

An Old Mare's Tale

By DeadManSleeping

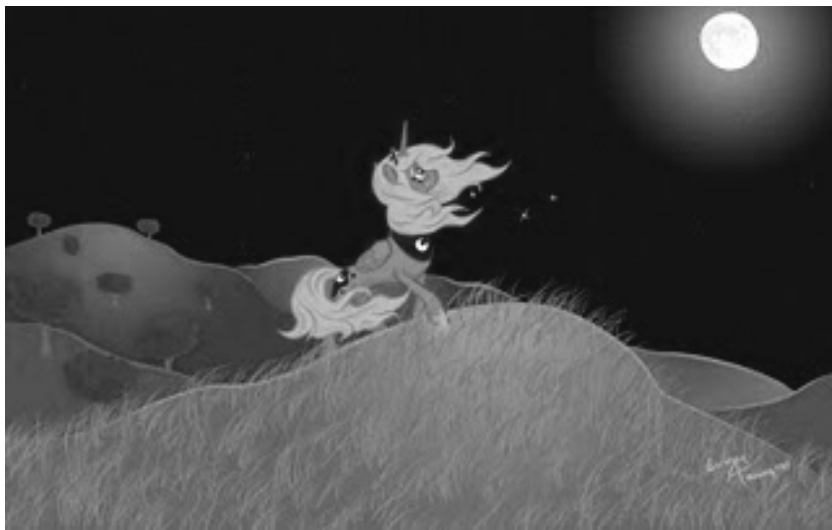


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Chapter 1

“Luna? Luuunaaa?”

The voice of Princess Celestia, one normally so gentle that birds would fall weeping, resounded through Everfree Castle. The enchanted walls carried its echo through even the highest towers, in one of which happened to dwell its intended recipient.

Princess Luna stirred in her hiding spot. At least sleeping somewhere other than her room had gotten her a bit of extra time. But she knew that if she stayed up in the observatory any longer, Celestia would start to worry, and Celestia got a little crazy when she was truly worried. With a sigh, Luna took to her wings and flew down the spiral staircase, and into the throne room. “Yes, Celestia?”

Celestia’s normal expression of serenity was completely absent from her face. She was, instead, looking positively frazzled. “Luna, it’s been half an hour since the moon should have been up! I’ve had to keep the sun on the horizon the entire time so that the sky doesn’t go black. Where have you been?”

“Sleeping in,” Luna replied curtly, though her horn glowed as she raised the moon into the sky.

“Luna! How can you care so little about your duties?” Celestia’s voice had the slightest hint of anger, just about the worst it ever got.

“No pony else seems to care if the night comes. I bet they were all happy to get an extra-long sunset before bed.” Luna turned and went to go down one of the corridors.

Celestia bit her lip. She had actually heard some of the castle ponies admiring the prolonged sunset. “Well, perhaps for one day. I mean, twilight is very beautiful...”

“Oh, Princess, you speak too kindly of me.” A unicorn with a red-orange coat and mane of the darkest purple trotted down from one of the towers. A pile of books and scrolls in a cart followed behind him, the

wood of the cart audibly creaking under the weight. By the look on his face, he was already starting to regret trying to say something clever.

“Twilight Sage,” Princess Celestia replied, her voice returning to its normal calm, “if you need to do more research, stay in the library. Don’t bring the entire thing with you.” She couldn’t help but smile when the young scholar made one of his rare attempts to sound self-confident. He was normally far too intimidated by social situations to even speak up. However, his outstanding performance at the Royal Academy had earned him tutelage under the Princesses, who ended up spending more time teaching him to be less of a shut-in than anything else.

“I’m afraid, Princess, that I need to go into town with all of these. I have to see Shimmerdust about some glass lenses, and these books have all the research that needs to be referenced.”

“Lenses?” Princess Luna spoke up from the back. Twilight Sage was one of the few ponies she knew well, since he slept so irregularly that he saw as many nights as days. “You don’t need glasses. You don’t even need a monocle. Are you getting a fake monocle? I know you’ve always wanted one.”

Celestia smirked, “Or maybe that’s not what you’re actually going to see her for.”

“Erm, beg pardon, Princess?”

“Really, Twilight, nopony would visit a lens shop as frequently as you even if they did need glasses. Perhaps there are...other needs you were going to have young Shimmerdust attend to?”

Twilight Sage blushed a bit. “Uh, not today, I’m afraid. I think I’ve devised a way to arrange lenses that will magnify things in a way that eyewear never could. I hope it could even show us something as distant as the stars. Perhaps gain more insight into their strange orbits, or why some shine more brightly than others. But it will take a lot of work. And that’s why I’m going to town now, since Shimmerdust should just be opening shop for the morning.”

“It’s night,” the two princesses said in unison.

Twilight Sage lost his smile. “Oh. Oh, dear. Well...I suppose I should go to bed. We’ve gone uncounted years without seeing the stars up

close. Another eight hours can't do us too much harm." Head low, he slowly walked back to the library.

"Oh, please tell me he isn't planning to sleep up there," Celestia said mostly to herself. She turned when she heard hooves walking the other direction behind her. "Luna? Where are you going? You should be on your throne holding court to hear petitions."

Luna didn't even turn to address her sister, "As if anypony will show up." She disappeared around a corner.

"Luna? Luna, wait!" Celestia galloped, hoping to catch up with her before she was lost in the corridors of Everfree Castle. Unfortunately, it was too late. Luna was an incredibly elusive pony even when she was in plain view, much less when she managed to get out of sight. The princess heaved a sigh and decided to make sure all the other royal duties were attended to. No doubt Luna was presently neglecting to attend to the rest of the castle. "I just wish that filly would let me talk to her," Celestia said to nopony in particular. "she's been getting more and more antisocial."

After a short trot, she arrived at the castle barracks. It was not a very large room, since soldiers were quartered in homes in the city of Everfree, using the barracks as mostly an armory. Equestria had lost the need for a strong standing army long before the sisters divine were even born. Still, the Royal Guard was kept at full strength, and somepony needed to keep them updated on the time change so that the shifts could get organized. As it stood, the Day Guard was just returning to the barracks, alabaster-coated ponies (mostly pegasi and unicorns) removing gilded armor. All except for one pegasus, who wore an illustrious captain's uniform. Though her uniform was enough to separate her from the crowd, she stood out more because of her tail of orange and yellow, like a blazing fire.. Celestia sighed and approached the captain.

"Flash Burn, you have been on shift for over a day now. You need to go home. Let Captain Pavise do his job." The two Night Guard ponies bowed and quickly fled to their posts. The fiery captain bowed as well, but stayed.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but it's necessary, Your Majesty. The notorious criminal, 'Dark Blur', is becoming more troublesome, Your Majesty, and he continues to evade us, Your Majesty." Celestia held in her

sigh. The entire Day Guard idolized Flash Burn for her talent and her steadfastness, but the princesses both found her incessant formality a bit wearying. Neither princess particularly cared to be called “Your Majesty” in the first place, but no matter how often they told the captain, she didn’t seem to be able to stop. The princess glared at the captain.

“Flash Burn, you can’t let your obsession with that scoundrel keep you from doing your job. Go home and get some sleep, or I’ll have you placed under house arrest and make you. I’ve been responsible for the sleep schedules of enough ponies today.”

Flash Burn gave the princess a quizzical look, “Your Majesty?”

“Luna slept in, Twilight Sage decided to spend all day holed up in his office, and now this. Really, I think something might be in the air. It’s even getting to me.” Celestia’s expression softened again. She realized that she too had been acting a bit stressed lately. “I’m sorry, Flash, for snapping at you. I...Flash?” Celestia just realized that the fiery pegasus was adrift in thought, beginning to blush. The princess quickly realized that she shouldn’t have said the ‘T’ word.

“Obsessing over my advisor isn’t a good reason to stay out of bed either, my little pony.”

Flash Burn’s blush began to cover her entire face. “Your Majesty, I...wasn’t...Your Majesty, it...Your Majesty-“

Celestia leaned in, smiling and nuzzling the pegasus affectionately, “Go to bed, and I’ll see you in the morning.” She pushed Flash Burn in the direction of the door, and the pegasus trotted off, obeying the princess’ request.

“I swear,” said the princess to herself, “sometimes it feels like I have to take care of the world by myself.”

Celestia woke up as the moonset stirred something primordial inside her. A quick look at the grand clock opposite her bed confirmed that it was indeed time for sunrise. She stretched out her limbs as she willed the sun to rise into the sky, and light crept into her eastern window. She took a look in the mirror to confirm that, as usual, she had a severe case of bedhead. It took ten minutes of brushing to get her pink mane and tail to fall straight. Keeping up the appearance of the perfect princess was rather

annoying sometimes. After a quick check to make sure she hadn't missed any patches of tangle, she trotted off to the grand hall.

Celestia was surprised to see her younger sister sitting at the foot of the Night Throne, chatting with a green-on-green earth pony of indistinguishable gender. She attempted to approach quietly, but it was no use. Her hooves on the stone floor rang throughout the chamber. Luna and the earth pony turned to look at her.

"Luna, while I appreciate you holding court, you're supposed to actually sit on the throne when you do it," Celestia said with a smirk. Luna went wide-eyed.

"Oh! Yes. Court. I was...holding it. On the floor. I, uh...thought it would be...a good idea. To get closer to subjects. Like, closer, physically. But also, um...that other thing. Personally. Yeah." She gave her most adorable smile.

"But Luna," the green earth pony said quietly, "when I caught you here, you said you were just on your way to-mphph!" The pony's mouth was suddenly full of silver-shod hoof. Luna looked even more worried, but Celestia just giggled.

"It's all right, Luna. I didn't need Amaranth to tell me you weren't being entirely truthful." The younger princess looked down at the floor guiltily. "Will you just promise me that you'll actually hold court tomorrow night?"

"But nopony comes," Luna whined.

"Oh, really? Would you like to know how many petitioners I see complaining that they come night after night for an audience, only to find an empty throne room?"

Luna responded in a flat voice, "Two this week, one last week, three the week before that, and-"

"Okay, okay!" Celestia had forgotten how disturbingly well-informed her sneak of a sister could be. "Look, I know that's not a great number compared to how many ponies come during the day, but I should be hearing zero complaints. We have a responsibility to all of Equestria, and these marks on our flanks to prove it." Celestia gestured towards her own flank, while looking at Luna's. The symbols that adorned their coats

distinguished them from all the other ponies, even more than their possession of both horn and wing.

"Yeah, yeah," Luna rolled her eyes, sounding like she was chanting something by rote, "you with that big ol' beauty mark."

"And you with your cutie mark." Celestia nudged her sister gently. As often as she said it, her affectionate name for Luna's royal symbol never failed to make the younger princess smile. "Now, do you promise me you'll actually hold court?"

Luna heaved a sigh, "Okay, okay, I promise." She didn't actually sound sad or resentful.

"Now, off to bed with you."

Luna gave her sister one last hug, and headed up to her quarters. "See you tomorrow, Amaranth."

"Good day, Princess," responded the earth pony. His eyes followed Celestia as she climbed upon her throne. "Would you like to hear my report, Princess?"

"Yes, Agricultural Minister Amaranth, I would love to." The green pony knelt in front of the Day Throne.

"All the farms in the province of Everfree are reporting in normal. The flood in Trottingham was mostly averted, but some of the outlying farms were hit. There's already a relief effort underway. Uh...I think." Amaranth looked down. Celestia was unsurprised that he wasn't quite sure. His organizational skills were quite poor. "Damarescus seems to have finally dealt with those strange locusts. Apparently a wandering bard found a way to get rid of them. I didn't quite figure out what they meant. Zebrica should be sending everything on schedule."

There was an awkward pause. "And the royal garden?"

Amaranth perked up, "Ah, yes, well, the honeybee population is stable, and the tomatoes and oranges are coming in, and the hyacinths are doing just great!" The green pony was positively beaming. Celestia knew that there was nothing he loved more than tending to the royal garden.

Amaranth continued talking, but Celestia was distracted by a sight over in the distance. An unusual clattering of armor was quickly followed by a strangely contended-looking earth pony trotting into the

throne room. She was dark brown, but her flowing auburn hair made her impossible to miss.

"Any problems, Amaranth?"

"Ah, yes, well, I've been having trouble keeping the morning glory off the wall..." the brown pony was now directly behind him.

"That's because I come through the front gate, dearie."

Amaranth literally jumped into the air. "Ah! Miss, I didn't see you there. I, uh, of course meant the flower. I mean, I know you're also Morning Glory, but I was referring to the decoration. Not that you aren't decorative! I mean pretty! I mean-" Amaranth simply began galloping away.

The brown pony held a hoof to her mouth to delicately conceal a giggle. "You knew exactly which flowers he was having trouble with, didn't you."

Celestia looked aside with fake guilt, "I'm not sure what you could possibly mean, Morning Glory." She couldn't keep the facade for long, and began to giggle herself. "Perhaps it may have been a little too much for the poor thing."

"Is Princess Luna here? I wanted to see her before she went off to bed."

"Sorry, you just missed her. Don't worry, she'll be holding court tomorrow night. I made her promise."

Morning Glory looked downcast, "Oh, I simply can't come tomorrow. Top Hat is holding quite the soiree that evening, and if I miss it, I'll lose the chance to meet some very influential ponies."

"Well, I'm afraid you'll just have to decide between playing your little political games and being there for your friend."

The earth pony glared at the Princess. "Oh, you're just loving this, aren't you. I know you don't like the way I work, Princess, but not all of us can simply wave our hoofs around and effect social change. My 'little games' are what got equal rights for zebras passed through the senate."

The princess never let her smile drop. "You know I appreciate your work, Morning Glory. But, you know, the night court lasts until morning. You can always stay up and go after the party."

"Well, not if somepony wants to take me home," Morning Glory said quietly. Celestia was thankful of how little she had to see of that side of

politics. Ponies like Morning Glory took care of the backroom deals that the princess had no stomach for. She worried that her younger sister might be a bit more inclined towards such things, but she trusted her. Luna made good choices in friends, ponies like Morning Glory who had good hearts, even if they played dirty.

"I'm sorry, dear. I'll let her know you stopped in, okay?"

Meanwhile- oh, good morning Twilight Sage!"

The unicorn was once again descending from the tower with his cart, which, Princess Celestia noted, was even more laden than it was last night. "Good morning, Princess." Twilight Sage turned his head and noticed the earth pony at the foot of the throne, "Hey, what's the story, Morning Glory?"

Morning Glory rolled her eyes, "Twilight Sage, if you think I find that even the slightest bit original or clever, you've spent more time cooped up in that library than I originally thought." Twilight gave her a guilty look and turned to head out the main gate.

"Oh, Twilight, you're heading to see Shimmerdust now?"

"Yes. I even checked the clock this time. She'll be opening soon. I can't be sure how long it will take to go over specifics, but I promise I'll be back in a few hours. This will probably need to be a multi-day project. At least I'll get good exercise bringing the books back and forth." Sage's cart groaned in response.

Celestia thought for a moment. "You know, this really seems like an important project. Why don't you take a few days of special assignment? You'll get your work done a lot faster if it's not broken up into tiny pieces, and you can keep the books all in the same place you're working."

Twilight Sage looked surprised. "Oh, really? Thank you, Princess!" He began to smile as he once again continued out the gate.

"And I'm sure you and Shimmerdust could use the alone time." Twilight Sage began to speed more quickly out of the room. Celestia swore she could almost hear his blush in his hoofsteps.

Morning Glory took a seat by the side of the throne. "I'm not sure why you let him carry on like that. It's not befitting for someone of the

Court to take time for dalliances with some commoner out in the lower quarters of Everfree."

"Morning Glory, you carouse with commoners from the lower quarters all the time."

"And I am a commoner, not part of the Court. Besides, it's all an important part of my work."

"So that little mare you snuck into the garden last week was part of some big power struggle?"

Morning Glory averted her eyes. "Well, I'm sure she was important to someone. Her father never seems to let her go anywhere. Someone needed to teach him what happens when you don't let your daughter have fun with colts."

"I see," Princess Celestia responded simply. "Well, how about you tell me what's going on in politics outside the bedroom."

Morning Glory began to fill the princess in on the various affairs of the Court. There was much hidden from the eyes of the princess that most political ponies wanted to stay that way. It was because of spies like Morning Glory that the royal sisters seemed so all-knowing and savvy.

Near the end of the briefing, a whistling sound began emanating from one of the adjoining corridors. It quickly grew louder, until finally, it erupted as a blazing streak burst into the room's center. The blur solidified at the foot of Celestia's throne into the form of Captain Flash Burn, in full uniform.

"Captain Flash Burn and the Day Guard reporting for duty, Your Majesty."

"What Day Guard?" Princess Celestia asked in an amused tone. Flash Burn looked to her right and left. Surely enough, she was alone. A furious fluttering of wings from the same corridor heralded a number of pegasi attempting to catch up, followed by the hoofbeats of a number of unicorns and earth ponies. Out of breath, they stumbled into ranks around their captain.

"Uh, apologies, Your Majesty." The Day Guard all glared at the captain. They would have been on time if she had started their march off on time. "I...I slept in."

Princess Celestia burst into laughter. "Perhaps next time you'll sleep every night so you don't have to catch up?"

Flash Burn's eyes were glued to the floor. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Alright, that's enough fun for the morning. Back to work."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Flash Burn stood up straight, still facing the princess. "Day Guard! Stations!" The entire Day Guard dispersed in a quick, orderly fashion to fill the castle and the streets of Everfree's upper quarter. Flash Burn remained in the throne room.

"Hey, what's the story, Morning Glory?" she said addressing the pony by the princess' side.

"Oh, Flashie, you're such a card," Morning Glory giggled in reply. The two walked towards each other and bumped their heads affectionately.

"So, how did you get in today?"

"Oh, you know, the guards know I'm allowed in here," Morning Glory waved a hoof in the air dismissively.

"Really?" Flash Burn raised an eyebrow inquisitively. "Because they're still under strict orders to keep you out of the castle."

"Oh. Ah, well, if you must know, young Lieutenant Destrier seems to fall to pieces when a lady brushes her flank against him just so." She demonstrated on Flash Burn, causing the captain's cheeks to go flush.

"Uh, you do know he's married, right?"

"Really? Well, introduce me to his wife sometime, and I'll teach her all about it." This simply caused Flash Burn to blush even more. A soft throat-clearing from the throne quieted both of the ponies.

"Perhaps, captain, you'd like to give me more information on your plans for the day?"

"Oh, yes, Your Majesty." Flash Burn once again bowed before the throne. "Normally, Dark Blur is inactive during the daytime, Your Majesty, but we believe that if we find a forensic specialist, Your Majesty, we may be able to figure out where he's staying based on his activity pattern, Your Majesty."

"Very good, captain. You should get to that."

"I'm sorry," piped up Morning Glory, "but did you say 'Dark Blur'?"

"Yeah, that's what he calls himself, we think," replied Flash Burn, rising. "Why, you know anything about him?"

"Me? Oh, no, I wouldn't know anything about that sort of thing. It just sounded odd, was all."

"Strange that you've never heard of him," said Princess Celestia, "since he's quite the plague on the nobles."

"Ahaha, well, yes, one can miss the occasional thing. It's not like I've ever had a run-in with him. I don't actually live in the upper quarter, you know." She waved her hoof in the air dismissively.

"Sometimes I forget," Flash Burn chuckled. The princess laughed as well.

"Well, Flash Burn, since you're headed to the lower quarter, there's a certain glass shop you may want to stop by. Twilight Sage is headed off to get some lenses. If you see him there, you can ask him about Dark Blur."

The captain's face lit up. "Oh! I, uh, yes, Your Majesty. I'll go do that, Your Majesty." In an instant, Flash Burn took off, leaving a trail like a flame.

Morning Glory glared at Princess Celestia once more. "Surely you can't be encouraging that foolish little crush she has on your advisor."

"I'm not encouraging it," Princess Celestia replied with a knowing smile, "and don't call me Shirley."

"Wait, what? Ooh!" the earth pony winced as she understood the princess' joke. "Nevermind. Why are you sending Flash Burn out to see Twilight Sage if you're not trying to get them together?"

"Because, my little pony, Flash Burn will be traveling to the shop as fast as she can, while Twilight Sage is trotting along laden with books. When Flash Burn arrives to inquire after him, the only pony who will be there to answer her will be Twilight Sage's filly-friend." Celestia's smirk got wider as she waited for realization to dawn on her confidante.

"Oh. Ohhhhhh. That was sneaky, Princess. I'm not rubbing off on you, am I?"

"Goodness, I hope not," Celestia replied in a jocular tone. Both of them laughed.

A few minutes passed before an alabaster pegasus in armor walked into the throne room. "Princess Celestia, requesting permission to open the gates to the public."

The princess smiled down at the guard. "Lieutenant Destrier, I thought you had already done that. Why, look who's sitting right here." Morning Glory stepped out from beside the throne with her most innocent expression.

"Um, I..." the pegasus could only stammer. The two mares up the staircase only laughed.

"It's alright, captain. If I punished guards for letting Miss Glory through, we'd have more prisoners than ponies to guard them. Go open the gates, please."

"Yes, Your Highness." The lieutenant slunk off in the most professional-looking way he could manage. The princess and Morning Glory waited until he left the room.

"Well, Princess, I should be going. I'm sure that my brother will be stumbling home shortly to attempt to wash off the smell of a night of carousing, and it's always fun to catch him." Morning Glory began walking towards the exit.

"You know, you talk about him all the time, but you've never snuck your brother up here to meet me or Luna."

"Ahaha," Morning Glory laughed delicately, "yes, well, he's never been terribly interested in coming up to see the palace. I'm afraid ambition doesn't run in the family, you know? Good day, Princess."

The princess stretched and adjusted her posture. The morning had been enjoyable and relaxing, but now she had petitioners to attend to. Very many whiny, self-interested, entitled petitioners. And she had to look nice for them.

"Oh, please tell me those aren't the Bluebloods I see coming in."

Chapter 2

Flash Burn both loved and hated flying into the lower quarter of Everfree. On one hoof, because there were no tall buildings, she was free to take any course she pleased as long as she kept her altitude. On the other hoof, what fun was a good flight without a few obstacles? Still, it was best not to endanger the civilians. As captain of the Day Guard, she had a reputation to uphold, even amongst commoners. She could feel the admiring gazes of the lower-class ponies as she left a blazing trail above them.

All that aside, she wasn't out on a pleasure trip. She was hoping to find information on the notorious criminal Dark Blur, and her first stop was Shimmerstar Glassworks, where she hoped to run into one rather intelligent, informative, handsome colt with eyes that she could just get lost in sometimes, in order to ask him for information in a strictly business-like fashion. She had never actually visited the little shop, but years of patrolling and chasing criminals down every corner of the city gave her a near-perfect mental map of even the lower quarters. The belltower struck seven chimes as she landed in the square that the glass shop was located in. She saw an "OPEN" sign being flung out to hang in front of the shop window.

"Perfect timing" Flash Burn muttered to herself, satisfied. As she walked over, other ponies cleared out of her way, somewhat unnerved by the sudden presence of the Day Guard's captain in their part of town. She ignored them and rang the little glass chime hanging on the window. "Hello?"

Out from behind a divider appeared a blue unicorn with the most exotic hair Flash Burn had ever seen. It was pale, but glistened like a prism as she walked into the sunlight. The unicorn had a pleasant, soft, but genuine smile as she leaned forward over the counter. "Good morning. How can I help you today?"

"I, uh..." Flash Burn coughed, "yes, I'm looking for a unicorn named Twilight Sage. Have you seen him?"

“Twilight? Oh, yes, I have seen him. Just a couple days ago, he stopped by and took me to dinner. I haven’t seen him since then, though, so I guess that’s not very helpful, is it?” The blue unicorn tilted her head and looked nowhere in particular.

“Wait, what?” Flash Burn took a tiny step back. “Twilight Sage, the royal advisor, took you out to dinner?”

“Why, yes,” the blue unicorn said returning back to the conversation. “He does that occasionally. Other times he just spends time here. Really, I like that better, but he insists that there’s a proper way to go on dates. Odd, since he’s never dated anyone before me. Maybe he reads books on dating.” Her eyes drifted off to nowhere again.

“Who...who exactly are you?”

“Who exactly? Why, that’s a very difficult question. I’m not sure that we can ever define ourselves exactly. We may strive for it in all our arts and creations, but I’m not sure we can ever know.” This time, her eyes never even returned to looking at Flash Burn.

The pegasus gave an exasperated sigh. “What’s your name, filly?”

“Oh!” the unicorn snapped back to reality. “My name is Shimmerdust. I run this glass shop now, but it used to belong to my dad. That’s why it’s Shimmerstar Glassworks and not Shimmerdust Glassworks.”

“Okay,” Flash Burn said, trying to keep herself from getting angry, “and how do YOU know one of Equestria’s most important ponies.”

“Oh, now, is anypony really more important than any other pony?” Shimmerstar managed to catch that Flash Burn was glaring at her intensely. “Well, he wasn’t always such a bigshot. He used to live down here, you know. We’ve been friends ever since we were foals. But the dating is a bit more recent, I suppose.”

Flash Burn looked down at her hooves. Twilight Sage really had a fillyfriend? They talked all the time, and he had never mentioned a fillyfriend. Though she had never really asked. In fact, most of their talking was composed of her trying to stammer out anything intelligible, and him trying to see if she was alright. The pegasus sighed.

"I'm sorry about that, I got a little lost in thought." Shimmerdust didn't respond. She was looking at nothing in particular again. Flash Burn rang the glass chime.

"Good morning! Welcome to Shimmerstar Glassworks." Flash Burn raised an eyebrow nervously. Had the unicorn really gone that far from reality? "Hey...I've seen you before. Welcome back!" Flash Burn went slack-jawed.

"Look, can I just come inside?"

"Oh, of course!" Shimmerdust disappeared and reappeared in the door next to the window. "Did you want to take a look at my gallery?"

"Actually, no," Flash Burn said as the unicorn closed the door behind her.

"Oh, shoot. No pony ever wants to see my gallery."

Shimmerdust looked at the ground and thrust out her lower lip in a pout. Flash Burn tried to say something, but couldn't get past the unicorn's pathetic expression.

"Fine, show me your gallery." The unicorn bounced into the air, and grabbed Flash Burn by the tail. "Hey, whoa!" She dragged the pegasus back behind the divider. Flash Burn's eyes were suddenly assaulted by shimmering colors. She had seen some glassworks at fancy houses in the upper quarter, but Shimmerdust's gallery room was something else entirely. Glass vases framed by glass candleholders, glass bowls and plates, glass goblets, and tiny glass figurines lined most of the shelves. Glass statues rested on top of chests, and a glass chess set was lit by colors from a stained-glass window. "How...? Who...?"

"Lots of practice, and me," Shimmerdust replied to the rhetorical questions.

"You said no pony comes back here? Then what do you sell?"

Shimmerdust sighed. "I may be an artist at heart, but that's not my job. I sell lenses. Most of the lower quarter comes here for their glasses, those who can afford them. If I had competition, I'd probably go out of business."

"Why don't you submit your work to a gallery?"

"All the galleries are in the upper quarter, at least here in Everfree. And I can't afford to travel outside the city, nor spend even a day

away from my shop.” She walked over to the chess set and used her magic to rearrange it to a new setup.

“I’m so sorry,” Flash Burn said, moving closer. Shimmerdust smiled back at her.

“So, if you didn’t want to see the gallery, what did you want to come inside for?”

Flash Burn snapped back to reality. She had work to do. “Well, I was hoping to find Twilight Sage to help me with a criminal investigation. Since he’s not here yet, I thought I’d wait.”

“A criminal investigation? Are you with the Guard?”

Flash Burn looked down. She was wearing her gilded armor, and she could feel the weight of her helmet on her head. “Uh...yeah.”

“Oh, goodness, I’ve been a little rude, haven’t I? Or have I? How is one supposed to act when the Guard comes to visit? I mean, I suppose if one is under arrest, then it’s obvious, but...” Shimmerdust stared off into nowhere again.

“Why don’t you just do what you normally do, and let me know when Twilight Sage gets here?”

“Okay!” That instant, Shimmerdust began loudly singing an old mariner’s tune and used her magic to fire up the furnace. She was using a notably saltier version than the one Flash Burn had learned at summer camp.

“Maybe you can do-“ Shimmerdust was singing too loudly for Flash Burn to hear herself. “MAYBE WITHOUT THE SINGING!”

“Oops, haha, sorry,” Shimmerdust continued stoking the furnace. “I guess not everypony knows that version of the song.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t be able to forget it.” Flash Burn was sure that the heat on her cheeks was from furious blushing, and not the nearby furnace.

Morning Glory heard the bell-tower in the distance strike eight times as she reached a public house called the Bucking Farmer. For the benefit of the illiterate, a picture of a young earth pony thrusting out her rear legs was painted on the hanging sign. The building had once served as a different sort of establishment, and the new owner seemed to be happy to keep the name. It brought in enough customers. Still, the new

establishment's reputation was solid enough that Morning Glory felt no shame walking in the front door.

"Good morning, Frothie," Glory called to the back of the bar. A middle-aged mare in an apron appeared from below the bar.

"Ah, ma petite liseron!" The mare ducked back behind the bar and reappeared with an apron in mouth. She placed it upon Morning Glory's back. "You are juste in time zis morning. I have to do ze brewing for mon petit today, so you will have to take of ze customers." Frothie pulled the knot tight.

"That's quite alright, Frothie. Have you seen my brother today?"

"Oh, non, he iz still out, I zink." She trotted to the back room of the bar.

"Perfect." Morning Glory retrieved a broom and began sweeping the inn floor. It would only be a matter of time before-

CRASH!

A dark grey pegasus with short black hair had plowed into one of the tables. He was doused in hot wheat porridge, and the customers with no more breakfast glared at him. He rose to his feet. "Ah, heh. I'll get you new ones, guys." He darted over towards Morning Glory. "I don't suppose you can give those gentlecolts their breakfast on the house." He gave her a big grin.

"Hurricane, from what I hear, you've been doing enough work to pay for it yourself." The pegasus' grin disappeared.

"Okay, I'll pay for it later. Just get them their food before they decide to make trouble." Morning Glory sighed, and then bit his ear and began dragging him to the back. "Ow! Ow ow owwwww! Come oooooonnnnn!" She didn't let go until they were in the back room.

"Do you know with whom I spoke today?" Morning Glory glared directly into his eyes.

"Uhh...the Princess of Equestria?" The pegasus grinned again.

"Besides her."

"Sorry, not a clue."

"CAPTAIN Flash Burn." Hurricane's shoulders dropped. "Do you know what she said? She's been trailing a NOTORIOUS criminal

named 'Dark Blur', and APPARENTLY, he lives in the lower quarter." Hurricane muttered something very quiet. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

"It's THE Dark Blur," he said just a bit more audibly, obviously put out. "They could at least get it right."

"I don't care if they call you Little Miss Frou-Frou! When you told me that you were going to liberate your income from those who wouldn't miss it, you promised me that you would remain undetected!" Morning Glory was backing the pegasus into a corner.

"I was gonna! And then they saw me, so I figured I'd have a little fun. It just...got a little out of hoof."

"OUT of HOOOF?!" Hurricane gave a panicked look towards his back. Nothing but walls and ceiling. "You are now one of the most wanted criminals in all of Equestria! The most influential military commander in all of Everfree has a personal grudge against you! They are going to find out where you live! WHERE WE LIVE! What do you have to say for yourself?" Morning Glory was breathing heavily.

"Hey, they still haven't managed to catch me."

In the main room, all the customers turned their heads as a horrid wail issued forth from the back room.

"No more," Morning Glory ordered the crumpled heap on the floor. "Find a real job. If I ever hear one more word of this 'Dark Blur' character, our room will become MY room."

"At least I won't get kicked there anymore," whined Hurricane as he tried to uncurl from his fetal position.

"Now, I have customers to attend to. Go wash up, pawn off anything you have to, and start looking for a real employer."

"But--"

"GO!"

Hurricane blasted off from a standing start, leading a dark cloud sparking with lightning in his wake.

"I swear," Morning Glory muttered as she spooned more wheat porridge from the kettle.

“Smack her croup and pull her hair! That’s the captain treats his mare!” Shimmerdust and Flash Burn collapsed into giggles after the last verse of the latest sea shanty.

“Oh, goodness. I haven’t laughed that hard since...I don’t even remember.” Flash Burn wiped a tear from her eye. “Where did you learn all these songs?”

“Well,” said Shimmerdust as she moved a new glass bottle to a cooling rack, “my dad, Shimmerstar, wasn’t much for songs, but Granpappy North Star was still sailing when I was born. He loved spending time with me whenever he could return to Everfree.”

“Your mom must have been furious.”

“I bet she would have been.” Shimmerdust was still smiling, but Flash frowned a bit.

“I’m sorry, I-“

“It’s alright, I know. I never really knew her.” Shimmerdust rearranged the chess board once again. “So, I guess you grew up with two parents?”

“Well, yeah. Sorta. I grew up with a maid. My parents just stopped in once in a while. They were both very big in the military.”

“I guess we both followed in our parents’ hoofsteps.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” There was a short silence.

“So-“ Flash was cut off by the sound of a glass chime. Shimmerstar trotted to the front of the shop.

“Good morning! Welcome to Shimmerstar Glassworks.”

The voice from the front of the shop was male. “Shimmerdust, you don’t have to say that every time I visit.”

“Oh, hi Sage!” Flash Burn’s stomach turned to butterflies. She’d forgotten that she was awaiting the second-most awkward social situation of her life (nothing really compared to arresting her father for soliciting a prostitute). She briefly pondered fleeing before anyone could see her, but she remembered that she had a job to do. She was about to go up to the front before Shimmerdust appeared from around the corner again.

“Twilight Sage is here. You wanted to see him, right?”

“Ah, yes. Is he coming back here?”

“Yes.” There was a pause. The pause went on.

“Um...is he coming back here now?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t think so. The wheel on his cart broke, so he’s trying to drag it. It will probably take him a while.” Shimmerdust’s eyes drifted off.

“Oh, for the love of-“ Flash Burn darted out the front door. Twilight Sage was indeed trying to drag a one-wheeled cart, with books falling out continuously. “Let me help you with that.”

“Oh! Captain, what are you doing here?”

“Looking for you. How many books did you bring?”

“A lot. Uh-“ Twilight Sage stopped as he felt Flash Burn pushing the cart behind him. They both managed to get the cart inside the door, and then began picking up all the fallen books. “How did you know to look for me here?”

“The Princess told me where you were going.” They both walked inside to find Shimmerdust staring at the cart of books.

“Uh...Shimmer?” Twilight Sage stepped forward to nudge the other unicorn.

“Mm?”

“What are you doing?”

“I want to see if they’re reproducing in there.” She wasn’t even blinking.

Flash Burn walked up next to Twilight and leaned her head in. “You’ve known her longer. When she says stuff like that, is she making jokes?”

“I honestly never managed to figure that out,” he whispered back. They both waited for a bit before deciding to give her a push to break her line of sight.

“Oh, am I in your way?” Shimmerdust obligingly moved to the other side of the cart, and she resumed her staring.

Sage cleared his throat. “So, you said you were looking for me?”

“Oh!” Flash Burn gathered her helmet from one of the benches. “I’m actually on an investigation. You’ve probably heard of ‘Dark Blur’?”

“You mean ‘The Dark Blur’? That’s what your first report said he called himself.” Flash Burn blushed. She knew Sage was smart, and that

was why she was asking him in the first place, but he shouldn't have a better memory of her reports than she did.

"Yes, well, either way. I am trying to figure out where he might base his operations. You're pretty smart, I thought you might be able to figure it out."

"Ah, well, I suppose I can try, but I doubt I can do anything your Guard can't do. Shimmer, dear, could you grab me a piece of paper?"

"But there's so many right here," Shimmerdust intoned in a voice that sounded far away, still focused on the pile of books.

"A blank one, dear."

"Oh! Okay." Just like that, the unicorn trotted off and retrieved a paper from a drawer.

Twilight Sage pulled a pencil from his pouch. "Now, Everfree is roughly a series of concentric circles." He drew near-perfect circles on the paper. "All of The Dark Blur's targets have been in the upper quarter. Here here here and here, mostly." He drew tiny dots. "Now, The Dark Blur used to work low-profile, meaning he would want to have a minimal distance from target to base of operations, so there'd be less chance of being spotted carrying stolen goods. If we draw these lines...and these circles...a few triangles. Aha! Yes, there's a single common area that makes sense as a starting point. And, why, it's right here!" Sage dropped the pencil and looked at Flash Burn, whose mouth was agape. "Brilliantly done, Captain! You must have already narrowed the search down. I knew I'd be no help."

Flash Burn searched for words. "I...well, yes, I...what?"

"Oh, Captain Flash, that's impressive. I've never known anyone to be as good as my Sage at these things." Shimmerdust pressed uncomfortably close to Flash Burn.

"Okay, okay!" Flash Burn pushed the unicorns away. "Enough funning. I had no idea he was here. I was just looking for you, okay?" The other two looked crestfallen.

"Oh, sorry Captain. I forgot how much running my mouth put you off." Twilight smiled apologetically.

"It what?" Flash Burn inclined her head in, as if she had trouble hearing.

“Well, every time we talk, I start blathering, and then you start stammering and fly away.” Flash Burn blushed. So he HAD noticed.

“Look, that’s...I don’t not-like you, okay? I just...it’s hard to explain.”

Shimmerdust rubbed her head against Flash Burn. “It’s okay if you’re a bit shy. Twilight’s really shy, too. Did you know he never even took his novels to a publisher?” Twilight’s face instantly contorted like he had just been pinched in a very uncomfortable place.

“Novels?”

“Darling, I’m begging you, please don’t tell her.”

“You haven’t even mentioned them? Sage, how could you?”

Shimmerdust dropped into a pout. There was a short moment as Sage attempted to keep himself from looking, but it was no use.

“Fine, you can tell her about them.” Shimmerdust bounced back and spun to face Flash Burn.

“Ever since we were little, Sage has been writing about a powerful unicorn wizard who goes around and saves Equestria. He’s such a brilliant hero. When he got out of school, he started to compile the old adventures into actual novels, and added more complex themes and nuanced side characters and everything. It was a complete overhaul, really. But Wonderbolt stayed the same. He’s kind of a big ham, but it’s really fun to read.” Sage was blushing, and Flash Burn turned to address him.

“Wonderbolt?”

Sage sighed. “When you’re the only unicorn you know with no magic, you really get some ridiculous fantasies.”

Flash burn reached a hoof out towards his shoulder, but the space was quickly occupied by Shimmerdust. “Oh, come on, honey, you do have magic. I should know.” She nudged him with a knowing smirk.

“Yes, please, dear, embarrass me even further in front of the Captain. I don’t think she yet knows enough of my secrets.” Sage rolled his eyes and sighed.

“Oh, okay. Well, Miss Flash, when we’re alone, we-“

“I WAS BEING SARCASTIC!” At that point, the two unicorns seemed to notice that Flash Burn was blushing vividly and had her helmet tilted to hide her eyes. “I’m sorry, Captain, if we made you uncomfortable.”

"I...I should go. Investigate." Flash Burn turned to walk out the door. Finding herself thinking about what her crush and the exotic mare might do in their alone time was much more than uncomfortable. Besides which, the morning was wearing on.

"I hope you can stop by again soon, Miss Flash."

Flash found herself standing in the town square. "Okay," she muttered to herself. "I think I need to go find somewhere to cry. Then I'll get to searching the area." She was about to take off to the sky, when she saw a familiar dark cloud with lightning burst from the door of a bawdy-looking public house.

Flash narrowed her eyes and bared her teeth. "Or maybe I can make somepony else cry."

Chapter 3

"For the last time, no, the Crown will NOT sponsor a Royal Dressmaker's Academy without Senatorial approval." Celestia was doing her best to keep her voice calm. There was no law in Equestria that forced any member of the royalty to hold public court for petitioners, but she insisted on doing so anyway, for she wanted to hear the voice of the people. At least, that was the intent. Ever since the upper quarter had been cordoned off, however, almost all the petitioners who came in without making special appointment were aristocrats. Mostly, self-interested aristocrats.

"Your Highness," said the white unicorn in front of her, affecting an upper-class accent that Celestia herself avoided ever slipping into, "with all due respect, the Senate mostly holds representatives from the more," she coughed, "common class. Those ponies simply don't have any perspective on what is good for Equestria."

"The 'common class' IS Equestria, Karat-"

"Lady Karat," the unicorn corrected her with a dismissive sneer. Celestia barely kept herself from snarling.

"AND you would do well to remember it," Celestia attempted to assert her conversational authority. "You know that the founding of any such school would receive many tax reliefs and incentives, due to the laws that the Senate has already passed. Your endeavor already has plenty support, and I'm sure that if you were to build in the lower quarter-"

"Good heavens!"

"IF you built anywhere other than Everfree's upper quarter, even, you would have no problem getting a land grant. But there's nothing that I, or anyone, can do about the land up here. It's all privately owned. Now, I will hear no more of this, unless somepony is acting in an illegal manner. And I mean a TRULY illegal manner, not violating some fine print that Senator Blueblood managed to slip in the latest bill. Are we clear?" Celestia realized

that she had started leaning forward and spreading her wings, towering over the mortal pony. She retreated to a more regal posture.

"Yes, of course, Princess." The unicorn hardly sounded sincere, but Celestia wasn't willing to press the issue. She was already too tired to deal with any more aristocrats. She watched the unicorn trot away, and peered into the distance. "Lieutenant, you can send the next one in."

"No pony else here, Your Highness," came a voice from the entryway.

"Oh, thank goodness." Celestia stepped down from her throne and closed her eyes. She allowed thoughts to float freely through her head. Though her usual petitioners were tiresome, she remembered that they were the most ambitious and petty of the upper class. Many ponies who were true of heart, such as Flash Burn and Amaranth, were also born and raised in the upper quarter. She had absolutely nothing against the rich ponies of the world. If only the nice ones would come to talk to her.

"Good afternoon, Princess," came a familiar voice from just beside her. Celestia opened her eyes to see the green pony that had run off in the morning.

"Oh, Amaranth. I'm glad you could make it back. Where did you get off to?"

"I." The green pony stared at the floor and shyly kicked a single hoof.

"Yes?"

"I ran into a wall."

"What?" Celestia took a step back.

"When Miss Glory surprised me, and I went running, I ran into the first corner I came across. I woke up to one of the guards checking if I had a concussion." Amaranth shrank a little.

"Goodness, are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Well, how about I get you lunch. I confess, I played a bit of a prank on you. I didn't mean for you to get hurt." Celestia bumped the earth pony's head affectionately.

"Oh, that's all right, Princess. I could tell that you were up to something. It's my fault I fell for it."

Celestia stepped back again. "You could?"

"Sure. Whenever you play a trick, you squint your eyes because you're trying not to grin. Princess Luna does it too. I think it's adorable." Celestia blinked. How many centuries of life had she gone without noticing that? Maybe it was new. Ponies change, after all, even immortal ones. Surely, in a thousand years, that tell would be completely gone.

"Still, I think I owe you. Besides, I could use the company of somepony who isn't conniving."

"Oh, of course, Princess. I don't even know how to connive." The Princess rolled her eyes. It was true: Amaranth was just about the least underhoofed pony in the entire city. However, he seemed to lack understanding of when that wasn't precisely a good thing.

"Well, where would you like to go?"

"Oh, I thought we would just eat here. Mademoiselle Gateau is just waiting for an excuse to use those strawberries that came in yesterday."

"My chef won't be in for another hour, I'm afraid, and she'll need the time to start on dinner."

"Oh. Where do you normally eat lunch, then?"

"Anywhere I like!" Celestia giggled a bit at her own joke. There wasn't a public eating establishment in Everfree that she hadn't been to at least once. She noticed that Amaranth was looking at her with confusion. "No, really, we can go anywhere. How about Zebraville? You haven't lived until you've had traditional zebra food."

"But there are restaurants with zebra cuisine all over Everfree."

"REAL zebra food."

"You mean they're all fake?" Amaranth looked positively aghast, even though most ponies knew that it was now common practice to serve more nativized food based on zebra dishes, rather than the more exotic fare that zebras were used to.

"Oh, come on, you." Celestia unfurled her wings and took to the sky. She only got a couple stories high before she remembered that Amaranth couldn't fly. She stopped. "Oh, sorry. Let me call for a carriage." She was about to whistle, when she heard a crackling sound behind her. She beat her wings just in time to dodge the streak of black cloud that had almost hit her. "That was clo-"

She did not dodge the blaze that was following it, and was met with the full force of Flash Burn colliding into her side. They both went tumbling to the ground, and the princess found Flash Burn struggling to stand on top of her.

"You idiot! I almost had him! What were you doing flying so high-ay-ayYOUR MAJESTY!" The guard pony sprung back and flattened herself to the ground. "I'm so sorry, Your Majesty! Please don't throw me into the dungeon, Your Majesty! I-"

"It's all right, Flash. Stand up, and tell me what happened."

Flash Burn stood up weakly. "Well, I went down to the lens shop exactly like you said, Your Majesty, but when I left, I saw Dark Blur leaving a...a house of ill repute. I raced to follow him, Your Majesty, but he must have seen me. I've been chasing him for hours, Your Majesty"

"You don't have to say 'Your Majesty' all the time, Captain," piped up Amaranth from beside the pair.

"I don't! Shut up!" Flash Burn was blushing furiously.

"Well, Flash, did you find out anything interesting at the glassworks?"

"Yeah. Twilight Sage has a fillyfriend," Flash Burn muttered more to herself than the princess.

Celestia giggled, "I meant something important to your investigation."

"Oh." The pegasus blushed even harder. "Well, whatever he may have been doing in that public house, Your Majesty, he probably lives near there, Your Majesty. Or maybe even in there, Your Majesty."

"Good work, Captain Flash. I think you deserve a break. Care to join us for lunch?"

"Can she order from the waitress without continually calling her 'Your Hospitality'?" Amaranth chuckled. Flash Burn shot him a glare that Celestia swore might actually set him on fire.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but I should really get back to pursue leads. Enjoy your lunch, Your Majesty." With that, Flash Burn took off. Celestia turned to Amaranth.

"I know you were just trying to be funny, but that was a little mean."

"So was you sending her off to meet her crush's fillyfriend without warning her about it." Celestia looked aside guiltily.

"I know. But it's not good for her to be pining for a colt that she can't have, and I thought that would stop it fastest."

"There's no way of knowing." The two shared a silent moment.

"Why don't I go get a carriage? There are plenty more cheerful things that we can discuss."

"Okay." Celestia went to fetch the royal carriage, hoping she hadn't made a big mistake.

Morning Glory was wiping the tables in preparation for the lunch rush when a black cloud once again burst through the front door. Her brother fell to the ground panting.

"I hope you're out of breath because you've been very hard at work at a job you happened upon just after I sent you out."

Hurricane put his hooves on her shoulders. "You won't believe what happened! The instant you kicked me out, I looked behind me and I saw the Day Guard captain chasing me. I didn't even get a chance to put my hooves to the ground." He tried his best to look pathetic, but Morning Glory was having none of it.

"Did she see you leave here?"

"I...I don't know. Probably." Morning Glory smacked Hurricane across the face.

"Do you see what you've done now? Now the Guard is going to find you, you'll be arrested, and they'll find out that I'm related to a criminal. My reputation will be ruined!" There was a brief moment of silence.

"No, it won't."

"What do you mean? Of course it will. That's what happens to anypony who associates with criminals."

"I mean, they won't find me, because I won't be here. I didn't want to do this, but there's no choice. I have to leave Everfree."

Morning Glory stammered. "But...you can't! You don't have enough money for a passport. You won't be able to enter any walled city, or use a highway, and if they catch you flying-"

"I'll be banished. I will be sent outside Equestria and my face will be on a poster in every guard station. But they won't know who I am. Or that I'm your brother. And you'll be able to keep helping the little ponies, those

who the rich want to keep down. That's what we've been fighting for this whole time. I can't let that go by." Hurricane started towards the door.

"Hurricane, you stay right here! We need to talk about this."

"No, we don't."

"But what will I tell dad? What will I tell your mother?"

"Exactly what I told you. They'll understand."

"But-" Morning Glory was about to raise a further point, when the door opened right in Hurricane's face, causing him to reel back slightly. As he opened his eyes again, he stared directly into the orange inferno of Day Guard Captain Flash Burn's glare.

"Aww, horseapples."

"They really serve that here?"

"They do." Celestia wasn't even looking at her menu. She was well enough acquainted with zebra cuisine to know what to order.

"I've just never heard of anypony eating tree bark."

"It's a special kind of tree bark. Of course, it's not for the faint of heart, or weak of tooth."

"I'm just not sure." Amaranth was looking at the menu with a very dismayed expression. Though he was not unfamiliar with the plant names, being a hard-working gardener, it was not common practice to nibble on the Royal Garden (well, not for a pony, at least).

Celestia smiled. "Take your time."

"But I've already taken so long."

"Oh, it hasn't been that long."

"Wanna bet?" Celestia jumped at the voice from behind her.

"Luna? What are you doing out of bed?"

"I woke up, duh." Luna dragged a chair from another table and sat herself down. "It happens sometimes, you know?"

"I'm sorry, it's just that you can't have been asleep very long."

"Sis, do you know what time it is?"

"Well, of course, it's-" Celestia cut herself off. "How is it already two o'clock?! I thought I finished with court before noon."

"You did," replied Amaranth.

"But we came here right after, didn't we?"

"We did."

"...Amaranth, pick something to eat already." Celestia heard her sister giggle. "Oh, come on, so I lost track of time a little. I don't know how."

"It's 'cause you're too patient for your own good." Luna stuck out her tongue.

"Well, aren't we in a cheerful mood," Celestia said, faking being offended.

"Sleeping during the day is waaaay more rejuvenating," Luna replied while stretching. "Honestly, I think everypony would be happier if they took afternoon naps and stayed up late to work instead."

"Gardening at night is pretty much impossible, though. So's farming." Amaranth was hardly looking up from his menu as he said this. Luna pouted and stuck her tongue out again.

"I think plenty of ponies would agree with you, Luna."

"Yeah, I just haven't met any." Luna folded up her legs and sunk her head down.

"Dear sister, if you insist on being so down, I'm going to have to tickle you."

"Wait, what?" Luna pulled her head from the table.

"You heard me." Celestia's narrowed her eyes menacingly.

"You wouldn't. Not in public."

"Wanna bet?" She got off her seat and began advancing around the table. Luna retreated.

"No. Nonono." They both sped up. "NononononononoNOOOOOOOO!" The younger princess took off instantly.

"Oh, I'm gonna getcha!" screamed Celestia as she shot off in pursuit. They both disappeared into the sky.

A male zebra with an apron walked up to the table. "Have you decided, yet, sir?"

Amaranth slammed a hoof down delicately. "Oh, I just can't make up my mind! Princess, tell me what I should order." The green pony looked up to see both seats opposite him were empty.

"Princess?"

Chapter 4

In the remains of a broken table, Flash Burn stood atop the body of a dark grey pegasus, pressing a single armor-clad hoof into one of his wings. The downed pony screamed piteously, and Flash pulled her hoof back to see that there was a smear of blood along its bottom.

“My wing! You broke my wing!” the pegasus screamed, choked-back tears in his voice. Flash Burn had never really seen his face before, and looking at it now, she could hardly believe her eyes. The notorious ‘Dark Blur’ hardly looked like any kind of hardened criminal. He was a handsome young stallion, who looked like he had never been in a fight in his life. She felt like she had just broken the body of a child. Flash fought to recall memories of the grey pegasus stealing valuable pieces of art and causing havoc for a great number of ponies.

“You are under arrest for grand theft, disturbing the peace, destruction of property, inciting mass panic, and resisting arrest. If you attempt escape again, I will not hesitate to break more.” Flash pressed her head in to try and get the criminal to make eye contact, but his eyes were firmly shut in pain and fear. She decided to look somewhere else before she started to feel guilty about her sudden assault, and the first thing she saw was a very familiar earth pony. “Glory?!”

“Captain, what is going on here?” Morning Glory was affecting a tone of respect that Flash found highly unusual. Then she realized that it was the sort that a civilian would normally take with an officer of the law.

“This pony is a criminal that I’ve been chasing for a while now. I’m bringing him in for questioning.” Flash looked down. “Is that an apron? You work HERE?!”

“Yes, I do.” There was a slight pause, and Flash felt herself avoiding eye contact with the earth pony. “It’s not that sort of establishment any more, dear, not since long before I was born.” She felt relieved. Morning Glory’s personal habits tended to bother her a bit, but that would have been much, much worse than anything she’d heard before.

“Okay, good.” She noticed that most of her weight was still on top of the other pegasus. “Have you seen this man before?”

“A few times, I suppose. I always thought he was just another customer.”

“I see.” Flash looked down. There really was nothing that seemed menacing about the other pegasus. “Did he ever tell you his name?”

“I’m afraid not.” Morning Glory started moving the pieces of table out of the way. “Really, there was nothing unusual about him.”

“Well, we’ll find out soon enough.” Flash prodded the pegasus to make sure he was still conscious. “This one doesn’t seem like he’ll be hard to get answers from.”

“You won’t hurt him, will you?” Flash looked up and noticed that her friend had an unusual look of concern on her face.

“...no, we won’t. Torture of any sort is more illegal than anything he’s done. Unless we thought he was connected to a murder or something, it wouldn’t even be considered.”

“Oh, good.” Morning Glory took an audible breath. “I hate to think of such horrible things being done to anypony.”

“Right.” Flash felt like something was off, but she chalked it up to paranoia. In a situation like this, acting on a snap judgment could be dangerous to innocent ponies. “Somepony gallop to the nearest guard station and alert them that Dark Blur has been restrained and is at this location.”

“It’s...” came a raspy voice from beneath her. The pegasus was trying to turn his head, but Flash Burn’s hoof was keeping it down. “It’s THE...Dark-“

“Quiet!” Flash increased the pressure on the young pegasus’ head. “Glory, you don’t have any rope here, do you?” Morning Glory shook her head. “Well, great. Keeping him pinned here is going to be a pain.”

“Oh, I doubt you have to worry. He can’t run nearly as fast as he can fly.”

“Still, I’d rather not have to bother-“ Flash shifted her gaze from the other pegasus to her friend. “How do you know?”

Glory stammered, "Oh, I have seen him before, and I suppose, well-oh, how wonderful, the guards are already here!" Flash turned her head and saw two ponies in guard uniforms walk in. However, the next thing she saw was a pink mane billowing into the door, followed by a familiar face.

"Princess Celestia?" both Flash and Glory cried out. The princess walked very slowly into the room. Her face was calm, but serious.

"What is going on here?"

Twilight Sage and Shimmerdust sat on opposite sides of the strange tube that now sat between them. It looked unfinished on the outside, but both ponies knew that the inside was a good deal more complex.

"Well," spoke up Shimmerdust, "I think we got it. I'll need to pick up something to use as knobs, but the inner mechanisms are just like you said they should be, and the lenses are definitely right."

"Yes," said Sage, not taking his eyes off it. "It's finally real. Tonight will be glorious."

"So what did you bring all the books for?" Sage looked to his side. Indeed, they had only opened five of the books he'd brought along, and those were only to double check the information Sage had already memorize.

Sage sighed. "I suppose now I have to tell you the real reason I came out here." He walked back over towards the cart and dug around in it.

"Real reason?" Shimmerdust tilted her head.

Twilight Sage finally pulled out a very old-looking tome and set it down. "I was translating this old tome when I found something amazing." He flipped the book open to a page that looked like a formula so complex that even a pony who spoke the old tongue would be completely lost.

"Funny symbols?"

"It's a spell, Shimmer. And not just any spell. This spell can calibrate a unicorn's magic to temporarily increase their power! This could let me use magic!"

Shimmerdust stood on her hooves. "But don't you need magic to cast the spell in the first place?"

“And that’s why I’m here. I don’t have magic, but you do.” Sage pushed the book towards Shimmerdust.

“Oh, Sage. I can’t even read that. I’m certain I couldn’t cast it.”

“Yes, well, there’s a lot of preliminary reading and calculations to do. The spell here is a sort of shorthand for a number of processes. But, I’m sure that if we go over it all, you can do it.”

“I just don’t know. Sage, every time you’ve tried something to get magic, it’s wound up with failure and a story that I’m not allowed to tell to any of our friends.”

Sage leaned in, “Come on, dear. This is my childhood dream. You’re the only pony I can trust with this.”

“What about the princesses?”

Sage looked to the side. “I don’t want them to know that I never really got over having no magic.”

“Eh, we kinda had it figured out already.” Sage froze. The voice coming from behind him was far too familiar. He slowly turned his head, and surely enough, Luna’s smiling face was poking out from the cart of books.

“P-princess? How did you? Why?”

“Me and Celestia were playing around, and now I’m hiding. I’m surprised she hadn’t stopped by here already.”

“How long have you been in there?”

“Like five minutes.” Sage saw that Luna was now looking behind him. “What’s with your belle?” He turned and noticed that Shimmerdust was looking wide-eyed at the book pile.

“Honey?”

“They gave birth. And I missed it.” Sage put his hoof to his face.

“No, dear, Princess Luna is a master of teleportation.”

“Oh. That makes a lot more sense.” Shimmerdust went back to looking at the book.

“So, since I already know, maybe I can take a look at the spell?”

Sage sighed. “I don’t see why not.” Luna jumped out of the pile, sending books everywhere. She went to the book, standing opposite from Shimmerdust.

“You know you’re reading it upside-down, right?”

“But I think it makes more sense this way.” Shimmerdust was moving her head back and forth, like she was trying to make sense of a magic-eye puzzle. Both Luna and Sage sighed.

“Well, Princess, how does it look?”

“Hard. You need to have a really good sense of a pony’s magic to use it. I mean, it’s supposed to be used on yourself.” The princess suddenly stood up straight. “Heeeey! I have an awesome idea!”

Sage raised his eyebrow. “You do?”

“I can practice this spell on myself! Maybe if I use it, I’ll become a fully-ascended goddess, or something.”

“A what?”

Luna shook her head. “It takes many centuries for a goddess’ magic to concentrate enough to give her full power. Right now, I’m kinda, like, half a goddess. So is Celestia, but she’s older than me, so she’s closer to ascending.”

“Princess, the spell only lasts a day.”

“But that’s the best part! Look, I’ve had misadventures trying to speed up my ascension long before you were born. But this is temporary, so it’s not going to screw with the natural order, right? I get to be the big cheese for a day, Celestia gets to take a break, and I learn a spell that you can get magic from. Everypony wins!” Luna reared up on her hind legs and clapped her front two hooves together in delight.

“Well...if you really think that’s best, Princess.”

Princess Luna’s horn began glowing as she sank into concentration. “Just gimme a few minutes.”

Celestia sat back upon her throne. Chasing Luna around had been fun, but seeing an arrest in progress reminded her that she still had work to do. She closed her eyes and began reviewing her remaining duties in her mind. There were five new laws that she needed to review and ratify, all of them excruciatingly long and full of unrelated addendums and minutiae. She was scheduled to visit the charity hospital in the lower quarter. At sunset, there was a knighting ceremony for some noble’s brat, a mere formality that was a mockery of the old purpose of such practices. She calculated the amount of time she had. Even with speed-reading, and

her powerful mind, the laws would take a good two hours. She needed to be at the hospital in an hour and a half. The knighting ceremony would last until her normal bedtime. She either needed to skip dinner or miss out on sleep. Celestia stifled a growl and wished that she kept her schedule on paper, so that she could throw it in the air and maybe tear it to pieces. Releasing the frustration as a sigh, she began to step down from the throne, when she heard hoofsteps at the entrance.

“Flash?” The guard pony walked up to the throne and bowed.

“Your Majesty, I need to see the prisoner. Do you know where he is now, Your Majesty?”

“That young man is in the hospital, having that broken wing you gave him healed.” Celestia’s voice was devoid of any anger, but Flash Burn still averted her eyes.

“I-Your Majesty, I needed to stop him before he could start moving. His flying is too good, Your Majesty.”

“It may not be anymore. Healing wings is no easy business, even for unicorns. If it broke the wrong way, he may never fly the same again.” Flash Burn sank lower to the ground. “But why are you concerned? I thought he was quite the notorious criminal, wasn’t he?”

Flash closed her eyes. “Yes, Your Majesty, but...I’m not sure how to say it. I’ve seen hundreds of criminals, Your Majesty, and all of them had wickedness in your eyes. I saw this colt’s eyes...and I don’t know. I just don’t know.” Celestia stepped forward and brushed her head against the pegasus’.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Flash. But perhaps you shouldn’t see him. He’ll be there tomorrow, and you really need to take a break. I think you should call it quits for the day.”

“I can’t, Your Majesty,” Flash Burn said standing upright once more, “We have that knighting ceremony for Lord Pearl Comb’s son, remember?” The princess winced as if she’d just been smacked.

“Right, well, just promise me you’ll take it easy until then. I can tell when a pony’s had a longer day than the hours should allow.” They gazed into each others’ eyes. They were both far too tired.

“I understand, Your Majesty. I’ll see you in a few hours, Your Majesty.” The captain trotted off, leaving Celestia alone again.

“And now I have 50 minutes to get work done,” Celestia groaned.

“I pronounce you Lord Pearl Wine.” Princess Luna and Princess Celestia lifted their horns from the young stallion’s shoulders. His eyes were full of emotion, as if this was something he was lucky to have. Celestia felt a tiny bit of joy in that, though her own expression remained placid. “You may rise.” The new Lord stood and slowly walked away from the throne, as the quiet but pervasive applause of his family and their allies filled the throne room. Soon, the other ponies were adjourning to the banquet room. Celestia moved to follow them, but she noticed her sister going in the opposite direction.

“Luna? Where are you going? You normally like these banquets more than I do, with all the gossip that goes on.”

Luna turned and gave her sister a smile. “Oh, I just thought I’d get some work done. It’s not like anypony will notice I’m gone.”

“They will, Luna, and they might take offense. Just come for an hour?”

“Sorry, sis, but there’s a lot to do. Just tell them that I was called away to something, okay?”

Celestia sighed. “Fine. Just remember that you have to hold court tonight.”

Luna stopped dead in her tracks. “Crap!” she yelled, loud enough to echo in the throne room. Celestia felt herself blush, and she lowered her head.

“Language, Luna,” she whispered, as if it would make ponies less likely to hear what had already been said. Luna began walking off with loud, angry hoofsteps.

“You’re lucky that you made me promise,” she whined. And, yet, up to her chambers she went. Celestia turned to the banquet, wondering what she would use as an excuse. At least it would be sometime until anypony asked her.

“Oh, Princess, where has your sister gone?” asked a younger mare.

Celestia grinned to hide her nervousness. “Uh...she had to...wash her hair?” The mare’s bewildered face clearly indicated that she hadn’t bought it, but she said nothing and went to join the party.

Celestia lowered her voice to a mutter. “Crap.”

Chapter 5

The arrival of moonset, Celestia noted to herself, felt not unlike being very hopped up on sugar. There was an incredible need burning inside her to just DO things, and it was also impossible to actually sleep. Without stirring from her pillow, she willed her divine magic into the sky and pushed the sun into the heavens once more. In her more philosophical moods, the princess often reflected on the fact that she and Luna were probably to only ponies capable of feeling glum while exercising powers beyond imagination. Changing the night into day did nothing to make Celestia feel any better after yet another night of attempting to appease nobles. Groaning, she pushed herself off her bed.

The princess walked over to her mirror and levitated a brush. She could hardly even get it through the tangle of pink on her head, and after half an hour, she decided that her tail was good enough that most ponies wouldn't notice. She would be sitting down most of the day, after all. Besides, today would be a good day. Flash Burn would finally relax a bit with Everfree's most wanted behind bars, Groza the griffon ambassador was coming by for the first time since winter, and Sage would probably be coming back to spend some time with her. Her close friends were happy, and that made Celestia happy.

The first thing that Celestia noticed upon entering the throne room was that her younger sister, Luna, was decidedly not happy. In fact, she had not seen such an angry glare from the other princess since the only time they'd ever had a real fight. Neither of them could even remember what it was about afterwards, but they had promised to never fight again, not even if the sun burnt to cinders and the moon was lost amongst the stars. Unable to bear the expression on her sister's face, Celestia looked out the eastern window to make sure that the sun was, in fact, in the sky.

"Did you sleep well, sister?" Luna had descended from the silver-and-midnight throne to stare her sister right in the face. Her horn was dangerously close to Celestia's head.

"Ah...no?" Celestia tried to manage a big grin, but it did not soften Luna's expression the slightest.

"Would you like to know how holding court went for me last night?" Celestia stepped back as Luna's face grew closer, but the younger princess pressed in without a delay.

"Not well?"

"I had three petitioners." Luna's glare faltered a bit as she looked off to the side, but it resumed quickly.

"Well, those three ponies must have really had urgent business with you, since they must have either skipped the ceremony or stayed up to come in after." Celestia breathed. That made sense, didn't it? It wasn't about the number, but the importance. And, surely, anypony who would come in that late or miss such an event must have had much more important matters than Celestia's own average petitioners.

"Two of them asked me if I could maybe please make the night start a bit later."

"Oh, that's nothing." Celestia rolled her eyes. "Do you know how many ponies come in asking me if I could put off sunrise so that they could sleep in easier on weekends? I tell you, sometimes I'm tempted to just post a sign. What was the third?"

Luna raised her voice to a shout, "The third one asked me to pose for naughty pictures!"

Celestia stepped back. "But we...Equestria has had no nudity taboo since before even we were born. What could that possibly entail?"

Luna narrowed her eyes, "You can see why I'm a bit upset."

There was an awkward silence, and Celestia sighed. "Luna, I'm sorry. But one bad night doesn't mean that they'll all be like this. You have to keep trying."

"ARGH!" Luna stamped a hoof down. "You just don't get it, do you?" The younger princess fled into the corridors.

"Oh no you don't, young lady. We are going to have a serious-" Celestia began to give chase, but she rounded the corner to find that Luna was already gone. "-chat," the princess said mostly to herself. She took a deep breath and willed magic into the walls of the castle. "This

conversation is not over." She knew that Luna heard the message. With no further way to resolve the matter, she sat upon her throne.

Many minutes passed before the Day Guard marched into the throne room. They all bowed ceremonially. "Captain Flash Burn and the Day Guard reporting for duty, Your Majesty"

"At ease, everypony." The Day Guard stood up stiffly. For them, that WAS 'at ease'. "Anything to report this morning, Captain?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. The agricultural advisor was found stranded in the Foreign Quarter sometime last night, Your Majesty. He said..." the captain trailed off, looking to the side. Celestia's stomach leaped. She should have remembered that Amaranth hadn't the first clue how to navigate a paper bag, much less the lower areas of Everfree. And he certainly would have had no problem saying that Celestia had been the one to leave him there without a way home.

"Please tell him that I would like to see him and apologize." Flash Burn tilted her head in a small bow. "Is there anything else?"

"We recovered most of the objects stolen by Dark Blur from pawn shop dealers, Your Majesty, but we have been unable to locate any of the money he received from selling them, or any objects he may have purchased with such money, Your Majesty. We plan to follow up by finding any gambling houses he may have had debts to, Your Majesty, but-" Flash stopped suddenly. The guard pony bit her lower lip, and some of the other guards were trying their best not to stare at her.

"Out with it, Captain."

Flash sighed. "Your Majesty, I don't think we'll find answers there. The only pony who knows where that money has gone is the criminal himself, and he is in no state for interrogation, Your Majesty."

"That's all right, Captain. Is that all?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Then you are all dismissed."

Flash stood up straight. "Day Guard! Stations!" The other ponies hurried off to their jobs. "Your Majesty, I know I screwed up-"

"You did nothing of the sort." Celestia stepped down from her throne. "Still, I'd like you to tell me why you think looking into the gambling

houses is a bad idea. I've met enough criminals to know that the debts those places rack up can drive a pony to desperation."

"I just have this unshakable feeling, Your Majesty. There's something more to him." The two ponies pondered in silence.

"You said he can't be interrogated now? Surely his wing is well-mended enough that he can move, at the very least."

Flash Burn shook her head. "I stopped by the infirmary early this morning, Your Majesty. His wing will heal properly, they think, but they had to re-break it. I got there just in time for the procedure. It...if I didn't know they were healing him-"

"Stop blaming yourself, Flash." Flash gasped and looked the princess right in the eyes. *Nailed it*, thought Celestia to herself. "Feeling guilty won't get you anywhere. I'm sure he'll be fine."

Flash turned away again. "It's just...when I was taking ballet classes, Your Majesty, there was a girl. She made a bad landing, and she broke her wing. They tried so many things to fix it, but in the end, she couldn't fly at all. She was my friend, but as time went on, I couldn't see her anymore. No pony could, because her parents never let her out. And one day, she-" Celestia heard a sob in Flash Burn's voice, but before she could assuage her, a voice rang out from beyond the gates.

"That, young lady, is why we took you out of those infernal classes." An alabaster pegasus and a deep orange unicorn were walking in the gates, both dressed in finery. Their age was only just starting to show on their faces.

"Mom? Dad?"

"In front of the princess, you will call me SIR, young lady." The white pegasus glared angrily at Flash Burn.

Celestia cleared her throat. "Duke Cirrus, the throne room has not been opened for the day. What are you doing here?"

The white pony and the orange pony both bowed. "Your Majesty, I apologize for intruding, but Lady Spring Dance and I must speak with our daughter about an urgent family matter." Flash Burn was looking at Celestia with a pleading expression.

"I, um, am afraid, Duke Cirrus, that the captain has a very important prisoner to attend to today. In fact, she needs to see him as soon as possible."

The white pegasus glared back over to his daughter. "You have work to do, and you were wasting both your time and the princess' with your daft sob story about that filly offing herself? If we weren't in the throne room, I would-"

"Cirrus Fluff!" The older pegasus bared his teeth upon hearing his full name, but backed down quickly.

"I am sorry that you had to see that, Your Majesty, but my daughter-"

"Is the leader of over two-hundred of Equestria's most fearsome ponies, and the most honorable member of my circle of advisors. You have no right to speak to her that way." The princess and the duke glared at each other.

"With all due respect, Your Majesty, she is my daughter. It is my duty to make sure that she remembers her standing and does not submit to the sentimental behavior of the common riff-raff." Celestia felt her muscles tense, and her magic surge. Perhaps it was because sunrise was so recent, but she still felt the need to unleash her power, and the duke was presenting a very fine target.

"Why Duke Fluff," came an androgynous voice from a corridor, "how wonderful to see you again." Amaranth trotted into the throne room to stand beside the collapsed form of Flash Burn. "I am so sorry that I missed you at the ceremony last night. It's lucky I caught you. I heard that you were discussing arranging a marriage between your daughter and the Princeps Minor, Azure Blueblood." Everypony's eyes opened wide, including Celestia's.

"Er, Lord Amaranth. How well-informed you are. Princess Minor Decadence seemed to have no intention of telling anypony." The duke looked a bit nervous.

"Yes, well, I only heard because apparently she also had to discuss it with the Duchess of Cloudsdale. Apparently she was supposed to marry Blueblood too. You know, that would have made your daughter his second wife? It's a good thing I stopped you in time, Duke Fluff. It would

have been a shame if you had traded your vote away for something like that." The duke looked much more pained than if Celestia had actually thrown him across the room.

"Excuse us, Your Majesty." Duke Cirrus and Lady Spring Dance trotted out of the room quickly. Flash Burn looked up from behind her hooves.

"Amaranth? Why-I thought-but-"

"I figured I owed you for yesterday." The green pony and the pegasus smiled at each other, and Celestia felt all the tension in the room melt away.

"You didn't. But thank you."

"Just promise me that you won't let that old blowhard decide on a husband for you?"

Flash blushed a bit. "I won't. As long as you promise to stand up to him for me."

"No problem. Besides, you seem more like a mare's mare to me anyway." The green pony stuck out his tongue.

Flash brought her hoof to her mouth to stifle a chuckle. "Oh, don't tell me you were planning on proposing?" That broke the dam. Both ponies collapsed to the ground laughing. Even Celestia felt that she had begun to chuckle.

"Okay, you two, enough joking around." She nudged them both off the ground. "Flash, I think you have paperwork to do."

The pegasus shot up into the air. "I forgot! Crap!" She looked down at the princess. "Er. Your Majesty." She disappeared into one of the corridors. Celestia let herself giggle. She then knelt beside Amaranth.

"Amaranth, I am so sorry for abandoning you at the restaurant. It was stupid of me."

"Yes, it was." Celestia winced. Brutal honesty could be brutal. "But I forgive you."

"You were okay, right? I mean, I know you were lost, but other than that?"

"I was not." The green pony turned to let Celestia see his right back leg, which had notable swelling on one of the joints.

"What happened?"

"I was in some alleyway when a gang cornered me. They wouldn't believe that I didn't have any bits left on me after the restaurant. Thankfully, somepony heard the commotion and found the guards. Honestly, if I hadn't been mugged, I might not be here right now."

Celestia frowned. "We never used to have muggers. Not even in Everfree. How are so many ponies so poor when Equestria is the richest land in the world?"

"Princess, if you want to know about economics, you are asking the wrong pony. However, I think the situation may have been alleviated somewhat yesterday."

"Why? Did something happen in the Senate?"

"No. I just think that spending my entire week's stipend ordering every item on the menu at that restaurant must have had some effect on the local economy."

"You didn't." Celestia inched closer to Amaranth. "Tell me you didn't."

"I couldn't decide on what to get. I was going to ask you, but you left."

Celestia looked at her hooves. "I'm sorry. It's just...my sister has been feeling poorly lately. I saw an opportunity to cheer her up, and I took it. I wasn't thinking."

Amaranth nodded. "You can be a bit singleminded when it comes to Princess Luna. Amazing that after centuries, she is still more important to you than anything else in Equestria."

Celestia squinted. "Was that an insult or a compliment?"

"It was a statement." Celestia laughed in spite of herself. She knew that Amaranth had not meant to be funny, but his offhand deflection of the question amused her.

"Alright, alright. You haven't seen Morning Glory today, have you?"

Amaranth looked behind him with a gasp, which made Celestia laugh again. "No, Princess, I have not.," he grumbled.

"Strange, she's always in before it's time for court."

"Oh, goodness, is it that late already? Should I go?" Amaranth stood up, but Celestia placed a hoof on his.

"Let the nobles wait a bit. Why don't you tell me what it was like to have real zebra food for the first time?"

Celestia rubbed her forehead with her hoof. "Decadence-"

"Princess Minor Decadence." interrupted the blonde-maned grey unicorn mare before the throne.

"Explain to me what you mean when you say 'secessionists'," grumbled the princess, heedless of the correction.

"Well, it's a very simple political concept. You see, when there is a state-"

"I mean, why are there any secessionists in Maredrid?"

"Oh, I see." The unicorn laughed. "Well, it seems that the recent tax increase has upset a number of the ponies there. Apparently they don't think that they can run their businesses with a tax placed on official document paper. It's utter nonsense, if you ask me. I think sending a little military presence down there will have the issue resolved swiftly."

"You are in charge of the taxes of that province. You could just lower them."

"Oh, Princess," the unicorn chuckled, "the taxes are to benefit you. The more money I make, the more goes into the royal treasury. We both come out on top."

"Ah, yes," Celestia rolled her eyes, "because I was just thinking that my sprawling palace have enough luxuries. Why, with more money, I could renovate the swimming pool to have diamond studs all around and change colors. Surely that's worth hundreds of Maredrid farmers being unable to afford licenses to sell their produce."

"That's the spirit, Your Highness!" The mare reared up excitedly.

"Out."

"What?"

"OUT!"

"Princess, please recon-" the unicorn mare stopped. A giant bird talon was on her shoulder. Feathers brushed against her mane.

"Mmm, it's been ages since I've gotten a pony in my talons. And you feel so...tender." The voice dripped with predatory lust and hunger.

Decadence Blueblood galloped from the room screaming, leaving an elderly griffon standing alone before the throne. Celestia rose to her hooves.

"Lady Groza of the griffons. Are you threatening a noble in my court?"

"Oh, only a little." The griffon chuckled to herself.

"That could be considered an act of war." Celestia narrowed her eyes.

"Yup." The griffon also narrowed her eyes. There was a moment of silence. And then both of them began laughing.

"Wow. I have never managed to make Decadence shut up that quickly."

"Well, everyone knows that griffons have more charm and charisma, of course." They both laughed again. Celestia moved in for a hug, but was stopped as she saw Groza's front foot held up, talons curled in.

"Uh...huh?" She raised one eyebrow and tilted her head. She had no idea what to make of the gesture.

"Ugh, Celestia, you are so unhip." Groza put her foot down and hugged the princess.

"How are you hip? You're over 200 years old."

"And still way more hip than you, so you should feel pretty bad." The two of them stared at each other for a moment. "So, how was winter?"

"Beautiful, as usual. Some days I wish I could have snow all year."

"If you like it so much, you could come live up in the mountains with me."

"No, Groza."

"Just the two of us. A nice log cabin..."

"Groza-"

"Snuggling up for warmth when the storms hit..."

"Enough, Groza. I'm a goddess. We're not interested in cuddling, or anything related to it, you know that."

"Hmph, maybe you aren't." Groza paced to recline onto Celestia's throne. "Your little sister's a different story."

"What do you mean by that?" The griffon silently preened her feathers. "Groza? What do you mean about my sister?"

"Don't worry about it, I was just teasin'." Groza waved her front foot in the air. "Say, where is the little tyke? This is the first time I've made it all the way to the throne room without her tackling me."

"She's really upset about something. A lot of things. I think it's my fault."

"Hey." Groza placed her foot on Celestia's shoulder. "It's not. I know you, and I know her. If she's mad, it's not at you. Remember the last fight you two had?"

"I try not to."

"Yeah, well, it wasn't your fault either. You can't take responsibility for your sister. She's gotta own up to herself."

"I know, but she's so young."

"She's older'n me."

"It's different for goddesses," Celestia protested, but she could see that the griffon was unswayed by the argument. "Oh, Groza, it feels like Equestria is falling into ruin and I'm just failing to stop it. What am I doing wrong?"

"How much control do you still have over Equestria?" Celestia felt her heart sink. It was too good of a question. "I rule over my lands absolutely, but you, with your Senate...I don't think you have enough power anymore to accept responsibility."

"Maybe. But it's my responsibility anyway." Celestia felt a sharp sting in her shoulder, and realized that Groza had smacked it affectionately.

"And that's why I like ya. Now, I expect that you have a cake ready?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle Gateau has been working very hard. I hope you like strawberries..." the pair walked out of the throne room and off to the kitchen.

Chapter 6

"Luna? Luuunaaa?"

Princess Celestia's voice rang off the castle walls as she once again activated its magic. "I'm so sorry, Groza," she said, turning to the old griffon, "lately she's been so-"

"Up in the library, sis."

"Yeep!" Celestia jumped a bit at the response. "Er, pretend you didn't just see that."

Groza chuckled. "My beak is sealed."

The pair took to their wings and flew up the stairs to the library. Waiting for them at the entrance was Twilight Sage, looking incredibly exhausted. He hung his head upon seeing the princess and the ambassador.

"I can't get her to stop. At this rate she's going to hurt somepony. Probably me." Sage turned to re-enter the library, which led Celestia to notice the state of affairs. Stone bookshelves had been toppled, some of the books were flying and trying to eat each other, and the filing cabinet had turned plaid. Princess Luna was at the dead center of the chaos, her horn aglow in night-sky purple.

"Luna?! What in the world are you doing?" Celestia advanced on her sister, but stopped to try and settle things down with her own magic.

"Practicing! You gotta check this out." Luna reared up on her hind legs, kicking at the air excitedly. Her eyes widened when she faced the entrance. "Groza!" The young alicorn leapt into the air and tackled the griffon in a large hug. Groza managed to keep her footing, though.

"Hey, squirt. I was worried when you didn't catch me halfway into the city. Everything alright?"

"Yeah, I've just been busy. Do the thing!"

Groza rolled her eyes. "Aw, c'mon. Aren't you tired of that by now?" From Luna's widened, shimmering pupils, the answer was obvious.

"You might as well do it, Groza. She'll just keep bugging you."

Groza sighed, smiling. "Fine." The old griffon reared up onto her lion legs and shut her eyes in concentration. Golden shards formed around her swirling in a whirlwind until they became a necklace, which ended in a golden crown. "You know I'm only supposed to do this when I face evil, right?"

Luna giggled. "Ooh, I can be evil, if you like. A vicious monster. Graaawr!" The little goddess once again attempted to tackle the griffon, only to meet with even greater resistance. Groza didn't even move an inch, as if she were made of stone. "Or not. I guess I'm not cut out for evil."

"Wouldn't matter if you were, kid. As the Spirit of Loyalty, none can fell me when I defend others."

"But you weren't defending anyone!"

"On the contrary. I seem to have been defending the princess of Equestria from a vicious monster." Celestia giggled. The fact that the forces more ancient than the world had a sense of humor gave her strange comfort.

"So, Luna, you said you wanted us to see something?" Celestia looked over at Groza to see that the necklace was already gone.

"Oh yeah!" Luna hopped back to her hooves. "Sage found an awesome spell, and I've just about got it. It's hard to hold, though."

"What could you be-?"

"Watch!" Luna braced herself in a wide stance and channeled magic into her horn. Celestia took a step back as her younger sister grew taller, her horn longer, and her wings wider. Her short silver mane grew immensely, and became a starry umbra. Her coat darkened just a little, but it seemed purer somehow. The young goddess wore a huge grin. "Cool, huh?"

Celestia's heart raced. She recognized that spell. It was one she had tried when Luna was still very young, just after their parents had passed on. She remembered what it felt like. The power of the sun had burned in her mind, fueling an unquenchable flame. It would have destroyed her, had she not heard Luna crying in the next room. It was unrelated, of course, but she had almost lost a hold on what was truly precious to her.

"Luna. End that spell right now. You don't know what you're doing."

Luna's grin turned into a snarl. "Don't know what I'm doing? I-oh no." The young alicorn's horn burst into magic once again, filling the room with light. When the light subsided, Luna was normal again, and the floor grew a carpet that felt disturbingly like real hair. Celestia sighed.

"Luna, that spell is for mortal ponies. Goddesses like you and I are tied to the very forces of nature in a way that no other beings are. Messing with our power is very dangerous."

"You just don't like the idea of me being better than you at something."

"Luna, that's ridiculous-"

"It's not!" Luna advanced on Celestia. "I know how you love being the better sister. All the ponies adore you, you and your sun. They act like you're the only princess here, and I bet you wish you were!" Celestia noticed that Luna was glaring at her again, intensely and full of hate. Her eyes shimmered, and Celestia tried to look away. There was just something so very wrong with that look. It wasn't natural. It wasn't the look of a pony, nor of anything else in the world. It was like a beast, or something that even beasts feared.

Luna was stopped by a clawed talon. "Your sister loves you more than anything in the world, squirt." Groza's face was filled with genuine concern. "I know it can be tough sometimes, but we have to trust that those close to us have our best intentions at heart." And that was it. Luna's eyes were once again those of an emotional little filly.

"I guess you're right. Sorry, sis."

Celestia noticed that her wings had flared out, and she folded them up as she tried to regain composure. "It's alright, Luna. I owe you an explanation." Luna's eyes popped. "A long time ago, I tried that spell myself. It messed with my head. The power of the sun is too much for a mind not yet prepared for ascension. The effects were permanent. You probably don't remember much of what I was like before then, but since that time, I've been a little prone to anger."

"Wait, that was magic? I always thought that was just your time of the month." Celestia blushed, and heard Groza launch into uproarious

laughter. She lowered her eyebrows and gave the griffon an even stare. It was not one of anger, nor of any emotion, but the instant she met the griffon's eyes, Groza stopped laughing immediately.

"Wow. Funny thing is, you're a lot scarier when you should be angry and you're not."

"This is serious, girls. Once I discovered the spell's deleterious effects, I hid the book away. I honestly wonder how you found it." Celestia heard a gasp from the corner. Sage had been standing there the entire time, and now appeared to be looking for a way out. His eyes lingered on the stained glass window. "Oh."

"I'm sorry, Princess! I was just doing research. I had no idea."

"I believe you, Twilight Sage. It's alright. Help me clean up after all this, and we can call it even." Sage hung his head. Since he had no magic, he would only be doing cleanup that required muscle and hoof. "Groza, why don't you go with Luna to get some more cake?"

"Ooh, cake!" Luna sprang into the air and began trotting out the door, with Groza right beside her smiling softly.

"Wait, Luna, one last thing." The alicorn stopped and turned around. "Whatever thoughts may have come into your head from the moon while that spell was on...don't listen to them. They'll do nothing but harm."

"Oh, Celestia, I didn't hear anything. Honestly, I felt as normal as ever when the spell was going on, except for being taller." Luna resumed her trot and was soon out of sight.

Celestia's stomach churned. Somehow that made her feel more nervous than ever.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." Sage's eyes were filled with determination.

"You know this will change everything, don't you?" Celestia didn't show her worry, but nothing could hide that she was greatly concerned.

"It's our only choice."

"Alright." Celestia closed her eyes and levitated a great tome in front of her, followed by a quill and a vial of ink. "From now on, we put the agriculture books under administrative sciences rather than physical

sciences." She began crossing out old entries. The change meant they'd have to undo a half-hour of work to get everything re-sorted properly.

"I'm sorry, Princess, but that's the only way we can compensate for the missing section of the shelf." The orange pony kicked aside some pebbles that still remained from the rubble.

"I know. I just didn't think I'd be spending the day that my oldest friend came to visit cleaning up." She levitated a number of books off the shelves and put them into a neat pile on the floor. "She has to head back tonight, and I won't see her again for months at this rate."

"I understand. Sometimes duty keeps us apart from the ones we care about." Sage pushed the books on the lower shelves so that they would be more compact. He didn't look up as he spoke, but Celestia could hear in his voice that his mind was somewhere else.

"You'll get to see her again soon, Sage. It's not like your job requires you to be here all the time, much as you act it." Sage looked back with a sad expression. Wordlessly, he went over to the main desk where his saddlebag was lying. He pulled out a tube with a lens on each end.

"It does now. This device magnifies distant objects like the heavens. The amount of research that could be done on the stars is too great to ignore. I'll be spending every night up in the observatory. Even when she's free, I'll be either working or asleep." He nudged the tube back into the bag. "Innovation can carry a hefty price."

"Even discovery should be tempered by wisdom." Celestia looked at her advisor calmly. He simply stared at the floor.

"I'm sorry that I didn't tell you about the book. I should have gone to you first."

"Yes, you should have." The princess gave the unicorn a hug. "But I forgive you." Sage hugged her back tightly. They both stood in silence for a moment before Celestia released the hug. "Now, let's get back to work."

"Of course." Sage resumed his compression of the economics section as Celestia levitated the new section onto the shelf. The fit was very tight, and he had to put his hooves against the shelf to pull his nose out. "You know, Princess, if you want to go and talk to your friend, I'm sure

I can take care of the rest of this. The magic's all undone and the heavy lifting's over."

"Twilight Sage, I will not have you doing all this work all by yourself." Celestia didn't want to mention that the workload would increase dramatically without the aid of magic. It was always a bit of a sensitive subject with her magic-less advisor.

"I have been doing library work without magic for years, Celestia. This is no different." Perhaps she had taught him too well. The boy was far too smart.

Celestia sighed. "If you're sure. But if you're not done by the time Groza leaves, I'm coming back to help you. Sage didn't respond. He was already getting to work. Celestia slowly walked out of the room, looking back the entire time.

She whispered to herself, "Confound all these insecure ponies."

"You have to leave already?" Luna was looking up at Groza with pleading eyes. The old griffon ruffled the alicorn's mane with a single talon.

"Sorry, squirt, but I've gotta be back in Griffonmont before sunrise to preside over a marriage. It's mostly a political thing, but my claws are tied when it comes to inter-tribal stuff. I can't get out of it."

Luna grumbled, "Stupid sun, always ruining everything."

Celestia watched the scene with an even stare. Luna and Groza were acting as blithely as ever, despite the events that had happened just a few hours ago. She knew that Groza was downplaying it on purpose, but what about Luna? Did she really have no awareness of what was going on?

"Okay, Luna, we should really let Groza get going. We've all got politics to get back to." Celestia placed a hoof on her younger sister's shoulder.

"Fine," groaned Luna with a sigh. She hugged the old griffon and backed off to let Celestia do the same. With that, Groza took off, waving one talon back at the pony princesses. "You owe me a story next season, you old harpy," yelled Luna after the griffon's diminishing form.

"Come on, honey, we have work to do. You still have bills to sign."

"They only need one of us to sign them."

"Yes," Celestia said in the most "yes-but" tone she could, "but do you remember the last time you tried to exercise that little loophole?"

Luna huffed. "For all you know, the newspapers were right and I really WAS off vacationing in Maredrid sipping drinks and fooling around with poolcolts."

"We ate dinner together every night that week."

"I am a master of illusion and trickery. That's just what I wanted you to think!"

"And you hate pools."

"Another deception!"

"And every time you have to drink alcohol, you make this adorable little gagging noise." The two of them stared off for a minute. Luna's eyebrows were knitted, and Celestia's were narrowed despite the fact that her smile was not at all broad enough to force them that way.

"Just gimme a pen." A quill and inkwell levitated right next to Luna, who began signing the papers beside the throne with an exaggerated frown. "Why do we even bother with a senate?"

"Luna, we have this discussion every five years. Long before we were born it was declared that all ponies must be free. That precludes a dictatorship, even one ruled by goddesses."

"But what about other forms of government? We could do what the griffons do. A gera-...gerald-..."

"Gerontocracy."

"That thing! It's way less convoluted than a republic. Just let all the old ponies be in charge."

"The griffons have a complex tribal system. A gerontocracy doesn't necessarily preclude dictatorship, Luna, it merely changes how it's decided who's in charge."

"But the leaders aren't decided by something stupid like royal families! The ponies could still choose who's in charge by making sure the ponies they don't like never reach old age and WOW I already see what the problem with that is." Luna set aside the bills and slumped on the throne. "Guh. I am not cut out for politics."

Celestia sat next to her sister, which was quite a cozy fit on the throne. "You're better at it than I am most days, Luna. You just need to not charge ahead with every little idea before you think it out first. She leaned down to nuzzle her sister. When she opened her eyes, though, she noticed that Luna was no longer next to her, but was rather at the foot of the throne.

"Oh, yeah, 'cause I'm just the little sister, right? I don't know any better, right?!" The younger princess was glaring right at Celestia. Her pupils were shrunken, and...wrong. Celestia couldn't put her hoof on it, but she couldn't help but avert her eyes.

"Luna, I was trying to compliment you." She kept her voice calm, but Celestia felt her heart racing.

"Yeah, well-" the younger princess cut herself off and stared at the ground. "I...I have to go!" Her horn glowed, and with a loud flash, she disappeared.

"Luna!" Celestia stood and looked around. "Luna, where are you?" She spread her wings and flew out the throne room at top speed. She closed her eyes as she sped into the city of Everfree. "What is going on today?"

Chapter 7

Princess Celestia followed the tug of her horn as she honed in on the energy signature of Luna's spells. The tracker spell wasn't usually worth trying, as it couldn't distinguish between different spells, but there was no other choice. Celestia could feel that her little sister was in danger, with a magic much deeper than that channeled through her horn. There was no time to lose.

Eventually, she located the closest location. A stall in one of the town squares in the lower quarter. The princess beat her wings faster and crashed into the door, where she found herself face to face with a blue unicorn with glittering hair.

"Welcome to Shimmerstar glassworks. I'm Shimmerdust, the-" the smiling unicorn began before Celestia cut her off.

"Have you seen Princess Luna?" The princess tried to sound calm, but she was breathing heavily, and her expression of concern was unconcealable.

"Why, yes, she came in here-"

"Which way did she go?"

"Back to the palace." The unicorn seemed completely unperturbed.

"I just came from the palace, of course she's not there!"

"Why, whatever were you doing at the palace?" The unicorn tilted her head. "Sayy...you're the princess, aren't you?" Celestia looked back to make sure her wings hadn't fallen off. Why would anypony even ask that?

"You must be the Shimmerdust I've heard so much about." She sighed.

"How do you know who I am?" the unicorn asked with wide eyes.

"You told me your name ten seconds ago."

"I meant how have you heard about me? Of course I know I told you my name. I'm no airhead." Celestia's eye twitched.

"Look, my sister is missing, and my tracker spell led me here. Do you know why?"

"Sure. My boyfriend said she teleported in here when she came in earlier today. But if it's magical auras you're looking for..." Shimmerdust used her mouth to pull down on a lever that lifted up a large lens, which had, through its light-bending properties, been completely concealing a large pair of glasses behind it. "These show the intensity and properties of magical auras. I've been working on them for over a year now, since I'm not good with magical theory. They were supposed to be a present for...well, somepony else, but I think you need them more." She lifted the pair of glasses onto Celestia's face.

Celestia's eyes were instantly assaulted. The glass shop, already full of color, was now nothing but color. The unicorn in front of her appeared as a vortex of near-white colors and glitter.

"How am I supposed to use these?"

"She teleported in over there," replied Shimmerdust pointing a hoof at a spot on the floor, "so just look at what you see there and try to find the biggest concentration of something similar." Celestia didn't need to focus to see what the unicorn meant. Luna's spell signature was an umbral swirl like a moving painting of the night sky, and quite a bit stronger than anything else in the shop, even the pony.

"Thank you. I'll find some way to repay you." Celestia took off straight up, leaving a hole in the ceiling.

Shimmerdust stood staring up at the new skylight. "I didn't accidentally make those prescription lenses, did I?"

With her new magically enhanced vision, Celestia had no trouble seeing the strongest of Luna's auras. The younger princess had hidden herself deep within the caves under Everfree. Celestia had found a clear spot in town and used her magic to tear through the earth until she reached the caves. She immediately noticed another pony on the opposite side of a still pool of water. The pony was shrouded in darkness, aside from the fading magic around its horn. However, the lenses told Celestia that it was most certainly her sister.

"Luna? Come here, sweetie, and let's talk about this." The other pony didn't respond, or even move. Celestia used her wings to hover above the pool, and inched closer to her sister.

"Why is this happening? What is this?" Celestia heard the sob in the other pony's voice. It was like her sister's, but a bit deeper, and lacking the usual childlike energy.

"Luna, I got mood swings from that spell, too. It's alright. They'll get better, I promise, but right now-"

"Mood swings?" The voice was even deeper now. "Is that all you think this is?" The sob had disappeared. "You still think of me as a witless child, don't you?" The other pony lifted her head. It had the eyes, the horrible eyes, full of evil and the promise of death. "You bitch!"

That's when Celestia noticed that the other pony wasn't so hard to see because of the lighting, but because she was pitch black. On those last words, her mane flared to life, a menacing, living nebula of stars.

"You're not my sister." Celestia looked the other pony straight in the eyes. "What are you?"

"What am I?" The pony chuckled condescendingly. "You can't even spare me the grace of a 'who'? Well, it matters not. Soon, you will be dead, and I will rule Equestria as Nightmare Moon!" The black mare reared up and cast her horn aglow. Celestia's glasses warned her that a lightning spell was brewing, and she threw up a shield just in time to keep from getting electrocuted.

"Give my sister back, you monster." Celestia returned fire with bolts of sunlight. She knew that the evil goddess could easily block them, but they were a simple enough message of deadly intent.

"Oh, Celly, Celly, Celly. I'm still your dear, sweet sister." Nightmare Moon spat the words. "Now come give me a hug!" The mare leapt up to ram its horn straight through Celestia's chest. Celestia pushed with her wings, clearing the height just in time to avoid a goring.

"With pleasure." Before Nightmare Moon landed, the older princess snared her telekinetically and flung her up through the hole that she had made from the surface. Without delay, she rushed up after her to continue the fight. However, on the ground next to the hole, she saw the form of Luna lying on the ground, crumpled up. "No, Luna!"

"Big sister?" moaned Luna weakly. "I'm sorry. I-ARGH!" With a piercing shriek, Luna's limbs stretched, and her coat blackened, as her hair came to life once again and wrapped Celestia in a stranglehold.

"No," growled Nightmare Moon through clenched teeth, "I won't go back. I won't let myself love you ever again. You don't deserve love. None of you ponies do!" The dark mare threw Celestia to the ground, face-first. Celestia shook the pain away.

"If you really are Luna, then I will always love you. You know that, don't you?"

Nightmare Moon snarled. "You haven't a loving bone in your body. It's all lies. I thought I was the trickster, but I believed your lie for centuries. No! More!" Nightmare Moon kicked Celestia with her front hooves. Celestia felt her breath go, but used the momentum to allow herself an easy liftoff.

"Your mind is being toyed with!" Celestia levitated rocks and hurled them at the dark mare. "Stop this, please."

"No, it is only now that I see clearly." Nightmare Moon easily batted away the oncoming rocks. "You only pretended to love me because you needed me to raise the moon. But you knew you would ascend first, and once that happened, you would-" she was cut off as a boulder from the rear soared past her peripheral vision to hit her solidly in the body. She fell over, and her form slowly started melting back to the form of the young princess.

"I love you Celestia," Luna's voice came through, accompanied by tears. "I love you so much. Please, end it now. She'll-NOOOOO!" Nightmare Moon's full form reasserted itself.

"Oh, but you don't need to know that yet," chuckled the mare of darkness. She flung all the rocks back at Celestia, who had to use both aerial maneuvers and magic to stay safe. Nightmare Moon took off to the sky as well, attempting to engage Celestia in melee combat. Since the dark goddess was bigger than Celestia, she would have the advantage.

"All I need to know is that love will win the day. Perhaps you've forgotten that in Equestria, the heart is the most powerful magic." Celestia climbed into the air, forcing Nightmare Moon to chase her. They reached the level of clouds very quickly, and Celestia landed on top of a large one.

Nightmare Moon landed on the cloud as well. From the vantage point, both could see that the sun was low in the sky and painting everything red. "But there's some other powerful magic as well." Celestia's horn glowed, and the red-lit cloud suddenly came alive. It trapped Nightmare Moon's hooves, and her struggles to get free did nothing.

"That sun will go down soon, and then we'll see who has the powerful magic." Celestia paid the words no heed and flung Nightmare Moon to the castle tower, where she crashed through the wall.

"No! She was supposed to resist that." The princess dived after her sister. She stood over the limp form of the dark mare, lying on the floor of the observatory. "Luna! Luna, can you hear me?"

The dark mare's eyes opened slowly. They were the eyes of a pony once more, though none of the rest changed. Tears flowed freely from Luna's eyes, over Nightmare Moon's face.

"Big sis," came Luna's voice just barely above a whisper, "you look totally dorky in glasses."

Luna's shriek of agony resounded through all the lands of the world, marking the Eve of Darkness.

Princess Celestia shook her head to clear the ringing in her ears. She saw Nightmare Moon standing opposite her in the observatory.

"Hm. Finally." The dark mare smiled approvingly at her own hooves. "I was worried that little brat had a fighting chance." Celestia readied her magic for another volley, but Nightmare Moon only chuckled. "Oh, don't worry about that, Celly dear. I was only overreacting because I was a bit at war with myself, you see." She began pacing around Celestia. "Oh, but that was just a phase. I'm all better now, I promise."

"No, Luna, you're not. You need help."

"Luna? Oh, my, it seems you've forgotten." In an instant, Nightmare Moon disappeared into the cloak of her own mane, reappearing right next to Celestia. Celestia hardly had time to register this as she was immediately kicked to the ground. "It's Nightmare Moon now."

"No," groaned Celestia, trying to ignore that some of her ribs had just broken. "You're still Luna. You're still my little sister, and I still love you." She tried to struggle to her feet, but Nightmare Moon kicked her again.

"Of course you do," cooed the dark mare. "Twue wuv always wins the day, doesn't it Cewwy-wewwy." She resumed her pacing. "Well, maybe you haven't noticed, but Luna is no more. I am free of that sickening admiration you programmed into me. But if I loved you, then what was the problem? After all, we all know how magical a pony's heart can be. Oh, I know." She leaned down next to Celestia's face. "Your love just wasn't strong enough." Nightmare Moon walked to the other end of the observatory.

"You're wrong," Celestia said between coughs. "This isn't over. You think that a little injury will stop me?"

"Of course not," snapped Nightmare Moon, "do you think I failed to notice how annoyingly stubborn you can be?" Her mane flared to life, but quickly calmed down. "But it doesn't matter. Your sun will only last another five minutes. Once that happens, they sky is mine. For you see, sister dear," she spat the word, "with my ascension, I've gained the power to control both sun and moon. And the night will last FOREVER!" Nightmare Moon cackled with glee.

"I can still stop you." Celestia struggled to her feet.

"Oh, really? You're running out of time, sister, and the game has changed. You see, beforehand, dear little Luna was holding me back. But now, there is nothing stopping me from destroying you." Celestia felt herself lifted into the air, but not by telekinesis. The magical energy was running through her body. No, it was tearing through it, slowly upwards. "Oh, sister, the heart really is the most powerful magic in Equestria. Now you will see what happens when a heart turns black." The tearing grew faster. Celestia could see the bottom of her body dying and withering.

"I can still stop you," she gasped weakly.

"Have you already resorted to repeating the last coherent thought you could manage? You were always weak, sister, just like all the ponies of Equestria who fear the dark. They will soon learn as you have."

"I can stop everything." Celestia poured all her magic into her horn. It glowed with enough power to bathe the room in light.

"No! You won't get the chance!" Celestia knew that it was obvious what she was doing. She raced to weave the complex magic as

the tendrils of death ripped further and further into her body. She felt them reach her heart.

All went black.

Chapter 8

Bump.

The sudden force under Celestia urging her back into the waking world was immediately disturbing. She never woke up to anything other than the urge of the sun, or occasionally another pony's voice. The physical world being upset beneath her as she was unconscious registered as an immediate threat, and her mind rushed to respond. She immediately tried to open her eyes, only they didn't open. It was no issue of blindness, but she could feel her eyelids refusing to respond. She tried moving her legs next, but they felt even more unresponsive, if that was even possible.

"Celly, Celly, Celly..." came a voice from right next to Celestia's ear. The princess' heart raced faster. "Even your most desperate measure failed. And now you're mine." Nightmare Moon's voice danced all around, as if the evil mare had enveloped Celestia within her darkness. "You never loved me, but you will now." Celestia tried to respond, but her mouth was as immobile as the rest of her body. "I'll make you love me." Nightmare Moon's voice sounded quieter now, but somehow closer and angrier. "I will take your heart, your soul," the evil mare's voice dropped to a whisper, "your body." Celestia tried to move anything and everything. Her body felt like a cage for her mind, now doomed to suffer. She felt the oppressive heat of another body pressed against her. "And I'll take them now." Celestia tried to scream, but felt only the quietest of whimpers escape her lungs.

"Princess? Are you awake?" The voice wasn't Nightmare Moon's. It wasn't even Luna's. Celestia's eyes shot open. She was in a wooden cart. It smelled like the library, and there were a few books wedged in the cart with her. In a panic, the princess shot her leg out to keep everything away from her, to get to safety. She felt her hoof make contact with something fleshy but hard. The fleshy hard thing cried out in pain. As her vision cleared, Celestia saw her faithful advisor, Twilight Sage, staggering back from the cart.

"Sage?" the princess said weakly. The mouth felt perfectly mobile, but when she tried to speak, she noticed that she was incredibly dehydrated. Her throat had never felt drier, in fact. Along with that realization came the one that every single part of her hurt. Her muscles burned like she had been exercising them all at once, and her head felt like she had won a game of "chicken" against a rock. She curled herself up instinctively, as if something was assaulting her from the outside.

Sage walked back up to the cart. "Try to calm down, Princess. I believe that your spell may have had an issue in its execution. It may take time for you to recover." Celestia relaxed her body. The pain was already starting to go away.

"Water." She wanted to say something else, to ask what had happened, but that was all that came out.

"Of course, Princess. Just sit tight." Sage walked out of sight, and the cart began moving. Celestia shut her eyes. Exhaustion threatened to overtake her again, but the dull pain kept her awake until the cart stopped moving again. "Here. This fountain is still working. Can you move?" Celestia managed to move her hooves under her body, but as she strained to rise to standing, she merely pushed herself off the back of the cart and onto the floor face-first. It didn't hurt too much, but it sapped her will to keep trying. Celestia went limp and felt herself start sobbing. She hardly registered her advisor dragging her head by the mane until it rested on the edge of a stone fountain. She lowered her head and took drinks between sobs.

"I don't want to rush you, but we have to finish quickly. This wing only has another ten minutes before it collapses." A rumbling shook the building. "Make that six."

Celestia raised her head from the fountain. "What's going on? Is Nightmare Moon attacking the castle?"

"Who?" Sage narrowed his eyes while simultaneously raising his eyebrows, a look Celestia had long ago identified as one that he used when attempting to discern if another pony was crazy.

"I'll tell you later. Just...explain, okay?"

"Short version?"

"Yes."

Twilight Sage took a deep breath. "The other spell you cast seems to be taking more energy than your body actually holds, possibly because that other alicorn is fighting it. It seems that you've unconsciously started unweaving magic around you for more energy. And, since you're in the middle of Everfree Castle, which is a giant pile of enchantment, well...this entire place is coming apart. The throne room and some other places should remain intact, but I had to get you all the way down from the observatory first. It's been a couple hours."

"Hours?!" Celestia began coughing. Yelling was definitely a mistake. "I've been out for hours?"

"Well, yes. Casting a big spell after you'd already drained yourself? I had little hope that you would wake up at all."

"Why do you keep saying I cast two spells? I cast a spell to keep Nightmare Moon frozen in time, and then I blacked out."

Sage sighed. "Look in the fountain's pool." Celestia obliged him, and immediately noticed what was wrong. Her horn was missing from her head, and her wings from her body. Her royal crown and the rest of her regalia were all gone as well. Her proportions also suggested that she was quite the same size as a normal pony.

"My clone spell?" At least her wits had not deserted her. It all made sense. Her muscles were atrophied, her clothes gone, and she felt like she'd never eaten or drank. An incredibly minimalistic clone spell would result in an earth pony body without any excess calories, water, or muscle mass. And, if she'd been in the stasis spell as well, she wouldn't need to use magic to keep up two bodies at once, meaning that she would need to spend zero magic at all until she broke the time freeze.

"Yes. I'm not sure how you forgot about it. Perhaps the blackout gave you a small amount of amnesia?"

"It must have. So, does that mean that my original body is in the stasis bubble with Nightmare Moon?" Sage nodded. "And she's still not moving?" Sage nodded again. Celestia heaved a sigh of relief. Disaster had been averted. She had time to think. "Let's get out of the castle. I need to find some food, and we need to figure out how to fix this mess." She pushed herself off the fountain, only to find that she could still not support

her own weight. However, this time, Sage caught her before she hit the ground.

"Let's get you back in the cart." With Sage's help, Celestia managed to climb back into the cart. She was able to make out the titles of some of the books. They appeared to be tomes of theology and history, none of them written in modern Equestrian.

"Sage, what are these for?"

"You'll see," said the unicorn dourly, as he picked up the cart and took Celestia down the corridor.

"Don't play games, Sage. I'm far too tired for them."

"You need to rest. It will take some time to explain, and we really have to get moving. Besides, I think you need to see it for yourself." Celestia's stomach churned. Mostly out of hunger, but she was also nervous. What else had gone wrong?

A short time later, Celestia noticed that they had arrived in the throne room. Non-magical torches had already been placed in the sconces along the walls, casting the room in a light that seemed somehow more eerie than the dimness of the hallways. She heard quick hoofbeats rush to the side of the cart.

"Sage? Are you alright?" It was Flash Burn's voice.

"I'm perfectly fine, Captain, but the princess could use your help." Flash Burn's head appeared over the cart.

"Your Majesty! I am so sorry. I didn't see you there, Your Majesty."

"It's all right, Flash." Celestia smiled weakly.

"Please, Your Majesty, tell me what I can do for you."

"I need food."

Flash frowned. "The areas leading to the kitchen have collapsed. There's no way in. The only other food I could find quickly is the food being taken by evacuees, but..."

Sage's head appeared next to Flash's. "What about the food in the hospital wing that's kept there for emergencies? None of the nurses were taking anything with them when they left, and we still have a couple minutes before that part of the castle collapses."

"The hospital's going to collapse?" Flash sounded very panicked.

"Yes, but there were no patients there, so-" Sage was talking to air. He looked around the room before turning back to Celestia. "If she's not back in a minute, we have to go."

"Sage, what did she mean by evacuees? What's going on?" Sage walked around to the back of the cart so that they could talk face to face.

"The pattern destabilization I spoke of earlier is spreading. Most of the upper quarter has magic architecture of some type or another. Once that destabilizes, the entire city will become a disaster zone. I was not confident that the issue leading to your sister's imprisonment would be resolved quickly, so I proposed at the Senate's emergency meeting that we evacuate immediately, under the standard protocol. They agreed."

Celestia felt her head swimming. Had she actually made things worse by trying to stop Nightmare Moon? "How exactly can you tell that's my sister up there?"

"Her flank, of course. It appears that no matter what form you two take, you keep those divine marks." Sage gestured towards Celestia's flank, which still had a golden sun emblazoned on it.

"Okay, second question: how did you get the Senate to agree to something like that? I may trust in your expertise, but those ponies can't agree to do something reasonable, let alone force everypony to abandon their homes."

"They've already been spooked. I didn't have to try hard to push it through."

"Spooked from what?"

Sage sighed. "I guess there's no putting it off. I'll show you." He took hold of the cart once again and wheeled it to the gates of the throne room. In an instant, Celestia understood everything.

The sky was black. There was no moon, and there were no stars. It was even blacker than the space between the stars had ever been.

"That's why."

"This feels wrong." Celestia looked apprehensively at the array of food in front of her.

"They're not coming back for it." Sage pushed a plate of fruit salad towards the princess.

"But still. Breaking into a noble family's house to eat their food? That's just not right, especially for a princess." In spite of her words, Celestia cleaned the china plate in front of her with a ferocity unmatched by any mortal pony.

"Desperate times, Celestia." The unicorn ate some food himself, albeit much more slowly. Celestia attempted to telekinetically summon a dish of baked vegetables before remembering that she had no horn. She leapt onto the table and dug into the dish, entirely ignoring table manners.

"So, you never explained all the books," Celestia managed between bites.

"I suppose now is as good a time as any." Sage pulled the largest tome from the cart and placed it on the table. He opened it to a page somewhere near the middle. "This book is a compilation of traveler's tales from before the foundation of Equestria and the establishment of Everfree. The wild ponies had many legends concerning the Elements of Harmony."

"They're real, Sage, if that's your concern. You saw one earlier."

"Yes, yes, that's where I got the idea in the first place." He pointed to the book. "The wild ponies did, in fact, have what I now believe to be accurate descriptions of them. This tale here and another one speak of golden necklaces which can be summoned in a flash of light. Other tales mention stones with symbols on them which match descriptions of ancient symbols. I think that these are the unbound forms of the Elements. Why, they might have evidence as to the creation of-

"Focus, Sage."

The unicorn cleared his throat. "Ah, yes, well, do you remember what the ambassador said? A single Element has the power to render her invincible under the correct circumstances. Not even your magic can do something like that. If we could harness that power, we might be able to fix whatever's going wrong."

Celestia finished another bowl of food and looked around for more. Finding that she had cleared the entire table, she climbed back down

to the floor. "Well, I'm not sure that we can get the Element of Loyalty from Groza. It's bound to her."

"Ah, but I have a backup plan." Sage pulled out another book. "This is what was recovered of the Testament of Freedom after it was destroyed in the war."

Celestia frowned. "And what does that evil thing have to do with the Elements of Harmony?"

Sage grinned. "Maybe if you'd ever bothered to learn Draconic, you'd know."

"Even dragons don't speak Draconic anymore, Sage."

"But they did when they wrote THIS." He pointed to a section of gibberish. Celestia raised an eyebrow at him. Sage's smile became a nervous one. "Ah, I'll read it aloud. 'The Dragons of Wisdom', ah that's part of their creation myth," Sage commentated, "'handed down the Elements of Harmony to all the free beings of the world, and so they shall not be kept from any. To the Sons and Daughters,' that's the dragons, 'goes the Element of Generosity, for though the power is theirs to take or destroy, they give equally to all the free beings of the world.'"

Celestia mumbled a few syllables in an attempt to invent new vulgarity, but didn't interrupt.

"The damage makes the next section unreadable, but here it says 'griffons' and 'Loyalty', and we know that still matches up. It also has 'serpents' and 'Kindness' in the same line, so that's a pretty safe bet too. Already we have solid leads on two other Elements." Sage shut the book.

Celestia sighed. "I guess if the griffons still have theirs, then the others might be the same too. Alright, I'll start off towards Griffonmont as soon as I can. I guess that will leave you in charge of the Senate, if they can even meet outside the city."

"Don't be ridiculous. I must go with you." Sage closed the book and placed it back in the cart.

"You must? Sage, you know that I would not deny your company without good cause. The people need an intelligent pony to keep things together."

"And you need me more. Celestia, you don't know any provincial tongues that weren't around centuries ago, and the road to

Griffonmont alone takes you through two places where you'll need to use local dialects. Outside major cities, very few ponies speak proper Equestrian."

Celestia placed a hoof on Sage's shoulder. "My trusted advisor, I have journeyed through Equestria time and time again. Do you really think I am without ways of getting around?"

"And what might those ways be?" Sage asked with a cocked eyebrow and a doubtful tone.

"A rather obscure, though handy, spell that-" Celestia gestured to her forehead and felt a sinking sensation in her gut. No horn. No magic at all. She smiled weakly at her advisor. "So, how's your packing coming?"

Sage smiled back at her. "It's all done, actually. I'm always prepared for a journey. I've left an emergency travel pack with Shimmerdust, and she knows where to meet me in case of emergencies like this."

"I'm not sure, Sage. She seems like the kind of pony who wouldn't notice an emergency was going on."

Sage scrunched up his face a little. "Well, I...when did you have the chance to meet her, anyway?"

Celestia's eyes narrowed despite her smile being quite small. "Not too long ago. So, we'll be stopping by her shop, then?"

Sage shook his head. "Whether or not she thought anything of the sky darkening, the Guard would have informed her of the evacuation. She is situated right on a square, after all. No, it would be best to make haste to the rendezvous."

"You sound like you're excited to go."

Sage smiled, but looked at the floor. "Well, can't a pony want a little adventure?"

"Of course." Celestia began walking to the door. Her hooves felt sure beneath her, like the banquet had restored her to perfect health in an instant. "And actually living one will most certainly be better than just writing novels about it."

There was a pause. "How does everypony know about those?"

The lower quarter of Everfree was not as it should have been. Even at night, the ponies of Everfree would light the streets with lamps.

Lovers would sing to their beloveds from beneath windowsills. Whispers would be heard in alleyways. Drunkards would stagger out of taverns. But in the darkness, not a whinny could be heard. Only the sound of the hoofbeats of two ponies, walking along slowly.

"Sage, do you think that everypony is alright?" Celestia turned to her advisor with a worried look.

"I do." Sage did not look back at his mentor. He was too busy looking around. "The evacuation protocols are quite sound. Even if they were made before the city was divided, they are designed to keep up with a changing populace. Although," he looked down at the ground, "they were made assuming that the Guard would be maintained at full strength."

"The Guard is very diligent. I am sure that any slack caused by loss of numbers was taken up by determination."

Sage laughed. "Ah, you should have seen Captain Flash. She was giving out orders like presents on the Winter Moon Celebration. Even Captain Destrier wasn't safe from her. I was sure somepony would wet themselves before she was through."

"She can be quite fierce when she's doing her duty, can't she?"

"So it seems. I guess my impression of her as shy was mistaken. In fact, no pony else seems to think of her that way."

Celestia rolled her eyes. "All those brains, and yet so much to learn."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"Oh, look, the gate." Sage turned his head. Indeed, the main gate of Everfree was just ahead. A line of guards stood in it, all facing outward, standing between the city and thousands of ponies. "We should probably warn them that we're coming."

"Good idea." Sage took a deep breath and called out. "Hello, the gate!"

Some of the guards turned. "Twilight Sage! Where's the princess?"

"Here." Celestia turned her flank mid-stride so that the guards could see it. They went slack-jawed.

"Er, yes, of course. Your Highness. Sorry." They separated to make way for the two ponies. Celestia and Sage passed through quietly.

After they were out of earshot, Sage leaned in so that his head was next to the princess' ear.

"Did you need to do that so...like that?"

"Like what?" Celestia raised her eyebrows in confusion.

"The way you, uh, showed your flank. When you walk like that it's...well, it's a little bit...oh, I'm not sure how to put this."

"Just speak plainly."

"It's what ponies in the Lower Quarter call 'shaking that thang'."

Sage stared intently at his hooves.

Celestia boggled. "That? That is what gets stallions in a tizzy? THAT is what you ponies make a big deal over?" Sage's silence told Celestia all she needed to know. "Wow. Next you'll be telling me that bucking is 'sexy'." Sage scrunched his face up and drove it into the ground. "You can't be serious."

"Just, please, never EVER do that again unless you absolutely have to. Either of those things, actually."

"Hey!" The voice didn't come from Celestia or Sage. Both of them looked over to the source. It was an earth pony with laden saddlebags and a strong build. "Are you really the Princess?"

Celestia stood in front of Sage. "Yes, I am. The state of affairs has left me in the body of an earth pony, but with any luck, that will soon be-"

"What happened to the sky? Where's the moon?" The large pony stepped forward until his height pressed on the princess.

"Calm down, sir. We're working to resolve it right now, if you'll just-"

"Don't give us that damn politico talk!" Another pony stepped forward. A mare just barely old enough to be an adult. "You tell us straight up what happened."

Celestia sighed. "Something happened to my sister, Princess Luna. She's had to be dealt with until-"

"What did you do with Princess Luna?" A third pony stepped forward. Then a fourth. A mob of ponies began surrounding Celestia and Sage.

"We've had to temporarily-"

"You royals and your infighting. Do you ever bother to consider the rest of us ponies?"

"Yes, I-"

"We've had it with you messing up our lives for your little power games!"

"It's not-"

"This ends now!" The mob closed in around the two ponies. The blaze of torches lit their bodies, but in the darkness, none of their eyes could be seen. All speech was drowned out by the rising collective noise of the ponies, and their hoofbeats coming closer.

Chapter 9

The din of the refugees closing in made Celestia unable to hear her own voice. She could vaguely make out her advisor, Twilight Sage, yelling something back at the other ponies, but he was pushed to the ground as he tried to fend them off. Celestia was running out of room to move. She felt the muscles in her back tense, as if she still had wings to fly away with. Without that option, though, it was starting to look like fighting would be the only answer. But she was still weak. Her tail brushed against somepony. She prepared to kick.

Her back hooves met with empty air. Celestia looked up and saw that, one by one, the ponies around her were being lifted into the air, surrounded by magical glows of varying colors. They were even louder now, many of them screaming in surprise. As they cleared the ground, three unicorns in silver armor, horns bursting with energy, marched under the levitated crowd. They parted from their triangular formation to reveal a green earth pony in a very old-looking set of bronze barding.

“Amaranth?” Celestia took a single step forward. “Is that you? What in Equestria are you wearing?”

Amaranth closed his eyes. “You’ve missed a lot in the past few hours, Princess.” He gestured with a hoof at the three unicorns. “These are Sirs Mistlocke and Dream Catcher, and the Lady Nightshade. They’re elite members of the Night Guard.” The unicorns glanced, but they didn’t bow. Their eyebrows were furrowed in concentration.

“And why are you marching around like this? And in that ridiculous getup?”

“This is not the first time tonight that a mob has formed targeting the nobility. Many nobles are far from able to protect themselves, so those who are able have taken it upon themselves to keep the rest of the nobility safe.” The unicorns set the crowd down many feet away, and the other ponies began to disperse. “I just hope this doesn’t get out of hoof. Being of the noble class does not always give one noble intentions.”

“You still haven’t explained-“

“The armor,” Amaranth interrupted, “belonged to my ancestor, who fought in the war and earned our family the duchy. I did not want to leave it behind in Everfree in case we were forced to abandon the city forever.”

“How optimistic.” Celestia helped pick Twilight Sage off the ground. “I have to say, Amaranth, I never pegged you for the fighting type.”

“I am not. I believe I mentioned that the nobility with fighting ability were protecting those without.” Amaranth’s statement led Celestia to look again at the three unicorns. They had returned to a triangular formation around the green earth pony.

“So you’re going around getting yourself into trouble even though you’re...” Celestia looked at the bronze armor, “basically defenseless?”

“I am not a weakling, Princess, merely untrained.” Amaranth looked at his own hoof. “Also, I have not yet found a convenient place to store this. I believe that I will require some ointment for the chafing.”

Celestia stifled a giggle. “You’ve been very brave, Amaranth. We’re looking for a unicorn named Shimmerdust. Can you and your retinue help us?” The unicorns all gasped, and Amaranth sighed.

“Finding her won’t be hard. Come with me.” The unicorns all looked at each other hesitantly, but raised no objection.

Twilight Sage groaned. “Oh, no.”

The walk took the ponies over ten minutes. As much as Celestia had tried to get Amaranth to reveal what had given everypony such apprehension at Shimmerdust’s name, the green pony refused to say anything. This change from Amaranth’s normal open bluntness upset Celestia. What could be so bad that even he wouldn’t say it?

Finally, the walk led to a large cluster of ponies who seemed quite a bit more calm than the last one. The unicorns ordered the ponies to make a path, and they complied. However, the group was not ten feet in before somepony yelled out.

“That pony has the royal mark on her flank!”

This caused the ponies to erupt in frantic conversation. Unlike the last group, however, this one was not talking to the princess directly.

Rather, they seemed to be arguing among themselves. Celestia was unable to make out any of it, though she swore that she kept hearing the word "goddess". She turned to Amaranth.

"Are these ponies going to cause trouble?"

"Not for us," Amaranth said curtly. "Come. We're very close."

The crowd gave Celestia a lot of distance, but their arguments were becoming more pitched, many ponies even yelling.

"Why are they all arguing? Amaranth, you're not telling me something, and I'm getting really worried."

"Here." Amaranth pushed an earth pony aside, giving Celestia a view of a clearing. The ponies were dressed in simple white cloths and bowing before a makeshift throne assembled from the remains of merchant stalls. Two ponies in what appeared to be bronze bikinis stood fanning the pony who stood upon the throne. That pony was a very familiar blue unicorn with glittering hair. Celestia's jaw dropped.

"Shimmerdust?!" Her yell was accompanied by Twilight Sage's. His expression was more composed, but his voice no less shocked. The blue unicorn on the throne turned her head.

"Sage!" Shimmerdust leapt from her throne, the force of which caused the thin wood to creak. She rushed to hug Celestia's advisor. "I was worried after they closed the gates."

Sage returned the hug half-heartedly, still looking worried.

"Honey, what's going-"

"The Prophet has chosen a consort!" One of the ponies near the throne held a hoof in the air. The surrounding crowd cheered. "Praise her glory!"

"Praise her glory!" repeated the entire crowd. They parted so that everypony could get a good view of Twilight Sage, who looked as if he had just had a door slam on his tail.

"Prophet?" Sage slipped out of Shimmerdust's embrace. "What are they all talking about?"

"Oh, I think they mean me. Somepony must have gotten my name wrong, and I guess it caught on. I've tried to correct them, of course, but misconceptions spread so fast, you know?" Shimmerdust giggled.

"Honey, listen very closely. What were you doing before they started calling you that?"

Shimmerdust looked off to nowhere in particular. "Let me see...I guess the last thing I was doing was talking with some ponies about the whole stars going out thing. I drifted off for a bit while I was talking, and next thing I know, there are a hundred ponies surrounding me and calling me Prophet. Maybe I accidentally introduced myself wrong? From what I hear, the things I say that I don't remember can be quite silly." She giggled again. Twilight Sage looked nervously at Celestia.

"Have you met Shimmerdust before?"

"Yes, once, not a few hours ago," Celestia answered uncertainly. She certainly didn't remember the blue unicorn being terribly prophetic.

"Oh, don't be silly," Shimmerdust said with her head between the two of them. "We've never met before."

Celestia raised an eyebrow. "It was just before sunset. You gave me glasses."

"Nooo..." Shimmerdust smirked. "At sunset, I met the Princess. And if your story were true YOU would be wearing glasses." She turned to Sage looking proud of herself. "I'm totally getting the hang of this 'deductive reasoning' stuff you're always talking about." Sage's hoof was buried in his face.

"Darling, that IS the Princess."

"Nuh-uh. The Princess has a horn, wings, and a really straight mane. This girl's an earth pony with a really frizzy mane. See?"

Shimmerdust used a hoof to bounce Celestia's mane up and down. Celestia felt her heart fall into her stomach. Her clone had started out fresh, which meant no brushed mane.

Sage stepped beside Celestia. "Look, she really is Celestia. See her flank?" Shimmerdust peered around the voluminous hair.

"Wow! So do you, like, turn into a normal pony at night because you're the Sun Goddess?"

Celestia inhaled to respond, but felt her breath arrested when a pony nearby yelled out. "The Prophet reveals to us the secrets of the divine! Praise her glory!"

"Praise her glory!" replied the crowd.

"Oh but wait," Shimmerdust looked off to nowhere, "we saw Luna during the day, so that can't be it. Maybe you're a clone." Celestia's eyes widened and she tried to respond, but she didn't get that far.

"The Prophet sees through mysteries and deceptions! To her, all truth is revealed! Praise her glory!"

"Praise her glory!"

"Enough!" Celestia reared up and slammed her hooves on the ground. "I am your goddess, and I am trying to have a private conversation! Hold the praising for just a minute, alright?!" The princess tried to slow down her breath, but her heart was still beating quickly. The other ponies quieted down quickly, though they were still murmuring. However, one of the fan ponies dropped her fan and stepped forward.

"The Goddess must speak with The Prophet! Everypony, please do not disturb them." Celestia turned her head. The voice sounded very familiar. The pony stepped out from the shade of the throne and into the torchlight, revealing a dark coat and a flowing auburn mane. She trotted up to the princess. "About time you got here," she said dropping her voice to a more conversational volume.

Celestia closed her jaw. "Morning Glory? What are you doing here?" She looked down. "And where did you get that outfit?"

"Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to, Princess." Glory waved a hoof in the air dismissively. "And as for what I'm doing here, well, I noticed this little cult forming, and I figured I'd try to get in so I could keep it twisted around my hoof."

Celestia raised an eyebrow. "Are...are you trying to take over the world?"

Morning Glory laughed. "Oh, heavens no, Princess. I wanted to make sure they could be easily dealt with once you were back on your hooves. Although I wish I'd seen you before they did. They've already started splitting into...denominations. It could be tricky."

"Right." Celestia rubbed her temples. "Look, Sage and I have to go save the world, and he left his stuff with your 'Prophet' here. We came to get it."

"Where are you going? Surely Everfree's library has the best resources for you to fix this."

Celestia shook her head. "The only magic powerful enough for this task is the legendary Elements of Harmony. They're all in foreign lands."

"Oh." Morning Glory looked away. "Yes, of course. I suppose I'll," she sniffled, "I'll just have to get used to not seeing you every day. And worrying if you'll ever return. But don't fret, Princess, I'm sure I can handle it."

Celestia rolled her eyes. "Fine, you can come with us."

Morning Glory leapt in excitement. "Oh, thank you, Princess! As long as we don't take any highways, I don't think we'll have any trouble at all!"

"Don't worry, Glory. We still need those supplies, though."

"Of course. You there!" Morning Glory pointed at one of the ponies in white cloth. "Fetch the divine regalia!" The pony quickly zipped off and reappeared with two sets of saddlebags and a white bandana. "That will be all. Return to your meditations." The pony disappeared again.

"Hey, my bandana!" Shimmerdust excitedly grabbed the white cloth and tied it around her head.

"Hey, my pack!" Sage hoisted one of the sets of saddlebags up. "This is it, Princess. We can head out any time now."

Shimmerdust went to Sage's side and nuzzled him. "You're going so soon? But you just got here. Do I have to go right back to missing you and worrying about you?"

"Absolutely not," said Morning Glory. She turned to the Princess. "We can't leave her here. With me gone, this whole cult thing could spiral out of control. She has to leave Everfree, and she's better off coming with us."

Celestia sighed. "Fine. She can come too. Let's just get going. And maybe find some place where I can brush my mane."

Shimmerdust broke off from Sage. "Oh, but why would you ever want to? It's so bouncy and fluffy! Just like a cloud, or a pillow." The unicorn rested her head on top of Celestia, though Celestia could hardly feel it through her thick hair.

"The Prophet has chosen another consort!" came a voice from the crowd.

"Wait-"

"The Prophet is the consort of the Goddess!"

Celestia pushed Shimmerdust off her. "I don't-"

"The Princess has taken The Prophet to be her eternal bride!"

Celestia began backing away.

"Okay, everypony, we have to run. Amaranth!" Celestia turned back to where Amaranth had been standing moments ago. He was still there, but now surrounded by female cultists, who were giggling and running their hooves through his mane and tail.

"Hm?" he mumbled incoherently through a mouthful of grapes.

"Get those unicorns to cover us, we gotta run!"

Amaranth swallowed. "Sorry, ladies. another time. Night Guard, cover!" The three unicorns seemed to materialize from nowhere, and in mere seconds, the entire area was blanketed with thick mist. "Follow me, Princess, I can see the way out."

The four ponies galloped off after Amaranth. Celestia heard Twilight Sage say something just before they left.

"The ponies in this refugee camp are CRAZY!"

The group slowed as they heard Morning Glory begin to pant with exhaustion. They were far enough around the wall that they were no longer in sight of the mist that had provided for their escape. However, they were now lacking the Night Guard unicorns, who must have stayed behind.

Twilight Sage turned to the auburn-maned pony. "Are you alright?"

Morning Glory growled back at him. "I'm fine. I just...don't run that much. Besides, look." Celestia saw that Morning Glory's hoof was pointed straight at her. She then noticed that she had collapsed face-first onto the ground, and that her legs felt like jelly. Her new body was not at all fit to be doing that kind of exercise yet. She felt Glory and Sage begin to lift her up.

"Don't bother, you two. I'll just fall right back over." She curled up to a more comfortable position. "Give me a couple minutes, alright?" The other ponies sat down as well. None of them said anything, but

Celestia sensed that they were glad to be away from chaos for a little while. "I swear, every time somepony notices me, things just seem to get worse."

A voice from above came. "Princess Celestia!"

"EEEEK!" Celestia tried to get her hooves under her, but she couldn't push even a pound, much less her full weight off the ground. She looked up, and relaxed when she saw a familiar orange streak in the sky.

"Your Majesty, are you alright?" Flash Burn spiraled down to the rest of the group, with an airborne litter attached to the harness of her armor. She touched down delicately, and the litter settled down behind her.

"I'm fine, Captain. Where have you been?"

"I remembered that criminal was still in the infirmary. When Sage said it was going to collapse, well..." she gestured at the litter behind her where a dark pegasus was lying with his hooves bound. "I couldn't just leave him to die."

Morning Glory galloped to the side of the litter. "Hurricane!" She leaned down next to the bound pony. "Are you alright?"

"Peachy," grumbled Hurricane.

Glory embraced Flash Burn. "Oh, thank you. Thankyouthankyouthankyou." Flash retreated from the hug.

"And what are you so excited about? I thought you didn't know this pony." Morning Glory's smile turned to a frown. She looked around, and all the other ponies were staring at her. She sighed.

"I guess there's no avoiding it now. Fillies and gentlecolts, this," she gestured to the pegasus, "is my half-brother Hurricane. We used to stay in a room together at the bar where I worked. Recently, however, he turned to a life of crime. I knew, but I kept quiet."

"So you lied to me?" Flash pressed forward so that her face was up against Morning Glory's. "You told me that your brother meant nothing to you while he lay there crippled?"

"Yes, but I had to, because-"

"Because you couldn't afford having ill repute attached to your name, is that it? I can't believe you would leave your own brother in the dust so you could keep playing at politics."

"But he-"

"I don't want to hear it!" Flash broke away and marched off to the other side of the gathering. "From this moment on, you and I are not speaking!" Morning Glory reached a hoof out to try to stop her, but pulled it back quickly. Her eyes glistened as tears began to form.

Celestia lifted her head. "It's alright, Glory. She'll calm down. She's just a little sensitive when it comes to these sorts of injuries. She didn't mean what she said."

Glory turned away. "Maybe. But she was still right." The earth pony walked away a few yards so that none of the group could see her face.

Celestia walked unsteadily towards the captain of the Day Guard. Her legs were aching, but at least they were working. She got the pegasus' attention by brushing up against her.

"So, are you going to be taking care of Glory's brother while she's gone?"

"Yeah, I guess I'm the only- wait, gone?"

"She's coming with me while I find the elements of harmony. Actually, all the ponies here are, it seems." Celestia giggled in spite of herself. She had originally intended to go travelling alone, but it seemed she had wound up with quite a bit of company.

"What? No, you can't, Your Majesty! In the past few hours, Equestria's become more dangerous than it's been in centuries, Your Majesty. You need somepony who can fight, Your Majesty. A warrior." Flash glanced over at Amaranth, who was adjusting his bronze helmet. "Er, a REAL warrior. Sorry, Amaranth."

"No, I completely agree," replied the earth pony.

"Right. Anyway, Your Majesty, I must insist that you let me accompany you. I know that it might be a bad idea to travel far with a large military force, Your Majesty, but at least take me, if no pony else."

"And what about Hurricane?" Celestia gestured to the litter.

"Don't worry, Your Majesty, this is a litter made for pegasi. It won't slow me down at all, Your Majesty."

"You could just let me WALK," said Hurricane from the litter.

"You're still a criminal, criminal!" yelled back Flash Burn.

"Oh, yeah, I might fly away with all your stuff. Oh, wait." Flash Burn frowned. It was rather obvious she was trying to get away from the guilt she felt at causing the injury in the first place. However, she detached the litter from her harness and untied the rope around Hurricane's legs, whereupon he clumsily climbed out of the litter.

"Happy now?" Flash tossed away the now-useless litter.

"Yeah." The two pegasi glared at each other for a moment before going in opposite directions. Amaranth put a hoof in front of hurricane. "Dude, what's your problem?"

"Are you angry at her because she is your enemy, or because she saved you in spite of that?" The two of them locked eyes, but Hurricane broke away quickly.

"I don't know what you're talking about, dude. All you nobles are the same. Us commoners are like dirt to you."

"If you say so. But think about what I said." Amaranth walked away to where Flash burn had gone, and Hurricane went to rejoin his sister.

Celestia sighed. With tensions so high, could the ponies even make it to Griffonmont before it took a turn for the worse? Things were definitely not looking up.

Celestia looked over the supplies again. Only Twilight Sage, Shimmerdust, and Amaranth had anything with them, and only Sage had packed well for travel. She put the packs aside and stood in the center of the clearing that the other ponies were resting in. They had all fallen asleep hours ago. She took a deep breath.

"Okay, everypony wake up." The others stirred, some of them grumbling. "I know you've only had a few hours of sleep, but we have to get moving. We don't have enough food between the seven of us to last a single meal, and it'll take two days worth of travel to reach Cloudsdale where we can get transportation to Griffonmont. That means we'll have to make a stop somewhere for food. I've been looking at Sage's map."

Celestia rolled out a map of the territory surrounding Everfree, "and the best place for us to go is a farming community known as Sweet Acres. We should have enough gold between us to buy supplies there if the farmers are kind. Is everypony clear on the plan?" The other ponies nodded. "And

one more thing. In the space of an hour, I was subjected to a riot and a mad cult simply due to other ponies recognizing me. We can't allow that sort of thing to delay us. And so, from now on," the princess took the cloth from the litter and tied it around her neck as a makeshift cloak, "just call me Sunny." There was silence. Everypony looked rather uncomfortable, but none spoke any objection. "Okay, let's get going."

The group moved quickly. They soon stood at the foot of the trail leading to the provinces. As the bell tolling the seventh hour struck, they set off on the path. Celestia, however, didn't move immediately. Twilight Sage noticed this and turned back.

"Prince-er, Sunny, aren't you coming?"

"Sorry. It's just that...if I were still capable of raising the sun, it would be scheduled for a minute after seven."

"I don't think we'll find the Elements of Harmony that soon."

Sage smiled weakly.

"Yeah," the princess said, returning the weak smile. "I guess we're going to have a day without sunshine."

Shimmerdust giggled. "That's gonna screw up so many proverbs."

A cool wind blew in the spring morning, and the seven ponies all looked to the West, to see the dark sky at dawn. And so they immediately noticed as the rays of the sun began to creep over the plains. They all cried out in unison.

"WHAT?!"

Chapter 10

Celestia scrambled for words. Surely as the goddess of the sun, she should have had some kind of explanation for why, despite her complete inability to use magic, the sun rose into the sky on its own course. After a solid minute of stammering, she fell to the phrase that she always did when explanations did not come to her.

“Um...Sage?”

The sunset-colored unicorn made a grumbling noise. “I don’t have anything for this one.”

Shimmerdust popped up beside him. “It kinda reminds me of that old mariner’s tune.” All eyes turned to her. “You know? Blackest sky? Cry the four winds?” Blank stares. “Let me sing it for you.” Flash Burn looked around nervously, but Shimmerdust’s tune was much less rough and rousing than those the two had shared earlier.

*Sail we under blackest sky
Heave the lines and hoist the main
Cry the four winds rage the tide
Heave to, ho
The flag of freedom still shall fly
Heave the lines and hoist the main
Thirteen sunsets ‘ere we die
Heave to, ho*

There was a brief pause, as everypony continued staring at the blue unicorn. Shimmerdust looked around.

“It’s a song for when you’re hoisting the mainsail.”

“We know!” shouted all the other ponies.

Celestia stepped forward. “That sounds like a song from the war. How is that related to this?” Shimmerdust grabbed Flash Burn by the

tail and positioned her in front of the sun, then pushed her onto her hind legs. Flash Burn spread her wings for balance.

Shimmerdust pointed. "Look familiar?"

Celestia stepped back. "That's the flag of Equestria, the symbol of freedom since before I was even born. Shimmer, do you know where the mariners learned that song?"

Shimmerdust shrugged. "They probably made it up. Seafaring ponies are very prolific songwriters you know."

"I don't think so." Celestia tapped her hoof on her chin. "Twilight Sage, correct me if I'm wrong, but most archaeologists agree that, before the war, there were twelve Divine Ages?" The unicorn nodded. "And one ended since the war. That means thirteen. Thirteen divine beings have parted from this world. Does that seem like a coincidence to you?"

Twilight Sage mimicked Celestia's pondering stance. "I'm having trouble imagining how sailors ran across something that could very well be a prophecy."

"Sailors travel to lands we know little of. Who knows what they may have run across?"

Sage shook his head. "Still, it makes sense. The gods have always been responsible for raising the sun and moon. Some of their essence still remains in the mortal world, so it's not unreasonable to think that the patterns of magic over the world have the power to raise the sun."

Morning Glory frowned. "If you two have this figured out, then maybe you know where the moon and stars have gone?"

Celestia nodded. "Actually, that part's easy. Luna and I weren't completely divine when this happened. I may have power over the sun, but it's not part of my being. When Luna became Nightmare Moon, the celestial objects of the night became truly a part of her. So, while she's disabled, they are too."

"Seriously?" Morning Glory's confused face was reflected by the other ponies.

"Quite. In fact, I suspect that the infusion of the moon's essence is what caused the shift in personality. I underwent a similar experience when I tried the spell that she was using to enhance her power. However, I

only tried it once, so the effects were...not too drastic. From what I could tell, Luna cast that spell very many times."

"But, Your Majesty-" Celestia shot Flash Burn a glare. "Oh. Umm...Sunny. Why did the moon and stars make her evil? Neither ever seemed particularly evil to me."

Celestia shook her head. "They didn't. She became obsessed with the night, of course, and the vast power gain made her desire even more power, but they didn't make her evil. It's more like a combination of temporary insanity and a terrible mood." The other ponies didn't look terribly assured. "Don't worry. We have thirteen days now. We just have to get one of the Elements of Harmony, and then we should have enough power to cleanse the moon essence from her. I'm sure that her regular pattern is still rejecting the foreign magic, so we just have to get past her defenses."

"Okay," Flash Burn sighed. "Thirteen days to get to Griffonmont and back? We'd better get a move on, then. Come on, everypony!"

The other ponies continued down the path after Flash Burn, but Twilight Sage hung back next to Celestia.

"I'm sorry. This whole thing is my fault. If I hadn't tried meddling with things like I was, Luna would still be safe."

Celestia didn't look at Sage, but she responded. "You're wrong. There's something I haven't told anypony." Sage looked at Celestia with wide eyes. "When Luna was being taken by the magic, she had this look to her. But it wasn't the first time she did. Whatever caused it...it's been in her for many, many years."

"So it's not the moon?"

"I don't know, but whatever it is...I'm not sure we'll be rid of it once this is all over."

"Then what will you do?"

Celestia said nothing, and continued on after the other ponies.

It was past noon when the first of the orchards that made up Sweet Acres came into view. It was surrounded by a rather low fence, which looked to be in significant disrepair. As the group drew nearer, a soft thumping sound started coming at irregular intervals. It became louder the closer they got, until finally, they came into view of the source of the sound.

A lone mare with a coat of greenish yellow like a ripe golden delicious apple and a vibrant green mane was bucking apple trees. Each kick knocked loose a number of apples into carts that were already wheeled into place around the tree.

Celestia waved her front hoof. "Hello!" The farmer turned around and gasped. She instantly galloped off into the orchard.

Flash Burn frowned. "Should I go get her?"

"No," Celestia said with a hoof on Flash's shoulder. "We don't want to make trouble. Let's just go to the front gate." Nopony raised a voice in protest, and they continued on the path. It took only a couple minutes until they were close enough to read the sign above the gate. "Sweet Apple Acres." A voice called out from behind the gate.

"All right, whadda y'all want!" The voice sounded like an older stallion, definitely not the farmer from before.

"We're here to buy food!" Celestia called back. There was a murmur from behind the gate. From the sound of it, there was also an older mare there, and she and the stallion were quietly arguing. After an uncomfortable minute, the gate slowly swung open.

"Alright, y'all can come in," grumbled the stallion. He looked as old as he sounded, though he was still broad and muscular, and colored a deep red. The mare appeared to be a bit younger, and her coat was deep purple. Both their manes had gone silver. The stallion wore a frown, but the mare had a soft smile.

"Oh, don't listen to him, dears. We've just all been a bit on edge since last night. C'mon in!" She stepped out to walk alongside the other ponies. "My name's Plum Juice. This here's my husband, Appleseed."

"Hrmph."

Plum smacked Appleseed as she walked by him. "And y'all have already met our daughter, Apple Juice. I hope you weren't too put off by her runnin' off like that. She only thought you might be apple bandits."

Celestia smiled. "It's alright. My name's Sunny, and these are my friends Twilight Sage, Captain Flash Burn, Amaranth, Morning Glory, Shimmerdust, and Hurricane." The other ponies waved and nodded as their own names were spoken. "We're traveling really far, but we left in a hurry, so we didn't pack too well. We need to pick up food."

"Refugees from Everfree, huh? Yeah, we seen the paths lit up with lots of ponies headin' away from that place. What all happened over there anyway?"

Celestia looked away. "Some kind of magical accident. We're actually out looking for a way to fix it. The city's still safe, but it's only a matter of time."

"Official business, huh? Explains the armor, though I thought all the guards wore the same uniforms." Plum Juice continued on nonchalantly, but Celestia noticed that Amaranth was slouching low to the ground.

"Yes, well, it's a bit complicated. Anyway, if we could buy some apples from you, we'll just be on our way."

"Sakes alive!" yelled Appleseed. "If y'all are goin' anywhere you can't just eat grass, you ain't gonna solve your problems with a pack fulla apples. Ain't none of you ever traveled before?" The group of ponies shook their heads.

"Appleseed, these here are payin' customers and you will be polite!" Plum Juice turned back to the group. "Beg pardon, dears. Before we were married, Appleseed used to be quite the wanderer. He helped a lot of settlements get their farming up and running, especially apple orchards and nurseries. So, of course, now he thinks he's some sort of expert."

"I am an expert, woman! I been just about everywhere in Equestria, and I'm none worse for the wear."

"Last time somepony took your advice, he threw a shoe, you old coot!"

"And how is it my fault your brother's a sissy won't use nails to put shoes on?"

Celestia cleared her throat loudly so that both the older ponies looked at her. "I don't want to be a bother, but we really need to be quick. We've got a limited amount of time, and the journey won't be easy."

"Of course, dears. Follow me." Plum Juice began trotting, but stopped suddenly. "Oh, I have an even better idea. Whatever I may say, my husband does certainly know how to pack for a journey. How about y'all

stay here while he goes about Sweet Acres getting' some real packs together for y'all."

"Oh, we don't want to be any trouble."

"Nonsense, he'd be happy to."

"Hell I will, woman! Any far journeyer's gotta have prunes, and you know the horrors I gotta face if'n I want those."

Celestia raised an eyebrow, and Plum Juice rolled her eyes.

"He means my mother."

"Mother nothing!" protested Appleseed. "Plum Jerkum is a vicious mule who could never be related to the sweet little filly I met on the farm she just happens to own."

"You better mean me, you old coot."

"Maybe," grumbled Appleseed.

"Oh, just get the wagon and git!" Plum Juice smacked Appleseed again, though he didn't show any noticeable increase in speed as he slunk to the barn. "Don't worry 'bout him, my little ponies. Only thing he loves more'n being ornery is helping other ponies. It's not like he went out traveling for his health. Now, c'mon, I got something for y'all to do while you wait."

Celestia looked back at the others. They looked as confused as she was, but none of them said anything as they fell in behind Plum Juice. None of them except Flash Burn, who leaned in to whisper something to her.

"Does the name Appleseed sound familiar to you?"

"Not really. Why?"

"I dunno. It's just...something bugs me about it."

Celestia peeled away from Flash Burn and tried to look as if she hadn't just been having a surreptitious conversation. The unease in her stomach made the walk to the mysterious objective seem like it took forever.

After a short walk, they came to a part of the orchard where many of the trees had no apples left on them. Plum Juice pulled a number of harnesses out of a cart.

"Y'all take these. You two girls might wanna be takin' off your armor. Apple bucking can tire a pony out quick."

Amaranth tried to say something, but Flash Burn cut him off.
"Wait, you want us to buck apples?"

Plum Juice nodded. "We've gotta get all the Macintosh apples in today, and with my husband out doing up those packs, we can't possibly finish. I figure the seven of you might be able to replace him. I'll put your farmhands' wages towards what you owe us for the food, of course."

"But we don't know how to buck apples properly," protested Morning Glory.

"Aw c'mon," said Hurricane, "how hard can it be? Anypony can buck, and you just gotta hit a tree, right?"

Plum Juice shook her head. "Ain't that simple. But I ain't the one to show you. Hey, AJ!" she called. Within seconds, the green-maned pony from before.

"Yeah, ma? Oh! Uh...hi." Apple Juice kicked at the ground shyly.

"You show these city folk how to buck apples. I'll go and make y'all some lunch."

"Okay ma." Apple Juice watched as her mother disappeared back into the orchard. "Listen, y'all, I'm powerful sorry about running off earlier. Pa's just been scaring me with stories about bandits. Thinks we're gonna be getting a bunch since the stars went out."

Celestia sighed. "Some ponies have certainly been acting up since then, but you don't have to worry about us."

"Glad to hear it!" Apple Juice started helping fasten the harnesses onto the other ponies. "You girls gotta get out of that armor. It's gonna get hot out today."

Amaranth sighed. "I'm not a girl."

Apple Juice blushed. "Oh." She looked around nervously. "Right. Uh...well, I just can't tell with that crazy armor of yours. I mean, it looks nice! Uh, but I ain't seen anything like it before. Not that that's bad!" There was a short pause. "Right. Well, why don't I show y'all how to buck so I can go off and die of embarrassment nice and proper?"

"Oh come on!" Hurricane shouted. "What's there to it? You just buck!" He went over to a full apple tree and kicked back with all his might. The tree shook, and two or three apples fell down. "What? Oh, come on!"

Apple Juice pushed him away from the tree. "Sorry, kid, but it ain't so simple after all. It's more than how hard you kick. You gotta kick right, too." She bucked the tree, and the apples fell out cleanly, filling the carts. "See? I'm half my dad's size, but I get just as many apples."

Hurricane grumbled. "How is that different than what I just did?"

Apple Juice blushed. "I guess I'm not much of a teacher. It's harder for pegasus ponies and unicorns, though. Y'all just do what you can, alright? It'll go faster with extra cart-pullers too."

The ponies all started bucking trees. Surely enough, most of them had trouble getting more than a couple apples at a time. Morning Glory started getting the hang of it, and was soon getting a tree finished in only three or four kicks. However, the real surprise came when Amaranth finally finished getting out of his armor. On his very first try, he finished a full tree in one kick. The same with his second try, and his third.

"Land's sakes!" cried Apple Juice. "You a secret farmer or something?"

Amaranth looked around, noticing that the other ponies were not faring nearly so well. "Well, I tend the castle gardens, but that's not quite the same. I don't actually do any harvesting."

Apple Juice shook her head. "All the same, I guess plants like you something fierce. Took me years before I could get a whole tree in one kick every single dang time." She took a breath. "Okay, I think I got us a system. Me, Amaranth, Glory, an' the Captain will do most of the bucking, and the Captain can fly up and get any stragglers. Hurricane, Sage, Sunny, and Shimmerdust can get the carts. We might get finished even faster than if Pa were here instead."

The ponies got back to work. Things went quickly, as surely as Apple Juice had predicted. By the time they were finished, Plum Juice had a stew ready, and Appleseed was folding cloaks to fit in the tattered saddlebags he had gathered. He looked as grumpy as ever, but he was very quiet as everypony had dinner. Shortly afterwards, they had apple pie.

Celestia stood up first. "Well, we appreciate your hospitality, but we should go. It's a few miles yet to Cloudsdale."

"Now hold on, girl," said Appleseed. "You been lucky so far, but I guarantee you that you ain't making it all the way to Cloudsdale without

running afoul of some nasty folks. Don Corleony an' his boys been quiet recently, but with all the problems coming about, you can bet your soft city flanks that they'll be running down every pony taking the roads 'round here at night. I know you're in a hurry, but you best wait until morning."

Flash Burn stood up. "I'm the highest-ranking member of Equestria's military. I think I can handle a couple thugs."

Appleseed smirked. "That so?" He stood up as well. "You got horseshoes on, right? Come out back to the corral. I wanna see."

Plum Juice stood in front of him. "Appleseed! I know you mean well, but you are not picking a fight with our guests. I forbid it in my house!"

"That's why I'm going outside. Come on, Miss Captain. I just wanna see it for myself, so's I don't feel guilty about letting you go off on your own." He brushed past his wife and disappeared out the back door.

Plum Juice frowned. "You don't have to follow him. I'm not sure what's gotten into him."

Flash Burn started towards the door. "You said you're just barely on schedule, right?" Plum Juice nodded. "And without Appleseed, you get a lot less work done, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't see."

"And if I don't show him I know what I'm doing, he'll insist on coming with us to Cloudsdale, won't he?"

Plum Juice sighed. "I suppose he will, stubborn ol' mule that he is. Just...just be careful, alright?"

Flash Burn laughed. "Don't worry, I won't hurt him. I've done plenty of sparring matches. And even if he catches me off guard, he looks like he can take a strong hit."

Flash disappeared out the door too soon to hear Plum Juice say "He's not the one I'm worried about."

The corral was suspiciously empty of any signs that cows had been kept there recently. Appleseed was already at the center, stretching. Flash Burn flew over the fence and faced off with him.

"Okay, so how are we doing this?"

"Pretend like I'm a thug and I'm trying to hurt you and your friends. Plain and simple."

"No, but I mean-"

"Hey! You foals get in here too. You can't see a thing over that fence." Celestia looked at the other ponies. Hurricane had already hopped over the fence, and one by one, the other ponies hesitantly hopped over. Celestia went last.

"Good! Alright, let's get started." With little other warning, Appleseed charged straight at Flash Burn. The Captain of the Day Guard deftly dodged and gave a counter kick, however, her hooves hit empty air. "Land's sakes, quit pulling your blows!" Appleseed was standing just two inches away from where Flash's hooves had stopped. "I said pretend I'm trying to hurt you and your friends. You got wax in your ears?"

Flash Burn growled. "I was trying to take it easy on you!" She kicked again, but Appleseed had already begun circling behind her. "Argh! How do you move so fast?"

Appleseed smirked. "Lotta practice. You're doing great, though. Best kicks I've ever seen."

"Shut up!" Flash sprung into the air and dove to plant a hoof into Appleseed's head, but he sprang backwards, forcing the spectator ponies to take a step backwards. Flash stared daggers at Appleseed, who looked perfectly calm. "Now I know where I heard your name. You're an outlaw! My father faced off against you once."

"WAS an outlaw. And anyway, I prefer the term 'freedom fighter'. Not all the Guard are kindhearted, hard-working ponies like you, Miss Captain. Some of them ain't no better than the thugs they're supposed to be facing."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Flash took off again and turned herself to take an aerial loop so she could hit Appleseed from the side. He reared onto his hind legs and she sailed right under him.

"I can't count how many ponies I saved when I was out on my adventures, but I know that more than a few of them were being attacked by those very ponies who should have been protecting them."

"Well of course you think that, criminal!"

"Look, girl, I'm sure your daddy was a right upstanding fellow just following orders, but if you can tell me you ain't never seen one of your number picking on somepony who couldn't fight back, you forgot on purpose."

Flash stopped fighting. "Well...I-"

"Any case," Appleseed gently placed a hoof on Celestia's forehead. "You lose."

"Wait, WHAT?" Flash resumed her crouched stance.

"I told you, pretend like I'm trying to hurt you and your friends." He looked at his hoof. "If that were the case, your friend Sunny here would be seeing stars, and that's if she got lucky."

"Get off her!" Flash practically disappeared into the air, and everypony heard the splintering of wood as she took Appleseed straight through the corral fence. He hit the wall of the barn with a thud. After a short few seconds he got back on his feet, and smiled again.

"That's more like it. But that's not important. I could tell you were more than good enough to fight Don Corleoaty's thugs halfway in."

"Then why did you keep antagonizing me?"

"Were you listening, girl? I didn't want to see if you could fight, I wanted to see if you could protect your friends." Flash slumped. "Look, peaceful times like we've had, I bet you can count the number of times you've had to worry about bystanders on one hoof. But it's gonna be different from here on out. You gotta make your TOP priority the protection of others. Somepony's life is gonna depend on you looking out for them." Appleseed turned and disappeared into the farmhouse.

The rest of the ponies looked at Flash to see how she would react. The fire-maned pony didn't turn back to face them. "Miss Plum Juice, I'm tired. Where can I get some sleep?"

"Apple Juice has plenty of space in her room, dear. Why don't you girls all stay there for the night.

"But Ma!"

"No buts, young lady! You've never cared about sharing your room before. What reason could you possibly be raising a fuss for."

Apple Juice's eyes drifted over to Amaranth, but quickly snapped back. "Uh, no reason, Ma. I'll go get them some extra sheets." The golden delicious pony disappeared into the farmhouse as well.

Amaranth tilted his head. "So, where do the rest of us sleep."

Plum Juice sighed. "I think that's all the room we have. I don't suppose you can sleep in the barn?"

Hurricane groaned, but he was the first to turn off to the barn. The other stallions followed without complaint.

"Well! Such polite young men. I tell you, my husband can sleep on the street, but if I tell him to sleep in the barn, he raises such a fuss."

Celestia approached Plum Juice. "So, Appleseed didn't really go around planting orchards?"

"Oh, of course he did, dear. He just ran into so many problems, since he was always on the road, or in places where ponies were less fortunate. It was rough. As much as I wish it, I ain't the reason he settled down."

"So you were seeing each other while he was still traveling?" Morning Glory was on Plum's other side.

"Oh, yes, dear, he came back every month or so. Why do you think my mother hates him so much?" Celestia laughed. "Alright, off to bed with you, dears. Early wakeup on this farm."

Celestia and the other mares headed upstairs to Apple Juice's room. The farmgirl was already under a blanket on the floor. The bed was empty, and after negotiations, Celestia wound up getting the bed, which could not have fit two ponies lying side by side. No amount of coaxing would get Flash Burn or Morning Glory to take the bed instead, so she had relented. However, voices coming from below alerted Celestia that the window she was lying next to was right above the barn.

"So, dude, was it awesome?"

"Was what awesome?"

"Dude, you were there with the girls while they were bucking all day. Tell me you weren't watching."

"Is not one of those 'girls' your sister?"

"Yeah, well, I don't care if YOU look. Come on, seriously, man, were you checking them out or not?"

Apple Juice sat up in her bed and yelled. "By the way, Sunny, the barn walls are real thin, so you might hear it if one of the boys snores." There was a long period of silence. She laughed and plopped back down. "Sorry 'bout that, Sunny. Boys will be boys, but I don't care to hear anything about my haunches."

Morning Glory waved a hoof in the air. "Oh, none of us do. I appreciate being admired, but there's a line, you know."

"Oh yeah?" Flash sat up. "As I recall, you once told me a story of when you heard somepony whispering dirty things about you, so you just shook your haunches so that he would faint."

"That was retaliatory. Like this!" Morning Glory pounced on top of Flash Burn and started tickling where the shoulder met the neck.

"Ah! Hey! Noooooo!" Flash was kicking in the air, but clearly not trying very hard to stop her assailant.

"Alright, you two, we need to go to bed now."

"Fine," both of them said in unison. They crawled back under their blanket, and Celestia blew out the candle next to her.

Very soon, the last of the sun's rays disappeared below the horizon. Celestia said nothing, but in her head, she counted it off. "Twelve left."

Author's Note: I don't do these often, but I felt like a particular topic in this chapter needed one. At a couple points, the ponies talk about horseshoes. From discussions in the brony community, I gather that it is totally unclear of how ponies do horseshoes. Since I don't feel like awkwardly wedging in exposition, I would just like to note that, in my fanon, ponies use horseshoes sparingly. Only those ponies who have hooves weakened from hard work (cargo hauling, pulling trains) or inactivity, or who want weapons for fighting would use them. Most of Equestria's farriers are probably the equivalent of pony podiatrists, really. Also, to those bronies who think nailing a horseshoe would hurt a horse: NO. Hooves are keratin. That's what your hair is. The only issue that can occur is that an improperly applied nail could hit the quick. This does hurt, but if it happens, the nail is swiftly removed (because, let's face it, it's easy to tell when a horse is upset with you) and the shoe is refixed properly.

Chapter 11

“Celestia.” The voice came from somewhere far away. It cooed gently. “Celestia, I’m here.” The voice was closer. Celestia tried to lift her head from her pillow to look, but she couldn’t.

“Nn...nnn...”

“Shhh...don’t try to speak, dear sister.” Nightmare Moon’s voice was right next to Celestia’s ear. “You escaped me last time, but now we can play.” Celestia whimpered. “No, no, shhhh,” Nightmare whispered. “It’s going to be alright. Just stop struggling.” The mare of darkness’ weight lowered onto Celestia, making her breathing difficult. Celestia felt a nip at the tip of her ear. Then a bite. Nightmare Moon was latched onto her ear, and pulling. The dull teeth dug into the cartilage of Celestia’s ear. She tried to scream, but nothing came out. Blood dripped down the side of her head.

“Celestia!”

Celestia’s eyes shot open. Her vision was fuzzy. There were indistinct shapes in her vision. Green, white, brown. The light of the sun in back of them made them even harder to make out.

“Hn...who?”

“Hey, she’s awake!” The voice was familiar.

“Flash? Flash is that you?”

“Yeah, Sunny, it’s me. You okay?”

“Flash, where am I?”

“Sweet Apple Acres.” A different voice. A young mare from the countryside. “Same place as you went to bed.” Celestia’s eyes began to adjust. She realized that she was looking through tears. She wiped them away with a hoof and saw that every pony in the room was staring at her.

“What’s going on?”

Morning Glory leaned in to give her a hug. “We woke up to the sun, and we heard you whimpering. Are you okay?” Celestia leaned into the hug. No blood on the side of her head.

"I...I think so." She looked around. "None of you heard anypony come in here?" The other ponies shook their heads. "Okay." She looked again. One, two, three other ponies. "Shimmerdust. Where is Shimmerdust?!" She kicked her legs to pull her weight over them, but she felt something holding her down. Her tail was being pulled.

Flash Burn blushed. "She's over there." Celestia turned her head to where all the other ponies were looking. On top of the frizzy pink mass attached to her rear was a familiar blue unicorn, slowly rolling back and forth.

Apple Juice giggled a bit. "I'll, uh, get you a comb."

The seven ponies stood at the gate of Sweet Apple Acres once more. Though their saddlebags were full, they were all full of energy and ready to get moving.

"Thank you again, for everything." Celestia reached out a hoof, but found that Plum Juice had already leaned in to give her a hug.

"Weren't no trouble at all. Y'all come back anytime once you're done saving Equestria and whatnot." Plum broke off to give hugs to the other ponies. Celestia turned to Appleseed, who made no motion other than eye contact.

"Thank you too, for all the help." She smiled gently, trying not to show that she still felt somewhat awkward about the sudden fight last night.

"Aw, shucks. 'tweren't nearly enough for the Princess of Equestria."

Celestia felt her heart fall into her stomach. "You...how did you...buh?"

"AJ saw that big ol' sun on your flank when you was sleeping. I sure never seen anypony with any kind of permanent marking like that, not even ponies who associate with zebras."

"Oh." Celestia looked at her hooves. "I guess I'll have to be more careful where I sleep."

"Reckon you will." The old stallion smiled. "But you'll always be safe at Sweet Apple Acres. Now go on. You got a long way to go." He didn't offer his hoof, but the warmth of his voice was certainly the most affection that Appleseed offered anypony. Celestia turned to say goodbye to Apple Juice, but she was still talking to Amaranth.

"-and I cleared out my wardrobe so it'd fit nice and proper. Ain't got much to put in there anyways. Just this old dress that'll never see the light of day anyway. No dress in Equestria's good enough to make look pretty anyways." Apple Juice was blushing rather heavily.

"Oh, you hardly need a dress for that." Amaranth smiled gently, and Apple Juice turned redder than her father. "However, I do appreciate it. That armor is old, and some cloths have oils that might degrade it further."

"Yeah, well..." the yellow-green mare pawed at the ground. "You just...you just make sure to come back for it, alright?"

"Of course. I would never have had it with me if it didn't mean a lot to me."

"Right. Yeah." There was a brief pause. Apple Juice took a small step forward. "Well, uh, goodbye." Their muzzles were very close. Apple Juice was biting her lip.

"Goodbye." Amaranth turned around and trotted towards the mass of ponies. They were all, Celestia included, staring at him with their eyes wide and their jaws wider. "Is everypony ready to go?"

Celestia was the first to speak up. "Sure. Let me say goodbye to Apple Juice and then we're off." She brushed past Amaranth and gave the gobsmacked mare a hug, and whispered in her ear. "He likes you; he's just a big idiot."

Apple Juice smiled weakly. "Thanks. And goodbye."

The group headed down the path again, and the Apple family waved until they were out of sight. As soon as they were no longer in view, everypony immediately turned to Amaranth.

"So," Celestia said with a grin, "she really wants you to come back, does she?"

"Hm? You mean Apple Juice?" Amaranth hardly even turned his head. "Well, it stands to reason. Even I hate taking responsibility of that artifact. It's not even hers to look after, so I can't imagine she'd want to be stuck with it for any longer than necessary."

"Yes," said Morning Glory, sidling up to Amaranth, "but I think she really looks forward to seeing you again."

"Well, I suppose that makes sense. It would be a pity to make somepony's acquaintance and never see them again. Plus, I imagine she

doesn't meet too many ponies living out on a farm. She certainly seemed to find talking to me awkward. I bet she doesn't have much experience with strangers."

"And don't you want to see her again?" Celestia asked, her tone insistent.

"Well, she seemed nice enough, so why not?" Celestia and Morning Glory poked their heads past Amaranth to look at each other. Celestia made a face, and Glory returned it. They both broke away from the green earth pony.

Hurricane piped up from the back. "Okay, somepony level with me. Is this guy for real?"

Shimmerdust giggled. "Oh, that's nothing. You should have seen how clueless Sage used to be."

"Hey, I wasn't that bad!" Sage retorted.

"Honey, remember when we went on our third date, and I kept making really saucy remarks about glassblowing?"

"Uh..." Sage blushed. "Yes, but do we have to-"

"And do you remember what happened when we reached my house?"

"Really, I don't think anypony wants to hear this." Sage picked up his pace, but Morning Glory and Hurricane headed him off.

"No, no, tell us." Glory leaned in closer.

"Yeah, bro, what happened?" Hurricane pressed even closer, forcing Sage to back up next to Shimmerdust.

The unicorn sighed. "She asked me to come inside."

"Did she ask you nicely and offer you tea?" Glory was now directly in front of him.

"Or was she all sexy about it?" Hurricane stood to his side, so that he and Shimmerdust were on Sage's flanks.

Sage made a pained expression. "She whispered in my ear and wrapped her leg around mine." This provoked an "oooh" from the siblings.

"And what did you say?" prompted Shimmerdust.

"I said," Sage rolled his eyes, "that I should go catch up on my reading, goodnight." That did it. Hurricane and Glory began guffawing loudly enough that Celestia was sure the Apples could hear it. They leaned

on each other for support, but ended up collapsing to the ground anyway. Celestia tried stifling her own giggling. She had, of course, heard the story the night it happened, but Sage's manner of painful recollection was simply precious.

"Hey!" Flash Burn yelled from the front. "We've got to get to Cloudsdale before sunset. " Glory and Hurricane picked themselves up off the ground to keep walking, but they were still laughing.

"I'll have you all know," Sage said trying to keep a stern voice, though utterly failing to suppress a smile of his own, "that I have gotten a lot better at being forward and figuring out mares."

Celestia poked him in the ribs. "Given the number of books you've read on relationships, you'd better be an expert."

"I am. If, for instance, I wanted a kiss right now, I would simply grab Shimmerdust and-" he cut himself off, as when he reached over to wrap his hoof around Shimmerdust, he noticed that she had begun galloping ahead of him.

"You'll have to catch meeee!" she teased. Twilight Sage began galloping as well, but was stopped in his tracks as Flash Burn body checked Shimmerdust, stopping her instantly.

"What is wrong with you all? In case you haven't noticed, the freaking world is ending!" Though Flash addressed everypony, she was yelling right in Shimmerdust's face. "Did you forget that we only have twelve more days of warmth? Or that Everfree is being torn apart? We are the only ponies who have any hope of fixing all this, and we're wasting time fooling around. When ponies start dying, it will be on your hooves!" The group stared alternately at the guard captain, and at their own hooves. Flash Burn looked like she was about to apologize, but instead she turned around. "Let's get moving."

Every pony marched along in silence in the long hours of the second day.

An archway made of fog drifting over the path filled Celestia with relief. "Cloudsdale!" The ponies in back of her cheered. They had made good time, and the sun was still hanging in the sky, casting long shadows along the cobblestone path leading to the foothills of the pegasus city. "Okay, everypony, let's get ourselves a flying carriage to Griffonmont."

"Er, Prin-" Flash Burn cut herself off, "I mean, Sunny, there's a bit of a problem. That archway is going to be watched by guards. Guards who will want to see ALL of our travel papers."

"Oh." Celestia felt herself lose her resolve. A long day of walking had made her legs weak, and without the elation from seeing their first milestone, she couldn't stand anymore. Everypony instantly came around her to help pick her up off the ground.

"Princess, you needn't worry," Morning Glory said, while waving a hoof in the air dismissively. "Those guards will be easy to take care of. And we have enough bits to pay for transportation that won't ask questions. It's not like we'll need bits outside Equestria anyway."

"You can't be serious," said Flash with a frown. "You expect to be able to seduce all the guards at the entrance and get all seven of us through with no questions?"

"Oh, Flashie," Glory laughed, "you act as if sex is the only weapon in my arsenal. No, it's far from my only one. It's not even my best. Just the most fun." Flash Burn blushed, but raised no objection. "No, I have a plan. Now, I'll need you all to do a bit of playing along. Line up, please." The group looked at each other, but silently lined up. "Alright, now, first, I need Flashie to play the part of the strong, honorable Captain of the Guard." She stood in front of Flash Burn eyeing her up and down. "Perfect!"

"Uh, I didn't do anything."

"Exactly, you're a natural!" Glory rubbed the side of her head against Flash's. "Now, the rest of you need to play the part of quiet, well-behaved citizens of Equestria." She paused. "Hurricane, dear, you might want to stay in the back."

"Yeah, yeah," grumbled the dark pegasus.

"Okay, everypony, let's get going!"

"But wait," Celestia started, "what are YOU going to do?"

"The same sort of thing I do every single day, dear 'Sunny'."

She turned and walked slowly in the direction of the gate. No pony else raised an objection, and uneasily followed her.

When they reached the cloud-gate, they saw two pegasi in silver armor. There was not much on the ground to be guarded, so the low

number of guards was understandable. Morning Glory approached them casually.

"Good evening, gentlemen. We need to take a carriage to Griffonmont. It's somewhat urgent Royal Guard business." The brown earth pony gestured back at Flash, who merely stood stoically.

"We need to see your travel papers," replied one of the silver-armored pegasi.

"Oh, don't tell me that being under the charge of the highest-ranking military officer in Equestria doesn't count for anything." Glory flashed the guard a friendly smile.

The guard leaned in. "No papers, no entrance," he growled. At that point, Morning Glory leaned in further to whisper something in his ear. The guard backed up. He stepped to the side so that the gateway was clear. "You may pass." The other guard looked like he was going to say something, but the first guard shot him an intense glare, and he stepped to the side as well.

The group passed through slowly, avoiding eye contact. Flash gave the guards suspicious looks, but they were also avoiding eye contact, staring straight ahead. Soon, they were well through the gate and out of hearing distance of the two guards. Flash Burn grabbed Morning Glory.

"What in Equestria did you SAY to that guard? I've never seen anypony backpedal like that."

"Oh, it was nothing. I just mentioned to him that if he didn't let us through, I might let the fact that he was on Don Corleoate's payroll slip to the Captain of the Day Guard, and it might not end well for him." Glory didn't shrug off Flash's hoof, but it fell off anyway, as Flash lost all muscle control from shock.

"How could you have possibly known that?" Celestia asked with surprise in her voice. "None of us had even heard of that pony until yesterday."

"Oh, of course not. However, from what we heard, he has been in operation in the area for many years now. Do you think he could get away with that if he didn't have control over the patrols?" Glory smiled wide. "Greed and disloyalty are easy to spot once you've seen the same patterns

over and over. Politicians, crime bosses, and businessponies are all the same. You just need to learn to take advantage of that."

"That's...how can you smile at that?" Flash had a bit of a sob in her voice. "Those ponies were sworn to defend Equestria and every pony in it. They've forsaken their duty for a few bits, and you think it's a joke?"

Morning Glory shook her head. "It's no joke. Why do you think I'm in this game? I have been lorded over by ponies who care for nothing more than to stand atop those crushed beneath their hooves. But to get in the game, you have to be willing to take advantage of other ponies." She looked away. "...no matter how despicable it is." Flash stepped forward to say something, but Glory cut her off. "I'm sorry about lying to you about my brother earlier. There's no excuse."

"It's okay, I forgive you." Flash hugged Morning Glory.

"Really? but I thought-"

"Normally it'd probably take me a bit longer, but..." Flash put her hooves back on the ground, "when Appleseed was talking about my father, I realized that every part of me wanted to pretend that I wasn't even remotely related to that pony." She looked at her hooves. "I've never felt that kind of shame before, but I understand it now."

"Hey, drama princess!" Hurricane piped up from the back. "She lied because I practically told her to."

"Say what?" Flash appeared to be too startled to get angry about the 'drama princess' line.

"Yeah, just before you came in, I was telling her I was gonna leave Equestria so she wouldn't be associated with a known criminal." The dark pegasus walked around so that he was looking Flash Burn in the face. "She's responsible for the well-being of every pony who doesn't live in a mansion. I couldn't let her throw it all away just because she looks after my sorry haunches. She wasn't even gonna agree to it until you busted in." He pointed a hoof at Flash. "So get off her case, okay?"

Flash Burn took a second, but then she smiled. "You know I already forgave her, right? Your sister's my best friend."

Hurricane stammered. "Uh...right. Um." He looked back and forth. "Yeah, okay, whatever." He slouched and returned to the back of the group.

Flash giggled. "Your kid brother's a sweetheart, considering he's a notorious thief."

"Yes, well," Morning Glory sidled up alongside Flash, "it's probably because I'm such a good influence." This caused Flash to giggle even harder.

Celestia cleared her throat, causing the giggling to cease. "Weren't you the one saying that we don't have time for fooling around?" Her voice dripped with sadistic pleasure, and her eyes narrowed. Flash and Glory separated immediately with guilt looks. "Now, why don't you two go and find us that nice, low-key carriage we talked about?" The two mares nodded and slowly walked off to the large cluster of carriages.

The other ponies surrounded Hurricane and began throwing muddled teasing remarks about his adorableness. His frustrated cries of rage and shows of manliness seemed to only egg them on further. Celestia just sighed and smiled. Perhaps the worries that she had at the beginning of the journey were unfounded. Perhaps all these ponies really could work together.

There was a loud thud and Hurricane Galloped out of a pile of ponies that had just barely missed collapsing on top of him. He looked very frightened.

Celestia sighed. "Or...maybe not."

Chapter 12

Celestia felt that the air around her was very still. She couldn't put her hoof on why it bothered her, but she couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. She tried to get her hooves under her, but her legs wouldn't respond. She felt a sharp pain in her left ear, and warm blood trickled down the side of her face.

"Dearest Celestia," came the voice of Nightmare Moon from inches away. "I missed you so. Those daylight hours feel so long." The mare of darkness nuzzled Celestia in a parody of affection, "and I ache for your sweet caress." She kicked Celestia's face. The princess tried to say something, but it only came out as a whimper. "Oh, what's the matter, sister dear? Am I being too rough?" A kick to the stomach. "Well, how about we just take it slow at first?" A bite on the shoulder. "And you tell me," a sharp blow just above the haunches, "whenever," a kick to the kidneys, "it starts," a knock on the back of the head, "to HURT." Nightmare Moon kicked Celestia under the jaw. It felt hard enough that it should have sent Celestia reeling, but she didn't move. The princess tried to speak once again, but all that escaped was a gasp.

The dark mare knelt so that she was nestled between Celestia's forelegs, limp as they were. "Oh, that does feel nice after the harsh, harsh daylight." She wrapped her own forelegs around one of Celestia's, holding it under her chin. "I know you don't appreciate it now, Celly. You never appreciated me." Nightmare's grip became tighter. Even if Celestia could move, she felt that she wouldn't be able to escape the hold. "But somehow, you did always manage to find time for me." The grip relaxed, just a tiny bit. "You found the time to introduce me to ponies who would talk to me. Who would care about me." Celestia's heart slowed a little. Nightmare Moon's voice sounded sincere. "You took the time to show me that for every thousand ponies who adored you, there was at least one who would acknowledge my presence." The grip tightened once more, and the dark

mare's voice became harsh again. "You took the time to let me know how truly worthless I was to you, and to everypony." The grip tightened more. Each of Nightmare Moon's legs were pushing opposite directions, each placed directly on the elbow of Celestia's foreleg. "You made time to not only show your contempt for me, but to make me hate myself!" Nightmare Moon pushed harder. Celestia's elbow snapped. Even though it was a single point, her entire leg shot pain into her body. Her stomach churned, and tears flowed unbidden. Her scream came out as a strangled whimper of agony.

"And now," Nightmare Moon said softly, nursing the broken leg, "I can make time for you."

"Sunny! Sunny, wake up!" Celestia's eyes shot open. Midnight Sage. Flash Burn. Amaranth. Morning Glory. Shimmerdust The rays of sunlight peeking over the mountains in the distance. The chill breeze flowing through the flying carriage.

"Hey, she's awake!" Celestia couldn't tell who had spoken. The pain from her leg was overwhelming her senses.

"Leg. Leg! Broken!" She dared not move, for fear of making it worse.

"Let me see." It was Flash Burn. The fire-maned pony bent down to slowly examine Celestia's legs. She ran over each one gently and quickly with her muzzle, not causing even a bit of pain. "They look fine. Which one hurts?" Celestia looked down. Her elbow was bent correctly. Nothing hurt anymore. She tried moving it. It felt fine.

"I..." she tried to say something, but she still couldn't think. "I. I am. Fine."

"Sunny," Sage said pressing himself in next to Flash, "you've been twitching and whimpering for the past half hour. What happened?" The pegasus was blushing from the proximity, but she looked at Celestia with pleading eyes.

"Nightmare." Celestia tried to form a sentence. "Nightmare was there. None of you were. When I was asleep. I couldn't...nothing. And she hurt me. She kept hurting me." Sage backed away a step, and Flash tried to help Celestia onto her hooves. It was very slow going, but Celestia

managed to get her legs under her. They felt weak. "Why didn't any of you wake me?"

"We tried." Sage frowned. "We've been yelling at you and shaking you. Nothing worked."

"Not until the sun came out," Morning Glory pointed a hoof at the place where the sun shone through the mountains. "Your eyes just flew open."

"I'm not sure how," Sage said with a hoof on his chin, "but I think that Nightmare Moon may be reaching through the stasis, only she's not powerful enough when the sun is countering the moon essence that flows through her."

Celestia sighed. Would this happen every night? What about when they ran out of sunrises? "How soon will we be at Griffonmont?"

"Less than an hour!" came a call from the front of the carriage. One of the two pegasi pulling it must have heard her.

Celestia tried to push strength into her legs so that she could stand tall. It didn't work, but she felt better for the attempt. "Alright, everypony, we should get ready to meet the griffons. Flash, put on your armor. A bit of a show of strength is customary for them, so we might seem less suspicious." Flash nodded and ran off to her armor. "Sage, see if you can teach everypony some griffon customs. I've known them so long I'll lose track of what's obvious and what's not." Sage nodded in response. "Hurricane-" Celestia broke off mid-sentence. "Where is Hurricane?"

Morning Glory smiled weakly. "If you don't kick him awake, he sleeps until the afternoon." She gestured to the dark form in the corner, which Celestia had mistaken for a shadow. "We'll get him, don't worry."

Celestia shook her head. "I was just going to tell him to stay back. I'm not sure how they'll react to his wing bandage. Okay, everypony knows what they have to do. Get going." The other ponies started to group off, but they stopped and started staring at Celestia. Flash Burn was blushing vibrantly. "What?" Celestia felt a slight tugging at her mane. She turned and saw Shimmerdust nipping at a distinctive trail of frizzy pink, her expression distant.

The blue unicorn let the hair fall from her mouth with a downcast look. "Eugh. Well, it doesn't TASTE like cotton candy." Silence fell over the

carriage. Celestia felt herself start twitching. Her breathing started getting strange. She was...laughing. With that realization, the laughter overtook her, and she soon found herself on the floor, desperately trying to stop.

Flash Burn pulled the unicorn back. "Sunny, are you okay?"

Celestia waved a hoof in the air, and tried to squeeze words out between paroxysms. "I'm fine I just...I just...it just finally hit me that I'm back somewhere safe." Her laughter calmed down. She really did feel better. "Thank you, Shimmerdust."

Shimmerdust tilted her head to the side. "For what?"

Celestia shook her head as she stood up. "Nevermind. Don't ever change, okay?"

"I'll try," said the unicorn with a bemused look. "I wonder how one goes about not changing."

Celestia held in further laughter. "You know," she said turning to the others, "I've been annoyed at it for so long, but I guess it's a comfort to wake up to now." She bounced her mane up and down with her hoof.

Morning Glory snickered. "Sage, have you ever found yourself thinking the same thing about somepony?"

Sage glared. "I know she seems odd at first, but Shimmer is very sweet and intelligent."

Morning Glory waved her hoof in the air. "I didn't say anything about your little friend, I was just asking a question."

Sage shook his head. "Look, can we get started? Griffon isn't a hard language, but even the basic customs take time." Glory smiled demurely. "Right, now, to start off with, you have to..."

Celestia stopped listening. She gazed into the distant mountains. The Element of Loyalty was very close, and she'd be able to put an end to Equestria's troubles. Hopefully things really would be that simple.

The mountain upon which Griffonmont was built towered over the rest of the mountain range. Its peak was so high that clouds obscured it, and at the level of the rest of the mountains, it was incredibly wide. Wide caverns pockmarked its surface, and griffons circled all about it. It was a sight that Princess Celestia had not seen in many years. However, though it was usually a welcoming one, something was making Celestia feel-

"Uneasy?" her advisor asked. Twilight Sage was leaning over the side of the carriage with her. He looked perturbed as well.

"I guess," Celestia admitted. "I wish I could figure out why. Griffonmont is one of my favorite places to visit."

"The world is in turmoil. We at least have knowledge of the goings-on of the heavens. The griffons will be a lot more confused than we are. Who knows how they'll act?"

Celestia sighed. "You're right. I hope we last long enough to reach Groza. How is everypony doing with the coaching?"

"I wouldn't be talking to you if we weren't done. Lucky for us that griffons aren't the types for long and flowery traditions."

A sharp call pierced the thin mountain air. A pair of griffons closed in on the carriage. The pegasi slowed, but they stayed on course. Within seconds, the griffons had already closed the distance.

"State your business, ponyfolk." The griffon's voice was nasty and dry.

"We seek an attendance with Elder Groza."

"Are you serious?" the other griffon spoke up. A young girl. "We should hardly be allowing you in our airspace, much less-"

"Erix!" The older griffon silenced the younger. "I apologize for her. But I must ask you to divulge everything. A mere wish to see the busiest griffon in the world is not sufficient for us to allow you to land."

Celestia hung her head. She had hoped to not provoke any more hostility than necessary. "We're trying to fix what's wrong with the sky. And we need more magic than Equestria has. We need the Element of Loyalty."

The young griffon's face contorted. "Presumptuous fools. You plan to steal our greatest treasure and you-"

"*One more word, Erix,*" said the old griffon in his sharp native tongue, "*and I'll put your tail on my mantlepiece next to that of every other rookie I've kicked off the force.*" The young griffon shut up rather quickly. "Not many ponies know about the Element of Loyalty. How did you find out about it?"

"I've seen it. My little sister loved watching Groza put it on." The older griffon glared at Celestia, narrowing his eyes. She kept her gaze even and expressionless, hoping that he wouldn't find her story suspect.

"If you know that much about its nature, then it would be quite a stretch for me to believe that you're lying. Regardless, you will all have to stay confined to the landing. This is a...difficult situation. We will guide you. Don't make trouble." The two griffons flanked the pegasi pulling the carriage, directing them to one of the smaller caves of Griffonmont. It was well-lit enough to see that the cave didn't go terribly far back, and wasn't connected to anything else. The older griffon opened the back of the carriage for them. "Stay here. Well, I guess most of you can't fly, but still. I will speak with the Elders. You'll have word by noon, and if they permit you to see them, you can submit your request at...ah, what do you say in Equestrian...lunch?"

Celestia smiled. "Thank you, sir. We couldn't ask for anything more."

The griffon nodded. "Our treaty says that ponyfolk are welcome in Griffonmont. Knowing that I serve griffonkind is all the thanks I need. If only that was a lesson griffons learned young." He turned his head to the other griffon. *"Erix, stay here and watch these ponies. If so much as a hair on their manes is out of place, it'll be your hide, I don't give a damn who your grandmommy is."* With that, he flew out of the cave and out of sight.

Erix made a grunting noise and sat at the entrance to the cave, glaring at the ponies. "Don't cause any trouble."

Hurricane made an eerily identical grunt. "Trouble like what? We're in a dead-end cave."

Erix's scowl deepened, but suddenly her eyes went wide. "You...is your wing broken?"

Hurricane looked back at his own torso. "Uh, yeah, kinda, I guess. It's gonna get better soon, really."

Erix looked as if she were trying to make her face unreadable, but her expression was undeniably guilty-looking. "Oh. I mean...I mean, yeah, I mean." She scratched her head with her talon. "It's like...whatever."

Hurricane put a hoof on her other talon. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

"So, yeah, like whatever, okay?"

"Okay."

Celestia looked at Hurricane, then back to Erix, then back to Hurricane. "Sage, are you schooled in whatever language they're speaking?"

Sage's expression was as bemused as Celestia felt her own was. "Not a word, Sunny."

"Hurricane, what just happened?"

The dark pegasus shrugged. "I guess she's seen a broken wing before. And it's like, she didn't do it, so she's not sorry, so I guess she's, like, whatever."

Flash Burn giggled. "Well, that makes sense, then. I didn't pin you for the sensitive type, Hurricane."

Erix looked away. "Hey, let's not get all mushy, okay? I just...whatever!" She folded her forelegs across her chest.

Hurricane glared. "Yeah, I'd hate for it to get so mushy that I start talking about the story behind it." Celestia gulped. There's no way that the young griffon would react reasonably to that.

Before anything more could happen, the older griffon from before returned. "Well, that went more quickly than I expected. Apparently Groza was pretty excited to see you once I related your story." He was glaring at Celestia. "You'll be coming up to...lunch. I guess we'll have to prepare a landing for your carriage. It will take some time."

Celestia bowed. "We can't thank you enough."

"You already have. Oh, and Erix." The young griffon turned. "Groza's in a cheery mood. You might want to skip out unless you're ready to hear the great-grandkids talk again."

"Thanks, sir." Erix gave a weak salute before the old griffon took off.

Celestia's jaw was hanging open. "Groza is your grandmother?!"

"Heh, yeah." The griffon shrugged. "All of her other grandkids are married. I decided to put it off so I could do officer training young, before having kids." She scratched her head. "It's a whole...thing. I don't suppose you ponies have weird bloodline politics like we do." Celestia looked at the other ponies, who were all as uncomfortable as she was. None of them were saying anything.

"Er," Celestia tried to think of how to explain the sudden awkward silence. "I guess, it's like, whatever?"

"The Council of Elders has been called," a young Griffon spoke from the side of the head table in the Great Hall of Griffonmont. *"The petitioners from Equestria shall be heard to their fullest, and the decision of the Elders shall be honored with food and song. We honor the Eternal."*

"We honor the Eternal." came a chorus from the other Griffons.

"And we honor you, Ponyfolk," said Groza in Equestrian, from the center of the head table. *"I speak, Groza, eldest of the Griffons, in the name of the Council and of all Griffonmont. Who speaks before the Council shall now be heard."*

Celestia looked back at her companions. They had to know their part to speak before the Council. She turned back to the head table. *"I speak, Sunny of Equestria, in the name of Princess Celestia, Princess Luna, and Equestria."*

Twilight Sage stepped next to her. *"I speak, Twilight Sage of Equestria, in full accordance with Sunny of Equestria, as her second."*

Flash Burn stepped on her other side. *"I speak, Flash Burn of Equestria, in...um...full accordance with Sunny of Equestria, as her servant."* She got the accents all wrong, but it was certainly close enough.

Amaranth stepped next to Sage nervously. *"I speaken Amaranth Equestria...uh...on the sunny accordion fully Equestria, and service her."* The odd looks from a couple of the griffons made him lower his head, but none of the head table reacted.

Morning Glory cleared her throat and stood next to Flash, clearly ready to deliver her line with the utmost perfection. *"I, Morning Glory of Equestria, possess an inordinate number of cheese blocks, and Sunny of Equestria can vouch for that."* Utter silence fell over the room. The griffons who were chatting quietly had all stopped to stare at the brown pony. Glory looked around nervously. "What?" Celestia was about to say something, but she heard a sound on her left. Twilight Sage was...snickering? And covering his mouth with a hoof in a futile attempt to cover it up.

"Twilight Sage, what did you do?" Celestia attempted her best scowl, but it only caused the unicorn to burst into laughter. Celestia looked nervously back at the head table. They were all...smiling? Indeed, several of them had begun to laugh. The entirety of the Great Hall was soon full of the sound of laughing griffons.

Morning Glory broke formation and smacked Sage on the head. "You wretch! You evil, wicked pony! You told me to say the wrong thing, didn't you? You've ruined everything!" Sage was unresponsive, still laughing.

Groza stood weakly, shaking with suppressed laughter. "Perhaps...perhaps we should...conduct theheehheehheehheeh the, uh, ceremonies in Equestrian, to prevent...to prevent any further...hnnn...mishaps!" She collapsed onto the table, unable to speak. She waved one of her talons, motioning for the ponies to continue.

Shimmerdust stepped forward as scripted, but she looked around confused. "I dunno what to say. You only told us how to say it in Griffon." The room once again surged with griffon guffaws. The head table, however, appeared to compose themselves a bit.

"Just...why don't you just give us the petition? All this laughing's making me hungry." Groza's eyes were filled with tears, and her talons gripped onto the edge of the table.

With a final glare at Twilight Sage, Celestia took a deep breath and recited the piece she had prepared. "Honored Elders of Griffonmont, we ponies come to you in an hour most dire. The night sky is dark, and soon, so too shall be the day. The princesses are in grave danger, and we require the most powerful magic in the world to save them. We need the Element of Loyalty."

The levity of the room died down, and the smile was gone from the faces of all the Elders. "We have seen the sky, ponies," said Groza, "and I personally know that there has been trouble with the princesses. However, you must surely understand the enormity of this request. For many centuries, the Element of Loyalty has been the most treasured object of all Griffonmont. Though the laws that named it the rightful possession of the griffons have long been abolished, it is more precious to us than all the gold and jewels that these mountains may contain."

Celestia lowered her head. "I understand. I would not ask, but the lives of all ponies and indeed all the world are at stake."

There was a brief silence. "Very well, Sunny of Equestria. As the Spirit of Loyalty, I accept your request." Whispers erupted around the room. "But," Groza said with a talon held in the air, "as the leader of the Council of

Elders, I must receive their support before I can release the prized treasure of the griffons to ponyfolk. Let the Council speak." A griffon at the end of the table stood up immediately. Groza sighed. "The Council recognizes Oerda, General."

The old griffon cleared his throat. "I respect the wishes of Groza, Eldest, and all the much more the wishes of Groza, Spirit of Loyalty. However, I do not trust these ponyfolk. They say that they require powerful magic? Their gods grant them powerful magics enough. What more can but one of the Elements of Harmony do? They must be deceiving us for some other purpose." Another griffon at the opposite end of the table stood up quickly.

"The Council recognizes Ynga, Wisest."

The griffon spoke with a shaky voice. "The lore of the Elements of Harmony is not well known, Oerda. I imagine that the ponyfolk only knew to look for even one because Groza is well-acquainted with the Royal Pony Sisters. Surely, they are truly in service to their princesses, and merely did not know that all five Elements must be acquired to summon the power of Magic."

Celestia's heart fell. "All f-five? But...but how will we find them all in only eleven days?"

Groza held up a talon to silence the other Elders. "The locations we know not, but we know who last had them. The Element of Laughter was turned over to the Great Temple after the war, and that lies at the other end of this mountain range. The dragons possessed the Element of Generosity, and entrusted it to their leader, who was last seen in the Eastern Desert, just beyond these mountains. The Element of Honesty lies south of that, once possessed by the Anansi, before their fall. We believe that the zebrafolk now have it. Finally, the Element of Kindness is in the hands of the Serpent King, who dwells in the ocean to the West of Equestria. If your magic is not enough to fix your problem, you will need to gather all of the Elements."

General Oerda scoffed. "You presume, Groza, that this council will indeed vote to trust these ponyfolk. They have not shown themselves to be worthy, even if their intentions are as noble as they proclaim."

"Then let them show themselves," Ynga proclaimed. She coughed from the strain of raising her voice. "All those griffons who wish to be proven have undergone the Trial of the Mountain, our greatest test of loyalty and honor. I say, let the ponyfolk perform the Trial."

Oerda growled. "The trial must be taken by six, and the ponyfolk have only three working wings between them. You mock our traditions, Ynga."

"And you overstep your bounds, Oerda." Groza shot the general a glare from across the table. "The Trial of the Mountain has been put forth. The Council must vote to allow the ponyfolk to enter. All who vote yes, raise your talons." All the head table but Oerda did so. "It is decided. Sunny of Equestria, do you and your companions accept the Trial of the Mountain?"

Celestia looked back and forth. "What is the Trial of the Mountain?"

Groza's expression softened. "It's the only way I can swing this, honey."

Celestia's head sunk. "We accept."

"Then the decision is made." Groza raised her volume to fill the Great Hall. "Bring forth the feast!" In an instant, the Hall was flooded with younger griffons bearing trays full of food. "Come, ponyfolk, and sit at the head table with me. There is much I would like to discuss now that the formalities are over." Groza snickered. "For example, Miss Glory's robust cheese collection."

Morning Glory boggled. "Cheese collection?" Sage started laughing again.

Shimmerdust turned to Morning Glory. "You collect cheese?"

"I do not collect cheese!"

Celestia rolled her eyes as Shimmerdust continued to ask Glory about a nonexistent cheese collection. "Sage, why did you do that? You could have ruined everything."

Sage caught his breath. "I was told that griffons were very fond of practical jokes, and that it was not abnormal for them to interrupt even the grandest of ceremonies. And I owed Glory."

"Who taught you that?"

Sage raised an eyebrow. "Why, Princess Celestia did. And I hear she's very well acquainted with griffon customs. She even taught me the language." Celestia screwed up her mouth. She had forgotten that she told him that.

"It's true, sweetness," said Groza, with a hunk of bread in one hand, "I was doing this big important wedding a couple days ago, and the bride had her brother put on some makeup and go in her place. We had to hold the wedding off until next sunrise. Man, that was a trip." She tore into the bread voraciously. "No way you would have gotten so many votes if the Council didn't think you were, well, a lot like us. Most of them don't know much about ponies."

Sage smiled. "You see? It's a win-win situation."

"Don't be so sure, Sage." Celestia pointed over to Morning Glory, who was surrounded by griffons. "They're all giving her suggestions on how to get you back." Sage's smile disappeared. "Anyway, what exactly is the Trial of the Mountain?"

Groza swallowed more food. "It's a race through the big cave that goes all the way through Griffonmont. There's a few natural hazards. The first one through receives the prize, but don't be fooled. You won't live through it if you don't all help each other out. We often use it to see who will get promotions in the military. Good, loyal leaders make it through. Bad ones have to turn back. Or worse."

Celestia frowned. "I know the ways of Griffonmont are harsh, but do you really have to put us through a deadly trial? You know how much we need the Element of Loyalty."

Groza's expression turned serious. "It's of no use to you if the power of Loyalty doesn't reside in you. Now, come on, eat." She gestured to the plate in front of her, which was now empty of all but crumbs. "Uh...let's get some more food over here." The griffon waved a talon at one of the servers, who rushed off.

Celestia sighed and muttered to herself. "Just when I thought things couldn't get worse."

Chapter 13

The sun still shone brightly in the sky as the ponies were flown down to the trial cave. The entrance was obvious. Though it was only as wide as six griffons standing shoulder to shoulder, the rock surrounding was carved with ostentatious designs, and it was sealed, unlike every other cave on Griffonmont, by a wooden gate. The gate was decorated with carved letters. Celestia could tell that they were the letters of the griffon language, but the words made no sense to her. There seemed to be some sort of rhyme to it, but it must have been a version of the language older than the war. The ponies were led off the carriage and two griffons stood by the door entrance. They grasped the metal handles to the gates, but did not pull.

Groza stood up on her hind legs. She intoned the words on the door like a chant, then reverted to Equestrian. "All but the brave and strong shall perish in the trial of fire and stone. Only the first to the end shall succeed, but they shall fail who endeavor alone." She fell back onto all fours. "A little melodramatic, but take it to heart. You have to work together if you want to make it through this."

Celestia stepped forward nervously. "What's in there?"

The griffon shook her head. "I can't tell you that. This isn't the sort of thing you're supposed to plan and prepare for. It's all about wits, strength, and courage. In fact," she turned to Flash Burn, "you'll have to take off that armor."

Flash Burn looked nervous. "What? Why?"

"No preparations whatsoever. We'd all go in armored if we were allowed."

"Well...what are you going to do with it?"

Groza gestured to Hurricane. "Have this one look after your things. Only six may enter, and he has a broken wing anyway. We take that sort of injury very seriously around here."

Flash narrowed her eyes. "He is a thief."

"Hey, don't worry," said Hurricane, the roll of his eyes audible in his voice, "I'm not going to fly off with it or anything." He flapped his one good wing. Flash Burn looked at the ground and slunk off to remove her armor.

Celestia turned to the griffon. "We won't need to fly to get through this, will we?"

Groza shook her head. "It's a cave. Griffons don't have room to fly through most parts of it. A pegasus pony might be able to pull it off, but unless that Flash has some pretty slick moves, it won't do you too much good."

"Right," Celestia said distantly, looking at Flash. The fire-maned pegasus was, without a doubt, an amazing flier, but even the halls of the castle were nowhere near as constricting as a cave. "So, how long will it take?"

"Officially, until sundown. The sun should start disappearing behind the mountains in six hours, and that's when they'll close the front doors behind you. After that, those of us waiting at the end are supposed to consider you failed, but there's no door there, so the only issue is that if we all leave, you won't have a witness to determine the 'winner'. Not a problem for your case."

Celestia nodded. The distance to the other side of the mountain, going straight through, could not have been two hours' walk. Six hours was probably more than enough time to determine if anyone was coming out. Her stomach fluttered as she imagined the griffons and Hurricane waiting at the entrance as the sun fell, only to never see the ponies exit.

"But," Groza added, placing a talon on Celestia's shoulder, "I'll wait as long as it takes for you." The elderly griffon was smiling gently.

Celestia chuckled. "So, you didn't buy that 'Sunny' bit after all, did you?"

"You kidding? Minus the horn and wings, you look exactly the same as you did growing up. We've been best friends for centuries; there's no way I wouldn't recognize you." Groza's smile faded. "I just wish the lie wasn't necessary. A lot of griffons aren't happy with the Royal Pony Sisters right now."

Celestia's head sunk. She looked over at Flash Burn, who was nearly finished disrobing. "We should get going."

The griffon smiled again. "Good luck." She backed up and reared onto her hind legs again. "The entrants are ready," she cried out loudly. "Open the Trial of the Mountain." The two griffons heaved the gates backwards. The heavy doors groaned at being moved, but they opened fully.

Celestia looked back at the other ponies. "Let's move, everypony." The others followed wordlessly into the darkness of Griffonmont.

"Hey, Glory?" Shimmerdust turned back to face the earth pony, causing the glow from her horn to recede from the cave.

"Eyes forward," replied Morning Glory with a slight hint of impatience.

Shimmerdust faced forward again. "I was just wondering something."

"What?"

"You live in a tavern, right?"

Morning Glory sighed. "An inn, yes."

"So where do you keep all your cheese?" This was immediately followed by gleeful chortling from the other end of the line. Twilight Sage sounded like he was having trouble breathing, but he laughed nonetheless.

Morning Glory's cheeks turned red. "For the last time, Shimmerdust, I do not now, nor have I ever, collected cheese in any way." Shimmerdust made no sound or motion of acknowledgement, which caused Glory to make a "hrmph" sound.

"How much longer until we get to the end of this?" Glory's voice was tired.

Celestia attempted to restrain the weariness from her own voice. "Probably at least another half hour, though it depends on what other obstacles are in our way."

Sage's giggling finally died down. "I can't imagine that we have too much to worry about. The worst we've run into so far was the spike hallway, and we got through that just fine."

Amaranth didn't turn back to speak. "You got your tail caught in the last closing wall."

"Yeah, well-"

"Your tail is only a few inches long."

"Oh, come on." Sage didn't sound terribly disheartened. "How can you be pessimistic at a time like this? Six brave heroes delving through a dungeon full of traps to acquire a powerful treasure...we're on an adventure!"

"I value my life over the idea of 'adventure'," Amaranth stated chidingly. Sage said something back, but Celestia didn't hear it. Flash and Glory were whispering just ahead of her, and she tried to listen in.

"...STILL can't believe he would do something so idiotic." Glory's whisper was harsh and hissing.

"He knew what he was doing," replied Flash softly. Her voice had a bit of an uncertain edge to it.

"You're just making excuses for him because you like him." Now Glory was positively growling.

"Do you really have to bring that up now?" Flash's blush was audible.

Glory made an impossibly feminine grunt and started walking faster. "Come on, everypony. The faster we walk, the sooner we get out of here."

Somewhere distant in the cave, there was a strange "hiss-clunk" sound. Then another one, closer. Then another. The hissing approached the ponies, and with no other warning, a pillar of stone shot up in front of them, causing Morning Glory to scream and tossing her backwards into Flash Burn's forelegs.

The earth pony turned around to embrace the pegasus. "Oh, Flashie, you saved me! I'm so sorry I yelled at you." She buried her muzzle into Flash Burn's neck, which caused the pegasus to make an expression that was at once amused, bemused, and confused. The stone pillar had already fallen back onto the floor, but dust from where it had hit the ceiling settled down onto the ponies. Celestia traced its path back to the floor, and saw that the entire cave in front of them was hewn into irregular section.

"It's another trap," she said flatly. "This entire hall is made of these crushing pillars." Another round of "hiss-thunk"s began. Different pillars hit the ceiling this time. "And it looks like they fire randomly. This is way more impressive than anything we've run into..."

"It's natural," said Sage with a hint of wonder in his voice. "That hissing sound? That's some kind of superheated gas from the geothermal activity under Griffonmont. I wouldn't have expected anything to come up this high, but...I think the entire Trial may have been built around this. Look," he pointed a hoof at the tiles that were, in fact, the tops of the pillars. "These are cut into really irregular shapes and sizes. Nothing even resembling uniformity. I'm not sure what made the cuts, but it wasn't griffons. Possibly some kind of ancient magic, from before Griffons lived here."

"Okay," Flash said, with Glory still wrapped tightly around her, "how do we get through?"

Another set of "hiss-thunk"s. "Well," Sage said uncertainly, "It seems that the interval is regular. Judging from the sound, they don't start too far off. If we start just after one pass ends, we'll only have to contend with one round of pillars."

"What?" Glory let go of Flash. "We have to be in that mess? I already almost got crushed!"

"The only other option is turning back and failing, and going through all the other traps again besides. Do you really want to go through the sticky hall again?" Sage raised an eyebrow with an amused smirk.

Glory stared at the ground. "We agreed to never speak of that again."

Shimmerdust brushed up against Glory. "Aw, come on, it was funny."

Glory grumbled. "I hope these pillars kill me."

The ponies lined up in front of the tiled floor. Another round of "hiss-thunk"s. The instant one hit in front of them, they broke into a gallop. As predicted, they were still on the tiles when they heard a hissing start. However, the sight ahead made Celestia's heart skip a beat. There was a gout of flame at the end of the tiles, and the instant it cut out, a massive chunk of stone the width of the entire hallway rose up and smashed the ceiling. The end of the trapped section would certainly kill them if they didn't make it in time. Smaller pillars began rising and falling in front of them. Celestia closed her eyes. She heard a hissing sound behind her and knew that she was clear. But then she heard another sound. She only dared to turn her head for one second. Shimmerdust had been pushed off her hooves and fell to the ground.

"Shimmer!" Sage's yell confirmed what Celestia had seen. The unicorn quickly scrambled back up, but she was still far behind the rest of the group. The sounds of the pillars were reaching the beginning of the hallway.

"We're not going to make it!" Glory screamed in panic. Then, suddenly, she disappeared in a blink. She reappeared with Flash past the giant end pillar, but Flash disappeared again. Celestia felt a surge lift her into the air, and by the time she could look down at the ground, she was already at the end. One by one, the other ponies were scooped up by the pegasus and deposited at the end of the hallway, until only one pony remained in the hallway.

Flash looked nervously at the hole in the wall where the flame jet had come out. "I...I-" she didn't have time to finish. The roaring fire pushed everypony back with its heat. And Shimmerdust was on the other side. Flash sunk to the floor. "I wouldn't have made it. She was too far back."

Sage stumbled into the wall. "Shimmer...no..." He stared at the floor. "She can't be...this can't..." Tears began forming in his eyes.

"She might make it," Celestia said hopefully. "Those pillars are random."

Amaranth looked at Sage sadly. "I don't think she'll know to avoid that final stone, and even if she does...the pillars near the end looked like they came up more frequently. I don't think we have that kind of luck. And we saw that the pillars start the instant the flame cuts out."

Flash spoke to Sage in a weak whisper. "Sage...I am so, so sorry."

He didn't get up. "You did everything you could."

Flash stammered something, but then her eyes narrowed. "Wrong."

Celestia saw Flash spread her wings and turn to the flame.

Everything seemed to go in slow motion. The pegasus leaped into the gout of fire as Glory reached out a hoof to stop her. There was a pause. The flame disappeared. Shimmerdust flew out into the crowd with enough velocity that she skipped off the floor. A streak of fire just barely cleared the giant stone pillar before it smashed the ceiling. The streak slowed down enough to be obvious as the form of a pegasus, who smashed hard into one wall, then the opposite wall, then finally tumbled to the floor until she reached a complete stop.

"Flash!" Morning Glory galloped over to the fallen pegasus. Flash Burn lay on the ground, the smell of burnt fur rising from her. Blood started to color her near-white coat in spots all over her body and head. "Flash, speak to me. Say something!"

Meanwhile, Sage was helping Shimmerdust up. "Can you walk?"

Shimmerdust's voice was shaky. "My back leg's a bit tender, but I'll be fine." It was the first time Celestia had heard anything in the blue unicorn's voice besides calm contentment. "Go help Flash." Sage looked uncomfortable leaving her, but he rushed over to Flash Burn all the same.

"How is she?" he asked Morning Glory.

The earth pony had tears in her eyes. "She's not talking to me. She's not moving. I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do."

Sage calmly leaned down next to Flash. "She's breathing. She's breathing well. She should be alright, but we have to get her wounds disinfected now. My supplies are in my saddlebag, but-"

"If we're carrying her, it will take us the better part of an hour," Amaranth said calmly. "And if she has any broken bones, that would be a bad idea."

Sage nodded in agreement. "Somepony has to go ahead and get my things while the rest of us tend to her. Shimmer is still injured-"

"I'll go." Celestia passed the other ponies. "They're expecting to see me first, I'll get the bags fastest."

"But, Princess," Sage protested, "your muscles may still be weak. A long gallop could burn your muscles out."

Celestia put on the bravest face she could manage. "Then today is a bad day to be me."

The princess broke into a gallop instantly. After the first minute, her lungs ached, and her legs felt weak. She didn't stop. Her hooves threatened to fall out from under her, but the cave slowly brightened. The end was near. Finally, around a bend, she saw the exit. It wasn't as bright as she had expected, and she could see the others standing outside. She pressed harder, though it still felt too slow. She finally broke into the open air, and she thought she could hear cheers over the wind rushing past her ears. She didn't care. She sought the dark form of Hurricane, the only pony in the crowd.

"Hurricane!" she tried to yell. It came out as ragged breathing which somehow resembled the word she wanted to say. "Flash. Hurt. Sage's bags."

The pegasus squeezed his way through a crowd of griffons. "What's going on?"

Celestia tried to catch more breath. "Flash is hurt. Needs what's in Sage's bag. I gotta go back."

An old griffon cleared his throat. "No outside materials in the trial, pony."

"Sunny has won," said a voice that Celestia identified as Groza's. "The trial is over, Oerda."

Celestia gestured frantically. "I have to go back. No time."

Hurricane put a hoof on her shoulder. "You'll collapse if you try to run. I'll go." He pulled Sage's bags on top of himself.

A young griffon rushed out of the crowd. Erix. "You can't run! Something could happen to your wing."

"I gotta risk it. The bandaging is good; I should be fine."

"But it's that guard pony that you don't even like."

There was a pause. "Doesn't matter. She's hurt, and I can help." Hurricane galloped off into the cave. Once he disappeared, Celestia felt herself stagger. She was caught by a mass of feathers.

"Easy, there. You did it. Now you just have to wait." Groza's voice soothed Celestia. She leaned against her old friend, and she rested her head in the griffon's plumage. Her part was done. She could do nothing but hope.

An hour passed in silence. Celestia never did stop leaning on Groza, even as her strength returned to her. She found herself able to do little more than worry. There was a good chance that bad news would

come out of the cave at any second. None of the griffons said anything. All of them stood reverently, waiting for someone else to make a move.

Suddenly, a griffon gasped. There was movement from the cave. All the griffons clamored around the mouth of the cave, hoping to get a better look. The shadowy forms coalesced into three ponies. Amaranth and Twilight Sage stood on either side of the formation, and in the center, with one foreleg draped over each of them, was a bandaged and bloodied Flash Burn, smiling weakly.

Celestia rushed up to give the pegasus a hug, but when she tried, found that her legs had all fallen asleep. She fell onto her face. It was just as well, since once they were outside the cave, Shimmerdust and Morning Glory took Flash from the stallions and began lavishing her with affection. Glory did so in her predictably melodramatic manner, and Shimmerdust with unmistakable quiet sincerity. Amaranth and Sage stood smiling silently, and Hurricane attempted to pry Glory off Flash to no avail. They all parted when Celestia got to her hooves and walked up to the pegasus.

The princess smiled down at the injured Guard captain. "You were amazing, Flash."

The pegasus gave a weak chuckle, then made a face that looked like she'd just hurt herself. "Just doing my job."

Celestia leaned down and gave Flash a gentle hug. The bandages were moist with disinfectant, and her fur was matted with blood in a lot of places. The princess released her, only for Morning Glory to come rushing back in.

"Never do anything like that again, Flashie! I'll die of worry." The brown earth pony stroked Flash's mane gently.

The pegasus laughed again. "YOU'LL die? Of course, how inconsiderate of me." This hardly seemed to dissuade Glory, but they were both smiling.

A soft coughing from behind made Celestia turn her head around. Groza was standing at the head of the rest of the griffons, looking impatient.

"Sorry," said Celestia, "I guess we're done now."

Groza nodded. "You have passed the Trial of the Mountain. With both my blessing, and the blessing of the Council, I bequeath unto you ponies the Element of Loyalty." The elderly griffon closed her eyes, and golden light appeared in the sky around her. It coalesced into a necklace, but then dispersed into a cloud of dust. The motes settled to the ground, where they formed a plain grey stone sphere, about an eighth the size of a

pony, with nothing but a simple geometric character marking its significance.

Celestia bowed, and reached out to grab the stone, but she felt herself bowled over by something heavy. Heavy and equipped with talons. She threw herself to the side to escape further injury, but the talon left a scratch in her side. She fell to the ground and looked up to see the source of the attack. An old griffon male stood framed by the setting sun.

"No!" came Oerda's weary old voice. "I will not allow our greatest treasure to be handed to these ponyfolk. Not in this time of darkness." He stepped forward, but he was whisked out of view by another blurred form.

"Stand down, you old bastard!" It was Groza's voice. She had knocked the general to the ground, and stood between him and Celestia.

"Your foolish decisions won't matter if there are no ponyfolk to give it to." He lunged into the air, but Groza rose swiftly and smacked him back down to the ground.

"The Council has spoken, fool." She settled back down to the ground in a low stance. "I have spoken."

"Then you are a traitor," growled Oerda. He let out a roar and charged Groza. Groza crouched down as if she were expecting a tackle. However, the general instead swiped at her with a single talon. It didn't look like it pushed her at all, but blood began to come from Groza's neck.

"You...you..." stammered Groza, as she lifted a talon to her wound.

The other griffon backed up a few paces. "Now I am in charge." His expression was grim.

Groza's eyes went wild. "You're a fool." She stood tall, despite the blood running from her throat. "Perhaps you have forgotten what Loyalty means. Allow me to show you." She made a blindingly fast charge and pinned Oerda to the ground.

"But...how?" Oerda's words were quiet. He was being strangled.

"The Element of Loyalty prevents me from being struck down as I defend those I care about. Surprisingly enough, that happens to include a very dear friend of mine."

"Don't...have...Element..." The general was kicking his hind legs into the air, and desperately attempting to wrench Groza's talon off his own neck. He was not succeeding.

"The Spirit of the Elements is stronger than that, fool. And now, you pay for your arrogance and treachery." Groza's talon went high into the air, and then plunged straight down Oerda's beak. The old general made a strangled gurgle, then stopped moving. Groza calmly climbed off his corpse, and faced the crowd of shocked griffons. "These ponies are here to

save the world. To harm them is as great betrayal as any griffon shall ever know. Does everyone understand?" The griffons nodded silently. They all appeared to slowly recede from the ponies and the fallen elder.

Groza turned back to Celestia. She crouched down and, with her clean talon, slowly stroked Celestia's mane. "There," she said, with a weak smile and eyes full of tears. "You're safe."

Groza the griffon collapsed on the ground, her neck split open, and her eyes empty of life.