastur's breath. The stench burned her eyes. She blinked and held her nose, averting her face to deflect the olfactory assault, then nodded timidly.

"I am so dreadfully sorry, Goddess," Hastur reconciled, clasping his hands together. "I seem to have been making the most abhorrent of impressions since my arrival here."

Luna could think of nothing to say, so she just sat there, staring at the imposing dragon opposite to her. Hastur seemed to sense he was rapidly losing ground.

"Has your court already been dismissed?" he asked, gesturing to the doorway. "I thought to check inside, but no one was present, so it seemed prudent to wait here for an official of some sort."

Luna shook her head. "You're here for my court?" she replied, a smidgeon of hope blossoming in a field of waning terror.

The problem with Luna's court holdings was that she wasn't just being ignored by courtiers, but that she was virtually unknown to them on top of everything else. Celestia had expressed a desire to share ruling power with her sister again at some point, but she had been extremely cautious and protective about the whole affair. Word of Luna's existence traveled around the castle, surely, but Celestia had gone out of her way to avoid promoting official promenades into Luna's new halls.

In a way it had been a death sentence from the very start. When the sun goddess turned her head from one of her subjects, the entire court did the same, and with no political support Luna was merely a common citizen with supreme magical power. Openly, Celestia had told Luna that she didn't want to rush her back into a world she was centuries out of touch with. Unofficially, though, Luna suspected Celestia was keeping an eye on her in case she unexpectedly relapsed somehow.

Granted, she didn't know how well she liked the idea of a dragon courtier, but maybe this was her chance. A foreign diplomat who didn't know that Luna was being shunned would ask her for a favor, and then he'd go home and tell his people that Luna had helped him. After that, who knew? She had to handle this situation carefully, though; if she botched it things would be even worse.

She settled herself, then decided to go for broke. "Most ponies are not so bold as to tend on me," Luna asserted.

Hastur seemed to consider this, but shrugged. "Carcosans are not known for their shyness, Mistress. Fortune favors the bold and wounds the docile, but I meant no disrespect, and I found myself here only by hint of rumors," he responded.

"Rumors?" Luna's inner voice whined. *"So what are we to the ponies, the Loch Ness Monster of Canterlot or something?"*

Luna disregarded that thought – now was not the time.

"Well, I admit that I admire your curiosity," Luna praised. This was the point where she threw the bait. She felt a little giddy, but tried to suppress it by

reminding herself how heartbroken she would be if this didn't work. "I suppose I won't be offended if you were to sit in on one of my sessions."

Luna held her breath.

"I would be delighted," Hastur submitted amicably.

Luna's heart raced, but she was somewhat put off. Hastur sounded pleased, but he certainly didn't look it. In fact, it dawned on Luna that she hadn't seen the dragon make a single facial expression since she bumped into him. His scarred yellow maw did nothing beyond its most technical requirements. Still, she wasn't about to lose this chance by being impolite about some sort of medical or perhaps even morphological impediment.

She swung open the double doors to the courtroom with her magic and strode inside with her most regal of efforts, holding her head up and wings out like she'd seen her sister do. Hastur followed, wordlessly, gliding like a shadow behind her. When they reached the dais of the throne, which menaced Luna with pointed decorations and blood red gems in the grim lighting, Hastur stopped and allowed her to ascend.

She took to the seat and held out her chest, glancing only a moment at Hastur to see if he was reacting. He wasn't, but he was definitely watching her intently enough. Luna surveyed the room. It looked cold and forlorn; a draft through an open window was causing one of the drapes to flutter about, but otherwise the hall was barren and dim save for the purple glow at the tip of her horn. She'd sat around in the empty throne room countless nights before, but now that she had a visiting dignitary at her fetlocks, she began to wonder if waiting around in ineloquent darkness all night didn't make her seem a little crazy. Alfred usually lit some candles for her when he visited.

"Hold on just a moment," she ordered.

Luna closed her eyes and began to concentrate. The light at the tip of her horn darkened and spread across her body into an ambient pulse. At the same time, the stars began to brighten and the moon shifted in the sky, waxing to full in the course of seconds. The curtains were thrust open, and soft moonlight filtered in through the stained glass.

When Luna opened her eyes again, she found the scenery was not much better than when it had started. There was, at least, a bit of color on the floor now from where the extra light was getting in through the colored windows, and that did make things seem a little more goddess-like, but Celestia's divine sun castle wasn't well suited to midnight miracles.

Hastur was still waiting politely.

"Great," Luna's inner voice lamented, *"All that effort, and to him it looks like we hit the dimmer switch and lowered a crystal ball. Want to ask him to make out? The mood is set."*

"Shush!" Luna snapped.

She tried to relax. She didn't want her guest to know she was trying to impress him.

"Well?" she asked, doing her very best not to sound too expectant.

Hastur blinked. "Mistress, you are the most gorgeous filly I have ever laid eyes on, and I say that with impunity to all the mares," he replied, smoothly.

Luna half processed his response and began to flush. It was not exactly what she was thinking about at the time, but it was certainly nice to hear. She didn't get enough compliments these days, except from Alfred, but he was always just being polite. Then her brain caught up and she realized the end of the sentence wasn't exactly what she had thought. Still, vocabulary mistakes aside, it made her wish she had paid more attention to her hair before going out tonight.

Luna stared at her hooves. "I mean about the moon," she insisted.

Hastur hesitated. In fact, he nearly froze in place, but after a flash of rigor mortis his muscles melted back into fluidity again. "Yes, it's a most wonderful night. The sky is gorgeous," he mused.

"Goodness," Luna's inner voice commentated. *"Maybe he really does want to make out."*

Luna started to worry, and she felt perspiration forming at her brow. Not only was Hastur not getting the hint, but that was kind of a scary thought.

Were dragons known to force themselves on ponies? Hastur did look fast, and he was probably strong too. She could handle it, but Luna did hope that Alfred would drop by just to say hello.

"That was a perfectly innocuous comment he made," Luna disagreed.

"Maybe it would be fun just to say we did it," her inner voice suggested.

She shot her inner voice a psychic, razor glare and soaked it in venom for good measure.

Openly, Luna fidgeted. "Please go look outside," she prodded the dragon.

Hastur obliged and went to the open window. He gazed out of it for a few moments, and Luna watched as his mouth dropped open and eyes widened. He backed away slowly.

"Doomed," he muttered.

Luna strained to hear. "I'm sorry?" she asked.

"We are doomed!" Hastur wailed. "In but a few moment's time the moon has shifted dramatically!"

Luna was bewildered. It wasn't the reaction she was hoping for at all.

"This is as bad as when the earth stopped moving almost one thousand years ago! Come!" He waved Luna frantically to the window. "This is completely catastrophic! Maybe the moon has been struck by something!"

As a rule, Luna and Celestia tried not to alter the paths of the stellar bodies too obviously. It caused upsets in the natural rhythm of things, but Luna hadn't stopped to think what creatures outside the domain of Equestria were probably thinking at this moment. All over the world where the moon and stars were visible, sentient creatures probably believed the sky was falling.

She trotted to Hastur's side where he was watching the giant silver sphere for any signs of misbehavior.

"It's nothing," Luna begged.

Hastur stared at her.

"Didn't they tell you about the moon goddess?" she asked him.

Luna's heart was sinking. Shouldn't he know? Shouldn't all the ponies know too?

"But -" Hastur stuttered, pointing to the sky, "To simply shake the heavens like it were without meaning!"

Luna opened her mouth, but could think of nothing to say. She'd ruined everything. Hastur would go back to his people and he'd tell them he'd met an infant goddess who played with the stars like they were a baby's rattle. They'd then fear her and secretly hope she was killed or imprisoned again.

She tried to think back on times she'd done this kind of thing before, but Celestia had always been very adamant about maintaining predictable cycles. It occurred to Luna that, although she had made the nights beautiful in the past, she couldn't remember doing something as blatant as just throwing everything out of proper alignment for the sake of aesthetics. How could she have done something so stupid! Celestia was right: Luna wasn't ready to be the moon goddess again. She wasn't ready to deal with ponies, dragons, or their daily politics.

Hastur offered a long, appraising look. "I'm sorry," he said at last, cautiously. He knelt down to the floor and placed his chin on the stone. "They said you rose the moon, but I thought there to be a trick."

Now Luna was speechless for a second reason.

"I did not mean to intrude," Hastur continued. "I am sorry to have doubted."

Luna was awestruck. Is that all it took to gain followers? Just terrify them by abusing your power in some benign way?

"Yes," her inner voice reminded. *"For some of them. For a little while. But you're going to be in trouble with Celestia soon."*

Luna shook her head. "No, no!" she cried. "It's nothing! I made a mistake!"

Hastur's eyes grew wide again. "A mistake?" he asked. "I dare not think what you should mean by that. Please, Goddess, if I have committed wrong, then spare my wretched life!"

"Stop!" Luna pleaded, bounding on her front legs, "You have to get up!"

Hastur rose immediately to his feet.

"Don't!" Luna's inner voice shouted. *"We can still salvage this!"*

"What do we do?" Luna wept to herself. *"I don't want Celestia to send us back to the moon!"*

"She won't!"

"She will! We're on a one way street to total corruption and she's going to know!"

"We're not!"

"We disobeyed her on purpose!"

Hastur stood rigidly, watching as Luna stumbled about awkwardly in a blind fit of evolving horror. She started to tell him something a few times, but then immediately stopped to pace around in circles.

"Should we move the moon back where it was? Maybe no pony will notice!" Luna asked herself.

"It's too late now. We may as well just wave it all over the place and really give them all a fright. One last night of fun while it lasts!" her inner voice replied.

"But you said she wouldn't send us back to the moon! We aren't Nightmare Moon anymore!"

"I just said that to make us feel better! I don't know!"

"Oh, hell. This is it! We abused our power and now there's no way to prove we aren't turning to evil again!"

Luna curled up in a ball and began to cry. First the sobbing was light and stifled, but it ascended gradually to being hysterical. Hastur seemed at a loss.

"Goddess," he mumbled beneath a cacophony of bereavement.

Luna tried to stop crying, but the urge came in heaves. She took deep breaths, but couldn't fight it.

"Goddess, I am sorry -" Hastur began.

"I don't -" Luna burbled, "want -" *gasp*, "to go -" *gasp* "back -" *gasp* "to the moon again!"

She covered her face and tried to go to a happy place. The worst of it was ending, she felt. She realized she'd never actually taken the time to cry about this since coming back from her lengthy sentencing.

Hastur looked out the window at the moon, then back to Luna. "I..." he started, but stopped. He was not making a face of any sort, but the rest of his body portrayed as many universal signs for confusion as possible.

At last Luna calmed down. Her make-up was ruined, but she was feeling better.

"It's not you," she said, exhausted.

"Oh," Hastur said.

The room filled up with the sound of Luna's breathing. Hastur shifted awkwardly where he was, still following Luna's orders to stand with diligence.

"That was a very frightening thing to see a goddess do," he added.

Luna gave a labored, tear-streaked chortle. She admitted to herself that a hissy fit was not exactly reassuring from a deity.

"Is there anything I can do?" Hastur asked nervously.

She looked at him through a tangled mess of hair. "Do you think -" she started, "Do you think you could smile?"

Hastur grunted and gazed about uncertainly. "I'm not sure." He threw his arms out in conciliation. "I think it has something to do with the face, does it? Could you show me please?"

Luna let out another few breaths and almost managed a short laugh. She grinned manically, showing off each of her bright, pearly teeth. Hastur watched her fiercely, engrossed in the learning process for several seconds. Then, with much careful effort, he peeled back his lips and bore hundreds of bladed fangs to her. It looked just like the face a clown would make before it stuffed you in its tiny car and took you away forever.

"Alright, nevermind," Luna said.

Hastur let his lips fall back to their neutral comfort zones.

"May I ask, what on earth?" he requested.

Luna took a few more breaths, then began to tell Hastur everything. She told him about Nightmare Moon and how she had lost that war. She explained how she had been imprisoned on the moon for a thousand years. She told him about coming back and how nothing had changed, and about how she was now being ignored by the courtiers.

It wasn't just for his sake. It was a lot to get off her chest, and she hadn't been straightforward with anyone about her feelings in ages. Hastur, being a stranger, and possibly a visitor who might not return, somehow made it much easier, and he did seem to be a good listener. He interjected now and again to ask questions, but at no point did he express horror at Luna's deeds during the conflict, and he didn't appear to be passing any judgments about current events either.

The hours ticked away, and Luna's story drew to the present. She finished by letting him know he probably wasn't supposed to be here in the first place, and that she might find herself facing a number of problems for what she'd done tonight.

Hastur nodded gravely. "Goddess, might I offer my insight?" he asked.

Luna agreed.

"It sounds to me that you were taken by envy and are now ashamed of that, but a creature exists only in so far as it is opposed. To covet the more successful is natural, and to struggle against them is equally natural. Any who ply the contrary are passive manipulators hoping to hold their positions through fashion of guilt."

Luna stared back at the dragon as he spoke these words. They were contrary to everything Celestia had ever told her and everything she had ever tried to enforce in Luna's life. Of course, Celestia had always enjoyed stations of higher prestige and importance over more than just Luna, so it sounded plausible that she *would* be the one to encourage docility.

"Envy can be a tool, Goddess," Hastur continued, "but not if it is left to dull and fester. Rather, it should compel you to reach out and surpass those who inspire your detestations."

Luna thought to argue that envy was what had gotten her punished in the first place and what had led to so much disaster in her life, but the thoughts rested lazily in her throat and did not escape.

"I could advise you," Hastur offered. "I can see much potential in you. The very world is within your grasp if you were but to stretch out and take it."

He held out a clawed hand and clutched it in mid air to demonstrate.

"You can't," Luna argued, "You'll be kicked out of Canterlot when Celestia hears what happened tonight."

Hastur waved his talons in resignation. "Then my first advisement is that you lie," he said simply.

"Oh, yeah, lying," Luna's inner voice chimed in, mentally slapping her in the forehead. *"That makes sense when we aren't having a panic attack. And we wanted to fly to the north pole where Celestia wouldn't find us!"*

Luna ruffled her wings. "I don't think I can fool Celestia," she said.

Hastur gave this consideration. "First be elusive, and when you are pressed, then you should tell the lie," he replied. "I trust your sister thinks she can read you easily, so when you evade her questioning she will think she has you pinned. When she extracts the squirming facts from you, they

will be false, but because she extricated them from beneath a layer of defense, she will mistake them for the truth."

Luna gave Hastur a look. In return, he offered to practice with her until she was convincing enough to do it. The night slowly plodded away with daylight chasing behind, none the wiser.

Chapter 6

Trouble is Magic

Celestia awoke before the sunrise, her eyes crusty and mouth dry. In her bed were two scrolls, one of which rolled off her face as she rose. She went to the mirror and got ready for the day, applying make up, brushing her hair, and performing other various humdrum activities. Afterward, she entered her balcony where she could be seen from the courtyards, and before a teeming mass of cheering tourists Celestia erupted into a brilliant, angelic being of light. The sun rolled lazily over the hills, and the day began.

Of course, the display was merely that: entertainment for the crowds. For her to truly raise the sun across all of Equestria, she would always need to start at the furthest point east of the country on any morning, and she'd have to travel from time zone to time zone to make sure every last city got their glorious dawnbreak. The work would be constant, and she'd never have time to do anything but drag the sun from place to place. As it was, the spinning earth did quite enough of the effort for her.

She went back to her room and picked up one of the scrolls. The first was from Twilight Sparkle, or from Spike himself, rather. He regaled her with inarticulate but vaguely poetic soliloquies about one of Twilight's friends. She was smart, funny, and beautiful, Spike explained, and there was no way he couldn't be smitten. It was cute, but not very useful. Celestia had been hoping for Twilight's more analytical approach to get unbiased information, but in any case it was no longer important. Celestia had modified her plans.

She tossed that letter away and levitated the second to reading level. This one was from Nyarlathotep, scrawled in archaic handwriting. It said:

Dearest Celestia,

Our diplomat, Hastur, is a Carcosan dragon, and from their breed are chosen the most elite negotiators at our disposal. You see, they have a complex mating system involving much trickery. One male will often court

and claim many females. The strongest is the only one to bear children, logically, if not for the fact that weaker males will often infiltrate the broods disguised as the opposite gender. Further still, other males will also attempt to impersonate the lead so as to confuse his mates into copulating with an imposter. The females, too, will do all in their power to emulate the favored wife to increase their chances of mating. Hence, the social interplay and conflict is constant, and Carcosans are remarkably good at identifying behavioral patterns and mimicking them.

We have done our best to educate Hastur in the customs of Equestria as we know them, and before he departed he had a firm grasp on reading and writing in your language. However, he will learn best from observation, and I trust that in time he will be able to blend in and understand all your needs in swift order. It is disappointing to hear he has made such a poor first impression, but I expect his manners will improve before you realize.

That matter having been cleared up, I do hope you do not begrudge me for not speaking to you about our requests personally. As you can imagine, I am rather indisposed at the present, and I have not the time to negotiate. Hastur knows the desires and costs of Azathoth. He can be trusted to handle any concerns you may have.

Regards,

Nyarlathotep

Celestia rolled up the scroll and set it aside. Well, there was some light shed on that mystery. Now to deal with everything else.

She went to her door and tried to open it, but it bounced off of something in mid swing.

"Oof!" came a voice.

Celestia peeked through the crack in the entry and saw Cecil sitting there, the door having bonked him in the face, flattening one of the points of his mustache.

"Cecil!" Celestia rang out in surprise. "Move please, dear, you're in the way!"

Cecil obligingly backed up a few steps.

"Lady Celestia," he said, "I just went to visit my father and he said he remembers his childhood."

Celestia scanned Cecil's face. He looked concerned.

"Oh. That's good, isn't it?" she asked.

Cecil nodded. "Yes mistress, but then I asked him if he remembered whether or not anyone had cast any spells on him to make him remember a fake childhood, and he said he didn't know. That seems like just the sign that somebody had cast an evil spell!"

Celestia drew a blank and began desperately searching her memory. Then it came to her.

"You're worried you're your own father," she assessed, yesterday's threats coming back to her.

"Yes!" Cecil cried, leaping forward. "My father and I are both desperately concerned at this point!"

"Cecil..." Celestia began. She wondered if it was worth it and decided it wasn't. "Do you have the morning newspaper?"

"Ah, yes, of course!" Cecil announced, the normal joy of his life returning instantly.

He trotted about in a circle, looking for where he had set it, then patted down his vest. Finding nothing, he scampered off. Celestia sighed. She waited for him, and he returned triumphantly, cantering down the hall with the paper levitated aloft.

Celestia took it from him and read the first page. It was war in Equestria, according to journalistic assumptions. Then, below the headlines, she found a second story: Loony Moon Sign of Disaster.

"What is this?" Celestia demanded.

Cecil stood on his hind legs so he could see what Celestia was looking at.

"I think they're talking about you moving the moon in your sleep, Mistress," Cecil supplied. "Does that happen?"

"Of course not," Celestia assured him.

She read the article from top to bottom. It was full of outrageous speculations, many of them supposedly supported by sources within the castle. They suggested that Celestia, in a fit over the stress of a war with the dragons, was now moving the moon and stars about in the middle of the night without realizing. The journalists asked if Equestria was safe and questioned whether or not Celestia was losing a grip on her powers.

She flipped through the rest of the paper and found numerous other articles exploring everything from the psychological reasons Celestia might have willfully moved the moon to the possibility that Celestia might have a mental break down and hurl the planet into the sun.

"Did this happen just last night?" she asked Cecil, frowning.

Cecil nodded jovially. "I heard they did a special printing this morning, my queen. There's been a lot going on since yesterday!"

"Oh, Luna," Celestia muttered, poring over the slander, "Why now?"

Celestia dropped the paper on the floor.

"Burn this," she commanded.

She stormed a few steps down the hall, but stopped. The paper lifted off the ground and flew to Celestia's side where she waved it about in the air.

"On second thought, I'll keep it," she sang coyly over her shoulder, "So I can show it to everyone in the next thousand years when *they* ask if I'm losing my touch!"

Luna was standing in front of the mirror of her nightstand. She had washed her face, but it still looked like she had been crying, so she was reapplying her makeup to hide the fact. The night before was feeling like a bit of a blur now. She'd been caught up in a torrent of varying emotions, used her powers pointlessly without thinking, wept uncontrollably in front of a creepy

if imposing dragon, and then spent the rest of the night lying to him in preparation for the morning.

She felt worn out, and she was losing steam. She wasn't even sure it was a good idea to listen to that dragon anymore. Deep inside she had just wanted to avoid punishment, but did the truth seem so bad now? Aside from that, Hastur had practically told her, "Join me, and together you and I could rule the world!"

Luna didn't remember any stories at all where the protagonist just went along with that kind of request for the fact that she didn't want to make a fuss. According to drama, she should have shouted, "Never!" instantly, but the thought hadn't occurred to her at the time. It would have made her look silly, which probably had to do with the way Hastur had worded it.

"You should work hard and try to live up to your potential!" Luna's inner voice played.

"Never!" Luna called back in mock-defiance.

Yes, it was definitely a lot harder to sound heroic in the face of an extremely reasonable villain.

A knock sounded at her door, and Alfred entered soon after.

"Celestia is here to see you, Mistress Luna," he said.

"Does she seem angry?" Luna asked.

"Well," Alfred replied, scratching his brain for a polite euphemism, "She did seem to be just a bit more direct than her usual. Is something the matter?"

"No," Luna said quietly, "Please send her in."

Alfred bowed and departed, and Celestia replaced him in her grand elegance, floating a newspaper at her hip. She didn't appear outraged, but merely stern.

"Luna," she asked calmly, "Have you read the paper today?"

"I can explain," Luna averred.

Celestia, brows knit with disapproval, waited for her to begin.

"Last night I met a dragon named Hastur," she confessed.

Celestia's expression changed at once to surprise. "Hastur?" she repeated. "Tell me what happened, immediately."

Luna gazed at the floor. "He asked me if I was holding court, and I decided to raise the moon for him, not knowing what time it was." She checked Celestia's face briefly before going right back to examining the carpet. "He panicked, and then I remembered about our rule."

"Luna," Celestia sighed, "How could you forget something like that?"

"It's been a long time!" Luna protested, stamping her hooves. "And then he told me to lie to you about it."

"He what?" Celestia demanded, evenly.

"He said I should make up some excuse so I wouldn't get in trouble," she clarified.

"Did he?" Celestia edged. Luna thought she could nearly see icicles hanging off the words.

Luna averted her complete attention demurely to a speck of lint between her hooves. "I may have told him I was going to get into a *lot* of trouble," she mumbled.

Celestia's face softened. "What do you mean?" she asked. "How much trouble?"

Luna looked back at her sister with a wistful glare. It wasn't intentional, she hadn't meant to, but the feelings were just too poignant. She locked eyes and didn't let go. Celestia's every nerve shattered into an abyss. It was far too much at once.

"Luna, I-" Celestia pleaded, "I'm sorry. You know..."

Luna just kept staring. There was too much hurt, too many accusations in her heart, too many questions, but for the love of her only living family it

was all too much to say. Celestia held a sharp intake of breath. She reached out with her wings and pulled Luna in close to her.

"I'm not angry, Luna," she whispered, kissing Luna on the head and nuzzling her valiantly. "I love you. I won't! Never again!"

When Celestia emerged from Luna's room, Alfred noticed she looked tired. The youthful vigor was drained from her face, and for the first time he'd seen her since working at the palace, Celestia appeared to be showing signs of age. It was perhaps just a trick of the light or his own impression, but between the worry lines of her face Alfred thought he could see hundreds of years resting there.

"Alfred, I want you attend Luna's court sessions every night from now on. No exceptions, even if she dismisses you.," she informed, severely.

"Mistress?" Alfred asked.

"And I'm going to station guards outside the doors to the throne room. If anything should happen, I want to be informed on the instant. Wake me if you must."

Alfred was silent, which was acquiescence enough for Celestia.

"I also have a request," she said. "I want you to find a guard and tell him to bring Lord Hastur to my study. Tell him to make Hastur wait. I have another issue to deal with at the moment, so I'll be in to see him when I am ready."

With that, she brushed past the aging servant and hurried on her way.

Celestia found herself at the grand stairwell leading to the palace gates. Before her lay the unconscious body of Incitatus, who was rolled over on his back, tongue lolling on the marble steps, one wing folded indecorously over his face. His expertly pedicured blue hooves were kicked up in the air and his cloak was bunched up around his neck. The occasional official on business sidestepped him, offering confused, backward glances if they were new, and not a second thought if they weren't.

The goddess stood over him for a few minutes. She wished she hadn't expected to find him like this, but it was all too common.

"Incitatus," she hummed, nudging him in the face with a hoof.

He shuddered, snorting awake in a fit. The glaring sun beat down on him from the sky, causing him to flinch and throw his free wing over his face again. The other wing he was still laying on. Incitatus cast around for his bearings, then stiffly rose to his feet. The crushed wing hung droopingly from his back. After squinting and gazing about unsteadily for a time, he realized Celestia was standing behind him.

"Oh," he cried hazily, "Hello!"

"I take it we had a nice night," Celestia observed.

Incitatus recounted some of the evening's events in his head. "Probably," he decided.

Celestia smiled. "Would you like to get some coffee?" she asked. "You know, I haven't had mine this morning."

Incitatus raised an eyebrow. "Coffee!" he scoffed indignantly. "I never touch that vile stuff!" He began to unroll the silver cloak from his body with his mouth, but only succeeded in tangling it around his wings. "If you want to get a drink later, though."

"Thank you, but I'll pass," Celestia replied serenely. "I just thought I'd see how you were doing."

Incitatus grinned for her. He was alright, although just a bit on the smelly side right this second. His well-being confirmed, Celestia unfurled her wings and took to the sky in a majestic leap. She gained a bit of altitude, but then glided elliptically back to where she had been standing.

"That was pretty," Incitatus remarked, still fussing his with cape.

"I just remembered!" Celestia said. "I wanted to ask if you found anything out about our dragon friend."

Incitatus left his clothing be. "Oh, that," he said uninterestedly.

Celestia nodded.

"Well," he began, "He seemed to be doing amazingly better with ponies after spending a little time out on the town. It was downright fantastic, really. A little trial and error took him a long way."

"Mmhmm," Celestia agreed, "Carcosans are amazing specimens, aren't they? They'll adapt to just about any social situation if you give them enough time."

Incitatus paused, taken aback. "Yes. Of course. Of course they are!" he recovered. "I know!" He shook his head and gave Celestia quite a knowing look. "But this was faster than *ordinary* Carcosans, you see?"

Celestia maintained her tranquil smile. She used this trick constantly in her life. One little insert to a conversation to make a pony think she knew more than she was letting on, and sooner or later she began to look omnipotent to the world. It wasn't important to do it to everyone, but by now it had become a bit of a habit for far too many occasions.

Incitatus cleared his throat. "I convinced him to try flirting with a few fillies, you know. I gave him some pointers. Such as that it's good to convince them that you divide up your interest between all of them. That way they'll be offended if you don't notice them." Incitatus jabbed a hoof. "They'll think something's wrong with them if you chase every skirt but theirs, after all. Ha."

"I've seen you in action," Celestia agreed, looking down her nose at the stallion. She had to admit, it really did work for Incitatus better than it should.

"Of course, some are more important to me than others!" he corrected nervously.

Celestia brightened her expression for him, which appeared to give him all but too much instant confidence. He beamed at her, but Celestia's smile ebbed as she waited expectantly for him to get to the point.

"The fact is, mistress, that I didn't learn anything useful. I could get him to drink with me, but he continually wandered off to talk to other ponies, and he wouldn't stop asking questions once I got him to sit down. I tried

everything! I even suggested to him that I might defect if the price was right, but he just wanted to know what was wrong with Equestria that made me offer!"

"I see," Celestia said, denoting just a little disappointment. "Well, you did your best, dear."

She reached out and gripped Incitatus' cloak in her mouth, then unwrapped it from his wings and neck. After a brief survey, she decided to use her magic to straighten out the creases and then set it all in place, good as new.

"Thank you, princess," Incitatus said.

"Bucephalus will be angry that you lost his helmet, you know," Celestia scolded.

Incitatus checked his head, which was bare of any military ornaments.

"Oh," he replied, smirking and sticking his tongue out. "Well, I'm sure he has others."

"Incitatus," she asked thoughtfully, "Do you happen to know what happened to Hastur after you passed out?"

Incitatus tried his best to remember, but couldn't account for anything. "It was all a blur nearing that event horizon," he said. "He seemed rather intoxicated as well, but at the same time a touch on the lucid side. Why, is he missing?"

"No," Celestia replied. "I was just curious if he found his way back to his room well enough."

Incitatus shrugged. Celestia thanked him again and proceeded to make her way to her study. It was beginning to sound like the dragon's delegate was just foolishly poking around all of Canterlot in an attempt to get better acquainted with society. This was no way for Nyarlathotep to handle negotiating for a war; it was downright clumsy.

Lieutenant Colonel Sunshine was a pegasus pony in prime shape. Her wings were strong, her coat was a shiny white, and she was oh so eligible. Her mane was naturally blond, but she went out of her way to dye it the same striped color scheme as Lady Celestia – it was a popular thing to do in any time period, especially when a filly had the fur for it. Celestia had a lot of poetry written about her, and she was regarded as the epitome of Equestrian beauty. On Sunshine's flank were a series of pony-shaped stamps struck through with crosses, representing theoretical "kills"; she had gotten her cutie mark not long after joining the Equestrian Air Force, and it said she was born for the job.

Sunshine was catching up to a teal pony ahead of her, the wind hitting her face at full tilt. He banked a sharp curve, and she followed. Her pixie cut hair fluttered about, and she couldn't help but wonder how Celestia managed to keep her ridiculously luxurious mane from getting frazzled when she flew. Closer and closer she drew, the other pony's tail almost near enough to grab.

Just before she had him, he passed into a cloud. There were other ponies flying around as well, committing to their own training exercises. She could follow him, but the likelihood that she might crash into another pony was too high, and at these speeds somebody could break a neck. Sunshine would definitely have some negative things to say about such reckless behavior to all her squads when this was over.

She zipped away and took a more leisurely pace, catching her breath. Her partner would breach the clouds above, and he'd waste a lot more energy fluttering up and down again than she would just waiting for him. Cloudsdale really had better training skies for pegasi, but she had been in Celestia's court room when the threat of war loomed its ugly head, and Sunshine called an emergency drill. From up here she could see small squads of unicorn ponies practicing their combat magic below, apparently having had the same idea. They threw spears at targets mainly, being that levitation was among the most easily learned and widely used skills of any unicorn.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted a large black horse waiting on the parade grounds. No unicorns seemed to be capturing his attention, and it looked like his nose was pointed to the skies. Colonel Sunshine wheeled

around for a landing and came in low. When her feet hit the ground, she ran to a stop before the war charger and struck a salute with her wing.

"Sir!" she barked.

Bucephalus saluted in return. "At ease," he commanded.

Sunshine put her wing down and stood in what passed for a relaxed stance in the God Princess Celestia's military.

"I've got some news, Colonel," Bucephalus said. "You're going south."

"Together?" Sunshine asked, betraying maybe just a bit more hope with her voice than she intended, but Bucephalus didn't seem to notice.

"No, I'd only slow you down. I'm sending you and your squads on an ambitious reconnaissance mission," he replied.

In her head, Sunshine swore with disappointment. There wasn't a rich history of female ponies serving in the armed forces, but there were some stories about romances that occurred within the ranks. One such story involved an entire platoon of gay ponies that fought to a bitter end in stalwart defense of one another. Supposedly, they were a great deal more dangerous than your average group of ponies, seeing as how they had a much harder time retreating from an injured loved one than the average soldier had with leaving his idiot co-workers behind.

Sunshine wasn't part of the Equestrian Air Force because she'd slept her way in or because she was looking to hook up, but if she was going to spend long hours cooped up with a bunch of colts, there was a vast difference between losing a lot of time with a burly, scar-faced general compared to the same with some of her lieutenants. Besides, she'd been getting an awful lot of attention lately by talking about military strategy with the big lug – he'd even taken her to sit in on that fateful court meeting yesterday – and it didn't hurt to have an ambitious heart.

"I might be headed down to that area soon, though, if we get the green light from Celestia," Bucephalus explained.

"Sir?" Sunshine asked, "I just thought I should mention, our squad would really like to see some new headgear. The brushes on top of the helmets we have now are too air resistant."

"I've mentioned it," Bucephalus conceded. "Until further notice, just consider them ceremonial. In fact, I encourage you to travel light. It's not like armor will do much good against dragons, so it will be better to be mobile."

"Yes, sir," Sunshine confirmed.

"There will be a briefing tomorrow, which incidentally is when you are leaving. I'll have some maps and instructions delivered to you this evening, Colonel. Dismissed."

It should come as no surprise to any pony that a being as old as Celestia would be a talented and well-versed scholar. For that reason, her study contained countless books on magical theory, alchemy, history, astronomy, and mathematics. In fact, Celestia herself wrote many books that were cherished by collectors across Equestria.

Among these many tomes, beakers, telescopes, and flanges, stood the dragon, Hastur, still graced by his purple and silver cloak. Surrounding him were four guards, chosen expertly by Alfred in a stroke of well appreciated genius for their looks. All were hulking, winged colts, with muscles bred out of an innate hatred and scorn for the world around them. One of the four had lost a piece of his lip in a bar fight, which caused his teeth to be visible through his grimace.

Another was missing a piece of his wing from an unsanctioned training exercise with live weapons. The third had a terrible scar just inches from his right eye, caused by a bite from some vicious creature in the woods near his home town. The fourth collected stuffed animals as a hobby, but was insecure about it to the point of frothing insanity. Anyone he believed to be making fun of him or who doubted his masculinity was on a sure path to pain. Because Celestia liked to choose royal guard from white-furred pegasus stocks for the spectacle, the lot gave the conceit of avenging angels.

Across from them had come to sit Celestia, who was busy scribbling notes from one of her books, paying no attention to Hastur or the guards. The average pony would have drowned in his own sweat by this point, but Hastur had no sweat glands. The average pony might have had abject fear written all over his face, but Hastur wore only the same mask of indifference he had walked in with on the very first day. The average pony might have quaked in horror after well over a half hour of sitting in silence like this, but Hastur was calmly chewing his pointed toenails with his serrated teeth, and was otherwise dozing with his eyes closed.

At length, Celestia placed her quill down on the table.

"How does this early afternoon find you, Lord Hastur?" she asked, the sound of a clock tock-tock-tocking away in the background.

"I am quite well, and yourself, Lady Celestia?" Hastur replied.

His voice was low and melodious, bounds ahead of what Celestia had heard from him just the day before. He was also carrying himself with more dignity, standing straighter and making more eye contact as he addressed her.

"I was wondering if you might like to share with me your selected choice of activities the prior night?" Celestia asked.

"If her Lady desires it," Hastur submitted. "Where should you like me to begin?"

"Where would you like to begin?" Celestia returned.

Hastur bowed, politely. "Thank you, your ladyship," he said, and divulged his explanation.

Hastur had been with Incitatus for much of the early night, enjoying the entertainment of an upscale bar privy to many rich government officials. There were, of course, many dancing fillies and much alcohol for the purpose of consumption, but Hastur was interested only in one thing. He desired to learn about Equestrian ponies so that he might carry out his duties as negotiator.

Incitatus had been a very good host. He paid for drinks and introduced Hastur to countless mares, offering very helpful advice on how to talk to them in a way that put them at ease despite Hastur's imposing facade. Hastur was also introduced to many upstanding ponies in Canterlot's political and money loaning industries, and they were perfectly concordant with Hastur after a few glasses of their favorite beverages.

However, as the long and illuminating festivities drew to a close, Incitatus found himself beyond drunk, and he mentioned that there was a night court being held in the castle. Incitatus had been too incoherent at the time to give any helpful details, and none of the other party goers seemed terribly aware of what he was referring to. Thus, when Incitatus had passed out and there was therefore no more money for drinks and no more guide to social gatherings, Hastur believed it would be sagacious to visit the courtroom to see if any proceedings had been missed.

By this time it was already quite late, perhaps nearly two in the morning, Hastur estimated, but he did not want to neglect an opportunity to observe the element he would be acting in for the foreseeable future. Sadly, the court was empty, and Hastur thought he had lost out on anything that may have taken place by now, but imagine his surprise when another young princess found Hastur waiting in the halls.

She bade him enter. Then, to Hastur's distress, she moved the moon. Because of his shock, the princess rued her actions with much rancor and fret.

"She was morbidly aggrieved," Hastur concluded. "She informed me that there might be dire consequences for what she had done, and in pity I offered to help her think of a way to evade discipline. It would benefit neither of us to incur your wrath, but I'm afraid that stretching the truth was all that came to mind."

Celestia was stunned. She had expected a variety of results, but she hadn't bet highly on direct honesty. In her mind she envisioned Hastur's meeting with Luna to be something so sinister, but from his perspective he sounded as though he were merely a bystander in a confusing new land. Of course, Celestia considered, Hastur actually *was* a bystander in a foreign land. Still, she resolved to play things safe.

"Luna told me she raised the moon in the middle of the night after waking up late," Celestia falsified, "I thought she had done it for the attention, but she did seem a little fishy."

"Please, Mistress," Hastur besought, waving his claws parallel to the floor, "Luna seems to be an ambrosial young filly. The guilt is entirely mine! I should have located a suitable attendant before itinerating about the castle."

Celestia knew there was far more to life than black and white. Honesty and dishonesty were both extremely dangerous weapons in the right hands. They were both merely tools to interact with others and to reach your own goals. Just because Hastur was being straightforward and thinking about Luna's benefit did not mean things were exactly as they seemed. However, Celestia would have gone insane to suspect everyone and everything of being manipulative to such a degree without ample proof. Even though Hastur was odd, he hadn't yet brought harm to anyone in Canterlot, and his visit was for truly important matters.

Celestia cheered up, and sunlight subtly blustered into the room as she did. There were certain perks to being the sun goddess as far as good lighting went.

"Why, my Lord Hastur, it sounds like an honest mistake," she assured him. "No one is going to be punished." Her face cracked for an instant on the world 'punished' as she recalled her sister's heart-obliterating glare that morning. "The reason I called you here was because Lord Incitatus claimed he'd been hit over the head the other night. He thought it might have been you, but he was so drunk I suspect he must have hurt himself in a fall."

"Are muggings quite common in Canterlot?" Hastur asked.

"Not at all," Celestia replied, "But in any case, I do not think you'll be implicated in any unnecessary trials. It's really just for the Duke that I brought you before my attention in the first place. I'm sure you know how subordinates can be."

"Quite," Hastur allowed, "But now that it is all out in the open, your ladyship, I would like to discuss Lady Luna."

Celestia gazed quizzically at Hastur. She thought carefully about her next move and decided she'd rather err on the side of confidentiality here. The guards were merely a formality in any case, as they couldn't protect Celestia from anything if she was not capable of protecting herself.

"Please excuse us," Celestia commanded.

The royal guard trooped out, leaving Celestia alone with the tattered, yellow lizard in his smart black and silver cape.

"Is Lady Luna in good health?" Hastur asked. "Has she been plucking out her own feathers or displaying other signs of mental fatigue?"

"What do you mean?" Celestia pried. The exterior of her good mood was fading, and with it the room dimmed as if the sun were obscured by an overhanging cloud.

"Last night she seemed stressed, to put things mildly," he explained, "and she seemed quite lonely. As I understand, solitude can play havoc on a pony's ability to rest peacefully during sleeping hours."

Celestia crossed her hooves across her desk. "Luna has always had trouble making friends," she said quietly.

"I think I can help in a meaningful way," Hastur offered.

Celestia's eyes narrowed. She was just about to cut Hastur some slack and leave him the benefit of the doubt, but now he had to get himself involved in Celestia's family matters.

"How?" she asked, coldly.

"I could prepare for her a magic that will make her feel better," he said.

"Luna isn't sick," Celestia stated flatly.

"But I can cure her of shyness, and I believe I know an excellent way to find her more little pony friends than she ever thought she could have."

Celestia leaned forward over her desk. "If you toy with me about my sister," she warned, "They dare not dream of the things I will do to you. There won't be words to describe it."

Hastur held up a hand in placation. "Not to worry, Mistress, I am not offering my services for free. There is, of course, a catch."

In some small way, it did cause Celestia to relax. The worst scams always promised something for nothing. They baited you with the allure of gain at minimal effort, then took everything from you while you were distracted. There was always a weight to every accretion.

"We ask that you aid us in our war," Hastur proposed.

Celestia shook her head. "I couldn't commit my country to conflict for personal reasons," she replied.

"We are hedging only on your pegasi," Hastur insisted. "If you can promise us that, then I will help Luna with all of my power. I will help to rebuild her old palace, and I will see to it she does not spend another night alone. Furthermore, your ponies have also been granted permission to take spoils from any location we liberate. There was much protest from the other dragons about this, but Lord Nyarlathotep has ruled that if they were fools enough to lose them in the first place, then they do not deserve to keep their holdings."

Celestia was torn. She had mediated petitions for war in the past, but Luna had never been one of the bargaining chips. Celestia wanted so badly for Luna to be happy. She wanted the only other pony who would live and grow with her over a long life span to be her friend and her family.

"I cannot make a promise now. I'll need to talk to my general first, and there will be time between now and when the pegasi are ready," Celestia surrendered. "But if you can make good on your promise, then I will see to my end of the bargain."

"Wonderful," Hastur said, clasping his hands together. "I see good things in our futures."

Lieutenant Colonel Sunshine had changed the drills. She was flying in formation now with a squadron, reaching out long distances past Canterlot. Out in the various fields and forests she had planted her own sentries. When the squads flew over these points, which were subject to the decisions of the sentries themselves, the watchers were to rush out from hiding and tag Sunshine's scouting groups.

Her ponies would scatter in all directions and make an effort to confuse their pursuers, zagging back and forth and crossing paths with one another to force the sentinels to lose distance and miss their marks. The sentry was to be regarded as an invincible dragon, so once he was upon them the squad's only order was to survive and return to base.

Sunshine hoped it was good practice. Among other things, there tended to be long stretches of time between leaving base and getting spotted, so her ponies would dose and lose focus. It was exactly what she sought to avoid. Sunshine only wished she had a way to make her sentries as large and imposing as a real dragon so that the squads would be a bit more on edge.

"Up above!" somebody shouted.

Well that was certainly clever of some pony, Sunshine thought. It must have taken enough effort to come down on top of them without being noticed. If there was another sentry coming up from below, she'd have to give those soldiers a reward. She gazed overhead and beheld the sight of four golden horseshoes descending smoothly out of the sky on massive wings like a concord jet. It was none other than the goddess Celestia herself, her prismatic mane streaming behind her with perfect noblesse.

She dropped low to the formation and hovered directly above Sunshine. "Hello!" Celestia shouted downward, conversationally. "I'm looking for the Lieutenant Colonel. Might you be her?"

Sunshine began to salute with her wing, which caused her to stumble in flight and lose altitude. "Yes, sir!" she barked. There was no point equivocating over whether she should have used the honorific 'miss', 'ma'am', are any other possibility. Training was training: why try to bend it for social reasons?

"I like your hair," Celestia commented. Sunshine was following Bucephalus's orders, and her head was uncovered. "You've got an awful lot of flight plans drawn out for today. What are we doing?"

"An escort mission," Sunshine replied smartly, giving the signal to form up on Celestia.

A number of very bored faces suddenly became quite serious as they protectively surrounded the princess. Most of them couldn't hear what was going on at the front of the group, and their tedious drill had suddenly turned into the genuine article.

"Oh, well I don't want to get in the way," Celestia minded. "I was just wondering if I could ask a favor."

Sunshine didn't like Celestia's mode of giving orders. Sunshine preferred clarity. If she was going to have to do something, then she would rather simply be told what she was going to do. The illusion of a choice was just frustrating.

"Yes, sir," Sunshine affirmed.

"I was hoping you could spare a few members of your squadron for a little top secret mission I had in mind," Celestia told her.

There were really no options. Why did Celestia bother making a personal effort out of this sort of thing? All Sunshine's squads would be gone by tomorrow, but wasn't there some way to make a rushed yet indifferent command from the top?

"We'd be delighted sir, just take whoever you need before tomorrow," Sunshine said.

"Great!" Celestia exclaimed. "Well, I don't want to keep you, Colonel. Please enjoy the rest of your day."

Celestia banked aerobatically away from the squad then flew at high speed for Canterlot. Sunshine gave the flag to return to their original formation. Weren't there important things Celestia ought to be doing, Sunshine wondered. Sunshine would just about kill to get the pampered job of sun goddess if she could. The nerve of just flying around from place to place,

pestering hard working ponies in the middle of their jobs like it was some kind of game. That mare must not have had a care in the world. Still, her hair was amazing, though, and that filly could fly.

Chapter 7

Slumber Parties are Magic

Luna lay on the floor of Celestia's courtroom, cards at her hooves and a candle between she and Alfred. The night was dragging on wearily, and Luna was not having much fun.

"I'm bored," she whined.

Alfred rubbed his balding scalp. "Perhaps we could visit the gardens, Mistress Luna," he suggested.

Luna groaned and set her head down on the bare carpet. "The gardens aren't pretty at night," she complained.

The two sat in silence. Alfred asked Luna if she had any twos. She did.

"Two is the loneliest number," she sang halfheartedly.

"I think two is quite alright," Alfred reposed.

Luna glared at him. He was wrecking her song. She might have told him that too, but the sound of the latch at the court's double doors echoed off the walls. The heavy doors swung open, and there in the entryway stood Hastur, like the visage of death if the Grim Reaper were yellow. He paced to where the two of them were spread out. Alfred tensed as Hastur ceremoniously bowed to Luna.

Luna crawled to her feet and nervously curtsied.

"I came to offer an apology, Goddess" Hastur said. "One for last night, because I feel that I imposed, and another because I'm afraid I told Lady Celestia about our meeting."

"Oh," Luna replied. "No, it's ok."

"I presume she came to find out you why you lied," Hastur said. "I asked to be held accountable, but she did not seem mad. In fact, you seem to be alright."

"I'm fine," Luna said primly.

Finding nothing more could be said, Hastur pointed to the cards on the ground. "Are you playing a game?" he asked. "I have little else to do tonight. May I join you?"

Alfred gave a worried glance to Luna, but Luna didn't want to be rude. It was just cards; Hastur had nothing evil to gain by playing with her. She nodded, and Hastur sat down. She dealt him a hand from the deck.

"How do I play?" Hastur asked.

"Do you have any fours?" Luna asked.

Hastur shuffled through his cards. "I haven't," he replied.

"Then you're an old maid," she said sardonically, checking his reaction for signs of protest. "Do you have any threes?"

He surveyed his hand a second time. "Yes," he said.

"Then give them to me," Luna ordered. Hastur obeyed. "You lose three points. Do you have any sevens?"

Hastur slowly lowered his cards and gazed at Luna's face. She was waiting for him in a fog of sadistic amusement. "I don't have any cards at all," he said. "My turn is completed."

"What?" Luna cried. "You can't do that!"

"I can," Hastur informed her. "When I do not have the cards you are seeking, I am called old maid, and when I do, I am penalized. Therefore, I surrender, and thus win the game as much as I am able."

"That's not fair!" Luna reached up with a hoof and pulled Hastur's cards down where she could see them. "You do have a seven!" she accused. "You lose at least seven points! No, fourteen!"

"What! Are my losses doubled for surrendering?" Hastur asked, appalled.

"No, for lying!" Luna replied haughtily. "Do you have any fives?"

"You just saw that I have!" Hastur lamented, "Please, it is the other gentlecolt's turn now."

"You lose another five points!" Luna teased. "And you lose another two for stalling!"

"Goddess Luna, I am Viscount Hastur of Carcosa!" Hastur proclaimed, throwing his cards down.

Luna began to giggle. At first Alfred had been rather concerned about the dragon, but seeing Luna so in control here put him more at ease. It was certainly nice to see his mistress a bit on the chipper side as well.

"We are playing by her ladyship's rules, Lord Viscount," Alfred said matter-of-factly, winking to the guest, "You have to understand that the way you win the game is by being the moon goddess."

"And you lose by being the evil viscount!" Luna chimed in.

Hastur eyeballed the pile on the ground suspiciously. "Then what's the point of all these?" he asked, waving his hands around.

Luna gathered his cards together and tried to shove them back into Hastur's claws. "You have to play with them!" she insisted.

Hastur deflated. "This game is very much like real life," he sighed.

Luna rolled her eyes, then spun over on her back. She spread her wings out for balance on the marble. "Tell me about it," she commiserated.

Hastur grievously stared at what remained of the playing hand between his scaly fingers, but then a thought seemed to strike him.

"Is this much like a sleep over?" he asked. "I have never had one, and I am told that makeovers are simply divine."

Luna cocked an eyebrow. "Seriously?" she asked, a touch of inconsolable hope forcing it's way out. A dawning fugue of alarm passed over Alfre'd face.

"Do you think we could paint my nails?" Hastur begged, holding his talons up and wagging them flamboyantly. "Duke Incitatus painted his, and they were the most gorgeous shade of blue. I'll do yours if you do mine." He tapped his fingers to his cheeks in excitement.

Luna flipped over to her feet. "You want that?" she asked. "You really want to have a make out -" Luna rattled her head, "I mean, you really want to have a make over?"

"Would it make sense for a dragon to paint his spines?" Hastur asked, clapping his claws together.

Luna began to feel herself being swept away. "Celestia bought me a very expensive kit for me to use with my first friends." She was trotting in place, but stopped. "Well, not my first ever friends, but my new friends."

"Heavens. Go!" Hastur pressed, waving for her to run.

Luna took off for her room at full speed.

"Goodness," Alfred remarked after she had left, "My heart nearly stopped when she mentioned her first ever friends. I thought for certain the next words out of her mouth would be, 'my first ever friends are all dead now,' and then we'd lose all that joy in one swoop."

"I'll remember to steer clear of that," Hastur resolved.

"Honestly, though, when I first saw you I didn't expect you to be much of a dandy. What ever compelled you to ask for a makeover? Now we're both stuck!" Alfred chided.

"I'll have you know that Carcosans do not have gender roles," Hastur admonished. "Furthermore, it's quite presumptuous of you to assume my gender in the first place." The bass in Hastur's voice did nothing to reinforce the implied femininity of the statement. "I, for one, intend to have a splendid time enjoying one of a young filly's rights of passage."

Alfred found himself perfectly dumbstruck. "So you're saying that you're a -"

"The real question you should be asking is how did I find out about make overs in the first place!" Hastur placed a hand on his chest. "Of course, as the proud parent of three hatchlings of my very own, naturally I should be interested in discovering how mares take care of their babies."

Alfred found himself feeling a tad hot under the collar. His face was growing bright red. "Oh. Well, I'm sorry miss – er, ma'am," he coughed apologetically.

The both of them sat in awkward silence until Luna returned. She was surrounded by a whirlwind of makeup, exfoliating products, teen filly magazines, and other female paraphernalia. In her mouth she was dragging a series of dresses, which she was accidentally drooling on. Luna's eyes were alight with hope and vitality, but she slowed to a trot on her way in just in case Alfred and Hastur were not quite in the same tizzy as she was about the whole thing.

She set the materials down gently, and at once lost confidence. She smiled bashfully, feeling silly about having gotten so worked up. It was easy to lose momentum to a face like Hastur's. The lizard, on the other hand, rose to his feet and examined the lipsticks and mascaras as they rolled across the floor.

"My word," he breathed, lightly gripping Luna at the shoulders, "You've brought everything! Let's start with a fashion show. Alfred will be the judge."

Alfred released a deep sigh of relief, and the passion rekindled in Luna's expression. A flurry of makeup rose into the air. Like a complex orchestra conducted by a well-oiled machine, Luna helped apply all ranges of cosmetic products to Hastur's crocodile-like face. He tried to return the favor for Luna, but even with the magazines as guides, Hastur found he was not terribly proficient at the nuances of looking good, and Luna had to reapply next to everything. Luna won the contest of course, with a perfect score from the only critic. In an upset, Haster called for Luna to get the opinions of the guards stationed outside, but they naturally, even if uncertain about the entire extravaganza, sided with Luna.

The night passed by in an endless stream of trying on dresses and Hastur protesting that he really was quite attractive by Carcosan standards. There

were quizzes about colts, there were mud treatments, pedicures, and the night chef was asked to prepare special meals for the event. At one point in the festivities, Alfred was perfectly shocked to learn that Luna had shared a first kiss with some young buck in literal ancient history. When the dragon began trying to explain Carcosan mating rituals, Alfred was forced to leap to his hooves and stutter, in a conniption of embarrassment, that the Viscount was to be thanked but he had said quite enough.

The hours of the evening waned thin, and soon came the cusp of dawn. Celestia's court room was a mess, and Alfred made it his duty to begin collecting shoes and stray game pieces from the regal red carpet.

"I dare say we have had enough fun for the night, mustn't you agree, Mistress Luna?" Alfred prompted.

Luna was entirely drained of energy. In fact, she may have stopped a bit earlier, but she had been spurned on by Hastur's enthusiasm.

"Alright," she concurred, gathering up several outfits at once with her magic.

The dragon began to scrape jewelry from his spines and claws. Luna was fairly certain he had eaten a few rings, but it wasn't as if they couldn't be replaced. His face was still laden with make up, which was about as attractive on his alligator maw as could be hoped - admittedly not very. He looked like he'd be going out to a hot nightclub to snatch zebras from the river banks and drag them under.

"For such an ad hoc affair, that was truly a lot of fun, don't you think?" he asked.

Luna bobbed her head emphatically. It was fun. She enjoyed spending time with Alfred, but he never had quite the pizzazz to make a night like that happen. He was polite, always weary of out-stepping his bounds, and was unusually content with the mundane.

Hastur examined his nails, now painted purple and dotted with little silver stars to compliment his cape. His spines were also painted purple, but Luna discovered that Hastur had etched engravings into them – he explained they were to help differentiate him from the other Carcosans – so she had painted silver lines following the patterns. Luna thought it looked

rather dashing, and she wondered if she ought to get her own horn engraved and painted. Celestia would never allow it, sadly, but it had the potential to be something of a fashion statement.

"Imagine if we had planned this," Hastur went on. "I believe we could have made quite creative use of the palace grounds."

"Like what?" Luna asked, shimmering garments orbiting above her. She really did want to have more court holdings like this.

Hastur placed his glittering talons beneath his chin. "Well, we could throw a veritable party, granted some organization. I imagine quite a few fillies would be eager to attend. Is it not the dream of most children to enjoy the luxury of royalty?"

"Oh," Luna whimpered. Her wings drooped. "I don't have a lot of friends, and I'm not very well known right now."

Hastur nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, yes," he mumbled. "However," he waved a claw in the air, "Perhaps that could be of some advantage."

Luna blinked. It sounded like Hastur was hatching an evil plan, but it seemed strange that he would be so dark about throwing a party. On the other hand, Luna was well aware that Celestia's own prime minister had a strange habit to be like that. Celestia once told her that Cecil plotted incessantly about all manner of inane things, but that was just the nature of an adviser. Reportedly, Cecil was one of the best prime ministers in recent history because he took his job so seriously and yet lacked any real ambition. Maybe Hastur had the same kind of personality?

"Here we are in Celestia's halls," Hastur said, walking to one of the stained glass windows. He placed a hand on the frame. "Yet the institution is ancient. Stale."

Hastur plodded back to Luna. Alfred eyed him suspiciously. Things were becoming serious again with this lizard despite the makeup, and mother of three or not, Alfred did not want trouble of any kind from him or her.

"You, Goddess," Hastur said, holding his claws out to her, "Are new to the ponies."

"I'm behind the times," Luna dismissed, shaking her head.

"Then you have an old world charm," Hastur insisted.

"I'm afraid that Mistress Luna is not interested in politics at the moment, Lady Hastur," Alfred interjected in Luna's defense.

Hastur threw his arms out. "Who said anything about politics?" he asked. "I merely believe that you, Goddess," Hastur pleasantly dabbed Luna on the nose; Luna flinched, "Have the potential to be the most beloved celebrity in all of Equestria. We could throw parties in your honor every night, and the ponies would come to celebrate you and tell you how wonderful you are. How beautiful you are!"

Luna blushed and cast her eyes downward. It was essentially all she ever wanted, but reaching out for that goal had always led to a lot of anger and frustration in her life. The more she struggled to be noticed, the more it backfired and the more she was shunned.

"I don't think it's that important," Luna capitulated evasively.

Hastur reached out and tipped Luna's head towards him so that she could see into his placid face. "Goddess, in my homeland we have a legend of two dragons: Mithra and her sister, Maonghah."

Mithra was famous for her ability to tease and inspire other dragons. She waved their desires beneath their noses and taunted them with the hope of gain. She always seemed just submissive enough and quite within reach such that all dragons thought they could own her. She promised riches to those of avaricious heart, romance to the lusty, and power to the ambitious, but always she stayed at arm's length. In time, she was pursued with ferocious madness by her suitors.

The sister, Maonghah, on the other hand, saw Mithra's popularity and believed she would place herself a step above. With equal wealth, beauty, and power, Maonghah would fulfill the desires of her suitors and rise above Mithra. At first her plan seemed fruitful, as Mithra's dejected and embittered hopefuls came to her to burn off their passions, but soon they came to take Maonghah for granted. Her wealth dwindled and her power slipped – many dragons lost respect for Maonghah, and even the males that visited her

began to treat her like convenient refuse. After all, if a dragon is not to be eagerly chased, then surely she is not worth chasing!

At last, Maonghah barred herself from the outside world. She slept for many years, refusing to interact with others or to be stolen from again. Mithra, on the other hand, continued as before, and during Maonghah's sleep Mithra's courtiers became more numerous and worked into a greater frenzy than ever before. When at last Maonghah woke, most had forgotten that she ever satisfied them in Mithra's stead, but Maonghah formulated a new strategy.

Now Maonghah selected Mithra's suitors carefully, identifying the ones that were most desperate to have their needs fulfilled. She invited them to her domain, and whatever they sought, she indulged them, but only once. If they returned a second time, she would send them away. Word spread that Maonghah had returned to the world, and rumors of her deeds spread with it. The greedy flocked back to her lands and to court her again, but now she was quite choosy and only gave favor to those who brought gifts.

The favors themselves were often worth more than the courtesies, and as such it became common standard to bring Maonghah an offering. However, she selected fewer and fewer suitors to satiate, and eventually it became a matter of gambling. Each dragon would do his best to bring the largest and most impressive charity, and she would choose one of hundreds on a whim. The contributions eventually summed to be worth more than any need Maonghah fulfilled, and her wealth soared beyond what it had ever been.

Both Mithra and Maonghah came to be of equal influence in Azathoth and were both widely sought after. However, one day, Nyarlathotep, the king of dragons himself, proposed he could tame the two at once. When he came to Maonghah she submitted to him, and he lavished her with prizes. When he found Mithra, in comparison, she slunk just ever so slightly beyond Nyarlathotep's grasps, hoping to prolong his attention and gift-giving. Yet though this had worked for her with countless dragons before, Nyarlathotep took her polite refusal as a personal insult, and Mithra was made no more.

"I see some parallels between your life and the story of Maonghah, Goddess," Hastur assessed. "Like her, you have been given a new ability to reinvent yourself and reach your avidity."

"I don't want to be some kind of royal prostitute," Luna protested uncertainly.

"Well I should certainly hope not!" Alfred gasped. "Lady Hastur, this is hardly the kind of advice to be giving to the Young Mistress!"

"You needn't be," Hastur responded to Luna, coolly ignoring the butler. "Maonghah's tactics for wealth and popularity were ones that she devised and chose herself. In my opinion it is foolish to dismiss romance or any tool in your repertoire of social combat, but as Goddess Luna you are free to choose your own colors and road to recompense."

"But..." Luna paused. She looked to Hastur imploringly. "Well those dragons seem..." She let her eyes wander, and she huffed in exasperation. "They seem clever," she managed, bleeding hurt into the observation.

Hastur reassuringly placed one of his talons on Luna's back. "Dearest Goddess," he cooed, "Cleverness is merely smoke and mirrors. I am sure you could be made to look the same."

Luna frowned. "You mean I can look clever, but you don't think I'm clever already," she accused.

Hastur released her. "Maonghah's benefit was that she learned humility while her sister enjoyed success," he said, changing the subject. "I feel the lesson of modesty has been pressed upon you cruelly. However, I believe that everyone who has met you personally would like to see you succeed. Myself, your sister," Hastur looked to the servant, "And Alfred too, I am sure."

"Of course, as much as anyone," Alfred obliged. He seemed to want to say more, but there was nothing to protest about encouraging Lady Luna.

"I have been thinking about your situation since we first met," Hastur said to Luna. "I think that perhaps we should consider rebuilding your ancient castle in the Everfree Forest. All this," Hastur said, motioning to the room in general, "Was not designed to compliment you properly."

"That sounds rather ambitious," castigated Alfred. "I would love to see Lady Luna ascend to her proper place eventually, Lady Hastur, but such things

cost a great deal of money, and we would absolutely need to have Lady Celestia involved in the matter."

"I already have her consent," Hastur snapped.

Luna's ears perked. "She said she was ok with rebuilding my castle?" She asked, shocked.

Hastur nodded. "Yes, but this is not a matter of following her orders. The decision to embark on this project is left entirely to you, Goddess."

Luna thought back to when her castle was first built. There had been parades commissioned by Celestia and a lot of pomp about its completion, but the walls came to grow cold and empty. Luna had her power, but she had nothing the world wanted. Celestia chased off the vultures picking for free meals, and Luna was not good at politics.

"I don't know," Luna replied bitterly.

"You do not need to make a decision tonight," Hastur relented. "However, I feel that once you have your temple, you will have ponies to dance in the moonlight with you. I swear I will make it happen. If you decide to try, then meet me at your former castle tomorrow night. Otherwise, it will merely be an interesting historical foray for me, and I will bring something to read to pass the time. Just promise to think about it."

Luna reluctantly agreed.

Chapter 8

Morale is Magic

Celestia sat on her throne before a throng of expectant ponies. The order of the business today for most was requesting defense and troop commitments. If they weren't there for that, then plenty of provinces were looking to sell Equestria war materials, and the nation's bankers were practically murdering one another to propose loans to the state. This all before Celestia had announced anything remotely final, and only two days after Hastur had arrived in the court. In a few weeks, the long distance travelers would arrive, and at that point the court room would be smothered in bodies.

Celestia hadn't slept much the previous night, mostly staying awake wondering if she had been rash about bargaining with Luna's benefit. She felt she could turn this entire affair into something bloodless, but it was going to take time to get things moving, perhaps more time than she was allowing herself. That morning Alfred had also told her about Hastur's "sleep over" with Luna and the end result of the event.

Aside from the initial shock of Hastur being female, supposedly, Celestia was reeling from how quickly Hastur was trying to complete his goals with her sister. She thought there might be a planning stage before Hastur made his move, but he was going to Luna's old castle this evening to discuss rebuilding the place. Originally, Celestia's ploy had seemed like a win win situation. The dragons would go out of their way to help restore Luna at their expense, and in that time frame Celestia would be free to make her own arrangements.

"And if we lose the apple farms then the company doesn't just suffer, the entire nation suffers," finished the determined pony standing at Celestia's hooves.

Celestia focused on the colt, only the last portion of his complaint having gotten through at all. She could swear she had just seen this pony asking Celestia to pay for apple orchards in the desert not long ago.

"I'll bear that in mind," Celestia said sweetly, "But as I informed the other patrons, Equestria is not yet at war, and there's no need to panic."

"Well it couldn't help to add a little armed to defense to the orchards anyway, just in case!" pressed the colt.

Celestia dismissed him with a sigh. In the crowds, Hastur had made himself a center of attention. Incitatus had been ecstatic about the dragon's newly painted nails and spines, and to the courtiers it appeared as though Hastur was trying to stand out. Of course, because he already stuck out like a swollen, gangrenous thumb, wearing flashy clothing and trying to get noticed only made Hastur blend in better. It caused him to seem as though he were struggling to be liked by the court, and that had the effect of putting the ponies at ease. They could trust a strange diplomat desperate for their approval.

Not only was he mixing in better just through appearance, but Hastur had been busy since the morning painting a lovely verbal picture of Azathoth. Celestia could overhear him talking about exotic rituals and strange historical anecdotes. He rambled about the plant life and about the dragons themselves, their society much like that of Equestria's, but yet so much more primitive, he regretted. He made no qualms about confirming the rumor that Azathoth had more gemstones laying around than any dragon knew what to do with.

He made it sound like a place of adventure and excitement, which is just what every pony wants to hear about foreign lands. However, Celestia noticed that Hastur's tales were perhaps a little too exotic. There were next to no ponies who had ever survived a trip to Azathoth and back again, but there was at least one famous case who claimed he had, and his books defined much of what Equestria perceived of the land in present day. That colt was never able to produce maps of the area and many doubted his honesty, including Celestia, but all the same, every year hundreds of adventurous ponies came forth with plans to hunt for the mystical dragon cities and artifacts from the stories.

Celestia strained to hear Hastur over the begging officials, at last catching him spinning some thread about vast magical gardens made to cultivate precious minerals. She was sure it was almost exactly the kind of thing written in the fables about the place. This meant either one of two things

were true: Equestria's understanding of a land it had never visited was completely accurate, or Hastur was merely aware of what his hosts believed Azathoth should be like, and he was feeding their ignorance.

Celestia leaned over to Cecil, which more or less train-wrecked the presentation a filly had been trying to give to her.

"I've had enough games," Celestia whispered. "I want you to find your cousin and ask him to meet with me."

Cecil snapped out of his own preoccupied thoughts, his hooves still rubbing together malevolently. "Cousin Miracle?" he asked ruefully. "Must I? He properly weirds me out, Mistress."

"I know," Celestia replied, "But if anyone knows whether or not you are your own father, it will be him." She nudged him with her nose insistently. "Go on."

Cecil rose from his seat and bowed before Celestia. "Thank you, Mistress. This is a sincere weight off of my shoulders! I'll fetch our chief auditor at once!"

He scampered past a series of charts and diagrams set up in front of the throne and ran out the door.

"Chief auditor?" squeaked a horrified, cruelly interrupted filly, still in mid-exposition.

"I'm sorry, dear, you were saying?" Celestia offered.

"N-no!" the filly stammered, nervously tearing down her entire presentation. "I mean, all done! Thank you."

Cecil wandered about the hallways of the castle. The key to finding Cousin Miracle, he believed, was to identify a pony that was most likely to be spying. Of course, the thing about a spying pony was that he would be doing his best not to get noticed. Therefore, it stood to reason, quite logically, that if Cecil wanted to find a spy, he should look for a pony that was least likely to be a spy in the first place. It was this deductive brilliance that nearly held all of Canterlot's jams in an iron hoof of submission.

At last he stumbled upon a likely candidate. She was a bright purple maid dusting one of the potted plants in a meeting room. That was just the kind of dim-witted masquerade a spy would use to disguise his mighty brain power. Cecil approached the filly cautiously.

"Pssst!" he hissed.

The maid drew her full attention to Cecil, the feathered duster still clenched between her teeth. She stared at him for a few seconds, bewildered, before she remembered to curtsy. A clear sign, of course, that perhaps she was not a filly at all!

"Her mistress Celestia requires a Miracle," Cecil whispered cryptically.

The maid continued her vacant stare. She uncertainly clamped at her duster, waiting dutifully for any kind of elaboration at all. Cecil could tell that if she was a spy, she must be one of the best Equestria had to offer. However, he realized that there was a chance he was just talking to a confused maid.

"Pass it on," Cecil urged, covering all his bases.

The maid blinked. Cecil could tell he was not going to crack this one without a fight, but he presumed the message would probably get through one way or the other.

"Okay?" Cecil asked.

The filly nodded. Satisfied, Cecil left the room, winking at her conspiratorially as he went. A job well done.

Celestia returned to her bed chambers to find a middle-aged unicorn pony of reddish fur waiting in the center of her room. His mane was turning gray, and he carried himself with dignity, back straight and head high. He had no cutie mark, but this was none other than Miracle Cecil, cousin to the prime minister and one of the most influential money lenders in the entirety of Equestria. Many speculated that a blank flank was his cutie mark.

Celestia shut her door behind her and locked it. "Isn't it a little rude to wait for audience in a princess's bedroom?" she asked.

She had hoped to freshen up a little and to take a bath. Maybe even an hour of dozing would have been nice after a restless night and a long afternoon.

"I thought maybe you'd finally come to your senses," Miracle replied in cloaked bitterness.

Celestia offered a wry smile.

"Always business and never pleasure with you," the aging colt observed.

"Maybe," Celestia derided. "If you hadn't tried to corner me-"

"I've read the history books," Miracle snapped, calmly. "I know the score." He sighed and his posture sagged. "Although I can only blame myself for getting sucked in."

The two stared at each other levelly. Celestia had known a number of colts in her lifespan. Some fell for her harder than others, but the most emotional part for them was when they tried to move on or when they grew old in light of Celestia's eternal youth. Sometimes, as was the case with Miracle, they turned disappointment into resentment. There were countless warnings written by droves of jilted, disillusioned artists and courtiers, but, generation after generation, the other gender still learned the hard way on a regular basis.

"Well," Miracle said, raising himself up again, "I trust that the Cecil family banks have your support if push comes to shove in upcoming events. What else can I do for you, Celestia?"

Celestia ignored the slight of being addressed without a proper honorific – it was behavior in Miracle that was unlikely to be easily modified. "I'm sure you've heard of this Hastur character by now," she stated.

Miracle nodded.

"He's been prowling around the castle at all hours of the day and night, and quite recently I struck a deal with him regarding my sister. From now on I want to know every time he sneezes, and every time he does so I want it to be because I planned the sneeze in the first place."

Miracle thoughtfully rubbed his cheek. "That's going to be expensive," he informed.

Celestia shook her head. "Cost is not an object," she replied. "He's going to be helping Luna, but I think maybe I've been smothering her. She needs to be able to meet and deal with dangers without me constantly standing guard."

"But her trials need to be carefully orchestrated," Miracle finished. "I understand." He gazed tranquilly at Celestia. "What is Hastur getting?"

"War," Celestia pronounced.

Miracle betrayed no surprise, but merely seemed bemused. "Equestria is getting the worse deal," he appraised. "I hope there are some strings attached."

"No, none," Celestia said, quietly. "Equestria commits to conflict when Luna is happy."

The two exchanged long, morbidly blank expressions.

"You are wonderful," Miracle acclaimed. "I don't care if you'll outlive me. I need you in my life, Celestia. No other mare can compare."

Celestia felt sick. Running a nation required so many steep twists and turns. Colts like Miracle were essential, and sometimes little foals never saw their mommies or daddies again. Sometimes a pony guilty only of being in the wrong place at the wrong time was dragged into the streets, kicking and screaming and crying, and that pony was executed in front of a jeering crowd. Of course, Celestia had to be willing to do to her own family the same as she did to others.

Miracle misjudged Celestia's calculated move for ironclad genius, but the truth was that he was merely observing the cost of a mistake. She had let her emotions and her ego get the better of her, thinking she could roll the dice and play the odds. Now she was backtracking and loading the dice while they were still rolling. Miracle's praise only made it feel dirty and evil.

She met Miracle with a face of stone. "I'm sure you know there's no need for any extremes," she warned him.

"Of course!" Miracle comforted. "I'm a professional. Luna will never notice the difference."

Lieutenant Colonel Sunshine stood at attention with the rest of her squads before General Bucephalus, who was briefing them on their trip to Azathoth. Apparently, they'd just be doing short reconnaissance runs into the territory, looking for dragon encampments near the border that posed the most instant threats to Equestria. It was a non-combat operation meant to provide much needed information to the military's higher-ups.

They stood outside on the marching field, Canterlot's launching pads being much too small to accommodate the entire detachment under Sunshine's command at once. The entire platoon held at rapt vigil. Then, down from the heavens like an angelic figure, descended Princess Celestia, a faraway smile painted on her face. She came to a landing and trotted up beside Bucephalus, who cut short mid sentence and struck a salute.

Celestia leaned in and began to whisper to him, which made his ear twitch. Sunshine strained her own ears to catch what was being said, but couldn't make anything out. A few sentences passed, and a glare splattered across Bucephalus's stolid expression. He turned his head to protest, but Celestia playfully nudged him back to attention with the front of her muzzle, like a kiss.

It was frustrating for Sunshine to watch. Celestia seemed to be getting some kind of demented pleasure from tormenting Bucephalus, and she was sure Celestia's behavior constituted some kind of sexual harassment, but who could a pony report the princess to? Sunshine guessed that when you were the grand general, you just had to play along with whatever games the Goddess Celestia wanted to play.

Celestia finished with Bucephalus and stepped forward. "The following ponies will be joining a special, separate mission, guided specifically by me!" Celestia announced, her voice radiant to make songbirds jealous. "The ponies I call will remain here, and will be given private instructions."

Sunshine's pulse sped. She had been expecting this, but she wasn't sure how her soldiers would be diced and separated. One by one, Celestia called out the names, and Sunshine cringed. Celestia designated no fewer

than forty ponies, and by the end of it Sunshine's ears had subconsciously flattened against her skull. They were the best airponies and officers Sunshine had at her disposal – the very ones she had hoped to rely on as her crack teams.

Well, there was no doubting it as far as Sunshine was concerned. Celestia was trying to kill all of them.

Celestia surveyed her selection of hand-picked soldiers, their peers having flown off to the south for certain danger and likely disaster. The ponies maintained a charade of dutiful attitudes, but from the looks on their faces Celestia could see that they had been robbed of glory and prestige. They might have been among the first sanctioned ponies to forge into Azathoth, bearing the banner of Equestria's airforce, directed by General Bucephalus, who was rather well liked as an officer and was known to add his own theatrical flair to military affairs. Now they were as good as grounded, their wings clipped and ambitions yanked out from under them.

Furthermore, Celestia herself may have been revered and, she hoped, loved in the distant sense politically, but she was not known for her martial qualities in the modern era. Centuries ago they sang hymns about the warlord sun goddess when she united the country. Today, however, she was viewed as a stern pacifist – delicate, flowery, artistic, and scholarly. The ancient days of a Spartan Equestria were presumed to be a legacy Celestia killed. Her divine conflict with her greatest nemesis, Nightmare Moon, had been all but stricken from history by her very will.

"Attention!" Celestia barked, her eyes narrow and voice aflame with mettle.

The soldiers came rigidly to order at once, their faces going blank and slipping into automated training mode. Everything is better when it becomes clear that the new boss is in control, Celestia believed.

"I know a lot of you thought you were making history today," Celestia commanded. "I know a lot of you were told that the life of Equestria rested on your shoulders, and now you feel like that burden is being hung on everyone else!"

Celestia stalked down the line, staring down each pony as she passed, daring them to blink. She felt a lit fuse in her own heart. A little rush of intoxicating power pumping through her body.

"Well I've reviewed each of your personal records, and from what I've seen I didn't think it was all that wise to send this group on silly little errands – to ask you to flit about Azathoth, trying not to be seen or noticed while you draw maps and guesstimate how many miles are between oddly-shaped piles of rocks."

She held her wings out as she prowled back and forth, her regal mane flowing behind her in the wind. It made her look bigger, and as it was Celestia was already an imposing figure to most ponies. She was muscular, too, in her feminine way. She was well toned, and as she moved she pushed her hooves off from the ground with a stridency that exemplified good health.

"Instead, I want this squad playing an active role. While the rest of Colonel Sunshine's pegasi passively gather information, this group is going to be hunting it down and throttling the life out of it!"

The ponies were staring at her now. Celestia couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten this much into a public speech.

"We're not just going to be looking at dragons like a bunch of silly bird watchers, we're going to scour Equestria for the things, we're going to find them, and we're going to shake them down for everything they're worth. Today and every day until I'm satisfied that Equestria knows every subtle detail about Azathoth from the major cities to the color of King Nyarlathotep's royal underwear!"

Celestia could see the troops itching from their idleness, her own enthusiasm catching to the group like a disease. Who cared if Nyarlathotep probably didn't wear underwear or if there may not even be dragon cities.

"The only things dragons understand is force and territory, and we're going to let them know just whose territory they're in! Ever since we were foals they've been predators to us! We live in fear of their fire and their teeth, but I am sick of their bullying! It is about time we find these dragons, and so help me – we all know they're rich – we will make them pay their damn taxes!"

Celestia struck the ground. The sound of her hoof colliding with the earth flew up like a thunderclap, aided, in part, by her godlike magic. The soldiers cheered and stomped their feet. Those not taken in by the bravado chuckled; even if they thought Celestia was over-hyping their mission, they could believe the government would stop at nothing to collect taxes.

"Tax forms to every cave in Equestria!" someone yelled, and was met with another round of cheers and stomping.

Celestia waited for the ponies to settle.

"Make no mistake," she continued, "This mission is every bit as vital to the lives of our colts and fillies as anything you'll live to embark on. That's why I've personally chosen this group. You'll be working closely with the royal guard. However, my guard are well trained, but they've grown used to a life of pampered luxury, defending the pristine halls of an unassailed castle in the middle of the country. What I need now are real ponies that work for a living!"

A few of the soldiers beamed with smug pride. Others looked somewhat cautious to believe it. The royal guard were some of the most militant ponies in the known world, drilled constantly and of unwavering loyalty. It was borderline preposterous to think this group could even compare, but Celestia seemed to mean every word. It was uplifting, but also terrifying to imagine having to live up to such an expectation.

Of course, Celestia would be hounding the leaders of her royal guard relentlessly if they couldn't surpass a squad of common soldiers. It would be an outrage if they couldn't, and it would be a permanent black mark on the prestige of the guard's ranks until the day they all retired of shame and embarrassment. Celestia was going to guarantee that her plans would start with a bang – with a competition to impress her.

She summoned eight officers that would be leading the groups and dismissed the airponies to their own devices. Many of them took to the skies in a fit of pent up energy, chasing one another in mock combat. A few nervous ponies were being cheered by their friends, the friends thoroughly infected with Celestia's confidence. The officers before her showed no signs of their original disgruntlement; being wrangled into a special mission under the god princess was turning out to be all it should be.

"We're starting this in earnest tomorrow," Celestia informed them. "Today, I want you to meet with the royal guard and agree on where you'll be sending your teams. Organize with your ponies, and make whatever preparations you need."

The officers nodded eagerly.

"However, bear in mind that with these small groups, you shouldn't try to bring down any dragons unless you see an opportunity you know you have to seize. Rather, just make a note of where you found the dragon and where they appear to be living. We'll reconvene and get the big ones in force."

Again, the officers agreed. It was good to leave them some benefit of the doubt, to let them decide for themselves what constituted a fortunate turn of events. As long as the important orders were clear, the means by which they were achieved would benefit from impromptu creativity.

"Foremost, I want to know what the dragons know. If you find some that are cooperative or willing to talk in exchange for something reasonable, then that's what we're after. I'll give you all a list of general information we need, but any dragon that seems especially interested in talking to us should be reported to me. I have my own agenda aside from what's on the list."

Celestia looked one colt in the eye and held the gaze several seconds. He didn't flinch, and she smiled at him, angelically.

"Maybe we can do sort of a good cop bad cop thing?" she suggested. "I'll be the good cop," she purred, brushing a wing against his face, removing a stray hair. "Time permitting, I'll be joining different groups in an effort to make this as time efficient as possible, so try to leave room for me."

Celestia hoped that would give them a bit of a dilemma. Whatever group she flew with would be able to apprehend and interrogate any dragon in their path, which would let them finish their jobs in one pass. However, whatever group she did go with was likely to either be upstaged by her or would have to work themselves like dogs to impress her. On the other hand, a group without her would have to try to keep up with her on their own, or else she'd feel let down. Celestia was definitely going to have to hint at that somehow.

Celestia turned to leave, but glanced over her shoulder and peered at the officers through her prismatic mane. "I hope you all perform as well as I've heard about you," she said, fluttering her eyelashes suggestively. "Dismissed!" she shouted, punctuating the farewell with authority.

She took to the skies in a magnificent leap. From behind her she heard an impressed sigh.

"I think I'm in love," bemoaned one of the officers.

"What exactly are you doing with my ponies?" Bucephalus demanded, following Celestia briskly at her side as they traversed the hallways of Canterlot.

The smaller servants scuttled out of the way of the two larger horses, especially from underneath the enormous charger.

"I'm afraid that's top secret!" Celestia hummed dismissively.

"What, exactly, is strategically beneficial about the grand general not knowing what his forces are doing?" Bucephalus asked, his ear flipping with irritation. "Forty soldiers! What's wrong with the royal guard?"

Celestia leered at Bucephalus. "Did you know, when Luna and I were both little, Luna always wanted to play with *my* toys. She had her own, but for some reason mine were always more alluring," she commiserated.

Bucephalus searched her face, but she only gazed back at him acerbically and serenely. "They aren't toys!" he protested. "These are my soldiers!"

He cantered ahead and blocked his goddess's path.

"Stop!" he yelled.

They stopped. The two were in front of one of the royal libraries. A few ponies were milling about, books levitated in the air, but they paused to watch the ensuing scene.

"This has been ridiculous!" Bucephalus hissed. "Are you trying to undermine me? If things keep going this way we're all going to die! First

you tell me you've lost Hastur, then you cut a hole in my scouting efforts, and you won't tell me anything about your plans!"

Celestia softened, folding her wings against her body. "It's becoming apparent that I'm paddling upstream," she admitted. "I can stall for time, but sooner or later I'll lose energy and get swept away, backwards, with no idea where I'm going anymore. My court is becoming positively excited about the prospects of invading Azathoth, every important pony in Equestria already thinks it's going to happen, and even you have your troops riled up with delusions of glory and national pride."

Bucephalus scoffed. "The way my troops feel about this war is important," he insisted. "If they go to fight, not sure why they're there and not sure of gain, then they'll be killed. A pony seeks to avoid harm at all costs – it doesn't make them cowards; that's a priority to live. It's my job to make sure that they see the benefit to balance the risk. Your court is your problem, but as long as conflict is looming over us, my soldiers will be eager to prove themselves."

"No better breastplate than a heart untainted?" Celestia asked, quoting one of her prior grand generals.

"That's why it's important for you not to be pulling ponies from the ranks unexpectedly," Bucephalus concluded. "If you hurt their morale and make them think they're being wounded by their leadership, then nothing good is going to happen."

Celestia gave this some thought. It was a good point, but, on the other hand, she decided that Colonel Sunshine would probably feel fine after a few weeks of flying. From reports, she understood Sunshine was a bit on the lively side.

"As for Hastur," Celestia began, changing the subject, "He snuck out immediately after court this morning. Nobody knows for sure where he's gone. I have some idea, but it won't be practical to scramble pegasi to look for him."

"Why do you just let him roam freely around like that?" Bucephalus groaned. "Don't you remember that when he first showed up he mentioned something about allies even the dragons are afraid of? Shouldn't we be deeply concerned to ask him a little about that?"

Celestia shook her head. "I don't think we can trust Hastur in any case, at least not to be wholly forthcoming," she assessed, "But don't worry, I am looking into it."

Bucephalus was no longer shouting, and both horses had resumed a civil demeanor. With the show over, the spectators began returning to their routine business.

Celestia sighed. "General, come here," she suggested, motioning with her head.

Bucephalus shifted uneasily. "I don't want to play any games, princess," he complained.

"Come," she ordered, tapping her hoof against the marble floor.

He watched her guardedly.

"Bruce," she pleaded.

Bucephalus moved forward with a few mistrustful steps. Celestia pulled him towards her with a wing. She craned her head forward and kissed him gently on the neck.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, kissing him again.

Bucephalus resisted at first, his body tense, but he gave in by the second kiss. She reached up and kissed him behind his jawline. Bucephalus sighed, deeply. A gawking pony in the library giggled. Celestia was known to flirt from time to time, but this was considered special treatment to any male.

"I know you're just trying to do your job," Celestia consoled, kissing Bucephalus on the side of his face.

She held her lips close to Bucephalus' ear, which he rotated away from her breath. With a snap, she bit him.

Bucephalus yelped, rearing up and dancing backwards away from Celestia on his hind legs. "What the hell is wrong with you!" he roared. "What is your problem you crazy -"

The general remembered himself at the last minute and snapped to attention, his eyes distant points of white hot fire. A thin line of blood trickled from his ear. Several ponies, their eyes glued to the scene, gasped at the scandal.

"You should get used to expecting things to go wrong, Grand General," Celestia admonished. "Every pony always sees their fantasies first, imagining what events will be like when they get what they're after."

A pony in the peanut gallery made an all too audible crack about a virgin princess and was immediately hushed by his friends. Celestia peered at Bucephalus innocently, trying vainly to suppress her conceited smile while he gritted his teeth hard enough to make her worry. She did feel a little sorry for him, standing there, rejected in front of everyone, likely full of conflicting emotions being mainly overridden by anger. Humility would do him a little good, though; he'd gotten too used to being her courtier, and it was time for him to learn he'd work with what the god princess gave him.

"The thing is, I've been ruling Equestria for just as long as I can remember, but I cannot recall when I lost my mind," Celestia informed, strolling past the furious stallion, "But one thing is for certain." She used her wing to straighten out his mane. "It's gone!" She sang in a lovely falsetto.

She stopped to brush his coat with her feathers, examining the little details, noting the perspiration forming on his skin. "Oh, and in case you hadn't gathered from all this, I'm condoning a full mobilization to prepare for the worst, but take your time because we don't want to rush. Also, I think your idea of evacuating the cities is good. We could train militias to slow the dragons down, but even you couldn't teach them well enough to make a difference, and letting ponies fight without training would be the same as abandoning them."

Celestia passed the war charger, swatting him playfully on the nose with her glorious tail on her way by. It was rubbing salt in the wound, but Celestia liked Bucephalus when he was angry. Get him riled up at the mountains and there was nothing he could do by himself. That's why he'd get a large group of other ponies just as mad at them, and together they'd level the whole range. He got things done when he was mad, and a little nudge in the wrong direction could send him charging for miles in the right one.

She could play the stallion like a fiddle. It was just a pity for him that his particular kind of psychology had to be so painful. Of course, the trouble with being on top of so many others like Bucephalus was is that a pony in power often forgets himself. It was good for him to feel like he had something to struggle against. The more he thought Celestia was dooming everyone, the further lengths he'd go to see that every pony was safe.

Chapter 9

Giggling is Magic

Luna soared over the Everfree Forest, four of Celestia's burly royal guard trailing her. Celestia had been too busy to talk to Luna personally this evening, but she had sent the ponies to look after her, so that was something.

"It's alright, we can do this," encouraged Luna's inner voice.

"We'll just tell him it's a big mistake," Luna wavered.

"No!" cried her inner voice, *"How many times can we screw up as a princess? This time will go right for sure."*

Luna might have liked that logic before the rest of her brain caught up. *"That's just stupid!"* She accused. *"The fact that we've screwed up consistently goes to show that we shouldn't be a princess in the first place."*

She felt the truth of the statement sting and burrow in. There was such a thing as ponies who got jobs they shouldn't have, even if they could move the moon and the stars. Maybe Luna should run away and find a more sensible, low-impact living.

"Sure, we could be an activist and write letters to Celestia complaining about issues we only understand emotionally," remarked Luna's inner voice, glibly. *"Celestia hates that stuff."*

Sometimes Luna's inner voice had some strange streaks, and Luna didn't always follow the track it was on with perfect unity. *"Sounds kind of fun,"* thought Luna, although she didn't really want to find work that centered solely around upsetting her sister.

"Okay, it does," agreed her inner voice. *"But not for the rest of our immortal life, is the point! It's too easy, and we need something to challenge us. We're destined for better."*

"I just want to have another slumber party," Luna murmured.

"Then we're destined for the best slumber party ever!" encouraged her voice.

Luna could see her old castle nearing in the moonlight, looming like the dried carcass of a prehistoric animal. It was overrun with vines and crumbling beyond repair. Centuries of neglect had seen all its carpets and tapestries turn to squirrel nests and silverfish snacks. It was here that she had returned to as Nightmare Moon, and also where she was vanquished in one demeaning swoop that same night by dumb luck and the power of getting along with others. Luna didn't really want to go back.

She passed over the eastern wall and her mouth fell agape. Below her the ground was aglow with luminescence. Soft blues, delicate pinks, pulsating purples, and a myriad of other colors oscillated and gamboled across the earth to some unheard music in the night air. Tiny orbs of light bobbed about, touching one another then spinning away like drunken pixies caught in the midst of reverie. As Luna flew in closer, she noticed symbols etched into some of the ruined cobbles at the palace entrance. Light pooled in the recesses like water.

Her feet touched the ground, causing the colors and drifting orbs to flutter away from her as if startled. She stood in the middle of it, in her own little bubble of dimness while an atmosphere of sheer wonderment existed just feet beyond where she waited. It made her feel like an outsider stumbling into something she shouldn't see or where she shouldn't be. Her guards, apparently feeling the same sense of foreboding, came to rest uncertainly, trying their best to touch the spectacle with as little of their hooves as possible.

Luna plodded forward and the magical world receded from her, desperate not to be involved with the clumsy night goddess. She went from cautious steps to a full run, and the lights were driven away as fast as she chased them, unwilling to be besmirched by an imperfect creature. Her guards stayed put, watching Luna worriedly, unsure if they should move around or touch anything. Luna halted, frustrated, and tried valiantly to swat one of the glowing motes with her wing, but it skipped effortlessly away.

She turned to face her guards. Feeling abashed and a little childish, she refolded her wings and stared at their feet.

"What?" she demanded.

The guards exchanged glances and shrugged. As far as they were aware, Luna's palace had always been like this, and their charge was just exhibiting an old pastime of yesteryear.

"They should go," Luna's inner voice recommended.

"Why?" Luna asked, her feelings hurting for reasons she couldn't quite place.

"Look at all this," her voice asserted. *"We're surrounded by beautiful things we can't touch or play with. Not because we're told not to, but because we just physically can't. This place is all about isolation and loneliness."*

"Then I don't want to be alone!" Luna cried, panicking.

She looked pleadingly to the guards, who merely gazed on apprehensively at the princess.

"That's too bad," her inner voice reprimanded, *"because we've always been alone and we'll always be alone. Surrounded by vibrancy and not wanted by any of it! This place is for us! It was made for us!"*

Luna felt the tears coming and she cursed herself for being so weepy all the time. She was going to break down and cry in front of Celestia's best ponies, and they'd think she was crazy.

"Shut up!" Luna yelled at herself. *"Shut up, shut up, shut up!"*

"We may not have trusted him at first, but this Hastur, he's got our number," Luna's inner voice pressed on. *"This place is a metaphor for our entire life!"*

Luna cast her eyes to the unreachable halo of color beyond her hooves. *"I hate our life,"* Luna raved.

"Princess?" motioned one of the concerned guards.

"Do you think you could go?" Luna warbled.

A wave of perturbation rippled over the muscular, white colts. Leaving was pretty well contradictory to Celestia's one and only order.

"Look for wild animals, I mean," Luna corrected, "In case it isn't safe."

The guards obliged, fanning out and hunting the edges of the premises for danger. They did their best to keep Luna in the corners of their eyes as they went. Luna, meanwhile, traipsed to the entryway of the castle, glaring at the little bits of light and color as they scrambled away from her. Where was that dragon? He should have been outside to meet Luna the moment she arrived.

She wandered the ancient citadel, memories of the old days pressing in on her from the walls. Inside, the place was as dark and desolate as ever. Even as Nightmare Moon, it had been a small shock to see what time had done to things. She climbed a flight of barren stairs only to find a large portion of the second floor had fallen away. Across a chasm of destruction rested the yellow, tatter-winged Hastur, his back against a marble pillar, leg tucked like a bird and book in hands.

Luna leapt over the gap, flapping her wings to carry her the full distance, and trotted to the strange emissary. Close enough to get a good look now, she could see his eyelids were shut. He appeared to be napping. Luna propped herself up against a broken stone slab and looked over the dragon's shoulder to see what he was reading, but found the text to be in a completely incomprehensible alphabet.

Luna nudged the dragon on the elbow with her nose, causing the book to slip from his claws and fall to the floor. "Hastur!" she called.

Hastur stirred, eyelids flapping open and eyes swiveling in all directions before coming to focus on the young mare. "Ah, Goddess," Hastur observed in his deep baritone, bending down and collecting his tome, "So glad you could make it."

Luna sat on her haunches and waited expectantly.

"Did your trip find you well?" Hastur asked, kindly.

Luna huffed. "Are you being coy?" she interrogated.

Hastur stared for several seconds, then spread his hands to welcome her exposition.

"You don't know me!" Luna accused.

Hastur folded his arms and considered the statement. He scratched his head with some consternation.

"Goddess," Hastur began, "There are times when the things you say remind me we are but borrowing time on a speck of dust, hurtling through the emptiness of space, prepared for nothing but merciless death."

"What?" Luna asked, taken aback. That had seemed morbid and out of the blue.

"I think he means it's tough knowing the moon goddess is mentally unstable," quipped Luna's inner voice. *"Lighten up. Sheesh."*

Luna averted her eyes impotently to the floor.

"Shall we walk?" asked Hastur, placing a claw in Luna's mane.

Luna rose to her hooves and followed obediently to a crumbling window overlooking the palace entrance. From here she could see the supernatural garden of light and merriment.

"I put this together for you as a sample of what I had in mind for your new castle, Goddess," Hastur explained. He absently rotated his claw about the cuff. "It was just a trivial effort. I'm quite the expert with illusions, you see."

Luna found it somewhat hard to believe that the thing below had required little work. She had seen the etchings in the stone, and a number of them were spaced very carefully. She imagined it must have required at least the better part of a day.

"I saw it already," Luna confessed.

"Well?" Hastur inquired. "Does it suit you?"

"Don't blow it!" advised Luna's inner voice. *"Not everyone needs to know you're insecure and insane!"*

Luna brushed off her own mental nagging. "Why did you make it so everything goes away from me?" she censured. "It's my castle! Just because... Just because...!"

Luna couldn't bring herself to say it. Just because she was a worthless goddess that nobody wanted to see didn't mean that Hastur had to make her new castle reflect that. Luna didn't want to create darkness and suppress happy atmospheres everywhere she went.

In her head, Luna's inner voice stomped her hooves in the Equestrian equivalent of a slow clap. "*Bravo, psycho,*" the voice chided.

"Stop it!" Luna shouted aloud.

She froze, eyes wide. She had yelled at herself in privacy, but never in front of someone before. She began to flush, feeling the heat rising from her neck into her face. She wanted to check Hastur's reaction, but couldn't bring herself to look at him.

"I wasn't saying anything," noted Hastur, mildly.

"I know... I was just..." Luna stammered.

Hastur tapped on a crumbling wall. On it was carved some archaic symbols Luna didn't recognize. They were arrayed in a bizarre pattern, and a few of the characters looked like horseshoes. Looking at them made Luna feel dizzy and a little nauseous. She felt a lump in her throat, like words trapped in her gut trying to force themselves out. Luna screwed her eyes shut to fight off the sense of vertigo gripping her body.

"I have a greater concern," Hastur supplied. "Do you know what these are? Do you know what they mean?" he asked, calmly. The question sounded rhetorical, but it was loaded with an undertone of severity. "I've seen them scrawled all over the place, probably from well before I got here."

Luna tried to remember. They did look familiar, but she couldn't quite gather how or why.

"*Oh, hell,*" Luna's inner voice intruded. "*This -*"

A shock shot through Luna's body like a bolt of lightning. Her body shuddered violently, and she fell to her knees. She began dry heaving. Her eyes popped open again so she could see, only to be greeted by a painful, white light. Her ears began to ring. First with nothing but a buzzing, whistling, but it grew to a crescendo of tinny fluting from some great distance away. A horrible pounding of drums filled her skull, throbbing and pulsing to some ungodly beat.

"I can't -!" Luna panted between wretches. "I can't -!"

The shining, bright world began to spin, and in her periphery she could see tendrils enveloping her vision. From the center of the vortex, without moving, a small creature scuttled close to her. It was small, insect-like, but had the face of a maniacally grinning pony and sharp, wicked teeth. It reached out for her with its mangled paw, and Luna felt her body lurch, as if pulled by something behind.

At her rear, she heard laughter. Not fiendish laughter, but something honest and friendly. The thing there dragged her backwards, forcefully, away from the small beast ahead of her. Luna's senses became a blur. She thought she could smell baked apples somewhere. At last, she came to, as if waking up from a state of supreme tiredness, half dreaming and half awake.

Luna was lying on her back, Hastur's talons beneath her head, her spittle dripping on him and pooling on the ground. She couldn't remember how she had gotten here. She gazed, blearily, into the night sky, unable to remember why she was in her old castle. Where had the ceiling gone? Where was her bed? Pieces of context floated back to her. Was she on the moon? No, there it was in the sky.

Hastur spoke to her, but he was muffled, as if talking through a sheet of plastic some ways away.

"What?" Luna asked hoarsely, but the dragon's response came again with equal distance.

She was sweating. She was tired and panting. However, as she lay there catching her breath, cognizance returned. Luna remembered as far as why she was here. She remembered being angry about the glowing garden Hastur had made. She remembered knocking the book out of his hands,

and from the book she remembered the... words? No, not words. In his book there had been grotesque pictures of Hastur doing things to Luna. Bad things. Painful things. Depraved things.

"I said, I asked if this has happened to you before?" Hastur came through, sounding like a grieved parent. "Are you alright? Can you hear me?"

Luna's thoughts were trapped with Hastur's book. She had looked over Hastur's shoulder and saw horrible, unspeakable pictures of the most terrible things being done to her, and then she had been mad about the garden. That didn't seem right. Then they went to go look at the garden, and Luna had calmly gone with Hastur, even though he still had the book. That also seemed wrong. Why would she do that? Why didn't she remember reacting over those *awful* pictures? She shuddered. They made her want to run away and scrub herself somewhere, to hide from the world and count each of her body parts to be sure they were still where they belonged. They had been so *vivid* at the time, but increasingly, she found herself growing foggier and foggier as to what she had actually seen.

Somewhere in the back of her mind played the little song a pink mare had sung before she and her friends had turned Luna from Nightmare Moon into her old self. Something about giggling at the ghosties and... laughing at the lurid? Luna couldn't quite remember that either. Luna also didn't feel much like laughing.

"*What happened?*" Luna asked herself, the world becoming more solid and the terrible things slipping from her mind.

"*Ha! Ha! Ha!*" replied Luna's inner voice through a fog of static, mimicking the pink mare's mirthful little tune.

She felt Hastur scoop her off the ground, causing one of her glass horseshoes to slip off. It tumbled to the floor.

Luna kicked her feet, weakly. "Put me down!" she whined.

Hastur set her upright on her hooves. He must have been pretty strong to lift Luna like that.

"Are you alright?" Hastur asked her, searching her face.

"Yes," Luna replied, unsteadily.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Luna thought.

"You'll see that they can't hurt you, just laugh to make them disappear!" Sang her inner voice.

Oh, that was right, she had shouted at herself in front of him. That had probably made her look just a little cooky.

"I'm sorry," Luna explained. "Sometimes when I'm thinking about things I just get emotional. I wasn't yelling at you."

The look she drew from Hastur was scrutinizing and eternal. Luna became impressed that her simple clarification was somehow unsatisfactory.

"If he thinks he can scare you then he's got another thing coming and the very idea just make you want to -" Luna's inner voice carried on, oblivious to anything but the song.

Luna giggled. She felt pretty good, like she had just after being hit by the Elements of Harmony and immediately after being turned back into her old self.

"Alright, Goddess," Hastur muttered. "Perhaps we should leave the castle proper."

He shooed Luna at the tail towards the gap she had crossed to reach the upper floor. She went along cordially.

"I'll just live inside your tummy! It's not unsafe at all!" babbled Luna's inner voice.

Luna stumbled, as if drunk. She gathered her balance, but then stood perfectly still.

"Whoah," she said, a clamminess washing over her. "Oh, I feel sick. Really sick."

Luna hung her head low and prepared to vomit, but though her body gave every indication that she would, she didn't.

"I find that an excellent cure for motion sickness is to stretch my wings and fly around a bit," Hastur tried, hurriedly.

"We'll be so close together, and we'll dance up in the stars!" Luna's inner voice proceeded.

"But I'm not feeling motion sickness -" Luna tried to protest.

"Come on!" Hastur pleaded, tugging at her.

Luna dug her heels into the ground. "What's in your book?" She demanded. She couldn't even remember why she cared, but it suddenly seemed very important.

"Let's go for a fly and I'll let you look at it!" Hastur bargained, letting Luna loose.

"We'll both be one with everything!" cried Luna's inner voice, now tuneless. Somewhere in her mind, however, Luna could still hear music coming from somewhere.

"No!" Luna yelled, the horrible images creeping back up on her. "No! I'm the moon goddess and you can't keep things from me!"

"We'll both get everything we ever wanted!" her inner voice ranted. It no longer sounded fully like Luna.

"Here!" Hastur conceded, tossing the book on the ground between them. "It's yours!"

Luna scrambled away from the offensive codex. She suddenly felt as though the thing was going to suck her away to someplace terrible. Someplace dark. She felt as though Hastur were a part of it somehow, and she wanted desperately to be away. Her heart was beating rapidly, and her breathing labored. She wanted anything but to be here with Hastur and his evil book at this moment.

"Just laugh and make him disappear!" commanded the voice, not Luna's own. *"He dreams of violating us! The things he would do are unthinkable!"*

Luna wanted to blast Hastur into nonexistence. She felt the desire rise from her breast, and she would let it manifest as the complete destruction of the dragon. The power to do it was at her disposal. Then a strange sense of compassion for the ugly lizard welled up from nowhere, and Luna lost the nerve. Instead, she turned and fled at high speed, taking to the air like a frightened finch.

"Stop!" wailed the voice. *"We can fight!"*

Luna could not stop. She had felt pressured and panicked, and her body had been given the signal. She flew, and she would fully commit to fleeing. Away she sped from the castle like an arrow, head down and eyes closed. She felt the air battering against her body as she accelerated, not sure of her direction or destination, just merely that she was headed away. That was all that mattered.

On she went until the terror in her heart abated, and the sound of music receded until neither drums nor her own pulse were pounding in Luna's ears. She decreased her speed and eventually came to a halt, blinking in the clear night air.

"What the heck is going on?" came Luna's extremely confused inner voice.

Luna thought back. The details were fuzzy again, and she felt a tremendous weight on her eyelids. It was as if she'd been awake for days.

"We felt a little sick and we're flying around to shake it off," Luna explained. *"We feel better,"* she added.

"Where's Hastur?" her voice requested.

Luna looked around. It was still quite dark, and Luna couldn't make out any distinctive shapes.

"Where are our guards? Where's anypony?" the voice demanded to know.

Luna didn't know. She circled around the forest, trying to get her bearings, looking for landmarks of some sort.

"We're lost?" shouted Luna's appalled inner voice. *"How did that happen? When?"*

Luna just didn't know. One minute she was feeling a little sick, and the next she was here. Somehow, on the very tip of her memory, Luna thought she recalled a monkey with the head of a bird and no lower body, but she wasn't the slightest bit sure how that connected with anything in recent memory.

In the starlight, Luna spied a black speck flying towards her. She felt a strange chill.

"It is cold up here?" she asked herself.

"Maybe that's Hastur or one of the guards," suggested Luna's inner voice.

Luna went towards the figure, fighting an unusual sense of dread akin to stage fright. She must have had one of her little blackouts for her to get all the way out here without realizing, but they had never been this bad before. Usually she just got a little ways down the hall or somewhere different in her room, and they only cropped up while thinking about what she'd done as Nightmare Moon. In this case, though, she couldn't even see the old castle where she'd been.

She met the flying creature and was relieved to discover it was indeed Hastur. He was beating his wings furiously, huffing and puffing from exhaustion, making little hissing noises as he gasped. He eased into a glide when they reunited, catching his breath.

"How are you feeling now?" he asked between inhalations.

Luna wasn't sure what to say. She hoped that Hastur was talking about her nausea.

"Fine," Luna ventured.

"Wonderful," Hastur provided. "Would you mind landing somewhere? I'm a bit winded. Perhaps out of shape, you know."

"Where's our shoe?" noticed Luna's inner voice, priorities all in order.

The two descended to a ledge near a river. Luna lit her horn so the both of them could see each other a little easier beneath the canopy. She found herself positively unsure of what to say next, feeling like she had missed

out on some crucial details somewhere. If she asked Hastur where she was or what they were doing, she'd only betray the fact that she'd had a blackout.

Hastur laid down in the grass. He took deep, controlled breaths with his mouth wide open, fanning himself with his wing.

"Kind of a brisk flight, huh?" Luna plied.

"You're very fast," Hastur complimented.

Luna stood there awkwardly, in silence but for the sound of running water, until Hastur recovered, at which point he sat up and pulled himself to his feet.

"Goddess," Hastur began, "I think your old castle should be demolished. I've had a close look and I don't think it can be safely rebuilt."

Luna didn't really care what happened to the castle. It was already ruined – she could see that – but a part of her resisted the idea. A kind of sentimental nostalgia, maybe, but with a stronger pull. The desire to preserve history, or to keep a remnant of her former rule intact.

"Why?" Luna asked.

"The foundations are uneven, the supporting walls are falling apart, and there is..." Hastur paused, considering something. "Graffiti. Crude little prayers etched here and there."

"Prayers? To me?" Luna inquired, raising her wings expectantly. Maybe there was some strange tribe of jungle ponies living in the forest that still paid homage to the moon goddess.

"Abhorrent prayers," Hastur explained. Luna's wings sank. "Although I do believe they may have something to do with you," Hastur said carefully.

"What did they say?" Luna asked out of masochistic curiosity.

Hastur waved a claw haltingly. "They do not translate and it is not important," he asserted. "Simply rest assured that the deed must be done."

Luna, feeling drained, sat down. What kinds of things would be written in her castle that Hastur could read but couldn't be said in Equestrian?

"Maybe he just thinks we're too dainty to hear curse words," guessed Luna's inner voice. "That or he doesn't want to hurt our feelings by telling us every single prayer is 'death to the moon goddess'."

"I think I may be able to expedite everything, and my belief is that such is most desirable, but I'll need your permission to call in for help," Hastur requested.

"What kind of help?" Luna asked, yawning.

"My wives from Carcosa," Hastur revealed. "They are numerous and their occupations vary widely. Some are architects, and at least one is an extremely skilled witch doctor. They can bring with them obsidian from our homeland, and we'll have the job done in no time at all."

"A witch doctor!" Luna exclaimed. "That's silly. Why do you need a witch doctor?"

"In case a pony needs some kind of medicine," Hastur replied, gravely. "It would be irresponsible of us to just let a pony go on being sick."

Luna nodded, then yawned again. Why was she so tired?

"Ok," Luna agreed. "But can you build the castle so that the lights don't run away from me?"

"Of course," soothed Hastur.

What did Luna care if a bunch of dragons built her a new castle? It wasn't like anybody would come to see her anyway, especially not in the Everfree Forest now that it was overrun with monsters. Luna didn't want to think about it anymore. She just wanted to go to bed. Overhead, she heard a pony desperately crying out Luna's name, probably one of the guards looking for her, realizing she'd left them behind.

"Giggle at the ghosties..." Luna hummed, softly.

Chapter 10

Dragons are Magic

A little over a month had passed since Celestia first began her dragon hunting expeditions. Sunshine's ponies and her royal guard had been diligent, but the results weren't what Celestia had hoped. Many of the dragons in Equestria's borders were young. They were detached from the politics of Azathoth, some having fled to make lives of their own independently of Nyarlathotep's rule. When cornered and brought to talk, either by force or bargains, they gave contradictory information and false explanations. They did anything to get their way or to get the armed ponies to leave them alone.

The ponies went ahead and plundered the dragons anyway, taking enough gems and trinkets to keep the military teams happy with their progress. The dragons didn't like it, of course, but they understood conflict well enough, and when it became clear that Celestia meant business they surrendered portions of their wealth with little more than disgruntled mutterings. Still, the goddess found herself frustrated. Her endeavors were still somewhat fresh, but a pattern was emerging, and Celestia was coming to find she might have to alter her plans again.

She touched down on Canterlot's landing pads, a sweating team of five straggling behind, straining themselves to keep up with their deity.

"Good work, gentlemen," Celestia lightly observed. "We've finished our entire route ahead of schedule, so now you'll all get a well-deserved rest while we wait for the others!"

The soldiers saluted with tired wings, then staggered off to find water, which they took down in gulps from posted buckets. It was a full fifteen minutes before another team returned home, by which point Celestia's group had already recovered and had taken to sunning themselves in the grass.

The leading officer, a dark gray pegasus pony, placed a wing to his brow but let his gaze fall unprofessionally and lecherously on Celestia's perfectly shorn fetlocks. "Reporting, miss!" he announced.

"I'm up here, sergeant," Celestia said, tipping the colt's chin up with her hoof. The sergeant grinned sheepishly. "Did you have any luck?" Celestia asked.

The sergeant nodded. "Actually, yes," he replied. "We got one. He wants to talk. No coercion necessary."

Celestia harrumphed. "Oh, plenty of them will tell you anything you need to know, 'no strings attached,'" she complained, making air quotes with her wings. "What does this one want? To personally talk to all the defenses of a nearby city at an isolated location? He needs *all* the city's defenses because he's frightened of being silenced?"

"I would not fall for that trick twice!" The sergeant remonstrated, rather proud of the learning process.

"Well that's good," Celestia said, frowning at the colt, "Because you know the last city was not too happy about being set on fire and having their citizens carried away in the clutches of a dragon."

The sergeant grimaced. It wasn't that big a deal. They had put the fires out and saved all the ponies, a few treatable injuries notwithstanding. Still, he was admittedly not next in line for a promotion after that.

"No, no! This one is different!" The sergeant recovered. "Although there might be just a slight request." Celestia gave the soldier a piercing look. "But nothing big!" he assured. "It's basically no coercion at all!"

Celestia ruffled her feathers. "Sergeant," she began, calmly, as if talking to an appreciated but troublesome child, "Of all the officers I personally assigned to this task, you are performing by far the worst."

She looked him in the eyes, and the sergeant's face sagged. His ears flattened abashedly against his skull.

"I know," he whimpered. "I know, but I'm trying as best I can."

Celestia sighed. "What's the request?" she asked.

Celestia found herself mildly surprised to be standing in the Everfree Forest. It was so close to the capital that it had been searched first thing. However, they hadn't checked the water, and looming over her like a purple snake with a goofy grin and meticulously cared-for mustache was none other than a sea serpent. Celestia wondered how and why he had gotten so far upstream, and she wondered what he had been eating to survive in the rivers.

"I'm so glad you found me!" the dragon cried out jubilantly, throwing his hands together. "And I'm so glad to have found you!"

Celestia smiled. She was aware of sea serpents, but not especially familiar with them. She was sure that some of them were ill-tempered and would wreck sailing craft.

"Oh, I know what you are thinking!" the dragon presumed, taking Celestia's three seconds of silence for shyness. "You're wondering to yourself, 'How ever does this magnificent serpent get his glorious hair to stay perfect while he's swimming!'"

Celestia shook her head, grinning politely.

"You're wondering how I got here!" he tried. "Ooh! You want to hear my story!" He leaned down, placing his chin on the ground. "It's a harrowing tale," he promised, then reeled back and threw his hand to his face. "But my, where to even begin!"

"Actually, I'm rather short on time," Celestia dismissed, tittering. "About your request -"

The serpent lunged forward in one spastic movement, landing his head on his hands and planting his elbows in the soil. Water sloshed from the river after him, towards Celestia's entourage, magically parting around the goddess but splashing several of the unsuspecting pegassi.

"So you'll do it?" He asked, eyes wide with delight. "You'll teach me a spell to get my hair just like yours?"

"Well, mine grows like this naturally," Celestia explained, tossing her head back to send an impressive wave through her flowing, sparkling mane. "I was born like this."

"Oh, posh!" cried the serpent, flipping his hand at the wrist, then setting it aside his face confidentially. "I mean of *course* it's natural! Mine too!" He winked. "I'm sure any male pony would be lucky to meet a female pony with such naturally fine hair!" he shouted over Celestia's head at the damp soldiers behind her. "Those are male ponies with you, aren't they?" he asked.

"Well yes, most of them -" Celestia was cut off.

"Well will you help me or not?" begged the serpent, his hands cupped together in prayer.

Celestia stared at the grinning beast for several moments, weighing her options. Was there anything to extort from him? If he had a gem cache it was certainly beyond the reach of Celestia's ponies. He was vibrantly flamboyant for a dragon, so the odds of him knowing other important dragons seemed remote. At the very least, he would be unlikely to have any kind of meaningful pull. Celestia was used to social butterflies having their uses – after all, Incitatus was allowed around the castle for a reason – but somehow she didn't see this purple creature fitting in well with the razor-toothed crowds.

The dragon fluttered his eyelashes ineffectually at the goddess. To be honest, Celestia decided, there was certainly nothing to lose. She concentrated, and in an instant flash of brilliant light, the deed was done. The Dragon's plain orange hair was replaced by a billowing crest of undulating white, red, yellow, and gold. It looked like a long, flowing pyre of flame cut into a very gentlemanly wig.

The purple serpent gasped. "Did you do it?" he asked, scrunching his hands into fists.

Celestia nodded.

"Oh glorious day!" proclaimed the dragon with a giddy chuckle.

Laughing like a lunatic, he plunged back into the river, sending another wave splashing out over the banks. This time Celestia's entourage were ready for it and flew out of the way. They waited to see if anything further would happen, but the serpent didn't come back. Celestia fought the urge to groan aloud. Dragons were so selfish! Gratitude is the weakest of collateral, and Celestia hadn't expect much from this one, but they seemed to have so little respect for other creatures that it was just appalling. At the very least she thought they'd have the decency to try to use the ponies for some extended plot, and Celestia could have worked with that, but every single one so far had merely tried to run them through half-hearted scams!

Even the dragons raised by Canterlot's magical scholars forgot who took care of them eventually. Celestia's groups had found several of the beasts, they having departed pony society after growing too old, and like the rest they treated ponies with disdain. It was as if some switch went off in their brains that caused them to realize they no longer needed ponies to live, and suddenly they just didn't care about family, old friends, or loyalty anymore!

Celestia fought her anger. She'd been slowed down by constant setbacks, and what she needed now was a new plan and a level head to think of it with. Her soldiers surrounded her in a hodgepodge fashion, having nothing else to do but wait for her orders. A few gazed into the river, possibly trying to gauge how deep it must be just by looking.

"Mistress?" checked one of the colts. "Should we go back to base?"

Celestia was scowling. She might have to trust Nyarlathotep and play his game after all. Whatever information she selectively received, whatever hand she was dealt, and whatever moves she was presented, that's what she'd have to use. It was going to be a disaster for the country. Celestia hated not being in control.

Gradually, Celestia let her face melt back into its sublime serenity. "Gather the troops and let's go home," she agreed, bitterly.

"Hey!" shouted one of the ponies at the riverbank. He was backing up hurriedly, the others staring at him and not minding what he was retreating from.

The surface of the river erupted at once, breached haphazardly by the great purple serpent. A massive wave flew in all directions and pulled several nearby ponies into the water. Their heads popped up when the drag subsided and they clawed at the banks, yanking themselves angrily back onto dry land.

The dragon was gazing fixedly into a gigantic hand mirror. "How does it look?" he asked, not noticing the soldiers he had nearly drowned. "Do you think it's fabulous? I'm sure to get noticed now!"

"You came back!" Celestia observed. "Why?" she asked, suspicious.

"Well of course I came back!" the dragon replied, strumming his claws through his fantastic new mane. "I just needed to get a mirror right away!" He clutched his mirror to his chest, then turned to Celestia. He appeared to be crying, but it was hard to tell with water already running down his face. "You ponies! You've been so kind to me!" He choked.

Celestia wasn't sure what to say. Here she was just about to proclaim all grown dragons devoid of any real graciousness, and now one was weeping and thanking her for something as trivial as fixing his hair.

"First the kindest pony fixed my mustache with her very own tail, and now... and now..." the dragon sniffled.

He bent down and grabbed Celestia as one might grab a dove, clasping a wing against her body. The other wing was left to hang freely over his thumb. The soldiers took the skies and began buzzing around the dragon's head like an angry squad of wet bees.

"Put the princess down!" someone yelled, but the dragon payed no heed.

The massive beast brought Celestia to eye level, far above the ground, then smooshed her back against his cheek. Celestia squirmed and gritted her teeth as he rubbed dampness into her luxurious fur.

"Excuse me!" Celestia cried out a bit desperately. She should have teleported away from him before it got to this point, but she didn't think he would actually go through with it, and the idea was too late now.

"How can I ever repay you?" the dragon sobbed, an emotional wreck.

"You could set me down please!" Celestia suggested.

"Oh," the dragon replied simply, realizing what he was doing.

He set Celestia on the ground slantwise, forcing her to stumble back to balance. The goddess refolded her wings, primly, as the serpent patted her nicely on the head. Her soldiers were still flying loops around the creature, not completely sure if they were in a combat situation or just a stupid situation. Celestia dried herself magically, then, feeling the best thing to do after being so degraded was to show some confidence and a sense of humor, held her wings aloft and raised her head straight and high.

"You're certainly affectionate for a dragon!" she teased, her colts still buzzing impotently about.

"Oh, I know! It's a curse!" admitted the dragon, rolling his eyes.

"But there is something you could do to thank me," Celestia went on. "Can you tell me anything about Azathoth?"

"Is that all?" the dragon asked, wiping imaginary sweat from his brow, "Thank goodness! That's easy! What would you like to know?"

"Tell me about Nodens," Celestia requested.

"Oh, him? Kind of nasty, I understand. Very old. Humiliated once by the Great One way before I was born," the dragon said.

"By Nyarlathotep?" Celestia clarified.

The dragon nodded. Ages ago, not long after Nyarlathotep's reign as the dragon king began, Nyarlathotep was besieged by criticism and the greedy ambitions of other dragons. The purpose of the king, in essence, was to prevent conflicts through deterrence. When two dragons fought over a mountain or treasure, the king would allow them to weaken themselves. Then, he would arrive when one could not defend himself from the king, and the king would take the one's land and spoils. The other fighting dragon would be allowed to live for a price. The result was very little incentive for direct, unaided conflict, and it led to a system of laws of a sort.

Naturally, the dragon king had to be the strongest dragon alive, or else he could not fulfill the role. In early times, many dragons were of nearly equal power, and with the right alliances a relatively weak dragon could easily fend off the king. At a point, the dragons began to wonder what purpose Nyarlathotep truly served. Resentful of having to pay tributes in order to conduct their business or engage in battles, they did their best to undermine him.

Finally, Nyarlathotep gave in to their constant pressure, and he abdicated, leaving another, younger dragon, Nodens, to rule in his stead. The breakdown of all the laws followed instantly afterward, and the effect it had on Azathoth was catastrophic. Dragons with much wealth and standing were assaulted from all sides, and the ownership of territory became an unanswerable question. Meanwhile, Nyarlathotep attended court meetings with the same frequency as his former detractors, and there he did his best to sabotage Nodens in the same way his courtiers had sabotaged him.

Unable to tolerate the anarchy any longer, the dragons at last drove Nodens from his position and reinstalled Nyarlathotep as the dragon king. He reclaimed stability for Azathoth, and has been consolidating power since. To the day, Nyarlathotep has not been forced to step down from his throne or give in to petulant demands again. His power was strengthened and made absolute, in fact, so that he would be able to deal with that time's destruction of society.

"And that's pretty well what most dragons know of poor old Nodens," the purple serpent finished. "Not a lucky fellow, although I think he's sleeping now."

"That's all most dragons know?" Celestia repeated.

Celestia had heard a lot of fantastic stories about Nodens from the local lizard populations. Many of them were simply made up, extravagant lies to inflate the figure to the point of being a mythical figure. After all, as Marigold Foal had taught her, big lies are often harder to see for falsehood than small ones. Who in their right mind lied about being a government official planning the destruction and sale for scrap of the royal palace? Nobody believed a lie like that, especially not well-educated ponies who should know better, so naturally well-educated ponies that should know better were the ones to fall for it.

"That's all I know!" the purple dragon admitted, throwing his hands up in the air.

"When was the last time you were in Azathoth?" Celestia checked.

The serpent scratched his chin. "I guess about two or three decades ago," he estimated. "Why?"

"Azathoth is in a state of civil war," Celestia informed, bluntly.

"How horrid," the dragon remarked, placing a hand on his cheek for mild concern.

"And Nyarlathotep has made it clear to me that he might allow the war to spread into Equestrian territory," Celestia went on.

The dragon shuddered. "Oh, dear! I'd hate to be in your shoes," he said, pointing daintily.

Overhead, Celestia's soldiers circled ominously. If the princess could judge the formation, it looked like they were ready to summon a tornado on a moment's notice. She counted nine ponies, so one must have run off to fetch a storm cloud in case lighting was called for. The purple serpent with his flaming new hair was utterly oblivious to it.

"Is that why you're asking me about Nodens?" he asked. "You know, he's been sleeping for so long, I'd hate to think of what's giving him the nerve to pick a fight with Nyarlathotep. Nobody fights with Nyarlathotep these days."

"What does his sleeping have to do with anything?" Celestia asked, perplexed.

She was in the dangerous territory of asking a stupid question, which defied everything she ever strove to maintain. Needing to have the obvious explained to her was a good way to obliterate the appearance of omniscience she worked so hard for. However, the fact was that the lifestyles of most dragons were relatively unstudied by ponies. The creatures were terrifying, uncooperative, and tended to be too smart for comfort. It was any pony's guess why they chose to seal themselves from the world and nap for eons.

The serpent wracked his brain for a suitable response, stroking his goatee between his thumb and index finger. "It's not something I can just tell you about," he tested, slowly. He laughed. "In fact, I'm not that good at it myself! Don't tell the other dragons though."

"Could you try?" implored Celestia. Any knowledge was better than none.

"Oh..." he trailed off, rolling his hand about in the air while he searched for words. "It's no good in Equestrian, really," he capitulated. "Nothing translates closely enough. Between dragons you just sort of..." The serpent placed his hands in the air haltingly, backing up mentally. "It's like the magic in your horn!" he concluded. "You couldn't really explain to me what it's like or what it feels like. It's just something that is for you."

Celestia might have liked to pry for more, but she suspected that was going to have to suffice. This dragon was being perfectly polite, and for the first time since starting her mission officially she found herself unable to poke holes in the stories she was being told. Still, she wouldn't be getting any crucial information as she hoped. At least not yet anyway.

"Dragon," Celestia started.

"Steven," the dragon corrected, smiling and putting his fingertips to his chest.

"Steven, you've been very forthcoming with me, and I want you to know that I'll be happy to help you out if you have any more interesting grooming requests!"

Steven beamed.

"I was wondering, though," Celestia proceeded, "I would love to meet other dragons with your sense of dignity and politeness. You wouldn't happen to know any, would you?"

"With my sense of dignity and politeness? No, not a soul!" Steven proclaimed.

Celestia's spirits fell. So much for meeting dragons by meeting dragons.

"But I know some dragons with plenty of social flair, if you know what I mean!" the purple serpent revealed, flipping his hands.

Hope blossomed.

"You wouldn't happen to know any eligible young dragon girls, would you?" Celestia asked, prodding the air with her knee suggestively.

"Me? Of course! I know plenty of single ladies! They simply can not get enough of me," Steven boasted haughtily. "Goodness. Such dears, too. Except for that Lola! Ooh, how she frustrates me!" He waved a finger. "I wouldn't wish her on anyone! She seems like a victim at first, but soon she's ruined your life, and you don't even see it coming!"

Celestia's heart skipped a beat. She wanted to leap up in the air and punch at the sky with the thrill of near success.

"She sounds perfect! I'd be ecstatic to meet her as soon as possible!" Celestia exclaimed.

An aging, red-furred Miracle hunched indifferently in the corner of Celestia's personal study as the princess bustled about the room, gathering spell books and making little notes with her quill. It was growing towards the evening, but where Celestia trod the room was lit like mid afternoon.

"I've had a splendid day today," Celestia said without looking at the colt. "I hope you have some news to make me even cheerier!"

Celestia dropped a book on her desk and began searching through the index.

"It's the same as last week," grumped Miracle. "There have been no traceable financial transactions. No talk among Canterlot's ponies about rebuilding anything. Alfred doesn't know a thing about what's going on, and Luna hasn't left the castle."

Celestia slammed her book closed and set it aside, her face becoming traced with distinguishable anxiety. She went to the shelf and began scanning for another volume.

"But Hastur is still having his little play dates with Luna every evening?" she asked.

Miracle nodded, gravely. "Alfred tells us he and Luna have grown very close," he confirmed. "He seems to dote on the girl, but they don't discuss her restoration. Aside from his nightly visits and his morning attendances to your court to generate a fantasy of Azathoth, he vanishes without a word."

Celestia flipped open another book and began reading from it, quietly.

"You should consider placing him under house arrest, if it concerns you," advised Miracle.

The goddess went on reading, wordlessly, as if Miracle were not even present.

"I worry about you, Celestia," Miracle confided.

"Princess," Celestia hummed, her nose in her book.

"Are you keeping something from me, my porcelain goddess?" Miracle asked.

Celestia glanced up and shot a fading look at the middle-aged colt. "Yes," she replied.

Miracle chuckled. "Ah-ha! That's why I love you, dearest, but whether you have an ace hidden in your bridle or not, you should know there is some talk of you losing your grip."

Celestia shut the book and re-shelved it, grinning. "That reminds me," she said, "How is Bucephalus doing?"

"I think the castle's fillies are done making fun of him at this point, and aside from that things seem quite in control with the fool," Cecil reported.

Bucephalus had developed a scar on his ear after Celestia bit him, and for about a week he was the laughing stock of the castle. She honestly hadn't meant to bite him so hard, but it was a little late to take it back now. Since then he had been a furious force of military duty, and Equestria's lower generals had been whipped into line in no time. Furthermore, the charger

had also established a militia training program with specific emphasis on the southern cities. Supposedly he was placing a great deal of importance on teaching the civilians the strategy of exchanging ground for time.

However, Celestia's general was running an incapacitated army. Equestria as a whole was in fine shape, but the government was flat broke. These things tended to happen, and Equestria's finances would bounce back eventually, but any kind of extended campaign would cause serious economic problems and the citizens would feel it. That was, unless either Bucephalus or Celestia could find some way to make the enemy equally impoverished and unable to fight.

"Poor Bucephalus," Celestia mused wistfully. "If he can pull off some sort of miracle, then I'll have to do something nice for him."

Cecil glowered. "A stallion does not need extra reward for merely doing his job!" he derided, jealously. "Especially an earth pony of all things. And what will you do if he can't meet the requirements of his station?"

Celestia shrugged and pulled another book from the shelf. "A failing war is always someone's fault," she replied distantly.

It took a few days for Celestia's airponies to hunt down the infamous Lola. Everything always lost Celestia just a little more time. As an immortal, Celestia felt like she should be over this feeling by now, but time was one of the few expenditures one could never demand a refund on. Even if she wasn't dying, everyone around her certainly was, however slowly. Each passing second was as precious as the life of Celestia's – well, the lives of the closest thing a good leader could call friends.

As it would turn out, Lola lived towards the north, near Stalliongrad. Scouts told Celestia that she was some kind of wooly breed of dragon, with thick fur, and Celestia found herself flying at a high altitude over snow-capped mountains. It was chilly, and what the goddess had in mind for Lola was not something she wanted spread around verbally, so she was making the trip alone. In any case she was faster that way.

At last she reached the peak that had been drawn out on her map. Pine trees decorated the white, fluffy mountain, and little birds flitted about

between them at the base. It was getting to be the warm season, and it was surprisingly temperate closer to the ground. Celestia spotted a massive cave entrance high above and landed there, sinking into the fresh powder up to her ankles.

She trudged into the yawning entryway, kicking snow off her hooves as she made contact with bare stone. With light flowing in like a gentle stream behind her, wings abreast, the goddess virtually filled the cavern. The entire space flooded illumination, like the sun rising to peek through a window. In the far reaches of the cave, a light blue dragon shielded its eyes with an outstretched wing.

The creature was lithe and slender for a thunder lizard, and it had a wreath of white fur around its neckline. She had hair in other places, but it seemed to have no practical purpose for fighting the cold, simply highlighting certain parts of her body more than anything. Her scales glittered like tiny water droplets in Celestia's presence, not comparing to the small collection of jewels she was lying on but still a touch attractive all the same.

The dragon lowered her wing, squinting, and spotted the white horse that had invited itself into her home. She gazed, dumbfounded, mouth slightly ajar, but then a mischievous grin crept across her razor-fanged maw. She prowled on all fours towards Celestia, body forward like a stalking cat. Celestia, meanwhile, merely stood her ground. The dragon approached, smile widening further and further, revealing a plane of deadly teeth behind curled lips, but halted right where Celestia could feel Lola's damp breath.

Lola looked small, Celestia thought. Or at least smaller than she thought Lola would be, in any case. Celestia considered introducing herself, but only smiled weakly before the Cheshire grin of the portending beast. Celestia's gorgeous hair flowed silently on magical currents. She blinked as the smell of sulfur and old meat stung her eyes.

"You're so cute!" the dragon squealed, pitch high and grating.

Celestia's heart took off like a shot at the sudden climax of volume. Her natural instincts kicked in, grabbed her by the reigns, dug spurs into her ribs, and clamored that she fly away like a terrified bird, sensing all the obviously present danger tied to a large, stupid predator. Celestia took several steps backwards, and Lola lunged, claws outstretched.

This time, however, Celestia was ready. In a flash, she teleported several paces away, just outside the grasp of the beast.

"Don't be scared, I'm not going to put you in my mouth or anything," cooed the dragon.

She scrambled to clutch Celestia in her hand, and Celestia danced away, ducking and magically changing positions in space to avoid capture.

"Stop squirming!" Lola pleaded. "I promise I won't mishandle you!"

She slapped at the ground where Celestia was standing, apparently trying to stun the pony or pin her to the floor, but came in contact with only bare stone.

"Miss!" Celestia called, a hint panicked. Celestia knew she wasn't in any real danger, but it was hard explaining that to her body.

"Relax!" Lola demanded, searching under her feet to make sure she wasn't accidentally stepping on her quarry. "I just want to touch your hair. It's so pretty!"

"Thank you, but -" Celestia said, evading another careless swatting, "But I haven't even introduced myself."

The dragon giggled. "You're such a cute little thing!"

She continued to paw fruitlessly at the ground while Celestia dodged her, Lola maintaining a persistent position with rump in the air and tail curled inquisitively upward. Eventually, the child-like grin faded from Lola's face and turned into a frown. She plopped down on her haunches and began to sniffle.

"I'm sorry miss, but you can't play so roughly with me," Celestia consoled, appearing front and center before the creature.

"I haven't been with a pony in ages," Lola quavered, tears in the corners of her eyes. "I used to live with them when I was little. They're always scared of me now."

"Ah," Celestia observed, putting the pieces together. "Did you used to be an assistant to some nice little unicorn?"

Lola nodded. So it seemed that here was one of the few dragons from Celestia's schools that still remembered her old bonds with ponykind.

"Well, I am Princess Celestia," Celestia said, providing a royal curtsy.

Lola gasped. "Celestia was queen of the ponies when I was just a developing baby!" she announced, up on her history.

"Princess," Celestia corrected, curtly.

"Is it like an honorary name or something? Are you Celestia's granddaughter?" Lola asked, awestruck.

"No, dear," Celestia tried. Lola seemed a tad dense – surely she had to know that Celestia was the sun goddess. It wasn't as if the creature was living in an uneducated environment during her tentative years.

"I'm *the* Celestia. The one and only."

Lola laughed, her eyes lighting up. "Really? You must be so *old*!" she clapped her hands together. "I didn't think ponies lasted that long!"

Celestia rolled her eyes. "I'm young in spirit, you know," she insisted with a betrayed sense of honesty.

"I bet," Lola agreed, leaning back to all fours again. "Oh my gosh, it must have been at least two centuries by now. What are you doing here? I'm too big to help ponies with their studies, and ponies can't afford to feed me anyway." She pointed at her tiny pile of precious minerals. "I barely feed myself. I'm lucky some nice boy dragons help me out sometimes."

A wave of disdain swelled up in Celestia's inner feminist. Her inner politician, however, smothered her inner feminist with a pillow and cackled like a villain.

"Oh, I know how that is," Celestia commiserated, master manipulator of the male heart. "It's so lucky to find a kind fellow to help you out when times get tough."

Lola bobbed her head, happy to find a friend who understood. "Especially because other ladies can be so mean," she complained. "They say such nasty things about me."

Celestia snorted.

"What?" asked Lola, suddenly feeling the center of some joke.

"Nothing, just a bit of a sneeze," Celestia quickly dismissed. "Oh, but sometimes stallions can be so pushy!"

"I don't know about stallions," admitted Lola, "But male dragons? All. The. Time." She wrapped her wings defensively around her shoulders. "Don't they know I have needs? I have my sensitive spots."

Celestia was buzzing with sadistic energy. She wasn't just going to throw a wrench in Nodens' political life. She was going to bury him alive.

"What you need," Celestia said, fighting the urge to sell too hard, "What you need is a real dragon to take care of you! There's no point in putting out for Equestria's lowlifes, a dragon as pretty as you!"

"I'm not that pretty," Lola abashed, grinning and absentmindedly assuming a taut posture that made Celestia feel a touch uncomfortable. "And I'm still a virgin," she reported, mechanically.

Celestia wasn't sure if virginity even mattered to dragons. She didn't know if Lola was all that sure either.

"Nonsense!" Celestia chided, disbelieving both lies. "But if you do think you could be a little prettier, you know I *am* the god princess. I know some spells."

Lola's eyes widened. "Prettier how?" she asked.

Celestia cantered to the dragon and motioned for her to bring her ear closer.

"Anything you can think of, of course," Celestia whispered. "I'm like your own little genie."

"You'd do that?" Lola responded, staring at Celestia with one large, green eye.

Lola picked at her tail and gazed into the distance. Celestia thought she could see lascivious, private thoughts tap dancing through the dragon's head, stopping to wave out at the world through her eyes and though the way she wrung her hands. Celestia knew girls like this. They thought: if only I were prettier, everyone would respect me and I'd be happy. They believed sex appeal and a following of males was the only difference between them and the world's greatest female leaders.

"I'm happy the way I am," Lola decided, punching a hole in Celestia's own lust for success.

The goddess wasn't ready to give in yet, but Lola was now staring at the ground, drawing invisible doodles on the stone with her claw.

"Not that I've given a lot of thought about it, but there are some things I would change, though. Maybe things I'd like to be bigger," she countermanded.

Lola proceeded to spill out a veritable laundry list of physical improvements, none of which included being smarter or more introspective. Some requests were downright lewd, and Celestia required a detailing as to what made certain features more attractive for certain reasons. Each one Celestia fulfilled in turn, having spent days looking up body alteration spells for this purpose. This was the good stuff. Not a dragon in the world would know Lola wasn't naturally born this way.

"My god," Lola breathed, having all but run out of ideas. She ran her hands along new curves, feeling out parts of her body that had been made smaller or larger than they originally were. "Oh, make my spines and claws exactly like cut emeralds," she proposed.

Celestia did. It was a trivial exercise of power. The dragon stared at her gleaming new digits, and as she did so fright began to crease her face. She clutched her snout, then pulled her head in and breathed into her chest.

"I don't even look like my old self anymore," she murmured, eyes dilating. Lola began to hyperventilate. "What if I want to go back? I can't even remember -"

Celestia suddenly felt a pang of guilt. It was dawning on her that she had forgotten she was drastically changing a living creature. It was possible she was going a little faster than was really advisable. Still, the needs of the many outweighed the needs of the few.

"I think you look absolutely gorgeous!" Celestia radiated. "Besides," she said, polishing a golden horseshoe by rubbing it on her chest, "We can always send you back to the way you were."

Celestia examined the reflection in her hoof, winking at herself. It was a bluff, of course. Lola wasn't changed by an illusion of some sort. What Celestia had done was irreversible, and she could only send the girl back by guesstimation and by asking Lola's own memory of herself, which was probably skewed in the first place. Still, she had the suspicion that it wouldn't matter.

Everything about Lola led Celestia to believe she was both insecure and desperate to be noticed. It was in the way Lola strove to make Celestia look at parts of her body while at the same time covering up if Celestia glanced too directly. It was about the things Lola said and the way she carried on. She just seemed to be sad, but in that extremely cruel and subtle way that can cause most not to notice it. Such individuals are often referred to as sinking ships, and they are known to take others with them. Females like Lola, especially, had the tendency to blind males with charm, and the unlucky ones never realized they were being slowly pulled beneath the waves.

Lola began to calm down. She let go of her nose and resumed her normal breathing. "You promise?" she asked.

Celestia nodded in wide affirmative strokes. She could not be more sure of anything if she wanted to be, she conveyed. Lola was gradually overtaken by reassurance.

"Actually, I'm a little excited," she said. "I know some dragons that are going to wish they were a lot nicer to *me*."

"Not just any dragons," Celestia cut in. "I know about you, Lola. You're destined for great things."

Lola blinked. She looked lost.

"I've had visions about you. I'm a seer, Lola," Celestia lied.

"You can see the future?" Lola gaped in disbelief.

Celestia shrugged. "Of course! They wouldn't make me the princess of Equestria if I couldn't," Celestia boasted. This, at least, was partially true. "I dreamt of you and a great dragon named Nodens together. You're meant to be a very important part of his life."

Lola clutched at her chest. "Oh my gosh! I always knew I'd do something important. I knew there was some reason why Goddess Celestia came to see me! When do I meet him?"

The dragon rose to her hind feet, bringing herself to an impressive height. Celestia worried the girl might slam her head on the cavern ceiling in her excitement.

"That's the trouble," Celestia forebode. "I saw a great number of trials in your future, and to fulfill the events, you have to travel to Azathoth and find Nodens. There, he will take you as his wife, and in time – though I can't say when – you will influence him to great successes."

"Azathoth?" Lola repeated. Her face fell, and the dragon rocked back to the ground. "I don't know anything about that place."

"Well that's a cause for concern," Celestia assessed. "You see, I don't know anything about it either." She smiled expectantly. "I hoped we could be pen pals and you could tell me all about it."

Lola took this in slowly, turning it over in her mind as if it were fragile. Perhaps as if it were a dream about to flutter away from her in the waking hours.

"I can't believe I'm going to be that important. Queen Celestia? Pen pals with me?" Lola remarked dreamily, staring at the world outside her cave.

"Princess," corrected Celestia. "I can set up a direct link between you and I. Any time you want to send me a message, just write it down on a piece of parchment and set it on fire. Easy, right? And if you have any questions, I can do my best to be your guide."

Lola nodded, and Celestia cast one more spell on the dragon. The goddess suddenly had a feeling she was going to be receiving a great deal more letters in the future. It was annoying, but everyone wants to talk about themselves, and having one's trivial tribulations noticed by the god princess was certainly among the highest levels of self-satisfaction.

"Okay, I can do this," Lola told no one in particular, hope rising in her voice like the break of day. "I'll ask Steven. He can help me!"

Again, Celestia's inner feminist muttered something nasty about Lola. Was it really all that appropriate that the girl's first instinct was to find an ex-boyfriend and beg for favors? Celestia's inner tyrant just laughed and demanded to be carried to her throne every day by a procession of enslaved, masculine stallions. Her inner politician brokered for a middle ground and recommended telling other ponies to think of the children.

Colonel Sunshine had been in Azathoth for nearly two and a half weeks now, and even with a team of highly trained ponies behind her, it was horrible. The air was humid and stagnant. Most of the region south of Equestria was dense jungle, and living in the trees were mosquitoes the size of a pony's hoof. Swampland popped up over wide stretches, making it difficult to find good land to rest on when cloud cover was bare. Worst of all were the nights.

At first, Sunshine had been willing to set up small camps on the ground. It seemed like a good choice because it was faster than anchoring clouds and setting up provisions to beat the cold night air at high altitude. However, when the sun went down things came out of the forest. In the fringes of Azathoth it was just obnoxious creatures. Small cats and poisonous reptiles that crawled out of holes in the ground to make their living, but as the team delved further the ponies on watch started noticing eerie figures.

The first couple of sightings were easily dismissed – obviously just imaginations running wild in tired minds. Then they grew more numerous. Ponies would hear scratching and strange gibbering noises from outside the camp. They would spot shapes in the trees, or a pony might cry out, having seen something watching her from the brush. Obviously, there were animals that lived in the jungle. Sunshine tried to keep everyone calm,

knowing that the fear and anxiety would only spread and would lead to exaggerated rumors. After all, whatever was out there seemed to be more frightened of the ponies than the ponies were of them. Ponies weren't a natural prey to anything in Azathoth.

Still, tales ran rampant. Ponies claimed they saw the accusing faces of dead family members in the darkness. Others said they heard voices talking to them. Then one night, two ponies went missing; Sunshine had no idea where they had gone to. There was no trace. It was possible they had deserted, but without supplies they wouldn't have gotten far. A somber demeanor fell over the entire detachment, and Sunshine, having split her squads to cover more ground, now wondered how the other groups were faring.

In honesty, Sunshine had seen figures too, but she had tried to shake them off and convince herself she was only letting the jitters get the better of her. That was what she'd tried to tell everyone else to keep them calm. Then, at last, while keeping watch, something did come close enough to the light where she could see it and no longer deny there were horrors in the woods. The thing that came stood on the very edge of the firelight, just watching Sunshine balefully.

It was tall and slender. Its asymmetrical body was mottled and cracked. At its side flaccid, tendril-like appendages hung. Seeing it in the dim, flickering light, Sunshine wasn't sure that it had a face or if it had multiple faces. Something about the way it was shaped gave her the impression she could pick out various places where a face could be, or she could see designs that resembled a face. It was hard to tell.

After spotting the one she began to see them everywhere. She recognized them for what they were now. Not tangled roots or hanging tree limbs. They were living things, and they were everywhere. The whole squad was surrounded every night, and Sunshine tried to count them. She tried, but the apparitions moved around while she wasn't watching them. At a point, she resolved that the ponies were outnumbered, and the things were coming closer towards the camps every night.

That's when Sunshine gave the order to relocate to the clouds every evening for the remainder of the mission. Despite the cold, it came as a relief to most of the squad, and the ponies were far happier huddling

together for warmth than they were braving whatever was on the ground. Avoiding the ground, though, meant less time for grazing, and that was going to lead to malnutrition in time. Still, a mundane problem was preferable to the whispering sounds and watchful eyes below.

They pushed deeper still in the boundaries of the dragon's sovereign land, having yet to find camps or dragon caves. The ponies had regained some composure. They were now bickering some about hunger and the long nights, but they were scheduled to return to rendezvous at the Equestrian border with the other squads soon, and in no time at all their harrowing mission would be over for now. They had maps and enough first-hand concerns to write a book on. Sunshine didn't care what ponies said, nobody had ever been out this far before. It was not possible.

Yet, despite the improved spirits, a new terror rose up to meet them. At night once again, from atop a chilly, unmodified cloud, Sunshine noticed a mist rolling over the earth in the moonlight. She shuddered, wondering what those things in the jungle might have done if the ponies had been caught in poor visibility like that, but her thoughts took a completely new course in an instant. Something drifted out of the fog – a long and bulbous thing like a jellyfish.

First the one, then another and another, like a cloud of spores being released from a popped blemish. They rose high into the sky and drifted lazily in the atmosphere, reaching up as far as the clouds Sunshine's soldiers were sleeping in. They were speckled gray and white, and their bodies were covered in tiny, needle-like, translucent hairs. The ponies were shaken awake by their friends, and in groups the ponies tried to maneuver their clouds between the things if they drifted too close.

The need to move was sparring, but forced everyone on edge and kept them at vigil. Her charges were exhausted, though, and Sunshine gave an order to let the ponies sleep in their regular shifts. The ponies on watch would keep an eye out and move the clouds if necessary. The floating creatures weren't objectively seeking them, and only the occasional one or two reached high enough to risk touching them.

They raised their clouds up higher to minimize the risk and waited it out. Sunshine was stressed and tired. More than anyone, she'd tried to keep a stiff upper lip and maintain a good example. She maintained an expressed

interest in duty and an objective perspective. She was the only one who wasn't able to bicker or talk about how she really felt.

Somewhere on her cloud, she heard a soft sobbing. Seeking out the source of the noise, Sunshine found a young colt weeping to himself. The others were laying about with eyes cracked open, staring into the night sky, kept awake by the weakness of their comrade. Sunshine knelt down and nuzzled him until he stopped.

"We'll be going home soon," she whispered. "Just a few more days, and we can tell everyone we're the bravest ponies in Equestria."

She stayed with him until he nodded off. The others found respite with him. Sunshine looked over the edge of the cloud at the nerve-wracking things still floating below in droves. There was a sea of them. There was no doubt in Sunshine's mind that if there were a place that would breed enormous, fire breathing monstrosities with a reputation for aggression and anti-social behavior, Azathoth was that place.

The next morning Sunshine woke, few too precious hours having been slept the night before. The sun hadn't risen long ago, but it was already beating down on them with a vengeance. The group packed up their things and wrung a little water from the clouds. They were going to be flying until the afternoon, and then they'd take a break to graze and rest so the heat didn't kill them.

Sunshine couldn't see any signs of the weird creatures from the night, but she was starting to get used to that around here. Day and night in Azathoth were completely unlike one another, but there were plenty of strange predators that hung around in the light. The crucial separating factor was that the ponies could clearly see their enemies during the day.

The squad zipped across the sky for an hour or two, listless and without verbal exchange. Sunshine felt herself nodding off here and there, but was often leading the formation and did her best to keep alert.

"Look!" someone yelled.

In the distance, a large puff of black smoke was spiraling up from the ground. The ponies flew towards it, and found a massive, yellowing, stone ziggurat looming over the horizon. It was an enormous structure, covered in elaborate etchings and spotted with mossy overgrowth. Smoke issued out from numerous holes built into the sides. Outside, several dragons – Sunshine counted five - of different size and color were sunning themselves peaceably. They themselves were a great deal larger than any dragons Sunshine had seen in Equestria.

One dragon lifted his leviathan head to the sky, looking directly at the scouting party. The others turned their attention to his line of sight, and now they were all watching.

"Let's go back and report," Sunshine ordered.

She banked tightly and led the squad with her in the opposite direction. She held out a hope that they wouldn't be identified as intruders, or at the very least that they'd be confused with some kind of large bird. A smaller, in the relative sense, green and brown dragon with great, branched antlers rose from its place and stretched its body. First it arched its back, then spread out its impressive wingspan at far angles.

Please mistake us for birds, Sunshine begged fate. *Please, please, please!*

The antlered titan bellowed out an earth-shattering roar. The bass in the beast's voice made Sunshine's teeth rattle and liquified her courage. The Colonel amped up her flight speed to double time, the other ponies following after her in organized panic.

Please! Sunshine pleaded. *Just birds!*

No luck. The dragon kicked off from the ziggurat and slid into the sky like a serpent in water. With terrifying grace, the great demon accelerated behind them and rose to their altitude. Sunshine glanced over her shoulder and could see the thing, looking large enough to swallow several ponies at once in a single bite. She broke into a full sprint, and the squad's formation tightened to break the wind ahead of them more easily.

They were tired and had already been flying for too long, and above all else, ponies were not very aerodynamic. The dragon, on the other hand, was a copperhead with a body like an arrow, and it weaved swiftly behind

them, closing the distance margin by margin. Sunshine's wings burned as she pushed them, but flapping as hard as she could she couldn't create any more space between her and the gargantuan. The squad began to break as tired ponies lost stamina, and the dragon pulled up behind them.

It opened its bladed mouth like a scoop to catch stragglers in the back of the group. Sunshine waved a signal, frantically.

"Scatter!" she screamed against the wind.

The ponies split off at all angles, just like they'd practiced back at home. Sunshine watched to see how the dragon reacted and her pulse stopped. Without so much as a second of confusion, the dragon effortlessly tore after a slower soldier who had flown downward in an attempt to gain speed. There was not a hint of wind resistance hindering the beast's massive frame; the sky merely slipped off of its movements like cooking oil.

Sunshine looped around, her heart pounding out of her chest. Two other ponies followed her, and they made a bid to fly directly over the chased colt. The beleaguered soldier spotted them and recognized the maneuver. They flew directly behind him, then all four ponies banked sharply in a new direction. Sunshine pattered as fast as her body would take her, terrified to look back and see what had happened. In her ears she thought she heard a faint zinging sound, and she flashed a look to her rear. The massive green devil was hot on her tail, teeth bared and gaining alarmingly fast.

Three ponies came in from overhead to save the day. They met then split in all directions again, Sunshine zipping to the right. They were close to the ground now, and she couldn't go any lower without being in danger. She just kept flying, sweating profusely, body clamoring for a break. Sunshine felt like her heart was going to explode. Behind her, the singing whistle of a fast moving projectile continued to sound, and sure enough the monster was still pursuing her, closer than before.

Sunshine had to take a risk. She had to give herself a break. She threw her wings out and dropped just a little lower, surrendering both speed and altitude.

Please! she begged, vision spinning and lungs hurting for oxygen.

The dragon whizzed by, just feet above her back, overshooting Sunshine in a stroke of calculated luck. Sunshine stuttered in mid air and tried to catch herself. Her mouth hung open and she sucked at humid air. Her wings hurt, and she couldn't muster the energy to rise up to a safer height. If this kept up, Sunshine thought, she might not even be able to make the flight home.

The dragon looped through the air without slowing. Sunshine cast about, hoping to see more help on the way, but she didn't spot any other ponies. The trick they'd invented was that the rest of the team could get away while the dragon confused and tired itself chasing a few alternating groups. Sunshine didn't know if her squad had escaped, leaving her, or if they were just not in her immediate sight. There wasn't any time to puzzle it out; the gargantuan monster was heading right for her again at speeds fast enough to squash her like a bug against a windshield.

Sunshine turned and fought her own body for control. She pumped her wings madly, accelerating as fast as she could. She didn't know what to do now. She was as good as doomed and she was only delaying the inevitable. The dragon glided in from behind her, matching her speed as it came within snapping distance. Sunshine tried to think of anything she could do. Any trick to stop it from ending like this.

The dragon's gaping jaw drew forward, and Sunshine lost speed again, letting herself fall back against the dragon's chin, just below the impending death of great, sharpened bone. She braced against the creature, feeling it push her through the air with tremendous force, just buying precious quarter seconds of time.

The dragon shook its head to dislodge the doomed pony, and Sunshine tumbled away from the beast, head over heels, falling into the wooded jungle below. Sunshine felt herself collide with something hard and her head rang like a large bell or shaken tin. She toppled through branches, spinning wildly about, legs kicking aimlessly. She landed on her side, heavily, knocking the wind out of her. She wasn't sure if anything was broken, but she didn't feel any pain and a darkness was closing in around her vision.

Sunshine lurched to her feet. She had to find cover somewhere. Fast. She ran forward, partially unable to remember what she was doing. Sunshine was on complete autopilot. Her body was in charge now, and her mind was

checking out after that crash. She just kept moving. She had to get away. She had to live.

A darkness loomed over her. Sunshine looked up, and there it was: the dragon. It was looking at her, but she couldn't make shapes out too well. She was half blind from static in her eyes. She tried to motivate herself to run, and to run faster, but her heart just couldn't take anymore. Sunshine fell down. She stared up, looking certain death in the face as well as she could before the end. She might have liked to think up something witty so she'd have some poetic last words to go out on, but real life never worked that way. The teeth came.

Chapter 11

Viziers are Magic

Hastur swept into the throne room, wings aloft and reptilian head equally so, his dark cape flowing elegantly behind him. Luna stood in the middle of the chamber, a collection of canvases at her feet and a paintbrush clutched between her teeth. She had hoped she might try painting portraits tonight. Celestia was known for her contributions to the sciences, after all, so maybe Luna might get a little more notice if she contributed to the arts.

Alfred was posing for her. Aside from his traditional butler's outfit, Luna had asked him if he wouldn't mind covering a bit more of his body for decency's sake. She hadn't wanted to draw nude paintings, and even innocuous parts of nudity just seemed too rude for her. She had coughed and whispered her concerns, and Alfred had thankfully caught on easily enough.

Hastur approached and bowed regally. These days he was nothing if not the very ideal of nobility. He carried himself with an untouchable dignity, and though he still could not smile, he managed to create a distant twinkle in his eyes that appeared friendly. It all made Luna worry, because she felt like she was seeing a replica of her sister slowly emerge from a creature that once seemed as lost and confused as she was.

It wasn't bad, exactly, but Luna harbored a hurting suspicion that one day, Hastur would realize he simply had better things to do and he would be gone forever. It was what had happened to her sister. It was the same thing that happened to most of her courtesans in the old days. It just occurred to them that Luna was weak, that she lacked any real influence, and that her indecisive behavior meant they'd be lucky to see any of their wishes granted without Celestia's direct intervention.

"How does the evening find you, my Goddess?" Hastur asked, politely.

Luna set her paintbrush on the floor. "I'm alright," she responded. "I was wondering if you wanted to try drawing pictures of each other."

Hastur picked up the brush, examining the bristles with his pointed fingers. "That does sound like a treat, Goddess," he said. "It would be quite the

remarkable talking piece, a hand-painted work of Luna herself, but perhaps another time."

Luna sagged. Her wings drooped. This was the start. A polite dismissal here, a bit of work to do there. He'd be too tired to drop by next week, and not long after she'd see him less and less until she was sitting alone in the dark again like a crazy pony.

Hastur tapped Luna pleasantly on the nose with the brush. Luna frowned. She didn't think it was very funny, and she wouldn't be teased into thinking it was okay. "Young Goddess," Hastur clucked, "Such posture is simply inexcusable from one about to receive a pleasant surprise."

The princess was splashed by a wave of guilt.

"See? This is the kind of thing that makes it hard to meet ponies!" Luna's inner voice chided. *"Some mild inconvenience occurs, and at the first sign of it you just roll over and assume they want to avoid you!"*

Luna didn't feel much like arguing with herself. She sighed, and tried to stand with firmer resolution so Hastur wouldn't be disappointed. She picked her wings up and stared straight ahead into the dragon's yellow chest. That was about as good as it was going to get.

"I should hope that is not how you'll greet your guests at your new palace, Goddess," Hastur remarked, politely.

Luna's eyes widened. "It's finished?" she asked, fighting a combination of excitement and sheer terror.

"It has been for a week," Hastur explained, absent-mindedly rubbing a clawed thumb along the smooth bristles of the brush. "But it is now suitably ready for your arrival. My wives are expecting you tonight."

Luna took several steps backwards and cast uncertain eyes to Alfred, who took the cue and came forward.

"Now Lady Hastur," Alfred admonished, "One does not simply call on a princess so readily!"

He placed a hoof down with an aura of infallibility. It seemed to him that any polite individual would find that an obstacle enough, but Hastur merely shrugged. The brush slipped from between the lizard's fingers and fell to the floor.

"I assumed that a Goddess had the power to make her own schedule," he replied, quietly, ignoring the fallen object as it clacked against the marble.

Against the level stare, Alfred balked. He was used to receiving orders more than giving them, and he was even worse at arguing. As the room's temperature dropped, Luna suddenly felt as though she had done something wrong – as if she had broken some rule and was about to be punished for it. Hastur's behavior didn't seem malicious in any way, just supremely disappointed, enough to imply that someone *should* be killed even if they wouldn't be.

"He did build a castle for you," Luna's inner voice reminded.
"A whole castle. For free."

Luna suddenly felt even worse. Her ears flattened against her head, and she pulled her wings in close to her body.

"It's ok, Alfred," Luna whispered. She felt miserable for getting him involved. "I'd like to see the castle tonight."

She tried to make it sound genuine. She did want to go, but the act of trying to convey that made it sound forced somehow. Alfred seemed at a loss and flexed his jaw to say more, but nothing came. Luna had made it look like she was being bullied now, and she suspected Alfred felt like he wasn't standing up for her very successfully.

"Just take charge!" her inner voice urged. *"Tell Hastur we're going, but you want to put the paints away! That way we're still the boss and everything is okay!"*

"I want to -" Luna began, craning her neck to the floor and clutching a tube of paint in her teeth.

She lifted her head and intended to finish her sentence, but now she had a tube of paint in her mouth. Alfred, Hastur, and even the two guards

stationed at the door were staring at her. More than anything, she wanted to disappear in a puff of painfully insecure smoke.

"Let's take your paints with us," Hastur mediated. "Once you've had your fill of the new castle, I'm sure you'll find the scenery more suited to a fine painting, if her Goddess desires."

Luna set the paint down gently. "Alright," she agreed meekly.

Deep inside her, Luna's inner voice groaned loudly and swore.

Flying over her old castle grounds, with four bodyguards in tow and a canvas along with them, Luna was sure they were in the wrong place. For one, it was no longer a clearing populated by ruined pillars and crumbling walls. The woods now enveloped most of the area, but one section appeared to be growing around a dark, glassy temple. Branches emerged from and dipped back into the black surface of the stone as if nature and time had conspired to trap them together.

There was a lake that looked natural enough, but at its bottom were shimmering lights that made the entire area dimly visible in a romantic sort of way, and the water was crystal clear. The fluorescent lights and bobbling motes were there too, just like the last time she visited, but when she landed the earth beneath her hooves lit up brilliantly and the spritely spheres orbited Luna like she was the center of their universe.

A few landed in Luna's hair and she shook them out in a panic, patting at her mane like it was on fire. They floated away easily enough, but then came right back and stuck to her like dryer lint.

"Get them off!" Luna cried, waving her wings out in a desperate attempt to make the things go away.

The guards landed around her in tense stances, exchanging looks. Whoever pounced on the princess first to brush the weird creatures out of her hair would be the bravest stallion in the bunch.

Hastur approached Luna and placed his leathery hand on her head. "Stop moving," he commanded indifferently.

Luna obeyed, flinching as the little lights settled into her mane again.

"They aren't real," Hastur explained, brushing one away and letting it return to nest again. "They're just little illusions. We designed them to follow you, to enhance your godlike eminence."

The princess eyed the blips suspiciously. They simply looked like little balls of light, but if she saw a single squirming leg she was going to scream.

"You asked for this, goddess," Hastur reminded. "As I recall, you were upset because you couldn't touch the sample ones."

Luna relaxed. She waved her head to and fro, causing the orbs to break free, only to land on her again a second later. She sighed, and Hastur ushered her along to the entrance of the wooded glass castle, her guards following along behind with the mannerisms of intense duty that came only from years of practice. Luna noticed that, while the glow of the cobblestones increased wherever she went, it seemed to get darker around the colts. The lights didn't do anything differently at all where Hastur walked.

Hastur swung the oaken double doors open with both hands, causing them to slam against the wall. Into the entryway he hissed something in the most visceral language Luna had ever heard. If she had to imagine a language composed entirely of insults, nothing would have come closer than the clicking, snapping, and barking that came from the lizard's crocodile maw. There was an ancestral menace in every syllable.

In a moment, the dragon led the ponies through a hallway that immediately opened into an obsidian ballroom. The floors were polished well enough to see Luna's reflection, but here faint lights flowed along like water, especially so around the princess's feet.

"Well this is going to get scuffed right away," Luna's inner voice noted pessimistically.

Waiting inside were about a dozen dragons, all the same size, color, and in nearly all regards, the same physical appearance as Hastur, each with their long snouts touching the floor, like slaves unfit to look upon their tutelary. The only defining difference Luna could perceive was that they were completely naked, unlike Hastur who still wore the dark cape Incitatus had

given him. All of them were scarred, grizzled creatures with wings tattered from conflict.

Luna eyed them cautiously, feeling like a little girl on center stage in the middle of a spelling bee, and she knew she was going to pee herself any second now.

"That would be quite the first impression," her inner voice chuckled.

"Shut up!" Luna shot back. *"What am I supposed to do with them?"* she asked, the urge to say or do anything to relieve the tension boiling up in her like steam.

"These are your servants," Hastur provided. "My wives are your cooks, your maids, your tailors, and -" Hastur eyed the white pegassi accompanying the princess, "They are your guards."

Luna's entourage rebounded glances. The stallions varied in expression from perplexity to mild indignation. They all knew there was something wrong with being replaced by dragons. It simply wasn't very traditional for a pony goddess to be guarded by ugly yellow lizards.

"It is different," Luna's inner voice observed open-mindedly. *"Maybe not great for our reputation, though."*

Luna agreed with herself, for once. She caught herself scowling in contemplation, but it was too late to hide it now. Hastur was watching her.

"Having dragons as servants displaces you from the rest of the world, my Goddess. As does your castle, buried in the forest," he began, matter-of-factly.

"There it is again," Luna's inner voice chimed in. *"Isolation. This is virtually the opposite of what we want."*

"Other ponies will have to struggle to find you. To reach your domain and ask you favors," Hastur said, leaning down at face level to Luna, his placid, toothy mouth nearly touching her. "If we are clever, you will be insanely popular. More precious to your subjects than diamond."

Luna arched an eyebrow.

"The key, my dear Goddess, is to make your court about the courtiers," Hastur explained, rising, as if it were an axiom and the solution to all of Luna's political problems.

Luna blinked.

"But that's just something a politician tells people. It's *my* court. *I'm* the princess," Luna reproached.

Hastur merely stared, his face a blank portrait of indifference. Luna had learned to tell Hastur's feelings from his gestures and voice, but since their first day he had still never mastered facial expressions. Luna felt rude having said what she did, but it was too late to take it back. She hadn't exactly meant that the courtiers weren't important, just that she should figure prominently into the equation somehow.

"Celestia's court *is* about her courtiers," the dragon supplied. "They come to her and ask for money, they ask for favors, and they ask for recognition for their services. She grants them rewards and punishments sparingly, and for that they are all the more grateful for them. Leadership is granted by *consent*. High stations are always about the subordinates in some way or another."

Hastur made it sound easy, but Luna scrunched her face and shook her head. She'd tried desperately to please her subjects in the past and it had only backfired. She'd bent over backwards to use her powers for good and other ponies had just tried to take control of her or take advantage.

"What about -" Luna began, trying to place a hoof on exactly what was wrong with Hastur's argument. "What about when a city's mayor throws all the tax money away on raises, pointless staff increases, and useless pony-pleasing policies, but they get re-elected?"

Luna may have been out the loop in terms of history, but she was a princess and knew enough about power abuse, at least. "What about when a pony goes out of her way and does her best, but everyone just ignores her natural power – that's natural power, mind you, not consented power – and they walk all over her like she doesn't even matter?"

Hastur scratched his neck with scaled fingers. "A pony wasting money sounds like a leader with too few realistic objectives," he surmised, "but at

least in your example the pointless pony-pleasing policies are there. They're probably the complete basis for re-election. As for submitting too completely to your subjects? Well, that is a more complex issue we may explore at a later juncture."

Hastur growled something in his terrifying language to the chamber, and the other dragons rapidly dispersed, verging on panic.

"You may leave Celestia's guards here in the foyer," the ancient creature recommended, sounding almost disappointed they had to be there in the first place. "Let us take a tour."

Luna considered 'Celestia's guards'. There the four stood, waiting anxiously for an order contradictory to the dragon's, and Luna saw ponies white like Celestia, in golden armor of Celestia's style, and who were really just there because Celestia told them to be. It was at times like this that Luna felt least like a princess. At times like this, Luna realized she had never gotten anything her Sister hadn't given her. Her old castle, these guards, even Alfred. She never got anything for herself.

At least the dragons were her dragons. At least the castle was her castle, even if it did seem a little scary at first. Even if it was just Hastur running everything when it came to it, at least Hastur wasn't constantly protecting her and treating her like she was incapable. Hastur played together with Luna. He seemed to think she was going to be the key to something big. He understood Luna in ways she didn't want to admit, and deep down, unlike Celestia, he seemed a little scared of her power sometimes, so even when Luna was letting him make decisions, she still felt in control.

Here and now, surrounded by the polished obsidian, swirling lights, and strange foreign beasts, Luna felt important. At least a little. Then it hit her.

"What's the difference?" her inner voice asked. "On the one hand, we get passed around and swept out of the way by Celestia. She loves us as much as she can genuinely love other ponies, but love is love. Politics is its own thing, so what does it matter if we're being cleverly manipulated by Hastur or cleverly manipulated by Celestia?"

"Hastur is an evil vizier," Luna motioned, plying the obvious.

"Celestia is an insane dictator," Luna's inner voice countered. "She bit her own general in the ear. We both know she must have laughed in privacy for weeks."

"But at least we know that Celestia -"

"Celestia has nothing to gain," Luna's inner voice pressed, planting the damnation like the first step of a crusade. "She has everything she could want, and all we can do is pull her down and distract her from important decisions. The only thing she wants from us is love, and that..."

Her inner voice stopped and let it sink in, and Luna's heart sobbed. After one thousand years, the two sisters had become like strangers to one another. So much had diverged since then, and where conflict seemed inevitable one thousand years before, now Luna was so hopelessly out of touch that she had nothing to so much as care about. No causes, no real desires, goals, or ambitions. She didn't know what was important to Celestia now, and Celestia had become more a closed book than ever before.

None of it was coldness on Celestia's part. Luna knew, simply, that she only saw the parts of Celestia that Celestia wanted her to see. Most ponies were like that when they could be, because it's so rare for a relationship to really benefit from direct honesty. Those little feelings of anger and passing judgments are always unimportant in the long run, so why reveal them to ponies one hoped to have as friends in the future? Celestia was just so good at keeping secrets now.

"And what would we have if we were close to Celestia anyway?" Luna's inner voice went on. "Before, familiarity just gave us courage to start a war, and we've ended with less than we had. We wanted followers before, and now ponies only know our name through rumor and small snips of hidden, ancient history."

There Luna sat, for minutes that stretched on, the eyes of the guards holding her in place, apprehending her with expectation. Hastur, on the other side, was now dozing, his wrinkled eyelids creased shut. Whenever a hero sided with the villain in the story books, it always seemed like blind stupidity. They would be utterly shocked when everything went wrong, and Luna always wondered why they didn't do the right thing in the first place.

Now, as the lines between good and evil were becoming very blurry, she saw how heroes might make those mistakes. Wasn't Celestia just like the wicked stepmother who locked her daughter in a tower for the rest of the daughter's life? For what reason did the stepmother do things like that anyway? Was it right, even if the stepmother really did love her stepchild in the story? What was right, and what was wrong? What if Luna had won the war, even as Nightmare Moon? Would she still have been evil, or would she have gotten to write the history?

Luna tried to squash that thought as soon as it arose. It was wrong, that she knew, but it crept back up again like a weed. Hadn't Celestia used politics and warfare to unify Equestria in the first place? History remembered her a hero for that, but Luna remembered how ruthless those wars had been. Luna had been a part of them, and Celestia had been a bratty child – although that might be the sibling rivalry talking.

"We were mobile artillery," Luna's inner voice scoffed.

Luna shrank against the glowing stone of her new palace.

"Please wait here," she whispered meekly.

The guard with the scarred lip looked tersely to the stallion who loved stuffed animals, then back to Luna.

"Your highness," he spoke, "We have orders to escort you wherever you go. We aren't to leave you alone under any circumstance. Especially not with a clan of meat-eating dragons."

It was frustrating not being in control. These were supposed to be her guards. If they were hers, it didn't matter what Celestia told them to do. They were supposed to follow Luna's orders.

"Well then now you have orders to go home," Luna mumbled bitterly, not looking at the group. "You can leave me alone for the rest of the night."

"I'm afraid you'll have to take it up with Celestia," the guard replied, placing the blame out of his hooves.

"I could blow up the entire forest by myself," Luna glowered.

She paused. She hadn't meant to make that sound like a threat, but Luna was starting to feel very emotional. Mean words were getting caught in her throat, and Luna was trying her best to bite them back.

"So go away, please," she said, a harmful edge on 'please'.

The guard thought a moment about whether he'd be in more trouble for disobeying Celestia or for getting the Everfree blown off the map. He decided the former was more personally threatening.

"Highness," he insisted, "It's not something I can debate."

Conflicting orders were not that unusual in any branch of the Equestrian military. Experience had taught this colt that his current stance was probably the safest. He'd just ride out the present orders until all his superiors had their differences worked out. He wasn't a high enough rank to think, and he definitely wasn't getting paid enough to be thinking either.

Luna huffed. Her horn lit, the room flashed, and the guards were gone. Hastur's eyes flapped open casually.

"May I ask what's happened to them?" the dragon inquired, calmly.

"I sent them home," Luna shortly replied.

"Safe?" Hastur asked.

Luna nodded.

"Good," Hastur approved. "Morality is a weapon. You should always keep it sharp."

Luna sighed. This was coming from the creature that had encouraged her to lie the first night they met. She hadn't killed or even harmed anyone, but it was still going to be a red flag to Celestia. Luna had the rest of the night, and tomorrow her sister would descend from the heavens to ask if Luna was thinking about ruling hell again. It didn't matter why Luna had used her power – she felt that next to anything out of the ordinary would be deemed a sign of relapse.

At the very least she was going to get a long lecture and a short leash. So now, on top of everything else, she realized she didn't feel especially trusted either. More than anything, though, Luna just felt tired. It was still the middle of the night, but Luna wanted to go to bed. She wanted to sob into a pillow a little while. She wanted to talk to another pony about her feelings, and upon realizing she had nobody she could talk to, she wanted to howl into a pillow between sobs.

"Come," Hastur said softly, gesturing for Luna to join him at his side. "Let us take our tour."

"Can you just show me my room?" Luna asked.

Hastur nodded. "If it pleases my Goddess, then I will oblige," he replied.

Together they walked upstairs, and Hastur led them to Luna's room, which was carpeted in a lush navy blue. The furniture had an exotic look to it, curved and engraved in foreign lettering. Small images were carved into the headboard of her bed, depicting some ancient dragon ritual. She had a balcony with a view of the glowing lake outside, and the lights below made strange auroras on her ceiling.

"I hope this is suitable?" Hastur asked, politely.

Luna nodded disconsolately.

"Then I will let you grow comfortable here. I will be back in the near present," Hastur said.

He left, shutting the door behind him, and Luna was alone.

"*Well,*" she thought, "*There's the pillow.*"

She climbed into bed and stretched across it, but she didn't cry. She felt angry more than anything. Luna wanted to blow up the world, and the scary thing was that she might be able to do it if she really put herself to the task. She tried to blame everything on Celestia, but she couldn't figure out how any of it was Celestia's fault. But then, if it wasn't Celestia's fault, who's fault was it? Luna was sick to death of blaming herself, and she couldn't think of any way to put all the blame on Hastur either. She could have blamed Alfred or the guards, but what did they do, really?

She'd checked off every being in her life right now and came up with nothing. If she couldn't figure out who to blame, then she wanted to take her anger out on whoever wasn't showing up to accept fault. As it turned out, that was everybody.

Luna wasn't sure how long she'd been laying in bed. She guessed it was about an hour before she heard a knock at the door and Hastur stepped inside carrying a blue, crystalline chalice.

"How is my goddess feeling?" Hastur asked, mildly.

"Celestia is going to send me to the moon," Luna complained with a grimace.

"I remember you telling me that before," Hastur supposed.

"This time for real," Luna snapped. "This time I'm not just panicking because you're panicking."

She set her head down on the pillow again and exhaled.

"Forgetting the routines is one thing, but getting angry and banishing guards to anywhere," she explained. "Anger leads to hate, hate leads to evil, and evil leads straight to the Equestrian space program."

Luna lifted her head and looked Hastur directly in his unflinching reptile maw.

"And you know what, I don't care anymore," she said. "Let's just hold the world ransom, Hastur. You and me, if you don't think I'm too stupid. You'll be the evil Vizier, and I'll blow up the planet if they don't give me a million bits. We go to the moon at the end of every plot, but we'll always find a way to escape and screw up the same idiot plan every time."

Hastur turned and muttered something vile in his language to the door, and Luna heard another dragon scamper away.

"It's amazing the kind of sarcasm and cynicism you're willing to share now that you've become so used to me," Hastur mused.

"I know," Luna whined, flopping her head down on the pillow again, rolling her eyes. "I shouldn't give into the hate. Conflict is the surest path to failure."

"Conflict management is itself an aspect of conflict, Goddess," Hastur assured her, placing the chalice on a dresser. "But in all honesty, I can only guess that you're hoping for some sort of personal reaffirmation."

"Do you think I'm a good pony, Hastur?" Luna asked bluntly.

She wanted to just set it out there. She didn't feel like a good pony. Luna didn't remember the last time she felt like a good pony.

"As long as we are being candid with one another, do you mind if I share something with you?" Hastur asked.

Luna raised her head. Hastur had always been somewhat aloof. It was one of the things that made him seem like he knew what he was doing. He said things in passing, but a lot of it had the tendency to seem a little calculated. This, though, sounded very genuine.

"I murdered my predecessor," Hastur admitted.

Luna blinked. It was obvious Hastur had been in a lot of fights from his torn wings and marred body, but it was something else entirely to hear the dragon say he had committed murder. It was a virtual confirmation of everything bad she might assume about the creature.

"I supposed you think that's deplorable," Hastur suggested.

Luna shook her head automatically. She had too many of her own sins to be throwing stones. It was sad to think about. She'd killed ponies. She'd killed dragons, too, and the dragons she'd thought less about. There was always a reason, though. She hadn't ever hurt anything without having a reason, but Luna supposed that another perspective might have also called some of her reasons "excuses".

Luna wanted to ask Hastur why he had killed the other dragon, but at the same time, she would have preferred to just imagine he did it because he had to. She wanted to think that there had been some great betrayal, and Hastur had his back against the wall, causing violence to be the only

answer. She suspected that wasn't the case, but she was isolated, and she wanted to trust.

"I suppose you can understand how such a thing must look to other ponies," Hastur said. "They do not need to be told I am a killer. They know."

Another Carcosan entered the bedroom and presented Hastur with his own chalice, this one made of tin. Hastur set it aside next to the other, and the intruding servant left them be.

"I am as friendly as can be, but the thought will always be in the back of their minds. They see the claws and my teeth, and though they may laugh at my jokes, most would not trust me to make 'moral' decisions," Hastur said, framing the word 'moral' in quotes with his bladed fingers. "I presume the same could be said about Nightmare Moon, if that history hadn't been all but obliterated from available texts."

Luna just gazed at the dragon. She knew that, technically, her sister had made it possible to assume a position of regal purity. It had not been a small task. Celestia still knew what Luna had done, though. As long as she was there, Luna could never start over. Not really. It was going to hang over them for eternity.

"We will never escape such judgments if we are susceptible to them," Hastur commiserated. "So if that is the case, if we are to be wicked, then let us not be at odds with our wickedness, and we shall be all the better for it. If we are evil, then all evil has its price, and in allowing ourselves to be persuaded, by placing ourselves so that others always shy from the outcomes we find least desirable, perhaps we may do some good."

Hastur took the tin chalice in one hand and held the crystalline one out to Luna, who accepted it.

"I think you are a good pony, Goddess Luna," Hastur said, toasting. "So now, for the good of us both, let us drink to our evil ways."

Hastur drank, and Luna sipped at the contents of her glass. It had the consistency of milk and tasted somewhat sweet. It was lavender, and smelled fragrant. The aftertaste was a little bitter, causing Luna to shudder.

"What is this?" Luna asked, staring down at it.

"It's a sort of nectar gathered from flowers in Azathoth," Hastur explained. "It's quite like alcohol, but when brewed correctly it should behave as a stimulant, so one is unlikely to pass out from drinking it. We'll be importing it for your guests, and I thought you should be the first pony to try it."

"Is it strong?" Luna asked, taking another sip.

"Concentrated doses are fatal, so yes," Hastur revealed.

Luna let her small mouthful of the stuff dribble back into her chalice. Hastur chuckled through mirthless teeth.

"But my wives are experts in preparing the drink!" he reassured. "It would barely have an effect on a dragon's constitution, and it should be sufficiently safe for any pony."

The princess sniffed at it uncertainly.

"You know, my predecessor used to have a saying," Hastur ruminated, "It went something like this: how does one persuade a cat to eat pepper? You can force the cat, but it will fight you. You can wrap the pepper in something the cat wants to eat anyway, but the cat will still resent the pepper. Instead, the best way of doing things is to rub pepper in the cat's fur. Then it will lick itself, eating the pepper, and it will be all too happy to relieve itself of the irritation."

"If you pour this drink in my hair I'll send you to the moon," Luna teased, half joking.

"I would dream of no such thing!" Hastur exclaimed, placing his claws on his chest in mock outrage. "However, with your cooperation, I did have certain plans in mind for the evening."

Luna decided to trust the drink and sipped at it again. This was the third go, and she was already feeling a little bit bubbly. It looked like there was still a fair amount of the stuff left.

"Is it possible for your magic to turn me into a pony for the night?" the dragon proposed.

Luna considered the odd request, then it dawned that she was a princess drinking alone with, presumably, a male of some sort, and they were both in her bedroom.

"Hey," chimed in Luna's inner voice. *"Do you remember when we first met Hastur and we thought, pointlessly at the time, that things might get frisky?"*

Luna backed off of her bed slowly.

"Oh. Uh..." Luna stammered, nervousness gripping her heart.

She hadn't thought much about this sort of thing. If she had known it could have come up, then maybe she would have been more careful about all those dress-up games.

"I'm going to the nearby pony settlement, and I do not think they will trust a dragon," Hastur explained, "but with your magic that will not be a problem."

"Oh," Luna replied.

Her heart fell. She was going to come up with an excuse to turn him down anyway, but now she was just feeling silly. Besides, it was a little exciting, even romantic to imagine a physically scarred, emotionally-wounded dragon secretly pining over her. Or at least it was in a fictional world. In reality it would have made their working relationship a lot more awkward.

"I can do better than this," Luna insisted, standing behind a grimy, yellow pegasus pony who looked as though he'd fought off one too many manticores in his day.

Hastur, now that pony, regarded himself in the mirror. The eyes were a little off. They were too small, and he still had a hint of sharpness to his teeth. Not to mention, his feathers looked too thick and bristly.

"This will do well enough," Hastur decided.

"You're going to creep the other ponies out," Luna pressed.

"I'm not sure I'd know how to behave if I didn't terrify them at least a little," Hastur reasoned.

"What about your..." Luna began, looking away and waving a hoof at the new pony's nether regions.

Hastur followed her gesture.

"Oh. No worries, I suppose we can say I lost them in a tragic accident," Hastur surmised. "I trust everything there will be in order when I need to..."

Luna nodded emphatically.

"And when I change back everything will be properly arranged," Hastur guessed.

Luna nodded again, flushing. She wasn't using the best magic for this sort of thing, but at least it was all going back to the correct places when it was over.

Scratch sat in her kitchen, some kind of far-eastern, herbal tea steaming on the table. She was normally a bit of a night owl, but tonight she couldn't get to bed even if she wanted to. According to ponies who saw it, some big yellow bird had dropped a huge stone through her roof while she was out of the house, and now there was a gaping hole in her room and a stone in her bed. One self-proclaimed expert suggested that the bird must have thought the hundred pound boulder was actually a turtle. Some birds were known to drop turtles like that.

Regardless, she could stay up all night, crash with a friend, or try the couch. She tried the couch, but found it was way too much trouble to dig all the leftover food out of the cushions, and since it was too late to bother a friend now, she just had to wait until she was too tired to notice anymore. The hours were ticking away with a merciless lack of intensity. Scratch was pretty sure time was slipping a few extra seconds in there while she wasn't looking.

Worst of all was that money was tight. Scratch was a good DJ. She liked to believe she was a good DJ, anyway, but there weren't a lot of solid paying gigs in small town Ponyville. Sure, there were parties all the time, but the local party mare, Pinky Pie, did who-knew-what with her money, so those were a charity on Scratch's part. The result was that she was going to be

eating those leftovers in the couch soon, because she wasn't going to afford food after the roof repairs.

Absorbed in her problems, Scratch almost didn't hear the noise at the door. It sounded like somebody tapping at the wood. A few bumps, then a scuff, then nothing for a few seconds. Scratch waited, but catching silence, she apprehensively guessed at squirrels as the culprit. Then, entirely without warning:

Slam!

Scratch fell from her seat in a start, her eyes turned, horrified, towards her door, which was still closed. Her heart was pounding out of her chest. Was something trying to break in? Did she remember to lock the door? Maybe some pony was drunk and had confused her house for theirs. Scratch took decent care of herself on her own, but in a time like this, she kind of wished she had a stallion around.

She held her breath. Nothing hit the door again. Maybe it was just a bat that wasn't watching where it was going, Scratch reasoned. A really huge bat. Then again, there was constantly something crazy going on ever since that Twilight girl moved out here from Canterlot. Hydras, cockatrices, ancient moon princesses with unclear motives, Pinkie Pie with clear motives, and who knew what else. It could be anything out there.

A minute or two later, something knocked on the door. The knocking was too loud, like some pony was using her hind leg to do it, but that was definitely the intent. Scratch tried to steady her nerves. She was being paranoid. It was probably just one of her friends after a long night, too messed up to remember where they hid the key to their house, so they came to hers to sleep it off. It happened all the time.

Scratch unlocked her door, really wishing she had a chain lock, then cracked it open to look outside. Standing there was a dark yellow pegasus, looking torn like the Angel of Death in the night.

"Ah, young miss, my apologies for disturbing you at this late hour, but I am sadly unavailable during the daylight," the pony said, his deep voice the smoothest thing about him. "Are you Miss Scratch? I am told you entertain at social gatherings."

Scratch peered out at him, her nerves only rattling worse at the sight of her guest.

"Was that you banging on my door earlier?" Scratch asked.

The pony paused. It was a long pause.

"No," he replied unevenly, not the least bit sly.

Well one thing was ruled out, Scratch figured. This pony wasn't drunk, but he was apparently kind of an idiot.

"Sheesh, dude," Scratch sighed in relief. "You really scared the ballestia out of me, you know? I thought you were some kind of crazy animal."

"I assure you, miss, that there is nothing crazy about me except for how crazy I am into good music," the pegasus said awkwardly.

Scratch giggled a little. No pony this stupid could blink and walk with scissors at the same time. If this guy had malicious plans, knocking on the door was probably about as far as the planning stage went.

"I bet dude," Scratch agreed, "Oh, shoot. Are you looking for music or something? I don't think I recognize you from anywhere. Are you an out of town fan?"

"Your hair is - it's very pretty," the colt surrendered nervously, looking away, face stiff. "Yes," he managed.

Scratch laughed out loud at this. Oh, she'd seen this kind of guy before. Really bad with girls, socially terrible, too shy to make friends. They were always weird, and they made some of the absolutely dumbest decisions when their nerves got to them. He was probably a nut, but scratch knew a lot of nuts, and this seemed like the harmless kind of nut.

"Well hey, you want to come inside?" Scratch offered. "I'm up anyway, so don't worry about it."

The pony shuffled inside uncertainly, into the light, his face totally deadpan but the rest of his body a mess. There was no doubt about it, this guy was a huge nerd. Maybe the kind that loosened up after a couple drinks. There

was one strange thing, though, and that was that his face didn't look quite right. Scratch wondered if he might have a genetic defect of some sort, and she felt a little sorry for him. His wings were looking really scruffy too, the poor guy.

"It's okay," Scratch encouraged. "Relax, big guy. It's not your first time in a girl's house, is it?"

"Actually..." the pony stammered.

"What's your name, buddy?" Scratch asked, patting the pegasus on the shoulder.

"Incitatus," the pony replied.

"Well hey, stud, you want some tea?" Scratch suggested.

"Please," Incitatus obliged.

They sat down together, and Scratch poured the weirdo some tea.

"So what can I do for you, pal?" Scratch asked, after giving the colt some time to get situated.

"Well, it's not for me," Incitatus began. "You see, I actually work for Princess Luna."

"Princess Luna?" Scratch repeated, her jaw dropping open. "*The* Princess Luna? As in the Princess formerly known as Nightmare Moon?"

Like most of the ponies in Ponyville, Scratch's encounter with Nightmare Moon was brief, confusing, and actually a little silly in retrospect. The town's encounter with Luna, in turn, was more brief and more confusing. Scratch wasn't totally sure if she understood the connection between Nightmare Moon and Luna, but she'd heard enough rumors to get some of the details.

"Yes, well, I've mainly just been hired to procure entertainment, and being such a big fan, well, I thought you were nearby," Incitatus confessed.

"I've never done a royal thing before, though," Scratch confided. "That's all formal isn't it. You've got the wrong filly for that!"

Incitatus waved a grimy, chipped hoof inarticulately in the air.

"Goddess Luna has not had entertainment in over one thousand years," Incitatus justified. "There are no conventions, but do you think I could ask you to play something borrowing more from the classical era? Our Goddess has refined tastes."

"I don't know," Scratch said resignedly. "When's the gig?"

"Tomorrow night," Incitatus replied.

Scratch shrugged. It was a hopeless request.

"I can't do it, dude! I'm sorry you had to come out here. That's way too soon!"

"I can offer an advance," Incitatus suggested, his tone growing more determined.

Scratch sighed. She didn't know if it would be possible even if she wanted to DJ for Princess Luna. On the other hand, though, she needed to buy a new roof and a new bed. The timing was almost perfect, and Scratch didn't know the next time money might come in.

"What's the pay?" she asked reluctantly.

Incitatus told her, and the offer was frugal for a royal affair or for a job on such short notice. It was a little more than enough to cover the estimate on the damages to Scratch's house, but not much else. It would have been a great deal for a normal job, but in this case she might have been getting skinned. Well, it was either this or sleep on the couch until the next offer, and Scratch was begging more than choosing.

Hesitantly, she agreed to try.

"I'm glad we could come to an agreement," the unsmiling Incitatus said, satisfied. "I am sure the Goddess will be so thrilled."

He clumsily untied a pouch from his tail and laid it on the table.

"When you arrive, you will need to present the guards with these. They require some form of valuable offering to gain entrance, regardless of why you are there," Incitatus explained.

Scratch undid the string on the pouch and spilled the contents out before her. Dozens of glittering red stones spread out across the table.

"Are these rubies?" Scratch asked, split between awe and perplexity.

"That is your advance. Take what you need to cover the cost we discussed, then offer the rest to the dragons at the gates," Incitatus said.

"You're just trusting me with a whole bag of rubies?" the DJ asked, dumbfounded.

"They belong to the Goddess," Incitatus replied indifferently. "I am sure you will do what is right."

Scratch's brain clicked.

"Dragons?" she asked.

"The goddess would not imperil ponies by stationing them in the Everfree," Hastur dismissed.

This Incitatus character was suddenly appearing a great deal less like a bumbling chump. Scratch was off her footing as it was, and now he was just casually dropping information bombs faster than her brain could rebuild.

"The Everfree?" Scratch demanded.

"I believe a certain Twilight Sparkle is familiar with the location of the Goddess's castle, so I shouldn't worry myself with getting lost," Hastur arbitrated.

He rose and showed himself to the door. Scratch scrambled after him.

"Hang on!" Scratch insisted.

"I'm afraid my time is limited," Incitatus consoled. "However, before I leave, I should warn you that this job is one taken in implicit secrecy. The Goddess is fickle, and I dare say I cannot predict her disposition towards uninvited intrusions."

"Well how am I supposed to ask Twilight for help if I have to keep this a secret?" Scratch begged.

It wasn't what she wanted to ask. What she wanted to ask was how to cancel this arrangement and go back to sleeping on the couch.

"Do you know any ponies likely to spread a secret like this around?" Incitatus asked.

"Yeah," Scratch considered, disoriented, "I guess I know ponies like that."

"Who?" asked Incitatus.

"I won't tell them, dude," Scratch said, the bizarre sharpness of Incitatus's teeth creeping into her mind's eye.

Incitatus said nothing, merely waiting as if he expected more.

"Pinkie Pie, I guess," Scratch suggested, trying to fill the void.

"Where does she live," Incitatus stated, coldly.

"I won't tell her!" Scratch pleaded.

She didn't know if she was arguing or what the conversation was even about. Everything had suddenly turned completely around, and now she felt like she was revealing the hideout of a war criminal. Again, Incitatus observed her in demanding silence, and Scratch felt the tug of the void.

"She lives at Sugar-Cube Corner," Scratch betrayed, "but I won't tell her anything. Honest!"

Incitatus shrugged.

"That is probably wise," he counseled.

With that, the disfigured creature allowed itself out, and it vanished into the night. Left behind were several dozen rubies and one Vinyl Scratch, her knees shaking.

In the darkness, a somewhat large, unpleasant-looking pony stumbled over his own legs. He muttered something throaty and punctuated it with an inarticulate wheeze. He paused under a street lamp, which in this case was a glass box full of hyperactive fireflies. The low light they provided was not enough to illuminate the street, but they appeared to be trying. At the very least, they marked the tempo of travel, and one might have used them to find where one was going if one counted the lights. This particular pony knew the place he wanted to be but not which light to count to.

The pony regarded the stretch of darkness that was the town at hours past midnight. Then headed down the road again. He stopped short, however, when a tall piece of brush caught his eye. He allowed his vision to adjust in the darkness and discovered it was, in fact, another pony. This one much smaller, wearing a nightcap, and with a tangled nest of a mane. She was obviously crazy.

"Boo!" the insane pony shouted at the grim, mysterious one.

"I do not have any change," the grim pony remarked.

The insane pony chortled.

"I know that, silly!" she exclaimed. "I'm not homeless! But guess what! I just woke up with a start a few minutes ago! My eyes were flapping, my nose was itching, my teeth were vibrating, and my left ear got turned inside out! You know what that means, don'tcha?"

The death of ponies leaned ever so slightly away from the insane one, taking her in with sheer wonderment for her energy.

"That means there's a new pony in town, and that pony is you!" she announced, reaching out and bumping the grim pony on the nose with her hoof.

The grim pony was flabbergasted. He was being accosted for his newness to the town by a bright pink, psychic mare who had possibly just admitted to having terrible nerve damage, and she had touched him without permission! If she revealed herself as a shape-shifting demon and devoured him, he would not have stood a chance. His brain was too busy adjusting to a new world where two plus two equaled purple.

"Don't be shy! I'm Pinkie Pie!" the mare declared. "And if you're new, that means we've got to have a party!"

The grim pony struggled to regain its composure. It was the same feeling a hungry wolf must have when a jackrabbit ambushes it by leaping into its unready throat.

"What's your name?" Pinkie asked, her friendliness spilling out in all directions.

"Hastur," the grim pony mumbled, forgetting himself in the moment.

"Hastur what?" Pinkie prodded. "Hastur Gumdrops? Hastur Dancer? Oh, is that an apple recipe? Are you Hastur Apple?"

"I am Hastur," Hastur croaked, then recovering somewhat, "Hastur Apple. You are good at guessing."

"I'm the best at guessing games!" Pinkie agreed enthusiastically. "Oh, but that must mean that you're related to Applejack! And ohmygosh, you're a pegasus! Isn't that such a scandal to the Apple family?"

"It is," Hastur replied.

He was beginning to get a handle on the situation. It seemed peculiar at first, but as he realized what he was dealing with, it got easier.

"So I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't tell the rest of the Apples that I'm in town," Hastur continued.

"Oh, don't worry, Pinkie's lips are sealed!" Pinkie said, mimicking a lock and key with her hoof. "But that's going to make it awful hard to throw your party!"

"Maybe we can think of a plan," Hastur suggested, absorbing some of Pinkie's spare enthusiasm. "I could use a fake name, and I love disguises."

"Oh, I know one!" Pinkie snapped. "How about Harry von Jenkin-Weiner?"

Hastur thought about it for a moment.

"They'll never know," Hastur concurred, eagerly.

"This is going to be so much fun!" Pinkie shouted. "A secret disguise party! I've never had one of those! It's so exciting! Where do you live, Harry?"

Hastur went for broke.

"I live in the Everfree, in Goddess Luna's castle," he professed.

"The Everfree?" Pinkie sputtered, the fuzzy tip of her nightcap rolling around her head. "That place is super spooky!"

"You have no idea," Hastur sulked, "and the palace is guarded by dragons. They won't let anyone in unless they bring gifts."

"That's okay, Harry!" Pinkie assured him, putting a hoof on the beleaguered colt's back. "We can have your party at Sugar-Cube Corner! That way every pony can come!"

"That would be wonderful, but I'm afraid I can't leave the castle after tonight," Hastur excused. "Scheduling conflicts, you see."

"Oh," Pinkie said.

She scowled, placing a hoof to her chin, brow furrowed in deep concentration.

"This sounds like an awful big party challenge," she decided. "But challenge accepted! For Harry von Jenkin-Weiner, Pinkie will get the job done!"

"Tomorrow night would be wonderful," Hastur supplied.

Pinkie's eyes widened.

"Wow, this sounds like an even bigger party challenge!" she announced.
"But nobody can throw a party like Pinkie!"

"Well this is truly wonderful," Hastur said thankfully. "I am so stunned by the hospitality of the ponies here in Ponyville. I am deeply touched."

"Aw shucks," Pinkie said bashfully, bopping him in the shoulder, "I'd do it for any pony. Every pony deserves a great party now and then!"

"I'm embarrassed to admit this is my first big party," Hastur said, pleased as could be. "I've had so few friends in my life. Oh, this is going to be so wonderful."

"You bet!" cheered Pinkie.

"Well, I must be getting to bed now, it is very late," Hastur said, providing his dismissal. "I will see you tomorrow evening at midnight."

"See you then!" said Pinkie, jovially, waving goodbye.

The grim and mysterious Harry von Jenkin-Weiner took to the sky towards the Everfree, disappearing once again into the night, never to be seen again.

Luna stumbled down the black corridors of her new castle, pawing at the twirling lights just to stir them up. She had finished off the chalice Hastur brought her, and she was feeling extremely energetic. She was also feeling very dizzy, and the ground was waving around like nobody's business. A small gaggle of dragons were following along cautiously behind her, making certain she didn't fall down the stairs while tromping about the place.

"Tell them to build you a statue!" Luna's inner voice instigated.

"Build me a statue," Luna slurred, placing an unsteady hoof on the floor.
"Right here."

Luna wondered what Hastur was doing and why he was away for so long. Luna wondered if there was enough wood in the Everfree Forest to build a

giant ladder to the moon so she could climb down it tomorrow when she got banished.

"Cut down all th' wood in the Everfree an' build me -" Luna commanded, teetering, "- build me a ladder, from which my royal butt can descend from."

She wheeled around, wobbling, and looked at the spinning dragons so she knew they were paying attention. This was very important. It was Luna's master plan.

"I got ta' get down from the moon," she explained. "It's dusty there."

Knowing they were being addressed, the lizards garbled quietly at one another. A likely question on their minds was whether or not they should pretend to work on this request or just ride out the storm until it was over.

"I'm goin' ta' hold the moon still so you can tie the rope on it, mmkay?" Luna asked.

The dragons froze under her gaze. Luna nodded for them, and they copied her, nodding along.

"You -r dismissed!" Luna ordered.

She stumbled and fell down, but picked herself up again right away. The dragons were still standing there, watching her like paranoid birds.

"I bet if Celestia asked them they'd build a ladder," Luna's inner voice complained.

"Celestia sucks," Luna babbled rapidly. "She doesn't even *need* a ladder, and that sucks. I -" Luna placed a hoof on her chest and steadied herself before she rotated to the floor again, "- I need a ladder. I am in *need*. I need it."

The dragons seemed unimpressed by this appeal, strangely. Luna spread her wings out to their full span.

"I'm a alicorn," Luna demonstrated, then promptly forgot where she was going with that. "I am," she added triumphantly, saving face by driving a point home anyway.

Then Luna had a better idea. A rope ladder was so stupid. Of course they could cut down the Everfree to build the wooden part of the ladder, but where were they going to get the rope from? This wasn't a rope forest. The obvious answer was not to build a solution to the problem, but to get rid of the problem entirely.

"I'm goin' ta' send the moon away," Luna announced, pointing in the general direction of the sky.

This provoked a number of worried glances among the dragons. A heated discussion with a lot of hissing and snapping erupted into the hallway.

"Should we take a vote?" Luna asked, mediating conflict. "I vote on make the moon not be there anymore. I'm a democritic pony. Princess. This is a pony princess demockercy and I am the demockercy pony princess, and you are the demockrats."

Luna held her hoof in the air as a sign of support for her own idea, but didn't see the dragons making much of an effort.

"All 'pposed?" she asked, praying that none of them would say "neigh". Luna hated that joke, but some pony always made it.

One dragon hesitantly put his hand in the air, then another, then one more, and finally the rest followed suit. Luna scrunched her face into a scowl.

"Well I am counting a vote of one pony princess in favor of no pony princesses against," Luna proclaimed, adding her sums quite nicely. "So I guess we can comp'r'mise by not making the moon go away, but we can hide it so Celestia can't find it."

This, of course, presented a new question. How does one hide the entire moon? It was a difficult obstacle, but in this state, Luna was ready to tackle anything.

"We'll hide it in the sun!" Luna declared, swelling with absolute certainty and a feeling of genius. "Celestia will *never know!*"

Luna felt a clawed hand on her shoulder, and looked to see a spinning dragon gazing down at her.

"I have returned from my trip, Goddess," the dragon said, using the rich baritone so familiar to Luna's new vizier.

Luna squinted. The dragon was naked, which made it almost indistinguishable from all the others, but Hastur had removed his cloak before he left, so that made sense. However, a flashing traffic light in Luna's mind prompted her to reach up and grab hold of the dragon's face with her clumsy, drunken hooves, or she grabbed as well as anything can be grabbed with drunken hooves. Grunting, Luna tried to steady herself, turning the dragon's face to its side.

"You're not Hastur!" Luna whined, placing a hoof over a large set of distinguishing scars raked down the dragon's face. "Hastur is ugly," she explained. "He is a ugly pony."

"The spell wore off on my way home," the dragon replied.

"You're lying," Luna accused. "I'm telling."

"I thought you may like to discuss your drink," the dragons suggested. "Did you like it?"

Luna nodded happily. It was good.

"Where'd you get those scars from?" Luna asked.

"From Lord Hastur," the dragon said, plain as day.

"Oh," Luna said, sitting down with a plop.

She suddenly remembered Hastur telling her about how he'd killed his predecessor. Luna hadn't heard anything about him being violent around Canterlot, but maybe it was different between him and other dragons. In other circumstances, Luna might have given this some consideration, but at the moment she was feeling far too plucky and far too intoxicated.

"You should'a stayed in the kitchen," Luna observed, having been told enough about contemporary gender politics to make that joke.

The dragon blinked. It did not seem sure what to make of that assessment. The fact that Luna was behind the times and actually thought there was some truth to the joke probably did not help matters.

"I attempted to usurp Lord Hastur and was taught a vicious lesson," the dragon clarified. "I am the doctor. I do not work in the kitchen."

"You can't ur-surp Hastur," Luna protested.

"I am aware," the dragon replied, dryly.

"Because he's the dragon king and wives can't be dragons," Luna helped. "I mean dragons can't be queens."

Luna did a double check to see if that sentence had come out the way she intended, and the blank look from her dragon compatriot informed her that, no, she hadn't made an ounce of sense just then.

"It goes princess, king, queen, prince, duke..." Luna moved her hoof down a few inches with each level of royalty, then paused at duke, her arm hanging in mid-air. "Then all th' other ponies," she finished, tossing her hoof aside to show that the rest of the levels weren't important anyway.

"Why can I not be king?" the dragon asked, holding the fidgeting princess upright.

"Cause the wife is a queen," Luna said.

"If Hastur is gone then I will not be wife, I will be king," the dragon argued.

Luna shook her head.

"Whoever marries you is king," she said insistently.

"Why should my wives get to be king if I have killed Hastur!" demanded the dragon, growing frustrated with these new rules of political ascension.

"You don't marry wives if you're queen," Luna pointed out, rolling her eyes.

The dragon examined Luna carefully.

"The Goddess is very drunk," it accused, not without foundation.

Luna nodded. That much they could agree on.

"Perhaps the Goddess is confused?" hoped the dragon. "Surely the queen may take wives if the queen is to produce a new king?"

Luna clamped her hooves down over the dragon's mouth, pinning it shut.

"No," Luna said, shushing the dragon. "No."

She looked the dragon in the eyes as well as she could, trying her best to show a combination of love and and disapproval.

"'s okay to be dumb," Luna coddled. "You'll learn one day. 's okay."

Luna crossed her eyes and tried to channel Celestia. Luna felt like she was frequently in this dragon's position whenever she spoke to Celestia.

"Friendship, trust, love, th' good of th' ponies, love th' good of th' ponies, and don't stick forks in th' toaster, Luna," she implored through her nose, blowing a raspberry at the end for good measure.

Luna really hoped that it was clear she was doing an impression of her sister, but she knew there were plenty of other buzzwords that Celestia liked to use when talking to her subjects. That last lesson was one she'd been taught after her thousand year imprisonment. It was one of the more practical things she'd learned since her return. Another thing she learned was the food cube, which apparently used to be a triangle once and was a pie chart before that, but that had made too significant a portion of the food chart a pie. She would have taught that to the dragon too if she could remember the details.

It was nice having a conversation with another creature like this. Luna didn't feel like she had many opportunities to cut loose and really be herself. The conversation wasn't going very well, but still, she was having a nice time.

Chapter 12

Balance is Magic

Celestia's eyes cracked open. With her wings she brushed away the crust formed at her eyelids. In recent days she hadn't been sleeping at much, and it was starting to drain on her health. While the goddess possessed the spells to save herself from any noteworthy illness, a fatigued immune system could still lead to a scratchy throat and the morning sniffles.

The angelic creature went to the sink, washing her face and gargling, then proceeded with the tedious daily ritual of standing at her balcony until the sun rose. Celestia donned her golden regal garments and went to open her door, which came to a halt against a living body sitting too close to the exit.

"Cecil, you're in the way again, dear," Celestia cooed through the crack.

Cecil backed up. He had a newspaper stuffed in a vest pocket and a stack of papers on the floor which he attempted to scoot out of the way. A few sheets were left behind, stuck to the carpet, but Cecil quickly levitated them beneath the stack again in whatever order he noticed them. Internally, Celestia loathed seeing so much paperwork in one place. It had been another two weeks since she had sent Lola on her merry way to Azathoth, and it was probably going to be some time still before everything fell into place. Celestia was going to be seeing a lot more paperwork in the future.

"Good morning, highness," Cecil beamed, the bags under his eyes betraying that he had been missing as much sleep as Celestia lately – perhaps more. Celestia didn't know how he stayed so upbeat.

"Goodmorning," Celestia replied, polite but short. "What's on our agenda for the day?"

Cecil levitated the newspaper in front of his goddess. Celestia didn't take it. It was more of a visual aid at this point. There wasn't time for the princess to read the opinion of every journalist in Canterlot these days.

"Looks like this whole war business is reaching something of a boil in the news," Cecil summarized. "Almost every periodical in publication right now

has an article on it. Some are for, some are against. Even Marmalade Monthly has been discussing how the war might affect the price of domestic jams in the future."

"What are they saying about my involvement specifically?" Celestia asked.

Cecil examined the paper, rotating it around and looking at the pictures. "Seems they're regarding you as something of a figurehead, Princess. Your noncommittal public stance has gotten them focused on the politicians who are actually arguing about it."

Celestia sighed. "Well thank goodness for that," she said, relieved. "What's all this?" she asked, pointing to the offensive stack of papers sitting next to Cecil.

"Oh, well these," Cecil said picking them up, "These you may want to read for yourself at your leisure. It's the report from our scouts to Azathoth, and also a list of casualties. The deceased are listed from top to bottom according to rank."

Celestia scanned the first page of the list. It was longer than she had really hoped from a reconnaissance effort.

"Colonel Sunshine was leading the expedition," Celestia commented. She was mildly shocked, but reading the other mare's name on the sheet of paper made her death seem distant.

"Yes, I'm afraid that team will need to find a new leader," Cecil said, placing a hoof over his chest in reverence.

"Didn't I see her in my court with Bucephalus a while ago?" Celestia asked. "Has he already gotten a copy of this?"

"I don't know what she looks like," Cecil replied, scratching his head. "But General Bucephalus got his report this morning. Of course, it wasn't delivered with the Cecil family expertise!" Cecil shook his head, haughtily. "But I'm sure he's already looked over the details."

Celestia frowned. If her general had some kind of emotional involvement with the Colonel then things were about to get messy. If Celestia had any guess, Bucephalus was most likely to respond with anger, and then he'd

start tearing down mountains. The question, in that case, was how to deal with it?

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to skip my meeting with Luna again," Celestia rued.

"Ah! Well, about the Princess Luna," Cecil hesitated, shuffling and looking at his feet.

Celestia's eyes widened. Whatever it was, Celestia was sure she didn't want to hear it.

"The thing is, she seems to not be here," Cecil explained, daintily.

Celestia stared. Not here? Then where? She wanted to ask, but wasn't sure where to even begin. Had she gone to the store? Run away? Kidnapped?

"...Anymore," Cecil added, unhelpfully, trying to dampen the screaming silence that was rapidly forming between them.

Celestia smiled. It was good to assume the best. If she assumed the best, her staff would certainly not want to disappoint her.

"When will she be back?" Celestia inquired, as if it were a joke and that the punchline had better be very good.

"Yes, well," Cecil considered, looking to the ceiling, "The thing is, reports from Luna's bodyguards are saying she might return any time between now and..." Cecil looked at Celestia, whose modest smile was slowly creeping into a sardonic grin. "Er, perhaps not very soon."

"Her bodyguards said that?" Celestia asked. She could feel cracks forming against her equanimity but did her best to stay calm. "Did they send us a letter from wherever Luna is at?"

Cecil shrank. "N- not exactly," he stuttered. "They're here at the palace, waiting further instructions."

"Oh," Celestia quipped. "Then they're fired."

"O- of course!" Cecil appeased. "They do know where she is, though."

Celestia shot veiled daggers at Cecil. "Why didn't you just say?" she asked, terrifyingly nonchalant through a rapidly peeling facade.

"Well, the thing about *that* is," Cecil rattled, staring at the floor, pleading for it to save him, "She seems to be at her new castle."

"Oh! Well thank goodness she's still safe!" Celestia replied, placing her gorgeous wing around Cecil and patting down the raised hairs on the back of his neck.

Celestia had only one train of thought, and it was flying down the rails without breaks or control. What on earth? What! When had Luna gotten a new castle! Why did she leave without saying a word to her older sister! She was going to roast Miracle alive! This was exactly the kind of thing he was supposed to be keeping track of! A tiny ball of fire was burning a hole through Celestia's chest.

"Yes, it's quite a relief that she's alright," Cecil agreed, but there was a slight upturn in his voice that implied he was about to follow up with 'but there is a complication'.

Celestia waited. She was about ten seconds from picking the unicorn up and tossing him off her balcony in front of everyone. She pulled him in close and hugged her adviser. She could feel him shaking against her body. Somehow, this made her feel a little better. She bent down and kissed him on the top of his head.

"Lord Cecil," she mumbled, a mix of motherly reassurance and pillow talk, "You are not going to be in trouble. You are a good prime minister. My favorite, in fact."

Cecil responded with conflicting emotions, ducking his head a little and keeping his ears as far from the princess's teeth as possible, but he submitted to this treatment all the same. On the one hoof, it was nice to be cuddled by Celestia. On the other, it was hard not to remember what had happened recently with Lord Bucephalus, and the warhorse still had that scar. On the third hoof, this was also perhaps a bit degrading, and Cecil's wife would be angry.

It was things like this that really cemented Celestia's power. No pony in Equestria could ever get truly comfortable with her and begin serious plotting, because every now and then the goddess revealed that she was *flagrantly insane*. It was really very unnerving to try to plan an assassination attempt knowing that Celestia herself might be heading the whole conspiracy, and certain historical rumors did imply that such a thing was an entirely plausible concern.

"That is good news, highness," Cecil decided. "I will tell the Mrs when I go home tonight. Er, that I am the best prime minister."

"She'll be proud," Celestia hummed.

"She will want me to have a raise," Cecil suggested.

"Then she'll have to come here and ask for one," Celestia suggested.

"Oh, well, I suppose she will," Cecil said.

The two sat there for a moment, the princess's white, feathered wing still hugging the prime minister, a faint and distant smile applied to her face. She was using her magic to comb through Cecil's mane, maybe checking for nits or something. It was hard to say.

"So, I don't suppose you'd like to discuss the agenda for today's court session, would you?" Cecil asked. "There's rather a, well uh, that is, we seem to have a somewhat..."

Cecil trailed off. He was searching for a word that was polite and eloquent.

"I'm sorry," Celestia dismissed. "I am still enjoying the knowledge of how positively safe my little sister, my only family, still is."

"Yes," Cecil agreed as the princess hugged him tighter, "There in her castle. Not a thing to up and worry about!"

Celestia looked Cecil in the face. She was still smiling pleasantly, but in her eyes there was just a tiny glinting splinter of eternity. It was the awareness of a being who had spent the last several thousand years dealing with politicians every day of her life. The almost imperceptible, cackling

madness of a creature that had done almost everything there was to do, and that would, at any moment, invent something new if it were provoked.

"And she is so safe in her castle," Cecil began, very slowly, taking this in the smallest steps possible.

Celestia nodded, but didn't break eye contact.

"Because nobody can find it," the adviser finished.

"Oh," replied Celestia, gradually lifting her wing and refolding it against her body.

Cecil wished she'd put it back. Now he felt naked.

"Then how do we know that she's there?" Celestia requested.

She wasn't angry. Not at Cecil anyway. She just needed information. She knew, somewhere in the back of her screaming mind, that there wasn't information, though, or else she wouldn't have had to extract this little detail with such persistence.

"Well, I am not clear on the specifics," Cecil admitted apologetically, "But we are still looking. Apparently her new castle is in the same place as the old castle, but nothing is there."

Celestia nodded. Nothing was there. Of course. That made perfect sense. And of course Luna was safe, because how can someone be in any danger if they don't happen to be anywhere?

"I think maybe they were looking at the maps wrong," Cecil postulated. "I was going to speak to you about it after we'd looked at the maps a little better."

"Court is canceled for the day," Celestia announced.

Cecil winced.

"The other thing is, and this is why I did not want to distract you, is that – you know how we have been having a small dragon problem in the court lately?" Cecil reminded.

Celestia sighed, audibly. This was becoming extremely tiresome.

"Well, we seem to have a sort of large dragon problem outside of the court," Cecil wrapped up, quickly.

Celestia stood in her throne room amidst a crowd of nervous visitors. A giant purple dragon snout was poking through one of the windows.

"Is she there?" the snout asked, excitedly. "I can't see! This castle is simply not designed at all for a guest of my stature!"

Celestia looked to Cecil, who shrugged. Incitatus was standing right next to the dragon's enormous teeth, grinning fearlessly at a group of tittering fillies.

"I'm here," Celestia called out to the serpent. "Steven, was it?"

"Oh, good! You remember me!" Steven proclaimed.

He tried to pull his lengthy nose from the window, but twisted a bit to de-stick his face. The short, jerking motion drove a large indent into the stone window frame, and then he was outside. Celestia followed him onto the balcony, where the railing had already been smashed. A few diplomats peered timidly from the other windows and the damaged archway.

"How can Equestria be of service?" Celestia asked. She found herself with few other ideas on how to start the conversation.

"Well I would like you to have a word with your architects!" Steven demanded, shaking a finger at the goddess. "This has been simply unbelievable!" The serpent reached behind him and pulled a spear from the scales of his back. "And your guards have been exceptionally rude! Look at this! I told them why I was here! Is this how you treat friends in Canterlot?"

Celestia wasn't ready for this. She wanted to go back to bed right now. She had to be dreaming. This entire day was impossible.

"Who lives on a mountain, anyway! Honestly! And these walls!" The dragon fumed, pointing to a smashed battlement. "If I can't fit through the doors, the least you could do was build walls that can support my weight!"

"That must have been quite a climb for you," Celestia observed, weakly.

"No climb is too great!" the purple serpent exclaimed, clasping his hands together. His burning hair blew heroically on unseen currents. "This is a matter of the heart!"

This was terrible. With all this talk of warring on dragons, for one to actually break into Canterlot and destroy portions of the castle defenses *on accident* was easily the worst blow to morale they could have afforded. Of course, the upside of this was that maybe the rest of the courtiers would stop supporting the war in the first place.

"Matters of the heart do tend to be quite essential," Celestia agreed. She was trying to hurry this along – she had something important to be doing.

"Oh, tell that to your guards," Steven moaned, rolling his eyes. "'You can't come in here,' they said! 'I am friends with the princess,' I said! I begged and pleaded! I told them how far I had come!" The dragon clenched his hands into fists and put them sternly on his sides. "One simply cannot find good subordinates! They argued with me the entire way! Can you *believe* that?"

"You must be here for something *very* important," Celestia pressed, cordially.

She flashed a winning smile. The problem with having the dragon here in front of all her courtiers was that, despite feeling pressured for time at the moment, she had to be absolutely certain not to lose the appearance of control. Whatever was going on was happening because Celestia allowed it. For her to get impatient now would make her seem flustered by the dragon assailing her castle. A normal pony would be, but not the god-princess. The god-princess was never flustered by anything.

"Whatever you did for Lola, you have to do for me!" the dragon spilled.

Celestia clenched her teeth into a grin. *Damnit.*

"What, specifically?" She asked.

"Everything!" Steven shouted, fluttering his arms at all angles. "Make me beautiful! You have to!"

Suddenly, Celestia found herself in familiar territory. She'd had this talk with her young disciple, Twilight, more than once.

"Oh, Steven!" Celestia chided playfully, flipping a hoof at the gratuitously groomed dragon. "You're easily the most handsome dragon I've ever met! Besides, I can tell you from experience that it's not always how you look so much as it is your demeanor!" Celestia tossed her head back, throwing her twinkling hair to the wind. "I look for a stallion who can lead and take charge! A poor fool whimpering about his looks would never - "

"*No!*" Steven cried, lunging forward in one crazy motion. "You do *not* understand!" He held his hands out like a beggar. "I *know* I'm great! I *need* to be greater! It's the only way I'll win back Lola!"

"Lola?" Celestia asked, taken aback.

Celestia's inner feminist smashed a chair against the metaphorical wall of her mind. A male of any species would go crazy for female with a giant pair of voluptuous, emerald claws.

"I thought you said she was nothing but trouble," Celestia checked, mentally shushing her inner self.

Steven wrung his hands.

"I know what I said," Steven replied apprehensively. "But listen, I'm willing to deal with it. She wasn't *that* bad, in retrospect."

"Maybe you want to sleep on this," Celestia implored.

Steven shook his head violently, then pointed his head to the sky.

"*I climbed a mountain!*" He howled. He put his face to his claws. He was snorting and sniffing, fighting back emotional desperation. "I've been thinking and sleeping on this non-stop! I let your guards stab at me with spears! I almost wrestled an ura major on my way over here, for goodness sake!" Steven spread his arms out as far as they could reach, using them for reference. "Do you know how large those things are!"

Celestia was actually a little touched. It was so shallow, but so moving all the same. Sure, he was basically risking life and limb for nothing more than

a pair of emerald claws, but something could be said for the raw determination. Not to mention, she had to appreciate her own skill. If Lola could produce this kind of reaction, she was about to make some huge waves in Azathoth.

"If I could bring myself to stop, I would!" Steven wailed. "Don't you understand?" He finally broke down and cried. Tears streamed down his face as he blubbered without control. "You have to help me!" He pleaded.

As determined as he was, Celestia had to talk Steven out of this. If he were successful, it would throw a wrench in her plans. Aside, what more was there for Celestia to do? Even if Celestia did help him, he'd have to climb back down the mountain and find his way to Azathoth. Once there he'd have to fight... every... all the way... to Nodens.

Celestia's lips curled upwards of their own accord. The Devil himself cranked them into the most evil smile the goddess had known in ages. She hadn't had a war plan this devious since the old days. Why paddle upstream when there's a perfectly good rocket-powered speedboat pointed along the flow?

"Noble dragon," Celestia began, "Your story has moved the very earth from beneath my hooves, but even if I granted your wish, I'm afraid your dreams may be out of reach!"

"No!" Steven begged. "How? Why?"

"Young Lola has gone to Azathoth to be with Nodens," Celestia informed him.

Steven whimpered. Even to his stalwart advance, that was news to think about. Stealing a girl from one of the most powerful dragons in Azathoth was a sure death sentence.

"However, I am so touched, that I may hereby bequeath the entirety of the Equestrian military at your assistance!" Celestia proclaimed.

Steven gasped, and so did the courtiers watching the affair from the courtroom. The dragon's eyes went glassy. Celestia had mentioned to him that there was a war already looming on the horizon, hadn't she? Oh well, all the better if he forgot that and believed it was all for him and his love.

"I... I..." Steven fumbled, "I will never say anything bad about ponies. Ever."

"I'm thankful for that! You know quite a few dragons around Equestria, don't you?" Celestia asked, casually.

"Hmm," Steven mumbled, coming hazily out of his reverie. "Oh, yes."

"Well perhaps you should tell them about this?" the goddess hinted.
"Maybe there are cutesy little dragon girls in it for the rest of Equestria's dragons if they should care to get involved? Oh, and not to mention treasure hordes from anything we can conquer. Ooh! And, if we are very lucky, maybe I can even get Nyarlathotep himself pulling for you!"

Steven's meticulously pampered maw fell wide open.

"I'll send him a little letter. I have some strings I can pull," Celestia assured him. "All we need are some scouts and guides, and we'll help you win back Lola! I never thought, in all my life, that I'd ever see a love so pure."

"Oh, my," Steven muttered. "Leading a country to battle to earn back the love of my life. I never dreamed such things really happened."

"Time is of the essence!" Celestia plied, prancing forward, trying to rekindle the fire that led Steven here in the first place. "Every day Lola must be headed further into Azathoth! Quick, get as many dragons as you can! If we gather enough help, then this can be possible! Go!"

Steven nodded, shaking off his numbness. He took off at speed for the smashed wall behind him.

"Watch out for ursa majors!" Celestia called after him.

At the princess's back, the courtroom exploded into argument.

Celestia took a mental recap. So far, she'd tried to seek information and an alliance with the local dragons, but had failed. She'd then changed to her plan to getting just one dragon to go to Azathoth to seduce Nodens, which was possible but kind of a long shot. Now she was using that same dragon to seduce another dragon at home, and she was using him to raise a dragon army that would intercept Celestia's seductress. If she was really

lucky, Lola would make it all the way to Nodens, and she wasn't sure yet how sticky that was bound to make things for them yet.

Forget Discord, Celestia was the real god of chaos! Best of all, she'd made a complete heel-turn, so everything that had been going against her before was now suddenly going to be up-heaved and flat-footed. Until everyone got themselves back into order, everyone was going to be listening to the pony giving commands, and that was the goddess herself. One day, historians would look back on this and assume it was all part of some brilliant master plan.

The only problem left, aside from keeping track of everything she was doing now, was Luna.

"Everything is flying out of control and I've got almost no time to deal with it all!" Scratch complained, chin slumped against a restaurant table.

She'd been up all night after agreeing to do the gig for that weird Yellow Pony the other night. This was her first break all day, prompted by a visit from her close friend, Dub Trot. They'd gone to lunch together, and now Scratch was on her third cup of coffee in the last hour.

"Who's it for?" Dub asked.

"I can't tell you!" Scratch whined in exasperation.

"Well where's it at?" Dub tried.

"I can't tell you, dude!" Scratch insisted.

"What's it pay?"

"I can't tell you!"

"Do you not know or can you not tell me?"

"I can't tell you!"

Dub stirred her drink.

"You can't tell me, can't tell me, or -"

"I just can't tell you anything about it!" Scratch finalized. "The whole thing is a secret!"

From thin air, a frazzled pink pony exploded into existence. Scratch, utterly overdosed on caffeine, screamed and tossed her coffee in the air. Then she just kept on screaming again and again for a few minutes, realizing it was Pinkie. She couldn't help it, her entire body was in full panic mode. Pinkie started screaming along. When Scratch finally got a hold of herself, she sat in her chair, clutching at her heart and gasping for oxygen.

"Wow, that was really good!" Pinkie complimented.

Scratch scooted her chair back and laid down on the ground. Dub leaned over and gazed at her from above.

"Are you alright?" Dub asked

"Just need a minute," Scratch wheezed.

The world was reeling, and Scratch could feel her heart beating in her ears.

"So you ponies know a secret thing?" Pinkie asked.

Scratch tried to hold the earth still with her hooves.

"Scratch was just saying she had a secret gig," Dub said.

"That's amazing!" Exclaimed pinkie. "Because I know of a secret party!"

Scratch's ears rotated backwards towards Pinkie, who was behind her.

"Maybe it's the same thing!" Pinkie suspected.

The pink mare turned away from them, then surreptitiously slipped an envelope onto the table. Dub picked it up and read the contents aloud.

You are hereby cordially invited in complete secrecy to an exciting social gathering that is officially not happening. Do not tell anyone you were invited. Disguises and gifts are required (gifts should be good for dragons). No pony by the name of Harry von Jenkin-Weiner will be attending so do

not inquire. This event is to occur at midnight, at the old Lunar Ruins in the Everfree Forest (map and directions included on back).

Scratch scrambled upright, then grabbed Pinkie by the head.

"How?" she asked.

"How what?" Pinkie replied.

"How did you find out about this?" Scratch demanded.

"It's a seeecret!" Pinkie sang, fluttering her eyelashes.

"Scratch, is this your gig?" Dub asked.

"Dude, nobody is supposed to know!" Scratch hissed.

"What's going on there?" Dub persisted.

"Secret stuff!" Pinkie cried, dropping down for a pounce. Her tail waggled in the air.

"What's this about disguises?" Dub prodded.

"A secret party needs secret disguises!" Pinkie explained.

"Nobody is supposed to know!" Scratch shouted at Pinkie. "It's supposed to be a secret!"

Pinkie snorted.

"That's why I'm telling everyone *secretly*, silly!" she said, shifting her eyes back and forth.

"Everyone!" Scratch yelped. "How much is everyone?"

"Only half the town so far!" Pinkie said, as if it were a work in progress. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Don't tell anyone," she warned.

Pinkie bounded off. Scratch slumped her head against the table and jittered.

The graying Miracle Cecil was backed into the corner of the royal bedchamber, the eyes of a god boring into him like searing rods. He was doing his best not to be intimidated by this – after all, he was *the* Miracle Cecil, a stallion so conniving that they called him the chief auditor – but his throat clenched.

"Where is my sister?" the furious angel before him demanded.

"Given the circumstances, I'm afraid we just don't know!" Miracle forced out.

He tried to draw the emphasis on 'we' to the front of Celestia's attention. It was not Miracle, essentially, who was at fault here, but an entire team of ponies that had dropped the ball.

"How long has her castle been repaired?" Celestia asked.

"We don't know that either," Miracle managed, shaking his head, ears flattened.

"Why don't you know anything?" Celestia shot back.

Miracle didn't have an answer. The spy master was good; he didn't deserve this kind of treatment, and if his prey escaped him, then clearly something fishy was going on. Celestia began pacing around her room, fuming and snorting. Admittedly, Miracle felt a twinge of excitement seeing her like this.

"What good are you?" the goddess pointed, rhetorically.

"What kind of question is that?" Miracle scoffed.

"I was supposed to know every time the delegate from Azathoth sneezed! Didn't I ask for that!" Celestia accused.

Cecil gave the princess a moment of silence, enjoying the aggression for what it was. There were days he regretted pursuing her so ardently throughout his young life, and then there were moments like this that made it crystal clear why he had.

"We've got perfect records up until last night," Miracle said, "at least around the castle, but we've got nothing to imply a major reconstruction project has been undertaken anywhere in the area."

"Castles don't just appear out of thin air, Miracle!" Celestia scolded. "And they don't vanish into thin air either!"

This last fact they were both thinking. Celestia noticed the wry smile on Miracle's aging lips and realized what effect her raking him over the coals was actually having.

"Oh, stop!" She ordered, punctuating with a deflating gaze.

Miracle chuckled.

"Now, now, princess," Miracle replied, "We'll figure this out -"

"This should have been figured out before it became a problem!" the goddess interrupted, forcing Miracle back into the corner.

"Let's start with what we *do* know," Miracle suggested, plaintively. "For starters, Hastur came to our court with a ridiculous demand. How could we ever join a war with so little at stake for us and so little information? The proposition was absurd from the very beginning."

Celestia put a wing to her face and sighed.

"You think it was all some kind of diversion?" she asked.

"Maybe, but on the other hand I don't see how they could benefit by kidnapping Luna either," Miracle said.

"Dragons that old think of time differently," Celestia considered. "They probably think Luna's thousand year imprisonment was about as severe as a five minute time-out. It could be one hundred years before they even send their demands!"

Miracle shook his head.

"I doubt that," he said, calmly. "One does not kidnap royalty then figure out the details a century later. My bet is that your sister is now a bargaining chip. If you want her back, then you'll join in this war they've proposed."

"That is, if there is even a war," Celestia added, grimly. "I'm going to send Nyarlathotep a letter. This needs to be resolved immediately."

"Why bother?" Cecil asked, laughing. "You've likely confused the hell out of everyone! Think: if they kidnapped Luna to extort you into war, you've already submitted to their demands this afternoon!"

"If I send a letter and they make some sort of demand before word catches up, then we'll know what they were intending," Celestia explained.

"I suppose," Miracle agreed, "But everyone is tripping over themselves trying to figure you out. The entirety of Equestria is already in an uproar. There's no guarantee Nyarlathotep doesn't already know what's going on."

A scroll poofed into existence above Celestia in a spurt of green flame. It fell to the ground unceremoniously between the goddess and the auditor.

"How obnoxious," Miracle commented. "Here we are in the middle of a crisis."

Celestia picked up the letter and unrolled it.

"You're not going to read it now, are you?" Miracle asked, appalled. "What did your 'faithful student' Miss Sparkle learn today? The value of sharing her coloring books?"

"Sometimes they send me something important," Celestia dismissed, "Like that my faithful student is about to turn the entirety of Ponyville into a burning crater and that she needs to be stopped before it's too late."

"Leaving her in a small town with such minimal supervision was a mistake," complained Miracle, sourly.

Celestia skimmed over the letter. It looked like the usual thing, up until the PS.

Dear Princess Celestia,

Today I learned once again that, no matter how eccentric your friends may be, you should always take them seriously. Just because their claims may seem outlandish, maybe even dangerous, does not mean they lack a real basis. Listening to their propositions could lead to fun for everyone, and you never know when they have an idea that might work out for the better in the end!

Sincerely,

Your faithful student, Twilight Sparkle

P.S.

I think we've figured out that the special party tonight is for Princess Luna. Who else would be living in the old Lunar Ruins? Congratulations on rebuilding her old castle!

Celestia rolled up the letter.

"Miracle, have you checked your recent reports from Ponyville?" she asked.

"No," Miracle replied. "Should I add a new item to our list of disasters and political upheavals?"

"Maybe you should check the reports," Celestia recommended.

Scratch was either dizzy from exhaustion or dizzy from too much caffeine. She wasn't sure which. Probably both, but the good news was that she'd gotten all her mixing done just in time. It was going to be midnight in a few hours, and now all she had to do was figure out how to get to the Lunar Ruins and set everything up before midnight.

Originally the question was, how was she supposed to move everything and get ready without telling anyone about the specifics of the gig. Thanks to Pinkie Pie, though, apparently that didn't matter, and now Dub Trot was in tow with lights, turn tables and other gear being pulled along in a wagon. They had the map, too, also thanks to Pinkie, but the Yellow Pony had mentioned something about Twilight, so it seemed like a good idea to talk to her.

Scratch knocked on the door. She meant to hit it twice, but twitched off a third rap accidentally. She waited outside, ears flapping about and random directions without her control. The pony that answered the door was a brown unicorn in modestly formal attire. It looked like she was wearing one of Rarity's horn-made get-ups.

"Um, hey, is Twilight available?" Scratch asked.

"Yes!" the pony cried, pumping a hoof in triumphant glee. "It's me! My disguise worked!"

It sounded like Twilight. It didn't look a thing like her, though. Scratch's brain went ahead and wadded up this sensory information and threw it in her mental waste bin. This brown pony was Twilight Sparkle now. Data processed, stored, and deemed of no consequence.

"That's cool. So I'm going to the Everfree Forest now," Scratch said, trying to will her flailing ears to hold still.

"Aren't you going to wear a disguise?" Twilight asked, clearly caught up in the fun of the moment.

"I'm just trying to stay awake until tomorrow, dude," Scratch confessed.

Twilight gave Scratch a Look.

"We are supposed to wear disguises aren't we?" she asked superciliously. The question had all the right qualities of know-it-all and don't-tell-me-now.

Scratch's ears flipped faster. She had to go to the bathroom, too. She'd been going to the bathroom roughly every three minutes today. They should put a warning label on the coffee about that. It seemed like something a pony ought to know.

"Everyone in town is going to wear disguises, aren't they?" Scratch asked, cringing internally at the thought of the whole town showing up to this party tonight.

"Those are the rules," Twilight condescended.

Some ponies got along with Twilight. Scratch thought she was way too organized. Maybe a little mental, even. A girl like that was liable to have breakdowns all the time, especially with how seriously she took herself. Scratch wanted to say something snarky about how an education isn't that big of a deal, but could not for the life of her think of anything that would slip under Twilight's radar. Instead she just sat there, beating herself about the face with her own ears and trying not to think about pee.

"You know, for a little while I was worried," Twilight said. "At first I thought Pinkie Pie was crazy, but once word got around that you were going to DJ for this whole thing I guess we all realized it wasn't so crazy."

"Don't think about pee. Don't think about pee. Don't think about pee," Scratch ran through her mind on a loop.

Twilight cocked an eyebrow.

"So is there something I can help you with? Or..." Twilight asked, rudely implying that Scratch's behavior was weird.

"I have to pee," Scratch informed her.

"Oh," Twilight replied. "Well there's a bathroom upstairs if you want."

Scratch excused herself to take care of business. When she came back Twilight and Dub were making small talk.

"So, dude, do you want to come with me to the Lunar Ruins?" Scratch interrupted.

"Right now?" Twilight asked. "I was going to go with Rarity and the others."

"Okay," Scratch replied, this irrelevant bit of sensory information also wadded up and tossed in her mental waste bin. "I have to go now and the guy that hired me told me to bring you," Scratch explained.

"Bring me? Why me?" Twilight asked, incredulous.

What was with all the stupid questions! Scratch had stuff to set up!

"Because you've been there before so you know the way, and you can protect the music equipment!" Scratch insisted, hyperactive exasperation seething through.

"Oh, I guess so," Twilight agreed hesitantly.

She didn't seem sold on that? Fine! Everything else was ruined, Scratch might as well spill the rest of the beans.

"Maybe Princess Luna wants to speak to you or something, dude. Just come on or we're going to be late!" Scratch begged.

"So it *is* a party for Princess Luna!" Twilight proudly deduced. "I knew it!"

"Yes!" Scratch hurried along. "You guessed it!"

A tiny star twinkled in Twilight's eye.

"I'm going to be the favorite of *two* princesses!" Twilight squealed.

"If you would just listen for two seconds," grumbled Bucephalus as he followed Celestia down the main stairwell of the palace.

Celestia had been harried all day by various politicians, reporters, and any hanger-on that could get her attention. It was now close to two in the morning, and Luna's party, if it indeed was happening at all, would have already started two hours ago.

"I really don't have time for this," Celestia said without looking at the large stallion.

She leapt to the sky but felt something grip the base of her rump. The goddess halted short, falling unevenly on the stairs. She turned to find the warhorse holding her tail in his teeth.

"Then make time!" he grunted through a mouthful of hair.

"Bucephalus," Celestia began severely, "I could have you killed for that. Do you hear me?"

She was not in the habit of making direct threats, but she had woken up without enough sleep and it was only getting worse as the night dragged on. With each passing second Celestia's patience was waning thinner and thinner.

"Then do it!" Bucephalus demanded, fearless.

Celestia closed her mouth. She wasn't sure if she'd simply let him get too comfortable around her, or if she just had a bad habit of employing very frustrating stallions. It was likely samples from both categories.

Bucephalus let her go. He raised his head and met her level gaze with the same confrontational intensity she was supplying on her end. He, however, had the upper hand of being on slightly elevated terrain and would still be larger in any case. Gradually, instinct forced Celestia to lose the ensuing stare-down. She had never been the best at head-on conflict, but she wasn't in the mood to be coy or clever tonight.

"Whatever you're planning on doing, you have ponies for it," Bucephalus scolded, his eyes not leaving the goddess's face.

"This is a personal concern," Celestia reproached, shooting brief glances back into the warhorse's eyes. She'd lost the battle, but she wasn't quitting.

"I am sick to death of being nothing more than -" Bucephalus started.

He broke contact to search for words. Celestia struck at the opening.

"If you are sick, General, then perhaps you should take a leave of absence," she threatened.

It was an ultimatum. One more step in the wrong direction and she'd get a new grand general.

"What are you?" Bucephalus hissed. "Trying to kill everyone? Is that what you want?"

Celestia tried to think clearly about the situation. If she argued with him, she'd only be playing his game. She turned her head away from the warhorse. It looked like a sign she was folding, but it was only to get his angry face out of her own so she could concentrate.

"From square one, I feel like you've been constantly working against me," Bucephalus complained.

"Working against you? Why?" Celestia asked, feigning concern.

She creased her brow in worry and her eyes went big. Not a soul would be able to tell by looking that she wasn't feeling modest hurt at this lack of emotional connection between her and her stallion. Bucephalus studied her.

"Why!" he blurted.

This was it. That space where she'd taken everything, reacted incorrectly, and then put her opponent off-balance. It was why Celestia wasn't good at direct confrontation. It never got her anywhere. Not like good-old misdirection did. Just bump their feet around and tip them over. That was the ticket. Even now, she said nothing to justify herself. She just kept staring at Bucephalus with those big doe eyes. How come, Bucephalus? How come?

"Because..." the General tried.

He knew that he was being fought against. He just couldn't think of the exact instances that proved it. Celestia had given him permission to train militias around the border. He'd been able to send his scouting teams. She had just committed Equestria to war, and he had been in support of that. He just hadn't been in support of it being so crazy.

"I feel left out of the loop," Bucephalus decided.

Celestia went on giving her inquisitive eyes. Oh? Left out of the loop? Why?

Bucephalus coughed and shifted uneasily. He'd been ready for a fight. He hadn't thought about what he'd do if he got the chance to calmly and politely list out his grievances.

"I need to know what you are planning," the stallion elaborated.

"I'm planning on going to war," Celestia said, innocently. "You said we could."

Bucephalus flinched.

"Is it okay?" Celestia asked.

"Well, yes and no," the warhorse replied, flustered.

"What do you mean yes and no?" Celestia chided, suddenly switching to motherly condescension.

"Well there's more to consider than just *can we!*" Bucephalus elucidated.

"It sounds complicated," Celestia grouched.

"Are you kidding? Of course it's complicated!" Bucephalus shouted, raising his voice as he started to regain control.

"Then it's late and I don't have time tonight," Celestia said quickly. "Just prepare a report and I'll read through it tomorrow, okay?"

Bucephalus tested his jaw, but couldn't put adequate sounds to the movements. Celestia imagined tiny capillaries popping in his head from the stress. She turned away from him, spread her wings, and vanished into the horizon, leaving behind a befuddled and soon to be furious grand general.