



Of Harmony and Chaos

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Chapter 1

New Dawns, New Lives

CRASH!

The rain, thunder and lighting were relentless. The ivory-coated, red-haired mare sighed to herself and trudged on, her long, spiralled horn just barely illuminated the rocky mountain path in front of her. She *really* ought to have consulted the pegasi on what weather was due today, but the trip had still been worth it; two saddlebags full of books and papers for her to study from New Manesterdam; Star Swirl's latest theories on the possibility of pony teleportation, 'A History of the Blizzard and Canterlot vol. 2', the list was extensive, as was the mare's interests, but it would be some time before she could afford such another spree.

"But..." *'At this rate I'm going to have to find shelter and wait out this storm...it's too dangerous to fly, and I doubt it's exactly safe to be trotting practically blind on these paths either'* The mare was in luck however, as the furious lighting roared once more and briefly revealed what looked like a small cave in the side of the mountain, less than 100 metres away.

"Jackpot!" cheered the pony. Gritting her teeth with intense determination and a challenging smirk, the mare willed on her weary hoofs. Within a few minutes she was out of the angry maelstrom and shaking herself down in an attempt to dry her soaking coat and mane. Using her telekinetic magic to lift the heavy bags from her back and lay them down gently onto an oddly flat stone, she then proceeded to use her magic again to spark a warm fire for her to lie by.

'Heavenly...' the equine thought as she rolled onto her back and shifted her body to try and get as close as possible to the fire. After the biting cold of the rain, the heat from the flames made even the rock-hard floor feel like a freshly squeezed out cloud from the weather factories.

Several minutes passed before the pony actually made another move, going to magically try and arrange her still damp hair from out of her face, surprisingly being the largest of her worries. *'I know I can rely on Celestia*

not to worry too much, and to look after Luna. Wouldn't be the first time I've left those two alone for the night!' smiled the mare as she thought happily of her two daughters. Celestia may only just be in her early teens, but she was already a mature and dependable pony, who could take care of her sister just as well as her own mother.

"...who's there?" inquired a small but confident voice from within the shadows of the cave behind the grinning pony.

Turning her head with a slight expression of surprise, the mare replied, calling back into the void of the cave "Oh? I'm sorry, am I intruding in your home?". Without waiting for a reply, the mare began to magically gather up her things "Excuse me, I'll leave you if you wish?" as she spoke a small, serpentine figure began to emerge from the blackness.

"No, no! Please, stay! Maybe you can help her!" clearly that of a young creature, the voice became louder and more pronounced as it got closer to the circle of light cast by the fire. The voice's plea for help prompted the pony to rise to her hoofs, trotting closer and casting a soft glow from her horn.

"Help? Of course, please, explain-" the pony stopped her sentence in surprise as the owner of the voice became illuminated by her magic. There before her was a creature she had never expected to see. Peering up at her with a look of great worry was a small draconequus. Possessing the head of a pony, the limbs of a lion, eagle, lizard & goat, the wings of a bat and a Pegasus, and the tail of a snake, this was clearly one of the ancient race thought to be on the verge of extinction. The mare shook her fascination away and turned her face stern again. Her curiosity could wait, somepony, needed her help "Sorry, do go on"

The draconequus motioned for the pony to follow him, turning and scampering back towards the shadows "My mother, I think she's very sick! Please, follow me!" explained the young creature, stopping every few metres and waiting for the light-emitting mare to catch up to him.

The contrasting duo reached their destination after only a handful of metres from the makeshift camp, the patient in question being mostly concealed by the blinding gloom. Lying almost perfectly still save for the very slight rise and fall of it's chest was another, though mature,

draconequus. Like her son, this draconequus was composed of the same attributes, arranged differently but noticeably pale even in the dim light the mare's magic provided *'She looks so weak... I doubt she has long left...'* the equine thought sadly to herself.

The young draconequus rushed over to nuzzle his mother's face, overjoyed at the thought that his only family would recover "Mother! Mother! Someone is here to help, you'll get better!" he exclaimed while gesturing to the mare as she slowly approached the two.

"Hello there, my name is Equidae Aumean" soothed the mare as she tried to keep her voice hopeful for the small draconequus' sake. *'I can tell already, there's nothing I can do for her. She isn't sick, she's old'* concluded Aumean as she finished scouring her vast knowledge for possible illnesses.

The ancient creature raised her head to try and see the visitor with near-blind eyes, smiling as she realised the nature of Aumean "Heh... well, what an honour, to have an alicorn be my last ever gues-" the old draconequus couldn't finish before launching into a raspy cough that essentially confirmed Aumean's suspicions, she was nearing the end of her natural life.

"Mother, don't speak like that!" pleaded the little being, hugging his mother's head tightly before flailing at Aumean to come closer and try to help. *'It's ok Mother, you'll get better, you will!'* he told himself repeatedly.

The dying creature looked at her son deeply as if trying to apologize for everything that was happening "Oh, my son..." paused the draconequus as she tried to think of a gentle way to tell him "...you must understand, my time is up" the sadness in her voice was not that of self-pity but rather sympathy for her child who fate had dealt a cruel hand "I'm so sorry I couldn't have brought you into this world sooner, so you would have had more time to prepa-" she could not finish her sentence as, once again, the hoarse cough robbed her of her ability to speak.

Aumean settled herself down close to the ancient being and began concentrating her magical energies into her horn as the younger draconequus began tugging urgently on her coat, simply wanting her to make all the badness go away "I'm sorry all I can do is ease your pain..."

but you must know that even if I was capable, it wouldn't be right for me to prolong your-"

"Everything has its time, alicorn. I've lived a long and happy life..." asserted the elderly being as she fondly remembered her youth "...as did my kin before me. Much like your own people, the legacy of us draconequus is almost up" she stated with a slight air of questioning, apparently not knowing the exact status of the equally old race. "I just hope my son here can lead as good a life as me" spoke the elderly creature, smiling contently at Aumean. And what a life it had been! The draconequus sat and warmly recalled soaring blissfully through the skies, competing in grand yet-exclusive competitions of creativity, even curiously observing from a distance the gradual birth of the three pony races and how they struggled with the land's near-eternal blizzard before finally overcoming their differences and forging a fiery passion for goodwill and friendship that thawed even the iciest of frosts.

Aumean couldn't help but feel a bond had formed between the two. She was right, much like the draconequus, there were but a handful of alicorns left, herself included. It wasn't a saddening fact though, they may be physically different, but there were still plenty of those who would carry on into the future.

Aumean's musings were interrupted by another of the ancient creature's coughing fits, but the mare's magic was clearly having an effect, much of the rough wheezing having disappeared "I ask one thing of you, alicorn" inquired the mature draconequus with an increasingly serious tone. "When you leave, take him with you. I was unfortunate enough to give birth so late in my life, he is not ready to stand on his own two feet" she explained, gesturing to her son's rocking gait. "Please, give my son the chance at life I couldn't provide him" she looked over sadly at her child who had wandered over to Aumean's fire, apparently trying to brew some kind of tea for his mother.

"I'm thankful you can trust me with such an honour. You have my word I will raise him as well as I can" pledged Aumean as she followed the draconequus' gaze to the struggling child. "Tell me, what is his name?"

The old draconequus smiled proudly as her son began waddling back awkwardly with a steaming pot, almost tripping up and spilling it everywhere “Discord”

The distant rumbling of thunder provoked a long and weary sigh from the white foal. *‘Looks like mother is going to be late home again. I’ll have to make us something then’* she thought to herself as she trotted from the large window of the castle-turned-library to the crackling fireplace where a pile of cushions held a tiny, curled up, majorelle-coated filly, dozing oh, so sweetly.

“Luna... Luna...” whispered the older alicorn as she lightly nudged her sister from her adorable slumber. *‘That mother of ours... she can be so irresponsible!’* thought the firmament-maned pony as she tried and failed at being mad at her mother, an impossible feat with not only her intensely cute sister smiling up at her with sleepy eyes, but also her profound love of the kind mare.

“Ce...Celestia!” beamed little Luna, wobbling to her hooves cautiously to try and hug her sister.

“Ce-les-ti-a” corrected the older sibling, smiling back at the filly while offering a hoof to help steady her. *‘She’s growing up so fast!’* the white foal grinned as she mused over how quickly Luna was developing, despite being only being a few months in age. “Now, Luna. Mother isn’t going to be home tonight, so I’ll have to make you something to eat...” explained Celestia as she carefully led Luna towards the kitchen at the back of the library. Of course, the small filly didn’t really understand all of her sister’s words but “eat” was one her tiny, yet always expanding, vocabulary certainly *did* recognise.

“Oh, oh...” Luna excitedly sounded, instinctively unfurling her petite wings before furrowing her brow trying to remember the right names for her favourite treats. “Ca...cake!” shined the filly, on the verge of hopping in anticipation.

Celestia picked the bouncing dark foal up with her forelegs and settled her in a seat at a simple wooden table and began investigating the cupboards

and shelves for something simple yet edible for them to have. "Cake? Well... alright, so long as you have something *healthy* with it..." explained Celestia somewhat pointlessly, the filly not knowing the word. "I don't want my little sister getting chubby!" teased the foal as she spied some fresh greens and the cake in question.

"Cake! Cake!" bobbed Luna in her seat as she watched her sister telekinetically pull down a large plate with about a third of a carrot cake left on it. She then proceeded to magically cut the delicious sweet evenly, leaving a slice for her mother, and serving it on two separate, smaller plates. "Yay!" cheered little Luna as the cake was slowly lowered onto the table in front of her. The young filly went to pick the cake eagerly but stopped before reaching it. She looked up at her sister levitating a number of kitchen utensils around, then stared back at the cake with immense concentration.

Celestia was busy cutting and mixing a variety of vegetables and fruit into a salad. Looking down at her decent, but by no means extravagant work the white foal gave herself an awkward smile *'It's better than something Surprisena could make'*. She didn't notice a few sky-blue sparks fly from Luna's horn, or the slice of cake shudder slightly. "Alright Luna, here's a nice nutritious salad so that you don't get fa-" Celestia's words were stopped by her mouth gaping open in surprise as she saw her sister's slice of cake surrounded with a faint blue aura, levitated ever so slowly from its plate and then splatter in Luna's face after shooting towards her at extreme speeds. Both sisters merely blinked in surprise for several moments.

Naturally, Luna's eyes began to bubble and then release a trickle of tears. "...caaaake..." sorrowfully cried the little filly as her treasured desert fell to the floor.

Celestia couldn't help but let out a small chuckle before going to comfort her silly little sister "Oh, Luna, you're growing up *too fast*!" giggled Celestia. "Don't worry, let's get you cleaned up..." floating a pile of napkins over to the table, Celestia began wiping Luna's face tenderly to remove all the crumbs and growing stream of tears.

"B-but..." sniffled the dark filly, scrubbing at her face with her hooves and looking sadly down at her empty plate.

“Here” offered the pure white foal as she telekinetically slid her own slice of cake over the table and then cut it down the middle, levitating one half onto Luna’s plate. “Now no magic at the table until you know how to use it little sister!” she scolded while simultaneously nuzzling her younger sibling.

Luna didn’t fully understand what her big sister’s words meant, but she knew she was being told not to try that again to which she nodded vigorously in response before nibbling in delight at the cake Celestia had given her.

With Luna happy again, the white foal trotted over to the kitchen window and peered out at the far-off mountains to the west *‘I’m sorry mother, you missed Luna’s first ever bit of magic!’*

Though dark, the night sky was cloud free when Aumean’s internal clock awoke her. It was of course time for her to perform her duties passed down to her by her ancestors. Picking herself up from the thin sheet she had been sleeping on, the white mare made her way outside the cave onto the cool, damp rocks. Looking up at the now-unclouded stars, she smiled, taking in the beauty of the glistening night sky before she was forced to replace it. Taking a deep breath, closing her eyes and pointing her horn to the horizon, the powerful alicorn’s horn began to glow and spark with a golden light. The aura from her horn spread to the rest of her body and outstretched wings, illuminating the entire mountainside. In a final flash of light, the divine rays of the sun began to pierce their way lazily across the sky, signalling the beginning of a new dawn. “There...” smiled Aumean as she appreciated her work for a few moments more. Satisfied, the tall alicorn made her way back into the cave and noticed the young draconequus, Discord, muttering and rolling around in a disturbed sleep by his deathly still mother. The mare gave him a gaze full of pity as he began to wake from the warm light of the rising sun, stretching his long body and rubbing his bloodshot eyes.

“...is it...” Discord began to say but stopped, recalling the events of last night. Without saying another word, the small draconequus simply sat himself down in front of his mother and grasped her neck tightly, rubbing his cheek against her’s affectionately. The elder being did not respond, but

the content smile she had left behind showed her passing was not something to despair over.

Hoisting her saddlebags onto her back, Aumean continued to shower the sight with a gaze of sympathy. "Discord... it's time to go"

The small draconequus nodded and gave his mother a final squeeze before letting go and wordlessly scanning the cave. Finding what he was looking for, Discord made an awkward path towards Aumean carrying nothing of his mother's possessions but a fat iron teapot, the same one he had used the night before.

"Don't you want anything else...?" She questioned, surprised by Discord's choice "I could carry something for you, if you..."

Discord shook his head. Though they had never had much, none of their possessions held as much value as the teapot. Countless times had Discord's mother beaten away the cold nights and huddled with her son with cups of tea brewed with this very pot. It was a simple thing, worthless to anypony, but a sentimental treasure brimming with loving memories of the one individual to show him affection. Discord would not trade this battered lump of dark metal for any amount of bits, gold or gems. Even a painting would not have the same value; Discord had seen his mother's caring face enough times to burn it forever into his memory, and it was her actions, not her appearance, that defined her as someone the little draconequus would never forget.

Nodding with understanding, Aumean lifted Discord and his pot onto her back. Twisting her head to give him a reassuring smile, she began a steady trot forward out of the cave, carrying the draconequus into the light of his new life.

Chapter 2

Resolution Not To Cry

Pink clouds swirled unnaturally in the sky showering the earth with brown droplets of rain. Animals assumed twisted forms, their limbs growing out of proportion with their bodies and sending them into insane races that tore up the ground below them. The plants grew inexplicably, curling into random shapes and sprouting leaves and fruit of eye-watering patterns and colours. Everywhere she looked, the white foal saw only pervasive abominations. “By the Elements... mother! Mother, please, help! What’s happening!?” cried Celestia as she launched into a gallop, unable to stop her eyes from darting in all directions and soaking up the warped scene. *‘I have to get out of here... get to town... somepony must know what’s happening...’* raced Celestia’s mind as she focused on that goal. The madness that was infecting her beloved Everfree forest was neither scary nor particularly threatening, it was just so... *wrong*. How had such a place of tranquil beauty become like *this*?

With a relieved cheer Celestia saw the roofs of Ponyville’s houses. Even if she couldn’t find mother, the citizens would surely have *some* idea of what was going on. As the white alicorn continued her gait towards the small village her hopeful smile began to fall and her fierce gallop slowed to a weak trot. She had seen the roofs and spires, not because she was getting close to the earth pony built settlement, but because the buildings themselves were floating in the air. “Not here as well... mother... mother!” pleaded Celestia as she resumed her rush to the now-cursed village, intent on finding somepony to explain the havoc. Passing over the bridge and into Ponyville proper, the young mare couldn’t help but once again surrender her eyes to the visions of utter chaos around her. Ponies of all ages and size were either laughing manically on the floor, leaping off balconies regardless of whether they could fly or not, poking their heads into every nook and cranny with looks of wonder, trying to slap together random objects into something meaningful or trotting around with their heads held high. *‘What is wrong with everypony!? There must be...Penwell! He’ll know what to do!’* realised Celestia as she thought of the town’s librarian, an intelligent and sensible stallion who was a good family friend. Surely he wouldn’t have been drawn into all this madness?

As Celestia set off full-speed to the village's centre and local library she was so distracted and confused by this horrid turn of events that she ploughed straight into a hovering figure, sending both crashing onto their blank flanks. "I'm so sorry, I wasn't looking where I was-" Celestia began to say but was stopped by Surprise, both the feeling and the pony.

"And *who* do you think you're running into, eh!? How *dare* you even *think* of touching *me*! I am, without doubt, the greatest..." dramatically proclaimed the small snow coloured pegasus, though her proud rants were heard by nopony, as Celestia simply stared at her normally carefree and fun-loving friend with horror.

'Surprisena too...? By the Elements, somepony help...!'

"...and it's all thanks to that *wondrous* gentlecolt!" applauded Surprise as she pointed a hoof to the village pavilion, where a tall, thin throne-like seat had been placed at the top of the stairs, replacing the normal pedestal used to make announcements. Despite the sun shining brightly in the sky, the chair was engulfed in a menacing shadow, obscuring the long serpentine figure that coolly sat upon it.

"He's responsible? Who is...? Why...? None of this makes sense!" despaired Celestia as she clutched her thoroughly aching head with her hooves. The figure upon the throne stirred at her confused cries, a sadistic, mocking chuckle echoed from the undoubtedly evil being's throat.

"Well of course it doesn't make sense, my dear..." spoke the figure as it literally stretched it's arm, a wicked set of eagle talons slowly clawing their way through the air towards Celestia as she lay frozen on the ground with terror. "...where's the fun in making *sense*?" it cackled as a talon forcefully came down on the white-foal's head, not cutting her skin but slicing deep into her mind and infecting her head with such intense feelings of chaos she could do nothing but scream.

The morning sun had still yet to rise, but the two travelling companions were already approaching Everfree forest which glistened and sparkled with dew in the orange light. Still high up on the mountain slopes, the cosy village of Ponyville and even the towering spires of Canterlot were visible in

the distance. The contrasting couple had remained silent in the few hours they had been hiking the rolling paths. It was not an awkward silence however, Discord naturally needed time to think about last night and Aumean was fully aware of it. He would speak when he was ready. The red-maned mare smiled wearily to herself; she had accepted responsibility of the young draconequus without so much as thinking about it, but it now occurred to her that just Celestia and Luna alone could be hooffuls at the best of times. Despite this, her thoughts were more that of planning than reconsideration, there was no way in all of Equestria that she would think of abandoning Discord now, even giving up responsibility to someone else was not an option to the wise mare. The little draconequus was having enough of a hard time as it was; betraying her promise and his feelings was simply inconceivable.

“...that village... is that where you live?” piped up Discord, speaking with a curious look in his large yellow eyes that were fixed on the small settlement. Aumean was glad; for one so young, the orphaned draconquus seemed to be taking his circumstances well, she had expected him to want to mourn his loss for longer.

“Not quite, I live in a converted chapel with my daughters a little way in that forest, but we often go into the village, Ponyville, for food, supplies and just to be social!” explained the ivory alicorn. “...in fact, I want to cut around the forest and go to Ponyville first to see if I can pick up something as an apology for my little ponies...” continued Aumean with a guilty grin on her face. She had told Celestia she would be back from her trip the night before, no doubt the teenage foal would be cross with her.

“...daughters? You have children?” asked Discord, his inquisitive eyes turning to look at the back of his carrier’s head with wonder.

“Why yes, their names are Celestia and Luna. Celestia is about the same age as you, I think, maybe a little older, but Luna is only just nearing a year now. Don’t worry, they’re both very kind, I’m sure they’ll welcome you” assured Aumean, smiling back at Discord.

‘She has daughters!’ exclaimed Discord in his mind, unsure of what to actually think about it other than the fact that there would be other children. He had always been an only-child and while Discord had certainly met many others during his and his mother’s nomadic life, Discord had never

had much of a chance to really get to know them or make friends. It would be a completely new experience for him. His feelings of intrigue only grew as more questions about this pony and her family sprung to mind like embers from a flame. One question in particular tugged at the draconequus' mind "Aumean... can I ask what you do? My mother told me that you could tell what a pony did from the marks on their flanks..." asked Discord as he peered at the equine's rump. "...yours is a quill and some ink, right? What does it mean? Are you a writer?"

The mare laughed heartily at the draconequus' many questions. He certainly was a inquisitive one! *'In fact... he just might do...'* pondered Aumean before shaking away her thoughts to answer the little creature on her back. "Your mother was right. That is a 'cutie mark', it symbolises a pony's calling in life, once they've found what it is" explained Aumean as she moved her wings slightly to give Discord a better view of the marking on her rear. "I am a writer, of sorts. I don't write about stories though, I mostly research and write about magic"

Rather than nod in understanding as he had been, Discord suddenly frowned, as if Aumean's explanation wasn't the answer he was hoping for. "So... it doesn't have to do with...well... having a horn *and* wings!" exclaimed the diverse chimera, flapping his mismatched arms to represent the mare's wings.

"Ah, no. I have both a horn and wings because I'm an alicorn, but... you'll have to wait for another day to hear about that tale, it's a *long* history not really suited to mountain hiking!" chuckled Aumean as she slowly came to a canter and looked around the steep slopes, her grin turning to a frown. "Speaking of which... I think we've lost the path..."

Discord blinked several times and stood as tall as his slender body would allow in an effort to help him scan the unfamiliar surroundings "...I don't see it..."

For several moments, the pair simply stood and dumbly looked at the rocky inclines around them. "Well, I suppose the only choice is to fly. You don't mind do you Discord?" sighed Aumean with an amused tone. Contrary to her reputation as one of the wisest and most powerful beings in the land, she really could be hopeless at times. It was a shame as well, she enjoyed

leisurely absorbing the scenery from the ground, rather than see it all as a blur from the air.

Standing tall and proud while simultaneously clutching his precious pot, Discord gave Aumean a confident grin "I flew with mother all the time! No need to worry about me!" It was true that the draconequus had flew on his mother's back plenty of times before, but it was also true that Aumean was considerably smaller than his mother and the pony's hooves were not particularly well adapted for holding onto him.

The alicorn returned the grin to her passenger, clearly being able to sense the tiny pang of doubt in him "I'll keep you in place with magic if I have to, I'm not *that* irresponsible" assured Aumean as she covered the draconequus in a shining gold aura that kept him firmly seated in his place "Ready?"

With an excited nod in response, the alicorn unfurled her majestic wings to their maximum, accelerated into a thundering gallop and leapt into the air, leaving the ground with a powerful gust.

Yawns were all the pure-white foal could muster as she stood at the kitchen sink, magically scrubbing the morning's dishes, black bags having already formed under her violet eyes. Last night's horrible dream had seen fit to deprive Celestia of all sleep; first simply by making her bolt up in bed, sweating and shivering with fear once it had reached its stomach-curdling conclusion but also by indirectly scaring poor Luna through her sister's waking screams. It had taken hours of soothing and lullabies to hush the midnight-filly back to a peaceful slumber and at least an hour more for Celestia herself to dose off again, by which time it was already early dawn. Yet another long yawn lazily sounded around the kitchen, tempting Celestia to return to bed. Her normally flowing pastel-mane lay curled and tangled and screeched to be tamed from its wild state. On the verge of falling asleep where she stood, the tired foal didn't notice the hovering figure slowly advance towards her.

"SURPRISE!" boomed an adrenaline pumping voice in Celestia's ear that caused the alicorn to rear up in shock and lose her grip on the levitating dish. The plate, luckily, fell harmlessly in the sink's soapy water, but splashed the startled foal with a face full of suds. Turning wide-eyed,

Celestia saw a yellow-maned pegasus giggling and rolling hysterically on the floor behind her. “Oh...Tia!... *Your face!*” squeaked the snowy Pegasus through aching laughter.

“Surprisena...please...don’t do that...again...” gasped Celestia, having lost her breath as well. Though she tried to look annoyed with the sniggering mass on the floor, the alicorn couldn’t help but chuckle a little herself.

After roughly a minute the two ponies recovered enough to actually hold a conversation “...sorry, Tia! But you know me, can’t help it! So, how’s things? Your mom not back yet?” Surprise asked her friend, not particularly astonished that Ms. Aumean hadn’t yet returned from her trip to the rapidly-growing colony.

“No, but I doubt she’ll be long now. Knowing mother she’s probably went to go get something to try and apologize with, not that she needs to” spoke Celestia. Her words were true. Of course she loved having her mother at home but everypony knew, Celestia included, that the young alicorn was very mature for her age and was perfectly capable of taking care of both herself and her little sister. “Luna will be happy though, you know how much of a sweet tooth she has” sighed Celestia as she turned her gaze back out of the kitchen window to the libraries’ garden where her sister was playfully trying to chase a trio of pink-winged butterflies, the stress of the night before having seemingly been forgotten.

“Can’t really blame her though. My pals in Cloudsdale say the mountains were due a big one yesterday, she’d have to be one a mule to try and get through *that!*” Surprise informed as she floated up to the sink to join her friend in gazing out into the simple garden.

A few moments passed as the two contently watched Luna prance about carefree amongst the flowers, her little wings flapping weakly by her side. “Hmm...oh! Where are my manners? How have *you* been Surprisena?” inquired Celestia, not noticing the snowy pegasus’ eyes rolling at her constant use of her full name. “Usual! Bouncing about moping ‘bout how this sleepy little place is too small for ol’ Surprise!” chattered the fun-loving pegasus, clearly not as bored as she made out.

“And what about *Red?*” casually asked the alicorn with a knowing smirk, suppressing a chuckle as Surprise’s cheeks turned a deep rose. “Got him

to examine any *jewels*?" Celestia continued to tease. Everypony, par Redstone himself, knew that the spring-hoofed pegasus had a crush on the quiet and humble earth pony.

"He's...he's good...! Though I haven't actually..." Surprise paused as her eyes quickly scanned her surroundings "Wow, look at Luna go! I bet soon she'll have no trouble flying at all!" stammered the pegasus, zooming towards the garden door to go and play with Luna so she could escape the topic of her blatant affections. Despite her speed, Surprise could not escape the white ponies taunting chuckle. *'I'll get her back!'* she vowed, already in the process of concocting some suitable revenge for Celestia, an amazingly easy task given the alicorn's organisation loving nature.

Celestia remained in the kitchen and quickly began finishing what cleaning was left from breakfast as well as giving her mane some much-needed attention. With a little magic here and there, the chores and grooming were soon complete and 'Tia' could give herself some much needed relaxation after her horrible dream and sleep deprivation. Glancing with a smile through the window, the now well-groomed foal indulged herself and let a fantasy or two slip into her mind; a young, charming colt or perhaps a big strong, stallion...? She giggled at her the thoughts forming in her mind. It was silly to think she or Surprise would find true love at their young ages. *'But it would be nice to meet somepony...'* she thought while breathing a hearty sigh. Giggling at herself once more, Celestia shook away her mind's melodramatic images of romance and trotted out into the garden to scold the two filthy fillies practising flying in the meadow's *one* muddy pool.

Cheery greetings were gifted by all those whom the pair past, hailing the alicorn with goodwill. "Aumean...you're famous! Everypony must have said hello..." Discord trailed off while staring at the merry residents of the small town. Little heed was given to the draconequus, but from the foals to the nags they all recognised Aumean.

The alicorn blushed faintly and turned her head straight "W-well, I suppose you could say that..." she stuttered and accelerated into a trot, giving the occasional polite nod in response to the constant acknowledgement.

'...she doesn't like the attention?' pondered Discord at Aumean's reaction. It wasn't that unusual to be shy, but he did find it a little surprising the way

she blushed at every greeting after he had made the remark. The alicorn had appeared to him as the confident type who wouldn't mind a little renown.

Ponyville was not a large place and it did not take long for the mare and her passenger to reach the Aumean's first port of call; a new, two-storey thatched roof building with a sapling of what looked like an oak tree growing in the open space beside it. "I hope you don't mind the delays, I just want to see a friend then we can go buy the girls a treat and be on our way home" assured the red-maned mare as she smiled back at the small mix-up creature on her back who promptly returned the expression in kind.

"Just a minute, please!" called a slightly muffled voice from the back of the library/bookshop as the store's doorbell dinged loudly. Several moments passed before an inky blue pony emerged from a backroom on his hind hoofs, precariously carrying a large stack of dusty tomes which obscured his face. The struggling stallion eventually made it to the counter and dropped the stack down with a large THUD!

"Really Penwell, I'm sure anypony wouldn't mind giving you a hoof if you asked" remarked the mare with an amused frown. The librarian, who had been regaining his breath, suddenly poked his head around the large pile, adjusting his circular glasses and shone the mare a bright smile before bringing the rest of his body with him to stretch over the counter, forelegs spread awaiting a hug.

"Well, well, if her royal majesty the Queen hasn't returned to grace her oh, so loyal subjects!" chuckled the earth pony teasingly, causing the powerful alicorn to blush as she embraced the blue stallion warmly.

"You know I don't like being called that!" cried Aumean, her cheeks glowing even more furiously "Honestly, you'll be having all the young fillies and colts bowing their heads whenever I walk past!" Aumean scolded the stallion. "It would be so embarrassing if somepony *actually thought I was a queen!* Can you imagine?"

"D'aww, I'm sorry, you know I don't mean it. But it *is* good to see you Aumean, please, tell me all about your trip! What's Manesterdam like? Growing as fast as they say? And the library! I hear it's *grand!* And did you

try some of the cuisi-" Penwell's ramble was cut short by Aumean raising a hoof.

"All in good time friend, for now though I have to go and see my girl's, I am late back after all *and* I need to get this one settled" explained Aumean as she turned to allow Penwell a better view of Discord who up until then had been sitting quietly either looking around at the many stuffed shelves or listening in to the two ponies' conversation with fascination, especially regarding the 'Queen' business. The draconequus gave a small wave to the earth pony as his eyes met a questioning frown.

"Well...what...what *is it?*" questioned Penwell, his eyebrow reaching beyond the tip of his short, neatly combed mane. The librarian did not attempt to get closer; rather, he simply moved his head to different angles to take in the random assortment of species that made up the small being.

Though the alicorn and earth pony were good friends, Aumean clearly did not appreciate the tone with which Penwell spoke about her new responsibility "*He* is called Discord. A draconequus, believe it or not. *He* will be living with me from now on" Aumean informed the stallion, intent on emphasising that Discord was, in fact, a creature with feelings.

Penwell had read of the draconequus'. Supposedly a near-extinct race of nomadic, chimera-like creatures rumoured to have great magical potential and an affinity for either creativity or randomness, dependent on opinion of course. So the legends went. "I...see..." trailed off the stallion, looking at Discord with a curious gaze, not a warm, interested one a friend may give another, but a cold, impassionate stare a scientist might give a test subject he was best deciding on how to dissect.

Discord shrank back at the earth ponies' questioning eyes and tugged at Aumean's mane to pull her closer. "...can we go soon?" whispered the draconequus, obviously unnerved by Penwell's uncompassionate gaze.

"*Anyway...*" the mare broke the growing tension with "...like I said, we'll have to chat some other time, Penwell. I must be getting home now"

Penwell's face snapped back to his old friend "Of course, of course! I look forward to it! Be sure to bring those bags with you, I *know* they have the latest releases in them!" the blue-maned librarian smiled, waving a hoof.

“See you soon, Penwell” said Aumean as she turned and trotted through the store’s door and back out into the open air. Much like their initial journey together, no words were exchanged the two companions. Discord remained silent as Aumean made her way to the market, the ‘Sugarcube Stand’ in particular and bought a large crème and raspberry gâteau with the few bits she had left from her trip. Though she kept a brisk pace, Aumean finally slowed and came to a stop just at the borders of the Everfree forest. Levitating the draconequus and his pot off her back to the ground in front of her, she herself than sat down on the road with him.

“...why have we stopped?” asked the draconequus after several silent seconds, his voice lacking its normal inquisitiveness.

The mare took a deep breath before speaking “Discord, I want to say something’s. Firstly, I’m so sorry about Penwell, he’s a good pony, really, but he... can be a little insensitive at times... he doesn’t get out *that* much after all...” spoke Aumean carefully and slowly. It didn’t take a sun-raising alicorn to see that Penwell had hurt Discord with the way he acted and the mare was worried how much abuse the little draconequus could take, given his circumstances.

“It’s ok, it’s happened before” replied Discord while shrugging his shoulders indifferently, cautious to keep his head down and not meet Aumean’s concerned face.

“That doesn’t make it right or any less hurtful, Discord. Please, I don’t want to push you, but you mustn’t hide your feelings from me. I may still be a stranger, but I swore to take care of you, I want you to trust me and I assure you that you can tell or show me your feelings no matter what shape they may take” Aumean explained as comfortingly as possible. Discord seemed fine before, but his silence made it occur to the alicorn that he may well be suppressing any lingering sorrows over his mother’s passing for her sake. The draconequus raised his head slightly, catching the caring eyes and warm smile directed at him “Discord... tell me. What are you feeling? About everything; Penwell, me... your mother. Do you trust me enough to say?”

The wind whistled gently over the scene, causing the trees to rustle quietly and the iron teapot to ding against the draconequus’ scaly tail. Discord did

not answer for some time and remained sat in the road, perfectly still. To Aumean's surprise, he rose to his feet and looked her directly in the eye, bursting with resolve. "I saw it. I saw the way mother smiled when she left us. She was happy. She didn't want me to despair! Of course I'm sad, but I'm not going to make *her* sad by letting it hold me back! I'll miss her, but I've got my own life to live!" Discord proclaimed confidently. Aumean was speechless as the draconequus continued proudly "And the same for Penwell! He's not the first to think I'm some sort of animal or monster, but I'm not going to let it keep me down! He wants to judge a book by its cover? His loss!" finished Discord, puffing his chest out and smiling broadly with intense self-satisfaction.

"Discord..." began the mare with a growing smile "Oh, I think we'll get along *just* fine!" she laughed heartily. She didn't realise he had so much spirit. "Come, let's go home and introduce you to Celestia and Luna, I'm eager to see those two get to know you" smiled Aumean as she levitated Discord, his pot and the gâteau onto her back. The few grey clouds that had been lingering in the sky slowly parted, making way for the bright rays of the sun to light up their path.

Chapter 3

Everything Is Better With Family

For the second time in the same day, Celestia received a bubbly volley to the face. “Luna! Would you *please* stay still...?” begged the white alicorn as she used her magic to levitate a towel to wipe the soap from her eyes with “...and would *you* stop encouraging her?” she continued, flashing the pegasus pulling silly faces an annoyed glare. It had been difficult enough dragging a dirt-ridden Luna back through the old chapel and into a bath. The flailing filly had nearly ruined half of mother’s papers as she cried to be returned to the yard so she could continue her play, though the task at hand of *washing her* was proving to be no small feat either. Of course, now that she was *in* the warm, soapy water, the dark-blue foal was splashing about giggling, happy once more and the previous offense forgotten.

“WooooNAA!!” called Surprise through a scrunched up face, ignoring her more-mature friend’s frustrated stares. As expected, the filly bounced up and down and threw her hoofs in the air with excitement, sending yet more water flooding over the bathroom floor.

A loud knocking sound caused all three ponies to pause, ears pricking up to try and catch the sound again to confirm their suspicions. The snow-coated pegasus was the first to break the silence “Hey! That’s probably your mom, you should go-”

“No, you do it”

“Eh? But wh-AH!” yelled Surprise as the irritated alicorn flung her from the room telekinetically and slammed the door shut behind her before grasping the brush and resuming her careful grooming of her sister’s mane. Luna momentarily looked a little startled and confused at the funny pony’s abrupt departure but simply giggled and went back to swirling the water about and throwing bubbles where ever she deemed them lacking.

“Finally... now let’s get you cleaned up quickly before mother sees you...” Without the bouncy pegasus’ distractions and if she was quick, Celestia

calculated that she *just* might get Luna into a presentable state for when her mother finally got settled and found them.

Celestia's efforts were in vain however as an all too familiar voice echoed from the library "Celestia! Luna! I'm back!". The foal sighed and put down the brushes and bar of soap she had been using as Luna's whole form froze except for her tiny twitching ears. The pastel-maned pony made sure to move back in time, avoiding a total soaking as her sister exploded from the bathtub and dashed as fast as her tiny legs could carry her into the library. With another long, yet cheery, sigh, Celestia slowly followed the damp trail left by Luna.

"OH!" exclaimed Aumean as she was forced from her hoofs by a blue, speeding, dripping-wet torpedo that proceeded to bombard her with hugs and endless nuzzling.

"Mama!" squealed Luna as she wrestled her mother to the ground again, relentlessly showering her with affection.

"Sorry mother... I was giving her a bath..." apologized Celestia, trying to hold back the urge to pounce her mother in a similar fashion to her sister as she strode past the many book shelves and into the centre of the library. Her family lay rolling on the floor giggling and snorting with warm laughter.

"Oh, Celestia, stop being so formal and come here!" ordered Aumean as she managed to grab her youngest filly and restrain her in a cuddle with one leg while leaving the other open for her older daughter.

The pastel-maned mare rolled her eyes at the chortling pair but was nonetheless quick to trot over and receive a tight embrace followed by a fair share of kisses. "M-mother!...heehee...stop! Surprisena is-" protested Celestia, not wanting to offer the often mischievous pegasus any teasing material.

"Too late wittle Cewestia!" Surprise laughed with them. She wasn't going to let the alicorn live the gushy moment down any time soon, but it was no less a happy sight for the pegasus as it was for the reunited family or even the other small figure waiting by the libraries' large wooden doors.

There was surprising amount of bustle for the time of day noted the inky-blue earth pony. Having decided to close early and take a stroll through the village and green outskirts, Penwell found himself feeling a tad miffed. As good a friend as she was, the earth pony could never quite understand Aumean's fascination with what he could only describe as *everything that breathed or was green*. It had only been a handful of weeks since she had come to him spouting about the supposed discovery of a small insect that could consume several hundred times it's own mass and reproduce at an unheard of rate. And now this 'draconequus'? He found it hard to believe that the diminutive patchwork monster she had on her back could be one of those legendary beasts, especially given how they were, after all, *legendary*. The few reports of somepony having met and talked to them often had no evidence to back them up and sightings were more likely just that of regular chimeras. The worst thing about it all however was that she had said it was going to *live with her*. 'Oh, Aumean whatever are you getting yourself into this ti-'

Bang!

Penwell was unable to finish his thoughts as he was thrown into a daze by the sudden impact that sent him sprawling hard onto his back.

"Oww... geez, mister, I told you to *look out!* You deaf or what!?" a voice rang sharply in the ageing stallion's ears. Pulling himself back to his hooves, the older pony's suspicions were confirmed as to the voice's owner: Ponyville's resident 'speedster', Firefly. The pink earth pony sat looking up at him with great impatience. "You're lucky I don't have wings mister, or you'd be on the other side of Ponyville by now!"

Penwell matched the fillies' unimpressed glare, rubbing his bruised flank "Again with this, Firefly!? I don't even know which number victim I am! By all means, race yourself, or whatever it is you do, but not through the village! Ponies will and *have* gotten hurt!" disciplined Penwell, inspecting the area around his cutie mark – a black and gold fountain pen drawing a neatly curving line - for any serious damage.

The blue-maned filly simply hmpfed and crossed her arms defiantly. She knew it was dangerous to gallop through the village, but her parents didn't let her go outside the town by herself and even when she *could* gather a few friends to go with her, the *really* good tracks were further still, places

absolutely off-limits without her parent's supervision. *'It's so stupid! Everypony knows the Everfree forest and all the other areas around Ponyville are totally safe!'* Firefly mentally complained *'If I had wings, then I wouldn't need to go through the town...'*

"Please try not to cause too much trouble, Firefly. I would hate to have to ask Aumean to help patch somepony up again after she's only just returned..." sighed Penwell, satisfied that his hind quarters were in no need of medical attention.

"Meanie's back!? You could have said earlier mister! I wanna hear all about her adventure!" exclaimed the pink earth pony, forgetting her attempts to show off her pride to the bookish stallion.

Penwell sighed once more as he cleaned and readjusted his glasses, thankful he had them on a chain and they had not been broken in the impact. "Yes, she is, it's been the talk of the town. Congratulations, it seems you can gallop faster than the speed of sound..." sarcastically commented Penwell as he returned his focus to the younger pony "...you might have heard if you would *slow down* for once"

Firefly simply stuck her tongue out at the remark before leaping back to her hooves and readying herself for another full speed gallop "Deal with it mister!" taunted the blue-maned speedster, her launch leaving the inky-blue stallion coughing in a dusty cloud.

"Celestia, Luna. This, is Discord"

The two sides stood like a pair of opposing statues. Neither moved, intensely scrutinising the other. The heavenly white, well groomed alicorn and the randomly assorted, dishevelled draconequus stared and gazed at one another in a fierce battle of examination, each weighing up the other and making silent judgments.

'She's beautiful...'

'What...is he?'

“Di-Di-...Dis-cord!” the neutral silence was shattered by the midnight fillies giggling. So absorbed by the teenage foal, Discord had not noticed the tiny alicorn’s approach. Unlike her sister, who employed mature understanding and logic, Luna scanned the new individual the way she knew best: she prodded, smelled, felt and even hugged the thin being before her, ultimately and hastily concluding that he should be her knew friend and play partner, effective immediately. Trotting behind the bemused Discord, she began to forcefully push him in the direction of their mother with what little strength her little legs could muster, careful to use the side of her head so as to avoid hurting her wiry companion with her horn, stubby as it may have been. The draconequus showed only the slightest hint of resistance as he was squashed against Aumean’s chest, the ivory-alicorn content with letting her youngest have her way. With a pair of soft hooves to the back of the neck, Discord was foalhandled into lying down by the elder alicorn, the two being quickly accompanied by Luna herself, who snuggled onto her mother’s side and eagerly began gesturing to her sister and the snowy-pegasus to come join them.

“Luna...? Oh, excuse me...” Celestia cleared her throat, taken aback by how quickly even her sister had warmed to the...unattractive, new arrival “...as you can probably see, she’s only very young, apologies if she bothered you...Discord?” Even his name had a chaotic ring to it.

The draconequus nodded slowly, blushing faintly, presumably at his position, though he made no attempt to change it “P-please, I don’t mind, it’s a pleasure to meet you...C-celestia?” spoke the chimera awkwardly, extending a talon for the white-pony to shake.

Celestia froze. She had seen just such a talon in a place she had most certainly wanted to *forget*. Quick to regain her manners however, Celestia suppressed any frowns before they could form and smiled politely, letting the draconequus take her hoof and shake it. She thought she caught a glimpse of a ‘look’ from her mother, but dismissed any notion of acknowledging it, it wouldn’t do to make an uncomfortable situation, especially given how much of a tantrum Luna would throw if her envisioned family moment did not come to pass because of it. “...Likewise” the alicorn forced herself to say.

Aumean smiled. She was glad with the results. Luna had taken to Discord well very quickly and though it may take Celestia time to feel the same, the

two would surely become friends “I have something important to say” announced Aumean, drawing the attention of the room to her “I realise it is sudden, but Discord here will be living with us for some time, please, make him feel comfortable”

“Consider yourself super lucky then!” congratulated Surprise with a wink. If there was any other pony she had to live with, it would be Aumean ‘...*well, except maybe Redstone...*’ she quietly told herself.

Luna was not listening and the pegasus took the news with cheer, though it left her friend’s mouth agape. *Living* with them!? Discord seemed nice enough, now that she knew he was actually intelligent, but even so, bringing a complete stranger into their home? Where there was a young foal? And of course there was also *those*, was it not mother’s duty to guard them? Celestia shook away her shock, reason returning to her. ‘*There must be something about him... plenty of times somepony or animal has stayed here for a few nights...but never **lived** with us! Mother must have a good reason...*’

“...Celestia? Celestia?” Aumean dragged her oldest back to reality, grinning as the pastel-maned alicorn blushed at realising she had slipped into such deep thought “Celestia. I want to show Discord around, could you and Surprise perhaps start making lunch please?” asked the ivory mare.

“Sure thing Ms. Aumean! Come on Tia! Luna, you can help to!” the pegasus exclaimed as she swooped down and gently lifted a slightly startled Luna from her mother’s side. The midnight-filly struggled a little, wanting to go back to the warmth but was soon giggling as Surprise swerved and looped lazily around the large hall in the general direction of the kitchen “Hurry up Tia!”

Celestia nodded to her friend as she disappeared over a bookcase before turning back to her mother with a slightly concerned expression

“Mother...you aren’t going to show him *them* are you...? You don’t know-” she spoke with a hushed voice, abruptly stopping by a reassuring hoof.

“Don’t worry Celestia, I’m glad you showed some concern, but I know what I’m doing” Aumean said with full confidence, her gaze matching her tone. Celestia retained her expression momentarily before realising that it was her mother she was questioning. If she was happy to show the small

chimera artefacts as precious as those, then the teenage foal would go along with it. Everypony, even strangers, generally found themselves trusting the alicorn's judgment; her daughter's were no exception. With a smile and nod, Celestia followed her friend and sister and left the mare and draconequus alone together.

'...*What are "them"?*' pondered the brown-coated creature as he watched the fair pony elegantly stride away. His curiosity had been sparked countless times in the past couple of days and like nearly every other incident in that time, the draconequus looked to his new guardian with a raised eyebrow and as usual she exchanged it for a knowing smile.

"I know what you must be thinking, Discord" He merely continued to look at her blankly "Come. They are, after all, perhaps the most interesting things I have here" calmly spoke the mare as she rose to her hooves and gestured for Discord to follow her along the length of the hall towards the back wall, a simple stone construct "Oh, and don't worry about our things, they'll be fine in the entrance hall for the moment" she commented as the draconequus quickly shot a thoughtful glance over his shoulder. As they passed the bookshelves and approached the wall, Discord heard echoing voices and the occasional burst of laughter resounding from a corridor branching off to his left. This was clearly where Celestia, Luna and the pegasus had went and must also be the direction of the kitchen. "I trust you Discord, but what I am about to show you is... a sort of secret. Please, do not talk about them to anypony you meet" requested Aumean, her normal relaxed voice carrying a slight edge of gravity to it.

Discord's mere and simple nod masked the buzzing of his mind which was now aflame with intrigue. What could the alicorn possibly have which she did not want others outside her household to know of? Celestia had also seemed worried of letting knowledge of whatever it was Aumean owned leave the family. As the pair reached the wall, Discord noticed that it was not completely without detail; within its centre lay a small hole surrounded by eleven coloured circles, the top most circle, decorated purple, being slightly larger than the other ten. Each circle was connected to the next with a golden line which linked them all and formed one greater ring.

"Hmm...I may have to change this lock..." Aumean stated with a minor frown as she lowered her head and smoothly inserted her horn into the hole, resulting in each circle and the line lighting up with a soft glow. The

wall revealed itself to in fact be a well disguised doorway that proceeded to rumble open, its demands met, showing a stone corridor not unlike the one Discord had seen previously. The corridor was dimly lit with glass lamps filled with glow worms and its only other noticeable feature was the large wooden doors, reinforced with dark iron, marking the end of the passage, silently standing guard of whatever treasures lay beyond them. As the two made their way along the corridor the large pony's hooves kicked up wisps of dust that floated in the air and quickly wound up snagged in one of the many cobwebs stretched across the walls and ceiling. Aumean or any other pony evidently didn't come here often. The alicorn threw a smirk over her shoulder to Discord as she placed a hoof on the doors "Ready?" the draconequus eagerly nodded in response. "These, Discord..." Aumean began as she shoved the creaking doors open, allowing a spectrum of soft rainbow light to flood into the passage, prompting the draconequus to scrabble closer to try and satiate his burning intrigue "...are the Elements".

The bearded pony stared out of his studies window firing daggers to the many builder ponies shouting, banging and making all the noise generally involved in construction. The move to New Manesterdam had certainly been a trade-off. On the one hoof, the wise unicorn had close access to what was quickly becoming any academics *dream*, the growing town's Central Public Library. He didn't know quite how the gleaming marble building had attracted so much attention and with it, enough books to last a century; that was a sociologist's field he imagined. Regardless, the immense diversity and volume of research material had come with a terrible price: racket. Everyday from dawn till dusk, wood was sawed, mallets rang on metal, concrete churned in large vats, it was relentless! The ageing grey unicorn, powerful as he was, could only keep his sound-proofing spells up for so long! After one more pony received the fright of their lives by letting their gaze wander accidentally to the old stallion's window and meet those bloodthirsty eyes, the robed sorcerer slammed the blinds closed and tried desperately to concentrate on his notes. Using his magic to carefully and neatly continue writing down his most recent thoughts on the dangers of magical manipulation of space/time, the elderly wizard neared a state of perfect focus.

BOOM!!!

The sound physically shook the house and left a large, thick line of ink splattered over the many paragraphs of top-class study. Grinding his teeth, the gray-unicorn narrowed his eyes over the offending line of spilt ink and applied to a light touch of magic to levitate it off the page before it dried and stained. Calmly, he righted his inkwell and let the black liquid drip back into its proper place. With a deep breath, the stallion walked over to the window, rolled up the blinds and pushed open the glass.

“WOULD YOU KEEP IT DOWN!? SOME OF US ARE TRYING TO *STUDY HERE!*” yelled the old pony as loud as his frail lungs could muster to the crowd of workers who were condensing around the fallen girder. Each one of the silent construction-ponies received a terrifying death stare before wincing in union as the unicorn’s window was slammed shut with enough force to leave a small crack at its base. With the blinds shut once more, the white-maned pony collapsed onto a cushion. He *really* shouldn’t have bought a house so close to the town outskirts where all the heavy expansion work was taking place, even if it did mean he had saved a small fortune in bits.

“Uncle Star Swirl! Uncle Star Swirl, are you alright?” cried a worried voice, its owner bursting into the room a moment later. The blue filly was panting and a little sweaty, having rushed up the tall spiral staircase to check on her elderly uncle as soon as he heard his infuriated screams.

“Victory Dawn... Dear, I’m fine, just those noisy construction workers tugging at my beard is all” Star Swirl’s voice relaxed the moment the blond-maned earth foal had flown through the door. It always clamed his heart to know that even at such a tender age his niece never failed to look out for the senior pony. Despite not being a unicorn, Dawn had always had a keen interest in magic and loved to help her uncle in his studies, even if it was just to take some weight off the stallion’s aching bones.

“Uncle~~!” complained the filly, looking at him with an annoyed but terribly adorable glare. It took a moment for the wise unicorn to realise the cause of her protest, he had used her full name. Even though Star Swirl himself and his brother and sister-in-law had approved of the name, the filly hated ‘Victory’ and preferred to just be called Dawn.

“You must be the only one who doesn’t like it girl! Even Aumean thinks it a good, strong name!” countered Star Swirl, beaconing for his niece to come and sit with him.

"I know... Hey, Uncle, when's Ms. Aumean coming to visit again? You make a really good team!" beamed Dawn, fondly recalling the amazing experiments which the alicorn and her uncle had performed.

"Oh, I don't think dear Equidae will be able to come 'till at least next year" he told her, wincing a little at the memory of their library outing. '*She **did** buy some of the libraries most prized books after all...*' remembered the gray-unicorn with a frown. He had never known the library staff to get so flustered. It had been an embarrassing situation indeed, watching the alicorn literally begging the clerics to sell her part of their one-of-a-kind collection; she even began *throwing* bits at them at one point. "...Now, Dawn dearest, why don't we go have some tea? I suddenly feel the urge to hide myself in a cup..."

The wonder overflowed from Discord's eyes. He stood, head near the floor, not having moved from the awkward position he had assumed so as to catch a glimpse of the chamber's contents as the doors had been opened. There, above a simple pedestal floated eleven gems under what must have been their own power. They were arranged into two rings, each ring composed of five gems orbiting an eleventh, slightly larger purple gem. With an amused grin plastered over her muzzle, Aumean nudged the draconequus into the round chamber and walked in herself, shutting the wooden doors behind with magic as she did so. "These, Discord, are the Elements. The most powerful objects known to ponykind and perhaps even the world" stated the alicorn, approaching the pedestal casually. "The Elements have been guarded by us alicorns for millennia. Who or what made them, how they work, why they are here, there is a great deal still unknown about them, a great deal we will likely never learn and perhaps shouldn't" she continued, rounding the pedestal until she arrived back in front of Discord "Please, ask anything you want to though".

The draconequus could actually *feel* the intense magic power of the Elements radiating onto every inch of his varied skin. "What... what exactly do they do...?" whatever it was, the Elements did it on a massive scale.

"Good start. The Elements are infinitely powerful artefacts that can, in theory, grant the wish of anypony who can wield them" explained Aumean, her tone confident. This was an area she knew about. "For many though,

that is the problem right there. Each Element embodies a particular personal trait and those who don't also embody that trait well cannot effectively wield them. Only if somepony was a living representation of that trait could they unlock an Element's true potential"

"But...doesn't that mean there are barely any who can use them? And what traits are they?"

"No, not exactly. There are very few ponies who can use an Element at its best, but most would be able to wield one to some extent if they had one. As to the Element's traits, they are: Honesty, Kindness, Will, Generosity and Loyalty, these are grouped together as the 'Elements of Harmony'. Then there are the 'Elements of Chaos' which are: Innovation, Pride, Laughter, Ambition and Curiosity" recited Aumean proudly, before taking a breath and continuing "Finally, to tie them all together, Magic" at which she gestured to the larger gem in the centre of the other ten.

"...Harmony? Chaos? So... some are good and some are bad?" inquired Discord, confused at why something as simple as 'Laughter' had been labelled as chaotic.

Aumean laughed awkwardly "...No...you see, my ancestors didn't seem to think those names through very well. Basically, there is no fundamental difference between any of the Elements, perhaps baring Magic, except for what they represent. As far as I know, they were only grouped as such because that's what the Element's original guardians thought those traits would create if society exhibited them excessively" Aumean paused to breath and think of how best to explain it to the young creature. "But...once again, they did not think it through very well. Harmony, in excess, can be just as bad as Chaos. Too much order deprives freedom, halts progress. Likewise, too much Chaos is bad, is would only bring destruction and madness. Do you understand? It all revolves around balance and a concept known as 'the Golden Mean'"

Discord nodded slowly, taking some time to absorb the wave of information, but he still wanted more "Golden Mean?"

"Yes, it was originally thought of long ago by a very wise stallion called Ariscolte. It states that in order for their to be true peace and happiness, ponies and every other species have to find just the right balance, the

golden mean, between an excess or a lack of a personal trait. Let's take Generosity as an example, were there too little generosity, then everypony would lack something they need from somepony else. Too *much* generosity, and a pony would forget their own needs, they would give away everything they required and desired and would be left miserable and even sick"

The alicorn's lecture began to make sense in the draconequus' still growing mind, but there were still some things that bothered him about the Elements. Hovering over to the pedestal, Discord gave one of the orbiting gems a light tap with a talon, causing a sharp note to echo around the chamber "I get that they're very powerful, but... they look a bit fragile, is it possible to...?" he trailed off, looking back to the alicorn expectantly.

"Destroy them?" she finished his sentence with and stopped to think about it "...I honestly do not know. It isn't something I've ever dared to find out, were I to accidentally break one, I would have no idea how to restore it, or even if it *could* be restored. That and it would be a dark day for the world if somepony *did* try to destroy them"

"Why? Would something bad happen...?" the draconequus asked as he imagined the quaint Canterlot Valley consumed in a huge magical explosion. The thought made him shudder slightly. He was beginning to understand why Aumean or Celestia did not want knowledge of the Elements to be made widespread.

"Like what? Some sort of devastation? I wouldn't think so. No, it would be a tragedy simply because somepony may have been *willing* to destroy them" mused Aumean, pondering the thought herself.

"But you said that any being could potentially wield the Elements! They could be used for evil, couldn't they?"

Aumean shook her head "*Could. Could* be used for evil. Equally, they could be used for great good. For somepony to destroy them purely because they *could* be used for evil would show that that pony, and maybe other ponies, held great fear in their hearts. And fear like that is a terrible, terrible thing Discord". The chamber fell silent as the two thought deeply about such a awful scenario.

“One more question...” Discord broke the stillness “What happened to the Element’s guardians? To the alicorns? Your ancestors? You, Celestia and Luna are the first I’ve ever seen in all my life! Did they die out like... my...my people...?” Discord stung himself with the question, but he genuinely wanted to know. Before a few days ago, he thought only three kinds of pony existed, earth, pegasi and unicorn.

Aumean smiled warmly at the draconequus. So few could sit through her lectures and still drink up more “To put it simply, the alicorns changed. Through the generations, they *became* the ponies of today. What you must understand about alicorns is that though we are very long lived, we aren’t immortal. Not only that, but we can only have children during a very small window of opportunity in our lives, normally around ten to twenty years, depending on the individual” schooled Aumean a little sadly. The alicorns were fortunate really, though their descendants were physically different, they did at least have them. The draconequus lifespan and reproductive methods were very similar to that of the ancient pony race, yet they had not changed and had now been almost totally swallowed up in the murky depths of history. “Unlike the ponies of today, we alicorns were never truly united in friendship. Some, like me, liked to devote their time to magic and research. Often, they felt their mastery of the arcane made them the superior of the ‘clans’ that had formed, you could say. They were the ones who eventually became the unicorns” Aumean was now pacing around the chamber, occasionally creating starry drawings of what she spoke of in the air “There were those alicorns who loved to live among the clouds and the freedom of the air. Much like the sorcerers some believed that without their weather-controlling expertise, the rest of pony society could not function. Their children were the pegasi” with another spark from her horn, the magical images morphed into a far-shot of Canterlot Valley “And then there were those alicorns who were happy with simple farming and connecting with the earth. Perhaps ironically, a number of them thought their basic lives were above the arrogance and pride of others and that they were the better ones because of it. As you might have guessed, they became the earth ponies” Aumean finally stopped her pacing and drew a simple picture of an earth pony, pegasus and unicorn holding hoofs together and smiling. “Perhaps for all their natural power and abilities, the alicorns were always destined to be triumphed by their descendants. After all, it is thought that it was their friendship that thawed the blizzard that had plagued this land for countless years, something alicorn kind had never successfully achieved”

Discord nodded with unending interest and cursed his body for not being able to muster the same intrigue when he let out a long yawn “I-I’m sorry, it’s not...”

Aumean herself yawned as well “No, we’ve been talking for hours now! I think we should leave the lessons there for today, yes?” the ivory mare asked, but before Discord could reply, a loud gurgle echoed from Aumean’s stomach causing her to blush “...and let’s see if there are any leftovers from lunch”

“...thanks again for putting Luna to sleep Surprisena, she can be such a terror sometimes” the white foal thanked her pegasus friend. The two had gotten sick waiting for Aumean and the new arrival and simply eaten lunch without them, then spent the next hour or so trying to get Luna, who had thrown a tantrum at not being able to play with her mother more, to take her nap. The winged ponies had then simply lay around the chapel patio, recovering from the exhausting battle with the midnight-filly before it was time for Surprise to return home to Cloudsdale.

“No problemo, Tia! I’ll call around again tomorrow if it’s ok with your mom” replied Surprise while saluting.

“I’m sure she won’t mind, unless she get’s to distracted with the lodger or...whatever he is” The alicorn rolled her eyes. She wasn’t particularly thrilled with the idea of Discord staying with them, but she trusted her mother had made the right decision in letting the patchwork being take up residence in the chapel.

“Discord? He seems a swell guy! Anyway, gotta jet, later Tia!” the gold-maned pegasus waved as she ascended further into the sky. Celestia returned the wave smiling before closing the large wooden doors and trotting casually back to the kitchen, levitating her mother’s saddlebags and other items left in the entrance hall, including a large gateau and an old iron teapot. The gateau was be expected really, Celestia had known her mother would get *something* like it as an apology, thought she had no idea why she had brought a teapot home, they didn’t need a new one and even if they did, this one wasn’t new. The white-foal shrugged and simply decided to leave the teapot with the saddlebags on the table in the centre of the library hall while she took the cake to the kitchen with her.

'I suppose I can make a start on dinner, if just for me and Luna at least' she told herself with a sigh. It was always a bother when mother went into the Element's chamber, only she could unlock the seal on the door to them and there was no way Celestia could contact her once the large stone portal closed again. Of course the worst part was that Discord was in there with her. If he was *truly* going to be staying with them, then there was no doubt that mother had entered her teacher mode and was telling him all about them, which in turn meant they could be in there for who knows how long. The kitchen's only noise was that of the rhythmic thud of a knife against a chopping board, but Celestia's mind was whirring with thought. There *must* be something about Discord, other than his odd appearance, that mother could see if she trusted him enough to both show and tell him about the Elements this quickly. Could she want him as a student? A tiny pang of jealousy resounded in the alicorn's stomach. Up until now, Celestia had been the only to have been taught of the Elements and she was also the only that was learning how to use them, should she ever need to. Luna would also naturally receive such tuition, once she was old enough, but Discord? He wasn't even a pony, let alone a part of the family. She didn't like it, but she would have to learn to live with it. Hopefully, sooner rather than later, mother would inform Celestia of the reasons behind her unusual decisions.

"My, that looks good!" The sudden voice caused Celestia to leap with fright, she was so startled "And I see you found the gateau, it was supposed to be a surprise!" Turning around, Celestia was met by the sight of her mother chuckling at her and Discord struggling to hold back his snickering. The pastel-maned alicorn shot them both an annoyed glare and held a wooden spoon in the air threateningly. That was the second time in the same day she had been caught like that!

"Don't scare me like that, I might have-" Celestia stalled and looked around, unwilling to reveal the thoughts which had muffled her senses to the chortling duo's presence "...spilled the stew?" she said with no great confidence. There bubbling on the stove was a pot of potato and leek stew that she couldn't actually really recall making, so lost she had been in her mental far lands.

"Mama..." an angelic voice squeaked from the other corridor leading to the bedrooms. Peering over the table, Aumean discovered her youngest

wobbling into the kitchen, stopping every few steps to rub her eyes of sleep.

“Luna, just in time! Look, big your sister has made us all dinner!” the ivory-mare spoke as she scooped Luna up in a golden aura into her outstretched hoofs “What do we say when somepony makes us something?” coddled the elder alicorn as she held her in the direction of the stove.

“T-...Th-...Zankyu!”

“Th-ank you” gently corrected the mare, spinning her daughter around before putting her down in one of the simple wooden seats next to Discord who had taken the liberty to sit down himself.

“Dis-...Discord!” playfully giggled the filly, stretching her stubby hooves to try and reach her knew friend.

“That’s right!” Discord replied cheerily, snaking his tail around the chair and dangling it just above Luna’s reach so she would try and catch it. He had only met her hours ago but Luna’s very presence already made his heart melt a little.

“Oh, mother, I forgot to say, Luna used magic!” excitedly said Celestia, turning her head from the stew to her mother who beamed at her youngest proudly.

“She did? Oh, Luna! I’m so sorry I wasn’t there to see it!” she apologised while spinning her filly around again “I’ll have to start teaching you! Let me guess, there was a mess?” grinned Aumean back to her oldest. First time magic use *a/ways* made a mess.

“Only a little, but I don’t think she’ll be trying it again when food’s about anytime soon. Speaking of which, the stew’s done” Celestia remarked, quickly turning off the stove to stop the piping ho soup from boiling over. After leaving it to cool for a few seconds, she levitated the pot onto a folded cloth in the middle of the table while Aumean arranged cutlery and bowls for four and an additional chair normally reserved for guests so there was enough seats around the table that would normally only see three.

Once they were all seated, Aumean turned to Discord and smiled "This is your first meal with us, but please, don't feel you can't act casually. You're probably going to have many more experiences like this and well... I hope you feel welcome"

"I do! But I should really be thanking you, Aumean, you've done so much for me" replied the draconequus as he took a small bow of gratitude towards not just Aumean, but Celestia to.

"Now Discord, there's really no need for that! This is your new home and I hope you'll come to see it as such, now, let's dig in" happily proclaimed the red-maned equine before taking a spoonful of soup. Discord smiled and did likewise; pleased his assumption that the stew was delicious was correct. After all, food always tasted better with family.

Chapter 4

The Night Everypony Saw

Bright orange rays stretched across the horizon, the sun performing a passionate finale for the day. Emerging from the shaded floor of the Everfree forest were two ponies, clearly bickering amongst each other as they ascended the light slope to a small gathering at the edge of cliff

“Surprise, hurry UP! We’re going to miss it!”

“Maybe if you hadn’t insisted we race through so many detours we would have gotten here *half an hour ago!*”

“Well maybe if YOU weren’t so *slow* and actually sped up sometime this century!”

“Please, Surprise, Firefly, there is no rush! Luna is still preparing!” Discord called, breaking the two ponies dispute as they approached the wide ledge where five other figures were waiting.

“Cool! Told you we weren’t going to be late, didn’t I Surprise?” boasted Firefly, ignoring the white pegasus roll her eyes.

“Of course we aren’t late, the moon isn’t up yet is it, silly?” she countered, putting a quick stop to another potential argument.

“Oh. You’re right...!” The pink speedster surveyed the cliff top to see who was there ahead of them. Discord of course, who was waving and gesturing for them to come closer; the bookkeeper Penwell, who was lying on a plain linen cloth while passing his gaze back and forth between the fiery sky and some kind of chart; Celestia, who was also lying by herself, happily observing the final two who stood closet to the sheer drop, Aumearn and Luna. The young filly was listening nervously to her mother, nodding occasionally as the mare calmly explained something inaudible to her. It was most certainly last minute instruction and encouragement for the momentous undertaking she would soon attempt.

“Wonderful, isn’t it? It seemed only yesterday she had difficulty in saying our names, and now? Little Luna’s going to raise the moon. How the years have flown by!” the draconequus mused as he snapped his talons and caused three stripy deckchairs to appear in a flash of light.

“They sure have! I can’t wait to see her lift the *moon* all by herself! You think she’ll get her cutie mark like Celestia did?” The two ponies followed Discord and took places in the deckchairs.

“I can very well see it happening. It would certainly make sense; talents can run in families, can’t they?” he quizzed the two ponies.

“Yeah! My dad says grandpa was super fast as well! I bet I get these pegasus-beating legs from him!”

“Alright everypony, she’s ready!” a clear voice rang on the cool wind, halting all talk and turning all eyes to Luna who smiled back anxiously.

“Mother, are you sure I’m-”

“Yes, I’ve taught you all I can. Don’t worry sweetie, we all believe in you” Aumean interrupted her daughter, refusing to let doubt get the better of her. The ivory mare left Luna standing at the cliff edge to go join the others, Celestia and Penwell getting up to walk alongside her.

“Aumean, are you sure she’s ready? She’s even younger than Celestia was when-” the ageing stallion began before he was similarly interrupted.

“Penwell, old friend, it isn’t just my daughters that have grown, I too have been learning, learning how to teach. I’m fully confident she will succeed.” Penwell tried to frown yet could not help but grin instead at the alicorn. Wise and humble as always.

As the three approached the seated audience, Discord spawned more chairs for their benefit and they reclined and lay in them. Celestia however, opted to morph hers into a neatly patterned cushion instead.

“Whenever you want sweetie!”

“Go Luna! You can do it!”

“Good luck!”

“We’re rooting for you!”

“T-thank you, all...” Luna meekly called back to her cheering friends and family. The blush from her cheeks faded as she stood and turned to face the cliff and the horizon in the distance. The sun had now all but been set by her mother’s magic, only the tiniest rays of light scrabbled over the sky in a desperate bid to prolong the day for a few seconds more. Without the sun or the moon, the sky was left as an odd sort of void, deprived of both the light of day and the true darkness of night. Luna had to remedy that. Sinking her hooves firmly into the damp earth, closing her eyes, and taking a long, deep breath, Luna concentrated solely on focusing the ancient magic that controlled the passage of day and night into her spiralled horn. The crowd behind her didn’t just fall silent, they fell from her mind, everything did, the chilly wind, the rustling trees, the distant calling of birds and howling of animals. Everything left her conscience except one purpose: to bring the moon from it’s slumber.

“...go Luna...go” Celestia barely breathed under her breath. Each and every one of them continued to mouth and whisper their support automatically, not caring that their words would be lost in the breeze.

A deep blue spark. Then another. And another. Soon Luna’s horn was wrapped in midnight-light and throwing embers cascading through the air, swirling and sizzling with power. *‘There!’* she could feel it. The great white eye of twilight, sat just beyond sight, begging to be set on its way, free, so it could fulfil its duty as beacon in the dark. Luna pushed harder, egging her magic on, encouraging it to form a guiding hand for her namesake. *‘It’s...so...heavy!’* It was heavier than anything Luna had even dreamt of lifting, the very thought of a pony being able to carry such a thing almost made her laugh out loud, but it *had* to be lifted. She couldn’t bear to leave the depressing gloom of the sphere-less sky in existence. She was going to get rid of it, replace it with something that could give even the most lost pony hope. Luna poured her very being into her horn; every ounce of will she could muster was turned to pushing that eternal orb into its rightful place. *‘Come...on! Almost...!’*

Within Luna’s mind, everything went black.

“Mother, I did it! I did it!”

“Oh, Celestia, words cannot describe how proud I am of you!”

*“Woaaah, that was **awesome!**”*

“I had no idea you could do something so amazing, Tia!”

“Celestia, look, look! You got your cutie mark! Congratulations!”

*“I did!? Wow, I **did!**”*

“Astounding. Truly astounding. I don’t know how you did it Aumean, but you must surely be an amazing teacher. Well done Celestia!”

“Yay! Again sis! Again!”

*“She can’t do it again, Luna. We’ll have to wait until dawn. But she **can** start practicing for tonight!”*

“Wha-... You’re going to let me raise the moon as well!?”

*“I don’t see why not. It’s easier than raising the sun. In fact, I would have had you raising the moon instead if you hadn’t **insisted** on learning to master the sun first.”*

“Wow, thank you so much mother! Oh, do you think when it’s Luna’s turn I can help teach her?”

“Of course! It will be much simpler for me and for her with some help. Actually, I know he’s almost finished his training, but you can assist Discord as well!”

“Oh...yes...I-I will. A-anyway, I’m going to go do some last minute study for tonight! Bye!”

“So Luna’s also going to...?”

"Of course, Discord. Celestia has done it and like I said, you've almost finished your training. I love you all equally, and I'm going to treat you all equally."

"Dissy's going to do that as well!? Your family is so cool!"

"We should celebrate!"

"That's an excellent idea, Surprise."

"Don't worry, leave it to me! If anyone knows how to throw a celebration, it's Surprise! Come on Firefly, I'll need help carrying stuff."

"Race ya!"

"I'm going to have to write something about all this, I truly am. It still boggles me to think that the sun and moon must be controlled like that, and that even one so young can do so!"

"Just be sure not to mention any specific names, old friend."

"Of course, of course, Aumean! I look forward to tonight's show as well! Until then!"

"Goodbye Mr. Penwell!"

"Bye-bye!"

"So, Discord. Has seeing Celestia do it given you some more confidence? It's just magic, very powerful magic certainly, but magic nonetheless. With enough practise, anypony can theoretically do it"

"I'll do my very best!"

"I want to do it to!"

"D'aww, in time dear, in time. But you're a little young at the moment."

"But mother, I'm not a baby anymore!"

"I know you aren't sweetie and I promise you, one day you too will move the sky."

It was there. Gazing at her head-on in all its elegant glory. A great, round candle in the dark, cradling everything in its soft light. Queen of the night, surrounded by thousands of tiny subjects mapping the sky with countless constellations.

"Luna, are you going to lie there all night or would like to come join the party?" Luna blinked and tore her gaze away from the glowing sphere in the black sky. Her mother stood over her, smiling with overflowing pride for the young alicorn.

The dark-coated foal dizzily got to her hooves putting one to her head as she tried to steady her senses. Her stomach was damp and she realised that she must have slid from her hooves onto her chest. Slowly, she turned her head around and saw the rest of the group cheering and talking excitedly amongst each other; Surprise was even firing party poppers and showering everyone with confetti. *'I did... this isn't a dream, I really did it!'* Luna leapt in the air with joy and began a hasty trot over to the crowd.

"Luna, aren't you going to take a look?" the alicorn stopped in her tracks at her mother's voice and turned to look at her confused. The ivory-mare replied only with a nod at Luna's flank. The filly followed her mother's eyes and bulged her own at her rear. Where normally her midnight coat would continue uninterrupted, there was now an image, a crescent moon within a black cloud-like shape. Her cutie mark. "Congratulations, Luna"

The blue maned alicorn said nothing but leapt again and again and again. She ran to her mother and nuzzled her tightly before bounding to the waiting group shouting in excitement "I got it! I got my cutie mark!"

The applause echoed across the still forest for miles around but was cut short by the clearing of a voice. "Please, everypony listen." The cliff top fell silent as they all stared up at the red-maned mare a little surprised. "Today is a great day. Luna has not only achieved something amazing, but has also found her calling. However, today is also the day I hope something will begin, something I have been planning for some time. Please, come home with me and continue celebrating, Luna definitely deserves it! But you'll

have to excuse me while I prepare” The six looked at her a little dumb-founded. It was a normal speech except for the ‘something’ which had sparked the cognitive gears of all those assembled into motion.

‘...A tad odd, but it makes complete sense. It must be something to do with the Elements’ a certain draconequus concluded. It had begun several months prior, Aumean had been silently reading in the library when she had suddenly jumped with inspiration. Everyday since then she had, at some point during the day, locked herself within the Element’s chamber for several hours at *least*. After a few weeks signs started to show, black bags became a constant addition to her appearance and her mane was rarely combed or treated. All three of the house’s children had initially worried but soon accepted it once they realised her mood was no less cheery because of it and were told their mother was working on a ‘secret project’. They *had* to be related.

“C’mon Discord, you just gonna stand there or what!?” Discord broke his silent self-debate and blinked down at Firefly who was tapping her hoof impatiently waiting for him. Every other pony was making their way back towards home to carry on the party.

“Oh, yes, yes. I was just thinking about what mother said...” the deck chairs disappeared with a snap of Discord’s fingers and the draconequus and blue-maned pony began the short trip back to the chapel.

“Yeah, wonder what she meant. Maybe she’s planning an even *bigger* party, you know, since all three of you can do the moon and sun thing?” quizzed Firefly, clearly as curious as Discord.

That was another possibility, even if Luna hadn’t raised the sun, the magic required for it was similar to that of the moon. With a little practise, she would surely be able to command the day as well. The mix-match creature nodded and gazed up at the new moon, stroking the small tuft of white hair that had recently began spurting from his chin.

“I knew you could do it, Discord! Congratulations!”

“Brother, that was amazing!”

“Celestia, don’t you have anything to say?”

“O-of course! Well done...Discord.”

“Hey! Are you even listening to me!?” The flow of memories suddenly was suddenly cut by Firefly’s voice. The two were standing just outside the chapel’s entrance, far further than Discord remembered covering.

“...Yes?” Firefly’s scowl made it evident his reply was not the correct one. Discord couldn’t help but chuckle “I’m sorry Fire, but mother has gotten me all distracted. What were you saying?”

The speedster waved a hoof dismissively “Nah, its fine. I was just telling you how *awesome* I am for beating Swiftwind in a race, wings allowed, *twice!*”

“Awesome indeed!” Discord chuckled again before pushing open the large wooden door “Let’s not keep everypony waiting though, shall we?”

The scene that greeted them in the main hall was another to be cherished. The large, round table at its centre was covered in all manner of party food from salads of pansies and bluebells to toffee coated apples. In the middle of it all was a cake coloured and shaped like the moon.

“You two, hurry up! Your mom told us to start without her, and the way Tia’s going, there won’t be anything left!” a cry, muffled by food, tried to disagree with the group’s party specialist.

“Don’t need telling again, c’mon Dis!” Firefly was already at the table stacking food onto a plate before her words reached Discord’s ears.

‘...I think this is a worthy occasion.’ The draconequus walked past the table of munching ponies in the direction of the kitchen “I’ll be with you in a minute, carry on if you will!” Even Penwell was not afraid to do so, almost choking himself on a cupcake.

The kitchen was predictably, given the feast in the main hall, a mess. In that household however, mess was simply another opportunity to practise magic and was in some cases, encouraged. The yellow aura shining around Discord’s talons was not focused on the mess, but rather, carefully lifting an old, iron teapot from the highest cupboard. With a snap of his paw,

the stove burst into life, the tap began running and a box of herbal leaves disappeared then reappeared on the bench. Discord did not need the pot or any of the other tools and ingredients, he could have simply used his magic to create a cup of the lush liquid, but he always preferred to do it manually. The draconequus gently stroked the pot fondly and sighed happily as he stuffed a bunch of the leaves in it and set it to work. His life had certainly taken an interesting turn since then, it was not perfect, he wished his and Celestia's relationship wasn't quite so...formal, yet he was nonetheless extremely happy with his existence

"Discord! Discord?" a tender voice called from the main hall "Could you come here, please? I have something to show you all!"

"Just a moment, mother!" he called back, deciding to give his brewing tea a little magical push so as to not keep Aumean waiting.

As Discord returned to the hall with a steaming cup, he was not entirely surprised to see his adopted mother sitting in front of the table waiting with eleven glowing gemstone-shaped objects orbiting around her "Discord, there you are! Please, everypony follow me. I'll try to keep it short, I want some of that cake too!" Aumean smiled as she got to her hooves and began leading the way back outside the chapel. She was either oblivious or ignoring the intense mix of confusion and wonder that filled her family and friends. All of them had at some point seen the Elements and been given at least a brief explanation on them; after Discord's arrival and as Surprise, Firefly and Penwell got closer and more comfortable with the family, each had been granted a viewing of the mystical artefacts, on the condition they swore never to tell any other pony about them without Aumean's approval. Penwell was the only one of three friends to show any *real* interest in the Elements, but the pegasus and earth pony were just as amazed as he and the ivory mare's family were to see the Elements so casually taken from their secure chamber. After a moment of blinking and head shaking, they all cautiously followed Aumean into the chilly twilight.

"Aumean...what are you...?"

"It occurred to me some months ago that even though it may be years from now, eventually I won't be here to keep protecting the Elements from anything that might misuse them." calmly explained the alicorn, walking slowly into the clearing outside the chapel "So I came up with an idea."

“An...idea?”

“Yes, an idea. Should my children want to continue my work, then they will have to be ready. It takes more than just a magic door to properly guard the Elements and use them in times of crisis. I’ve been waiting for the time when not just Celestia, Discord and Luna are prepared, but their friends as well. With Luna raising the moon today, I think that time has come”

“Ready...? Aumean, ready for what?” Penwell spoke for all those gathered behind him as well.

“A lesson, Penwell. A lesson that only hardship and experience can teach. A lesson that will show them the one thing more powerful than the Elements themselves and what they *truly* embody” Aumean unfurled her wings and slowly started to rise in the air as she spoke, the gemstones still orbiting her.

“Mother, what are yo-” Celestia tried to shout but was cut off by a blinding light radiating from her mother. The Elements shone with a rainbow visage and swirled around the alicorn at increasing speeds, becoming a colourful blur with the magic that poured forth from her horn and burning-white eyes. Despite the gleaming light and near-hurricane strength wind emanating from the wise alicorn, none of the struggling spectators could resist casting an eye at the sight from under and shielding hoof. The pure power captivated them as it only grew and grew until eventually, when it seemed reality itself could take no more...

BOOM!!!

Everypony shut their eyes tightly as an explosion of such warm, soft light engulfed them, filling them with a feeling none of them could quite name but which all of them never wanted to let go. As the light faded, each whipped their heads to the skies as the night time silence was shattered by a tremendous howl. The stars, with all their beauty, were for a brief few moments shunned and ignored as their splendour was obscured as streaks of every colour tore across the sky like comets, each in a different direction and each beyond the visible horizon. With an inaudible thud, Aumean returned to the ground, breathing deeply and drenched in sweat. So powerful had her spell been that after-sparks still popped from her horn.

“A-aumean! Are you alright, dear? What did you do!?” the ageing stallion who ran to his friend’s side to help support her was quickly joined by the others once they had recovered from their shock.

“Haha... I hid them, of course! For the...phew...for the little ones to find...” Penwell’s eyes turned to saucers.

“You...you did what!?”

“Penwell...old friend...let’s...let’s go back inside...I’ll explain once I’ve had some cake...”

Star Swirl the Bearded, as he had come to be known, did not like tardiness. It was a disruptive thing which could have disastrous effects when it came to so many sciences. Add an ingredient a few seconds too late? Potentially an entire batch of elixir ruined. Fail to think about your destination in time? Possibly teleported miles out of your way. Don’t raise the moon on time? More painful minutes an old unicorn has to suffer from his tired old bones waiting for the chance at some celestial observation. He seemed to recall Aumean mentioning that she was starting to teach another of her children how to raise the moon, no doubt it was that which was causing this delay. Star Swirl sighed and simply continued to stare at the ugly nothingness from his window. The creaking door to the study prompted the old wizard some relief from his frustrations.

“Uncle, did you find anything interesting?” The wizard turned and smiled at his delightful niece but could not keep the annoyance from his voice.

“I’m afraid there’s been a slight *hindrance*, my dear... Ah, not to worry, it’s here, finally” huffed the elderly stallion as he noticed the lunar body creep into view. Magically drawing his chair forward so that his eye perfectly met up with the room’s powerful telescope “There we go...much better...Hmm, its late but not too bad for a novice...”

“Novice, Uncle?”

“Oh, yes, hmm, I suspect that the afore mentioned *delay* was the result of Aumean’s doing. Likely teaching one of her girls the whole moon-raising

malarkey.” explained Star Swirl to a giggling Victory Dawn “...and what’s so funny?”

“You! Honestly Uncle, getting into such a twist over a few minutes delay. And you speak about it so casually! You know how serious Ms. Aumean is about keeping it a secret” chortled Dawn as she carried a pile of fresh parchments and scrolls over to the telescope so they could continue their mapping.

“Secret!? Pah, I don’t see the point! So somepony raises the moon, somepony has *always* raised the moon *and* the sun; it’s old, boring magic. If everypony knew that then they wouldn’t bat an eyelid! Pah!” the unicorn snorted, taking his eye away from the telescope and making a few notes on one of the scrolls.

“Not everypony thinks like you, uncle” the earth pony spoke soothingly, trying to calm the moody sorcerer “Shall I get you some tea? Oh, 30° to the left, I think we need that one.”

“That would be wonderful, dear. And are you sure? It looks awful similar to the constellation we mapped last winter.”

“It does, but see those four stars there? I think it’s different, note it down at least.” The wizard chuckled as his niece’s young, sharp eyes once again set him right. “I’ll be back in a minute. Crème?”

“If we have some, just don’t get it confused with my mane froth, as good as it is for the old hairs, the stuff is foul on the tongue-Oh, my!” Star Swirl abruptly swirled the telescope in chase of some red light that shot across from the east and over the growing spires of New Manesterdam.

“What was *that!*? A meteor?” the earth pony pressed herself against the window, having been startled by her Uncle’s exclamation and tried to follow the bright object across the sky and beyond the telescopes reach “Oh, another one! 80° to the right! And another!” she almost punched out the glass as she tried to point in the direction of yet more sparkling mysteries of many colours.

“Curses, they’re too fast...! I don’t think I’ll be able...gah! Missed that one as well!” the wizard grumbled and banged a hoof on the small table next to

him. Whatever the objects had been, he had only gotten to view their fading trails “Hmm...” the drawn out sound told Dawn that hundreds of hypotheses were now passing through her Uncle’s mind.

“What do you think, Uncle? They couldn’t have been meteors, could they? Not with that colour or altitude”

It took some time for the unicorn to respond, time spent with intense beard-stroking and humming “Yes, I think you’re right, but what then? No pegasus, or any other creature for that matter, could achieve such speed...”

“They all seemed to come from the same direction as well.” For all the years spent being taught science and magic, Dawn had no idea. Such moments occurred rarely and all she could do was help her ageing Uncle to get all the facts straight.

‘Indeed...you know Dawn, I cannot help but think this is also somehow Aumean’s doing.’ Concluded Star Swirl, leaning back in his cushioned chair and folding his front legs.

“You do? I suppose they *did* come from Ponyville’s direction, but...” from the few times Dawn had met the alicorn she knew that she was very powerful, but could the unusual occurrence really be down to her?

“I don’t know what those lights were exactly, dear, but what I can work out is that were magical in nature, powerful magic at that.” The wizard furrowed his brow at this. He didn’t like it when something magical-related happened and he had so little pieces of hard-knowledge to work with. “And anything involving strong magic coming from over those mountains instantly places Aumean as the prime suspect, it’s the only possible explanation from what we know”

“I suppose you’re right...what are you going to do? I know you aren’t going to just leave this”

“I most certainly am not! No, I’ll write to her and see if she knows anything. Either she does and we’ll get it sorted nice and quickly or she doesn’t and we’ll likely end up collaborating on finding out” Dawn instinctively handed her Uncle a clean scroll and inked quill so he could do just that “Thank you, dear. Really, as interesting as it no doubt will be, it’s really quite disruptive

when something like this happens, messes up my schedule worse than a ursa major does anypony's day"

Dawn smiled "You'll figure it out Uncle, you always do! Now, how about that tea?"

For once, the air was perfectly still amongst the mountains west of Ponyville. So still, in fact, that the splintering crack of wood echoed unchallenged through the winding crags and valleys of the notorious mountain range. As did a pony's cursing. The azure-unicorn stared with a twitching eyebrow at the wheel of his stagecoach. This was the fourth time one of them had broken and he was at his wit's end about having to stop and repair it *again*. Naturally, it wasn't a particularly difficult task for one of his talent, but this made it no less annoying. After all, it forced him to divert his attention away from the *important* things, like new and exciting performances. Still, at the very least it had happened on a wide ledge that afforded plenty of space to move around and was surrounded by a wall of natural stone barriers that allowed even the most cross-eyed of ponies to safely approach the edge. Thoroughly better than one of the dreadful and precarious narrow paths that made up so much of the route to New Manesterdam from Canterlot Valley. The silver-maned pony hmpfed at the sheer ineptitude of the wagon and turned his gaze towards the oddly empty sky. Though the sun had set only a few minutes ago, it would be quite bothersome to keep a track of the time, and by extension his progress, without any form of celestial body with which to estimate it. The unicorn hmpfed once more; this unusual sky was probably another hurdle these mountains had stored for any hopeful travellers. Regardless, he would have had to buckle down for the night in an hour or two anyway; he could afford to waste it by simply stopping here. With a bright burst of magic from his horn, the travelling stallion lifted the entire coach and gently moved it to the side of the dirt path. With a quick check to ensure nothing within the wagon had fallen off their shelves, the azure pony gave a satisfied nod and set to work on the cracked wheel.

"Grr..."

"Stupid wheel, I may as well just make a new one...reinforced...with iron..."

"Grr..."

It was only at this point that the unicorn heard the faint growling behind him. Raising a hoof behind him as if to tell whatever creature was there to *wait* while he put the finishing touches to the wheel, the silver-maned pony stared at the small stone he was levitating oh, so carefully towards the last crack.

“Grr!” the growling did not cease, and the added ferocity caused the pony to lose his concentration and drop the stone. Without a sound, he raised his head and turned to the offenders. Only meters from the coach stood a pack of chimera, six or so strong and each was advancing closer with each passing second.

The traveller calmly surveyed the pack, counting their number and noting their position. The only two escape routes had been cut off, not that he had ever planned on using them. He sighed before speaking “Clearly, you overgrown stuffed toys don’t know who I am.” The nearest of the chimera, seemingly enraged by the pony’s taunting, howled and leapt, claws unsheathed and ready to shear anything they came into contact with. Less than a second before the great beast crushed the azure unicorn, he was gone in a poof of smoke. The chimera landed on its paws and twisted its head back and forth searching for its prey in the thick fog. The prey in question however, quickly became the hunter and the chimera was sent sprawling onto its back unconscious as it received two bucking hoofs directly to the face. As the smoke cleared, the other chimera saw the pony standing triumphantly on the stomach of their dazed comrade. They hesitated momentarily, but soon followed suit and pounced at the unicorn. The resulting flailing tangle of frothing beasts was stopped only by an amused snort from where the chimeras had attacked. Each beast gazed at the travelling pony with primal hatred and it took them a moment to notice his horn shining brightly, the hidden grimace of effort on his face and the shadow they were standing in. In turn, each chimera turned their attention from the pony to the air above them where countless small boulders were held by a thinning aura of magic “Run, little kitties.” The chimeras did as the pony commanded and tried to simultaneously bolt from the knot of limbs they had tied themselves in. Only three made it back into the clearing conscience or unpinned by one of the cascading rocks, but they did not let their reduced number deter them. The pony was quickly surrounded on all sides by the chimera who were more determined then ever to devour this individual. Unfortunately for them, the unicorn had no intention of letting

that happen “Enough playing around” in an instant, the chimera in front of the pony was left knocked out with singed fur by a large blast of magical energy. The remaining two ended up crunching their faces together as they both attempted to attack the pony, who disappeared in a flash of violet light. Each received a further blow as the unicorn elegantly landed on their skulls hooves first. The two were finally left just like their kin with a mid-flip buck to the muzzle. With a soft clop, the pony landed neatly on his hooves and glanced around the battlefield “And let that be a warning to you all, no beast; cockatrice, chimera or even ursa major challenges *this* unicorn!”

“Mewww...” whimpered the chimera who were gradually coming to and turning tail as soon as their dazed minds would let them. With a proud hmpf, the pony returned to his stagecoach which had miraculously remained untouched throughout the conflict. He only just noticed that the moon and stars had finally come about, yet his attention was snatched away and his eyes made wide by many streaks of colour burning through the sky, lighting it up more vividly than any firework could hope to achieve. They lasted for only a brief moment, but that was all it took for inspiration to explode into the unicorn's mind like a bomb of creativity. Fantastic ideas for new displays of magic blossomed in his mind faster than flowers in spring and he had no choice but to scratch them into the ground before they slipped away as if they were the rarest and most beautiful of butterflies. Minutes later, the stallion was lying on a cushion in his coach, recovering from the excitement. He swore that his next show would be the best, everypony of Manesterdam, neigh everypony of the land would want to see it, everypony would fight for the chance to him, everypony would know and love the name The Grand & Mighty Viator!

“Kromi, Kromi! It is time to come in, child!”

“Just a minute more, mama!”

“Now, Kromi! The elders say this sky is unnatural, that the moon may be displeased!”

“Yes, mama...” the young zebra called back, defeated. She stole one last glance at the endless expanse of water before slowly making her way to the gathering of huts that was her home of Oromo village.

“Come, child, quickly! Or do you desire one of them talon folk to snatch you from where you stand?” Kromi’s mother’s threat was a hollow one, the Taloned hadn’t been seen in the area for nearly a year now, they were far more interested in the huge boats that could sometimes be seen crossing the Great Sea to the north. Her mother insisted that there was still a danger but Kromi played on the beach and gazed across the eternal stretch regularly and unlike the older folk she paid attention to what was actually happening far out on the calm waters. She occasionally saw the boats sailing peacefully and then getting swarmed by large groups of shadows, what could only be the Taloned. Often, smoke would start billowing from the boats but they always drove off the Taloned in the end.

“Alright mama- wait, look! The moon! It’s rising, everything’s ok!” surely enough the heavenly white sphere had begun lazily ascending into the sky, bringing the stars with it. Kromi jumped in happy circles, her ringlets jingling with appropriate cheer. Hopefully she would be allowed to stay out a little longer; looking across the Great Sea in the moonlight was among the best fuels for the young zebra’s imagination. Everyday she dreamed of one day boarding one of the big boats and travelling across the Great Sea to new lands where she could have all sorts of amazing adventures and meet so many kinds of interesting creatures.

“Kromi! I said in!” her mother’s voice rang out, filling Kromi with disappointment. With a heavy sigh she resigned herself to what would no doubt be another night of boring lessons on the importance of tradition and staying true to the tribe. Pushing through the bead doors of her families’ clay and straw hut confirmed it; one of the village elders lay by the fire mumbling some incantation or another.

“Here Kromi, eat your food now” ordered her mother as she placed a bowl of nuts in front of the zebra. She sighed and began eating on the nuts one by one. The same dry, bland flavour she was used to. Rarely did they have the luxury of anything with actual *taste* but young Kromi had heard amazing tales from passing travellers of huge towns of glistening stone where the people ate fresh, juicy plants everyday! What she wouldn’t give to be able to visit such places, even for just a day! Her fantasies however, were interrupted by a clip to the head.

“Ow!”

“Listen when the elders are speaking to you girl!” Kromi looked around the room and noticed her mother, father and the tribal elder glaring at her as if she had stolen something.

“I’ll say it again for the little rude one. Have you planned yet how you are going to help the tribe?” the elder continued to glare at her. Kromi knew the look well, she received it often. It was a look that tried to fill her with shame. Much to the disapproval of her parents, she had a reputation in the village of being a dreamer, which meant being lazy and disrespectful “You’re almost of adult age, girl, you’ll soon have the responsibility and duty to uphold”

Kromi hated being glared at like that. She *was* a dreamer, but she could be just as hard working as every other zebra. Just because she didn’t want to spend her entire life devoted to this tiny little village didn’t mean she deserved scorn! “I...I don’t know-”

“You don’t know!? What *do* you know, child? Anything? Or is it all just fantasy in there?” the elder brought her face uncomfortably close to Kromi’s, she could smell the rancid breath and almost feel her leathery wrinkles.

“I...I know I *hate* it her-” once again Kromi was cut off, but not by the elder this time. Through the smoke hole in the top of the hut she saw a trail of pink light rip across the sky, leaving a sparkling path through the nether.

“Hate *what*, child!? Answer me!” despite her fierce tone, the elder’s demand was not met as Kromi jumped to her hooves and stormed out of the hut. The group sat stunned, so are was such an act of disregard.

“Wooow! They’re so...so pretty...!” gasped the zebra as stood in the parched, brown fields outside her village. They came from across the Great Sea, beams of colour swept through the sky free and unhindered by anything. Kromi could not believe such a magical sight even existed. She made her mind up then and there, one day, one day soon, she would leave this awfully dreary place and she would see the rest of the world. She didn’t care about the looks and the whispers that would come from it; she didn’t care about upholding the village’s decrepit traditions and practises. She would go where ever she wanted to go, say what she wanted to say, be *free* to do what she wanted!

“Yhh knhh, Penwhh, I thhhk chk hhs hhhllhng prhhpties”

“What?”

“Healing properties” Aumean tried again after swallowing her mouthful of cake “I was completely drained after all that, but I feel so much better now”

“Please, mother, you’ve had three slices. It *was* meant mostly for Luna...”

“It’s ok sis, I’ve had enough anyway”

“But-”

“As fascinating as cake may be...can we please talk about the Elements and...well...what you *did* with them!?” cut in Penwell, his muzzle scrunched up with confused worry.

“Yeah! What was that awesome display all about! You said you had hidden them!”

“Oh, yes, I suppose we should, shouldn’t we?” calmly suggested the ivory mare much to the apparent frustration of the book collector “It’s quite simple, really. Like Firefly says, the spell I cast hid the Elements all around the land. If any of you wish to one day take over my duties as their guardian, then it is vital you understand them. That is something neither me nor anypony can teach in full...” Aumean momentarily stopped herself to take another small bite of cake. The tension only rose “...yes. Now, I am not going to force any of you to do such a thing, the decision is purely yours. If you want to take this class, then I must warn you that the journey you’ll undertake will be fraught with difficulties and hardships, but also discovery and adventure!” she continued, waving her hooves in the air dramatically and throwing cake crumbs over everypony present “If none of you do, if you want to lead your own lives free of any such responsibility, then that is also fine. The Elements will remain hidden and should I ever need them, I can gather them once more.” She finished to a quiet room.

The silence was eventually broken by a quiet chuckle that grew until it was hysterical. Frowns assaulted the draconequeus who was struggling to stay in

his seat “That’s brilliant! *Brilliant!*” though at first Discord was alone in his laughter, giggles and snorts began to titter out of Firefly, Surprise and even Luna.

“H-he’s right! That sounds *awesome!* Don’t know about you slow pokes, but I’m in!”

“Yeah! Think of all the ponies we’ll meet!”

“You...you really think we’re ready for something like that mother?”

Aumean smiled “Yes, Luna. You’re all still young, I know, but you all show such promise. Sweetie, you raised the *moon* today and I’ve seen you use magic in other situations. If you go together, then I truly believe you have nothing to fear”

“Aumean...”

“Penwell, you have not seen these children as I have. Together, there is little that could stop them. And it won’t just be *them*; I have a feeling they’ll make even more allies on their tri-”

“I...” the talk and cheer stopped as the room turned expectantly to Celestia. She looked around at each pony sat at the table, uncertainty clouding her eyes.

“Celestia.” The attention then shifted to Discord “You heard what mother said. You don’t have to, you can do what you want and we shall think no less of you. Besides, we all know how much you hate getting...*dirty*.” the draconequus’ last word was spoken with a distinct smirk, bait the pastel-maned alicorn could simply not resist.

“Are you...are you *challenging* me?” Celestia gazed at Discord and with all her might she tried to suppress the grin raging to be released. Her muzzle failed her and just a tiny portion of a confident smile was leaked to all those gathered.

“Challenging you? Why would I ever do such a thing?” the same smirk played across Discord’s face and there was only one thing Celestia could

do to ensure she would be able live with herself thereafter despite knowing she was playing right into Discord's paw.

"A-alright...I'm in" Celestia's words were met with yet more cheer and an approving smile from her mother. The celebration and excitement grew and fell with the moon which shone brighter than it had in many years, as if to signify how with that white alicorn's one decision, the fate of everypony was changed.

Chapter 5

Always Look Up!

“...We'll *totally* need some of these...”

“...I hope it doesn't get too cold...”

“I'm assuming from all the mess that none of you are ready yet? Its late-morning already” Penwell looked at the pile of bags, supplies and two young ponies with a clear sense of disdain. *‘By the earth...how can Aumean trust the fate of the Elements to them...?’*

“Ah, buck it! I'm just gonna take what I have here.”

“Fire...all you have is a pair of sunglasses, two loaves of bread and a hat...” to prove her point the pegasus grabbed one of the speedster's saddle bags, turned it upside down and shook it. A few crumbs dropped to the ground “Make that one loaf...”

“I got hungry on the way here!” the pink-earth pony innocently shrugged “Besides, we don't even know what direction we're headed in yet! No point weighing myself down with stuff I might not even end up needing!”

“Still...” Surprise could not help but share some of Penwell's concern -at least she thought it was concern- for the speedster. It was true that the route had been left for Celestia and Discord to work out, but Firefly hadn't even packed a scarf! Who knows where they might end up?

“Surprise!” a bold voice called out over the loose crowds of Ponyville's market, a voice that made Surprise's heart skip a beat. She turned and found herself face-to-face with an auburn-coated, coal-maned earth pony. Much like his cutie mark, a varied heap of valuable rocks and gems, his emerald eyes often gleamed in contrast with his somewhat dull coat and mane “Surprise! I'm glad I found you, I wanted to say goodbye before you left.”

“R-restone! Oh, uhh, umm, h-hi! H-how did you, umm, know I was...?” the snow-coated pegasus spluttered. It was all she could manage, all Penwell and Firefly managed however was to roll their eyes.

“Going on an adventure?” he finished “It’s the latest gossip, that Aumean’s kids, Firefly and you were heading off on some journey. Took a while for the news to get to me, so I’m just glad I got here to see you off in time.”

“Hey, did you hear that Surprise? You’re boyfriend came all the way from his rock farm to say goodbye! How swe-” a hoof to the head cut Firefly off, but it was already too late to stop either the pegasus or the geologist pony from turning scarlet.

“I-ignore her Redstone! / at least know it isn’t a ‘rock farm’.” Surprise’s don’t-reference-the-boyfriend-part plan worked, and Redstone’s blushing ceased a little and was replaced with a slightly less awkward smile, much to her relief.

“I know! Why don’t you come with us Red!? Then you and Surprise could get all lovey-dovey on a mountainto-” once again Firefly’s head made a harsh impact with the earth, though the blow couldn’t stop her mischievous cackling which ensured the embarrassment was shared between her two victims in generous doses.

“Heh...it sure sounds, uhh...exciting, Firefly, but my folks really need me around these days and I’ve got a paper due soon anyway, so...” the question had made the usually stoic auburn pony even more uncomfortable and he desperately sought to change the topic “So...what do your folks think about all this? Sure they’re ok with you just upping and going on a voyage like this?”

“Nah, they’re cool, said they’re glad to get me out the house. Whatever that means.” said Firefly disinterested, earning her a momentary scowl from Redstone. The question had been meant for Surprise.

“It’s fine, they were a bit surprised, but said they were happy I would get to see the world and that even if they wanted to, they couldn’t have stopped me anyway.”

“Well...that’s good. I wish you luck, Surprise!”

“D’aww, how romant-OW!”

“Surprise, Firefly!” the two ponies sparking conflict was halted just in time by Celestia’s voice ringing overhead. Turning, they saw three alicorns and one draconequus quickly approaching the village for a landing. The two waved and a few moments later the travelling party was assembled.

“Do you girls have everything?”

“Sure do Ms. Aumean! Got everything we need-” Surprise shot Firefly an expectant glare before tuning back to Aumean “Uhh...*want*. And we’ve told everypony we know that we’re going to be out of town for a while.”

“Hello Ms. Aumean.”

“Redstone, it’s nice to see you again! How are Flint and Amethyst?”

“Oh, they’re getting on in years, happy thou-”

“Hey, did you get a route sorted out? Are we going to Canterlot? To the mountains?” interjected Firefly, eagerly bouncing up and down.

“You’re free to go in whichever direction you like, but I’ve made something to help guide you, Celestia, if you would...?” The ivory alicorn nodded to her daughter who proceeded to levitate a golden yet simple metal box from a leather string around her neck and float it close to the intrigued faces of Firefly and Surprise where it snapped open to reveal a compass-like dial, complete with markings.

“A...compass? How is this going to help us find the Elements?” remarked Firefly, clearly unimpressed.

“This isn’t just any compass; I have enchanted it to point in the general direction of where you should go. Follow it, and you will surely find what you are searching for.” Celestia narrowed her eyes at her mother’s words. It was tiny, but she was sure she had detected a slight trace of sly cunning in the red-maned pony’s voice. She could not help but feel she

was hiding something, or at the very least not being as forward as she could.

“Wow, this’ll be really helpful!” Surprise grabbed the compass from Celestia’s magic with her front hooves and peered at it in more detail. Much like Aumean had said, the compass’ dial pointed only in a general direction, the arrow never fixed itself on any certain way and was constantly flitting back and forth within a 90° range. According to the pointers current alignment, they should head in a westerly direction.

“We have our things, we have our routes and we’ve said our goodbyes. Is there anything else anypony would like to do before we depart?” the draconequus’ question was met with a nervous silence. As hyped as the team had been at the idea, it was beginning to dawn on each of them the scale of the task they were about to perform.

“Remember everypony, this adventure is yours to shape. Take your time. Yes, the journey will be hard, but it should also be fun and exciting.” the elder alicorn broke the silence with a light heated chuckle and more of her words of wisdom “There is no hurry, be sure to stop every now and then to take in and reflect on what you’ve seen and done, there is no finish line to race to.”

Without warning, Aumean found herself being leapt at by her two daughters who clung to her tightly and nuzzled her affectionately “I promise I’ll look after Luna!”

“I’m going to miss you, mother!”

After overcoming her surprise, Aumean chuckled again “Girls, girls, you’re taking this all a little too seriously! Now hurry, you’re brother and friends are waiting for you...” Aumean trailed off, her words not quite as accurate as she thought. While Discord seemed content, smiling happily at the show of warmth, the sight of the open road out of Ponyville seemed to be spurring Surprise and Firefly into welling up with the same emotion as Luna and Celestia.

Penwell rolled his eyes “...please, just go already...”

Thirty minutes, more than a few tears and countless cries of “farewell!” and “good luck!” later, the party was trotting and hovering along the western road out of Ponyville towards the Everfree forest and the looming mountains beyond. They all moved in relative silence; while Celestia furrowed her brow between their compass and a map, the others plodded along happily, enjoying the warm sun and rolling hills that made up most of Canterlot Valley.

“Sooo... this is it, huh? We’re actually doing it.”

“Sure are, Fire. Scared?” Surprise teased the pink earth pony who tried and failed to swipe at the floating pegasus.

“‘Course I’m not scared! I’m more pumped than ever!” retorted the speedster, puffing her chest out an impressive distance.

“Oh, yeah? Prove it!” Surprise did not actually expect the speedster to take her up on the challenge and immediately stop to scan the surroundings fields for some way for her to do just that. It only took her a moment to make her decision, her eyes darting from one lonesome tree just visible in a distant field to the south and another by the roadside several meters away. An evil grin spread across her face.

“Alright, listen up everypony! I know we’re just started, but here’s our first challenge! See that tree there?” she pointed with her hoof to the distant tree once the rest of the group, who had carried on walking, came to a stop and craned their necks “And this one?” with her other hoof she pointed to the closer tree “We have to move as fast as we can from this tree to that one!” she proclaimed, a mock-tone of alarm in her voice.

“Umm...why, Firefly?” nervously inquired Luna, picking up on the blue-maned pony’s voice.

“What’s wrong?” piped in Celestia, tearing her eyes away from the navigational tools before magically rolling up the map and slipping it away in one of her saddlebags. Discord glanced at the closet tree and seemed to notice something which prompted him to share Firefly’s mischievous smirk.

“Well, none of you want to get stung, do you?” commented Firefly with barely contained laughter and she totted casually up to the tree and lined her back legs up with its trunk.

“Stung...? Fire, what are you- Wait, you wouldn’t...!” realisation dawned on the pegasus and she flapped her wings fiercely to try and tackle the earth pony away from the tree, though for all her efforts, she was too late.

“We have to run or we’ll get stung by these *wasps* of course!” without a seconds hesitation the speedster reared up her back hooves and bucked the tree as hard as her strong legs would let her. The tree shook violently and one, two, three, four rough, beige spheres came crashing down to the ground where even the soft grass did not stop them from shattering.

“Eeeh!” Luna squealed, Celestia froze with shrunken pupils, Discord laughed merrily, Surprise pulled a sharp 180° in the air and Firefly leapt forward and launched herself across the fields full gallop as a gargantuan wall of buzzing rage formed in front of them.

“***RUN!***” Firefly yelled back cackling. The draconequus and ponies took heed and turned tail, bolting into the air to follow the pink blur as a massive vibrating hand, large enough to cast a five meter shadow over the earth, charged after them.

“*Firefly, are you insane!?*” angrily shouted Celestia as she pumped her wings as hard as she could, surprisingly unable to overtake the earth-bound pony.

“Delightful, Firefly! What a way to start us off!” applauded Discord who struggled to feed his own beating wings with precious air over his giggling. The conversation ended at that as each of them concentrated on making as much distance between them and the angry hoard close behind them. Despite the immediate danger, each of the party’s fear slowly drained away as each of them exchanged challenging glances, wordlessly egging each on to go faster than not just the rampaging wasps, but each other as well. After only a handful of minutes the dash for life had turned into an all out race as which even Luna participated in with grit determination. Small meadows, rolling hills and even the clouds shot past as the five pushed themselves to even greater levels of speed. The wind

slapped and stung at their eyes but could not manage to deter any of them. The distant tree that was previously just a speck grew in size and beckoned the racer's on. The now far-off swarm was forgotten, the only thing that mattered now was reaching that tree! No pony could really tell who was in what position since there was no audience and the racers themselves had only the gently-swaying oak in their focus. Closer and closer and closer, the tree little more than a green blur and then...gone!

"...wha?" each contestant blinked and gradually brought themselves to a stop. Each turned their heads and realised that they had overshot the tree by at least a hundred meters. They all exchanged glances as it hit them how exhausted they had made themselves. Luna snorted. Then she snorted again and held up a hoof to try and hide her growing tittering. Celestia likewise let out a rising chortle, then Surprise and Discord and finally Firefly joined in. Soon the five of them were rolling on the floor rasping for breath, on the verge of suffocating themselves through their uncontrollable laughter. They didn't even know who had won, yet the spur-of-the-moment contest had left them each in a fit of humour.

"...Why...oww...why...did we...?"

"...Just...because, Tia!" replied Firefly, which prompted a second round of boundless giggling. The party continued their carefree laughter until their aching sides could take no more and they flopped limply onto the cool grass with a cheerful sigh.

"L-lunch now...?" speech was still painful for the snowy-pegasus. Everypony simply nodded intent on letting their lungs rest. Too weary to move, Discord saved his companions the effort and levitated a trio of shiny red apples from his backpack and distributed them to his sisters and himself before bringing forth another two for Firefly and Surprise.

"These should do...eat up now...everypony!" each nodded in thanks and took slow bites of their apples. It had been less than an hour since their journey had begun and they had already been confronted with a potentially painful scenario and were completely exhausted.

Celestia looked around at her fatigued companions *'It's going to be an interesting trip indeed.'*

The teacup rattled on it's saucer as the nervous hoof that had carried it half-placed half-dropped it. The owner of said hoof had already received a number of wary looks from the two waiter ponies who ran the cosy Ponyville café. She wasn't a regular, a daisy yellow-pegasus with a curly silver mane and tail, and it seemed almost certain that she would at some point break something with her jitteriness. Both made a note to subtly try and replace her cup with one of the less valuable ones as soon as possible.

"...You *sure* she's alright?" the light brown stallion looked the quivering pegasus up and down once more before turning his quizzical eyes back to her husband, also a pegasus whose coat was a baby blue whereas his mane was straight, unkempt and copper in colour. His cutie mark was three connected arcs like those that would illustrate something bouncing in a drawing. The earth pony had seen plenty of shy mares and stallions in his time but few who reacted as uneasily in such a casual situation as she did. Her cutie mark, three marshmallows, didn't give much to suggest why she was as shy as she was. The earth pony scratched his short, rough black mane with one hoof while taking a large bite out of his mushroom sandwich with the other. He was big but not normally labelled as intimidating, still, perhaps it was him?

"Sorry, she always gets nervous around strangers, Mr..?"

"Dustcloud. It's a pleasure to finally meet you two, surprised we haven't done so before, way our kids are usually together."

"Not that surprising, Dustcloud. Cloudsale is not that close, after all." Though the voice was no more raised than any of the other customers sat in the comfortable heat outside the café, it still received the most attention and practically everypony threw a greeting in its direction.

"M-Ms. Aumean!" gasped the timid daisy-coated pegasus as the powerful alicorn approached the three seated ponies.

"Please, dear, you know she doesn't like it when ponies stare..." the baby-blue pegasus reassured his wife who proceeded to shrink into her seat and paw the ground nervously.

“I should apologise myself, but Sun Spring is right, Softheart, it is a little... uncomfortable.” Both the alicorn and pegasus had begun blushing, causing the former’s partner to try and frantically comfort her.

“Hehe, well this is a good start!” chuckled Dustcloud, completely unaffected by the awkward silence which had slowly begun to descend on what had been intended to be a causal meet. The three other parents smiled but remained mostly quiet until one of the waiters appeared by their side, graciously offered a menu to Aumean and took a discreet glance into the shaky pony’s cup to see if it was empty yet. With an inaudible curse, the waiter bowed his head and disappeared as quickly as he had materialised.

“So...do you truly think they’ll be alright, Aumean? I know Surprise is a grown girl now, but I still worry about her so much, she’s our little pony, after all...”

“Please, Softheart, do not worry.” Interjected the ivory-mare while placing a supportive hoof on the pegasus’ shoulder “I have every confidence that they will all be fine. The lands beyond the borders of Canterlot Valley are not known for their extreme danger. Even the Western Range should not pose much of a threat to a large group like theirs.” She confidently explained. Aumean realised she would have to be sure to make her faith in the children clear so as to not harm their parents with worry. “You should also remember that Surprise is travelling with some powerful magicians. I try not to promote violence, but Celestia, Discord and Luna each know how to defend themselves should they need to and,” Dustcloud received an approving nod from the alicorn “from what I know of Firefly, she can also be a force to be reckoned with.”

“She sure is, once my girl sets her sights on something there ain’t no stopping her getting it.” The earth pony nodded to himself in a mix of agreement and pride.

“There, so you see, Surprise is quite safe, I assure you.” Finished Aumean with even more confidence than when she had started, having assured herself in the process.

“Well, I suppose in that case we shouldn’t, should we?”

“We *won’t* worry, dear. There’s no reason to. Surprise will be *fine*, let’s not make her feel guilty and what to come back, hmm? This will be good for her.” Sun Spring placed his hooves on the silver-maned pegasus and stared hard into her eyes as if to try and transmit his own trust in his daughter into her mother. Softheart did not respond immediately and seemed deep in thought “...dear?”

“Yes! You’re right! All of you are right! I *won’t* worry! I’ll... I’ll do the complete opposite!” the pegasus burst into the air enthusiastically, eyes burning with passion “We should cheer for them-oh, oh, we can make a banner and streamers for when they come back! A *real* party! Surprise, would like that wouldn’t she!?”

“Dear-”

“And cake of course! Lot’s of cake! Ooh, it’ll be so fun!” infected with excitement, Softheart began flying in circles and twirls, oblivious to the efforts of Aumean and her husband to calm her, Dustcloud’s sniggering and the other gawping customers of the café.

“Softheart-”

“We could invite the whole of Cloudsdale! No! All of Cloudsdale *and* Ponyville! It will be the best celebration in the history of Canterlot Valley!” As the pegasus finished with a dramatic flourish of her front hooves, perfect silence fell over the café. The other patrons gazed, mouths agape at the odd outburst.

“Oh my...”

“Seems she went a little overboard with not worrying, eh?” The brown-stallion seemed to be the only one to find it funny at first, though Aumean also joined in grinning.

“Perhaps we should go to another café now?”

“Come on brother, we’re leaving now!”

“Just a moment, Luna!” The young alicorn could tell that Discord must be doing something with their leftover apple cores. She hesitated for a moment and looked over her shoulder at the waiting group but nonetheless trotted over.

“What are you doing, brother?” she asked curiously, trying to see over one of his wings.

“We don’t know exactly how long we’ll be on this journey, do we? So, I thought it would be a fun idea to plant these apple seeds and see if they’ve grown at all when we get back!” proclaimed the draconequus, proud of his idea.

“Luna! Discord! Hurry up, we’re waiting!”

“There, that should do... Coming, Celestia!” as Discord reared his slender body around, Luna could see that he was indeed holding a pile of apple seeds in his paw. As the two began to walk over to the other three, Discord quickly noticed Luna staring at the seeds he carried “We’ll each throw some into the ground as we move back to the path. It’s a little late, but they should be able to grow at this time of year and I think that these hills are plenty fertile”

“Fertile for what?” inquired Celestia a tad sceptically, having only caught the last part of Discord’s explanation over studying her map and the compass some more.

“Ooh, ooh, brother had a great idea sis!”

“...did he now?” Discord smirked as he was hit by one of Celestia’s questioning looks. She always did suspect him of plotting some kind of mischief, even though most of the time her suspicions were proven completely false.

“Yes! We’re going to plant these apple seeds as we walk and see if they’ve grown when we return home!”

“Hey, that’s sounds like a cool idea!

“Yeah, we can leave our own little mark!” agreed Firefly and Surprise, having stopped their own talk to listen in on their companions.

The white-alicorn looked around at the faces of her travelling mates. Even if she had objected to the idea, she would have been defeated four to one. Admittedly, Celestia hoped it would not cost them anymore valuable time, their mother would not keep the sun out longer just for them and the pastel-maned pony wanted to reach the cover of the Everfree forest before dusk; she did not want to sleep in the middle of a field, even if the stars *were* pretty that night. Despite those thoughts, she did have to give credit to the draconequus; it was quite a nice idea “Alright then, just so long as we don’t dawdle.”

“So we’re all in agreement then? Good!” with a touch of magic, Discord gave out an equal number of seeds to everypony “Shall we be on our way?”

Nodding between them, the party set out on their quest once again. Every few meters and under Discord’s instruction, one would throw a seed into the rich soil. It was a small thing, but each enjoyed the idea of leaving their mark on the journey, something for them to tell and boast to others about in the future. They remained quiet as they trotted northwest through the fields towards the lush green of Everfree forest, appreciating the simple beauty of Canterlot Valley as the sun made its lazy way across the sky above them. Before long, they had thrown all their seeds and had returned to the road. Everfree was home to Celestia, Discord and Luna and even the two other ponies visited it often, but it was the growing mountains beyond it that plucked at the strings of adventure-lust in their hearts. It would not take long to traverse the width of the Everfree, a day at the very most, at their current pace. Once they had done so, they would have to scale and find a way through the mountains, not a unique task in itself, but one none of them had ever attempted themselves. *‘Assuming the compass doesn’t take us in some other direction before then...’* Celestia half-hoped they would not have to go through the mountains. Naturally, it would no doubt be a breathtaking experience but at the same time the Western Range was - unlike the Everfree- actually regarded as dangerous, and few ponies attempted to traverse it. There were plenty of balloon or chariot services available that covered the Canterlot-Manetserdam route, though Celestia had a distinct feeling that the trials their mother had set for them would involve venturing into that mountain range.

“Well, here we are: the Everfree forest!”

“So we going to stay at your house or something?” replied Surprise to the draconequus’ announcement.

“What!? No, of course we aren’t! Where’s the adventure in that!?” cried the pink earth pony, evidently wanting to camp out.

“It would take us quite far out of the route, and I’m not sure we could make it that far south before nightfall-” Celestia thought aloud, the only one with any real concerns.

“And think of the adventure!” threw in Firefly.

“Yes...that as well...”

“Everfree isn’t dangerous either, let’s stay out, it’ll be fun, right?” with Luna’s opinion, it was once again decided by majority for them to follow the compass and continue west into the forest and simply camp out.

“Well, let’s be on our way then!” with a gesture of his talons, Discord lead the way under the leafy blanket. Despite the forest canopy being thick, light still managed to somehow filter through onto the floor and cast the whole wood in a gentle yellow glow that was charged with magic, even Surprise and Firefly could feel it playfully tingling on their skin. Celestia had a lot of happy memories and experience wandering the forest, though she had rarely ever ventured to this part of the old wood, so far north of her home. It seemed that few others had either; it only took several hundred yards for the dirt path to virtually disappear under a carpet of grasses, ferns and bright flowers, each resonating with life. The sheer diversity was captivating as always; ants, beetles, bees, cicadas, crickets, dragonflies, mantises and hundreds of other insects buzzed and crawled around them while the trees shared their trucks with mosses and fungi. Above them in the canopy doves, parrots, sparrows, toucans, hummingbirds, owls and swifts all sung and chirped, further adding to the loud yet strangely calming song of the forest. Content with listening to the melodious tune, the five kept up a fast canter that saw half of the forest’s width behind them in good time and without incident. As the gold of the sun began to fade to a bright orange with early evening, they arrived at a clearing by a wide river,

Discord signalled for them to stop, having noticed the beads of sweat running down Celestia and Luna's muzzles. "We'll rest here for now and have something more to eat. None of us are workponies after all." He, Surprise and Firefly were breathing harder than normal but were no where near as exhausted as they had been after their race earlier, Discord and the pegasus having opted to use their wings, as they were used to, instead of their hooves and Firefly having simply trained her endurance as a side effect of trying to improve her speed almost everyday. It was Celestia and Luna who really needed a break, they were not athletes like Firefly and their larger frames and wings made flying more awkward for them amongst the dangling vines and thick woodland than it did the smaller pegasus or slender draconequus who also preferred to remain in the air on a far more regular basis.

"S-sorry everypony!" apologised Luna as she wiped her brow and horn with a hoof and levitated a water canteen out of her saddlebags with her magic.

"It's cool, I'm hungry anyway." A rumble from her stomach confirmed the blue-maned pony's claim and she reached around to grab the single loaf of bread left in her saddlebags with her teeth.

"Shouldn't you save that for the Western Range, Fire? There's plenty to graze on here, up there I doubt there's going to be much." Firefly hesitated clamping her jaws down on the scrap of bread she had already torn from the loaf at the snowy-pegasus' words. The earth pony looked back and forth between the looming mountains and the fresh grass at her hooves, the bread still in her mouth.

"Ffhin." She gurgled as the small bit of bread slid down her throat. Peering at the leaves closely she took an experimental nip. Surprise and Discord were already tearing up clumps of green and chewing on them happily, so the grass couldn't be bad. Grass normally wasn't *bad* per se, but Firefly had always found it to be extremely dull in taste and never capable of fully satisfying her often ravenous appetite. Can't win races on something as energy-deprived as grass after all. Of course, they weren't in a race and Firefly fully knew it. '*Still...*' she thought.

"Come on Fire, it's pretty good stuff! Juicy!" Firefly rolled her eyes at the ever optimistic pegasus and gave in, ripping a mouthful of grass from

the dew-soaked earth and chewing on it with a clear look of disapproval. It really wasn't bad, better than average for grass actually, but still nothing to get excited about. By this point, the two sisters had finished guzzling water from their canteens and had silently joined their three companions in munching. A few minutes later, they were all rested and recharged and after refilling their canteens in the river they resumed their way. Despite its large girth, the river proved not to be a problem. Four of them could fly and quickly hovered over and the waters were calm and not particularly deep, prompting Firefly to splash her way across in a deliberately explosive swimming style that was more playful flailing than it was an actual technique. With the river crossed and their manes soaked by the earth pony drying herself like a dog, they ventured deeper into the magically-engorged forest.

"Perfect. Just *perfect*. Really, were they alive, I would thoroughly *lecture* these damnable hills on the meaning of *respect!*" voice dripping with corrosive levels of sarcasm and burning annoyance, the Grand & Mighty Viator concluded that today was *not* a good day. The azure-stallion sat on his haunches, hooves crossed and stared at the largely broken heap that was his stagecoach lying, twisted and wrecked at the bottom of a steep slope, with twitching eyes, seemingly willing the situation to fix itself. When all he got was the suspiciously mocking-like screeching of a falcon flying overhead, the traveller sighed and rubbed his horn. A throbbing headache was already taking root in his skull. The Western Range truly was perilous, one moment Viator was happily pulling the cart along a high-up path, fantasising about the fame and fortune that would be his once he reached Manesterdam, the next the road had partially collapsed under his coach's weight and had attempted to bring it and the unicorn cascading down to the gorge below as well, the former successfully. So taken by surprise had the pony been that he had had barely enough time to magically undo the harness that would have also dragged him down to a no doubt messy doom.

"Phewee! That's one mighty fine pickle ya got there, pardner." The strongly-accented voice boomed in his ear and sent another pulse of pain racking through Viator's head, encouraging his headache to undergo a growth-spurt. Casting a wincing eye to his side, Viator's vision was filled with sight of a moustached, moss-green earth pony grinning uncomfortably close to the unicorn's face.

‘When did he get there...?’ pondered Viator. Apparently he was losing his senses as well as his patience. “Please, *sir*, I’m quite capable-”

“Names Craggy! I’m a these ‘ere mountain’s ranger! Pleased ta meet’cha!” Craggy, as he called himself, grabbed Viator’s hoof and shook it vigorously as part of his introduction before sitting himself down on his own haunches to survey the damage strewn about below them.

“‘Ranger’? And what exactly does that-”

“Eeyup, a *mighty fine* pickle indeed. Don’t know if ya’ll be able to hocus-pocus it back up ‘ere or not, bu’ either way, looks trashed ta me, pardner.” Viator glared at the oblivious earth pony. The hair of his moustache and mane were an earthy brown colour, his cutie mark was a far-off shot of two stubby mountains stood together with what looked like a path winding off between them. To complete his appearance -which the azure-stallion was already beginning to loathe- he wore a beige, brimmed hat on his head and a short vest of the same colour.

“Would you please let me speak-”

“A’ight, tell ya whut, pardner. Ya makin’ ya way to good ol’ Manesterdam, yea? That there gorge, where ya wagon’s lying in bits, ‘ll take ya there as well. Add a coupl’o hours onta ya trip, but ya can least gather up what ya can carry, an’ whats not been smashed, ‘course. I’ll show ya a safe way down if ya want.” As much as his pounding headache and throbbing veins yelled at him to throw Craggy into the gorge, Viator could not help but admit that the aggravating earth pony could help. While the unicorn was sure he would be able to levitate the wagon back up onto the path, it would take far too long to fix it and there was still the possibility of the exact same accident occurring later on. Although there wasn’t anything of terrible importance to his work in the coach, Viator still hoped that he would be able to salvage some of it simply to save him time and bits replacing anything that might have broken when he got to Manesterdam. He was also torn over whether to ask the infuriating Craggy to help him carry what he could salvage, assuming there was anything left *to* carry. On the one hoof, it would mean he wouldn’t have to leave what may be perfectly good supplies behind, on the other, he would have to travel for hours more with the insufferable pony Viator suspected Craggy of being.

Today was indeed *not* a good day.

“...we should stop here, it’s getting dark.” the four other travelling ponies came to a halt as Celestia spoke. They had reached another clearing where a clear stream flowed freely and glistened in the fading light of the sun, which was already dipping below the horizon. It was unlikely they would find another good spot such as this before reaching the mountains proper, already the terrain had become considerably more rugged and inclined. A mixture of boulders, some covered in moss and some freshly fallen from the slopes dotted the ponies’ path and more and more frequently did the grass suddenly give away to patches of bare rock. It would be better to stop here where they still had at least some cover from the wind and rain which might pounce them at any point, so untamed was the weather of the self-regulating forest.

“Agreed. I’ll gather up some firewood, shall I?”

“I’ll help, brother!”

“Alright, Luna, Discord, you go get some firewood. Surprise, can you help me build up a bit more shelter? And Firefly, would you mind going to fill up our canteens?” everypony, bar Firefly who grumbled something about getting the most boring task, saluted cheerily and set about their assignments. Working together with their wings and magic, Luna and Discord were able to snap off some dry, fat branches from the surrounding canopy while Celestia and Surprise were soon on their way to making a makeshift tarpaulin by meshing together the thicker leaves of the floor species with strips of bark from the nearby trunks. Within minutes, smoke was billowing from a large campfire and three ponies and a draconequus were comfortably sitting around it taking occasional bites from bits of torn up grass.

It was Luna who first noticed the absent one. “Firefly...?” looking over through the growing darkness to the quietly gushing stream, the midnight-alicorn spotted the speedster lying silently in the grass, her mane drooping over her eyes while she sporadically pawed aggressively at the damp ground. “Firefly, why are you all the way over there...? Come join us!” by this point the other three had realised how long the pink earth pony had

been by the stream and enthusiastically nodded their agreement with Luna's words.

"Are you sure I don't need *wings* or be able to cast *magic* to be able to do that!?" she did not raise her head to her companions and her voice was laced with a bitterness that stung.

"...F-firefly...?"

"*'Firefly, would you mind going to fill up our canteens?'* I can *help*, you know!?" her mocking tone quickly reverted back to a harsh cry "I know I've been holding us back, you could have all just flown over the forest and been halfway through the mountains by now, so at the very least let me help with something, I don't know, *important!*"

"Fire...? What's wrong?" Surprise's look of concern reflected all four of their expressions.

"What's *wrong!*? I just...just...ARGH!!" as she screamed in frustration, the speedster violently kicked one of the canteens by her hooves, sending it spinning through the air spraying water where it then landed by the fire with a dull thud. "...I just hate seeing you guys- no, everypony, do all these amazing things that I know I'll *never* be able to do..." a few tears began to trickle down her muzzle, defying the desperate sniffing that tried to stop them. Firefly's four companions could do nothing but stare in shocked silence, never had they seen such an outburst of emotion from the normally confident and strong earth pony "...ever since I was small, I've always looked up to the sky and saw ponies soar so...so *freely*...and no matter how much I train, no matter how fast I get, I can't help but be...be...j-j...j..." she choked on the word, seemingly terrified to say it "...*jealous.*"

Surprise, Luna and Celestia and Discord instinctively furled their wings in closer to their bodies. "Firefly...is that why you wanted to come on this journey? To somehow...well-"

The earth pony cut the white-alicorn off "To prove myself? I dunno. Probably." Firefly rubbed her mane out of her eyes to wipe away her tears before turning to look up at the steep mountains. None of them knew what to say to her, each had the natural gifts she was so envious of and neither

of them could think of a counter for her sorrows. Earth ponies were generally stronger, studier and more resolute than their unicorn and pegasi cousins, but even knowing and acknowledging this could not soothe Firefly's longing. "Even speed, my special talent," she rubbed her cutie mark, two blue lightning bolts while keeping her eyes fixed on one particularly tall and steep mountain "isn't so special. I mean, I have to work so *much* harder, just to achieve the same thing as a pegasus. Sure, I can beat an average flier in a race, but no matter how hard I push myself, I'll *never* be able to win against one who puts a bit of effort in to exercising." She took a deep long sigh and wiped her eyes again, still sniffing.

"And that's why you're better." Discord's calm voice managed to swivel even Firefly's head away from the mountain she had been staring at so sternly. "*Because* you keep pushing yourself, even if you know it's hopeless, you'll always be the one to achieve the most."

The pink speedster looked to Discord quizzically "What...what do you mean?"

"What I mean, Firefly, is that yes, you may never be the fastest, but the ability to always look up means you'll prevail in not just speed, but any challenge fate sets you. So really, there's no need to cry-"

"**ROOO-DAAAAHHHHHH!!!**" the *roar* tore the calm quiet of the increasing night apart; it was so loud the air itself shook as if in terror. The draconequus and ponies automatically squeezed their hooves to their ears in a vain attempt to block the shockwave. After a few moments, once the frantic scurrying and rustling of animals had died down, the silence returned. The travellers each blinked and looked around with the tiniest of pupils.

"Sis...what...what was *that!?*" Luna had tried to crawl under her elder sister's wing and was shaking in fright. The roar had been a thing of nightmares and in all her years living within the Everfree, Celestia had never heard such a dreadful wail.

"I...don't know, Luna, just stay there..." the pastel-maned alicorn continued to dart her head around, scanning the clearing and the pitch black woods beyond. None of them had realised just how dark it had become and each had let their guard down.

"THERE!!" Firefly's scream was too late. A massive shadow had been skimming the tops of the trees, silently despite its bulk, coming in from the east. Before any of the assembled could follow the earth pony's flailing hoof, it was upon them. The thing landed in the clearing with enough weight to crack the earth beneath it and almost crushed the four seated around the fire. As it bent its long neck down the campfire revealed its identity: a dragon. Plated from its razor sharp claws to its spiny head with diamond-hard, crimson scales the beast was certainly a sight to behold and each of the hopeful adventurers were stunned into paralysis. The huge creature largely ignored the other ponies, whether because it hadn't seen them or because it simply wasn't interested none could say and it instead settled its eyes on Firefly, who could only stare in still horror. The dragon took two snorts before bursting into action once more, with one of its colossal taloned hands it swiped up the pink pony and leapt into the air with a powerful gust of wind from its wings that blew out the other's fire.

"FIREFLY!!!" they all shrieked in unison. Without another seconds hesitation their wings sprung from their sides and they took to the air in pursuit of their abducted friend. The dragon's mighty wings had ensured it had a good head start and they created a constant downdraft that forced those who chased the beast to fly above it or be sent hurtling back to the ground. The dragon climbed higher and higher into the air, apparently heading for the peak of the mountain which Firefly had been eyeing previously. For all its superior wing strength however, the creature was not flying at its full potential and was flapping casually back towards where its home would undoubtedly be, unlike Firefly's companions who were beating their wings as fast as they possibly could, allowing them to slowly begin closing the gap on the ponynapper.

"HELP~~~!!!" even though she yelled as loudly as her lungs would allow, Firefly's shouts did not nothing to deter the dragon and could only just be heard over the howling winds.

"FIREFLY, JUST HOLD ON!!!" Celestia attempted to yell back, though it was unlikely the pink pony could hear her over the wind and the fatigue which was beginning to seep into her wings, making her breath go ragged. None of them were accustomed to flying at such speeds at such high altitudes. Little by little, they closed the distance between themselves and the dragon but they had only moments before it reached its lair, a

gaping cave on the face of the mountain, a wide ledge situated in front of it provided the dragon with somewhere to land lest it clip it's wings attempting to fly into the cave directly.

"Celestia! We *have* to do something *now!*" Discord was right. They were out of time. There was no way they would be able to fully catch up to the hulking beast before it returned to solid ground and could put Firefly in real danger.

"It's underside looks softer! On the count of three!?" Discord nodded, needing know further explanation. "1...2...3!" as soon as Celestia reached three, the two swooped down, horn and talons glowing. In the brief second before the irresistible downdraft forced them out of range the alicorn and draconequus let loose with two golden beams of pure magical energy. The beams danced and twisted around one another before merging into an intensely bright blast which struck the dragon hard on the sandy skin of it's belly. The creature released another deafening roar and bucked in the air, involuntarily releasing it's prisoner moments before coming to land on it's ledge. Each of the four pursuers gasped in terror as Firefly fell and collided hard with the mountain below the now-raging dragon's ledge. Bruised and slightly winded, but not incapacitated, the pink pony waved her hooves desperately to try and catch onto something as she began to slide down the mountain face. Luckily, her hind legs landed on a tiny sliver of rock poking out of the cliff, giving her a chance to better secure her precarious balance by wrapping her forelegs in some branches and roots growing above her.

"Firefly, we're coming to get yo-AHH!" Celestia's reassuring words were interrupted by a column of flame that almost turned the earth pony's would be rescuers into ash. The ponies circled and attempted to get closer to Firefly again, only to be forced back once more by another fiery pillar from the furious beast's stomach.

"Celestia, we're going to have to distract or defeat it, we'll never get close otherwise!" yelled Discord as he narrowly dodged another bout of searing breath.

"Curses...Discord, Luna, with me! Surprise, you get Firefly!" ordered the alicorn, as she swooped up to the ledge to meet the dragon head on. "Bombard it with spells, it doesn't matter what, just distract it!"

“G-got it!” though she was terrified, the younger alicorn and draconequus ascended to accompany their sister. Despite its intensity, the last magical attack had surprised the dragon but failed to cause any significant damage and the following arcane pelting by the trio fared little better. The armoured beast’s scales were naturally resistant to magic and the sibling’s spells did little but bounce straight off. It didn’t matter though, so long as Surprise could get close enough to airlift Firefly to safety, and they could actually get away themselves, then it was good enough.

“Hold on Fire, I’m nearly there...!” the snowy-pegasus called, pumping her wings to try and keep steady in the unrelenting winds. “Just a little more- WOAH!!” as Surprise extended a hoof towards Firefly, she looked down to her waist to find a scaly, crimson tail wrapped around it which proceeded to yank her up onto the ledge and away from the perilously placed pony. A moment later her head poked over the cliff “Just stay there Fire, I promise we’ll get you-!” it was all the yellow-maned pegasus could manage before she was forced to roll to the side or be squashed by a humongous claw.

“G-guys! Don’t...!” she looked down and could barely even see the ground thousands of feet below her for all the clouds. There was no question, if she fell, she would die. The unceasing growls, roars and spurts of fire also told her that her friends were fighting an unwinnable battle. Even with all their years of tutelage under perhaps the most powerful pony in the land, neither Celestia, Discord or Luna could harm the dragon to any great extent and Surprise would be no help at all in that situation. And neither would Firefly, stuck there clinging for dear life on a bump of rock. The emotions that had filled her before began to resurface and it took all her strength to force back more tears, rolling her head back to try and stop them from escaping her eyes. “...*the ability to always look up means you’ll prevail...*” for some reason, Discord’s word echoed in her mind and Firefly could not resist unclenching her eyelids to gaze at the stone face above her. It was certainly steep, even sheer at times, but it definitely wasn’t *smooth*. Branches, roots and slivers of rock just like the ones she was using to hold herself up jutted out from the cliff at least every few inches. Suddenly, she realised something; there was no reason why she couldn’t physically climb up. She would do it. She would climb the cliff, climb higher than she had ever climbed before. She may not have wings, but it didn’t matter, because she would let her resolve carry her. She wasn’t going to let

some mountain stop her! She was going to reach her goal, not just for herself, but for her *friends*! And if she fell and died trying? Then at least she would be able to experience the feeling of soaring through the air once! There were no more tears left in her eyes, just a glare of steely determination. Unwrapping one of her forelegs from the cradling safety of the branches, Firefly pulled herself upward with the other and caught another hoofhold. She repeated the action with the other leg and slowly but surely she began to rise. Lift one leg, then the other, and repeat. It wasn't that hard, she could do it.

CRACK!!!

A piece of rock gave way beneath her. She roughly slid down the cliff, grazing the skin on her stomach and knees, but managed to hook a hoof around a branch and stop her fall. Her goal didn't change. Lift one leg, then the other, and repeat. Even the wind and dragon's earth trembling stomps that threatened to throw her off each moment didn't stop her, she simply continued to cling to the mountain side, downright refusing to let go again. The pink speedster entered an almost trance like state, all that mattered was reaching that ledge. And she *would* do it. Then, almost without realising it, she had. She was there. Heaving herself up once more, her four hooves were planted firmly on solid, flat stone. She looked behind herself at Canterlot Valley below, twinkling with lights like the night sky above, an indescribable view she would never forget.

"*S/S!!*" Luna's alarmed screams snapped Firefly back to the present. Lying huddled against a boulder, singed, bruised and bleeding lay her companions. Luna had rushed over to her siblings to try and help them up, but the dragon was already staring at them, hatred pouring forth from its yellow eyes. In one swift moment, the dragon had reared its head back, getting ready to spew one last breath of flame that would finish the fight, and Firefly's friends. Without a single thought, the speedster then did what she was best at; she galloped. Time seemed to slow as the dragon's head came back down, embers leaping through the gaps in its teeth, foreshadowing the burning torrent that would cut their journey and their lives short. As the moment dawned, Celestia, Luna, Discord and Surprise clustered together even tighter and shut their eyes. They missed the pink blur that hurtled through the air and collided with the leering orb of the dragon with enough force to shove the entire beast's head off target, causing the stream of flames to fire off harmlessly into the open sky. When they did not feel death's scorching embrace, the four wounded travellers

peeked a look to see their fierce foe thrashing about wildly, clutching it's eye in immense pain.

“How...*Firefly!*?” as Celestia spluttered the name, they all gawped at the grinning earth pony. “What...but...”

“I'll explain later, now let's just *RUN!!*” they needed no further encouragement. Careful to avoid the crashing limbs of the dragon, the adventures struggled to their hooves and galloped as fast as they could towards a downward path. They kept on galloping down the mountainous trail, often almost tripping and falling from their injuries and aching muscles. After minutes of painful fleeing, safety presented itself. “Quick, in there!” skidding to a halt, Firefly pointed towards a thin inlet within the rock, another cave with a small and well disguised entrance which they should be able to just squeeze into and hide from the dragon's wrath. With some huffing and groaning, the five companions found themselves safely tucked up in what was little more than a hole, only just big enough to accommodate them all. With what small drops of magic they had left, the three sorcerers of the group lit up their hiding spot and created a miniscule fire for them to hunch around. Wary of revealing their position, they ensured that the flames provided only the bare minimum in illumination.

“We...phew...made it...!” gasped Surprise between breaths, collapsing to her stomach. Everypony nodded and smiled, relieved to have survived. They didn't care that they had left their saddlebags and supplies back at the clearing, they could head back and retrieve them later once they had recovered and there wasn't an angry dragon possibly on the hunt for them. In turn, they each fell to the ground and simply lay, but they all jumped in surprise when it came to Firefly's turn as she yelped in pain. Turning her head down to the ground to try and see what had poked her in the bottom, she could only make out a faint glint in the weak light of their fire.

“What's this...?” frowning, the earth pony reached down and pulled a slightly glowing, violet gemstone from the pile of stones she had tried to sit on. “Wait, is this...guys, look!” weariness forgotten, the speedster thrust her hooves into the middle of their circle, holding out the gemstone for them all to see.

“By the...is that one of the Elements!?” the mention of the artefacts which their entire quest revolved around caused each of the ponies’ eyes to bulge from their sockets.

Taking the gemstone into his paw and weighing it up then covering it in a magical glow, the draconequus grinned intensely “It is!”

“WOW! We did it! We found one of the Elements! Can you *believe it!?*” reinvigorated, Surprise leapt back to her hooves and began dancing around the cramped space with Luna.

“We did it!? We did it! YAY!” cried Luna, echoing everypony’s cheer at their success.

“Which is it? Generosity or...?” inquired Celestia, peering at the perfectly cut gemstone in Discord’s paw.

“Ambition, I believe. Though I do wonder how it got in...” the draconequus trailed off in thought and let the stone be levitated from his paw by Celestia who examined it thoroughly before nodding in agreement.

“Yes, Ambition... one of the Elements of Chao-”

“THIS IS SO AMAZING! We actually *did it!*” Surprise and Luna continued to dance around the small cave happily. Their near-death experience all but forgotten, even Celestia could not help but eventually join in with the two’s merriment. They were in high spirits, and rightly so. They had only just began their adventure but had already made a great success. Though their harsh trial was out of mind, it was not out of body, and one by one as they sang and danced in celebration the ponies and draconequus gradually slumped to the floor and slept.

The ivory alicorn beamed a soft smile into the clear orb where an image of four ponies and a draconequus slept soundly in a small cave. She had been worried, for a moment, but deep down knew that Firefly would find the courage and ambition in her heart to conquer that high mountain and the perils it held. One down, ten to go. The mare felt a pang of guilt streak through her, she hoped the little ones wouldn’t think that their whole journey would be *quite* so daunting, she didn’t want to put them off after all.

It also seemed that Discord was the only one who was beginning to suspect the true nature of the trial and the nature in which they had found the Element. No matter, the others had plenty of time to catch on, or be told. Taking one last look at her children and their friends, the alicorn dimmed the orb with a spark of magic and made her way to her own bed. "Well done, little ones, well done..."

Chapter 6

Crossing Paths

Light. Demanding, horrible light. Even with his eyes closed it somehow managed to burn at his retinas. He rolled over, it made no difference. The light still prodded and stung at his eyes, unrelenting in its efforts to wake him up. Suddenly, he realised that light had been joined by an ally: Discomfort. Why was his bed so hard?

'Dragons.'

Dragons. What odd reason for his bed to be uncomfortable. Why had he thought 'Dragons'?

'We fought a dragon. Then escaped and hid in this little cave.'

Ah. They had fought a dragon and hid in a cave. It all made sense now.

Discord's eyes fluttered open. He was lying flat on his back, head pointed towards the small slit that was the cave entrance. Cruel rays of orange were squeezing through and beaming directly into his face. The floor was cold, hard stone littered with pebbles and little rocks that dug into the draconequeus' back. It all made sense then. With a drawn out yawn, Discord rose to his haunches and groaned as seemingly every sore joint and aching muscle popped and creaked. He looked around. The other four were still asleep, all huddled together to help keep warm and comfortable. The bright orange line cutting across them told Discord it must still have been early dawn and he was tempted to wake them, but thought better of it. Their ordeal last night had been an extreme one and they were in no rush, he could afford to let them sleep longer.

'But what to do? Start on breakfast...?'

He definitely wouldn't have been able to go back to sleep. Even though he was still a little tired, the hard floor would have ensured that by the time he had nodded off again, he would have needed to get up anyway.

'The saddlebags.'

That was right. Their equipment and supplies had been left in the clearing when Firefly had been taken by the dragon. With a bit of effort, he would be there and back in a few minutes. Trotting carefully so as to not wake his companions, Discord slipped quietly out of the cave onto the narrow mountain path. The sun had still not escaped the clutches of the horizon; to think, his mother had to wake up so early everyday in order to actually start it on it's way. Try as he might though, Discord could not see their home from where he was, it was either too far or hidden amongst the sprawling expanse of green.

'Oh well.'

A tad disappointed, he then turned his view to the woods below him, trying to pick out the clearing where their bags were hopefully still sat. The forest, however, was still quite dark, the morning rays clawed at it, to tear it from the shadow, but fell short. Discord had two options: the first, wait until it was lighter and he had the eyes of his companions to help him; the second, to go for an early scouting mission.

'A fly would be good.'

He picked the latter. He stretched some more, moved to the very edge of the path, looked down the dangerously steep slopes below, and then leapt. The whistling wind was strangely soothing and Discord chuckled as he fell.

'To think, the sound of a lethal plummet to almost certain doom can be comforting! Hilarious!'

He was of course, in no real danger. As the earth drew close enough to allow individual rocks and the occasional flower to be visually picked out, Discord opened his mismatched wings and swooped away from death's stony maw. He allowed himself only a moment's more fun swirling and twisting freely in the air before getting to work and finding their would-have-been campsite. It didn't take him long; they hadn't flown that far in pursuit of the dragon after all and had travelled in one direction.

'Let's hope no critters have had their way...'

With a soft thud, the draconequus landed in the damp grass of the clearing. The stream, burnt-out remains of a campfire and makeshift shelter told him that this had certainly been where they had stopped momentarily the night before. Holding his breath, Discord trotted over and peeped under the tarpaulin. Luckily enough, all their bags were there and didn't look to have been raided in the night. With a long sigh of relief, the draconequus began to gather up the various bags but began to feel somewhat apprehensive while doing so. Would he be able to carry *all* of them back up to the cave? He could make several trips, but it would be a bit of a bother. Frowning, he lifted each ponies bag and weighed them individually. None of them were especially heavy, but combined they would surely prove a fierce foe. Magic was naturally an option, Discord knew several spells which would help him carry all the bags, but he was wary of casting anything on Luna's or Celestia's packs. Other than the obvious, he wasn't entirely sure what either of his sisters had decided to bring and he knew of several objects and substances they owned which could...react, with any direct contact with magic. And it would just be plain rude to rummage through their things.

'Compromise.'

It was all that could be done if he wanted to make the one trip. Discord settled on using his magic to lighten the load of his, Surprise's and Firefly's bags and then simply hope he was strong enough to carry his sister's packs at their full weight. He slipped his own bag onto his back and grabbed the eight others by their straps, shrouding four of them in a golden glow. Setting his sights back onto the mountain that was cloaked in a thin fog, Discord jumped into the air and flapped his wings.

'I should be able to manage this...'

The additional luggage was by no means light, but neither were they extraordinarily heavy. It would be tiring no doubt, though Discord suspected that he would be far less exhausted by this trip than he had been by some of the other trials they had already endured.

'Hopefully they aren't awake yet. I wouldn't want them to worry.'

The sun was still rising yet the return voyage was not as exhilarating as it had been to come down the mountain, it was far more nerve-wracking. With the added weight, Discord was unable to fly as fast or as nimbly as he

had initially and as such was very wary of encountering their scaly friend from the night before. Fortunately, the jaunt passed without incident and the draconequus was able to locate the cave and its safety after a few minutes of searching, having been sure to mentally note down its approximate location before leaving. A second later, and Discord was once again in the company of his sleeping sisters and friends, still closely knitted together to share each other's soft coats and body heat in the cold, hard hole they slept in.

'To wake or not to wake...'

Discord wished himself to have, quite literally, fallen asleep with them beforehand, so at the very least his body wouldn't have been in as much painful protest as it was earlier. He looked to each of them in turn, breathing and snoring peacefully, until his bright yellow eyes fell on her. Celestia.

'By the Elements, she's so beautiful.'

She most certainly was. The morning light of the sun was gentle to her; unlike it had been to Discord. It didn't shine and directly besiege the meagre defence that were her eyelids. No, rather it played gently across her heavenly white wings and coat, blanketing her in gold.

Discord sighed quietly to himself. He shouldn't be thinking of her like that, she was, after all, his stepsister. But ever since that day, when he had first laid eyes upon her, there had always been that lump hidden in the very depths of his heart, kept sealed down there through sheer willpower alone, a lump that had grown ever larger and more restless with each passing year.

'I love her.'

As much as he would like to deny it to himself, Discord could not. He loved her, perhaps he always had. And it wasn't simply her beauty that caused the draconequus' heart to defy all reason and circumstance and long for the alicorn, she was as smart and kind and gentle as she was nature's masterpiece. True, even after all those years spent together Celestia had never *truly* warmed up to Discord like Luna had and their mother intended. But even so, the draconequus could tell that Celestia had

a pure heart and wished only for the best for every being, despite not always loving each and every one of them personally. As Discord placed the packs in the corner by the entrance, he heard a pony stir.

“...Discord?”

“VIATOR! VIATOR! WE LOVE YOOOOOOUUU~~~!!

“Where’s your next show going to be!? When!? I HAVE to be there!”

“Grand & Mightyful Viator, please can I have your autograph!?”

“VIATOOOR! VIATOOOR!”

They wouldn’t stop. For thirty minutes now, the Grand & Mightyful Viator had simply been standing on stage basking in the crowd’s never ending applause and love. He had long finished his performance to a silent audience that then required a minute to fully absorb and appreciate what they had just seen. A show so amazing that many of them would be unable to return to their normal lives now that they knew just how indescribably excellent life could be with the influence of one such as the Grand & Mightyful Viator, of which of course there was *only* one. Many even had to be taken to hospital, having either fainted or slipped due to the tear-drenched floor.

The Grand & Mightyful Viator looked back and forth through the screeching crowds with a smug smile. His performance had proceeded even better than expected, and he had expected it to go *very* well. He *was* the Grand & Mightyful Viator after all. As he swept his gaze over his adoring audience, the azure unicorn spotted a news mare struggling to get closer and shout some questions at him while waving a pencil and notepad. Naturally, additional coverage was always good so why not just do an interview here?

“Please, quiet.” The performance pony hadn’t even needed to speak; his raised hoof was enough to hush the roaring waves of affection into near-perfect silence. Turning his head, Viator nodded once to the news

mare, giving her permission to speak.

“Grand & Mightyful Viator! Manesterdam Weekly, please, would you mind answering just a few questions?”

“But of course not! My work here is done, I can spare the time.”

“Wonderful! Now, my first question is: just *how* are you so Grand & Mightyful?” The whole crowd was listening to the news mare and looked up eagerly to their new hero who was casually inspecting his hooves for dirt.

“Why, a simple combination of unparalleled natural talent and years of incomprehensibly difficult training.” The audience applauded their approval as the news mare excitedly took notes.

“I see! Something to be expected, really! Next question: how do you react to claims that you’re the best pony in the land, all of history and will never be surpassed in the future?” A ripple-like effect coursed through the throng of ponies as each leaned forward in anticipation of the undoubtedly incredible answer.

“Well, since I’ve never been defeated in anything at any point in time and since no pony has yet to challenge me, I can only assume that...” An even greater ripple. This was hoofs down, going to be the greatest reply ever to leave a pony’s mouth. “...I am.”

“WWWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!” The crowd went insane. They danced and writhed with excitement. Their lives were complete. They could be struck down then and there and would die happily. The news mare however, though barely able to write due to the shaking in her hooves, was not done. The Grand & Mightyful Viator raised another hoof to calm his people.

“F-final question, and then a message! What was your personal favourite part of your show?”

Viator chuckled smugly. What a silly question! His favourite would naturally be the same as every other ponies’ favourite. “Obviously, my *personal* favourite was...was...” The Grand & Mightyful Viator stopped, hoof in the air. What was every other ponies’ favourite part? What did he

actually *do*? "...it was...uhh..." He couldn't remember. He had just performed the greatest, most spectacular show that cemented his place in history and ensured he would be immortalised in memory, art and song. And he couldn't remember it. He couldn't remember any of it. He was drawing a total blank. "...*clearly*, I enjoyed all of it! I have no particular favourite...uhh...p-part!" They didn't scream. They didn't hug the air fantasising that the Grand & Mighty Viator was wrapped in their legs. There was no reaction at all. "N-now! That message you mentioned? What is that?" He had to dazzle them again. Remind them just what he had *done* for them.

"Oh, yes, yes of course! This comes from an old friend of yours! He wrote in and asked us to tell you this!" Viator raised an increasingly sweaty eyebrow as the news mare cleared her throat and put on an impressive accent. "Time ta git up, pardner! Rise an' shine there!"

Viator twitched. He had heard that voice before. And he did *not* like it. "Where did...?" spluttered the unicorn. Before he got a reply he noticed something dreadfully odd from the corner of his eye. The crowd was frozen still, everything was, and not only that, they were...*changing*. The Grand & Mighty Viator stared in increasing horror as the ponies around him began to warp into...rocks? Others simply began to disintegrate, blowing away in a cold wind that had appeared from nowhere and left an empty floor where there had once been hundreds of ponies packed tightly together. Then the walls of the stadium began to morph as well, becoming a dull grey and littered with the occasional plant or weed. He whipped back around to the news mare, trying his best to suppress the panic in his voice. "What is going on!?"

"Looks ta me like somepony 'eres 'aving a mighty bad dream. C'mon now, time ta git up 'an back on the road."

"A dream...? So all this...No! No! NOOOO!"

Viator opened his eyes and glared pure, boiling hatred at the other cheerful pair looming far too close over him.

"Ya'll awake now, pardner? Seemed like dem bed bugs were nipping somethun fierce! 'Course ya weren't sleepin' in no bed, but ya git ma meaning, yea'?"

“Yes, yes I do. Now, I think we should ju-”

“We probably ought ta be hittin’ the road sooner ra’er than later. Still a coupla hours trek till ya git ta da plains.” Viator was reminded once again why he did not appreciate the company of Craggy.

In the end Viator had decided to leave the broken heap that was once his stagecoach. It would have simply taken too long to repair, even with the unicorn’s considerable powers, and he wanted to reach New Manesterdam as soon as possible. He had also, with great reluctance and uncertainty, decided to ask Craggy for help carrying what could be salvaged from the smashed remains of the performer’s wagon. As Viator had feared, the green earth pony had happily offered his assistance, even stating it was part of his duties as ‘mountain ranger’ to lend a hoof to anypony in need.

Viator pulled himself to his hooves from the blankets he had been wrapped in and looked west along the winding path of the gorge bottom and sighed. Climbing back up the higher, more direct path would be both difficult and dangerous and Craggy had highly advised against them trying, claiming the unicorn should never have been on that path in the first place since they were so unstable. That of course had begged the question as to why Craggy had *also* been on it, but Viator was already too tired of the mossy green pony’s voice to ask anything but the bare necessities.

As the travelling unicorn magically rolled up his blankets and placed them neatly in the dirty worn saddlebags he had managed to retrieve from his coach he simultaneously lifted out a loaf of bread and precisely cut two slices from it telekinetically, which he then preceded to stuff down his throat as quickly as possible. It was *his* food, and he didn’t want the infuriating ‘ranger’ trying to leech some off him. Even if he was helping Viator out immensely, he should still have his own!

“Ya ready there, pardner?” Viator waved a hoof behind his head to signal to the earth pony that he just about was, still trying to conceal his chewing with the rest of his body. Once Viator’s bread was safely in his stomach, he slipped his saddlebags on and turned to face Craggy, who was kicking dirt and dust over the ashes of the fire they had made.

“Shall we be on-”

"A'ight, let's hit the road!" The two began a brisk trot along the canyon floor in silence. With all his might, Viator tried not to look towards the ranger pony trotting to his left for any reason. Instead, he tried merely to appreciate the rugged beauty of the steep mountains and cliffs or plan a new performance. Perhaps the stores of Manetserdam would stock ingenious new items which he could incorporate into a show? He had even heard that the legendary Star Swirl had moved there.

'It must be, or at least will be, a city of great magical commerce and learning! Oh, it is obvious that I, the Grand & Mighty Viator, will find destiny waiting for me there!' The thought sent a shiver down the unicorn's spine and he grinned to himself. He was pumped.

"Y'all never did say what ya did, pardner! Ben tryin' to work it out from ya mark, but it jus' ain't happening!" Viator's excitement instantly deflated. He didn't want to talk to Craggy. But then, he somehow doubted the irritating stallion would give up and accept silence. The azure unicorn sighed and looked back to his flank and the mark upon it, a stereotypical magic wand standing straight with a ring of light bursting from it's tip and encircling it.

"I, am a performer. I travel the land and use my *great* talents for the entertainment of others!" As he finished speaking, Viator almost tripped over his own hooves. He hadn't been interrupted; Craggy hadn't cut in with something else. The azure stallion slowly turned to look at the ranger who simply nodded and smiled at him. "A-and I don't just use my own abilities, why, some of the things you're helping me carry are-

"Ben meaning ta ask, what's all the fancy bottles and such we carrying for?" The unicorn stopped talking, stared straight ahead and ground his teeth together audibly. He had thought, hoped, *prayed* that Craggy might start changing. But no, clearly just a one off.

Thankfully, the agitating earth pony did not seem to mind having his question left unanswered and retained his ever-optimistic smile plastered on his muzzle even as the two continued to trot in quiet. Viator however, began to notice that there were a number of sharp rocks and heavy boulders lying loose around them. *'It would be easy. No pony would miss him, would they...?'* As the unicorn's eyes locked onto a particular large

and heavy stone he shook the criminal thoughts from his mind. The Grand & Mighty Viator was no murderer! He just hoped to the sun that he could truthfully make the same claim by the time he left those mountains.

Plop!

'Missed it.'

Plop!

'Missed it.'

Plop!

'Missed it.'

"Ahoy!"

'Missed...what?' The young zebra stood still and listened, ignoring the slippery fish she had been trying to catch from a rockpool for nearly an hour.

"Ahooy!" Definitely a voice calling. She twitched her ears and tried to follow the direction of the sound, but was almost afraid to do so. The voice had come from *behind* her. And the only thing behind her was the Great Sea.

"Ahoy, I say! Can you hear me, lassie?" Kromi darted her eyes to the left and then the right. There was not a single soul other than her on the beach. The voice was speaking to *her*.

"Hmm, maybe speaks a different language per chance...?" The owner of the voice cleared it's throat. "He-llo. My. Name. Is. Coin Bag. Do. You. Under-stand. What. I. Am. Say-"

"By the Elders! I...I don't...you're *real* aren't you!?" Kromi had finally managed to slowly turn her head behind her. There, standing on the deck of a small, wooden sailing boat was a zebra-like being frowning at her. He

didn't have stripes and his coat was platinum coloured. His mane, though not particularly long, was neatly arranged so it didn't get into his eyes while a white hat sat in between his ears. He appeared to have some sort of drawing or tattoo on his flank, though Kromi could not make it out at the distance he was at.

"Real? Golly lass, I hope so!" Kromi instinctively hit herself in the leg lightly. It hurt, so it couldn't have been a dream. So, in other words, Kromi was truly speaking to an individual who more than likely came from beyond the Great Sea. Not someone who had simply heard *tales* of the huge cities and lush landscapes, but had actually *been* there, maybe even *lived* there!

"What's it like!? Are there really towns built on mountains!? With buildings so high they touch the sky!? Do they eat flowers and green grass there everyday!?" The young zebra hadn't hesitated to charge into the water just to get a little bit closer to the boat and it's incredible passenger, who seemed taken aback by the girl's enthusiasm.

"Calm down lass! One question at a time! One at a time I say!" It took several minutes for the surprised sailor to calm the jumping zebra, she was so consumed with excitement. Once she was simply trembling rather than bouncing, he lowered a small rowing boat from his yacht and came to shore.

"I say girl, you're acting like you've never seen a pony before! The names Coin Bag by the way, if you didn't hear it before."

"A pony? Are you a pony? I haven't seen one before!" Coin Bag, as he had called himself, raised an eyebrow at the zebra, who continued to stare straight at him with a huge grin spread over her muzzle.

"Never seen a pony...? Ah, well, that would explain in then, wouldn't it?" On closer inspection, Kromi noticed that the mark on Coin Bag's flank was of three stacks of gold and silver coins. She also saw that he had a small sliver of facial hair above his mouth, which he proceeded to stroke gently while in thought. "A bit of a mystery though. I thought Sharpsail, Rubybox, even Blackmane and all their crews traded dragon hoards with you zebra folk! Unless..." Without letting go of his hair, Coin Bag looked around the beach and trees growing behind it. "No pier...this...this *is*

Cairib...isn't it? Please tell me it's at least close by?" The doubt was clear in his voice.

Kromi knew of Cairib, but had only ever been once, when she was very young. It was by far the largest village within the known radius of Oromo, Kromi's home; like many villages it was built on the shores of the Great Sea, unlike many villages however, it wasn't shrouded from the water by trees. It had been a long time since that village had come to mind, but Coin Bag's words made Kromi think. Cairib was located to the west of Oromo, further along the coast. Kromi often saw the big boats sailing in Cairib's general direction, and if they were trading boats like Coin Bag had mentioned, then it would make sense for them to go to the biggest, most visible village they could find. Was Cairib where the big boats docked? How long had they been going there for...? Cairib wasn't *too* far from Oromo, a few days hard galloping at most. The young zebra was sure she would be able to go there by herself if she wanted to.

"Lass? I say, lass, are you alright there?" Kromi blinked out of her thoughtful trance at Coin Bag's calling.

"S-sorry! And no...this isn't Cairib...Cairib is several days that way!" She pointed with her hoof to the west.

"Oh, blast! I *knew* that wind was too strong south!" As he spoke, the stallion pony lifted his hat and pulled a roll of paper from it while at the same time revealing to Kromi that he had a horn. Despite her best efforts, the zebra could not get a good look at it before it was hidden again under his hat. "Hmm, so if I was going faster south than I thought, then I'm probably about...here!" Coin Bag jabbed at a spot on the paper which he had unrolled and scrutinised for a few moments in an attempt to show Kromi where they both were standing. The sheet of paper was clearly a map; Kromi had rarely had the chance to look at them but knew that her tribe owned a precious few.

"Wow..." The map confirmed the zebra's hopes. North of where Coin Bag pointed, where they currently were, lay a large expanse of water and then more land. And unlike Kromi's native land, which had been coloured almost entirely in varying shades of yellow and brown, the terrain beyond the Great Sea was green with occasional splodges of blue or bumps of blackish grey and white. Kromi pointed to the beautifully colourful

drawing on the map. "Are you going to go here?" she asked, barely able to contain her exhilaration.

"Back to where now? To Ploughmouth? Ah, well yes of course! I wouldn't be able to run the Ploughmouth-Cairib route very well if I didn't now, coul-"

"TAKE ME WITH YOU! PLEASE!" One moment Coin Bag was casually conversing with his new zebra friend, the next her face was almost planted in the sand by his hooves. He was thoroughly surprised.

"I say...either my ears need a good scrubbing or I swear you just asked to take you with me?" As he spoke, Coin Bag gently tried to lift Kromi's head from her bow with an expression composed of both confusion and amusement.

"Please! Please take me with you! I *hate* it here! I want to go explore, have an adventure, get away from this...this...this *backing place!*" Such was Kromi's frustration that she was forced to take large breaths. Coin Bag placed a comforting hoof over her shoulder to try once again to calm her.

"There, there lassy, let's talk about it, shall we? Over a nice cup of tea, hmm?" Kromi didn't know what 'tea' was, but she nodded anyway, still shaking a little from her outburst.

"You'll do no such thing!" The two whipped their heads around to try and locate the source of the voice. Standing just by the trees that marked the end of the beach, was a small crowd of angry-looking zebra, including Kromi's parents, lead by the same wrinkled elder that had scolded Kromi earlier.

"Mama? Papa?" Coin Bag noted that the young zebra standing by him almost sounded afraid.

"Get over here child! And *you!* We do not want any of your cursed pony goods! Be gone! Back to the waters with you!" The elder almost spat the words and pointed her staff accusingly at the unicorn.

"Wait here lass, I'm sure we can talk things over and be best of

chums lickety split..." Coin Bag forcibly injected confidence into his voice, but his stride towards the zebra was steady, slow and cautious.

"I said back with you pony! We do not want your kind corrupting our way of life like you did Cairib!" Both sides tensed and the zebra audibly hissed at the pony, causing him to hesitate.

"Hmm, seems I'm clearly not welcome!" Another hiss emanated from the mob. "Now, now! No need to get our tails in a twist! I'll be on my merry way..." Slowly, Coin Bag began to back away from the crowd.

"Mama, Papa, please stop this! He's my friend!" The young zebra's efforts were met only with a disapproving glare.

"I will not ask again, child! Come *here!*" Kromi hesitated, but ultimately submitted. If she refused, she would no doubt receive a severe beating later and if she tried to flee with Coin Bag then they would try and hurt him too. Defeated, Kromi lowered her head sadly and slowly walked over to her parents who refused to look at their daughter. "The same for you pony! We will not ask again. *Be gone!*" Coin Bag complied and retreated to the rowing boat. The tension began to relax only as the platinum pony had reached his yacht and begun hoisting the dingy up its side.

"Let us go, Kromi. And you will never speak to an outsider again, understand?" Kromi simply nodded and watched as the crowd began to disperse back through the trees. As the last of the zebra vanished into the foliage, Kromi sighed and picked herself up but jumped in shock when something hit her flank. Rearing her head back, she saw a large bag suspended in the air by a shimmering aura of bronze light. The unusual sight captivated her entirely before a sharp whistle drew her attention to Coin Bag's yacht. She could make out the pony waving at her, a similar glow shining from under his hat. She waved back and thought that just as the boat's sails caught the wind and began to set out, she caught Coin Bag wink. The young zebra watched as the boat sailed off to the west then quickly looked around her to ensure there were no prying eyes before undoing the knotted sack and examining its contents: a wooden and bronze tube with two pieces of glass fixed in either side; a brightly coloured cylinder with a rounded arrow head and a small length of string emerging from its rear end; some small collections of neatly collected paper and

finally a hastily scrawled note.

"I think I can see why you don't like it there, lassy! Just sit tight and don't worry your stripes though! Come next run, I'll be sure to offer you a jolly 'tour' of this old rig! Who knows? We might 'accidentally' leave the sails out and get caught in the wind! I've left my predicted schedule on the back of this note and included manuals on how to use those two toys. Keep an eye out for me with the telescope then signal with the firework when it's safe and I'll bring her in quick as can be to get you!"

*Best Regards
Coin Bag, Merchant Extraordinaire"*

A single tear dropped onto the note, smudging the still wet ink. Kromi quickly wiped her eyes to stop herself damaging the note anymore but could not help smiling at it for a few moments more. She wasn't going to forget her promise to herself. Just as those amazing lights had inspired her to do so, she *would* escape this place and travel to better lands. A little bit longer, and everything would become better.

BANG! BANG!

"There we go, careful now! Hoist it up nice and slow!"

"Hey, get some more cement mixing!"

"Are those timbers from Gallopotris here yet?"

"Anypony seen my helmet?"

Dawn smiled. It was busy as usual in the Manesterdam outskirts. Her uncle would no doubt be grumbling, but she had gotten used to it for the most part. And the earth pony had to admit, it could be quite the sight seeing the feats accomplished by the growing cities' endless army of construction ponies. She did not, however, have time to marvel at the engineering accomplishments. Not only were there groceries to buy, but she had to pick up their latest orders from the library. As she turned into another street, this one free from any construction work, Dawn shook her

blond mane to try and remove any dust that had gathered in it. The staff at the public library would throw a fit if she began trailing any form of dirt into their immaculate marble halls. They could well react in a similar manner if she brought bags of provisions in with her, so she decided to go to the library first.

Victory Dawn liked Manesterdam. In the outskirts, there were the breathtaking towers slowly climbing high and higher to the clouds, surrounded by groups of fluttering pegasi and the glowing spots of unicorn's magic. And then there was the inner city, finished in its construction for the most part and absolutely striking. Nearly each building was unique in its architecture but they all shared a common trait: height. Ten floors was a bare minimum, a minimum the vast majority of the towers choose to exceed. Of course the city wasn't just buildings; a massive green space, which Dawn loved to stroll through, had been left close to the centre as both a place of recreation, but also to serve as a reminder of every pony's duty to take care of their environment.

"No! You can't borrow it! It is *strictly* for display only!" Dawn was so caught up in enjoying the sights and wonders of the city that she almost didn't notice the ruckus taking place just within the large white building that was Manesterdam's Public Library.

"Please! I'm an excellent guardian! There's no need for you to worry about it! Just two days! Two days and I'll bring it right back!"

"NO!" As Dawn approached the scene, she could see an unusually tall unicorn wearing a simply white dress, wide brimmed hat and sunglasses trying desperately to grab a worn tome from the hooves of one of the library's curators. Despite her face being well covered by the glasses and hat, the curator's eyes flashed with recognition. "Wait a second, I remember you! You were the one who *forced* us to sell you the collection on the studies of '*Extra Sensory Perception through Involuntary Spasms*'! Do you realise how *rare* they were!? Do you realise how rare *this* book is!?"

"Oh, erm, well, yes, but..." The tall, white mare began prodding her hooves together embarrassed. "...But I haven't read anything on the moon in maybe four hundred yea-Uhh, I-I mean ever! Yes! I haven't read any good research on the moon ever! And that's '*The Viability of Life on Lunar: A Study of Mixing Magic & the Moon*'! It is *the* book on the whole subject!"

“No. Now please, leave before I have to call security.” The mare gazed longingly at the book once more before sighing and pacing out of the library, head down. The blue earth pony already had her suspicions as to the true identity of this character.

“...Ms. Aumean?” Quicker than Dawn thought possible, the disguised alicorn was by her side with a silencing hoof in the blond pony’s mouth.

“Shhh! Sorry, Dawn, but I’m not really supposed to be here...” Equidae Aumean, a powerful sorceress, poked her eyes out from behind her large sunglasses and darted her head around, scanning to see if anyone had heard her name being spoken.

“Whh nht?” It was unsurprisingly difficult for Dawn to speak with a hoof in her mouth.

“Oh, sorry.” The alicorn quickly pulled her hoof from a frowning Dawn’s jaws and shook it a bit to try and get rid of a string of saliva.

“I said, why not? Is this why you’re being all...secretive?” Aumean glanced to the library with a flash of guilt.

“...Yes and no. Why don’t we talk over a nice cup of tea?” Dawn nodded slowly, still frowning.

“That sounds nice...but first I have to pick up a book order,” she nodded towards the white building “from there. I suppose you’ll just wait outside...” Aumean simply nodded sheepishly in response.

Half an hour later and the two ponies found themselves sitting at an outside table by a casual, friendly establishment situated right next to the park, Aumean having directed them here rather than Dawn and her uncle’s home, much to the confusion of the blond earth pony. As the alicorn magically sipped her tea, Dawn examined her disguise in greater detail. Aumean had seemingly gone to great lengths to conceal her identity and status. Her hat and glasses covered her mane and face while the white dress ensured her wings and tail were also hidden. The whole situation

was quite bizarre, and Dawn was intent on finding out exactly what was going on.

“So...” Dawn waited to continue while Aumean placed her cup down lightly and let out a long, relaxed sigh.

“Yes, all this,” she gestured to her hat and glasses with a hoof “It’s all quite simple really. Partly, it’s just to hide my...standing. You know how I hate people staring or wondering how I have both a horn and wings, it can be bad enough in Ponyville. I don’t think I could cope with it in a big city like this with so many ponies.” She took another sip of her tea and adjusted her hat a little.

“But why the hat? And glasses? The dress I can understand, but why hide your identity as well?” As Dawn spoke, Aumean looked back up the street they had come from the library from and laughed nervously.

“I don’t suppose you remember that *little* incident years ago, when I-

”
“When you almost got arrested for nearly stealing that book? Yes, I do.” Dawn smiled at the memory. She remembered herself as a filly rolling around on the floor in tears of laughter at the huge fuss Aumean had stirred and her uncle’s attempts to defuse the situation while simultaneously attempting to cover up the fact that he knew the alicorn.

“Heh heh, yes...that incident.” Aumean blushed and laughed nervously again.

“You also said you weren’t supposed to be here...?” The ivory mare nodded in response.

“You see, my children recently embarked on a journey. A journey that I planned for them and one that will eventually bring them here,” she looked to the eastern sky with a frown “Now, I’m *supposed* to stay at home and keep everything in check there, buuuut...” Dawn similarly frowned as Aumean childishly drew out the word.

“But?”

“But then I heard that somepony had donated a surviving copy of that book to the library! It’s been lost for hundreds of years; I just had to try and read it again!” The alicorn’s eyes glistened over with excitement as she talked about the book she had tried to obtain. “If I remember correctly, it was a truly *fascinating* read, very advanced theory and magic.”

“...so you don’t want them to know you’re here?”

Aumean nodded with an awkward grin. “Celestia certainly wouldn’t approve of me leaving the house empty, even if it is quite a trot into Everfree. Were I at home, I could check their progress, once I set out to come here however, I can only guess. They may well end up arriving here early then I anticipated,” the alicorn took another quick slurp of her tea and pointed hoof in the direction of the library. “And knowing my little ponies, they would probably want to at least visit the library once. And since I was going to be there as well...”

Dawn nodded and took a long sip of her tea, which was now a little cold. The alicorn’s reasoning made sense, she supposed, though one thing was left unexplained. “So this visit has nothing to do with the lights?”

Aumean placed her cup down and raised a questioning eyebrow. “Lights?”

“You didn’t get Uncle’s letter? It certainly would have been fast if you had, but I did manage to find a courier quite fast, so it’s possible.” Aumean’s shaking head answered Dawn’s question. She didn’t think that the googly-eyed mail mare would be able to deliver the letter *that* quickly. “Two nights ago, we saw a series of bright objects fly from over the Western Range. Uncle thought that they were magical in nature, and that you might know something about them.” As soon as the earth pony mentioned ‘bright objects’ and the Western Range, the ivory mare’s eyes flashed from uncertainty to realisation.

“Oh, yes! I’m afraid that was my doing. I should apologize, I would have warned him in advance, but there are reasons why I can’t.” Once again, Aumean looked around as if she feared her fellow sorcerer might be sitting beside them. “Please, Dawn, don’t tell him I was here.” The alicorn’s expression of worry was not one that hinted at danger, but as if she was concerned that something important to her might go wrong, like a surprise party at risk of being found out.

“Why? Is it the reason you wanted to come here,” the blue pony gestured to the café “Instead of home?”

“Yes. I just may be being silly, but I don’t want to take unnecessary risks. I would love to be able to explain to both you and Star Swirl, but right now, I probably shouldn’t. Don’t worry, everything will become clear in time.” Dawn was intensely curious. As her uncle had thought, Aumean was the one responsible for the magic comet-like objects they had seen. Dawn also knew that the red-maned alicorn was a very powerful user of magic, perhaps more powerful than even her uncle. With Aumean confirmed as the perpetrator behind the streaking lights, then Star Swirl’s other suspicion of the objects being connected with exceedingly potent magic was also now more likely to be true.

“I see...”

“I hate to ask you to hide things from your uncle Dawn, but this is important to me.” The blond-maned earth pony looked hard into the alicorn’s pleading eyes. Predictably, she could find no trace of malicious intent. “I promise you that I will explain everything soon, a few days at the very most.” To Aumean’s surprise, Dawn started laughing.

“Of course I won’t tell him! Whatever it is, you and your secret are safe with me! It’s not as if you’re asking me to shave his beard while he sleeps!” Aumean could not help but break into a chuckle with her young friend.

“Thank you, Dawn. Thank you.” The two silently dinged their near-empty cups together and smiled deeply as they drank.

“...Discord?”

“Ah, Celestia, good morning! How did you sleep?” The white alicorn simply mumbled something inaudible in response to the draconequus’ questions, concentrating more on rubbing the sleep from her eyes with her hooves and stretching her wings as far as they would go.

“I’m a little achy...” she finally said in response, flexing her legs and neck to try and coax them into loosening from their stiff state.

“Yes, not the best place to sleep, but better than becoming dragon chow.” Celestia’s eyes shot open at the mention of the previous adrenaline-filled night, her memories finally filtering through into her still drowsy mind.

“By the Elements...I truly cannot decide if yesterday is something I want to forget forever or cherish. It was just...” she trailed off and brought a hoof to her chin in thought

“Exciting?” Discord offered, receiving a gentle smile for his efforts.

“Not quite the word I was searching for.”

“Caaaaake...” Both were interrupted by Luna’s sleep talk. Their conversation had caused both their sibling and Surprise to begin stirring, though Firefly lay snoring quietly just as peacefully.

“Luna...oh, Luna...” The elder sister calmly whispered and nudged the midnight foal, causing her to frown and grumble and wave her hooves around in front of her, as if trying to grasp something.

“Caaaaaake...Oh!” The young alicorn’s lashes fluttered open to the sight of her brother and sister giggling at what could have only been her dream-speak. It wasn’t the first time Luna had awoken to such chortling; ever since she was a tiny filly she had had a habit of talking in her slumber. “H-heeey!”

“Ugh...morning everpony.” Surprise was next to awaken, the chatter and Luna’s protests having dragged her from her rest, though a grin to managed to stretch itself across her muzzle “...all still alive, huh?”

“We most certainly are, and with one of the Elements to show for it!” Discord smirked as he proudly held the orange gemstone high in the air, everypony present -even the sleeping Firefly- smiled happily at being reminded that they had overcome the first of no doubt many trials. The gem glowed in the dimly lit cave, supporting the few beams of sunlight in wrapping each of them in a golden aura.

“Woooooo!” The moment was interrupted by Ponyville’s speedster cheering in her sleep.

“Do you think we should wake her?” inquired the snowy pegasus. She was debating with herself whether to try, likely in vain, to poke her friend awake or leave her sprawled out on the hard floor, apparently oblivious to the rough, uncomfortable surface.

“She can have a few minutes more. Meanwhile,” with a snap of his talons, Discord levitated each of the packs he had retrieved to their respective owners. “You should check these and make sure everything is still there. They’ve been lying out in the forest unattended for the whole night after all.”

“You went and got them? Wow, thanks brother!” Luna and Surprise’s eyes lit up as their belongings were returned to them and they hugged the packs like some sort of stuffed animal before unclipping their personalised clasps and rummaging through them.

“Yeah, thanks Dissy! Now we can continue straight on!”

Even Celestia managed a smile at seeing her saddlebags safe. “That’s very thoughtful of you, Discord. Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it. Now, let’s wake our dragon-beating friend, have some breakfast, and be on our way.” Another snap of his talons and a small, brass horn appeared by Firefly’s head “Shall I?” His grin was it’s usual mischievous self and he had already readied his talons for another click.

“She probably won’t wake up otherwise, trust me.” Surprise was quick to inform, fully aware of how deep a sleeper the blue-maned earth pony was. Luna gave her consent with a giggle and clamped her hooves over her ears in preparation. Celestia rolled her eyes, but her attempts to hide a grin did not go unnoticed by the draconequus.

“Well, with all in favour then.” His talons snapped together.

TOOOT!

“AGHH!”

“Good morning, Firefly!” The pink pony had leapt to her hooves in fright and was looking around with pinprick pupils.

“What...who...?” Discord had skilfully made the horn disappear just as the earth pony was still mid-air, destroying all evidence of the devious prank.

“No time for that, Fire! Quick, eat up!” Both Surprise and Luna were desperately struggling with their lungs, trying to contain a fit of giggles. Discord and Celestia managed to each release a tactful, discrete chuckle as they both rummaged through their packs for something to eat. The others quickly joined them, even despite Firefly still being in a state of slight shock and confusion as to exactly what had happened. She had thought the dragon had found them or some equally perilous situation had befallen the group.

Without any abundant plants growing within the cave, the travellers were forced to take something from what they had brought. Soon, they had each finished their varied breakfast, buckled their saddlebags in place and were ready to continue their adventure.

“Let’s go everypony!” For all the danger they had faced last night, Luna’s call was still bursting with enthusiasm and motivated her companions enough to be able to leave the safety of the cave without a moment’s hesitation.

The dawn had long since broken and the group was greeted by the mid-morning sun and a spectacular view of Canterlot Valley. They each only took a moment to savour it however, anxious to carry on and make as much distance as they could from the large den that sat higher on the mountain above them.

“You sure I won’t get ponynapped today?” jokingly asked Firefly as she peered up the track they had escaped with. A trail of deep black smoke could be seen lazily floating from around the mountain, signifying that the dragon had more than likely gone to sleep.

“Good...let’s try be as quick as we can, at least until we get deeper into the mountains,” Celestia signalled with her hoof as she spoke and took the lead, breaking into a mild gallop down the mountain and further away from the dragon’s lair. Her companions were quick to join her and the group fell into silence, concentrating only on the road ahead.

A few hours passed and the adventurers stopped for a break by a small spring. They had made good time, and though the dragon’s mountain still dominated the eastern view, the deep crags and high mounds of earth gave them enough cover that the chances of being found by the fiery beast were minimal, were it to start hunting. As Discord, Luna, Surprise and Firefly cooled and splashed themselves in the fresh waters; Celestia sat in the shade of a boulder studying her map and the compass. She had only given a brief glance to the enchanted tool to confirm their general direction, but hadn’t taken the liberty to perform any serious pathfinding since before finding the Element of Ambition. She was curious to see how both the compass and their possible route had changed.

‘It’s more northerly now,’ she thought as she observed the compass’

ever-changing needle for a few moments. It was true, the needle now spun back and forth between the northern and western pointers, unlike before where it had pointed exclusively in a westerly direction. To double check, the alicorn cast a quick spell and created a starry arrow in the air above her head. It pointed in the same direction that Celestia had aligned the compass' northern marker in, confirming that she was reading it right and they should generally head north east. *'As I thought. Straight to Manesterdam. What could be awaiting us there I wonder? I doubt another dragon.'* Celestia could only ponder on their future momentarily before she was pulled from the depths of her mind by a splash of cold water to the flank. She blinked in surprise and turned her head to find her companions all soaking wet, their manes dragged to the floor by the weight of the liquid. Luna in particular had a sheepish expression and Celestia was certain she had seen the last few sparks of a spell pop from Luna's horn just as she had turned to look.

"C'mon Tia, the water's great! It'll freshen you right up!" Celestia had to admit, Surprise's words tempted her. She was quite sweaty from all the galloping and it would certainly be a good idea to clean the cuts and bruises she had received in the fight against the colossal lizard.

"I suppose a quick dip wouldn't hurt."

An hour later and Celestia's mane was still drenched from the watery assault she had suffered at the hands of her companions. She had protested, but was secretly grateful. Though the clumps of her pastel mane that obscured her vision were a little annoying, her wet locks greatly helped in keeping the heat at bay and the odd shake of her head to sprinkle some droplets over her wings and coat was revitalising. Time went and the sun crossed overhead and began to make its descent. For the most part, the group was silent, preferring to save their breath for their legs and wings but as the light from the falling star began to burn orange the quiet was broken.

"Why'd you all come on this trip anyway?" The pink pony's question caught the group off guard and they all slowed, frowning at Firefly.

"What do you mean, Fire?" Luna was the first to respond.

"I mean *why* did you all want to do all this? You all heard Meanie, none of us had to. And last night got me thinking, why did *I* come along?"

By that point they had all come to a slow trot. "At first I just thought it was for the adventure, you know? But the things you said Tia, they made sense. I think, deep down, I joined you guys to prove something to myself, maybe prove something to others as well. And it just made me wonder if any of you had similar reasons." As if on cue, they all looked up to the sky in thought.

It was a difficult question. None of them had thought of any real reason. Celestia even blushed at the realisation that with just a little taunting even she had leapt at the task offered to them without much consideration for what it would truly entail. *Was there a reason? Or had they all simply grabbed the opportunity as soon as it was presented to them?*

'For mother perhaps...?' The thought made *sense* to the white alicorn, but didn't feel quite right. For all the years living and learning together with her mother, Celestia had never given much consideration as to what she would do when Aumean was gone. The very thought that Aumean *could* be 'gone' was also entirely new to her. *'Come to think of it...I don't even know how old mother is!'* Celestia's mind was undergoing a number of revelations. The very idea that she did not know her mother's age, had never even inquired into the subject, was shocking. She knew that alicorns were extremely long lived, but even without this fact she remembered the wise mare once telling her that ageing an alicorn was a notorious task. Once they reached the upper level of their immense life span; an alicorn would still retain their youthful appearance, giving no hints as to their exact age. The more Celestia pondered on it, the more she realised how little she knew of her mother's past and how little she knew of the alicorn race as a whole before their gradual change into modern ponies over the many generations.

"Gee Fire, I really don't know! I guess I just got caught up in all the excitement." Celestia's yellow maned friend brought her back to the present.

"Umm...sorry, I can't think of anything either." Luna was next to drop her head down with an awkward smile.

"D'aww, don't worry you two! We've only just started this merry little quest now, haven't we? There's plenty of time ahead to think and discover!"

“That another way of saying you can’t think of anything, Dissy?” The five began to pick up their pace again as Firefly shot the draconequus a grin, causing him to grin back in return.

“Guilty as charged!”

“What about you, sis? Do you have any special reason for coming?”

“Oh, err, no, I suppose not! Sorry, Firefly, we’re making you sound like the odd one out.” Other than Discord, they all chuckled and giggled sheepishly towards their speedy companion.

“Nah, don’t worry about it! I should say sorry as well, for that little tantrum I had...” It was then Firefly’s turn to rub the back of her head with her hoof and blush.

Before the ponies could hide their embarrassment by picking up the pace, a familiar roar echoed through the rolling valleys. Humour forgotten, they all instinctively dived behind a large mound of earth.

“Oh no, not this guy again...” They each poked their heads above the mound and scanned the skies above them, muscles tensed and ready to flee at a moment’s notice.

Far to the south, in between the peaks of the stony spires, they saw it and breathed a sigh of relief. The dragon was heading in the direction of his lair, the opposite way of the traveller’s route and the fiery beast should miss them by a good few kilometres.

“Let’s not dawdle too much now. It’s evening already and if yesterday was anything to go by, he likes to come out at night as well.” Discord’s companions nodded in agreement and they set off in a gallop once more. “We should try and either get out of the mountains by nightfall, or find somewhere to hole up for the night quickly.”

Neither of them needed any further encouragement, and the group lapsed into silence once more. Determined to create as much distance between them and the dragon’s home, the adventurers cut down on their breaks as well, pausing only for a few minutes at a time for a quick bite and swig of water before marching onward.

Their swift pace was truly interrupted only once, when the group had to pause and fly over a section of road that had collapsed, but Firefly who opted to slide around what little remained of the still crumbling path. They then briefly investigate the shattered remains of a stagecoach that lay on the gorge bottom below them.

"I hope nopony is hurt..." Luna, Surprise and Firefly waited on the upper path as Discord and Celestia went to investigate the remains.

"I bet they're fine, I don't see anypony, and they were probably pulling it from the front, so if they had fallen, we would be able to see them," the snowy pegasus tried to reassure the midnight foal, though she still held her breath as the alicorn and draconequus began poking their heads under the shattered boards of wood. The two seemed to pick up a few objects from the wagon and then flew back up, shaking their heads while holding the items with their magic.

"There's no trace of anypony there. Just a few cheap magic items and supplies. Looks like somepony's already had a look through it though, so I don't think the owner was hurt. They probably just took what they could after it fell." As Celestia explained, she and Discord dropped the items in question on the floor so the others could look at them. A few bottled rainbows, some firecrackers, and a jar of green illusion dust were among the objects strewn on the earth, all of them quite cheap from any alchemy store.

"Hey, why don't we take these things with us? That way we can return them if we find the owner!" proposed Surprise, opening her saddlebags to see if she had room for any of the vials or bottles.

"But what if they come back looking for them?"

"In the Western Range, Celestia? I doubt anypony would risk it for a few bits worth of common goods." Countered the draconequus, picking up a swirling bottle of rainbow.

"I suppose you're right. But does anypony have room? We shouldn't give up our own belongings for them."

“Hey Surprise!” The pegasus looked over to Firefly to see a huge smirk. Her voice had a clear mocking ring to it. “I seem to remember you saying I *shouldn’t* have brought so little...you *sure* I still shouldn’t have?” Surprise was incredibly tempted to hit the speedster, but decided against it and endured her giggling as the earth pony loaded the supplies into her saddlebags which until now had lain deflated by her sides. Despite the light quickly fading, Firefly choose to put her sunglasses on rather than risk breaking or crushing them accidentally with the glass bottles now dinging repeatedly in her packs.

“Let’s keep moving. This path is quite straight, so if we hurry we might be able to reach the Range’s borders by nightfall.” With that the group set off full speed once more. True to Celestia’s word, the terrain gradually became less rugged as they galloped on. The slopes and cliffs became less inclined and the mountains themselves grew smaller and smaller.

Another few hours passed and just as the sun began to dip below the horizon, the five travellers made their way around one final mound and saw their goal. Where once their eyes were crowded and stopped short by snowy peaks, deep gorges and sharp cliffs, the sight before them stretched on endlessly. Even within Canterlot Valley could they not see so far. Without thinking, the group came to a standstill and simply gazed. Below them fields of grass and wheat swayed gently in the wind and a large winding river stretched out to the north west where the flickering lights of New Manetserdam could be seen sparking into life. They had passed a difficult hurdle in their journey and from then on, at least until they reached the city, they could relax a little and not push themselves too hard.

“Come on everypony. We just need to follow this path down and then we can stop for the night.”

“In the open!? Under the stars!?”

Celestia smiled warmly to her little sister “I don’t see why not Luna.”

“Yay!” The dark-coated alicorn shared a cheer with Surprise and Firefly while Discord beamed a similar expression to his elder sister.

Rather than gallop, the group navigated the winding path down into the plains at a more comfortable speed and soon were able to appreciate the feel of cool grass under their hooves again. By the time they had reached the mountains proper, the sun was all but gone with the moon taking it's place. It was only due to the darkness of night that they spotted a campfire burning alone a short way ahead of them.

"Look, a fire! Maybe it's that carts owner!" Celestia certainly hoped it would be. Additional company would no doubt be pleasant and they would hopefully be allowed to share his or her fire, which would save them the effort of making one. It was not that making a fire was an especially difficult necessity, but Celestia and her companions had once again greeted the moon with exhausted breaths. They had been galloping nearly none stop all day through rough terrain and it had certainly took its toll on their muscles.

As they approached the fire by the side of the dirt road, they could hear the voices and make out the shapes of two ponies.

"...I *assure* you, Craggy, you don't need to come all the way to Neighly with m-"

"Aw, now don't be like tha', pardner! Even wit all your fancy unicorn magic, 'll be a mighty tough ride carrying all these 'ere bags by yaself!"

"But! But! Don't you...need to stay in the mountains? And do...whatever it is a ranger such as yourself do-"

"Naw, I'ma due a break bout now anyways, so I can come all the way to the city wit ya pardner!"

The travelling group stared as the azure unicorn looked both on the verge of tears and wanting to stab the moss green earth pony next to him with his horn. It took several moments and despair-filled staring before the two noticed the diverse team standing looking at them.

"Please," the unicorn began, his eyes bloodshot and his tone full of desperation "help me."

Chapter 7

Loss and Gain

“So who is he?”

“I’m not quite certain. But he will be important, I think.”

“And the ‘ranger’?”

The mare chuckled “You don’t like him either, Penwell?”

“He certainly seems...friendly, but just as annoying. I can’t help but pity this Viator character.”

“Don’t worry, I believe our little ponies will be able to relieve him of his suffering soon.”

“You think he will travel with them?”

“It’s a distinct possibility.”

“A possibility? Or have you arranged for this in some way?”

Another chuckle echoed within the stone hall. “Arranged? Oh, old friend, I’m hurt! You make me sound like some sort of puppet master. I haven’t ‘arranged’ anything. Just given the occasional...nudge, is all.”

The stallion’s chortle joined the mare’s. “Really, Aumean, you’re terrible at times. I still can’t believe you felt it was absolutely *necessary* to go all the way to Manesterdam like that, even if it risked, in your own words ‘jeopardising their entire quest’.”

“When you’ve lived as long as I have old friend, keepsakes of the past become more valuable than gold. They were happy times when I first read that book.”

"I'm sure. How did you get back so quickly by the way? You couldn't have flown, even in good winds you wouldn't have been so fast."

"Did I tell you about that spell Star Swirl has been developing over the past few years?"

"...you teleported?"

"I most certainly did. It's a shame though, I haven't seen him in quite some time and I very much wanted to discuss the finished spell with him. I'm sure he's very proud of it, but if I *did* go to see him..."

"It would jeopardise their entire quest. I know you've worked with him on it a few times, but if you didn't go and see him then how did he teach it to you?"

"He didn't, his niece, Victory Dawn snuck a copy of the perfected notes out for me and gave me all the pointers. Admittedly it took a bit of practise and more than one jump to get all the way back here, but it's still much faster than flying."

"Well, that'll be very useful for you I'm sure. How is the old Bearded's niece doing anyway?"

"Oh, she's good..."

"Please, help me." Despite the desperation in the unicorn's voice being quite clear, the moss green earth pony sat and smiled, totally oblivious to the distress he was causing the azure stallion.

"Well, howdy there strangers! C'mon over, there's plenty space." The five travellers stood and looked on to the two ponies, unsure of whether to take up the offer. One was kindly gesturing for them to go and sit while the other was flailing with contained urgency, as if to try and discreetly warn them to do no such thing. "Oh, yea, Ah shud ask now rather than spring it

on ya later. Like ma pal says, some 'elp carrying all these 'ere fancy bottles an' such to the big ol' city would be mighty appreciated."

"Bottles? Were you the ones whose cart got smashed? We might have some of your stuff!" asked Firefly as she wiggled causing the bottles in her packs to ding together.

The unicorn suddenly ceased his flailing and jumped over to Firefly, his eyes locked onto her packs. "You do!? Oh, *excellent!* This will certainly save me a good few coins," he excitedly stated.

Prompted by the eager's pony's twitching hooves, Firefly pulled off her saddlebags with her teeth and let their contents roll out onto the grass. The azure stallion's worries were seemingly forgotten and he whopped happily at the sight of the bottles. "By Clover's horn, you *do* have them! *Thank you!*" he cried and grasped each of the bottles with his magic. With impressive speed, he was settled next to the fire again and gesturing just as his companion had been. "Fear not, this will not go unpaid! Come my next performance, I, the Grand & Mightful Viator, will be sure to credit you five in helping to make it possible! Please, come, tell me your names!"

Encouraged by the sudden change in mood, the three youngest ponies took places by the toasty blaze. "I'm Firefly!"

"Surprise here!"

"And my name is Luna!"

Discord quickly went to join them, Celestia however remained somewhat wary of the two odd ponies. She joined them around the fire last, giving the two stallions another once-over. With the excitement having died down and the glow of the crackling flames illuminating their true forms, Celestia, Luna and Discord each managed to turn Viator's smile into a slack-jawed gape. Craggy simply continued to beam happily, either somehow unaware or simply uncaring for his guest's interesting appearance.

"Stop, stop, stop...a horn *and* wings!? They mustn't be permanent, oh, I cannot let anything else be spoken of until I know what magic-"

“Whoo Wee! Would ya look at that! Don meen no offense o’ nuttin, but you’s an awfully funny lookin fella, pardner! An’ Ah specially don’ wanna be insulting a lady, but you two missys sure a rarity round these ‘ere parts, whut with the wings *an’* a horn!” The green earth pony addressed the draconequus and alicorns in turn and tipped his hat to each. As usual, he also received a threatening glare from Viator which flew straight over him.

“I’m sorry, we’ve been travelling all day and we’re tired but we’ll be happy to talk tomorrow, if that is ok with-”

“Don’ git ya tail in a twist missy! Proper introductions an’ such can wait until we’ve all gotten sum rest!” Much like Viator’s own expressions of disapproval, Celestia’s raised eyebrow sailed directly past Craggy’s head and without a moment’s hesitation he lay down on the ground, placed his hat over his eyes and was soon snoring loudly.

“I apologise on behalf on my...*friend*. I truly believe that those mountains have gotten to him in someway,” remarked Viator while he shook his head at the sleeping earth pony.

“I think he would begin to grind even *my* hoof, eventually. Discord, by the way,” the draconequus said. He shook the unicorn’s hoof with his paw before gesturing to his elder sister. “And this is Celestia.”

“A pleasure, Mr. Viator, was it?” Celestia asked, also shaking the show stallion’s hoof.

“*The Grand & Mightful* Viator, yes,” he proclaimed his full-title proudly.

“‘Grand & Mightful’? What does that even mean?” inquired Firefly, looking to the stallion with clear scepticism.

“It *means* that I am the most great and powerful uni-” Viator was stopped once more, not by Craggy, but by a loud yawn accompanied seconds later by gentle breathing. A flash of annoyance whipped across the pony’s face and he turned to fiercely gaze at whoever was not apparently listening. “...how dare-Oh...” The sight of both Luna and Surprise curled up snuggling together in slumber cut the azure stallion short for the countless time. For all the stallion’s pride, even he could not resist freeing a tender smile to play across his lips. “...perhaps we *should*

just leave the full introductions until tomorrow,” spoke Viator. He smiled at the pair half-buried in each other’s manes and tails a moment more before shaking his head and lying down himself to try and obscure his blushing. After all, how could the Grand & Mighty Viator ever live down being caught almost audibly “d’awwing” at such a sight, as sweet and adorable as it was?

“Hehe, night everypony!” called Firefly as she adjusted her sunglasses and sprawled out on her back. Discord and Celestia soon nodded to each other and followed suite, using their packs as make-shift pillows while inching closer to the warmth of the fire and their friends. Within just a few minutes, the night was filled only with the sounds of crickets and the slow, rhythmic breathing of six ponies and a draconequus.

There was not a single cloud in the sky. Only the sun stood up, unopposed as master of the heavens. The animals did not fight, bicker or even play with one another, they merely went about finding and doing what they needed without so much as a squeak. Straight lines had become an all too prevalent part of nature; the trees and flowers grew at strict right-angles and each leaf and branch had its symmetrical double, they even grew in patches clearly organised by species. Everywhere he looked, the draconequus saw only pervasive abominations.

“By the Elements...mother! Mother, please, help! What’s happening!?” cried Discord as he launched into a swift flight, unable to stop his eyes from darting in all directions and soaking up the stringent scene. *‘I have to get out of here...get to town...somepony must know what’s happening...’* Discord’s mind raced as he focused on that goal. The perfect sanity that was infecting his beloved Everfree Forest was neither repulsive nor particularly frustrating, it was just so...*wrong*. How had such a place of creative freedom become like *this*?

When he saw the roofs of Ponyville’s houses Discord let out a relieved sigh. Even if he couldn’t find his mother, the citizens would surely have *some* idea of what was going on. As the draconequus continued his flight towards the small village, his hopefully smile began to fall and his whooshing wings slowed to a weak flap. He had seen the thatched roofs

and spires, not because he was getting closer to the earth pony-built settlement, but because the buildings themselves had grown considerably in height and had become carefully arranged in firm patterns.

“Not here as well...mother...mother!” pleaded Discord as he resumed his race to the now-bewitched village, intent on finding somepony to explain the rigid order. Passing over the bridge and into Ponyville proper, the young draconequus couldn’t help but once again surrender his eyes to the visions of utter harmony around him. Ponies of all ages and size were staring in total focus at their tasks, throwing everything they had at others, standing steely-eyed by the side of another as if trying to guard them, spouting their deepest secrets as loudly as they could or massaging and pampering random passer-bys.

‘What is wrong with everypony!?’ he wondered. *‘There must be...Penwell! He’ll know what to do!’* realised Discord as he thought of the town’s librarian, an intelligent and proud stallion who was a good family friend. Surely he wouldn’t have been drawn into all this rigidness?

As Discord set off full-speed to the village’s centre and where he hoped the local library still stood, he was so distracted and confused by such a horrid turn of events that he ploughed straight into another speeding figure, sending both crashing onto their flanks. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t looking where I was-” Discord began to say before he was stopped by Firefly.

“Oh, hey, do you want some stuff? I should have some stuff, just wait, I’ll get it for you!” the pink earth pony offered, though her generous gifts were received by nopony, as Discord simply stared as his normally tough and independent friend with horror, unable to even continue listening or pickup the many presents she was eagerly trying to show into his arms.

‘Firefly too...? By the Elements, somepony help!’

“...but you should really be thanking our amazing queen!” applauded Firefly as she pointed a hoof to the village pavilion, where a tall, golden, throne-like seat had been placed at the top of the stairs, replacing the normal pedestal used to make announcements. Despite the harsh sun being the only source of light, the chair was engulfed in a menacing glow, obscuring the majestic figure which sat sternly upon it.

“She’s responsible? Who is...? Why...? How can any of this be fun!?” despaired Discord as he clutched his thoroughly aching head with his paw and talons. The figure upon the throne stirred at his agitated cries, a judgmental, disapproving “hmm” echoed from the undoubtedly tyrannical being’s throat.

“Of course it is not fun, you foolish monster...” spoke the figure as she sparked her horn into life, a hideously neat rainbow slowly swirling its way through the air in symmetrical patterns towards Discord as he lay frozen on the ground with terror. “...how can order exist with *fun*?” she hissed as the rainbow forcefully came down on the draconequus’ head, not burning his skin but solidifying his entire body and mind with such intense feelings of boredom he could do nothing but weep.

“Hey, Dis! Dis!” the pink blur seemed to be calling him. “Did getting up first yesterday make you *this* tired? Sheesh.”

“Shut up, Fire! Can’t you see he was having a bad dream? Look, he’s been crying!” another voice rang out.

“Don’t worry brother, I’ll help!” Suddenly Discord felt the damp grass beneath him disappear and a distinct sensation of hovering in the air. The grass then returned, but only in his hoof and claw. He was clearly standing.

Discord opened his eyes fully and allowed them to focus. Luna, Surprise and Firefly were standing around him smiling while Celestia talked over by their packs with the two ponies they had met the night before.

“You awake now Dissy?” Surprise spoke, a small hint of worry in her voice.

The sight of his three companions, particular Firefly, stirred the draconequus’ memories of the dream he had been forced to experience and he was quick to wipe his eyes before another round of droplets made a break for his cheeks. “Yes, yes! I am! Oh, and thank you Luna, for the assistance. Quite a nice way to wake up.”

“You’re welcome!” she giggled in response.

The chimera looked about his surroundings once more. “So do we have a plan, or is that still in the making?” he asked.

“Tia’s working it out. I think I overheard her saying something about just going along with those two,” replied Firefly while scratching her head with hoof. “So long as they can keep up, I don’t mind at least.”

On closer inspection it became quite apparent to the draconequus that both Celestia’s and the unicorn’s, Viator, faces were cringed in annoyance. Combined with what he had already seen and heard of the green earth pony, Discord quickly deduced that Craggy may have been well-meaning but was completely insufferable. *‘In some ways,’* he thought *‘that is the worst combination.’* If Craggy were rude, unkind or mean, then Viator -and now the other five- would have had every reason to leave him. However, because he did genuinely seem to be a good pony at heart and only unwittingly drove those around him to tear at their manes, it created an awkward situation that would be very difficult to escape from without resorting to hurting the earth pony’s feelings. It was mostly speculation on the draconequus’ part, but regardless, there was little he, or his fellows, could do about it except push on and see what the road held for them.

“Ohh~, Dissy! Still there?” Discord snapped from his ponderings to the sight of a white hoof full of grass. “You might want to get some breakfast quick, Dissy,” Surprise nodded her head over to Celestia who was attempting to restrain her eye from twitching. “I think Tia’s going to want to get going pretty quickly.”

“Of course, of course...” Without further ado, Discord took the grass and joined Luna, Surprise and Firefly in eating. The draconequus noticed that Firefly had decided to wear both her sunglasses and cap, with good reason; there were barely any clouds and those that did float lazily around the sky were small and provided nothing in the way of shade. Without the trees of the Everfree or the hills of the Range there was no cover from the shining rays of the sun. Though the mid-morning heat was gradually rising, Discord shivered. The sky was uncomfortably familiar.

“What do you think of this grass, brother? It’s not as juicy as in Everfree,” Luna pouted as she frowned and pawed at the faintly brown grass below her, trying to find some greener leaves.

“Yeah, talk about disappointment. At least the stuff in the forest was *okay*,” complained Firefly in agreement.

“It’s not *that* bad, right Dissy?”

“Well, it could be better. Instead of the magic and dew of Everfree, all this grass likely gets is a lot of sunlight and hot air,” explained the draconequus while pointing to the blazing sphere of flame above them with a talon.

“Luna, Surprise, Firefly, Discord, are you almost done? We’re ready to go,” called Celestia to the munching ponies. Her tone was full of frustration and she was quick to move away from the green earth pony.

“Just a second sister!” replied Luna, taking a final bite of grass and quickly chewing it down. Discord, Surprise and Firefly quickly followed and buckled up their saddlebags. The route was clear, though Viator and Celestia still decided to hide their faces in maps and scrolls as they waited for the others.

“Ready to roll, T-”

“Ya’ll ready there, pardners?” Firefly had become his next victim.

“Let’s just be on our way, ye-”

“A’ight, let’s head on out! Yehaw!” Discord too, was struck with a bolt of irritation. Rather than immediately following Craggy’s gallop, the six decided to let him gain a head-start before following: with a slightly slower pace.

Soon after the group set out on their journey once more, they were each brought in to a close-knit formation by Celestia’s subtle gestures. “Me and Viator have agreed. We’ll try to lose him in Neighly. Get on different boats perhaps. Any objections?” she spoke and outlined their plan in a hushed tone, loud enough to be heard over the pounding of their hooves

but soft enough so that the earth pony ahead of them would hopefully not hear them. The alicorn's question was met only with shaking heads. Luna and Surprise had yet to feel the green stallion's burning sting of aggravation but had seen and understood its excruciating effects, even in the short space of time they had been around Craggy.

'It's a good plan. Hopefully we'll be able to find a good enough distraction,' Discord mused to himself. He was not entirely sure if Celestia had planned to take them to Neighly in the first place, but it would not be surprising if she had. A small riverside town built to be more of a crossing than a true settlement. Discord had heard that most ponies coming from over the Western Range on their way to Manetserdam, on hoof or by air, often stopped in Neighly to resupply and rest before the final stretch to the big city down the Saddle River. In recent years however that "final stretch" had become less imposing than that title suggested due to the town's ferry network being expanded to include up and down stream and not just bank-to-bank.

It took little more than an hour of galloping before the log cabins of Neighly became visible on the horizon. "There she is folks!" yelled Craggy. Pony and draconequus alike decided to remain silent and concentrate on keeping Craggy a good number of paces ahead.

They were thankful however to at least have yet more new sights to gaze upon. Unlike Canterlot Valley, the Manetserdam Plain was very flat and lacked the rolling hills they were all familiar with. It was, all in all, a very simple land; aside from the occasional tree or field of wheat it was thoroughly unremarkable. Given a few years living in it, they would all no doubt begin to find it dull but, baring Craggy, it was a new and wondrous sight for each of the travellers. It did not exceed the sheer breathtaking beauty of the mountaintop views they had recently experienced, but the countless fields of gently flowing grass had a certain rustic charm which they could all appreciate.

"Oh, looks a like we're 'ere!" The earth pony's sudden deceleration caused an impressive mess to form behind him. Each of his companions had dug their hooves into the ground or pulled back sharply with their wings a little harder then necessary so as to not just avoid a collision, but also to not end up right next to him; instead however, they had all collided with

each other and become thoroughly tangled. Craggy did not notice the groans of pain and sheer aggravation.

“Let’s...let’s just find out when the next ferry is due,” Celestia growled through gritted teeth after spitting the dirt from her mouth.

“Don’t you worry yer fancy self missy, leave that to ol’ Craggy!”

“NO!” The white alicorn’s scream only intensified the curious looks of the town’s ponies who had come to greet an entourage of travellers and instead found a mismatched ball of limbs that was struggling to free itself from its own confines. “I...umm...think it would...think it would...” she stuttered, trying to find any possible excuse to stop what she was slowly beginning to see as irritation incarnate. If he learned the boat’s schedule, it would be far more difficult for the rest of the group to ‘accidentally’ slip away without him. ‘...*Accidentally*...’ Celestia repeated the word in her mind. She really didn’t want to have to do such a thing; she could see that Craggy was an incredibly well-meaning and kind pony at heart. He just seemingly happened to also be utterly ignorant of some of the essential norms of social interaction and his own habits which drove those around him to despair. In total, Celestia had only interacted with Craggy for perhaps a few minutes at the most, yet she already found herself wanting to go against her better nature and abandon him as soon as possible. “...think...it would...” she looked over to the azure stallion who was resorting to using magic to try and free himself. From what they had talked about, Celestia knew the unicorn had suffered hours with Craggy. ‘...*How did he ever...?*’

“Think it would be fairer for you to go have some rest! You’ve been...leading us all this way after all...right?” Discord interjected. It was not the greatest pretext Discord had ever thought of, but the earth pony’s unceasingly cheery grin had become strangely frightening and had demanded an answer.

“Would ya looka tha’! We got ourselves a real gentlecolt righ’ ‘ere! If y’all sure ‘bout it, I’ll take ya up on tha’ mighty kind offer,” Craggy said while looking to each of the ponies in turn. Each forced a smile and shook their heads to confirm they did not mind.

“Where will you be?” Discord asked. “So we...know where to come and get-” he quickly tried to add for good measure.

“Ah might go ‘ave maself some good ol’ apple cider down at the bar. Centre o’ town, can’t miss it,” sighed the earth pony, already dreaming of his drink. “Well, catch y’all later!”

The six travellers had ceased their struggling and frozen, waiting for the green stallion to trot out of eye and ear shot. As soon as Craggy’s short tail disappeared around a building, the group’s efforts to untangle themselves resumed at an even more frantic pace. With the help of a little magic, they were all separated quickly.

“We have to be quick. Firefly, Surprisena, you find the general store and see if you can get us any food for the ride. Luna, Viator, you come with me and we will find out the boat’s schedule and secure our passage. Discord...find Craggy, make sure he isn’t fit for sailing. In case of emergency, I will send out a flare which means you should each get to the pier as soon as possible. Everyone understand?” A round of nods followed. “Good. Remember, everypony meet up at the pier once everything is ready.” Each of the six raced off to complete their tasks with no complaint and militaristic discipline. They each had a vitally important mission and would have to work in perfect synchronisation in order to succeed. They weren’t just trying to catch a boat. They were trying to save their sanities in the process.

“General Store spotted!” called the snowy pegasus after a few moment’s of aerial reconnaissance. “Second left, then right, third building down!”

“On it!” Surprise’s pink friend yelled back. With the directions firmly stuck in her mind, Firefly burst into action, sending dust flying into the air. It was midday and ponies were going about their business in full, but years of galloping through the streets of Ponyville had taught the speedster a great deal about crowd behaviour and evasive technique which ensured the only thing she was hit with was expressions of shock and disapproval, neither of which would scar anypony. It took Firefly mere seconds to reach the store

and skid her way directly in front of the counter. Several impatient taps on the wooden surface were required to break the store keeper from his trance and get him to close his gaping jaw.

“...C-can I help you...?” he asked cautiously, unsure of what to do about the bright young pony that had suddenly raced into his store.

“We need food for the boat! Stat!”

“O-oh, yes, of course. I have these lunch-bags made specifically for the trip. They’ve got just the right things to give you the best experience!”

“Great, great, give me six of them!”

“Fire, you got something yet?” The two ponies looked to the swing doors to see a yellow maned pegasus that was poking her head into the store. Her urgent tone and beckoning hooves spurred the store owner into an equal state of haste.

‘Come to think about it, the ferry leaves soon doesn’t it...?’ realised the store pony. He had seen it before, ponies rushing about because they wanted to catch the boat before it left, and for good reason: the next wouldn’t depart until the next day. With skilful speed, the sales pony grabbed six of the bags and threw them onto the counter perfectly. “Sixty bits, please!”

Firefly was already tearing through her saddlebags to her money pouch. With one sweeping movement, she cast six ten-bit coins and slung the bag’s handles onto her hoof then used the remaining momentum to twist her body around. With a kick of her back hooves she was at the doors before the coins had even hit the counter. “Thanks!”

“Have a nice...” He did not bother finishing. The two ponies were already gone.

“What did you get, Fire?” inquired Surprise as she peered at the bags. Though not zooming through the streets quite as quickly as they had been, the two still garnered a host of curious looks from passerby’s who wondered what the rush was.

"A bunch of premade food, especially for the trip," replied Firefly.

"Huh, grea-" The bouncy pegasus could not finish. A bright, red flare tore into the sky above Neighly and popped loudly. Both the two travellers and the townspories were stunned into momentary silence. "Do you think that's...?"

"Yep. Come on Surprise, race ya!" Despite the pink pony's grin, urgency had definitely been restored.

"Welcome, sir. What can I-"

"Ya wouldn't min servin' little ol' Craggy a nice, hard cider would ya?"

"...Of course, right away, sir." The barpony obviously did not appreciate being cut off; regardless, he went to pour the first alcoholic beverage of the day drink. It was still relatively early and the bar was mostly empty save for a handful of ponies whose drinks lacked the colour, froth or bubbling of ethanol.

Discord, who was peering discreetly into the open bar, noticed that the few other patrons were quick to shuffle their chairs so that their backs were turned to the green earth pony. Obviously, they were either quick judges of character or Craggy had a reputation, the latter would not be all that surprising to the draconequus. Discord's task was to make Craggy less likely to be able to sail and make it to the boat on time. He didn't know how long he had exactly, but the sight of a fair number of ponies making their way to the river with saddlebags by their sides suggested that the boat was already here. Given the current situation and his own rough estimate of available time, Discord concluded that getting such an excessive quantity of liqueur into the earth pony that he started dancing on the counter, flirting with everypony that passed or simply ended up asleep in the corner was the best course of action.

"Your cider, sir. That will be three b-"

“Aw, thanks a bunch, pardner! How much that cost now? ‘bout three bits I reckon?” The barpony glared at Craggy but simply gave him a slow nod that to any normal creature suggested a few kindling sparks of rage were brewing.

Discord winced. He didn’t want to, but he knew he would have to directly intervene, not only to ensure the cider-sipping stallion would have less skill at numeracy than a newly-born foal, but also to possibly save his life from anypony less forgiving than the draconequus or his friends.

“...F-friend! Hell-”

“Well howdy there, pardner! Come ta share a drink wit’ this ol’ ranger?” Although it had been blocked before it was even finished, Discord’s voice had attracted a glance from everypony present in the bar. His body had then also succeeded in attracting mixed looks of mild fear and wariness. Much as his mind begged him to show the bar’s ponies otherwise and lecture them, the draconequus ignored the eyes watching his every move save one pair. He had far more important business to deal with.

“Not share, to offer! I just wanted to...thank you for all the...*things* you’ve helped us with,” Discord forced himself to say. “So here! Have another drink...on-”

“Tha’ is awful kind of ya, pardner! Don’ mind if I do!” Craggy nodded to the barpony who in turn looked to Discord with a large frown. Discord was able to confirm his words with another nod, though he could not help but roll his eyes in doing so.

‘Two might not be enough. Hopefully I can remember how it goes...’ the draconequus said to himself as he watched the earth pony begin to reach for his first drink. Discord made sure to press himself closer against the bar so he could hide his talons with his body.

Without warning a lonely glass sitting on a table in the corner spontaneously shattered, drawing the attention of everypony bar Discord. With the mystery of the breaking glass, nopony noticed Craggy’s drinks being momentarily enveloped in a golden aura.

“What was that...?” muttered the barpony as he walked over to the table to investigate the mysterious breaking glass. After a moment spent looking around the table for any clue as to what happened, the pony shrugged and went to fetch a broom and dustpan to sweep up the shards of glass with.

Craggy, meanwhile, turned back to his drink and began slurping it down.

Discord smiled. “I should get back to my-I mean *our* friends now. I’ll come and get you when the boat leave-”

“A’ight, pardner! Come git me when we’re all ready to move ‘em out?” asked the earth pony. Though he had interrupted Discord once more, even Craggy’s unwitting efforts could not wipe the grin from Discord’s face.

“Of course, of course!” Discord waved and then walked out of the bar. He still received stares, though they bounced off his pride before he could even register them. ‘*Oh, I am brilliant!*’ he chuckled to himself. He hadn’t been able to use it in a long time, but the particular spell he had cast on Craggy’s drink was one of his personal favourites: an alcohol multiplier. It could turn even the mildest of drinks into a potent brew of liquid friendship and the best part was that it didn’t alter the taste, so whoever drank it wouldn’t realise and probably never would due to drunkenness’ immense appetite for memories. A fine party trick, one Discord had very fond recollections of, *especially* the one time Celestia had, for once, agreed to partake of a little social lubricant.

BANG!

“Hmm?” What sounded like a firework lured the vision of everypony to the air above the river where the fading sparkles of a firework or flare were glistening. “An emergency already? My, my.” Discord was in a humourous mood and he chortled once more before flapping his way into the air and towards Neighly’s pier.

She could see the whole of the town from only a few feet in the air. Though roughly the same size as the more familiar Ponyville, Neighly was markedly different in feel. Rather than the thatched cottages that Celestia was more accustomed with, Neighly consisted mostly of log cabins and planked buildings. It was far less warm or gentle than Ponyville, more rugged, but quaint enough to the white alicorn. The few patches of trees on the outskirts suggested a small wood had resided in the spot previously but was felled and then literally turned into the town. There was also the river which sat directly by the town. Unlike the small streams that surrounded and flowed through her hometown, Neighly had one large flow of water which was perhaps the village's very reason for continued existence. More specifically, the large wooden construct which sat patiently on the river's edge was Neighly's primary source of purpose.

"There it is," called Celestia to her two companions on the ground. With one last quick glance to try and memorise the route, Celestia returned to the rough street and began to lead the way towards the pier. The aerial surveillance hadn't really been necessary; they knew the direction of the river and Neighly was small enough that the chances of getting lost were minimal and even if they did, they could no doubt quickly find their way.

"Was that really necessary?" inquired the newest member of Celestia's entourage of fellow travellers. "If we just followed the main street, we could have found it I bet."

"I didn't go up just to find out where the pier was," she replied. "Seeing things from the air helps me...get a *feel* for the place."

"A *feel*?" Well, regardless, it still begs the question as to *how* you have yourself such a fine horn but can still go and get a *feel* for somewhere," Viator remarked, not even trying to hide his curious gaze which shifted its focus repeatedly from Celestia's horn and wings.

"...Would you please stop that?" the white alicorn scolded. "I'll tell you about it once we're on our way to Manetserdam."

"I would, but for equalities' sake you'll have to ask everypony," he nodded to a number of the town's citizens which each stopped what they were doing to give Celestia, Luna or both a quick moments' look of intrigue

as they trotted past. "If you didn't want ponies to look, then putting yourself on full display right above their heads might not have been the best idea."

Celestia tsk-ed and increased her pace. They didn't have the time to be messing around with her heritage. At least Luna did not seem to mind; she responded to the attention with nothing but a friendly smile and wave.

"It doesn't matter, we're here." Surely enough the repeated sound of clopping on hard dirt changed to the rattle of wood as the three ponies arrived at Neighly's single pier. The sound of their hooves on planks stirred the interest of an elderly earth pony -who Celestia assumed to be the dockmaster- from some scrolls of parchment on his podium.

"...Hmm? Ah, oh, yes, yes, here for the Manesterdam Ferry? You're just in time!" piped the old mare. She adjusted her thick glasses to give the alicorn before her a better look, though made no comment on Celestia's somewhat unusual appearance.

"Yes, six tickets, please and...just in time?" replied Celestia with a growing tone of worry in her voice.

The dock mare began organising the requested tickets before speaking. "Why yes, the boat leaves in less than five minutes," she answered, causing all three of the ponies to recoil their heads in concern. "Six, you said? For friends? They had best hurr-" She was cut off by an intense magical glow from the white pony in front of her and the bright, red ball of energy that erupted from her horn. The sphere screeched into the air above the dock and exploded with a loud pop. "Oh, my! Whatever was the meaning of that!? Almost gave me a heart attack!"

"I'm very sorry, but it's an emergency. Can we have our tickets now?" Celestia forced a smile and stared anxiously at the six, stamped pieces of paper the mare had collected on her podium.

"...Yes, yes...umm...of course, that will be, uhh... ninety bits," she stuttered, still in a state of shock and mild confusion in regard to the abrupt firework-like spell.

"Sis, do you think they can make it on time?" asked Luna, her tone full of unease.

Celestia's horn was glowing anew, telekinetically sorting the money from her saddlebags. "Firefly and Surprisena should be fine, but..." Celestia trailed off as she levitated nine coins onto the podium in exchange for the tickets. *'Discord's good at that sort of thing, but even he might not be quick enough without resorting to violence,'* the pastel maned alicorn thought to herself. "Luna, Viator, come on. We had better get aboard."

"But sis!"

"I've already cast the emergency spell. There isn't anything more we can do except trust that they'll get here on time. Hurry now..." Celestia had to resort to gently start pushing her sister along the pier and towards the boat which was now starting to buzz with activity. It was a rather modern vessel, a mixture of wood with some metal plating and two large paddled wheels on either side of it. It was reasonably short for its width and was tiered with three floors in a vaguely pyramid-like shape. The walls of each floor, with the exception of the top, was covered in benches which many ponies now sat on, normally with saddlebags at their sides.

"Is all this really worth it for one pony?" Luna asked while still trying to watch the path back into town for the arrival of her friends.

"Yes," spoke Viator with nearly unnerving conviction. "He...that pony is not one we should take with us." The unicorn's voice was enough to subdue Luna into allowing herself to be pushed up the ramp and onto the boat.

"Prepare for departure! Light 'em up!" a pony called from above the trio. Once the order was given the paddle wheels were each enveloped in a white magical glow and creaked into life.

"Oh no..."

"Sis! We can't leave th-"

"Wait, wait! We're here, we're here!" Three heads whipped to the pier to the sight of two ponies and a draconequus racing towards the boat, not even stopping at the surprised calls of the dock mare. Encouraged by the flailing gestures of their friends, Discord, Surprise and Firefly were able to

scurry up the ramp and onto the deck of the vessel just as the wheels burst into life proper, the glow surrounding them reaching its peak. The sound of splashing water grew and the ship slowly began to pull away from the pier and turn further into the river.

“Brother! Surprise! Firefly! You made it!” The midnight alicorn laughed happily and drew each of them into a big group hug.

“...Wai-hic!...For...for ol’ Craggy...hic!”

“...oh...no.” Joy was instantly transformed to dread. Slowly, as if terrified at what he might see, Viator turned his head back to the pier. There, at risk of collapsing at any moment, was Craggy galloping towards the boat. “No...no, no, no, no...” The normally proud and unshakeable show stallion seemed on the verge on a panic attack. “He’s going to try and jump. And he might make it...”

“Really, incredibly impressive. There must have been enough alcohol in those drinks to sedate a bear in ten seconds flat,” commented Discord, more amused at Craggy’s ability to walk let alone gallop despite being so inebriated.

“What...what do we do!?” Even Firefly had begun to panic and looked to each of her companions in turn, eyes begging for a solution.

“...Be there...be there...hic!...in jus’ a secund...” The boat drew further and further away from the pier with each passing second but had not reached its full speed nor made any significant distance. Though improbable, the jump was still certainly in the realms of possibility for anypony with a bit of buck to their hind legs; many would say it was still a crazy feat to attempt but Craggy’s blood was at that point likely flammable enough to easily allow him to be included in an insane category.

As the earth pony drew closer and closer to the edge of the pier, Viator suddenly darted to the edge of the boat, horn flaring. “...Sorry,” he uttered as his horn flashed with light. Just as Craggy was mere feet away from the ramp, a plank beneath his pounding hooves snapped, causing him to trip, roll and plunge into the water with a resounding splash. The six travellers remained frozen in direct contrast to the other passengers and citizens of the boat and town who rushed to try and see what had

happened. Much to Viator's chagrin, there was talk of diving in to save the drunkard stallion. Their breaths remained held as they watched the stream of bubbles pop continuously on the surface. Then, a moss green pony emerged, lying on his back in the water, his chest bobbing slowly up and down.

"...Is he alright?" asked Luna, struggling to see over everypony and the considerable distance the boat had now achieved.

"...I think he's asleep," observed Surprise, her keen pegasus eyes allowing her to make out the rhythmic rise and fall of the stallion's stomach that was characteristic of sleep. "He'll be fine! Just out of it for a bit!"

They each breathed a sigh of relief and went to sit on some vacant benches. The way through Neighly had been far more hectic than any of them had predicted but they were all at least secretly glad that they wouldn't have to suffer at Craggy's hooves for the rest of their journey, even if abandoning him *did* leave a tiny lump of guilt.

"So," Celestia began after sighing once more. "Just plain sailing from here."

"Not quite. I think somepony wanted a little lecturing, hmm?" Discord nodded in Viator's direction.

"Yes," he rubbed his eyes. Fatigue was beginning to set in. "What I want to know is," he pointed to Celestia, Luna and Discord in turn. "*How* do you do that? Have both, I mean." Firefly shifted a little uncomfortably, though everypony's attention was fixed on the unicorn. "And him; I don't think I've ever even heard of such a type of chimera, let alone one that's intelligent!"

'Should we tell him? Would mother approve? She must have known we might get questioned. Perhaps we can just say it was-'

"We're alicorns! And our brother here is a draconequus!" Celestia was dragged from her thoughts and stared at Luna a little wide eyed. The white alicorn's sister clearly had no reservations about revealing their true status to a pony, even one they barely knew. Discord, unsurprisingly, simply chuckled quietly to himself.

“...Alicorns? Draconequus? I see.” He did not inquire further and merely began prodding the paper bags resting by Firefly’s side. Celestia frowned at him and shook her head in disbelief.

“...I’m sorry?”

“...Whht?” His voice was muffled from the bread he had taken from his chosen bag and hungrily began chewing on. “Is something wrong?” he clarified after swallowing the soft bit of loaf. Though not as in such a state of amazement as Celestia, the four other travellers looked at the unicorn with mild expressions of surprise.

“You know about alicorns? About the draconequus?” The elder alicorns was not going to let such a simple acceptance of her heritage go un-scrutinised.

“No,” replied the stallion calmly, preparing to take another large bite of bread.

“Aaand you aren’t curious? At all?”

“No.”

“But...you seemed so interested before! Why have you suddenly changed your mind?”

The unicorn sighed and put down his bread then looked at Celestia directly. “Because at first I thought that you had acquired them through some sort of magic. Now I know it’s simply because you’re a different species. The same applies to...” he nodded at the draconequus. “Discord was it?” Discord nodded back in return.

“But...” Celestia was having a hard time accepting Viator’s own acceptance so easily, even though her companions had. Firefly and Surprise had snuck off to have a look around the rest of the deck, Discord lay relaxed on the boat’s edge, apparently trying to sleep and Luna was listening to her sister’s stuttering and giggling in response. It wasn’t often that Celestia got so flustered.

“Listen. I travel around a lot and I’ve met many different kinds of ponies and creatures. Earth pony, unicorn, pegasus, buffalo, zebra...I *know* there are countless different kinds of species out there,” he spread his legs to try and illustrate his point. “What I thought you had was due to some kind of... *special*, magic. Something I might be able to explore for myself. But it wasn’t, you’re just another pony-Well, sapient being,” he nodded to Discord again. “Like the rest of us.” Viator picked up his bread again. “Why are you so bothered anyway? You think being an alicorn, or whatever it was, *is* special or something?”

“Well...” Celestia shook her uncertainties away. It was neither the time nor place. “It doesn’t matter. Why don’t we talk a bit about you?”

Viator smiled and placed his hoof on his chest dramatically. “The Grand & Mighty Viator, greatest show-stallion in the land. I don’t just amuse ponies with some cheap tricks, I *amaze* them!” The pride was already trickling back into his voice.

“That sounds really cool! What kind of things do you do!?” Luna asked excitedly, shuffling closer on her seat so that she was closer to the unicorn.

Celestia settled down on a vacant bench and lifted a food bag for herself. It would take a few hours for them to reach Manesterdam, there was no reason not to let Viator do a little of his thing.

“Come out girl! Take your punishment with dignity!”

“Haa...Haa...Phew...”

“Hiding will only see more strikes of the cane!”

“...”

“Elder Zekra, the lookouts say they see figures on the horizon! Could she be trying to flee with her pony friends?”

“Check the stores! Make sure nothing has been taken and that they are guarded!”

“Yes, Elder Zekra!”

“ . . . ”

*“...You are foolish girl. This is your home, where you **belong!** Your kinsmen should come before all else! Alone we would perish, but together we may survive the evil which rules this world!”*

“ . . . ”

“You continue to dishonour that unity! The unity you owe everything to!”

“ . . . ”

*“...I know you are here somewhere, Kromi. And I will not let you disgrace your family as you did. You **will** be punished.”*

“ . . . ”

*“And you **will** learn your lesson. I have the right mind to have you exiled, but no. You **will** learn, I do not care how much I must beat you for it to stay, but you-“*

“Elder Zekra! Elder Zekra! You must come quickly!”

“What is it? Did you find the girl? What of the figures?”

“They took to the sky and are approaching! They must be the Taloned!”

“The Taloned!? They have not been near here for months! O great Ancestors, why now!?”

“Elder Zekra, what should we do!?”

“How!? How did they find us!? We have remained hidden from them for years! Spirits, please!”

“Elder!”

“...Go...Go alert the tribe. Rouse the warriors!”

“E-elder!? We are to fight!?”

“Yes. The Spirits are on our side. This is our home, they cannot defeat us here!”

*“B-but, Elder Zekra, it is the **Taloned**...”*

“To question me is to question the Spirits! GO! And may-”

*“THEY ARE HERE! THEY AR-**AGHHH!!**”*

Discord rubbed his eyes. He could not quite remember its contents, but he was sure he had experienced yet another dream. Unlike his previous one however, it had been chaotic, the bad kind of chaotic. He blinked and looked around to help jog his still blurry head as to where he was. Since starting his journey, the draconequus had decided that if he woke up in the same place twice, it was likely a not very good sign.

“Brother!” The smiling face of his younger sister popped into view. “You’re finally awake! You’ve been really sleepy today; Celestia even got a little worri-”

“D-don’t go bothering Discord now, Luna!” a clear voice called over the increasingly familiar sound of machinery and water. They were still on the ferry, though the dipping sun told the draconequus that he must have slept through most of the afternoon. Perhaps all the travelling was truly catching up to him? More importantly however, Celestia had actually been worrying about him!

“No, no, don’t *fret* little Tia! I’m awake now! What were you saying Luna?” asked Discord with a barely repressed grin. Celestia sighed and it was not difficult to picture her shaking head to go along with it. As much as Discord wanted to continue teasing his elder sibling through the younger, he was interrupted by a particularly fierce rumble erupting from his stomach. “...Seems I missed lunch.”

“...You did!” a pink blur said before whipping around the deck, with more than a few shouts of annoyance to accompany it.

“Please, Firefly...” Celestia sighed again. The blur soon came back around, having circled the deck. Firefly never got to complete a second lap however, as her tail was nearly ripped from her rump after being grasped firmly in the grip of Celestia’s magic. “...stop with the running? I know we’re close to Manesterdam, but I still don’t want to have to wait for you to *swim* the rest of the way if they threw you off.”

“Hey! That engineer said in a one-on-one, his magic would beat my hooves in powering the boat! How else am I going to make him take that back? It’s not as if they have a big pony wheel I can use to get the juice flowing!”

“In a one-on-one, no-pony would beat any other pony. They would *both* lose,” Viator answered, having caught on to the conversation while returning from the front of the ship. “Well, perhaps unless *I* was participating. Anyway, why do you think they need a whole crew of unicorns on ships like this?”

“...They take it in turns?” replied the earth pony with no great confidence.

“No, silly. These things are really, really heavy, Fire!” From the upper decks, Surprise had floated down.

“Going back to the original topic, where is the food?” Luna kindly levitated the last remaining lunch bag to the draconequus.

“Don’t take too long, Discord. We should be coming into port soon.”

Discord did as instructed and ate quickly. The time passed and the sun fell even lower. The ferry was big, but not huge nor open; a bad place in which to have to wait with a pony like Firefly. Celestia could only breathe a sigh of relief when the captain called for everypony to prepare their things and get ready to come into port. A few minutes and a final bend in the river later and the travellers were met with the sight of Manesterdam, the fastest growing town since the great migration to Equestria itself.

“Wow! Sis, look at all those buildings! I’ve never seen something so tall!” Luna’s companions nodded in agreement and shared her gaze of amazement.

“I wonder what we have to do there though,” Celestia thought aloud.

“The compass points this way, right Tia? There’s an Element somewhere there?” The elder alicorn was too late to put a hoof to her lips to signal Surprise to be quiet. Viator had already heard.

“Element? Are you scientists? I don’t believe you ever said what it was you were going to Manesterdam *for*,” the unicorn commented in a tone full of curiosity.

“Oh...we are...umm...”

“Prepare for docking! Please, hold on tightly until the boat has come to a complete standstill and form an orderly line in front of the gangway.”

“Well, we had best be going!” announced Discord, saving Celestia from further questioning.

Having sat next to where they boarded, the six were able to leave the boat first. After a few minutes navigating the maze-like structure of Manesterdam’s harbour they found themselves ascending a flight of perfectly-chiselled stone steps into the city proper. An awkward air suddenly engulfed them.

“I...assume this is where we must part ways.” Though blunt in his approach, Viator’s efforts did little to break the tension. For as brief a time as they had been together, and despite the unicorn’s somewhat aloof personality, both parties had found each other to be good partners. They

had, after all, united against a common annoyance and triumphed over it. "So, where does your route take you now?" he asked once more. Viator had temporarily travelled with other ponies before and he wouldn't normally show as much interest as to where their own travels would take them, but this particular crowd tugged at his sense of intrigue. It held two unusual species he had never encountered or heard of and they had decided to *walk* over the Western Range; despite most of them having wings and not carrying enough luggage that a chariot or balloon service would refuse to transport them.

'What do I say? I don't even know where we're supposed to go from here and I can't mention the Elements,' worried Celestia.

"Hey sis, can we go see Uncle Star Swirl? Its been years!" Oblivious to the situation at hand, Luna's suggestion nonetheless helped it. Upon hearing her words, the show-stallion's eyes bulged to a thoroughly dangerous level.

"You're related to Star Swirl!? *The* Star Swirl!?"

Luna frowned "Oh, no, we're not related to him, I think. He's just really good friends with our mother, so we sometimes call him 'Uncle,'" clarified the midnight-foal.

Viator was no less deterred and waved a dismissive hoof at Luna "Good enough! I had been tempted to try and seek him out, though I've heard he stays somewhat low-key these days...but this is excellent!"

"Star Swirl? Isn't that the old wizard dude?" Firefly joined in with, although she was clearly less interested than the azure stallion, having chosen to lean on the wall by the steps and gaze out over the harbour and sea.

"Oh, oh, I've heard he's the most powerful unicorn ever! We *should* totally go see him, Tia! Think of all the cool stuff he could show us!" Surprise was not normally a huge fan of magic, but even she was interested in meeting a pony as highly regarded as Star Swirl the Bearded.

"I assume this isn't where we part ways," Discord mirrored Viator's previous words.

“Yay!” cheered Luna and Surprise in unison.

With yet another common goal in mind, the six went on their way into the city. Even with the aid of a map, they repeatedly got lost and were forced to deny themselves the pleasure of visiting some of Manetserdam’s many fine attractions. It had been late afternoon when they had first arrived in the burgeoning town and Celestia knew that turning up on Star Swirl’s doorstep when it was dark would earn them more than a little scolding. As time dragged on however, such a scenario seemed more and more likely; the white alicorn could only vaguely remember the area where Star Swirl lived and though she was sure they were generally heading in the correct direction, their destination never seemed to get any closer. Neither Celestia nor any of the group had truly appreciated the sheer intricacy of Manesterdam’s countless streets and avenues. Large settlements were not a new experience for any of the travellers; they had all at one point visited Canterlot, but unlike the city in the mountain, Manesterdam was a thoroughly disorientating place for anypony unused to being surrounded by hundreds of dizzying tower blocks and skyscrapers.

As the companions rounded yet another corner they came face-to-face with a large, marble building guarded by two stone manticore statues.

“...You know, guys, I’m pretty sure we’ve been here before,” commented the group’s speedster.

“...Yes, Firefly. We have,” Celestia spat through gritted teeth. “Ugh! Useless map! Why do they even give these things out!?” Her enraged yells prompted Luna to huddle close to Surprise and Discord. The three of them all believed they saw the map being pulled even more taut by the magic holding it in front of the pastel maned alicorn. They each figured that without correct directions soon, the paper may well cease to exist as nothing more than ash, or possibly tiny shreds if Celestia’s frustration did not build to such great heights.

Rather than incinerate the offending document, the elder alicorn simply took a deep breath and stored it away. “I’ll try and find us another one. Or ask for directions. Really, I don’t think it could get worse.”

“...O-oh no! She’s back! Guards, guards! Police!” The shouts drew the six’s attention. To their surprise, the source of the noise, an old pony that had just left the Public Library, was pointing and bellowing in their direction. “You’ve been suspended from the Library! We won’t have you taking anymore of our collections! Police! Shoo, be gone I say!” Each pony present tried to trace the screaming pony’s hoof. Despite numerous attempts to try and prove otherwise, they always followed it to Celestia who was sat on her haunches blinking and pointing her own hoof at herself, rage erased by the strange turn of events.

“E-excuse me?”

“Putting a wig on won’t help you! I’d recognise your size and coat anywhere! Guards, hurry!”

It was at this point that the librarian’s calls were heeded and numerous security and police ponies began to converge towards the six travellers.

“Sis! What did you do!?”

“I didn’t do anything! This must all be a misunderstanding!”

“But how? Tia, there isn’t any other pony that really looks like you, except...”

“...Wait, you mean Meanie, Surprise? Oh, that is awesome! I never would have thought she was secretly a pony-burglar!”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were criminals!? I can’t have my Grand & Mightful name tarnished through association!”

“Oh mother, how I do love the things you do.”

“We can work out why later. For now, let’s just go!” shouted Celestia. She wasn’t well versed in Manesterdam’s laws, but the white alicorn was certain they hadn’t broken any. At least, she hoped they hadn’t.

“Yes! Do you hear that, Dawn?”

Silence.

“...No? Uncle, is something wrong?”

“On the contrary my dear, something is very *right!* You can’t hear anything and neither can I! No hammers, no drills, no noisy workers, no heavy machinery, no cursed girders!” The unicorn was ecstatic. For the first time in weeks had he had the pleasure of being able to drop his sound proofing spells early and keep them down for the rest of the day.

“I’m almost afraid to question how, but I really do feel like thanking somepony!”

“Then you should thank the mayor I think, Uncle. Everything’s closed early today because of the vote.” Victory Dawn put down the beaker in her hooves and walked over to her uncle, Star Swirl, who was sitting grinning like she hadn’t seen him in many months.

“Vote, dear?”

She nodded. “Don’t you remember, Uncle? It’s the day everypony votes on whether to rename the city! It’s an important event for the whole town’s culture!”

The old stallion nodded in recognition and began stroking his beard. His grin had faded to an expression of thought. “Oh, yes, that. You’ll have to forgive an old wizard, dear. My memory really isn’t what it used to be. Which reminds me, funnily enough, has anypony answered those adverts yet?”

Dawn turned, partially to check their mat for any mail and partially so she could sigh discreetly. She had told her uncle about the renaming vote only a few hours ago. ‘*What am I going to do...?*’ the earth pony worried to herself. She hated to think about it, but what Star Swirl had said was

perfectly true, the unicorn was *old*. They were going to celebrate his birthday in a few months and it should be a joyous thing, but it only made Dawn even more worried about how much longer the two could continue this life style. As the years rolled on, more and more was Dawn forced to become Star Swirl's carer rather than him as hers. "No, Uncle, they haven't."

"Blast, I really do need somepony willing to be a test subject for just a little while."

"Uncle, I've told you loads of times now that I'll be happy to volunteer!" complained the blue earth pony. For all her efforts however, Star Swirl merely shook his head, beard still in hoof.

"And I've told you that I won't endanger my own niece like that! This spell isn't without risks and I downright refuse to play about with *your* memory knowing that!" the stallion snapped back. Silence descended. "...Dawn, I'm sorry, it's just..."

"I know Uncle! But you just said it! Your memory isn't what it used to be, nothing is!" Dawn shouted back in response. "You *need* to perfect this memory spell Uncle! You need to perfect a lot of other spells to! I don't care if you have to use me as the test subject!"

Star Swirl the Bearded sighed deeply and gestured for his niece to embrace him in a hug. "I know, dear, I know."

BANG! BANG!

"...Was that the door?"

BANG! BANG!

"Yes, it was. Don't worry Uncle, I'll get it," Dawn said. She pulled away from the old ponies hooves and smiled at him before quickly going to open their door.

"Uncle Star Swirl? Are you there?" Dawn froze as she heard the voice from the other side of the wooden entrance.

“Is that...?” she murmured before increasing her pace. With a quick tug, the door was opened to reveal a group of five ponies and a draconequus squashed into the corridor. “Celestia! Luna! Discord! I haven’t seen you in months! What are you all doing here?”

“Who is it dear? Did someone reply?” called her uncle from within the house.

“Come in, come in!” urged Dawn to the six. She didn’t need to know the other three, if they were friends of Aumean’s children then they were friends of hers. “It’s Celestia, Luna and Discord, Uncle!” she called back to the waiting stallion.

“My hearing must be going as well...Aumean’s kids?” He did not need a reply as the kids in question were presented before him in addition to three strangers. One of them, a azure unicorn, looked as if he was going to explode with excitement. “Well! This is certainly an unexpected surprise. What brings you three here?”

“It’s good to see you too, Star Swirl, but...”

“I sorry, but I can’t wait any longer! Star Swirl the Bearded, mentor of Clover the Clever and father of the amniomorphic spell! I challenge you to a magical duel!” Viator’s sudden outburst held the tongues of everypony present and ensured their eyes were fixed upon him.

It took some moments for anypony to react, but then one did: Star Swirl started laughing. A hearty chortle rang around the house and stole the attention which the show stallion adored. Viator’s confident grin slowly hardened into a fierce glare. Star Swirl did not stop laughing because of this and only calmed down after chuckling some more. “A *duel*? I don’t know who you are, colt, but you clearly don’t *truly* know who I am either.”

“I am the Grand & Mightful Viator. I know full well the accomplishments you have made and I assure you, my challenge is a serious one.”

“*Viator!* What are you doing!?” hissed Celestia. “He’s one of the most powerful unicorns in history! And we’re his *guests!*”

“You’ve made some interesting friends, Tia. Don’t worry, it wouldn’t be the first time some *colt* has challenged me. I think I’ll actually rather enjoy a bit of action,” responded the elder stallion. His tone was clearly one of mocking, though Viator did not let himself get wound up and remained cool, his grin returning.

“Uncle, no!” Dawn leapt in between the two unicorns on her hind legs, hooves spread. “Are you crazy!? You can’t go duelling at your age! I’m sorry, sir, but my Uncle is in no fit state-”

“Settle down, Dawn. I know a pony I can beat when I see one,” retorted Star Swirl, his eyes focused solely on Viator.

“But, Uncle...”

“I’ll be fine, dear. Is the roof good enough for you?”

“A roof? That’s excellent, higher is always better.”

“Oh, this is I have to see! C’mon Surprise, race ya!” Firefly suddenly yelled and raced out the door.

“Fire, wait!” The snowy pegasus called as she flew out after the speedster. “You don’t even know how to get to the roof!”

“Everypony, please, just calm down!” Celestia’s efforts to defuse the quickly heating situation were largely in vain. Both Viator and Star Swirl had become dead set on having this duel. Now that the challenge had been issued both their prides were at stake.

Though both Dawn and Celestia protested, they all found themselves on the roof of Star Swirl’s building with the wizard himself standing on one side, smiling assertively to Viator on the other. The five other travellers and Dawn were stood in a makeshift sideline and each had varying expressions. Firefly was grinning with excitement, Surprise was darting her head back and forth between the two unicorns, Celestia and Dawn both looked on with worry etched deeply in their faces, Luna did not seem to know what to think while Discord remained unusually quiet and distant as if lost in thought.

“Standard rules, colt? Nothing lethal, no leaving the designated battlefield, no physical contact, the first to be hit three times or become unable to continue is the loser?” listed Star Swirl.

“I *know* the rules, Star Swirl the Bearded. Let us see if you are truly as powerful as they say!”

“Fine. Would someone please count us in?”

“Ooh, I’ll do it!” called Luna. Before anypony could protest, she was in the air above the two unicorns with her hooves lifted above her.

“On my mark...get set...”

“Didn’t he say *count*, Luna?” questioned the pink pony. Luna simply stuck her tongue out and resumed her pose.

“Get set...GO!” with a quick flourish, Luna whipped her arms downwards to signify to the two unicorns to begin, then joined her companions by the roof’s edge.

Neither sorcerer made a move. The wind whistled loudly through the stone and steel canyons below.

“Don’t want to make the first move? Then let the Grand & Mightful Viator make it for you!” cried the azure stallion as he focused his energy into his horn. After only a moment’s charging, six violet beams of magical energy burst forth, spread, then rapidly began homing in on the elder unicorn who remained motionless. Everypony bar Dawn leaned forward in anticipation of Viator’s attack.

Star Swirl did not move and did not need to. As the beams came within mere feet of his position, his horn sparked with light once and the streams of magical energy froze in air allowing their bright trails to catch up with them. The glowing energy twitched and paralysed the breath of the travellers in the audience. Another twitch, then a small ‘poof’ and the orbs of light transformed into a handful of small pebbles which clattered to the ground.

“...What did he do?” Firefly uttered, voicing the question for her pegasus friend as well.

“What an honour. To see the famous amniomorphic spell used by its very creator!” proclaimed Viator with a hint of sarcasm.

“Amniowhat? He said that before, what is it?” Firefly poked Celestia with both the question and her hoof.

“It’s a famous spell that Star Swirl created. Basically, it turns one spell into another. Very difficult to master and get right,” the white alicorn explained briefly. Celestia, Luna and Discord had all been taught the amniomorphic spell by their mother, though none of them, Aumean included, could use it with so little effort and so flawlessly as Star Swirl could.

“I’m really quite glad that such a *simple* attack didn’t go through,” casually spoke the azure unicorn. Both Celestia and Discord frowned: Viator’s attack had been a fairly powerful one. They were curious to see what the stallion’s definition of an *advanced* attack would be. “It wouldn’t have been very satisfying if it had.”

“Simple? Colt, I was teaching myself bigger spells in kindergarten,” Star Swirl replied coolly.

Viator’s smile dropped a notch and rather than reply with words, he threw more magic at the ageing wizard. Several volleys composed of tens of magic spheres that were constantly changing their exact trajectory tore towards Star Swirl. Much like the beams before them, each sphere was stopped still in its flight, twitched, then morphed into some harmless object that fell to the ground. The roof was quickly littered with small pebbles, leaves or clumps of dirt. Star Swirl yawned.

It was clear from his face that Viator was becoming frustrated. Even for the travelling unicorn, they had both been powerful attacks, yet Star Swirl had countered them with but the slightest glimmer of his horn. Though egotistical, Viator was not stupid. He had issued his challenge fully aware of the old unicorn’s reputation and had been determined not to underestimate him despite his age; regardless, the azure stallion was beginning to realise that he had done just that.

“Tsk...I admit, Star Swirl the Bearded, you are indeed as great as the legends say. But I’ve barely even begun to show my hoof!” Viator reared up as he spoke and planted his hooves firmly on the hard ground, head held low. Once again his horn glowed yet it was more intense than any of those gathered had seen before. Another barrage of magical orbs sped towards the grey unicorn, Viator however was nowhere to be seen, having disappeared in a bright flash of lavender light. Despite the fact that Star Swirl had managed to remain perfectly calm throughout the duel, this act visibly threw him off guard and he immediately adopted a more ready pose, magic at the ready.

‘He couldn’t have teleported. I haven’t even published the perfected spell yet,’ Star Swirl thought, alert but still retaining his composure. Not even Aumean had ever managed to develop a teleportation spell by herself, it was inconceivable to the old stallion that some young, country colt had managed to develop such a complex magic. *‘Invisibility, perhaps? But I should be able to sense him.’* The rapidly approaching orbs were of no concern; Star Swirl was able to counter them nearly without thinking. What the young unicorn had done was of concern however.

Before even Star Swirl’s magic had fully countered Viator’s latest attack, and much to the old wizard’s surprise, he heard another distinctive poofing sound behind him. What Star Swirl saw to his rear almost took his breath away. Still partially in the air was Viator, face a picture of concentration and horn flaring with power. It was only a momentary sight, for in the next moment the azure stallion was obscured by yet more balls of energy. The sound of a teleporting pony told Star Swirl that Viator was no longer there anyway.

“Uncle...!” Dawn’s cries were met with similar gasps from the rest of the crowd. The bearded old pony had been taken by surprise and the sparks from his previous spell had yet to fade. They did not know whether he would be able to defend himself in time.

Star Swirl the Bearded’s horn shone; blindingly so. The orbs, that had been screeching towards the old unicorn, stuttered, convulsed and slowed to a stop mere inches from his skin. Each and every one of the many violet spheres was surrounded by another, silvery glow.

The roof was silent save for Viator's quiet panting. He had reappeared in his starting position, exhausted and with a look of grim realisation on his muzzle.

"Wow..." whispered Luna. Celestia and Discord were just as stunned as their younger sister. Generally, successfully making magic directly interact with other magic was strenuous and far more difficult to achieve than having it interact with simple, physical matter. Star Swirl had telekinetically caught, and forced into submission, every single one of Viator's projectiles. And the elder stallion did not seem even the least bit out of breath.

"I have to say, colt. I misjudged you. A little, at least. It's getting a tad cold out here now though, so I'm going to finish this, if you don't mind." Without giving the travelling unicorn a chance to respond, Star Swirl flicked his horn, sending the converted orbs hurtling towards Viator, even faster than they had been initially launched. Too late did the azure unicorn realise his mistake when, rather than blocking or countering, he choose to evade his own attack by teleporting. Shrouded by the fragmented wall of light, Star Swirl had prepared another spell, which he fired just as Viator's shape began to re-materialise precisely where the older unicorn had predicted.

The eagerly watching crowd reared back in shock as a huge, smouldering shape flew across the roof towards the helpless show-stallion. A dragon, composed entirely of a burning smoke, sealed the outcome of the duel. The cindering drake was upon Viator the moment he reappeared yet before he could even hope of somehow saving himself from the terrifying cloud.

The dragon flew onwards, passing off the roof before slowly disintegrating into the air. The five travellers in the audience rushed over to find Viator: singed, wheezing and struggling to return to his hooves.

"You alright there, V?" Firely was the first to ask. "You think you can keep on going?"

With some hesitation, Viator shook his head slowly. He had only been hit once, but as much as he would like to, he was in no state to continue fighting.

“He’ll be fine. Stay out here for a few minutes, clear your lungs,” blankly stated Star Swirl as he dusted his chest down with a hoof and turned to return to his apartment. “And then you may want to go back to magical kindergarden, colt,” he added bitterly before addressing his niece. “Pah! Really Dawn, can you believe *this* is the sort of thing this generation has to offer? I bet I could defeat them all at once, blindfolded! Pah!”

“Uncle...”

“...Wait...” Viator managed to cough in between his rasping breaths. Star Swirl stopped and raised an eyebrow at the young stallion. The moon had begun to rise and with it came a biting wind, though the aged unicorn waited for the colt to recover and say his piece. With some assistance from the other five travellers, Viator rose back to his hooves with a slight grin on his face.

“...Two things. Firstly: don’t you *dare* involve them. This was between me and you. Not ‘this’ generation or ‘that’ generation. Not western ponies or eastern ponies. Not any group against any other. *Me* and *you*. I won’t let you just group me in with some other lot like that, as if I was just a part of one big *thing* with no achievements or pride of my own.” Viator’s tone was fierce, as if the very notion of what Star Swirl had said was extremely offensive to him. “Secondly: magical kindergarden? You may have defeated me, but I’m *still* the Grand & Mightful Viator! You might be more powerful than I am, for the moment, but that doesn’t mean I’m *not* powerful!”

The two unicorns stared at each other in silence.

“Heh. Colt has guts at least,” Star Swirl chuckled and left the roof followed closely by Dawn.

Viator turned to the five remaining on the roof and shook his hoof at them. “Go on. It’s getting cold out here,” he said, his voice noticeably softer than it normally was.

“What about you? Shouldn’t you come in as well?” inquired Surprise, fluttering over closer to the soot-covered unicorn

Viator coughed in response. "You heard the old pony. I should let my lungs clear a bit. Go on," he urged. It was clear to all of them that Viator wanted to be alone for a little while.

"That was pretty awesome, right Dis?" Firefly began as she, Surprise, Discord and Celestia made their way towards the stairwell that would take them back into the building.

"Luna, come on," spoke Celestia to her sister. Luna was still staring at him with a worried look. She tugged herself away at hearing her sister's voice.

"O-okay, coming sis."

Soon the show-stallion was the only one remaining. Being sure to be gentle, Viator cast a few spells to help clean his coat and mane and to soothe the small burns he had received after being engulfed by Star Swirl's spell. He remained still for several minutes, letting his magic and the cool breeze do its work while he stared at the stars and moon overhead. Another handful of minutes passed before he sighed and chuckled quietly to himself. Rising to his hooves, Viator began to walk limp slowly to the stairwell but stopped suddenly when he heard a small yet beautiful dinging sound and felt the sensation of something smooth by his hoof.

"What is this...?" he murmured to himself as he brought the object closer to his face with his magic. Before his muzzle was a deep blue gemstone that shone softly with its own glow. *'Did Star Swirl or one of the others drop it...?'* he pondered. He could feel that it was magical in nature, and powerful magic at that. Viator shrugged and started to limp towards the roof entrance again. It was probably important.