

# Skyfall

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# Chapter 1

## The Visitor

Applejack awoke to the sound of metal clanging against the floor of the kitchen below.

“Oh Angel, are you alright? You must be more careful! You’ll hurt yourself trying to do that.”

It was the voice of Fluttershy, who had evidently decided to wake up early again to prepare breakfast. Applejack groaned as she forced herself out of bed and plodded heavily down the stairs. Upon entering the kitchen, she saw what had caused the ruckus. Fluttershy was busying herself about the floor where several half-cooked pancakes had recently landed while a rather disgruntled Angel was trying desperately to remove batter from his fur. It seemed that Angel had been a bit too enthusiastic in his attempt at flipping the pancakes. The scene would have been much more amusing if Applejack were not already so accustomed to being awakened in this way.

“Fluttershah, how many times do Ah have to tell you? Yer *mah* guest.. Ah’d be more’n happy to make breakfast for y’all.”

“Oh, no I couldn’t have that. It’s the least I could do after everything you’ve done for Angel and I. Don’t worry, we’ll have this cleaned up in no time.”

Applejack opened her mouth to offer a retort, but decided that it was pointless and simply sighed, shaking her head. She never could argue with Fluttershy. Instead, she spent a few minutes helping Fluttershy clean up before beginning the familiar routine of her morning chores.

The yellow and pink Pegasus had moved in a few days ago after the most recent “earthshake,” as the ponies had come to call them, had damaged her cottage. While repairs were underway, Sweet Apple Acres was the only place big enough to accommodate Fluttershy and all of her animals. Granted, it meant that the Apple family had to be a bit more vigilant to prevent the animals from eating the crops, but Applejack was happy to be able to help Fluttershy in any way she could.

The day was looking to be an especially busy one for the Apple family. The Summer Sun Celebration was tomorrow, and this meant a prime opportunity to sell their wares. This year was a bit special, however, as they would be donating half of the proceeds to help the ponies whose homes had been destroyed in the earthquakes. Applejack had recruited the help of her close friends for the occasion, but Fluttershy was still finishing breakfast, and Rarity, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie wouldn't be along for several hours. Twilight would be unable to help, as she was away to Manehattan to oversee preparations for the Celebration.

After Applejack had readied the applecarts, fed the chickens, awakened Applebloom, and milked the cows with Big Macintosh, she and her brother returned to the kitchen. They were greeted with the enticing smell of fresh pancakes and maple syrup. For a while the three Apple siblings, Fluttershy, and Angel enjoyed their breakfast in silence, all of them still too groggy to be much for conversation, when a sound came at the door. It wasn't as much a knock as it was a single, deafening impact that would have caused Fluttershy to come dangerously close to hitting the stratosphere, had the ceiling not painfully interrupted her sudden ascent. Applejack hurried to the door. Upon opening it, her vision was filled with a rather noisy mass of pink fluff.

"HIYEEE!" Pinkie Pie squealed, a little too loudly for this early in the morning.

There was now a large, suspiciously Pinkie-shaped dent in the door. Fortunately, for some reason, Pinkie had been wearing a hard hat that was the same vibrant shade of fuschia, as her unruly mane. Applejack simply stared at her friend for a moment, dimly wondering at Pinkie's sheer cranial fortitude, before offering a response.

"Uh...mornin', Pink. What's with the hard hat?"

Pinkie Pie bounced inside with her usual amount of energy.

"Well, *duh*. I just came from Fluttershy's cottage! Mr. Cobble says it's all fixed for her to move back in, so I decided to come over early to tell everypony the good news!"

Applejack's mind unfocused just long enough to picture Pinkie handling power tools.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Fluttershy chimed, gingerly rubbing her head. "Angel and I were beginning to get homesick."

"Well whah dontcha join us fer breakfast? There's plenny to go around."

"Thanks!" In a single motion, Pinkie bounced into a chair and immediately buried her face in food.

After the ponies had finished with their meal, they set about the daunting task of harvesting the southern apple field. At about noon, Rainbow Dash and Rarity could be seen walking along the long dirt road to the orchard. Even with the five of them, along with Big Macintosh and Applebloom, harvesting the apples took most of the day, and they worked long into the night preparing pies, candied apples, and all manner of appletastic treats. At long last, at about three o'clock in the morning, all was ready for the Celebration. The ponies had loaded their delicious cargo onto the train that Applejack would be taking to Manehattan and now gathered on the boarding platform to bid their friend farewell, an exhausted Applebloom soundly asleep on Big Macintosh's back. The young pony seemed even smaller than usual as she rose and fell with the breathing of her older brother, like a tiny yellow ship in a vast sea of red. Applejack blinked sleepily, making no attempt to stifle an enormous yawn.

"Thank you kindly for helpin' us harvest these here apples. I don't know what we woulda done if it hadn't been for y'all."

"But of course, darling. We wouldn't dream of having you do all of that on your own." Rarity smiled. The white unicorn jumped at a sudden noise like a bandsaw from just behind her. Rainbow Dash was sprawled unceremoniously across a nearby tree branch and had begun to snore loudly. Rarity glared indignantly at the unconscious pony and shook her head in disgust.

"...But I think its time we all got some rest. We've all got quite a lot of work ahead of us if we're to do our part in helping the refugees in Ponyville tomorrow."

Rarity used her magic to shake the branches of Rainbow's tree, knocking the slumbering Pegasus to the ground with a heavy thud. Rainbow took a moment to utter a few choice words under her breath before saying goodbye to Applejack and taking off in the direction of her cloudy home. All of the other ponies did not hesitate to follow suit, each of them eagerly anticipating a soft bed of their own.

Despite Big Macintosh's offer to allow her to spend another night at the farm, Fluttershy insisted on returning home with Angel. The journey was not far, though it seemed to Fluttershy an eternity had passed before she finally saw the familiar lights of her cottage in the distance. She had put Angel to bed with the rest of her animals and was about to do the same for herself when she noticed the silhouette of a tiny figure standing at the edge of the Forest through her window. Her first instinct told her to hide, but it was overridden by the sudden realization that she recognized the figure as that of one of her close friends. She ran outside and walked toward the figure until she was within shouting distance.

"S...Spike? Is that you?"

He did not respond. Perhaps he had not heard her.

"Um...Spike?" She edged closer to the baby dragon. "What are you doing out here all by yourself?" I thought you were supposed to be in Canterlot with the Princess."

Again, there was no response. He may as well be made of...oh no...

Fluttershy bolted toward Spike, fear quickening her steps.

"Oh...Oh thank goodness, you're alright. I thought maybe that awful cockatr...wait...who...?"

Before her stood a baby dragon, by all appearances the same age as Spike, but the resemblance to her friend stopped at that. His scales as well as his spines were of deepest emerald green, polished to the point that Fluttershy could see her own dim reflection in the moonlight. The eyes that seemed to stare past the pegasus before him were of a brilliant silver – white, his snout pointed and sharp, unlike the cute, round face of Spike. For a while, the two simply sat in silence until Fluttershy's curiosity prompted her to speak.

“Oh my! I never thought I would meet *another* baby dragon. Do you know Spike? He lives here in Ponyville. Are you hungry? What’s your name? Are you lost?”

Fluttershy’s excitement was clear in her voice as she rapidly fired one question after another at the newcomer. When he did not answer, something that should have been rather obvious from the beginning dawned on the yellow pony.

“...Where’s your mother?” she said slowly, looking around for any sign of an adult dragon with a faint sinking feeling.

“...ot...ere...”

“Um...sorry, what did you say? I didn’t quite hear you.”

“...not...there. Where are they?”

The dragon’s eyes were unfocused, darting about with no apparent purpose in their movement. His voice was very weak, barely above a whisper. It occurred to Fluttershy that he may be delirious.

“Oh dear, I must get you inside right away. You must be starving!”

She moved to scoop the dragon up in her hooves, when he jumped out of her reach with alarming speed. Suddenly, his eyes snapped into focus and glared piercingly at Fluttershy. It was then that the pony noticed that this dragon had wings, rather large for his small size, which he now displayed to the effect of making himself appear much larger than he actually was. He spoke once more, but this time, his voice was clear and sharp, with more than a hint of hostility.

“You! Who are you!? Explain yourself!”

Fluttershy recoiled violently at the outburst. The tiny dragon stepped toward her.

“Did your mother not teach you to speak when spoken to? Speak! Tell me your name!”

His words did not suit the voice of the tiny body that spoke them. He spoke with all the confidence and command of a grown dragon, and it was making Fluttershy much too frightened to be able to speak in return. He moved to take another step toward her when he paused mid-step, sniffing the air. Suddenly, the dragon stumbled backward. His eyes were wide with what appeared to be shock. He stared at Fluttershy for a few moments before speaking again.

“I...I can smell it...but its not where it’ supposed to...”

The dragon glanced behind him into the heart of the Everfree Forest, then looked down at his own body, as if realizing where he was for the first time. Finally, he cast an appraising eye upon Fluttershy, who was now partially hidden behind a bush several feet away

“...That’s interesting...I suppose I should have considered that...” He muttered to himself, absently patting the front of his body, as though he were looking for something but couldn’t quite remember what it was. After a few moments in which the dragon seemed to be lost in deep thought, Fluttershy spoke again.

“I...I’m sorry. I-I-I-I’ll just ...I-I’ll just go...”

She took off as quickly as she could manage in the direction of her home, but before she could fly more than a few feet, the dragon called to her.

“No, wait! Please! I’m sorry that I frightened you...please, don’t leave...”

His voice had lost all of its former hostility and had taken on a tone of genuine desperation. Fluttershy hovered uncertainly, staring at the young dragon (by far the moodiest dragon she had ever met, she thought to herself).

“Please, I didn’t...didn’t mean to shout...” His eyes wavered, shifting in and out of focus. “I have to... have to get back...before...”. He stumbled as he tried to turn back toward the Everfree Forest, the formerly intimidating figure reduced to a bumbling baby once more. “Where is it? I just...I need...” The young dragon managed a few more unsteady steps before collapsing, unconscious, to the ground. All of her fear washed away by a



sudden flood of concern, Fluttershy swooped down to get a closer look. He was completely immobile. Fluttershy felt a sickening lump form in her throat when she noticed what was wrong.

“Oh no! Oh my goodness, oh my goodness he’s not breathing! What do I do?! Her motherly instinct took over as she scooped up the baby dragon, searching frantically for any sign of the baby’s parents. She screamed into the darkness. screamed as loudly as she could, screamed for anyone to help. But no one came. In a panic, she remembered the CPR training she had received as a volunteer at Ponyville Urgent Care. As she began the first compressions, Angel burst out of the cottage and was at her side in a flash. At first, he hesitated, his gaze shooting nervously back and forth between Fluttershy and the stranger she was trying desperately to revive. Fluttershy had only to look into his eyes for a moment to convey the urgency of the situation. Immediately, Angel moved to race toward Ponyville but stopped short knowing that he would never make it in time. As he whirled about to face Fluttershy again a peculiar pattern in the earth caught his eye – a trail of tiny footprints leading back to the edge of the Forest. Without hesitation, Angel bolted along the path into the Forest.

“ANGEL, WAIT!”

But he had already been swallowed by the wall of trees. Several tense moments passed. All was silent, save for the sounds of Fluttershy’s frantic efforts to revive the dragon, punctuated by an occasional sob. She knew there was not much time left before....

*WHACK*

Fluttershy shook her head to clear the stars from her vision. Something small and hard had hit her between the eyes, and now hung limply off the tip of her muzzle. It appeared to be a pendant, ornamented with a single, oddly shaped black gem. In the depthless heart of the gem shone a tiny, almost nonexistent point of light. The stone was strangely mesmerizing. She looked up to see Angel, who, judging by his stance, had just hurled the object at Fluttershy, and was now gesturing frantically toward the dragon. The Pegasus looked down at the tiny form beneath her, her mind whipping painfully back into reality. As she bent down to continue resuscitating the dragon, his body heaved violently, his eyes shooting open. They immediately found the pendant. He gestured weakly,

reaching toward it with a tiny scaled hand, but was unable to manage anything more than a pained gasp to communicate his intent. Whether by motherly intuition or some deeply buried instinct, Fluttershy kneeled to bring the pendant down within his grasp. In an instant, all that she knew had vanished around her.

Complete and utter oblivion. A yellow Pegasus with a pink mane sat alone in the nothingness, dimly aware that something was wrong – very, very wrong. Who was she? She couldn't remember. Where was she? She didn't know. And yet...she was not afraid. It felt peaceful in some reassuring way that she could not understand, as if she had just awakened from a terrible nightmare. She basked in the eerie tranquility of the feeling with no grasp of how long she sat in this way. From every direction at once, a single word echoed endlessly.

“Fluttershy...Fluttershy...Fluttershy...”

It occurred to her that this must be her name. It sounded foreign to her, but she somehow knew it to be so. With this epiphany, other words began to dance through her consciousness in rapid succession, all of them warmly familiar, yet somehow alien. Before long, a series of images joined the ethereal parade. She saw a white pony with a purple mane. Her name was... Ror...no...Rarity. Then, an image of a sky blue pegasus with a multicolored mane. “Rainbow Dash” she soundlessly mouthed each syllable. More images, less familiar this time – a grey Alicorn with a beautiful pale mane of white and blue...a castle, a castle wreathed in flame. The images increased in speed, faster, faster, faster. Ponies, thousands of them, beneath a black sky. Chains that seemed to stretch forever. Raining fire. Screaming faces. So many faces screaming. The images flew by in a constant, blinding blur, so fast that it hurt. All of the words, all of the voices she heard blended together in a piercing whine that cut to her very core. Her former calm was replaced by a sudden, all-consuming terror. Above the light and the noise a single voice boomed...a voice that she knew, though she could not remember how. It terrified her. Over and over, louder and louder.

“Fluttershy...Fluttershy...Futtershy...”

Fluttershy screamed in the swirling horror that engulfed her, but the sound was obliterated in the maelstrom. The voice grew louder and louder still. It

was laughing now, so loudly that Fluttershy felt her head would surely burst. Then, as suddenly as it had all started, all was silent again.

“Fluttershy! Oh thank goodness you’re awake! What happened?! Are you alright? Please, speak to me!”

Fluttershy sat bolt upright. Her vision swam, filled with the face of her friend Rarity. She felt cold, and was keenly aware of a throbbing pain in her temples. The white Unicorn turned to a rainbow – maned pony beside her.

“Don’t just stand there, bring her some water! Oh my goodness, how did this happen?! Pinkie, get a doctor, *now!*”

# Chapter 2

## Shadows of the Past

On a balcony in the castle at the capital city of Canterlot, a lone pony sat watching the sunrise. Princess Luna yawned, not yet fully conscious after her recent slumber, and stretched her wings luxuriously. A gentle summer breeze tousled her hair and played across the soft purple feathers of her wings. It felt wonderful. This was her favorite part of the day – granted, this had not been the case a thousand years ago, but to feel the gentle caress of the newborn rays, the reassuring warmth of that ever-shining light – she had forgotten how beautiful it was after being away for so long.

Just as she was blinking away the last vestiges of sleep, a knock came at the door to her bedroom, shortly followed by a voice.

“Luna, dear, are you awake?”

The voice carried the same comfort and warmth as that of a familiar hearth after a long day’s work, but also possessed an unmistakable air of authority. Luna turned in mid – yawn to welcome the owner of that familiar voice into her quarters.

“Good morning, sis!” Luna said brightly

In the now open doorway stood princess Celestia, as resplendent as ever, despite the obvious signs of fatigue that lined her face. Her horn was glowing, casting a dim light across a brightly colored box which bobbed lazily in the air beside the princess. Luna’s eyes opened wide the moment they found the package.

Celestia chuckled softly to herself and set the object down before Luna. As she did so, she settled somewhat heavily next to her younger sister and made a rather unsuccessful attempt at stifling a yawn of her own. She had been away for most of the night to Hoofington to deal with an Ursa Minor who had apparently decided that the city hall would make a fine chew toy. This had been the latest in a long string of events that had required the Princess’s attention over the past few weeks – the parasprite

infestation in Phillydelphia, , the wendigo uprising near Stalliongrad, and the preparation for tomorrow's Summer Sun Celebration in Manehattan, to name a few. Luna had lent a helping hoof when she could, but she still was not ready to assist in many of the weightier royal duties.

Celestia sighed heavily before she spoke.

"I trust you and Hussar had no trouble while I was away?"

Luna rolled her eyes.

"Aside from the usual, no. I swear, I can't be alone for a moment without him and half the castle bursting in on me, armed and ready to attack my would-be kidnapper."

Celestia gave a knowing smile. "It's only because he cares for your safety. He's a bit overzealous, yes, but his heart is in the right place."

Luna pouted playfully. Suddenly, she remembered what had happened only a short time after her sister had departed on the previous night.

"Actually, a message from Ponyville arrived for you just after you left. It said that another of those earthquakes had toppled several buildings on the edge of the town. Nopony was hurt, but I sent a few of the guards to aid in the reconstruction."

Luna turned to her sister to find an intense frown upon her face.

"Oh no! D-did I do something wrong?"

Celestia's eyes seemed to slide back into focus

"What?...Oh, no, no, not at all. That was the right thing to do..." Her voice trailed off absently.

Celestia sighed again, her frown giving way to a gentle smile. She took a moment to gather her thoughts before speaking.

"I'm simply worried about the citizens of Ponyville. The royal researchers have been working day and night, but we still haven't determined the cause

of the earthquakes, only that they seem to be coming from the Everfree Forest.”

Somehow, Luna wasn't convinced that that was all that was bothering her big sister. There was something strange in Celestia's eyes that Luna had never seen before. Just for a moment she had looked utterly exhausted, as if Luna could see the weight of every one of Celestia's long years of rulership on her shoulders. But, more than that, her sister's eyes shone with...Luna wasn't sure what. Before she could ask, her sister spoke once more, all traces of her former mood gone

“Oh, well. I'm sure it's nothing too serious” Celestia smiled, nudging the temporarily forgotten gift toward Luna. “I think you're really going to like this.”

Her train of thought suddenly derailed by the brightly colored box before her, Luna excitedly tore into the package. Inside, carefully wrapped in silk, was a small but rather thick book, its pages tattered and yellowed with age. Its dark, blank cover stared back at an intrigued but confused Luna. As she carefully opened the book to its first page, she read aloud the simple inscription it bore.

“For my daughters, that they may dance forever in the light”  
Luna's eyes went wide as her head jerked up toward Celestia's smiling face.

“This...” Luna stammered “This was...”

Celestia nodded. “Yes, Luna, it belonged to mother. And now, I want you to have it.”

Luna was speechless. She ran one hoof across the smooth surface of the spine, inhaling the heavy, faintly nostalgic scent of the aged paper. She remembered nothing of their parents – All she knew was that they had died when she was very young and the tiny amount that she had learned on the rare occasion that Celestia spoke of them. Instead, her big sister had always been like a mother to her.

Luna was dragged back into reality at the sound of her sister's voice.

“I’ve kept this book with me since I was a filly, and it has helped me throughout the years more times than I can count. It was mother’s journal. In it she kept all of her teachings on the ways in which we, as the rulers of Equestria could maintain peace and harmony amongst our people. Many, many years ago, when you were just a baby, she gave this to me and instructed me to pass it on to you when the time was right.”

Luna remained silent for a few moments as she processed the significance of what her sister had said. She was overjoyed, but also a bit stunned at the suddenness of the gift.

“But...but why now?”

“You’re old enough now to be able to learn quite a lot from her lessons. Besides...” Celestia winked. “I’m going to need your help over the coming months, if things continue with the way they’ve been go-“

Celestia’s breath caught in her throat as her sister lunged forward to hug her.

“Oh thank you, sis! I can’t wait to read it! I promise I’ll make you proud!” Luna squeaked.

Celestia chuckled at her sister’s sudden affection, returning the embrace. They remained that way until the moment was broken by a loud yawn.

“Oh my, excuse me. I think perhaps its time I went to bed. If you need anything, Luna, Hussar is just outside. Good -\*yawn\* goodnight.”

But Luna was already too engrossed in the book to utter more than an idle “G’nigh...”

Hussar, the captain of the castle guard, snapped to attention as Celestia passed him on her way out and did not relax until long after she was out of sight.

Back in her room, Celestia nudged open the glass doors of her own balcony and turned to face the distant, vast green expanse that was the Everfree Forest. Amongst the sea of trees, she could just make out the

ruined form of her ancient home. The wind blew gently through her shimmering mane as she inhaled deeply, and, ever so softly, began to sing, just as she did every year on the eve of the Summer Sun Celebration.

*“Oh fair, oh green, oh vast land of mine  
No more shall you shiver in darkness and fear  
For the tyrant king is gone to his sleep  
And at last, at last, the smoke has cleared*

*Oh fair, oh green, oh vast land of mine  
No more shall your children be bound in gloom  
The Queen and her daughters our victory assured  
It shines in the arc of the sun and the moon*

*Gone are the days of fire and blood  
Silent the voice that shattered the sky  
Broken the shadow that haunted our dreams  
Blind are the eyes that burned on high*

*Oh fair, oh green, oh vast land of mine  
Forever in Harmony together we shine.”*

As if to punctuate the last notes of her song, the wind gusted across the distant forest toward the castle, carrying with it the invigorating scent of pine. Celestia enjoyed the sensation for a moment before turning wearily back to her bedroom. Past the trees, atop the crumbling walls of the ruined palace, a lone figure gazed toward the princess's retreating form before disappearing among the treetops.

Celestia removed her crown and slid beneath the blankets of her luxurious bed, and had nearly fallen asleep when she was jolted awake by a voice she had thought she would never hear again.

“You still haven't told her, have you?

Celestia's eyes shot wide with fear at the sudden recognition. But this...this was impossible.

“What's wrong? Aren't you happy to see me again after what you did?” The last three words were accented with a tone of biting accusation.



“You...no...not again.” Celestia could barely speak

The figure laughed, and the sound tore into Celestia’s heart. It made her want to die.

“Please...” The Princess of the Sun pleaded. “Please, no... I’m sorry...I’m so, so sorry...”

As she turned her gaze toward the source of the familiar voice, Celestia was met with two burning green eyes...The eyes of Nightmare Moon.

# Chapter 3

## Changeling

“Well, the burns aren’t too bad. Mostly first degree, though it will take some time for your fur to grow back.” Dr. Grey pushed his glasses up with one hoof – a nervous habit of his – and eyed the pegasus before him with concern. “Can you tell me anything about what happened?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know wha – *ouch*.” Fluttershy winced as the bandages chafed against her wounds. “...don’t know what happened. The last thing I remember, I was saying goodbye to Applejack at the train station.”

Fluttershy turned to look at the other inhabitants of her living room. Rainbow Dash wore a sour expression on her face and was fidgeting in mid – air, obviously anxious to teach who or whatever had done this to her friend a lesson. Rarity was busying herself in the kitchen with a pot of Fluttershy’s favorite tea, and Pinkie was...

“Uh...Pinkie? Are you alright?” Fluttershy arched an eyebrow.

Pinkie was smiling, or at least, she appeared to be, judging by her eyes. It was a bit difficult to tell since her lips had become severely puckered. Meanwhile, both of her ears were twirling about like propellers. The overall impression was that of a large, pink bird that was trying desperately to swallow its own face. With an audible pop, Pinkie’s features returned to normal and the sound of her infectious giggling filled the room.

“Of *course*, silly.” She hummed merrily to herself. Fluttershy waited, but it soon became clear that Pinkie wasn’t going to explain herself further, apparently fully satisfied with her curt response.

“Here you are, darling, drink up!” Rarity placed a cup of tea on the table before the couch on which Fluttershy lay. Dr. Grey got to his feet, adjusting his glasses again.

“When your friends found you, you were holding this.” The tall, slate-colored unicorn produced a small lump of metal from his saddlebag. In its center was a small, black jewel. It appeared to be some sort of pendant.

Fluttershy took the strange bauble, turning it over and over in her hooves. No matter which way it turned, she noticed, it never quite seemed to catch the light.

“I’m afraid I’ve never seen this before in my life, Dr. Grey. I have no idea where it came from. You...you said I was holding it?”

He nodded. “I’ve seen and treated magically inflicted burns before. There are many cases of artifacts or trinkets that, for purposes of mischief or protection, have been adorned with spells. I thought perhaps that this pendant had contributed to your burns or even your apparent memory loss, but as far as I can tell there are no traces of magic about it.”

Fluttershy looped the pendant’s chain around one hoof and lifted it so that the gem hung spinning before her face. “It’s kind of pretty...”

Rarity blanched “Oh darling, that tacky *thing*? You must be worse than I thought!”

“Well...” Dr. Grey began re-packing his saddlebags. “I’m afraid I must be off for the time being – I’ve an appointment with one Miss Scootaloo. Apparently she had a rather nasty disagreement with a certain bramble patch on her way to school.” As he gathered his things, he reached for the pendant.

“NO!”

Dr. Grey blinked in surprise. Fluttershy sat frozen for a moment, then blushed, embarrassed at how loudly she had spoken. “I’m sorry...I Just...I just thought that I should have my friend Twilight look at it as soon as possible. She knows more about magic than anypony...no offense, doctor.” Fluttershy grinned sheepishly. Dr. Grey shrugged.

“None taken. I’ve heard quite a lot about your friend. She’s the pony who vanquished the Ursa Minor a couple of years back, right? It certainly couldn’t hurt to have somepony like that take a look.” He moved to the door. “In the meantime, lots of rest and daily application of the salve I gave you should have you up and about in three or four days at most.

“Three or four *days*? But I can’t possibly...”

“Don’t worry, Miss Shy, I’ve been told that your dragon friend – Spike, was it? – would be more than happy to help you care for your animals.”

Dragon....dragon...for some reason that particular word stuck in her mind

“I’ll leave you in the care of your friends.” With a curt nod to the room in general, Dr. Grey was on his way, his tall, lean body casting a long shadow in the light of the sunset. Most of the day had passed with Fluttershy asleep on her couch having passed out again after her friends had found her by the edge of the Everfree Forest.

“Thank you all so much for your help. You girls can go, if you’d like. I’m sure the ponies in town need you much more than little old me.”

“Nonsense, darling! We can’t just leave you all alone after something like this!”

Rainbow Dash growled, “Don’t worry, Fluttershy, I’ll find the jerk who did this and teach him a lesson he won’t forget. Ooh when I get my hooves on that punk...” She didn’t finish the sentence, but the gesture she was making left little to the imagination.

Pinkie put her two cents in, but her exact words were lost to the others as she had resumed her spastic puckering.

“No really, I’m fine. Besides, I’ve got Angel here with me.” Fluttershy smiled down at the sleeping form of her long – eared companion. “You girls go. I just wouldn’t feel right if I hogged all of you when there are other ponies in need.”

Rarity pouted. “Ohhh...very well, if you insist. But promise me that if you need anything for any reason, you’ll let us know, won’t you?”

Fluttershy nodded, smiling despite the pain in her chest. “I promise”

“You sure you don’t need a body - guard? At least lemme take that creepy necklace thing with me – I don’t like the look of it.” Rainbow Dash eyed the pendant suspiciously.

“No, I think I’d rather keep it for now, if that’s okay. Twilight will be back tomorrow, and in the meantime, it might help me remember what happened.”

“Hmph...fine. But Imma take a quick look around outside before I leave.” In a prismatic blur, rainbow Dash shot out into the darkening sky. The other two followed behind her at a somewhat slower pace, Pinkie puckering all the way, until the door finally closed behind them. The cottage was now eerily silent, save for the lively crackling of Fluttershy’s fireplace. She sat for a while, blowing on the tea and enjoying the earthy aroma of her favorite blend, but couldn’t quite bring herself to drink it. Some tiny shadow of a thought tugged at the edges of her consciousness – something that the doctor had said bothered her, but she wasn’t sure what.

“Dragon...” She whispered to herself, sending ripples across the smooth crimson surface of the tea. “Dragon...”

“YOU! WHO ARE YOU? EXPLAIN YOURSELF!”

The worlds cleaved through her consciousness like a razor. The teacup shattered on the floor, staining the carpet with its contents.

“DID YOUR MOTHER NOT TEACH YOU TO SPEAK WHEN SPOKEN TO? TELL ME YOUR NAME!”

She clasped her head in her hooves, writhing in agony. The voice boomed within her mind, careening off the inside of her skull with explosive force. In her spasms, both Angel and the pendant were knocked to the floor. Angel’s face contorted in anger at the rude awakening, but his expression was quickly replaced with one of shock at the apparent suffering of his mistress. He tugged at her hooves, trying desperately to discern what was wrong.

Fluttershy was vaguely aware of a faint pressure on one of her hooves, but it was all but obliterated by the combined pain of her burns and the merciless booming in her head. She felt fear, she felt despair, but she also felt rage. Invigorating, terrifying, passionate, depthless rage, at nothing and everything.

“SHUT UP!” She bellowed. “SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!”

All was silent.

Angel stared slack-jawed at the pegasus, his eyes filled with confusion and hurt.

Fluttershy panted, shuddering from the recent emotional surge. She opened her eyes slowly, and saw Angel standing in a puddle on the carpet below. She wanted desperately to apologize to him, but the shock of what she had just experienced rendered her speechless. She remembered everything – meeting the dragon, trying to revive him, and the pendant...Her eyes slid to the dull gem lying amongst the jagged pieces of the former teacup. Fluttershy blinked, and once more she was at the edge of the everfree forest, standing over the breathless form of the baby dragon. He had grasped the gem, and in a flash of light, she had felt a strange warmth wash over her. The two locked eyes for what seemed like an eternity, and Fluttershy watched as the life drained out of those brilliant silver orbs. For a moment, his lifeless body had remained still before it burst suddenly into flame, vanishing in an instant. Caught off-guard by the dragon's transformation, she had been burned and subsequently collapsed. Fluttershy choked before finally finding her voice.

"No...I couldn't save him...Oh Celestia, no..."

All traces of his confusion swept away by her sadness, Angel quickly jumped up to comfort her, patting her gently on the hoof.

"But you did save me."

Fluttershy's sobs ceased abruptly. "Wha...?"

"It's all right, Fluttershy...I'm right here"

The voice came from within her mind, and yet, she felt her gaze being pulled toward the pendant once again. Nervously, she reached to pick it up.

"Please don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you." The voice grew somewhat louder as she gazed into the black heart of the pendant, but did not rise above a gentle whisper.

“You...you can’t be...is this...some sort of magic?” Fluttershy stammered, half-afraid that she was going mad. It was the voice of the baby dragon, she was sure of it, but it was not angry, nor was it pleading for help. Now, It resonated with a reassuring kindness.

Angel cocked an eyebrow at Fluttershy, wondering who in Equestria she was talking to.

“Yes, Fluttershy, a magic more ancient than any of your generation would know. That is why your doctor friend failed to recognize it.” The voice was soothing, almost hypnotic.

“But...how? Why? What happened to your body?” Fluttershy was utterly confused, so many questions rose to her lips that she stumbled over her words, trying to ask them all at once.

Angel was genuinely concerned now, tugging at Fluttershy’s mane, but she paid no attention to him.

“The form you encountered was a temporary shape at best – It could not have been preserved any longer regardless of the circumstances. But, had it not been for you, I would not have been able to preserve my consciousness in this manner. You saved me, Fluttershy” the voice repeated.

“But...so...” Fluttershy began uncertainly, trying with some difficulty to wrap her head around all of this. “Are you...inside the pendant?”

“Not exactly...It seems that a part of me was transferred directly into your consciousness. But fret not...” the voice said, as if in response to Fluttershy’s apparent revulsion at the idea. “I have no influence over you or your actions. Besides, it is only a matter of time before I am strong enough to break fr...that is, to regain my original form. In the meantime, I wish to use what power I have to reward you for your kindness in trying to save me.”

Fluttershy felt a familiar warmth wash over her body.

“There now, isn’t that better?”

“Isn’t what...?” Suddenly, Fluttershy realized that she was no longer in any pain. In fact, she felt better than she had in quite a long time. Slowly, she removed her bandages. Dumbfounded, she stared at down at what had once been burned flesh, but was now perfectly healthy. Even her fur had grown back. Angel sat with his jaw on the floor, rubbing his eyes in a desperate attempt to make sense of what he was seeing. One of them had gone crazy, he thought, but now he wasn’t sure who.

“Then...that voice...was that you? The one who was so angry?” Fluttershy felt a tinge of fear at the memory of the emotional outburst she had felt. “What...what were you so angry about?”

“Ah, yes...that...this may take some time. Before I begin, it may behoove you to explain what is happening to your rabbit friend before he begins frothing at the mouth.”

“Huh?” Fluttershy glanced down at the floor. Angel was eyeing her with a mix of fear and concern, and had developed a spastic twitch in his left ear.

“Oh my, Angel, I’m so sorry. Fluttershy moved to scoop up Angel in her hooves, though he only reluctantly assented.

It’s the dragon we met last night. I...I know it sounds strange but I can hear him. He used some sort of magic to...to put himself into this pendant...but it looks like it messed up and a part of him...is ...um...inside my head.”

Angel simply blinked.

“I don’t really get it either, but...but...” Fluttershy swallowed, forcing a smile. “He’s still alive! He’s the one who healed me!”

Angel eyed Fluttershy’s body, inspecting her for the ugly wounds that he had seen only moments ago. Suddenly, he jumped up to her shoulder, peering into her left ear, as if searching for the dragon who had supposedly lodged himself inside his mistress’s head. Fluttershy swatted at her shoulder.

“Angel stop it! That tickles!” But angel only continued his inspection with increased vigor. He darted all over the pegasus, searching in her ears, her



eyes, even her mouth for any sign of ailment. Finally, he came to the pendant, and, with a sour look, attempted to yank it from her grasp.

“Angel, I said STOP! You’re acting silly!

Angel yanked harder.

“ANGEL STOP IT RIGHT NOW! Fluttershy heaved on the pendant’s chain, sending the tiny white rabbit flying behind the couch. She deftly swung the chain over head, glaring at Angel.

Angel simply stared. He couldn’t believe it. His mistress had never treated him like that before. When she realized what she had done, Fluttershy’s expression suddenly defrosted.

“Oh, Angel...I’m so...” But she had no time to finish. Angel bolted from the room and hid in the tiny house that Fluttershy had built for him, slamming the door with surprising force.

“Why did I do that?” Fluttershy’s lip quivered. “I’ve *never* done anything like that, not to anyone.”

“Don’t let it worry you. You’ve been through a lot and he was acting a bit silly. I must apologize...even under the best of circumstances the binding process can be a bit...draining to the bindee. I’m sure you must be feeling it as well”

“Oh I feel awful...I’d better apolo...”

“No.”

“But...”

“How will he learn to listen to you if you are not more forceful? I know that you are a kind soul, Fluttershy – it is because of that very kindness that I still live.” Fluttershy gazed uncertainly at the tiny rabbit-house. “But if you are too kind, you will invite others to take advantage of you. I’m sure I’m not the first to tell you this.”

Fluttershy fidgeted, then finally ran to the door of Angel’s home.

“Fluttershy, n-“

“Angel, I’m so sorry! Please, please forgive me! I should never have treated you like that! please come out!”

The door opened

“Oh thank-

WHACK

A half – eaten carrot bounced off of Fluttershy’s muzzle onto the floor.

“Wha...I...” Fluttershy stuttered, her lip trembling. “Well FINE! STAY in there for all I care! I care for you and feed you every day, I make sure you get lots of exercise and try to make you happy, but if you think for one SECOND that I’m going to let myself be taken for granted, you’ve got another think coming, mister!”

Fluttershy panted. She felt angry, but also...relieved, as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. It felt good. A knowing “tsk-tsk” echoed in her mind.

“I tried to warn you. Kindness is a wonderful thing, but too much and it can become quite harmful, to all parties involved. Now, why don’t you leave him to his tantrum and make yourself comfortable, I’m afraid my story is rather lengthy.”

Fluttershy walked back to the couch, still annoyed. The dragon was right – she was angry for letting herself be manipulated like that. The dragon...come to think of it...

“What’s your name?” She was surprised at the realization that she hadn’t known it thus far.

“Yes, always a good place to start. My name is Acheron, Prince of the Emerald Keep.”

Fluttershy's jaw dropped. "Y...Y-Y-You're a p-prince??" She straightened involuntarily in her seat.

Acheron chuckled. The sound was pleasing to Fluttershy, the sort of laugh that made one want to laugh right along with it. "No need for formalities. I haven't been a proper prince for some time."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm afraid there was a rebellion in my kingdom, quite some time ago – long before you were even born."

"But–"

"But I'm just a baby?" Acheron chuckled again, and this time, Fluttershy giggled a bit in response. She wasn't sure why, but she liked this dragon. "As I said, that form was temporary. An accident, really. You see, a dear friend of mine was...tempted. Tempted by a power beyond both our understanding."

There was a pregnant pause as the voice fell silent and Fluttershy eagerly waited for him to continue.

"I assume you are familiar with a magic known as the Elements of Harmony?"

Fluttershy perked up. "Oh, yes! Actually, I...well, it's nothing really..."

"Go on. If we're going to be sharing space for a while, we may as well get to know each other."

"Well, I...um...I'm actually...the bearer of the element of kindness..."  
Fluttershy blushed

"Well, then, I must say I'm honored. Though I cannot say that I am terribly surprised."

"Anyway..." the voice cleared his throat, for lack of a better word, to punctuate the return to topic. "...The powers that tempted my friend were cut from the same source as your Elements of Harmony approximately

1300 years ago. You see, He was a powerful pony, next in line for the throne of a neighboring kingdom. When he learned of this magic, the Element of Dominion, he became obsessed with its power and what it would bring to his people. One day, he simply disappeared, and did not resurface for several years. When he did, I was the first of my kind to see him.”

The fire sputtered in the fireplace, and darkness had fallen outside but Fluttershy was too engrossed in the story to notice.

“He came to me one night as I flew over the gardens of my home in the Emerald Keep, perched on a distant cloud. He was changed from when I had seen him last, no longer the same small pony I had known. His body was tall, lean, and powerful, and he now had a sharp horn sprouting from his forehead as well as a pair of broad, feathered wings. He spoke to me, accusing me of betraying him, of hiding the element from him. I tried to tell him that I knew nothing of what he spoke, but he was mad – he would not or could not hear me. Supposedly, the treasure he sought was held deep within the Emerald Keep itself, hidden away to keep it safe. He was convinced that I had known, that I had hidden it deliberately to prevent him from gaining power. He attacked, and I defended myself. After our years of separation, I had grown into an adult dragon worthy of my office as prince, but even I had difficulty keeping up with him. We fought for hours, driving deeper and deeper into the castle – my brethren could not come near us such was the ferocity of our battle. At last, my strength failed me, and he burst past me to the place where the Element lay hidden. His power, his fury was...incredible to behold. My kingdom burned around me as he and his armies marched through the cities of my kind.”

“My goodness...I never knew there even was a kingdom of the dragons...” Fluttershy sat in awe of what she was hearing. “How could...How could your friend do something like that? I...I’ve never known anypony to be so cruel...”

“He told me before his disappearance that his intentions were pure, but in hindsight, he was always the ambitious sort. I should have seen it coming. At least I can say that I did not completely fail in my efforts to stop him. That’s how I ended up here. The pendant you now wear is...was an artifact of great importance to my people. I knew that its power was my only hope in defeating him. I used the last of my strength to retrieve the

pendant from my father's vault and confront my friend one final time. The power in this pendant allows one to permanently seal the magic within another by combining it with magic's opposite – entropy.”

“En...Entorpie?” Fluttershy struggled with the unfamiliar word, staring down at the pendant.

“Entropy. You see, the word “magic” is a bit of a misnomer. There are actually several types of magic, though the two most prominent varieties are Entropy, and Order - the variety embodied by the Elements of Harmony. I attempted to use the pendant to stop him, but I'm afraid I lacked the strength and the knowledge to control it. The spell backfired, sealing not only his power but my own as well, reducing me to the form of a baby. For 1300 years I slept, aware to some vague extent of the happenings around my resting place, but unable to act. Though I do not know what caused them, one of the recent earthquakes-“

“Earth...quakes?”

“Yes...is that not what you call them?”

“We call them “earthshakes.” At least, that's the name my friend Twilight came up with. Nothing like them has ever happened in Equestria before, not that I know about, anyway.”

“Yes well, they were somewhat commonplace in my time. Anyway, one of the earthquakes must have broken the seal on my tomb, allowing me to escape, which is when I found you. As for scaring you, I'm terribly sorry. I was rather frightened, myself, and seeing as how the last ponies I had met were trying to kill me...”

“Oh, no need to apologize. I understand completely.”

“You're too kind. The anger you felt before was my fault as well. You see, I had not expected to become bonded to your consciousness to such an...intimate extent. I had thought that this was some sort of trickery on your part, but when I felt your sadness, your grief for me, I knew that you meant me no harm.”

“So...you can feel what I feel?”

“And vice versa, I’m afraid. But fear not, I vow to respect your privacy and, of course, I expect you to give me the same courtesy.”

Fluttershy swallowed. Acheron seemed pleasant enough, but she wasn’t sure she liked the idea of sharing her emotions with someone she had just met.

“I know it’s not an ideal situation, but I’m afraid that that’s the hand we’ve been dealt.”

Fluttershy nodded, though she still felt uneasy. She decided to change the subject.

“What was his name, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“To whom are you referring?”

“Your friend...what was his name?”

“Ah yes, I forgot...He was called Chronus.”

# Chapter 4

## Regret

Celestia commanded her limbs to move but they refused to obey. No amount of effort could tear her away from the infernal gaze of those hateful eyes. Nightmare Moon grinned.

"I'm really not sure what makes me more ill. That I once looked up to you or that I was defeated by such a pathetic little wretch. Look at you! You can barely stand!" She spat on Celestia's face, cackling with malevolent glee. Celestia made no response.

"Even after all this time you're still such a disappointment. I've waited so many years to hear your voice, and now you don't even have the decency to scream." Her grin widened grotesquely. "You will scream for me, won't you? Just like you did on that night-"

"STOP IT!" Celestia shuddered with a mixture of fear and rage. Why, Luna...*Why?* I was so happy...so happy to see you again...I *missed* you...I cried every night for years after...after I-"

"LIAR!" In an ebon blur, the Mare in the Moon smashed her hoof into Celestia's face, cutting a deep gouge in her cheek.

"Luna...Luna please, don't make me do this again...I love you, little sister...I never wanted to banish you, I hated myself for it the moment I had done it! *Please...we were meant to rule together.*"

"You really never learn, do you? It's always "*Luna, Luna, Luna*" with you. I'm not Luna, not anymore." Nightmare stepped closer to her elder sister.

"And do you know why?" She knelt down to whisper in Celestia's ear.

"Because Luna is *dead*. And *you...killed...her!*"

"Stop it..." Celestia whispered, her voice now a low growl.

"You *made* me, big sister" She sneered, her words dripping with mock gratitude. "YOU MADE ME!!!!"

“I said *STOP IT!*” Celestia lunged at her sister, hoping to tackle her to the ground, but her hooves met only air.

Silence. Celestia panted, a mixture of tears and semi-coagulated blood dripping from her face. She whipped about searching in vain for the source of her torment. But there was no one there. She was completely and utterly alone. She jumped at a sudden heavy pounding from the opposite end of the room.

“Princess! Your Majesty! Are you alright? What’s wrong!? Bastion, break down this door, *now!*”

Celestia opened the door, causing the guard pony named Bastion to stumble past her in his effort to break into her chamber.

“Princess, you’re *bleeding!*” It was Hussar. In a single movement, Hussar dashed past his princess, raring to attack her assailant. His charge ended rather anticlimactically when he saw that she was alone.

“Hussar, stand down.” Her tone was stern and her speech clipped.  
“Where is Luna? Have you seen her?”

Hussar was more than a bit confused. “I...well...we passed her on patrol when we heard shouting coming from your chambers. She was reading in the courtyard.” “Princess, we must tend to your wou-“

She ignored him, taking off at full speed. This didn’t make sense. If Luna had been in the courtyard, then the mare she had seen must have been... Sure enough, as she glided over the next wall, she saw the tiny purple form of her sister far below.

“LUNA!”

The purple alicorn jumped, dropping her book. “Wha...? Oh, sis, you scared-“

Her words were lost as she suddenly found herself smothered by her elder sister’s chest. Celestia embraced her sister tighter than she ever had before, smelling her hair, praying that it was real, that her sister was really there with her.

“Fiffter, whut va heckf are oo fooing?” Luna’s words were barely audible. “I cann breeve!”



The sight of Luna safe and sound, the warmth of her fur, had allowed Celestia to begin to calm down. She pulled away from her sister, and gasped. Luna's mane and face were smeared with blood.

"Oh Luna, what in Equestria happened to you? Where was Hussar?" She snorted angrily. "He's supposed to be protecting you!"

"Sister, what are you...!" Luna inhaled sharply as she got a good look at her sister for the first time. "How did your face get all bloody? And your hooves!"

"My...hooves?" Celestia looked down. Both of her front hooves, especially the left, were stained with blood. On closer inspection, she noticed that a torn clump of fur and flesh was stuck to the bottom of the left hoof.

"How...?" She looked up to see a frightened Luna staring back at her. "Oh...I...Well..." She faked a small laugh, desperately searching for an excuse. It sounded more than a bit absurd, even to her. "I'm afraid that I tripped getting out of bed."

Luna cocked an eyebrow, still wearing an expression of deep concern.

Celestia inhaled deeply to regain her composure. "I'm sorry, little sister...I must have given you an awful fright." She wiped her hooves on the grass, then wet them with her tongue to begin cleaning the mess she had made of her sibling's mane. "I had an awful dream, and...I...I just needed to make sure you were safe." The sound of rapidly approaching hooves pounded behind the princess.

"Princess!" Hussar tried to speak between gasps. "Wha-?"

"It's alright Hussar, stand down. This was all just a big misunderstanding."

"But who were you shouting at? And your wound-"

"-Is superficial and the result of a bit of clumsy silliness on my part." She said with a tone which indicated that the matter was closed. "Just a bad dream, nothing more."

Having finished cleaning her blood from Luna's fur, Celestia sighed, shaking her head. "It looks like you were right after all, Hussar. Perhaps I have been stretching myself a bit too thin as of late. I'm terribly sorry for frightening all of you over something so silly."

She smiled, deftly regaining her typical radiance. "Speaking of which, I can say the same for you, Hussar. Get some rest, and that's an order. Besides..." she turned back to face Luna. "I'd like some time alone with my sister."

Hussar refused to leave until Celestia had agreed to visit the infirmary later that day, then, with a reluctant nod, he and the other guards finally left, leaving the two royal sisters in silence. Luna spoke first.

"Celly, are you...alright?" She fidgeted, pawing the ground.

"Of course I am, Lu-

"I mean it." Luna's expression was suddenly serious. "You've been acting strange for a while now. I thought maybe you were just stressed or tired from running all over Equestria every day..." She stepped closer, looking directly into Celestia's eyes. "But something else is going on, isn't it? Something's really bothering you."

Celestia opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. She turned away - Luna's persistent gaze was making her uncomfortable. Finally, she smiled again.

"Don't be silly, Luna. I'm just tired, that's a-

"CELLY!"

Celestia was struck speechless for a second time, her smile faltering. She turned back to meet Luna's gaze. Her sister's expression was stern, but not angry. "Tell me the truth." She said evenly.

Celestia's smile disappeared altogether. Her shoulders sagged, and even her mane seemed to lose some of its shimmer. She stared at her little sister with world-weary eyes.

There it was, Luna thought. There was the same look she had seen just before Celly had given her the book. She now recognized the strange, misty glimmer she had seen in those eyes before. It was grief.

"It's not fair." Celestia sighed, her words flowing out in a single breath that felt to the sun Goddess as though it had sat stale at the bottom of her lungs for untold years.

“What do you mean?”

“It just isn’t fair, not to you, not to anypony. I...never told you...how sorry I was, Luna.”

“Celly?” Luna’s expression had softened. Seeing her sister in this state was a bit disturbing for her.

“Luna, I was wrong.” Celestia’s voice had suddenly taken on a tone of urgency. “I...I never should have tried to use the Elements of Harmony that night. I never should have treated you as I did to drive you to such a state...as...” Her words came like a flood, and with them all of her grief, all of her guilt, all that she had held within her behind a wall of smiling silence for one thousand years past came bursting forth.

“Luna, I’m sorry...sorry that I banished you, sorry that you had to go through all of those years alone.”

Luna was stunned. She had known that her sister felt guilty about what had happened, but she had no idea that it had hurt her this much, for so long.

“It isn’t fair...” Celestia repeated “...that you had to go through all of that because of me. That you had to feel such hate and loneliness because I failed to ease your pain.” Her shoulders shuddered as fat, hot tears rolled down her muzzle. “I failed you. I failed Equestria that day in depriving it of one of its rulers. I fai-”

Celestia fell silent. Her little sister wrapped her in a crushing embrace. She simply sat there, unable to move or speak. The tears still came, running down her neck to splash onto Luna’s face. She had no idea of how much time passed before she was jarred to attention by a sharp pain on the right side of her face. Luna had slapped her.

“First things first, don’t you ever hide something like this from me or anypony again.” Luna whispered. “How can I help you, not just as a princess, but as your *sister*, if you never talk about what’s bothering you?” She stepped closer to her sister, smiling gently. “I had no idea you were beating yourself up so much about this. Weren’t you the one who kept telling me that I needed to stop asking you for forgiveness and forgive myself? And let’s make something clear. Nightmare Moon...” Luna paused. That name still caused her stomach to turn at the memory of what

she had become, if only for a short time. "Nightmare Moon was a creation of my own jealousy. I wanted the night to last forever because I thought that maybe then everypony would learn to appreciate it as much as the day - maybe then I could have the same love and respect as you. But I was wrong. I already had all of that. It was *my fault* for being jealous and for allowing myself to use my magic in such a way. I was the one who made a mistake, Celly. You just did what you had to do, and honestly, I'm glad that you did."

"W...what?"

"If you hadn't stopped me, I would have stayed being someone I hate."

"But I failed. I tried to use the Elements to help you yet I couldn't. I lost control, and you suffered for it."

Luna considered her sister carefully before speaking. "Can I show you something?"

"What?"

"Here, follow me." with a flash of blue light and a sound like a wave dying on the shore, Luna transformed herself into a sparkling cloud of purple mist. She flew high into the air, where she waited, hovering, for her sister to follow. Celestia hesitated, then changed as well, into a ball of amber light. The two rose high above the courtyard of the castle, and higher still. Above the clouds, higher and higher, until the castle was but a tiny speck on the world below. Still higher they rose, until finally, Luna stopped, returning to her original form. Celestia followed suit. Far below, in a fluid mosaic of green and blue, spun the vast land of Equestria. Luna looked at her sister, her expression blank.

"What is pain?" She asked. Her voice seemed disproportionately loud in the silence of their altitude.

Celestia's brow furrowed in confusion. "What?"

"Pain is frightening. Pain is painful. Pain is inevitable. But above all..." Luna paused.

In perfect unison, the sisters spoke the words of their mother as they had been written in her journal so long ago. "Pain means that you're alive."

Celestia smiled, gazing in awe at her little sister. Not so little, anymore, she thought.

Luna continued. "When we feel pain, or acknowledge the risk of feeling pain for whatever reason, we are presented with an opportunity. Should we choose to take it, that pain can be molded into something beautiful. Should we choose to ignore it, we doom ourselves to dwell forever in regret, though perhaps in a different form than what would be risked otherwise. Love is beautiful because it exists despite the pain that is inherent in it, yet also because to truly love, be it another being or a particular cause, is to say that one is willing to endure that inevitable pain for another. All of the sacrifices, all of the failures, all of the tears we shed, when endured for the sake of a noble, if temporary, victory, become turned upon themselves and instead enliven the joy of that victory a thousand times over. Likewise, if one looks upon their pain, their failures as just that and nothing more, they will know nothing of joy until their last wasted breath."

"You're quite a quick read." Celestia murmured, immersed in a sea of nostalgia at the sound of her mother's words.

"And you're quite forgetful, so it seems." Luna shot back playfully.

Luna turned away, gazing down at their home, their kingdom. "Mistakes are a part of life. I knew it before - it's what I learned when I finally forgave myself for my mistake - but I think mother captured the meaning of that fact far better than I ever could. Neither of us is perfect, but that should never mean that we cannot learn from our failures. We both made mistakes on that night, though until today I think I only understood what that had cost me, never what it had meant for you."

Celestia shifted uncomfortably.

"Look at this world, Celly, at how beautiful it is. No matter what happened in the past, there are millions of ponies down there who love us, and whom we love in return. You said it yourself, every time I had a nightmare about that night, every time I came to you for comfort, you forgave me because you *loved* me." She drifted closer to Celestia, close enough to whisper into her ear. "And if we can repay their love by keeping this world safe, then what happened back then doesn't matter."

“Please, big sister. I’ve already forgiven you. I did the moment that Twilight and her friends released me from the shell of darkness in which I had bound myself. Now you just have to forgive yourself. Think of them” She gestured to the world below. “They need you. Isn’t it a blessing that we can help to protect their happiness? Their future? What would it all mean if you simply gave up on the faith they’ve placed in you? That I’ve placed in you?”

Celestia smiled the tiniest of smiles, thinking of the many young colts and fillies far below - the heralds of the days to come. She was blessed, it was true, to have had such a wonderful sister, so wise and compassionate despite her troubled past.

“Luna...thank you. I think I’ll be able to rest much more easily from now on.”

Luna beamed, smiling from ear to ear. She sidled closer to her big sister and leaned against her as she watched the world silently turn.

Celestia said nothing, staring blankly down at her kingdom. “Luna...” she thought. “Luna, thank you. Thank you...but, there are some things you simply cannot understand. I can’t tell you what is coming...it would only make what I...what we will have to do even harder. Soon, I may have to leave you all alone again - all because I wasn’t able to save them, I wasn’t able to stop the evil I feel stirring once more, after so many years...” She sighed, this time thinking out loud. “What will it mean, indeed?”

The belltowers rang their familiar lilting tune to herald the onset of evening at the castle in Canterlot. Celestia lay once more in her bed, having just awakened from a deep, if fitful, sleep that had been far too long in waiting, anticipating the ritual preparation she would soon undergo for the Celebration in Manehatten. She touched the wound on her cheek with a single hoof, her mind tingling with the last misty traces of a dream she could not remember. She would have to cover the wound so as not to alarm her citizens, she thought. Elsewhere in the castle, torches were extinguished, Luna lay herself to sleep, her mother’s journal lying open on the nightstand beside her bed, and tired murmurs echoed in the empty halls as the night guard relieved the day shift of duty.

Celestia sat upright, tossing her blankets aside. She knew she could not lay there any longer, nor could she exactly muster the strength to get out of bed. Instead, she stared into the eyes of the only other being in the room.

“You know she’ll hate you for this, don’t you?” Nightmare Moon hissed.

“You’re not real. I don’t have to listen to anything you say.” Celestia replied in a monotone.

“Not real eh? Then how do you explain this?” The black mare reached for the now scabbed wound on Celestia’s left cheek, but her hoof was swatted away before she could touch her. Nightmare merely chuckled at her sister’s reaction. Celestia flinched slightly, despite herself.

“This...” Celestia began, gingerly touching the scab with one hoof. “...I did this to myself because I thought I deserved it. I let you taint the memory of Luna that I held so dear during her banishment.” She glared at the thing before her, the thing that pretended to be her sister. “You died when Luna came back to me. You’re not real” she repeated evenly

“Funny you should say that, about me being *dead*. It seems to me that a lot of ponies you get involved with tend to end up that way.”

Suddenly, the figure of Nightmare moon twisted and warped. It shrank to the form of a young pony with a blonde mane and white fur. She had no cutie mark.

“You promised...” The child’s voice trembled. “You said you’d come back for me...for my friends.”

Celestia stared down at the tiny foal’s emaciated figure, her eyes dead and cold. A lump solidified in her throat. She fought the urge to vomit.

“Where’s mommy?” The child asked, her voice more insistent this time.

“Where’s mommy? You said I could see mommy! Where is she?!”

“Go...away...” Celestia struggled with each syllable, glaring in horror at the filly. “You’re dead. You’ve been dead for over a thousand years.”

“I want mommy! MOMMY, MOMMY, where are you?! I WANT MY MOMMY!!” The filly was crying now.

“Shut up.” Celestia growled. “Just shut up.”

“WHERE’S MY MOMMY?! YOU PROMISED I COULD SEE HER WHERE IS SHE?!”

“SHE’S DEAD! THEY’RE ALL DEAD!” Celestia screamed, her nostrils flaring wildly, tears flowing from eyes wide with grief. “YOU’LL NEVER GET TO SEE HER AGAIN BECAUSE I WATCHED HER DIE!”

The filly dissolved, elongating into the form of a tall yellow alicorn with a black mane.

“And yet you did nothing to stop it. How dare you *lie* to a child like that. You promise her the world and then leave her to die alone in the dust. Is that how you plan to leave my Luna? Is she so worthless to you?”

“Don’t you dare...I couldn’t...you know there was nothing I could do...” Celestia sobbed.

The yellow alicorn sneered. “You really are just a disappointment. If only you had died instead of me, maybe Luna wouldn’t have to suffer any mo-”

She stopped, unable to speak, as Celestia had lunged forward, piercing her throat with her horn. No blood issued from the gaping wound. Instead, the alicorn evaporated soundlessly on the spot.

Celestia shuddered with each breath. “My mother...my mother would *never* wish such a thing.” Her mother’s...no, Luna’s words echoed in her mind. “What would it all mean if you simply gave up on the faith they’ve placed in you? That *I’ve* placed in you? If we can repay their love by keeping this world safe, then what happened back then doesn’t matter.”

The room was silent. Celestia marched to her balcony. She had had enough. She knew that if the worst should happen, what she must eventually do could not be changed, but she would be *damned* if she let it hurt Luna any more than it had to. Silently, she lifted off from her balcony in a single beat of her wings, gliding on the breeze until Luna’s window came into view. She alighted on the railing of Luna’s balcony, using her magic to open the glass doors. Walking over to Luna’s bed, she bent down to nuzzle her sister awake, when yet another familiar voice stopped her in her tracks.

“Let her sleep, little one.”



Celestia ground her teeth, focusing on keeping her voice down despite her anger. "I thought I told you to leave me alone."

The owner of the voice seemed somewhat taken aback. "You know I can't do that, not now. We both know you may only get one chance to save her. To save everypony."

"Yes, I know, that's why-"

"If she knows about your decision, she will only fight it. Do you want my sacrifice to be in vain?"

"I refuse to keep her in the dark any longer. She deserves to know. I can't do this to her, not again..."

"...mm...daddy..." It was Luna. She had begun to toss about in her sleep.

"shhh-shhh-shhh" The grey, pale-maned alicorn to whom Celestia had been speaking cooed in Luna's ear. "It's alright, honey...go back to sleep." He placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. Luna calmed, her breathing slowed, and she was peaceful once more. "Bless her. She may not remember what I look like, but she still knows my voice..." He smiled. Celestia stared in shock.

"You...you...no. Stop it. This isn't real - you're just another hallucination."

"I know about your demons, Celestia, those nightmares with which you torture yourself. Did you think I had abandoned you? That I haven't watched over you for all of these years?" He stepped toward Celestia.

"S...Stay back" She backedpeddled slowly. "You can't be real. You died. I saw you die."

"Yes, Celly, I died. For you - both of you - so very long ago. But now, finally, I can help you both, at least to some degree." He stopped, inches from Celestia's face. Slowly, He lifted a single hoof toward his daughter.

"Please...no more...why won't you just go away..." Celestia did not try to deflect her father's hoof. She couldn't even cry anymore - she was simply too exhausted.

For an unreachable, timeless moment, her father's hoof hovered before Celestia's bowed head, before finally, gently, descending to caress her

cheek. The hoof did not make contact, passing instead through the flesh, unable to touch it directly. What was left of Celestia's emotional reserve exploded in a dizzying cacophony of joy, nostalgia, confusion, and sorrow at the her father's half-touch.

"You...you're really here...you're really..."

"Yes, Celestia - it's me. I'm here."

Celestia was speechless. She tried again and again to direct the fragments of her scattered consciousness into a coherent thought, to ask the obvious question than screamed in the drained void of her mind, yet was unreachable by her tongue. All she could manage was a few feeble squeaks. A single, final tear trickled down her muzzle. Her father's face glowed with a radiance like the most glorious of sunsets. The two gazed at each other, and boundless time evaporated about them. Celestia was a child once more, remembering the feeling of her father's heartbeat next to her head as she drifted down to sleep. She wished the moment could last forever, but in an instant she was back in Luna's bedroom, staring at the ghost of her father, with the sickening weight of grim significance growing rapidly in her mind. As if he knew what Celestia had realized, her father's own expression grew dark.

"You know what this means then? You know how I must have come to be here?"

Celestia nodded, mustering the strength to speak the words she had known would one day come - the words that meant that everything she loved would now hang in the balance - the words that spelled the end of Equestria as she knew it.

"He's here."

# Chapter 5

## Revelation

Twilight tapped her hoof impatiently. She and Applejack had just arrived back at Ponyville Station after the long journey by train from Manehattan. Although the Celebration had gone off without a hitch, all of her duties as overseer had left her exhausted. But, more importantly, she had only just received news of Fluttershy's injury, and was anxious to see her friend.

"Oh *come on*" Applejack muttered. This was the second time they'd been held up on their return journey. They stood at the far end of a long line of ponies that extended before a pair of royal guards. Some of the other ponies in line shared her sentiment and voiced it for all to hear, though most, Twilight included, were more concerned about why the guards were there in the first place. The line moved forward at a snail's pace as, one by one, the guards stopped each pony and thoroughly searched their luggage. The same thing had happened in Manehattan, though curiously enough, Twilight thought, she had not had to submit to such an examination when she had arrived there. She was snapped out of that particular train of thought at the sound of her name.

"Miss Sparkle? Is that you?" It was one of the guards patrolling the line to make sure that no one tried to hide anything before inspection. He was young, and a bit scrawny for a royal guard, thought Twilight.

"Yes, that's my name. Can I help you?"

"Please come with me, miss. You have someone waiting for you with a message from the princess."

"Oh thank goodness. May I take it at the Library? We need to get back to Ponyville as soon as possible to meet someone, you see. She-"

"That can wait, miss." The guard pony interrupted. "The princess personally instructed me to ensure that you read her message the moment you returned"

“What? Why didn’t she speak to me when we were at the Celebration?”

“I’m not at liberty to say.” was his curt response. Twilight had the impression that he had had the opportunity to rehearse that particular phrase more than once in the past. He began walking toward the head of the line when he suddenly whipped about.

“What do you think you’re doing, miss?”

“Whut? Ain’t Ah allowed to come too?”

“I’m to lead only miss Sparkle to the messenge-”

“It’s alright, sir. She’s my friend.” Twilight interrupted.

The guard eyed Applejack warily, as if deciding how to best incapacitate her should she become dangerous, before turning around and marching onward in silence.

Twilight tried to press him for information about the princess’s message and about why the royal guards were searching everypony’s luggage, but the only reply he ever offered was stony-faced silence. After several minutes of walking, Twilight spotted a tiny purple-scaled hand waving frantically above the crowd. It appeared to be attached to a voice that was excitedly calling her name.

“Spike!” She gave the dragon a friendly hug. “How were things in Canterlot?” She did not try to hide the concern in her voice. If it was this urgent and the princess had behaved this strangely about it, she knew that the message couldn’t be about anything good.

“Oh, the usual stuff.” He dismissed the question with a nonchalant wave of his hand. “You know, welfare reports, cataloging artifacts, that sort of thing.” Either he wasn’t concerned or, more than likely, it hadn’t occurred to him that something was wrong. Spike was a matchless assistant, but he had always been a bit oblivious.

Twilight sighed impatiently. “I meant with the princess specifically. I was told she had a message for me?”

Comprehension dawned in Spike's round green eyes. "Oh, yeah!" He rummaged about in the bag he had slung over his shoulder, emerging with a scroll clutched in his claws. "Here you go."

Twilight magicked the scroll out of Spike's grasp and began to unfurl it when the guard pony who had escorted her snatched it out of the air with his teeth.

"Wha - what are you doing?" Twilight sputtered.

He tucked the scroll under one of his ivory wings. "Terribly sorry, miss, but I was also instructed to ensure that you read this in private." His eyes slid down toward Spike then to Applejack, staring coldly at each of them in turn.

He began walking toward the exit, glancing behind at Twilight. "If you would, Miss Sparkle?"

Twilight frowned. She knew he was just doing his job, but she didn't care for this pony's gruff demeanor. She turned to look at her two friends.

"Sorry, guys - it looks like this is more important than I thought. Here..." She placed a small pile of bits in Spike's hand. "Go to Sugarcube Corner, pick up some of Fluttershy's favorite cakes - she likes the pineapple ones - and wait for me at her cottage. Tell her I'll be there as soon as I can." Spike nodded and stuck his tongue out at the retreating form of the guard before scurrying past them. Applejack followed close behind with her muzzle in the air.

Back at the Library, the guard waited patiently outside while Twilight unfurled the letter once more, her eyes darting rapidly back and forth as she read the familiar slanting scrawl of the princess's writing.

*"My faithful student, Twilight Sparkle,*

*I apologize for the confusing nature in which circumstance has forced me to contact you. You must be wondering why I could not simply speak to you in person at the Celebration. Such is the nature of the news I bear that it mandates that the information contained herein remains between the two of us, and the two of us alone. You may remember my lessons, however brief, on the different varieties of magic that exist throughout Equestria.*

*The most prominent variety is that which flows through the Elements of Harmony. However, contrary to what you have been taught, this magic was not always the most powerful magic known to pony kind. Long ago, in the time before my rule, there existed other forms just as, if not more powerful than the Elements. I do not wish to alarm you, Twilight, but I have reason to believe that an artifact of such power has recently appeared in Equestria and is more than likely to be associated with the recent spree of disasters occurring throughout the land. The one in question, if my memory serves me correctly, looks something like the image below.*

Twilight held the paper at a distance to get a better view of the image. The picture was expertly drawn, though it showed no evidence of artistic flair or stylization. It was a single, asymmetrical dark gem attached to a long chain, like a pendant. It's features were both elegant and ugly all at once. She stared at it for a few moments, memorizing its every detail, before continuing. Her eyes moved ever faster as her academic mind thrilled with a mixed sensation of fear and archaic curiosity.

*This is an object of tremendous power, and it was sealed away long ago for that reason. If this were to fall into the wrong hooves, the results could be disastrous. As such, I must devote every effort to finding it as soon as possible to mitigate any potential damage. I cannot know for sure where this object is located, but I have reason to suspect that it is somewhere in the vicinity of the Everfree Forest. If you should, at any point, become aware of this object's presence, notify me immediately. DO NOT attempt to handle it or analyze it in any way, and DO NOT allow anypony else to come into contact with it if avoidable.*

*I am deeply sorry for involving you in this, Twilight, but it is of the utmost importance that this situation be handled delicately. If it is known that such a power exists, I fear others will either panic or try to seek it for themselves. You may post copies of this picture and tell others that it is missing, but treat it as a strictly non-magical royal family heirloom that has been stolen by an unknown thief. This will maintain consistency with the story being provided to the public by my guards around Equestria at this very moment. You must share the truth with none aside from the other Element Bearers. If somepony should find it before you, please inform the nearest guards of the situation so that they may observe the pony or ponies in question under the pretense of providing protection against the aforementioned thief.*

*Also, a warning: If one of the Element Bearers does accidentally come into contact with the object, they are to come with you to Canterlot immediately. It is imperative that you do not delay in this case, for the magic contained within the gem is by its nature at odds with the magic of the Elements. I have no way of knowing what would happen if two forces of such power were brought together, but I assure you that it would not be good.*

*I apologize in advance for my presumptuousness, but I have instructed Bastion to escort you on your investigation. He is an able soldier and he is more than capable of assisting you.*

*I understand that all of this is very sudden and warrants further explanation. Please, at your earliest convenience, gather your friends and come to Canterlot so that I may speak to you privately.*

Twilight exhaled, not realizing that she had held her breath as she read the last parts of the letter. She read the letter again more slowly, then a third time to make sure she had read it correctly. Something was wrong. Aside from the obvious, Twilight had the feeling that the princess was hiding something. She had said “if memory serves me correctly,” meaning that the princess had seen the artifact before, and up close at that, judging by the detail of her illustration. But, what had happened the first time it had been sealed away? Why was this the first time she had heard of such an object? She shook her head. None of it made much sense, but she reasoned that there wasn’t much point in worrying about it - it would have to wait until she could meet Celestia in person. She looked outside at Bastion, reluctantly swallowing the idea of having him as her new, if temporary, assistant. Suddenly, she remembered Fluttershy.

“Miss Sparkle! Where are you going?”

She had dashed outside, but she had not made it out from under the shade of her tree before Bastion had stopped her.

“I’m just going to see my friend, the one I mentioned at the station - that is if you *don’t mind*” She wasn’t asking for permission. Bastion nodded, and silently fell into step beside her as they made their way out of Ponyville toward Fluttershy’s cottage.

Fluttershy stood in her kitchen humming over a fresh pot of tea. Applejack and Spike had arrived several minutes ago, carrying a suspiciously light package of her favorite pineapple treats. Spike didn't need to admit to testing them - the crumbs on his lips did that for him, and judging by their quantity, the treats were quite tasty. She had just finished pouring the tea into four separate cups when a loud knock caused her to spill some of it onto the table.

"Oh, not again...Spike, would you be a dear and get the door, I'd better clean this up."

Spike opened the door to reveal a tall, if lean, pegasus of the royal guard with one hoof still raised as though about to knock a second time. Twilight scowled as she brushed past him.

"I'm capable of knocking, thanks." She spat bitterly in his direction before turning to smile at Fluttershy.

"Hey, how have you...oh my gosh..."

Fluttershy cocked an eyebrow. "What's...oh..." She looked down at her bandaged body, as if she had forgotten she was wearing them. "Really, it's not nearly as bad as it looks. Dr. Grey said I would be fine in a couple of days." She smiled, sitting on her couch and pushing one of the teacups toward Twilight. "Oh, would you like some, too, Mr...?"

"Bastion." He replied curtly. "And no, thanks miss."

"Well, if you change your mind, there's plenty. So..." She turned her gaze toward Twilight and Applejack in turn. "How did it go at the Celebration?"

"Ah don't think Ah've ever *made* such a killin' in all mah life." Applejack reported proudly. "Shore it was slow at first, but after those city folk got a taste of our down - home treats, they jus' kept comin'!"

Twilight eyed Fluttershy for a moment, wondering if Fluttershy was truly fine or if she was simply directing attention away from herself, as she often did. Finally, she smiled, deciding to play along.



“Oh it was spec - spec - *\*yawn\** - tacular. Oh, my, excuse me.” She chuckled, embarrassed. “At least the parts I was awake for were. More importantly, what in Equestria *happened* to you?”

Fluttershy frowned. “I...really can't say.” she took a long sip of tea. “It's like I told the others. The last thing I remember was saying goodbye to Applejack at the station. After that, I woke up here, and Rarity, Pinkie, and Rainbow carried me inside. I guess they came looking for me when I didn't show up to help with the relief effort. Angel...” Twilight thought she saw the faintest trace of a shadow flicker across Fluttershy's smiling face, just for an instant. “Angel stayed with me the whole time, protecting me.”

“Well thank goodness he did!” Twilight said brightly. “Hey, where is Ange-”

“He's playing outside.” Fluttershy replied, a little too quickly. She was still smiling.

“Oh, okay...I thought you usually had him come inside at this hour?”

“He needs a little more exercise, I think. He'll be back when he's hungry.” Fluttershy shifted on her couch. “More tea?”

Twilight had barely finished half of her cup.

“Oh...sure, thanks.”

Fluttershy took the teacup and gently poured more of the crimson liquid into it. As she did so, Twilight looked around the cottage before her eyes finally came to rest on her friend. Fluttershy looked...awful. Dark bags hung under bloodshot eyes, and her normally beautifully combed mane hung limp and tangled around her face, although, Twilight thought, it was not surprising given what it was she had been through. The pain from the burns alone must make it hard to sleep. Apparently, Applejack was thinking the same thing.

Applejack frowned. “You shore yer okay, sugarcube? Ah know you said yer fine, but...that's *gotta* be painful. If'n you need any help around the - “

“Oh, no thank you, Applejack, you've already done so much for me - really, it's fine.” She pushed the now full cup toward Twilight. “Besides, Spike will

be here to help me with the animals, and Dr. Grey gave me some medicine for the pain.” She sat down. “Now, I wouldn’t be a good hostess if we talked about me the whole time. Is something happening in Canterlot?”

Twilight choked in mid-sip, nearly dropping her tea. “What? How did you-”

“Pinkie came by earlier - she mentioned something about a whole bunch of guards in town. Also, um, you don’t usually have a personal escort, Twilight.”

“Oh, that...” She cast a sour look in Bastion’s direction. “The “escort” situation is temporary. Actually, now that you mention it - ” She reached toward her saddlebag.

“That won’t be necessary, Miss Sparkle. I believe your friend already knows what we’re looking for.” Bastion stepped toward Fluttershy.

“What? Don’t be silly, how could she-” She was cut short as Fluttershy produced a small wooden box and opened it upon the table. Inside was a silver-chained pendant with an oddly shaped black gem at its center - the same gem Twilight had seen in Celestia’s drawing.

She stared, utterly nonplussed. Applejack cocked her head to one side,

“Whut in the heck izzat thing?”

Spike’s head was buried in the box of pineapple treats. Sensing that the flow of the conversation had shifted, he resurfaced, his mouth lined with yellow crumbs. Seeing the pendant, he bounded off the couch to get a better look. The sudden motion jarred Twilight out of her shock at having so easily located the pendant.

“Spike, don’t touch that!”

“Huh? Why not?”

“Bastion’s right. The letter you gave me from Celestia said something - well, quite a lot actually, about that pendant. It’s supposed to contain some sort of powerful magic. She said it was dangerous to handle it directly. But...but...” She shook her head in confusion “I don’t understand.

Fluttershy, how did you come across something like this?" She whirled to face Bastion, who was now moving to pick up the box. "And how did you know Fluttershy had it?" It was Fluttershy who answered.

"Pinkie's the one who told me that the guards were asking questions about it, but she wanted to ask me before she told anypony about me being the one who found it. Of course, I said that she could tell the guards that I had it, but I was hoping that you might be able to tell me more about what it was first. I was told by a messenger that that you would be by shortly with an escort who would then take it to Canterlot." Bastion nodded, confirming her claim. "As for how I found it, I...haven't the slightest idea. Dr. Grey told me that I was holding it when the girls found me by the Forest."

"Wait a minute..." Twilight's expression turned dire. "You said you were holding it?" She shifted forward on her seat, looking directly into Fluttershy's eyes. "Tell me the truth Fluttershy, this is very important - have you felt strange in any way since you woke up?"

Spike cocked an eyebrow at Twilight. "What kind of question is that? Can't you see the bandages?"

"I mean aside from the burns. Any weird dreams? Unexplainable sensations? Any change in behavior?"

Fluttershy looked in something like surprise at Twilight, then frowned, thinking hard. "No, not as far as I know. Thanks to you girls and Dr. Grey's medicine, I feel perfectly fine."

"You look exhausted. Are you sure you haven't lost sleep?"

"Twilight, there's no need to worry. The medication just makes it a little hard to sleep, that's all. I'm *fine*."

Twilight studied her friend in silence for a few moments, but could not detect any evidence to suggest that Fluttershy was lying.

"Alright, fine, but if you feel anything - *anything* out of the ordinary, let me know immediately. We have no way of knowing how long you were in contact with that pendant or how you came to have it, so we can't know if it's affected you yet."

"Not that there's really anything to be concerned about, right, Twi?" Applejack looked like she needed the reassurance more than Fluttershy did.

"...no...no of course not." She sighed. "In the meantime, I know you're still recovering, but I'm afraid you'll have to come with me to Canterlot, Fluttershy."

"C-Canterlot?! What in Equestria for?"

"It's nothing to be scared about, I promise. The princess said that she wanted to see all of the Element Bearers as soon as possible to discuss something important."

"Somthin' importn't? Like whut exactly?"

"I really don't know. She didn't say in the letter. However, if anypony can tell us more about that pendant, princess Celestia can."

Fluttershy had suddenly begun fidgeting feverishly on the couch.

"Oh...well, um...I don't...I really-" she stopped short, inhaling sharply. Her eyes darted back and forth several times between Bastion and Twilight, then she grinned sheepishly. "Oh well, I suppose...if the princess insists, it could be nice to take a trip to Canterlot. Besides, it might just be what the doctor ordered. Just give me a second to fetch Angel and make sure my animals will be set for the night."

"Miss shy, I'm afraid I must insi-"

"That will be *fine*, Fluttershy. We'll go and gather the others, *won't* we, Bastion?" Twilight was losing patience with this particular pegasus.

He snorted indignantly before turning his gaze back to Fluttershy. "Thank you for your cooperation, miss Shy. The princess will be very glad to have this returned to her. An associate will contact you with information regarding your reward." Bastion gave a curt nod, walking to the door with the pendant box strapped to his saddle.

“Re...Reward?! Oh please, I wouldn’t dream of-” But he had already left.

“Spike, please help Fluttershy with the animals while we’re gone.”

“Oh, um, That won’t be-”

“Not to worry, milady!” Spike puffed out his chest. “I’ve been reading lots of books about how to care for these furry little guys. I’m ready for anything!” Before Fluttershy could protest further, Spike hurried outside to the garden.

“Take as much time as you need, but please don’t be too long. I think Bastion’s liable to throw a fit if we keep him waiting.” Twilight grinned to herself as she left, with Applejack close behind. “We’ll meet you outside when we’re ready!”

“O...okay then! See you soon!”

Fluttershy waited. Once she was sure that her visitors had gone and she could hear Spike struggling with what sounded like a particularly disgruntled squirrel, she relaxed, sighing as though she had held her breath all evening.

“You handled that splendidly, Fluttershy.”

“I hope so...I just...I just don’t feel right lying to them like that, though.”

“I told you, Fluttershy, I don’t like this any more than you do, but if you tell them that you’re hearing voices in your head...well, think of what happened with Angel.”

Fluttershy flinched at the sound of Angel’s name.

“That wasn’t...that wasn’t my fault...” Fluttershy’s lip began to tremble

“No, no it wasn’t. He wouldn’t believe you, wouldn’t understand your kindness in trying to help me.” His voice was soothing to Fluttershy. “Your friends would only doubt you, too, and potentially get hurt in the process. Remember, Fluttershy, you saved me. No pony else would have done that.”

"I...I just don't know..." She gazed at the tiny house in which Angel used to live. She still couldn't believe he was...

Slowly, she walked over to Angel's house and opened the door. Inside, a tiny, cold lump lay on its side in the corner. What was once her rabbit friend was now lifeless stone, an expression of shock frozen on his face.

"Come now, Fluttershy, you're stronger than this." He paused. Her lip still trembled threateningly, but no tears came. "I'm terribly sorry...I've already caused you so much trouble. Please, Fluttershy, I know it's a lot to ask, but I need you to be strong for both of us right now. I need you to remember that this is not your fault. If the blame lies with anyone, it's with him. You know that."

"He didn't know any better."

"You're doing it again. You're blaming yourself out of what you think is kindness for him. You think you're being kind but you're only hurting your friends when you think like that. It's like what I said before, you must learn to be more assertive, Fluttershy, and not allow your friends to walk all over you, or they'll end up like Angel."

"So...it is my fault..."

"FLUTTERSHY!"

She whimpered, startled by the sudden increase in volume in Acheron's voice.

"You are an extraordinary individual, and I REFUSE to allow you to torture yourself because of your friends' selfishness. You have done nothing wrong. Angel failed you, and that is a *fact*. Think about it Fluttershy, all of the times in the past that you've either been overlooked or overruled because your friends didn't respect you, and what has happened as a result."

As if by magic, her vision was filled with memories of her life in Ponyville. On the day two years ago that the dragon came to the mountain and threatened to cover Equestria in a cloud of smoke, nopony would listen to

her warnings. On that day, her best friends, Rainbow Dash, in particular, had complained about bringing her along. And yet she, and *she alone* had driven the dragon away. Fluttershy felt pride swell in her chest. Another memory - Gilda screamed at her, and she ran, tears in her eyes. She had not had the strength to face her alone, so her friends had had to step in, and as a result, Rainbow Dash had lost one of her best friends. Anger. Yet another memory - facing down the manticore, then the cockatrice, and saving the children as well as Twilight. Pride again. Finally, her memory of her time as a filly in Cloudsdale, of how everypony had made fun of her.

Acheron was right, she thought. She was so much stronger than everypony thought, but nopony ever seemed to respect her for it. She had let herself be convinced by those around her that she was weak, and that she needed them to stand up for her. *She* had driven away the dragon, *she* had saved her friends from the cockatrice and the manticore, *she* had saved Acheron's life. How could that be a bad thing? She suddenly felt sick, sick with anger at herself for allowing her *friend* Rainbow Dash to stand up for her only to complain about her supposed weakness years later, and also for allowing Angel to cause her to doubt herself. She glared at Angel, slamming the door to his tiny home and huffily marching to sit by the fire.

"You know something, Acheron? You're absolutely right. I *am* strong, and I don't need any of them to try to protect me. I can take care of myself, and if anyone thinks that I can't, then I'll just have to prove them wrong."

"There it is!" Acheron laughed triumphantly, causing Fluttershy to giggle along with him, blushing slightly. "That's the spirit!"

"So...you're sure it's okay to give away that pendant?"

"Positive. That pendant contains all of Chronus's power, and is therefore a very dangerous object. If anyone can keep it safe, your princess Celestia can. I...I just wish we could have gotten rid of it before Angel was hurt."

"Angel...Angel should have known better." She thought back on how she had been awakened in the night by Angel trying to remove the pendant from her neck again. She felt the same anger rising as that which she had felt upon discovering him. With it, Fluttershy sensed a familiar pang of guilt, but stamped it out almost immediately, shaking her head. Acheron

was right - it wasn't her fault. She had been justified in her anger, even if that anger had accidentally tapped into some of the sealed power within the pendant and had petrified Angel. It was an accident, that's all. An accident that she would fix *without* the others. She didn't need their help to protect those she cared about.

"I can fix him. I *have* to."

"Yes, and I vow to do all that I can to help you. Together, I'm sure that we'll find a way to save him"

A thought occurred to Fluttershy. "What about you? Didn't you say that a part of you was still inside that pendant?"

"Ah, yes, well...I doubt Celestia would try to examine it before sealing it away again, and even if she did, she would not notice the part of my soul that is bound to it - the magic is too ancient, even for her. If that is the case, then I am prepared to accept the consequences to ensure that Chronus or anypony else is not able to use that vile power to hurt anyone again."

"So, what will happen to the part of you that's inside me?"

"Most likely, I will fade over time. It is, perhaps, a necessary sacrifice. I will do all that I can to help you with Angel while I remain, but I have no way of knowing how long that will be."

"That isn't fair! There must be something I can do..."

"I'm sorry, Fluttershy, but we cannot risk that pendant falling into the wrong hooves. It's my own fault, really - I'm the one who bound myself to the pendant in the first place."

"No, that can't be it. There must be some-"

"Fluttershah?! You still in there? We're ready to move out!" Fluttershy could hear the sounds of movement outside beneath Applejack's muffled voice.



“No time, now, Fluttershy.” Acheron whispered. “It will all be all right, I promise, just make sure to keep those bandages tight - if your friends see you, they’ll think something’s wrong.”

With one last lingering glance at Angel’s hut, Fluttershy walked outside, careful to make a show of her practiced limp. There, just beyond the bridge that crossed the brook in front of her cottage, was one of the castle’s golden sky chariots, already filled with her five closest friends. She boarded, taking care to gather up her long tail in her teeth so that it would not be left hanging outside the chariot, and without a sound, the chariot lifted off.

Rarity struggled for a few moments to keep her hair tidy despite the wind, but finally gave up with a huff, allowing her once elegantly curled mane to billow behind her.

“So, Twilight, to what do we owe this impromptu vacation?”

“It’s hardly a vacation, Rarity. From what princess Celestia said in her letter, it seems pretty serious.”

“Nothin’ we can’t handle, right guys? I mean, we’ve driven dragons to tears!”

“You mean *I* drove a dragon to tears.” Fluttershy muttered, glancing sidelong at Rainbow Dash.

“What was that, Fluttershy?”

“Oh...*nothing*.”

“Hey, you okay? You look kinda upset.”

“No, Dash, I just...”

“Let ‘er be, Rainbow. She’s jus’ tired from all she’s been thro-”

“I’m just *fine*, thanks.” Fluttershy snapped.

The others turned to stare at Fluttershy. The chariot was suddenly very quiet.

“...sorry Applejack. I guess I’m just...tired...like you said.”

“WHEEEEEEEEEEEEEheeeheehahaha\* *snort*\*heeheehmmhmmhahah\* *snort*  
\* This is *fun*!”

“Pinkie, what are you - get back up here, you featherbrain, you’re gonna fall!”

“Twilight, lookie lookie! I’m the Pink Baron!  
Vroooooooooooooooooommmnnnnnyeeeeeeeeroooooowwwwww...”

“Where did she get that cape?”

"Pink, I said get...up...here...hrngggggg!"

“The dreaded Rainbow Reaper closes in from the rear! Can the Baron escape her relentless attack?”

“Rainbow Re...? Pinkie Pie, stop...wiggling!”

"NYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEOOOOOOOOOWWWWWWWW  
WWW BUDDABUDDABUDDA NYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEOW"

After several minutes of struggling, Rainbow finally managed to wrestle Pinkie back aboard the chariot, at which time Pinkie orchestrated a very dramatic impression of a pilot spiraling to his doom. Finally, having grown bored with her little game, she began enthusiastically interrogating Bastion regarding his favorite flavor of cotton candy. Despite her dour mood, Fluttershy couldn't help but laugh a bit at her friend's antics. Soon, the ponies had forgotten the nature of their journey and simply enjoyed the ride, talking excitedly about getting to see the castle again. Their conversation began to dwindle, then quickly died as the castle came into view. Fluttershy swallowed, but failed to clear the lump she felt forming in her throat. There, on a balcony just above the landing platform, stood Princess Celestia, her lean, elegant frame silhouetted against the light of the setting sun. As the chariot came to a landing on the cobblestones below, she glided down to meet them, greeting Twilight with an

affectionate, if brief, embrace. With a curt nod from the princess, two guards rushed to Fluttershy's side to assist her as the ponies followed Celestia inside.

"Thank you, Hussar, that will be all for now."

Hussar bowed his head, his nose nearly rubbing the floor, as he retreated to his post at the entrance to the conference hall. Celestia looked around the table at the six ponies before her. She addressed Fluttershy first.

"Fluttershy, dear, I'm terribly sorry to have summoned you here in your condition. Were this matter not so important, I would not have had to cause you such undue inconvenience. Please, forgive me."

"...that's alright, princess, Thank you for your concern." She smiled, perhaps a bit insincerely.

"Now, I have called all of you here to discuss..." She paused, staring at Pinkie. "Good heavens, child, whatever is the matter?"

Once again, Pinkie had begun spastically puckering, her ears whirling absurdly like tiny propellers.

\*pop\* "Nothing at all, you royally royal-ness! It's just my Pinkie sense."

"I...I beg your pardon...*Pinkie sense*?"

"Uh-huh! Sometimes, I can tell when something is gonna happen before it does! Like, when my tail gets twitchy, it means something's gonna fall! Or when-"

"I don't understand it either, princess..." Twilight interjected, talking over Pinkie's rambling. "...but sometimes, Pinkie's body reacts in certain ways that seem to consistently predict future events."

"-it means a blizzard is coming, or when I-"

"I see...fascinating."

"-to beware of traveling calliope salesponies!"

Rainbow Dash turned to face Pinkie. "Calliope sales-wait, when did you-"

*“Back to topic, if we could.”* Twilight looked sternly at Rainbow, then Pinkie, who simply offered a smile in return, as unflappable as ever. “Sorry about that. Please continue, princess.”

“Yes...As I was saying, the reason I’ve summoned all of you here lies in the box you see before you.” She gestured to the box with the pendant, now resting in the center of the table. “Twilight, if you would, please read aloud the contents of my letter.”

Twilight obeyed, relating the princess’s somewhat cryptic message to the others. They all listened with rapt attention - Fluttershy in particular.

“Izzat little thing really whut all this fuss is about? Whut exactly’s so darn dangerous about it?”

“In a word, Entropy.”

The group stared at Celestia in confusion, all except Fluttershy, whose expression was blank, and Twilight, who scratched her chin thoughtfully.

“...I’ve heard that word before...something I came across in one of the books in the royal library, but I can’t remember...”

“Allow me to explain. There are, in total, five types of magic that exist in our world, and each, to some extent, can be found inside every living being. You have been told that the Elements of Harmony are the most powerful magic known to pony kind, and in most respects, this is true. However, the Elements only represent one of the five known varieties of magic.”

“Wait, so...” Rainbow hovered restlessly above her chair. “What exactly are you saying?”

“I’m saying that there are, or were, artifacts that represent the other magic types. This pendant is one of those artifacts, representing the magic known as Entropy. Entropy is an ancient magic not seen to any great extent in Equestria for a very long time, aside from inside the boundaries of the Everfree Forest. This magic, by its nature, is chaotic and unpredictable, and is the polar opposite of the magic embodied by the Elements of Harmony. That is to say, the magical force known as Order.”

Blank looks all around.

“Think about it like this. How do we, as ponies, regulate the seasons throughout the year?”

“Wait...I think I get it!” Twilight rose excitedly from her chair. “Order...you said that this is the most powerful magic known to pony kind, and that it exists in all living things. We ponies are responsible for moving the clouds, growing plants, and caring for the animals of Equestria, but in the Everfree Forest...” She paused, thinking carefully. “In the Everfree Forest, all of these things happen by themselves.”

“Exactly. And how does that make you feel?” The question seemed oddly direct.

“I remember that ever since I first entered the forest on my first day in Ponyville, it felt very...uncomfortable. Scary, even.”

“And can you guess why?” Celestia’s eyes began to sparkle with pride at her student’s brilliance.

“Because Entropy is the opposite of Order. The magic inherent in all ponies opposes, by its nature, the magic inherent in the Everfree Forest.”

“Precisely.” She nodded in Twilight’s direction. “The pendant you see before you is concentrated Entropy, and therefore could be dangerous to any pony to come in contact with it, although...I admit the magic has not been used or seen in this form for a very, very long time and as such, I cannot know what exactly it is capable of.” Fluttershy squirmed.

“Is something the matter, dear?”

“Oh, um...no, I just...um...I was just thinking about how I was the one who found it, and um...I don’t know how long I was holding it, that’s all.”

“Yes, I am a bit concerned about that, as well. Twilight tells me that you feel fine, all things considered, but I must ask you to tell us immediately if you sense that anything is amiss.”

“Y...yes, your highness.”

Celestia cleared her throat loudly. "Now, the power contained within this pendant is not the only development about which I need to speak to you all. For all of you to understand this, I'm afraid we're going to need a bit of background, so please make yourselves comfortable. This pendant, in the years before my rule, once belonged to a very powerful being. Little was known about the nature of magic in that time, but through a lifetime of study, he had come to the conclusion that magic existed in five separate forms. He presented his studies to the king and queen of Equestria, requesting to take them further in an effort to determine how the different types of magic would affect each other in concentrated amounts. However, the methods he advised were barbaric and cruel, and his request was rejected. Unfortunately, his resolve was set, and he had already forged, through his experiments, a gem of pure Entropy, which he then used to launch an attack against Equestria. The war was long and terrible, spanning the entirety of our fair land. His power grew as he gathered and concentrated various forms of magic from around the world. Finally, when it seemed that all hope was lost, the King of Equestria was able to harness some of that magic, sacrificing himself to destroy the source of the fiend's power and seal that power away within the Entropy Stone."

The ponies sat in disbelief of what they were hearing. Twilight was particularly flustered.

"But...why haven't I read about any war? How long ago was all of this? I never even-"

"I'm sorry, Twilight, but now is not the time. All of this can be explained later, when we have less important things to worry about. The fact is, the seal was broken, and the stone has reappeared. You can probably guess what that means."

"Ya don't mean-"

"Yes, Applejack, I have reason to believe that this being has also returned to Equestria to reclaim his former power."

"If that's true, the ponies of Equestria need to be warned, don't they?"

"Normally, yes, but something's wrong."

“Whatever do you mean?” asked Rarity. She was just as unsettled as the rest of the ponies, and her nervousness was manifesting itself in an overzealous attempt at straightening her mane, which was instead becoming increasingly frazzled as a result.

“He hasn’t shown himself, which means that he must be weak, and/or that he does not know where the pendant is located. As long as we have possession of the Entropy Stone, we are at a significant advantage, and we know that without it, he poses a much smaller threat. As such, I felt that alerting the public, at least at this early stage, would only cause panic. If this matter can be handled delicately to its conclusion, it will be far better for all of us.”

“But how will we find him? We can’t risk giving a big meanie like that time to hurt anypony, right?”

“Not only that...” Twilight nodded at Pinkie. What will we do once we *do* find him? I doubt the Elements will have any effect.”

“What the hay are you talking about? They kicked *butt* last time I checked.” Rainbow pounded the table in her agitation, then realized what she had said. “Oh...sorry, princess...”

Celestia shook her head. “Twilight’s right. The Elements of Harmony probably won’t harm him, as they would be cancelled out by the power of Entropy that he wields. Even without the stone, I would not be surprised if he retained some trace of magic. Luckily for us, I have managed to procure a solution to this problem. Namely, one who is familiar with the spell used to seal him in the first place.”

“Really? Who could that be?”

“I cannot say how happy I am to have the opportunity to introduce all of you to him. He is somepony for whom I have the utmost respect and whom I believe will be vital in helping us to prevent this situation from escalating into a disaster. Allow me to introduce...my father., the once King of Equestria.”

As soon as the words had left her lips, a brilliant silver light erupted at the top of the stairs behind Celestia’s chair. Slowly, the light faded to reveal

the translucent form of the most elegant pony any of them had ever seen. His coat was of a soft, almost metallic grey, and his pale mane of white and blue shimmered not as Celestia's did, but floated about him, dissolving and reforming itself like a liquid. The colors therein swirled around and about each other in a slow, purposeful rhythm. He smiled at his daughter, at the circle of dumbfounded and speechless ponies below, but his smile wavered when his gaze fell upon the pony farthest to the left - a meek-looking pegasus girl with a pink mane.

Fluttershy stared in horror at the alicorn above. She *knew* him. Her mind filled with the image from her vision - that same alicorn standing atop a castle wreathed in flame. Every one of her instincts screamed in fear. Sensing her terror, Acheron's voice leapt to the forefront of her mind.

"Fluttershy don't-"

"Chronus..."

"...You...*idiot*." hissed Acheron.

Chronus's smile vanished completely. Celestia whipped about, nearly falling out of her seat, staring wide-eyed at Fluttershy.

"...What...what did you say?"

"He's Chronus - He's the one...the one who stole the Element of Dominion."

"Fluttershy, how do you know that name?" Celestia's tone was low and urgent, almost panicked. "I've never told any of you about that before. Tell me how you know that name."

"Fluttershy, was it?" Chronus, Celestia's father, stared icily down at the tiny yellow pegasus. "I wonder...Does the name *Acheron* mean anything to you?"

Fluttershy did not answer, but from the look in Chronus's eyes, he already knew what Fluttershy had been hiding. He nodded grimly to Celestia.



“No...I'm so sorry, Fluttershy, but I have no choice...” Celestia stared sadly at Fluttershy. Suddenly, she swallowed, her expression turning cold.  
“Hussar! Seize her!”

# Chapter 6

## The Nature of Harmony

In an instant, Hussar and a full dozen of the castle's guards materialized out of nowhere, surrounding Fluttershy. Two of them pounced and pinned her to the ground, knocking the wind out of her. Overcome by terror, she writhed and thrashed, screaming yet helpless against the heavy limbs that held her.

"HEY! WHAT THE HAY ARE YOU DOING?!" Rainbow Dash rocketed toward Fluttershy but was deflected by two more of the castle pegasi who promptly pinned her, as well, against the nearby wall. The muffled sound of a string of cankerous slurs spilled from Rainbow's mouth as her face was pressed against the cold stone with crushing force.

Rarity jumped out of her chair in shock "Your Majesty, what is the *meaning* of this? Surely this isn't neces-"

"If you are truly concerned for your friend you will hold your tongue." Chronus's voice silenced all but Fluttershy's frantic shrieks.

"Hold her upright." The guards immediately obeyed

"Hey! You can't jus'-"

"Please, Applejack..." It was Celestia. "I'm sorry, but please don't interfere. We have to be sure."

"Whut in tarnation 're you-"

"SILENCE!" Chronus bellowed. This time, even Fluttershy went quiet, staring in terror at the inexplicably translucent alicorn who nonetheless had a very real and tangible presence. Her mind spiraled in a dizzying haze at the speed with which everything was happening. She was acutely aware of the cold steel of the guards' armor pressing her into an upright position, and could not tear herself from the arresting gaze of the alicorn's pale blue

eyes. She wanted desperately to disappear, to be somewhere, anywhere else, as long as it was away from those horrible, unfeeling eyes.

“Tell me the truth, and this will all end easily” Chronus whispered, his tone now softer, though it did nothing to soothe Fluttershy. “How do you know Acheron?”

“Please, I...I have to help Angel...” What was left of Fluttershy’s rational mind clung tenuously to the last thing she could remember before coming here, to this...

“Answer the question, and you may do as you wish.”

“Please - he’s the only one who can hel-”

“Answer. The question.”

“He’s...he’s my friend.”

This time, Chronus was silent. The icy interrogator’s mask he had been wearing melted to reveal a look of deepest pity.

“You poor girl. You poor, poor thing.”

Suddenly Fluttershy was angry. Angrier than she had ever felt in her life. Numbing, intoxicating, ravenous rage cascaded through her mind, consuming all of her senses save for the sight in the eyes that glared at the object of her hatred. She basked in the sudden adrenaline-fueled ecstasy of the emotion, her consciousness sharpening to a single, white-hot point, aimed directly at Chronus.

“How...dare you...”

Chronus eyed Fluttershy warily. “What d-”

“HOW...DARE YOU!!!!”

The guards were momentarily stunned by her outburst. She capitalized on the opportunity, though she was not quite sure how exactly she managed to do what she did next.

Twilight and the others were too stunned to scream. The tremor knocked all of the ponies to the ground, half-deaf from the force that assaulted their ears like an explosion. The sound of tearing metal and cracking stone rent the air as a concussion wave rocked the conference hall, sending the guards flying in all directions. Some slammed into the walls of the chamber and collapsed, unconscious. Others skidded across the stone floor before finally coming to rest, where they lay motionless. Hussar and Bastion, the two who had been restraining Fluttershy, were blasted out of their armor to land in a crumpled heap among their comrades, blood dripping from their mouths. Fluttershy stood alone at the epicenter of a tremendous crack that had split the floor of the conference hall, panting, still glaring at Chronus.

“If there is one thing...one thing that I am *sick* and *tired* of, that I absolutely cannot stand, it is being *pitied*.”

Chronus recovered himself quickly, returning Fluttershy’s acid gaze with a calm, unblinking stare of his own.

The blazing heat that surged through Fluttershy’s body was unlike anything she had ever experienced. She felt...powerful. The feeling rushed to the forefront of her mind, and her thoughts suddenly reeled with possibilities, many of which she would never have considered before, many of which sickened her, yet all of which filled her with an unyielding desire to delve ever deeper for something darker, something worse to do the revolting creature before her.

“How *dare* you assault me without explanation, without warning, then deign to take pity on me? You’re either very bold, or very, very *stupid*.”

Fluttershy stepped closer to Chronus. She was immediately blocked by Celestia, who looked at her with frantic, pleading eyes.

“Please, Fluttershy calm down. We aren’t going to hurt you.”

With a speed like a flash of lightning, her hatred immediately redirected its fulminous edge toward Celestia.

“Move. I am not some weak little girl that you can just push around.”

“Fluttershy, just list-”

“I will not ask again. Move. *Now.*”

“Fluttershy, plea-”

“That...is *not*...**MY NAME!!!**”

All was quiet. Whether it was the acoustics of the massive conference hall, or Fluttershy's own imagination, those last words seemed to echo forever. Without warning, the loathing that had consumed her only seconds before had utterly disappeared, replaced by a horrible, echoing emptiness. The room spun, and she suddenly felt very cold, the silent, stale air of the conference hall stinging her lungs. She faltered - her stance crumpled, her shoulders slumped, and her legs began to give out.

“My...name...?”

Why couldn't she remember? There was Twilight, and Pinkie Pie, and Rarity, Rainbow, and Applejack, her best friends - the friends she treasured more than anything in the world. Why were they looking at her like that?

“Stop that...stop looking at me like that.”

“Fl...Fluttershy?” Pinkie looked scared. She never looked scared.

“Stop it. This...this is wrong.” Fluttershy swayed. Every instinct screamed that something had gone horribly awry, but she couldn't quite grasp the source of the empty terror that consumed her. “Why won't you stop looking at me? What's wrong with all of you?” Pinkie Pie bounded forward, embracing Fluttershy tightly.

“It's okay.” She whispered. “It's all gonna be okay, I promise.”

Fluttershy did not resist. She inhaled the scent of Pinkie's mane - it smelled like...safety. Yes, that was it. Fluttershy...that *was* her name. How had she forgotten? Something wet dropped onto her hoof, then again and again. Was she...*crying*?

Noticing the change in Fluttershy's demeanor caused by Pinkie's embrace, Celestia and Chronus began to inch closer. It was a mistake.

"GET AWAY! GET AWAY FROM ME!"

*CRACK*

Another gigantic crack ripped across the stone floor beneath Fluttershy. Pinkie hurtled through the air, landing among the other guards with a heavy thud that echoed sickeningly in the large hall. Immediately, Rainbow rushed to her side.

"Ohmygosh ohmygosh, Pinkie, are you okay? Answer me!" She did not respond. A trickle of blood began to ooze from her left ear.

"GET AWAY GET AWAY GET AWA-"

The sound ripped through the hearts of her friends like a rusty knife. She thrashed wildly, foam issuing through clenched teeth. Her senses shattered under the weight of the pain that pierced every point of her consciousness. She felt the myriad daggers of agony digging, digging ever deeper from every direction at once. All she could do was scream.

Twilight and the others began to rush forward in alarm

"Stay Back!" Celestia commanded, freezing them in their tracks.

Again, Fluttershy's scream pierced the air, echoing, echoing, redoubling upon itself with each new wave of torture. She wanted desperately to die, to escape from this unseen hell.

Fluttershy thrashed violently in the center of the circle of concerned and terrified ponies. It was obvious that she was in a catastrophic amount of pain.

"We gotta help 'er!" Applejack lunged forward but Celestia knocked her aside with her wing.

"We can't get close! She's been affected by the pendant's magic. If we try to approach, it will only make things worse. Twilight, I need your help, *now!*

Focus on Fluttershy, on everything she means to you, on the friend you know and love. We must try to separate the magic from her body.”

Fluttershy was curled tightly in a fetal position, still shuddering. She looked at her friends, pleading them with her eyes to help her. Why didn't they come near? Why-

She vomited.

It was as though a thousand white-hot needles had pierced the space behind her eyes. Blinding, excruciating pain, accompanied by a voice, a familiar, terrifying, enraged voice. Through the pain and the sounds of her own screams, she could only comprehend snatches of what it said as it battered her mercilessly from within.

“IDIOT! WORTHLESS...long, and now you...so close...kill you...KILL YOU!!!!!!”

“Hu-aagggh H-h-help-p...h-help m-m-meee...” She struggled to speak as another wave of pain-induced nausea caused her to empty what was left of her stomach's contents onto the floor. She tasted blood.

“ROT AND FILTH! USELESS GIRL! DIE, DIE, DIE, DIE, DIE!”

Her vision blurred and began to fade, the voice growing ever louder. Her body was failing - even the pain seemed to be fading now. In her mind's eye, she saw a single pair of silver eyes, glaring, unblinking, their pupils narrow ebon slits - eyes filled with unfathomable hate. Their gaze burned her to her very soul.

“P...P-P-Pinki...every...I...I'm so sor...”

The voice was getting softer now. Slowly, the screaming monster in her mind faded to nothing, leaving her alone and numb in the darkness.

Silence. There was no pain, no sickness. She felt...nothing. All around her lay a cushion of inky blackness that stretched in all directions without end. She wondered dimly if she was dead. Not that it mattered, she thought. Nothing seemed to matter anymore. At least she was free of the pain.

A light in the distance...and...a voice? She tried to walk, but could not feel her legs. Instead, her body seemed to drift of its own accord, as though she were floating. Or...was the light getting closer? She smelled something...the cold, artificial scent stung her nostrils. More voices now, muttering frantically. What were they saying? She wished they would be quiet - she felt so tired. Why wouldn't they let her sleep? Just a few minutes would be enough...

Something stirred within her, though she couldn't quite grasp where it was coming from. It felt...warm, hot even. Suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to be rid of the feeling. She struggled to move, to locate the source of the sensation, but her body refused to obey, drifting ever closer to the light. The warmth spread throughout her body, the light growing brighter and brighter as it did so. It was all around her, so bright, so very, very bright...

"EYYYYYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!!!!" Fluttershy screamed as she bolted upright, flailing blindly as her eyes struggled to adjust to the sudden flood of light. She was overcome with vertigo, then pain. She tried to gain her bearings through the haze of light and the pounding ache in her head. All around, frantic, blurry shapes darted to and fro, and she suddenly felt herself being lifted bodily onto something large and soft. As the fog slowly cleared, she became aware of a few distinct voices shouting over the din.

"Doctor? What's wrong?! What happened?!"

Something hit the wall with a thunderous impact.

"Lemme through! We gotta see her *now!*"

"*Please* Miss Dash! Control yourself! I already told you, we're doing everything we ca-"

"That's not good enough! She needs us!"

Another impact.

"Hey! Cut it...lemme go!"



"I'm sorry Miss Dash, but Fluttershy needs you to be patient more than anything else. Any further shocks in her delicate condition could cause her to take a turn for the worse."

"*You're* gonna take a turn for the worse right now if you don't."

"That's enough, Rainbow."

The frantic shapes stopped dead. As her vision finally began to resolve itself, she could make out several ponies in white smocks, all facing the door from behind which the latest voice had come.

"B-b-but, your highness, I-"

"Dr. Dorian is correct. Please, just wait a little longer. Right now, we need to let the doctors...to...sure that..."

"...es...ajesty."

"In...meanti...why the...to..."

Fluttershy struggled to make out what the voices were saying, but she suddenly felt exhausted. The wave of adrenaline that had borne her when she awoke was quickly ebbing away. Her eyelids drooped, and she finally succumbed, welcoming sleep like a long lost friend.

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High above the city of Canterlot, a light flickered to life in one of the tower rooms at the Mendwell Memorial Hospital. Three ponies sat on one side of a long table, eagerly waiting for the fourth occupant to speak. Princess Celestia stared at the back of her father's head, trying desperately to pick out some hint of what he was considering. Luna pawed the ground nervously, her eyes fixed on the surface of the table. Occasionally, she would look first to her elder sister, then to the shimmering form of her father at the far side of the table, but each time she only received the same stony, intense silence in response, and soon returned to staring at the table. Dr. Dorian Mendwell, an elderly brown pony who had a nervous habit of adjusting his thick, coke-

bottle glasses, sat a respectful distance from the royal sisters, calmly waiting to be addressed. Finally, Chronus turned slowly to face the others.

“It’s important to recognize that in many ways, this situation is far better than we could have hoped. Had Miss Fluttershy not come into contact with the Stone, it is likely we would not have been able to obtain it this easily.”

“And yet, you don’t seem relieved.” Celestia suspected she already knew what the problem was - it was bothering her too.

“It’s just as I said...the situation is far better than we could have hoped. That makes me nervous.”

“You’re saying Acheron is still alive?”

“We cannot afford to rule out that possibility. I’ve thought about this at length, and I’ve come to the conclusion that, however unlikely, it may be possible that Acheron was somehow able to use the Stone’s power to transfer his consciousness into Fluttershy’s mind. I believe this is the most likely explanation for what happened in the conference hall.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing being possible. How can you be-”

“Entropy is not like the forms of magic you are familiar with. By its nature, it breaks many of the “rules” of the more conventional varieties of magic. Besides, the Stone’s power was not the only one at work here. Though I have not seen this exact situation in the past, I have seen the stone’s power directed by another’s will in such a way as to control others.”

“Then is it not also possible that Acheron is hiding and was simply directing Fluttershy from afar?”

“I don’t think so, for three reasons. One, while it is arguable that Entropy alone could be attributed to the damage Fluttershy sustained by way of the simple fact of her being a pony, what has happened concerning her cutie mark suggests that the power was being magnified or directed somehow. It seemed to me that her own magical reservoir was being directly drained to sustain some sort of force.” Dr. Dorian coughed in an attempt to cover for his sudden fidgeting. Chronus shot a disapproving glance in his direction. He was not at all pleased with the doctor’s presence - it was too

risky to involve someone from the outside with such information. The only reason he had agreed to include him was on his daughters' insistence, as they believed he should be included so as to know how best to treat Fluttershy.

"Two," Chronus continued. "Fluttershy referred to Acheron as her 'friend.' I have never known Acheron for his humility. The only reason he would have allowed her to believe that she was an equal to him is if he was desperate, and needed her to sustain himself."

"Three - according to the report submitted by Dr. Dorian, several of Fluttershy's friends stated that they had witnessed burns over much of the front of Fluttershy's body, yet when she was brought in for treatment here, no evidence of such wounds existed. Acheron is the only one I know of who would have the magical knowledge to heal her. The fact that he did so, despite the obvious risks, confirms to me that Fluttershy's health was one of his priorities."

Celestia looked down at the table, carefully mulling her father's words over in her mind. She could find no fault with his reasoning.

"Therefore, we are presented with a new problem. If Acheron was indeed able to bind himself to Fluttershy's consciousness somehow, he may have done so with another."

"That pegasus...Fluttershy...will be alright, though, yes, Doctor? You're sure of it?"

Dorian didn't answer right away. He was a bit surprised to have been addressed by Luna.

"I'm as sure as I can be. Physically speaking, at least. I'm afraid I can't say the same for her mental state, at least not until she wakes up again."

Chronus looked sternly at Luna. "That is fortunate, yes, but I believe the more pressing matter is how we may prevent this situation from being repeated."

"Actually, Luna has a point." Celestia looked with approval at her younger sister. "Please, continue."

Luna glanced between Celestia and her father, clearing her throat before speaking again.

“The unicorn, Twilight Sparkle, reported that Fluttershy was the one who initially found the Stone, yes? However, the exact nature of that encounter is still a mystery. We cannot know what happened until she is well enough to tell us. Therefore, I believe that our priority at the moment has to be ensuring her well being, as she is the only pony who knows where the Stone came from.”

Celestia smiled, and Luna suppressed a grin of her own. She was determined to present herself professionally before her father.

“Not to mention, it would be helpful to know what Acheron had told her, if your theory is correct.”

Celestia nodded. “I agree. In the meantime, I believe Fluttershy and the other Element Bearers should be allowed to know the full truth of the matter concerning Dominion and the Stones.”

Chronus’s eyes widened in alarm. “I’m not sure that’s wise.” He frowned, scratching his chin thoughtfully. “If Fluttershy’s wellness is our top priority, then that sort of information could be dangerous, especially to the Element Bearers. More importantly, we all know what Acheron was trying to accomplish. That kind of power cannot be allowed to fall into just anypony’s hands.”

“I think it would be far more damaging to withhold information any further. If Acheron is still alive somehow, they need to be well-armed to be ready to deal with any future threat. It was a mistake...my mistake to have hidden the truth from them until now. I’ve watched these ponies for some time now, and I have faith in their strength. I am certain they would not abuse the nature of their responsibility as Bearers for personal gain.”

“Do you think they will not resent that fact that we have not yet been completely forthright with them?”

“That is possible, but I think that, in time, they will understand why we had to keep it secret. Besides, it seems we have little choice at this point. I shall speak with them myself to mitigate any fallout.”

“...very well.” Chronus turned to look outside at the city below. “Speaking of which...Dorian, you do understand that everything you have heard in this room is never to be spoken of to anypony without my or my daughters’ express permission, yes?”

“Of course, your highness. Thank you all for allowing me to participate.”

Celestia smiled. “Luna is the one you should thank. It was her idea to include you in the discussion, as she believed keeping close tabs on Fluttershy’s condition was vital.”

Doctor Dorian bowed respectfully in Luna’s direction, absently adjusting his glasses as he did so. Celestia’s horn began to glow, and, with a pop and a puff of smoke, a blank scroll and quill materialized in the air before her.

“Just in case, I will send word immediately to the guards stationed in Ponyville to inquire about anypony else who may have come into contact with the stone. Dorian, I suggest you also ask your son in Ponyville about his treatment of Fluttershy after she found the Stone. However, as my father said, please do not tell him any more than what is necessary.”

“I’ll meditate further on the situation while you speak with the Bearers. I shall be in the castle gardens should you need me. In the meantime, Dorian, you are to keep strict watch on Miss Shy and report your findings directly to me. You may go.”

Dorian bowed in Chronus’s direction as he backpedaled toward the door. After he had left, Chronus drifted toward the window.

“Another thing. Celestia, after you have finished with your task, I would like to speak with you in private.”

Celestia’s expression hardened slightly, just for an instant. She did not look up from her scroll. “Yes, father.”

“Meet me in the gardens as soon as possible.”

Chronus left in a flash of silver light. Several moments passed in silence as Celestia finished composing her letter. Luna fidgeted, glancing between the scroll and her sister's face as she respectfully waited for Celestia to finish writing.

"Sis? Can...Can I...?"

"What is it, Luna?"

"...never mind. Now's not the time. If it's not too much to ask, could I talk to you about something later? When you have time, I mean."

"Of course, dear. Why? What's wrong? If it's important, I want to hear about it."

Luna looked away, opening her mouth to speak, but did not respond. Finally, she smiled. "Really, it can wait. Don't worry about it, okay? I'll see you later." She walked to the door.

"Actually, Luna, I think it may be helpful to have you with me while I talk to Fluttershy and the others."

Luna turned about in surprise. "I...really? What could I do?"

"This concerns all of us, not just father and myself. In fact, I should have been including you in all of this since the beginning, and for that, I am sorry. We share the responsibility as rulers of Equestria, and as such, it is necessary that you are involved in this matter."

Luna eyed her sister warily for a moment. Perhaps it was her imagination, but she thought she recognized the tone that Celestia had adopted. It seemed to her that Celestia only spoke that way when she was trying to hide something. The uneasiness Luna felt in the pit of her stomach leapt with renewed vigor as the realization stoked her suspicions. She would have to be forceful when she spoke with her sister later that night. At present, she faked a grateful smile.

"In that case, I'll do all that I can."

“Thank you. Besides, your tact in delicate matters such as this is...perhaps a bit more refined than my own. I’m sure it will be helpful.”

“I only hope Fluttershy will be willing to share everything she’s been going through. We’ll need to know as much as possible to take effective countermeasures.”

Celestia flinched inwardly. Luna seemed to have chosen her words rather carefully, and the look in her eyes didn’t quite match her smile. Damn it... No...she was right to suspect her, but an apology would have to wait for now. She returned the smile, already preparing herself mentally for what lay ahead. As she and her sister left the cramped conference room, she tried to ignore the insistent guilty squeaks of her conscience as it tugged at the corners of her mind.

The sisters wended their way downstairs, turning through the labyrinthine corridors of the hospital’s eastern wing. As they walked, the hospital staff hurried about their work, bowing their heads as they passed, but never ceasing in their duties. After several minutes, they passed into the intensive care unit waiting room to find four very worried-looking ponies. None of them looked up, their eyes instead securely fastened on the door across the hall.

Rainbow Dash paced anxiously back and forth, occasionally stopping to stomp the ground in frustration, but remained quiet. The room was silent, the air heavy with the combined weight of the unspoken dread that each of its occupants bore. Finally, the door to room 411 opened with a creak that made Rainbow nearly trip over herself in her agitation. Before she could ask the question, the aged brown unicorn who had emerged from the doorway cleared his throat and fixed a solemn expression on his face.

“They’re both sleeping now. All of Miss Shy’s tests came back normal, and she’s stable for the time being. As for Miss Pie, she will also be fine in time. A minor concussion, and a few small fractures, that’s all.”

The room resonated with a collective sigh of relief.

“However...concerning Miss Shy...there has been a development that I do not believe she is aware of yet.”

Twilight, Rarity, Rainbow and Applejack all held their breath. The doctor's stern expression had drooped suddenly, his glasses glinting in the cold fluorescence of the room's light as he feverishly began fidgeting with them. Celestia and Luna frowned, bracing themselves for what they knew came next.

"She...judging by what you've told me about her, Miss Sparkle, she is likely to be in a fragile psychological state over the shock of what has happened. That said, I believe it would be prudent not to allow her to discover...that is to say, at the present time, I wouldn't want to risk..."

He sighed.

Well, I suppose the only way to say this is to just come out with it. She...her cutie mark is gone."

The warmth that had filled the room at the news of their friends' recovery vanished instantly. No one moved. Time slowed to a torturous crawl as the doctor's words began to sink in like icy daggers running down each pony's spine. Twilight was the first to finally muster the wherewithal to speak, but even she could only manage a single word to express the crippling bewilderment they all felt.

"Wh...what?"

The doctor pony wiped the sweat from his forehead, stumbling over his words.

"I've never seen anything like it - based on everything I know, this shouldn't even be possible. It was there until just after she awoke earlier, and then it...it simply wasn't."

"It's...it's just gone? How can it be *gone*? That's impossible! That's impossible, right, Princess?"

Celestia did not answer.

"Princess?"



"I'm sorry Twilight, I never anticipated that it would come to this when I sent you my letter. I will explain everything as best I can in a moment, if you'll please just bear with me."

She turned to face the brown pony. "Dorian, may we see her now? I think seeing her friends might make this easier for her."

Dr. Dorian adjusted his glasses, nodding absently. "I agree. But, please, I must ask you to let her sleep for now. When she wakes, please let me know. I'll be just down the hall."

Celestia nodded, and entered the hospital room. Twilight hesitated as Rainbow bolted inside with the others close behind. She swallowed hard and followed suit.

The room contained two hospital beds, one on each end of the room. On the side nearest the door, a puff of curly pink hair poked out from under a bulky bandage. Pinkie wore bandages around one side of her head as well as around her chest, and one of her forelegs was suspended in a sling. At the other side of the room...

Twilight gasped, her stomach flipping. Fluttershy's body was thin and emaciated. Yellow feathers lay in small bunches around the bed where a pair of nurses silently swept them up, and her mane was a patchy tangled mess, her scalp bare in places where the long strands of beautiful pink hair had fallen out.. The dark bags under her eyes lay atop sunken, hollow cheeks. She looked as though she had been deathly ill for weeks. As she lay there, she twitched weakly, as though caught in a bad dream. She turned to one side, and Twilight saw that what Dr. Dorian had said was indeed true. Fluttershy's flank was completely blank, all traces of the trio of cheerful butterflies that had been there for so many years now gone. But it was worse than that - where the butterflies once hung suspended in their perpetual stationary flight, a large circle of fur was missing, the surrounding flesh reddened and cracked as though it had been burned away.

No one spoke. The only noise that broke the heavy silence was the rhythmic, mocking beep of the monitor apparatus as it faithfully measured out the sleeping pegasus's heartbeat.

Celestia inhaled, steeling herself.

“Never, in all my years have I encountered something like this. I’m sorry, everypony, but I can only speculate about what could have caused it.”

“Then why don’t you *speculate* a way to fix it?!” Rainbow’s voice quivered slightly as she glared at Celestia. Luna was taken aback by Rainbow’s tone.

“This wasn’t her fault, Rain-”

“No, Luna. Rainbow has a right to be angry.”

Rainbow looked down at Fluttershy, her eyes fixed on the glistening patch where her cutie mark once was. She turned away from her friends just as her lip began to quiver, stomping the ground in an attempt to draw attention away from her face.

“Princess...we can fix this, right? There has to be a way.,,:

“I’m sorry, Twilight, I just don’t know. I think that if her mark is going to come back, it’s going to be up to Fluttershy. She’s going to need all of you to get through this. In the meantime, I can at least tell all of you how I think this occurred.”

“Fluttershy’s prolonged contact with the stone has caused her to be exposed to a large amount of its magic. Because Entropy is the opposite of Order, it must have been making her ill, which would account for her appearance when she came here to Canterlot. As for what you witnessed in the conference hall, we first believed that she had somehow managed to tap into the stone’s power, and the strain of using it was simply too much for her. After careful review, however, it seems as though it was not this simple, and that there was another power at work here. I have talked at length with Luna and my father, and we have agreed that the most likely course of events involves Fluttershy coming into contact with the being you heard mentioned as Acheron.”

“Fluttershy said he was...her friend.”

“Yes...Unfortunately, we believe that this was a delusion placed upon Fluttershy in an effort to manipulate her.”

“Manipulate her? Into doing what?”

Whut ‘re you talkin’ ‘bout?”

“If you recall what I told you in the conference hall, I mentioned a being who had started a war a very long time ago using condensed forms of magic. This being was a dragon named Acheron. He was a prince among his kind, and the only successor to the throne. He and my father were once close friends and spent many nights studying magic, until Acheron’s obsession with his research began to drive them apart. Needless to say, their connection was severed completely when he murdered the king of the dragons and attacked . I...also told you that after the war, Acheron’s power had been sealed away within the Stone that Fluttershy found. However, I owe all of you an apology, as I...I’m afraid that I was not entirely truthful.”

“*Excuse me?!* ” Rainbow whipped about, her teeth flashing. “Are you telling me that you *lied* to us?!”

“I’m sorry, Rainbow, but yes, and I made an awful mistake in doing so. If you’ll just listen...”

Rainbow couldn’t control herself any longer - her anger exploded.

“YOU FEATHERBRAIN! WHAT THE HAY WERE YOU THINKING?!”

“I assure you, I was thinking in your best interest when I made the choice to withhold information from you, at least temporarily. You see-”

“HOW COULD YOU?! THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!! IF YOU HAD TOLD US EVERYTHING, WE...WE COULD’VE-” Rainbow was too angry to speak. Her mouth hung open, twitching absurdly as it tried to muster a curse foul enough to express the despair she felt for not being able to help Fluttershy, for not even knowing she had needed help so badly until it was too late. It wasn’t Celestia’s fault - she knew that - but she simply couldn’t bear the thought that it may be her own. She flung herself at Celestia, swinging wildly. Luna leaped forward, but couldn’t manage to react quickly enough to stop her.

“Rainbow, n-!”

With a dull thud, Rainbow's hoof connected with Celestia's chest. The princess did not flinch even as the air was struck from her lungs, but stared solidly down at the whimpering pegasus. The others could only look on in shock.

"Did that help to calm you?" Celestia gently placed a hoof over Rainbow's, lowering it to the ground.

Slowly, Rainbow fell to her knees, her strength leaving her as she submitted to the fresh flow of tears.

Celestia's expression remained calm, though it took some effort to keep her voice even.

"I am truly, deeply sorry for what has happened to your friends, and I hope you can forgive me some day, but I assure you I was only acting out of necessity. If you will listen, I will explain everything as best I can."

"Princess? I...I-Is it true?" Twilight stared at Celestia - the pony she had studied and grown under for so many years. Could the princess really have *lied* to her?"

"Twilight, listen to me. If anyone is to blame for what has happened to Fluttershy...it is I. I'm sorry, Twilight - I should have known I could trust you and your friends, and maybe if I had, I could have prevented all of this from happening."

Slowly, Celestia kneeled, turning to face her student. She bowed her head, and spoke in a slow, unsteady rhythm, staring at the floor. Luna struggled to maintain her composure as she watched her sister prostrate herself.

"I'm sorry, Twilight. I'm sorry for disappointing you, my most faithful student, for failing to protect your friend. All of you - I only wish I could turn back time to undo my mistakes. If you hate me, then know that I will gladly bear any fate you would will upon me, if you will only listen to what I have to say. I may never be able to earn your forgiveness, but perhaps I can at least correct my mistake before anypony else is hurt. Will you hear me?"

Celestia gazed up at her most prized pupil with empty eyes. She had never wanted to hurt any of them, least of all Twilight. Even if they did forgive her, she would never forgive herself, not after...

Luna couldn't stand it any longer. "Please, Twilight, don't-

"Luna! This is *their* decision. I made a mistake, and I must be held accountable for my ac-."

Luna ignored her.

"Please Twilight, don't be angry with her! Whether you believe me or not, I know how you must be feeling right now. All of you - I promise, Celestia had a good reason to do what she did. So please, please at least listen to what she has to say."

"...We'll listen. Celestia, please tell us what you wanted to say." Twilight's tone was thin and clipped. Though she did not appear angry, Celestia couldn't quite make sense of her expression.

"But-

"Getting angry won't help Fluttershy. Right now, we have to do everything we can to help her to recover."

For a few moments, Twilight and Celestia simply stared at each other. In silence, the two agreed that they would need to speak to the other in private when all of this was over. Twilight swallowed her emotions, trying to make herself believe that Celestia would never have lied to them without a good reason.

"Thank you, Twilight...I'll begin." Celestia rose to her feet. "There is much to discuss, though there is one fact at the heart of it all - the Elements of Harmony are not what you think they are."

"What are you talking about?"

"For you to fully understand, I first need to tell you how the power of the Elements came into being. All of this begins with the forging of the Entropy Stone. Contrary to what I implied before, the Stone that Fluttershy found was not the first of its kind. That Stone was actually forged after the Dominion War."

“Dominion...War? Didn't Fluttershy mention something like that?”

“She mentioned the Element of Dominion, for which the war was named, although this name was given only by those few who knew of the Element's existence. Namely, myself, Luna, and my parents. That is why I was so shocked to hear Fluttershy speak of it.”

“What is it? I've never heard anything about it.”

“I should hope not, Twilight. I'm sorry, but I must insist that what I'm about to tell all of you must not leave this room. The Element of Dominion, thank heavens, is still only a legend - a theory developed by Acheron that was to be the crowning achievement in his research on the nature of magic. Acheron believed that if he could condense and combine the five separate forms of magic, he would create a single, ultimate source of power - power over all magic in existence. He very nearly completed that research, but my father was able to stop him after he had assembled only three condensed samples. It is true that when Acheron was defeated, his power was sealed within the Stone of Entropy, but he was sealed in the original Stone, not the one that Fluttershy found.”

“Wait...there are *two* Entropy Stones?”

“Yes and no. I'm afraid this will take some time to tell, and I know this may be a bit confusing, but it will be easiest if you could keep your questions to a minimum until the end. A second Entropy Stone was forged years after the war. The original stone was drained of its power in a cataclysmic event that ended the war and ultimately made Equestria into the land it is today. This same event gave birth to the Elements of Harmony. Like the war itself, no public record exists of this event, and the only ones to have known of it until this point have been the members of the royal family and our most trusted associates. Among ourselves, we refer to this event as “The Shattering.” Now, you may remember that I told you that the magic known as Order flows naturally throughout all of pony kind. However, I never told you how or why this was. Long, long ago, ponies were very different, as was the land of Equestria. No ponies had cutie marks, nor horns, nor wings, nor any magic of any kind - magic, in all its forms, was almost a completely external force. I know that this may be hard to believe, but even the sun and moon, in those days, were not bound by magic as they are now, but spun through the sky of their own accord. The Shattering

changed everything. It was, in a way, exactly what Acheron had been trying to accomplish in fusing the five magics, though the result was absolutely opposite. That is to say, during The Shattering, condensed forms of all five types of magic were brought together, but rather than combining, they reacted explosively, scattering their power throughout Equestria. The three magics that Acheron had managed to condense were Entropy, Life, and Unity. To counteract this and ultimately win the war, my father used the knowledge he had gained from his time studying with Acheron to forge stones of Order and Willpower. Together, according to Acheron's theory, the magics of Life, Unity, Willpower, Order, and Entropy could all be balanced in fusion to form a sixth all-powerful Element.

Twilight's eyes shot wide with epiphany, but she held her tongue. Suddenly, she felt very afraid that she knew exactly what type of "fusion" the Princess was referring to.

With this newfound power, my father, as well as my mother and myself, were able to storm the dragons' stronghold in the Emerald Keep and finally confront Acheron. Acheron had already fused, somewhat clumsily, his three stones in a premature attempt at creating Dominion, but its power was incomplete. My father battled with Acheron, and in a last resort, the two used the magic in the stones to end the other's life. However, as I said, the forces therein reacted unexpectedly and destroyed both Acheron and my father, Chronus. What I witnessed on that day, though it was well over a thousand years ago, I still remember clearly, nor will I ever forget it. The bodies of Acheron and my father vaporized instantly in a blinding flash of light, and the same light consumed my mother and myself. That light contained the full strength of the five species of magic, and as it washed over Equestria it changed everything it touched. My mother and I were most visibly affected, most likely because of our proximity. It was then that I became as you see me today." To emphasize the point, Celestia rose to her full height, flexing her wings.

"You...you mean you weren't...you didn't always...?"

"No Twilight. I was not born as an alicorn as my sister was. In my youth, I had no wings, no horn, no cutie mark, no magic of any kind. During the war, I was only able to control magic to a limited extent as my father had instructed me, but even that required a tremendous effort. When the light hit us, we...changed. On that day, all ponies were changed by the blessing

of the magic of Order. The reason for this was most likely that my mother, at the time of the collision, was wearing the Stone of Order. We believe that this stone resonated with her body, as a pony, bathing all of pony kind in its magic. On that fateful day, millions of ponies suddenly developed wings and became Pegasi. Others grew horns that allowed them to focus their new power, becoming Unicorns. Still others were blessed with great strength and wisdom, becoming the Earth ponies. And yet, all of the different kinds of ponies, except of course those who were very young, now bore a mysterious mark upon their flank - the marks you now know as cutie marks. In a way, the magic of Order reflected itself in the way it blessed all ponies - to this day, this same magic still shines within us, shaping who and what we are throughout our lives. It is by virtue of that blessing that we are able to control our environment. The other forms of magic were scattered, as well, all of the power draining out of the five Stones. As a result, the natural balance of magic that flowed throughout the world was thrown into chaos. The sun and moon suddenly ceased in their orbit, many creatures all over Equestria became twisted and changed, entire ecosystems dissolved overnight to be replaced by wild, strange new growth, clouds stopped moving, the rain and snow refused to fall in some places while it never ceased in others. The very shape of the earth was reshaped by the forces that spilled across our land. For a brief, if very dark time, all of us struggled to make sense of this new world, and very many lives were lost, not just among pony kind, but among all of the species that populate our world. Fortunately, my mother, Aurora, discovered that she could, with her new abilities, use the magic that now flowed within her to move the sun and moon across the sky. From that day forward, as all the inhabitants of Equestria realized that their universal needs far outweighed the differences they had erected during the war, and peace began its reign, though it was a bit unsteady at first. Over time, politics settled as dictated by sheer necessity, and all came to recognize Queen Aurora as their ruler. In return, My mother vowed to devote herself to the well-being of all the inhabitants of our fair land, dragons included, despite the pains caused by the war. Her rule established, she destroyed all traces of the magical research that had led to the creation of the Stones on both sides. The five drained Stones that had been left over from The Shattering were kept deep within the castle walls - we dared not destroy them for fear of releasing Acheron's power. For many years, Equestria rebuilt itself under a single banner and in the name of peace. It was during this time that the second Entropy Stone was forged in secret."



“I thought you said the research was destroyed?”

“And it was, but this did not stop those who already knew the procedure from repeating it. There was a secret cult that had studied under Acheron during the time of his rule, believing in the superiority of dragons over all other races. They resented my mother’s inheritance of the crown, not to mention such powerful magic, and so they conspired against her. With their combined knowledge, they were somehow able to forge a new Entropy Stone, and used it to attack during one of the peace talks with the representatives of the dragons. Their goal was to break the seal on the Stone, thus releasing Acheron’s soul and returning him to his “rightful” place on the throne. My mother and I attempted to fight them, but even with our new abilities, we could not hold them off for long. The power of the new Stone was simply too much for us. My mother...died on that day in trying to protect me. I ran to the deepest part of the castle to destroy the Stones before the fiends could get to them. I arrived just ahead of them, but before I could accomplish my task, they released the magic in their Entropy Stone, breaking the seal and allowing Acheron’s soul to escape. However, something strange happened - the five Stones began to glow. I felt their power flowing into me, and I suddenly found myself in possession of a sixth stone unlike any of the five before it. The name of its power resonated within my mind - it called itself “Harmony.” With it, I destroyed the vessel they had prepared for Acheron’s soul and vanquished my attackers. After they had been disposed of, Acheron’s soul was re-sealed deep within the earth, as was the stone. This, in brief, is the entirety of the sequence of events that has led to the situation we now face today.”

Celestia took a moment to breathe, recovering herself after her rather lengthy speech. Luna simply stared at her sister. Twilight and the others were not the only ones who had been told something new and confusing, and it was making Luna feel a bizarre mixture of anger and awe. She tried her best not to allow her expression to betray her feelings, mentally adding to the list of things she would need to discuss with her sister.

Almost immediately, the air exploded with the voices of Fluttershy’s friends, all trying desperately to have their questions answered first. Only Twilight remained silent.

*"Please, everypony, be quiet!"* her voice dropped to a whisper. I know we all have things we want to ask, but lets do this one at a time. Besides, we don't want to wake-

"Pin...Pinki..."

In perfect unison, all eyes focused on Fluttershy. She began tossing about weakly, reaching to and fro with her hooves as though looking for something.

"Pinkie...where..."

Rainbow Dash silenced her by gently grasping one of her reaching hooves. Without speaking, she placed Fluttershy's hoof over her own heart. The steady rhythm of Rainbow's heartbeat seemed to soothe Fluttershy, and she ceased her fitful writhing. Instead, she turned to face Rainbow, sobbing weakly. She muttered the same words over and over again in her sleep, but no one could quite make out what it was she was saying. It was Rainbow who spoke first.

"What does any of this have to do with Fluttershy?" She did not take her eyes from Fluttershy's face as she spoke.

"As I said, we believe that Acheron had returned, and was trying to manipulate Fluttershy. His goal was almost certainly to find a way to forge the Dominion Stone, or otherwise restore himself to power."

"But what would he have gained from her? What did she ever do to deserve this?"

Luna gazed pitifully at Fluttershy. "It seems that Fluttershy simply had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. As Twilight said, Fluttershy referred to Acheron as her friend. My father has assured me that Acheron would never have allowed Fluttershy to view him as an equal if he did not urgently need her for some purpose. We believe he needed her to sustain him, just as a parasite requires a host body to live. That may explain why her burns disappeared - if Acheron needed her to be healthy, he may have been able to heal her. It is likely he took advantage of her kindness to earn her trust."

“So then, what happened in the conference hall...”

“Was likely the result of Acheron’s influence. Acheron would have needed to gain her trust for her to refer to him as a friend, so he probably would have fed her some warped form of the story I just told you. If you recall, Fluttershy stated quite clearly that Chronus was the one who “stole” the Element of Dominion. I understand if you cannot forgive me, but I hope now that you can at least comprehend why I responded as I did to Fluttershy’s inexplicable knowledge of the Element, not to mention my father’s name.”

“Speakin’ of that story of yers, there’s one thing I can’t make sense of.”

“*One* thing?” Rarity arced an eyebrow.

“Whut’s this about you using the power of Harmony? I thought you said the Elements were created during that “Shatterin” thing”

“The Elements of Harmony as you know them, yes. Allow me to clarify. The five Stones, that is, the leftovers from the Dominion War, were changed by The Shattering, just as the rest of the world was. They lost all of their former power, and instead became vessels for magnifying the magic within a living being. When the five are assembled and a sixth ingredient - the will of a living being - is added, they focus that being’s magic, condensing it into a solid form based on the individual’s intent.”

“I was wondering about that. When you spoke of the five magics being fused to form a sixth, all I could think of was what I had read about the Elements of Harmony before...” Twilight stopped, looking at Luna apologetically for what she had been about to say. Luna was unfazed.

“The Nightmare Moon incident, yes? Actually, you’re exactly right.” Luna smiled at Twilight. She could see why her sister praised her so.

“So what did you mean when you said the Elements of Harmony weren’t what we thought they were? Everything you’ve said about the Stones seems to match their description.”

“In truth, there is only one Element of Harmony - the very one you see my sister wearing right now.”

Luna pointed at Celestia's chest, at the resting place of the magnificent golden necklace the princess was always wearing. Celestia nodded.

"Luna is correct. This necklace is actually the one and only Element of Harmony, and I have worn it ever since the day Acheron was sealed for the second time. You see, when I faced Acheron's imminent revival, all I could think of was my mother's desire to build an Equestria in which all peoples could live in peace. The Stones must have responded to my will, giving me the power to overcome the obstacle before me."

Twilight's mind sagged under the tremendous implications of what she had just heard - Implications she could barely even grasp at.

"Wh...what?" She sputtered dumbly.

"The truth is, Twilight, the Elements that you and your friends bear are not actually the Elements of Harmony. The "Elements of Harmony" was simply a name I had given to the Stones as a symbol of the power I used to rule Equestria from that day forth. It was a name that gave meaning to the sacrifices of the past, as well as a hope for the future. Ever since that day, all of Equestria has thrived under the banner of Harmony - under the ideal of peace and equality for all of its inhabitants. You said it yourself, didn't you? When you saved my sister from the power of Nightmare Moon, you said that you had found "a different kind of spark."

Slowly, a tiny crack opened in the floodgate of Twilight's mind. A few small trickles of information poured through, pooling together, but she could only see a fuzzy, incomplete picture reflected in it. She didn't have enough to fully understand what Celestia meant.

"As I said, the Stones act as a magical lens. That is, they focus any magical power in their vicinity into a condensed form based upon the intent behind the holder of that magic. If you remember, when you first attempted to use the Elements, the spark backfired, and you were unable to summon the sixth. This occurred because, at the time, you did not have a specific end result in mind. You were trying to create the sixth Element, but you did not yet know what it was for you. It was only after your friends arrived that-

"

“That the spark ignited!” The floodgate burst open, and in a dizzying instant, Twilight suddenly understood what the Princess had been trying to tell her. Her hoof jumped to her chin as her eyes darted rapidly around the room in an absent flurry, rapidly fitting all of the pieces together.

“Will somepony tell the rest of us what in the hay yer talkin’ ‘bout?”

“Why don’t you explain it, Twilight? Perhaps it will be easier to understand coming from you.”

“What? Oh, certainly. I...I think what the Princesses are saying is that the Stones responded to - this might sound a bit corny - the strength of our friendship. It’s just like what I told all of you when you came up the stairs after me. All of you were my friends, and each of you carried an amazing gift that made our friendship so strong. I think...I think that the Stones must have focused that power into the Element of Magic!

“You’re mostly right.” Luna nodded in Twilight’s direction. “Actually, since you each believed so strongly in what Twilight had told you, the Stones responded not only to you as a group, but as individuals. That’s why each of you were granted with an Elemental gemstone representing your gift, or rather, the intent you had in mind when you used the power of the Stones.”

“You mean you knew about the nature of the Stones, even when-”

Luna paused, averting her eyes. “Yes...you see, I think I was the reason Celestia lied to all of you.”

Celestia rounded on her sister in alarm. “Luna, what do you think-”

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

Celestia stared open-mouthed at her younger sister. Her lack of denial proved that what Luna had said was correct.

“When I was younger, Celestia hadn’t told me about the Stones and what they could do. When I...when I started down the path that led me to become Nightmare Moon, I accidentally found the Stones, and they reacted to my jealousy. The power I received - the Element of Vengeance, as it called itself, transformed me, and I ended up doing a lot of very bad things

and hurting the ponies I love. Maybe it doesn't make a difference to you, but Celestia just didn't want you to know about the true power of the Stones so you wouldn't be tempted. She didn't want you to bear the burden of that kind of information."

"Luna, I appreciate that you're trying to vouch for me, but that's enough. It is true that I did not want Twilight and her friends to be tempted by the Stones' power as you were so long ago, but in failing to trust them with that information, I allowed them to be unwittingly targeted by Acheron. The fact that I was unable to prevent *you* from being tempted is yet another testament to my failure."

"*At any rate,...*" Luna continued, her eyes fixed on Celestia. "...It was my sister's wisdom in judging that the power of friendship would set me free that helped you to save me. For that, I am eternally grateful not only to her, but to all of you as well."

Twilight frowned. She was staring to understand where Celestia was coming from, but she still felt hurt that she would have mistrusted her.

Rarity slumped to the floor, momentarily abandoning her meticulously maintained posture out of sheer bewilderment.. "I still don't understand. So the Elements of Harmony...aren't real? Then how did we know their names? The names of each Element, minus the sixth, were in Twilight's book!"

"That depends on your definition of 'real' After I discovered the power of Harmony through my contact with the Stones, I decided that it would provide an ideal model for all of our citizens to adhere to. To make this model easier to understand, I built it upon five cardinal tenets - namely, Honesty, Kindness, Generosity, Laughter, and Loyalty. The idea was that if all of us, regardless of species, worked together to follow these five examples, we would create Harmony among all the peoples of Equestria. The true nature of the Stones was passed down over time in the legend of the sixth, unknown Element. That legend is the one you encountered in the book."

"So, in a rather roundabout way, it could be said that you truly do represent the Elements of Harmony, just not in the way you first thought."

“Alright, I reckon I understand that much, but...”

“What about Chronus? Is he a ghost?”

Applejack nearly hit the ceiling at the sound of Pinkie’s voice. All of the ponies whipped about to face her.

“Where...is that popcorn?”

“Well, *yeah* - you can’t listen to a good story without a yummy snack! I asked the nurse to bring it in just a minute ago - you guys really should pay more attention.”

“Have you been listening this whole time?”

“Ever since Rainbow punched you.”

Rainbow flinched, turning away from the princess.

“Hm. Its just as well, I suppose. Now, as for your question, my father cannot rightfully be called a ghost, as he cannot rightfully be called *dead*.”

“I thought you said he was killed in The Shattering?”

“His body was destroyed, yes, but the same forces that destroyed his body also preserved his soul in a different state of existence. Throughout the years of my mother’s rule, he was able to offer valuable council, though he could not physically intervene. When Acheron’s soul was released, he appeared before me in the same form as my father. I could not destroy him even with the Element of Harmony - that is how I knew it would not affect him today. My father realized that the only way to resolve the problem was to use what power he could muster to seal himself away with Acheron and the Stone. I was first alerted of the stone’s return when my father came to me two days ago, on the eve of the Summer Sun Celebration.”

“That’s when you sent your letter.”

“Precisely. I only wish I could have reacted quickly enough to save Fluttershy from getting involved in all of this...”

“So Acheron’s goal must have been to control the Stones.”

“Whaddaya mean, Twi?”

“I’m betting that Acheron wanted to use the Stones to help him forge the Element of Dominion. Think about it - why else would he need to turn Fluttershy against Celestia’s family? If he were able to focus his desire for power with the Stones.,,”

“Thankfully, it’s not that simple.”

“Princess?”

“Dominion, by its nature, would require the fusion of the five species of magic. Therefore, he would need to assemble a set of five forces powerful enough to represent each individual magical species. Only then would he be able to summon an adequate “spark” to give form to the Element of Dominion. Otherwise, his power could simply be cancelled out with the proper, opposing variety of magic in the same way that Nightmare Moon was vanquished. But yes, he would undoubtedly seek the Stones to aid in his endeavor.”

“Weren’t those Stones destroyed, though?”

“Again, it’s not that simple. After I had discovered the magnifying power of the Stones, I attempted to destroy them in many different ways so that nopony would ever be tempted by such a power again. However, every time the Stones were shattered, they would shortly reconstitute themselves. I do not know what force sustains them, but I assure you the Stones can never be destroyed completely, at least not by any means of which I am aware.”

“That’s right, I remember now...the Stones weren’t destroyed, they turned into those necklaces.”

“Exactly. In all likelihood, despite their change in shape caused by your spark, they may still retain their focusing capabilities.”

“My sister did not want to tell any of you about the true nature of the Stones until now, as she believed it would have caused you undue stress.



However, in light of the current situation, we felt it best to tell you the truth so that you understood what it was that Acheron was trying to accomplish.”

“So he would have eventually targeted us?”

“It’s possible. I had thought you would be safe as long as the Stones were locked within my castle, but I’m not willing to take any chances after what we’ve witnessed tonight. I’m sorry I never told any of you about this until now.”

“He’s gone though, right? We killed Acheron when we cast that spell to help Fluttershy, didn’t we?”

Celestia frowned. “...I cannot say for sure.”

“What?”

“If what I have told you concerning Fluttershy’s role in all of this is true, then it may be possible that Acheron was able to bind his consciousness, or at least a portion of it, to another, as well. It is a remote possibility, but one we cannot afford to overlook. I’m sorry, my little ponies, but none of us can afford to relax just yet.”

“How can you say that? What about Fluttershy?! Does *she* have time to relax?!”

Luna shot a warning look at Rainbow. “She only means that we don’t want what happened to Fluttershy to happen to somepony else.” Her expression softened. “We want Fluttershy to get better just as much as you do.”

“Twi...Twili...” Fluttershy began to squirm, tossing back and forth.

“Appleja...wh...”

“Looks like she’s waking up. Applejack, would you please fetch Dr. Dorian?”

“Yes, Princess.” Applejack hurried toward the door but stopped just before she could reach it. Her heart rocketed into her throat when she heard the first scream.

Fluttershy shot upright, toppling the IV apparatus. She whimpered incoherently, staring wide-eyed at the ponies surround her bed. The scream started as a weak, bubbling gurgle in her throat, but soon ripped through the room as a shriek of utmost terror. She flailed wildly, swatting at anyone who tried to get close. Her friends tried desperately to comfort her, but in her panicked state she was deaf to their voices, struggling ever more vigorously.

“Applejack, *now!* We’ll hold her steady!”

Applejack bolted out of the room as Twilight and the others held Fluttershy’s limbs against the bed, sustaining several painful bruises as they did so. Her limbs rendered useless, Fluttershy whipped her head back and forth, screaming louder still.

“*Please*, Fluttershy. We’re here to help you! Please try to calm down. It’s all gonna be alright, I promise!.” Fluttershy’s head suddenly whipped about to face Rainbow. Frantically, her eyes searched her friend’s face, but gave no evidence of recognition. Rainbow leaned closer, whispering in Fluttershy’s ear. Almost immediately, Fluttershy’s screams began to fade, until finally she was silent once more, gazing into Rainbow’s eyes.

“Ra...Rain...bow?”

“Yes, Fluttershy, it’s me. We’re all here for you, okay?”

“Rainbow...and Twilight...Rarity...” Fluttershy’s breathing began to slow. “...whe...where’s Applejack? And Pink-” Fluttershy’s eyes found her curly-maned friend in the bed across the room. Her breath caught in her throat, and her lip quivered. The dam burst. She sobbed uncontrollably, reaching forward to wrap Rainbow in a tearful embrace. With a loud bang, the door swung open to reveal Applejack and a very concerned-looking Dorian.

“What happened? Nurse! Get Miss Shy some water, now! Move aside please.”

All but Rainbow stepped away from the bed, as she was unable to leave Fluttershy’s arms. The doctor placed one hoof against Fluttershy’s forehead.

“She’s cold. Help me get these blankets around her.” Immediately, the friends obeyed, then stepped back a respectful distance to allow Dorian and the nurse ponies to attend to Fluttershy.

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Outside the Mendwell Memorial Hospital, night had fallen. One by one, the lights in Canterlot turned on as the city breathed anew with its bustling night life. High above, beyond the reach of the lights and the noise of the citygoers, a lone, slate-grey unicorn walked leisurely up the hill toward the hospital gates. He stopped as he pushed it open, gazing up at the large, simply decorated sign on the front of the building.

“What a pain...Although, I suppose it could have gone much less smoothly, all things considered. Who knows?...this could be fun.”

As he muttered softly to himself, his hoof absently toyed with a cold, somewhat bulky object in his jacket pocket.

“Besides, I’d hate to keep her waiting. She must be *dying* to see Angel again.”

He smiled, patting the front of his jacket with grim satisfaction. Slowly, easily, he made his way to the door with a cheerful spring in his step.

# Chapter 7

## Secrets and Lies

In total darkness, the co-ruler of Equestria sat staring at the extravagant ceiling of her bedroom. For the millionth time, she sighed, searching about in vain for some source of inspiration to ready herself for what she would soon face. Her search yielded the same result as it always did - empty silence. At least this time she was...alone...

*Creak*

“Who’s there?”

“Ah! Forgive me, princess - I did not intend to alarm you.”

“Never mind that. What is it?”

“I was told by his majesty that your presence is requested immediately in the gardens. He is...displeased that you have delayed this long.”

“I see. And does *his majesty* wish that I meet him myself or that I have an *escort*?”

“I...your highness?”

“Tell him I will be there shortly and that I do not require *fetching*. And next time I would appreciate it if you had the decency to knock before entering my quarters - or did *his majesty* tell you it was acceptable to do otherwise?”

“P-p-princess...I...f-forgive me...” The guard could do little more than stutter, bowing his head in shame.

Celestia glared at the pony in her doorway for a moment before finally relaxing. She sighed once more, letting go of her anger at his intrusion.

"I'm sorry, Mason, I'm the one who should ask for forgiveness. Please, I didn't mean to yell at you - I'm just a bit tired. You were just doing your job, and I appreciate that. I'll go to my father now."

"A-as you wish, milady."

The door closed with a soft thud, bathing Celestia in darkness once more. She was angry that she had allowed herself to react that way to Mason, but she was especially angry at her father's presumptuousness. Ever since he had returned, he had been stepping on her hooves at every turn, and it was beginning to become quite bothersome. She had been overjoyed to see him again, but this was *her* kingdom, and she didn't need him second-guessing everything she did - or even worse, making her subjects second-guess-her by undermining her authority.

Celestia opened the glass doors to her balcony, gazing apprehensively at the gardens below. There, pacing in a slow circle, she could see the swirling mane of her father. With a final, steeling breath, she leapt from the balcony to soar down among the trees.

"You're late."

"A delicate situation such as this requires careful handling. I had to be sure they were satisfied with what I told them."

"Their *satisfaction* will be worth little if they remain in danger for much longer. But that doesn't matter now - I wanted to talk with you about our contingency plan."

"Is that all?"

Chronus cocked a transparent eyebrow "Did you have something more *important* in mind?"

"...What about it?"

"As you know, the playing field has changed somewhat. I believe, therefore, a review is in order, just to make sure that if the worst should happen, we'll be ready for it."

Celestia remained silent, her features tightening. She was in no mood to talk about this particular subject at the moment.

“What did you learn from Fluttershy?”

“You were right. Fluttershy couldn’t tell us much, but she did confirm that Acheron was able to transfer his consciousness into hers through some unknown means.”

“I see. In that case, we may have to act sooner than we had anticipated.

“There’s more. She mentioned that he claimed he had also put a piece of himself within the Entropy Stone.”

“What?! That’s impossible...Are you sure?!”

“That is what she told me.”

Chronus stared at the ground. “But how? How would he have had the knowledge to do something like that? He must have known from the beginning...”

“I think its safe to assume that, yes. Is it possible to remove it?”

“...I believe so. I won’t know for sure until I have a chance to examine the Stone more closely. At least we discovered this *now*. If we hadn’t known before...”

Chronus shook his head, refocusing on the task at hand.

“I can deal with that later. In a worst case scenario, a substitute will have to be found. For now, we have no choice but to proceed as planned.. At any rate, we now know that he is probably still alive. Though his methods are different from what we expected, his goal remains unchanged. He will almost undoubtedly use the Elements to aid in his endeavor. Here is where we have the advantage - we have the Stones, as well as four of the necessary tokens, thanks to our friend, Miss Sparkle. The only piece that remains-

“I know my role - I know what I have to do...”

Something in Celestia's tone made Chronus uneasy.

"...but?"

"...but I'm not going through with it..."

Chronus whirled about, snorting angrily.

"What are you talking-"

"I said no, father. I'm not doing it - not like this."

"Have you gone mad?! What...what..." Chronus was so agitated he could barely speak. "You can't be serious. This is the only way, and you know it. What in the name of Equestria has made you think you can change that?!"

"This isn't the only way, it *can't* be."

"I distinctly remember you telling me two days ago that you were fully prepared to do your duty."

"And I *am*. Only now, I actually know what my duty is."

"Know what your duty...? You can't afford to be this naïve, Celestia - have you forgotten how many lives are hanging in the balance at this very moment? Can you even imagine what it would mean if-"

"STOP! Just stop talking for once!"

"I...how dare y-"

"How dare *you*?! Did you honestly think I hadn't thought this through? That I had forgotten about Luna?! About Everypony?! How dare you stand there, acting all high and mighty, and make this sound like some kind of war campaign?! You know what this could do to her. I *will not* risk losing Luna...not again."

"That's *exactly* what this is, isn't it? A war. We cannot afford to let everything fall apart because of a little emotional breakdown at the last-."

“DON’T YOU DARE! You have no right, *no right* to talk to me like you know what I’ve been through - what Luna’s been through.”

“Oh, I see. Is that what this is about? Are you upset because I couldn’t be there all of these years? In that case, *you have my apologies.*”

Celestia gaped at her father, tears beginning to form at the corners of her eyes.

“You...*idiot!* You don’t get it at all! This has nothing to do with you! This is my kingdom, and as its ruler, it is my *duty* to act in its best interest. I may have been ready and willing to do this once, when I thought it was necessary, but I’ve already allowed too many ponies to be hurt by your *plan*. Not anymore.”

“Then I assume you have an *alternative?*” Chronus’s eyes narrowed in anger.

“We’ll stop Acheron before it becomes necessary.”

“Ha! Are you so confident? And what if you should fail? Will you simply throw up your hooves and surrender?”

“Then I’ll find a new way. Dominion cannot be the only answer - nopony should have that much power.”

“Normally, I would agree with you, but we both know it’s inevitable. If Acheron fails, someone else will follow, and someone else will follow *them*. We need to put an end to this threat, and the only way to do that is to become its master before anyone else can.”

“And where will it stop? We already control the sun and the moon, and by proxy the very livelihoods of every living being in Equestria. Would you have us decide who is *allowed* to live in this world as well? We are not *Gods*, father.”

“Not yet we aren’t. Haven’t you realized it? Have your long years of rulership really been so kind to you? Ponies - no, all of the peoples of



Equestria will never be able to live in peace on hope alone. They need to be directed. They *need* to have an incentive.”

“And they *do* - or maybe you’ve been away for so long that you’ve forgotten what *peace* is like. Besides, We are not the only ones involved. Luna has every right to have a say in this.”

“And every reason not to know! What would you do? Hm?! Will you tell her everything, let her know everything is going to be alright, then what?! What if you fail to stop him?! Can you honestly put her through *that?!*”

Celestia opened wide to scream at her father but no sound came. Try as she might, she could muster no argument to counter her father’s words. She looked about in a heated bluster, searching for anything that might help her. In the end, all she could do was turned angrily away to avoid her father’s steely gaze.

For a few moments, all was silent. Finally, after what seemed like an impenetrable eternity, Chronus moved closer to Celestia, all traces of his former anger gone.

“Celestia, I-”

“Don’t. Just...don’t”

“...I think you may have a point.”

Celestia whipped about, glaring uncertainly at her father. She tried to pick out any sign of treachery in his features, but was only met with a concerned frown.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sorry, Celestia. I shouldn’t have shot you down like that. Of course I know you’ve been thinking extensively about this, and I should not have doubted your integrity as I did. I just think that ultimately, if all else fails, then we don’t really have a choice. Can you understand that?”

No response.

"If I could bear this burden in your place, I would gladly do so. You're right though - I have not taken the time to consider other possibilities that may be less impactful on Luna, not to mention everypony else, and for that I am truly sorry. If you'd like, we could talk about this later, after we've both had some time to think."

"...Yes...yes I think that's best." Celestia wasn't really sure if her father was telling the truth, but she would much rather be just about anywhere else right now.

Chronus sighed, tilting his head to look up at the tiny light issuing from one of the tower windows high above.

"How is she? She seemed a bit preoccupied during the meeting."

"As well as she can be. She's scared."

"She's not alone. She's lucky to have such a caring sister. I only wish I could have done more for her in my time."

Chronus raised a hoof to place it at the level of Celestia's shoulder. Though he could not touch her, she was aware of the gesture.

"Maybe now that I have the chance, I should do all that I can to help, yes? I'm sorry, Celestia. Can you forgive me?"

Celestia nodded silently, only half-turning to face him. As quietly as a breeze, Chronus moved toward the exit to the gardens. He stopped, turning to face Celestia one more time before taking his leave.

"And Celestia...thank you."

"For what?"

"For putting me in my place. You were right about another thing, as well - I'm not the king anymore, and I should respect your decisions in ruling Equestria. Thank you for putting things back in perspective for me. Good night, little one."

"...Good night, father."

Chronus left, and as he did so, the first chorus of nocturnal creatures began voicing their songs. They had all been frightened into silence by the recent shouting match, and it made Celestia realize how cold and lonely the gardens seemed without their sounds - sounds she had taken for granted for so long. The moon was full tonight, its gossamer brilliance casting an eerie air of nostalgia over the princess as she sat alone, kept company only by the persistent niggings of her conscience. The sky was so beautiful here, beyond the reach of the lights of Canterlot. All around her, the stars danced in an infinite sea, each a piece of an even greater beauty, swirling forever around the full moon like so many moths about a flame. Forgetting her troubles with her father, Celestia indulged herself, inhaling deeply. The night air always had a unique, particular scent to it - something she had noticed many years ago but still couldn't quite identify. This was her favorite time of each day - especially when the moon was full and bright. This moment, when time seemed to stand still, just for an instant, just long enough to forget about everything that happened during the day and lose yourself in the endless sky. It was her way of keeping things in perspective. It reminded her of her duty in ensuring the safety of all of her subjects, all of her little stars, but also of the fact that she was but a small force among countless others, all working together to form a single, glorious whole. She gazed at the moon, wondering briefly what it must be like to sit on its surface and look back upon the planet each day. How lonely it must be - how like this garden without all of its animals, all of its sounds. It may look so beautiful, so pristine, and yet, with no one to share it, it was little more than cold, unfeeling stone. Even the light it gave was not its own, but the reflection of another's warmth.

"Luna...if we can't stop him..." She looked up at Luna's tiny tower window, through which she could see her sister leaning outside with her eyes set on the same silver moon.

"Please, please forgive me..."

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Fluttershy lay with her face to the wall, absently prodding her pillow. She knew it was useless - no matter how much she fluffed it, she wasn't going to get any sleep. She had only told the others that she wanted to get

some rest so she could have some time alone to think, but now that she had it, she couldn't bring herself to do much of that, either. It kept hitting her, but it never really seemed real - she felt as though she had just awakened from an awful nightmare, but each time she thought of it, her stomach plummeted with the sickening weight of the scenes from the conference hall, crushing down upon her with tremendous force. Her thoughts danced in a jittery haze, trying to flee from anything that may indicate that this wasn't all some horrible dream, yet grasping desperately at the comfort of her friends, the same friends she had almost...She thought also of Twilight and the princess. When she had calmed down, Twilight explained everything, and though she hadn't actually said it, she could tell Twilight was upset. Everyone she cared about had been hurt, and she couldn't help but feel that the blame fell primarily on her. And Angel...oh Angel...

"...psst..."

Fluttershy froze, her eyes turning in vain to locate the source of the sound behind her.

"...psst, Applejack, you asleep?..."

"...ngh...hk...wha?"

"I said, are you asleep?"

She recognized Rainbow's voice, but did not turn to face her friends, choosing instead to pretend she was asleep. She heard a mighty yawn from behind her, imagining Applejack rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"...Well, consarn it, Ah ain't no more. Whatcha wake me fer?"

"I...sorry, its just..."

A long pause.

"Look, you know what? Never mind - go back to sleep."

Applejack sighed "No ya don't - I know that look. Whut's on yer mind?"

Silence.

"Come on now, Ah ain't gonna be able to sleep anyhow if'n Ah know somethin's botherin' you. Talk to me."

Nothing.

"Hay...She's gonna be alright - they both are. It might come back all on its own, remember? Din't the princess say-"

"The *princess* says a lot of things."

"...Rainbow, Ahm angry too - the princess never shoulda lied to us like that, but getting all hot under the saddle ain't gonna help nopony."

"I *know* that! I just...I can't-"

The two fell silent once more. Fluttershy could just barely make out a faint sniffing sound.

"Oh boy...c'mere, sugarcube. There now, it's gonna be alright."

"S-shut up...I'm not crying."

"Course not. I din't see nothin' at all."

Fluttershy squirmed inwardly. Suddenly she felt vaguely angry, though she wasn't sure who or what caused it. She'd only ever seen Rainbow cry once before, a very long time ago.

"...Thanks, Applejack."

"Ain't no trouble, sugarcube. Now whah don't you tell me whut's really on yer mind?"

"I...It's my fault."

"No whut kinda hooey izzat? This ain't nopony's fault, it jus' happened. All we can do is try to help 'er get better."

“No, you don’t get it. I knew Fluttershy longer than anypony. She’s been my best friend since as long as I can remember. I shoulda known something was wrong...I shoulda seen it coming.”

“Dash, yer talkin nonsense. You couldn’ta seen something like this if you was made o’ nuthin but eyes - none of us could have. This is way out of our depth - I still can’t quite wrap my head around all of it. This *ain’t* yer fault.”

“Even if that were true, I could’ve at least tried to stop her. Do you have any idea what this is gonna *do* to her? She cried for two hours once when she accidentally stepped on a spider - a *spider*. And I...I just stood there while she lost it...”

“If we had gotten close, it only woulda made things worse - you saw what happened to Pinkie. How do you think she would feel if she had hurt you, too?”

“That’s not the point! I...I *always* do this. Every time I try to be there for her, I just screw it up. I want to be a good friend, but, but...I make fun of her, I complain about her sensitivity, I...every time, I think I’m helping her, making her stronger, but I’m just making everything worse.”

“Don’t you say that, Rainbow, don’t you dare. Yer one of the best friends Ah’ve ever known, and Ah’ll eat Granny’s walker if Fluttershy don’t feel the same way. Don’t you remember back in the Everfree Forest, when we fought against Nightmare Moon’s traps? You had the chance to leave with everything you ever wanted and more, but you didn’t hesitate to choose your friends over all of that. If that ain’t bein’ a good friend, then Ah don’t know what is.”

Silence.

“And what about that race back in Cloudsdale? When those colts were making fun of Fluttershy, you were the only pony brave enough to step in and defend her. It’s cuz o’ you she earned her cutie mark”

“And for what? She doesn’t even *have* her cutie mark anymore! It’s my job as her friend to protect her, and I couldn’t do anything!”

“*SHH!*” Applejack hissed. “You hear that?”

Fluttershy clasped both hooves firmly over her mouth. Her cutie mark? What did they mean?! Her eyes darted down to her flank, but it was obscured by a large rectangular bandage. She desperately wanted to yank the bandage away, but remained quiet, trying to somehow feel the presence of the butterflies with her mind.

After a few moments, Applejack spoke again, her voice just below a whisper.

“We can still fix this Rainbow. Ah can’t explain it, but Ah’m *shore* that her mark will come back soon as long as we all do our level best to be there for ‘er from now on. You especially - you were the only one who was able to calm ‘er down. That’s how ah know she loves you, Rainbow.”

No response.

“Speakin of...if ya don’t mind me askin’, whut was it you said to Fluttershy to calm ‘er down?”

If Fluttershy could have seen her friends, she would have noticed Rainbow’s blush.

“...It’s stupid. You’d laugh.”

“Stupid or not, it shore meant a lot to ‘er. If it ain’t too much to ask, Ah’d like to know so Ah can do all Ah can to help ‘er. Ah won’t laugh - scout’s honor.”

“I...It’s some dumb little song she taught me a long time ago, back when we were both fillies. I dunno why, it just kinda popped into my head.”

“A song?”

“I’m not singing it again, if that’s what your’e after.”

“You don’t have to sing if you don’t want to, but Ah’d still like to hear about it.”

"I guess her mom taught it to her before she died. Fluttershy told me that it made her feel better whenever she was sad, and she thought it might-"

"Might what?"

"...She thought it might make me feel better after Hermes died."

"Hermes?"

"Yeah...he was my pet falcon. I used to fly with him all the time when I was little, but one day, I went a little too far from Cloudsdale and we got caught up in a storm. He...got hit with some lightning before I knew we were in danger."

"Oh my...Ah'm so sorry, Rainbow, Ah never...if anything ever happened to Winona, Ah don't know what Ah'd do..."

"Yeah, so...I was pretty upset. I mean, I...wasn't crying or anything...I just... Well, anyway, she taught me that song, and it helped me out a lot back then. I thought maybe it'd snap her out of it when she was freaking out."

Hermes...Fluttershy hadn't thought about that day for a very long time. It was just after her mother died, and she had been sitting alone outside the hospital in Cloudsdale when she saw a rainbow-maned filly bawling her eyes out on a nearby cloud. Rainbow had been holding a dead bird - she kept saying how she thought that maybe if she could have made it to the hospital in time...that was the day she and Rainbow had become friends.

"You know what I think?"

"...what?"

"Yer just a big ol' softie, ain't yeh?"

"Y-...You jerk!" A dull thud, followed by suppressed giggling. "You said you wouldn't make fun of me!"

"No, Ah said Ah wouldn't *laugh*. But seriously, Rainbow - Fluttershy's really lucky to have a friend like you. We all are. Ah mean that."



“Th...thanks, Applejack. Likewise. They’re really gonna be alright yeah?”

“Course they are“

“...Even so. I’m not gonna rest until I pummel that Acheron jerk into the ground. *No one* treats my friends like that and gets away with it. No one...and I’ll do the same to anyone who stands in my way.”

“Easy, Dash. I agree with you, but there’s no use getting’ all riled up when ya don’t got nuthin’ to swing at. Now hush up and git some sleep. We won’t be any use to our friends if we’re dead on our feet tomorrow.”

Rainbow...yet another friend who had been hurt. It was all Fluttershy could do to remain still. She forced herself to wait - she couldn’t let them know she was awake, couldn’t bear the thought of making them worry any more over her. Her cutie mark...she had to find out what Rainbow had meant. At long last, the sound of Applejack’s snoring filled the room, and Fluttershy felt it safe enough to risk a look over her shoulder. Sure enough, all of her friends were fast asleep in the spots they had chosen around her bed.

She moved as quickly as she could without making a sound. Tossing aside the blankets, she reached for the bandage on her flank. Why would they have put a bandage there? She didn’t remember sustaining any wounds in the conference hall, just the pain. With a mounting dread, she tried to take hold of the bandage, but couldn’t quite bend to get her teeth within reach. She would need to find some other way to remove it without the others noticing. Nothing around her but blankets...removing that bandage would mean leaving the bed. The IV tube - carefully, she removed the tape, wincing a bit as she extracted the needle. As gently as she could, she lowered herself to the floor and tiptoed to the door.

The hospital seemed enormous in the darkness. All of the hall lamps had been extinguished, the only light coming from a window across the hall and the distant, faint red glow of the exit sign above the fourth floor stairwell entrance. As the cold moonlight splashed across her face, she imagined the invisible eyes of some fearsome beast stalking her from the darkness. No time to be afraid - swallowing hard, she forced herself to walk down the hall, telling herself that the sounds she heard from the shadows were nothing but the echoes of her footsteps. Odd, - she thought that there were

supposed to be a pair of guards watching the room. Oh well - she was just thankful to have avoided a confrontation. For the time being, the only thing she was concerned about was getting that bandage off. There, on the counter! She could use that clipboard to pry it loose, now if only she had some light...just a few feet down the hall, a slice of moonlight illuminated the bottom half of a restroom sign. She made her way to the door, peeking inside.

Total blackness and also...a smell she couldn't quite identify. It wasn't an entirely unpleasant odor, but it was something she had not expected to find in a bathroom. Where was the switch? As she groped about on the wall, she stepped in something wet. Somepony must have left the water on, she thought, but she didn't hear any water running. Finally she found the switch. She was momentarily blinded as the neon fixtures flickered to life. As soon as her vision cleared, she leaned against the counter, digging under the bandage on her flank with the edge of the clipboard. With a triumphant tearing sound, the bandage loosed itself, falling to the floor.

She could never have prepared herself for what she saw. Where her cutie mark once was there was only cracked, reddened, furless flesh. The ugly, glistening patch throbbed dully now that it was exposed to the open air. In a frenzy, Fluttershy snatched up the clipboard, scratching frantically at the bandage on her other flank. She cut herself on its metal edge as she tore the second bandage away to reveal a mirror image of the wound on the opposite side. Nothing - there was nothing left. The clipboard clattered to the floor, the walls of the tiny restroom closing in around her. She wanted to scream but her body wouldn't let her. She couldn't breathe, couldn't feel her legs. She collapsed under the weight of the blistering numbness that engulfed her. A splash and something warm...something on the floor of the restroom. The strange smell was so strong now, mixed with the stinging scent of antiseptic cleaning fluid. Her shattered mind was overwhelmed with the strength of the smell, unable to process anything else but its strangely frightening pungency. Red. All around her, the floor was splattered and smeared with a sticky, crimson fluid. It was too much. As her consciousness gave way, the last thing she saw was the silhouette of a tall, lanky figure standing in the door of the restroom before she faded into oblivion.

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“Luna? Are you still awake?”

“...yes, I’m up. Come in.”

Celestia nudged open the door to Luna’s bedroom. Across the room, Luna’s back was turned as she gazed outside from her balcony. Even without seeing her face, Celestia could sense her younger sister’s apprehension.

“May I join you?”

Without a word, Luna shifted to the side to allow her sister to sit next to her. For several moments, the two sat in tense silence, staring at the stars.

“...Are you angry with me?”

“Why didn’t you tell me about how mom died?”

Celestia had known this was coming. She answered honestly.

“...It’s not something I like to talk about.”

Luna was sure that it wasn’t that simple, but at present, she didn’t feel the need to press the issue. Perhaps it was just that Celestia was feeling guilty about what had happened at the hospital, but Luna thought she seemed a bit...off, even considering how strangely she’d been acting lately. Besides, there was something else she wanted to talk about first.

“...I’m not mad, sis - sorry, I’m just...surprised, that’s all. How are you holding up?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about it until now.” Celestia sighed. “And I’m well enough. Everything’s changing so quickly - sometimes it’s hard for an old soul like me to keep up.” She shook her head, leaning gently on her little sister.

“You said you wanted to talk with me about something?”

“Yeah...It’s...It’s about dad.”

“Dad? What about him?” She already had a good guess. Luna had never really been able to have a close relationship with their father on account of the circumstances surrounding her birth.

Luna paused, searching for the right words.

“He’s back. That’s...that’s a good thing, right?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

“Then...why don’t I feel glad to see him?”

This time it was Celestia who had to take a moment to think.

“It’s probably because you never really knew him. Mom didn’t even know she was pregnant with you until after he died, and Dad’s spirit was sealed away with Acheron when you were just a baby. Why do you ask?”

“He’s...he’s happy to see me, right?”

Celestia blinked in surprise.

“Luna?”

“Well, I mean, like you said, I never really knew him, but sometimes when he looks at me, I...I get a little scared. I can’t really tell what he’s thinking, and I wonder...is he mad at me?”

“Luna, what in Equestria would make you think he was angry with you? Of course he’s happy - he loves you dearly, little sister, he always has.”

“I want to make him proud, but whenever I try to talk to him he just kind of...brushes me off. I feel like I’ve disappointed him somehow. Do you think he’s mad about...about what I did?”

“Luna...Luna, *no*. If anything, he’s proud of you for having the strength to overcome your demons. I think he just has a hard time knowing what to talk about because he really never had much time to get to know *you* either.”

"But I *couldn't*. If Twilight and her friends hadn't stopped me...I did so many terrible things..."

"Luna, listen to me. Twilight and the others may have helped, but ultimately, the only reason they succeeded was because you had the strength to change. I know that, deep down, you wanted them to stop you. You said it yourself - you missed me, and you felt terrible about everything you'd done. The fact is that you made the choice to change, and that's why you're here now. "

Luna didn't look convinced.

"Where is all of this coming from, anyway? I thought you said you'd forgiven yourself? And what about all of that about the meaning of life yesterday?" Celestia smiled, resting her chin on Luna's head. "Sometimes you get the silliest ideas."

Suddenly, Luna yanked away from her sister.

"L-Luna?"

She couldn't hold back any more. Luna had to know the truth.

"And what about you? I thought you said the same thing."

"What? What are you-"

"What were you gonna say to them in the hospital? Hm? Were you just gonna tell them you lied for no good reason?"

Celestia's expression hardened, the emotional wall fortified from years of faithful duty instinctively leaping into position.

"I was going to tell them the truth. I didn't want them to be tempted, it's as simple as that."

"But you were going to leave me out of it, weren't you? You weren't going to tell them that I was the reason you felt that way."

"It was my mistake. I saw no reason to involve you."

"So what, you could take all of the blame? You had a good reason not to tell them - I would have done the same thing! I thought you said ruling Equestria was *our* responsibility - that means we share everything, especially the consequences of our mistakes. If you never told them about me, they probably couldn't have understood why you lied."

"If they never forgive me, that is their choice. I'm not going to try to shift blame onto you when I'm the one at fault."

"That's not fair! Even if it were just *your* mistake, you at least deserve a chance to make this right. Besides, weren't you the one who told me that what happened to me could have happened to anypony? You were trying to protect them!"

"That doesn't change the fact that ponies were hurt as the result of my actions, or lack of action in this case. They *deserve* to judge me however they see fit."

"You *hypocrite*! You make it sound like you don't even *want* to be forgiven! It's as if-"

Luna's eyes went wide.

"Celly...that's it, isn't it? You really don't care if you're forgiven, do you?"

"Luna don't be silly. Besides, what I want has nothing to do with-"

"Celly, what aren't you telling me? Why would you have wanted to take all of the blame for the lie about the Stones? I don't need you to protect me, you know. Have you still not forgiven yourself for banishing me? Or is it something else?"

Celestia didn't respond right away. She was suddenly beginning to get very angry with her sister.

"I'll tell you as many times as I need to Luna - I'm fine. I've just been under a lot of pressure lately. That comes with being a princess from time to time - it's nothing abnormal." Immediately, Celestia regretted what she had said.

Luna glared at her sister. “Oh, I get it. What am I then? I thought you said I was ready to help you! I thought you said we were meant to rule together. You’re just *full* of lies lately, aren’t you?”

“...That’s not what I-”

“*That’s just fine!* Here, why don’t you just take this back then?! I certainly won’t be needing it!”

Luna leapt across the room to her nightstand, snatching up her mother’s diary in her teeth. She hurled the book at Celestia with all her strength, sending it careening off of Celestia’s shoulder with a painful thud.

“*Luna!*”

“How long are you planning on torturing yourself?! When will it be enough?! When?!”

“Luna, *that’s enough!* You’re acting ridiculous!”

“No, I’m not, because I get it now! You didn’t tell me about this whole business with Acheron and the Entropy Stone until after dad came back, you’ve had secret meetings with dad *without* me on more than one occasion now...I saw you in the garden, just now, Maybe I couldn’t hear you but I could tell you were really upset about something. Either you lied to me when you said we shared the responsibilities in ruling Equestria or you’ve deliberately hidden something from me! Something to do with what’s happening right now! I’m not *stupid*, Celly, nor am I blind! *Please*, Celly, I want to help!”

Silence. Celestia had only ever seen Luna look at her like that once before. Her anger dissolved, as did the last of her strength. Only the cold emotional wall remained for her to lean upon.

“Luna...I’m sorry, but I’m doing the best I can.”

“No! No you’re not! Why won’t you let me *in*? Why won’t you let me help you?”

Luna's face softened somewhat. Tears began to form in the corners of her eyes.

Celestia's eyes were cold. With what little resolve she had left, her voice automatically churned out her words in a heavy monotone.

"Because I would rather die before I allow you to pay the price for my mistakes. Whether I'm forgiven or not, I don't care. You've suffered enough already."

"C...Celly? What do you mean? What mistakes are you talking about? I thought you said..."

Luna was suddenly afraid. Her sister had never spoken to her like that before. Something in her voice was distinctly unsettling - it had the same inescapable finality as that of a judge issuing a death sentence.

"Luna, if you don't mind, I've had a very long day, and I'd like to get some sleep." Celestia said in the same lifeless, automatic voice. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I was only doing what I had to. Maybe someday you can understand that."

"Celly? Celly, wait, please don't go!"

No response. Celestia plodded stiffly to the door, opening it a little too hard so that it slammed against the wall. All of Luna's anger had vanished instantly. Her stomach plummeted as she kicked herself for being so insensitive, especially after what Celestia had already been through tonight...

"Celly, *please!* I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"No, Luna."

As she stood in the open door, Celestia glanced behind at her sister's tearful face. This time, her eyes were not the same blank, dead orbs they had been moments before, but sparkled with a dark, singular sorrow. Luna wasn't sure which was worse.

"I'm the one who's sorry."



With a slam, the door swung shut. Luna called after her sister, rushing out into the hall, but she was gone. Out across the castle grounds, the little princess's cries echoed, mingling with the hum of nocturnal life.

Celestia stood in the center of her bedroom, staring numbly at the floor. She thought of Luna, of her father, of Twilight and the Bearers...

"See? I *told you so*."

Nightmare Moon loomed overhead, almost invisible in the darkness save for the wrathful brilliance of her eyes. Celestia couldn't respond. Every part of her felt as though it was about to break.

"Perceptive girl, isn't she? Did you really think you could hide all of this from her? Even if you do tell her the truth now, it won't change anything. You've failed her in every possible meaning of the word."

"P-please....not...not now."

"I wonder how it will play out?" Celestia's mother stepped from the shadows, taking her place next to Nightmare Moon. "You said it yourself - nopony should have that kind of power, and yet you're planning to force her into it. All because you couldn't think of an alternative, all because you could only stand there while I *gave my life for you*."

Celestia was knocked to the floor as her mother slapped her, hard.

"You worthless little *pretender*. I threw my life away thinking you could save everything your father and I fought for. What a fool I was. Can you imagine what she'll do with that kind of power?! It'll be worse than it was during the war! She won't just kill dragons, she'll kill everyone and everything that gets in her way because you couldn't be there for her when she *needed* you. I might as well have just handed you to Acheron when I had the chance. At least then I could say I died with *dignity*."

Celestia couldn't bear to look into her mother's eyes. She just lay there, wanting to die.

“Are you even listening to me?! LOOK AT ME WHEN I'M TALKING TO YOU!”

Over and over, Celestia's mother slashed at her with her hooves, cutting great gashes across her face, her legs, anywhere she could reach.

“Do you hear me?! You're making my Luna into a monster!!”

“What are you going to do for all those people who are going to die because of *you*?! Are you gonna promise them what you promised me?”

The little blonde filly joined in, kicking Celestia's limp body. “Its because of you mommy died! It's because of you *I died!* How are you gonna pay for that?!”

“That's...I...” Celestia could barely speak, gasping between blows.  
“That's...enough...you're not...real.”

“You little worm!” Nightmare's horn began to glow, lifting Celestia bodily from the ground, the others still mercilessly beating her from both sides.

“Is that all you can do?! Run away and hide behind your excuses? Is that the sister I looked up to for so long?!”

“No. That's not her.”

Slowly, the owner of the last voice revealed herself. Princess Luna walked toward her sister, an expression of utmost disgust on her face.

“How could it be? I *never* would have looked up to someone like you.”

Luna stopped inches from her sister's face, her eyes locked with Celestia's.

“It doesn't even matter, really, in the end. Do you know why? Because I'm glad. Why don't you just save everypony the trouble and die right now? Go on. Die - I want to see it. I want to remember it forever.”

“L-L-Luna...Luna, no...”

“I said *DIE!*”

Behind a mountain of pressure, her psychological wall finally shattered. She screamed, a guttural shriek of deepest rage and despair that had slowly built within her for a thousand years. Her body lashed violently at anything within reach. Every chair, every lamp, every piece of furniture she trampled and smashed, blindly casting about for some release to her torment. The room exploded with blast after blast of light, great pillars of flame erupting where bookshelves and drapes had once been. The glass burst from the windows, her bed splintered into a thousand tiny fragments, the paint from the walls melted and danced through the air in iridescent globs. At long last, exhaustion consumed her, and she collapsed, twitching, among the shattered remains of her bedroom.

Outside in the hall, Luna's pace quickened as she heard a sound like an explosion from Celestia's room. Within seconds, guards began pouring from every direction toward the large wooden doors. Luna muscled past them, throwing the doors wide with a spark from her horn.

"Celly?! Oh my-"

Luna didn't know what to make of what she saw. Amid a pile of burning splinters and broken glass, her sister lay sobbing, one hoof digging resolutely into an already gaping wound on her side. Similar wounds covered the rest of the front of her body, wounds that, judging from their angle, had all been self-inflicted. Without thinking, Luna magicked Celestia's body from the wreckage and out into the hall. Immediately, the guards took hold of her limbs to prevent her from hurting herself further.

"Celly!! Oh Celly, *please, no!!*"

Her elder sister writhed in vain, trying desperately to pull away from the guards. She appeared to be in a state of complete delirium.

"*Move! Out of the way!*"

Pushing the guards aside, Luna wrapped her hooves as tightly as she could around Celestia's body. Immediately, Celestia struggled with increased vigor, her horn glowing threateningly. Luna only held on tighter, affectionately brushing her sister's bloodied mane with one hoof.

“Shh-shh-shh. Celly, it’s okay! It’s all gonna be okay...*please*, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry I yelled at you!”

Slowly, whether out of sheer exhaustion or from Luna’s efforts to comfort her, her struggling subsided, and her body went limp as consciousness left her at last.

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Fluttershy was vaguely aware of a steady whooshing sound that seemed to envelop her in a clammy haze. She tried to reach for her blankets, but something was wrong - she couldn’t seem to lift her limbs from the bed. Even her head was fastened in place. All she could do was stare blurrily ahead. There was something just past the foot of the bed - a small, lumpy object, sitting alone on a table at the far end of the room. It appeared to be covered with some sort of cloth.

“Oh good, you’re awake. Sorry, is that breeze too much? I’ll get the window.’

She was not in her hospital room surrounded by her friends, nor was she on the floor of the bathroom where she had collapsed. It appeared to be a hospital room, but it seemed much too...old. The paint peeled from the walls in great spreads, and the light fixtures flickered dimly, emitting a steady buzz as they did so. Even her bed creaked on its rusty frame from the gentle breeze that blew in from across the room. On the far side of the room, a slate-grey unicorn stood with his back to her as he reached to close the only window. As he turned about, something on his face caught the light, but her vision was still too foggy to resolve his features completely.

“Dr. Dorian?”

“Dorian’s out at the moment. I’ll be taking care of you in his stead for the foreseeable future. Speaking of which, you gave me quite a shock there in the bathroom. What were you doing out of bed, hm?”

Suddenly she remembered the strange crimson fluid she had seen on the floor.

“Was that...on the floor, was that-?”

“Blood, yes. They made quite a mess, those boys. A pity, too - I was actually starting to like this jacket.”

The unicorn’s words didn’t quite register. Fluttershy was having a hard time focusing on anything in the room. Her vision swam about, creating multiple ponies that danced in a perpetual circle. She could just make out a small, shiny object in his teeth.

“Helloooo? Fluttershy, can you hear me? Come on, I need you to focus, just for a little while, then you can sleep.”

Fluttershy could smell that same unidentified odor all around her. Did...did he say it was blood?”

“Must be the drug...Hang on. This might hurt a bit.”

Fluttershy gasped at the pain that pierced her foreleg. Suddenly the room snapped into focus - she felt her pulse pounding in her temples. Dr. Grey retracted the syringe.

“There, now, that’s a bit better. Hi there!” The doctor smiled, his face uncomfortably close to hers. There was something very unsettling about the way he was grinning at her. Wait a minute...

“B-b-blood? What do you mean it was blood? Whose-”

“The guards outside your room, of course. Ran into them on my way in. I had just finished hiding the bodies in that bathroom when you appeared in the hallway. Honestly, they weren’t very good - I’d done them both before they even knew I was there.”

Was this a dream? What was Dr. Grey doing here? Fluttershy struggled to comprehend - he spoke so casually, but all of his words filled her with a rapidly growing dread. The voice with which he spoke was not the same caring, if stiff drawl of the physician she had known, but now carried a deliberate, somewhat hurried edge. Out of the corner of her eyes, she could see that each of her hooves was bound tightly to the bed by leather

restraints. She could feel a similar restraint just above her forehead and around her neck, preventing her from moving anything but her eyes. Dr. Grey bounced onto the side of the bed. Gently, he ran a hoof through Fluttershy's mane. Despite the kind look in his eyes, everything about his behavior was terrifying her beyond the ability to scream. She struggled, her eyes fixed on the unicorn looming over her. In her sudden cogency, she noticed that the tattered leather jacket he wore was stained in several places with a dark liquid.

"Ah yes, the restraints. Sorry about that - I know they're uncomfortable, but I'm afraid it's part of the rules. You see, we're going to play a little game."

None of this made sense. How had she gotten out of the bathroom? Where was she? Why was Dr. Grey acting so strangely? Did he say somepony was...dead?

"And since you've come all this way to play, I took the liberty of inviting a dear friend of yours to play with you." As he spoke, Dr. Grey walked leisurely over to the lumpy, cloth-covered object on the table. With a spectacular theatrical gesture, he lifted it away to reveal the object beneath.

In an instant, understanding hit Fluttershy like a speeding train. Finally, her body found the strength to voice its terror loud and clear. The room spun as she struggled against the inch-thick loops that held her.

"See, Angel? I told you she'd be happy to see you."

Dr. Grey stroked the tiny stone rabbit behind the ears, ignoring Fluttershy's screams. He simply sat smiling at her for a few moments before slowly rising to his feet and walking over to the bed. With a mighty swing of his hoof into the center of Fluttershy's ribcage, he sent her into a riotous coughing fit. He yanked on her ear, whispering as he drew his face down to her level.

"If you really care about your little friend, you won't do that again. Besides, how will you know how to play if you don't let me explain the rules?"

"You...you're..." Fluttershy struggled to speak between each painful gasp.

“Oh yes, how silly of me. What kind of host would I be if I didn’t introduce myself?”

He drew himself into an impressive, authoritative pose, inhaling deeply. “You may call me Dr. Grey, the faithful physician from the little hamlet of Ponyville who’s recently had a change of career...wait, no that’s not right...”

He tapped his chin thoughtfully.

“Oh yes, I remember! My name is Fluttershy, the unassuming pegasus who makes a sport of turning her closest friends to stone. No, no that isn’t right either...”

He plodded slowly over to the bed, grinning maliciously.

“My goodness...it seems I’ve been so *many* people lately it’s a little difficult to keep track. Perhaps I should just stick to my given name. I am Acheron, Lord of the Emerald Keep, who despite his best efforts, was nearly killed by a girl who, even being perhaps the quietest little pony in all of ponydom, couldn’t manage to keep her mouth *shut* the *one time* it actually mattered.”

“No...No you can’t...this is a dream...you...you were *gone!*”

“Did you miss me? Fortunately, your doctor friend’s will was not quite so strong as your own. He submitted to me rather easily. Never hurts to have a plan B, right?”

Fluttershy’s screams filled the room once more. Her rational mind dissolved in a sea of panic, the images from Fluttershy’s visions returning full force. Those eyes - those horrible, burning, silver eyes. She saw those same terrifying eyes now smoldering in Dr. Grey’s smile. Without a word, he slammed his hoof into the side of Fluttershy’s face to silence her.

“You’re not a very good listener, are you? In fact you seem to have a true talent for bungling even the simplest of instructions. I’ll put it in words you can understand. Scream again, and I’ll smash your little rabbit to pieces. Now, are you ready to cooperate? *Quietly?*”

Fluttershy couldn't speak. She couldn't think. All she could do was stare dumbly at Dr. Grey's face.

"Good. Now, as I was saying, the rules..." He walked over to the table where Angel's petrified form stood. "I'm going to ask you some questions, and you're going to answer them honestly. If I think you're lying, or if you make me angry, Angel here will help you get back on track." As he spoke, he removed a small hammer from his jacket pocket and placed it pointedly on the table in front of Angel.

"What...what...are you going to do? What are you going to do to him?! LEAVE HIM ALO-"

*Crack*

Fluttershy nearly vomited. Dr. Grey had snatched up the hammer and brought it down on one of Angel's ears, shattering it.

"That was one ear. Every time you do something I don't like, I'm going to break something else off. If however, you cooperate, I will do my best to fix him once I run out of questions. Understand?"

Fluttershy could barely even hear him anymore. She nodded absently, still staring at the shattered remains of Angel's ear.

"Then let's begin. First question: what do you know about The Elements of Harmony?"

Fluttershy didn't answer right away. Dr. Grey reached toward the hammer...

"No! Wait....please....please don't, I'll tell you. Just plea-"

"Talk."

Slowly, Fluttershy told him everything her friends had told her after she awoke. About the Stones, about Celestia's lie, about the Shattering - everything. Even as she said it, she could not fully understand all of what she had heard at the time, but her friends had seemed to believe in it and



that gave her strength as she related the tale. At long last, she finished her story, panting half from fear, half from exhaustion.

"I see...the good princess told you everything then. Actually, that makes my job easier."

"Next question. What have you told your friends and the princesses about me?"

"I...I didn't...I couldn't..." Fluttershy thought back to her time in the hospital room. After their lengthy explanation, Celestia had asked her if she felt ready to talk about what had been happening to her over the past couple of days. The only reason she had been able to speak at all was because Celestia had pressed a very specific question upon her, as she said, out of necessity. Fluttershy now fully understood why Celestia had been so desperate to know about the nature of her relationship with Acheron.

"I...I..."

"Slow." With another mighty crack, Angel's other ear was smashed to oblivion.

"NO! OH ANGEL N-"

*Crack.* A leg this time.

"QUIET! I've told you twice now not to do that, and I'm beginning to get very tired of repeating myself!"

"I told her everything! I told her how you put yourself inside my head! Just please, *please* don't hurt him anymore...please." Fluttershy sobbed as she stared at the shattered form before her. Angel's face was still frozen in fear - his eyes seemed to reach across the room into her heart, judging her, pleading her for help.

"And the Stone? Did you say anything about what I did with the Entropy Stone?"

"I...yes...yes, I told them about that too...please...if you're angry, take it out on me, do whatever you want! Just please leave Angel alone..."

Dr. Grey paused, scratching his chin in thought. "Just as I suspected. They'll be looking for the doctor before long. Good. One more question then. To what lengths would your friends go to rescue you should they become aware you were in mortal danger?"

"W...what?"

"Tick-tock, tick-tock." Dr. Grey dangled the hammer over Angel's head, swinging it mockingly like a pendulum.

"I...they...They would do anything for their friends...they would do anything...for me..."

"Excellent. In that case, I have good news for you." Casually, he tossed the hammer aside and smiled. "I'm out of questions. Congratulations! It seems you've *won*."

"Angel! You said you'd fix him! I told you everything you wanted to know so you fix him *now*!"

"I said I would *do my best* to fix him. I suppose I *could* glue him back together for you, but, unfortunately, even I can't revive the *dead*."

"W....what?"

"He's dead. Been that way ever since *you* killed him."

Fluttershy froze. Every sense, every emotion, every thought died. Dead? No...no that wasn't possible. Angel was always there for her- he was the first friend she made after coming to Ponyville. He couldn't be *dead*.

"On the bright side, he can't hate you this way. You did murder him after all - I imagine he'd be pretty upset about that." With a swipe of his hoof, he knocked Angel's broken body to the floor, shattering it completely.

Fluttershy felt as though her own heart had been shattered with Angel's body. All will left her. She stared at nothing, hearing the word over and over in her mind, but unable to understand what it meant.

*Murder...murder...murder...*

“Don’t worry, though, Fluttershy. I’m not going to kill you like you killed Angel.”

Fluttershy’s vision began to fade, her consciousness finally collapsing from sheer stress. Above her loomed the smiling face of Dr. Grey, leaning ever closer to whisper in her ear. Before she fainted once more, she heard him utter a few final words.

“I’m not nearly that *kind*.”

# Chapter 8

## Dreams

Outside the elegantly curved walls of the Ivory Citadel, evening was bathing the land in an amber glow with the last lingering rays of the setting sun. One by one, the walls sprung to life with a thousand tiny lights as the lanterns were lit throughout the castle in preparation for the night watch. Deep in the structure's heart, a small coven of the social elite gathered around a long table, exchanging obligatory tidbits of small talk to pass the time as they waited for the purpose of their gathering to assert itself. The last fingers of warm sunlight disappeared over the edge of the glass ceiling, leaving only the cold illumination of the lanterns as it reflected throughout the chamber's dark, polished walls. The massive conference hall was the height of opulence, its enormous marble columns covered over every inch of their circumference with beautifully carved murals, each telling a different story as it wound its way skyward. But the thoughts of each of the occupants were concerned with other matters of a somewhat less palatable nature. There was much work to be done, and no easy way to go about doing it.

As the echoes of idle chatter gradually subsided, a silent tension descended upon the occupants of the conference hall, settling somewhere between hope and fear. At one end of the table, seated beside the head chair, sat a young white alicorn with a beautiful swirling mane of many colors. She suppressed a sigh, swallowing instead to clear her thoughts. This was not the first time she had been to one of her mother's sessions, but they never failed to make her uneasy – she often wondered whether she could really comprehend the ramifications of what they would be discussing or whether she even had a right to be involved in discussing it in the first place. Judging by their expressions, many of the other occupants shared Celestia's unspoken sentiment to some degree. Despite her reservations, she found strength in her mother's logic – like it or no, they had been presented with a very difficult and very sensitive situation, and it was their responsibility to handle it as best they could. None of them had chosen this, but they could still choose, this time as a whole, what came next for their world.

Perhaps out of the same uneasiness, it was princess Luna who first broke the silence with her whimpering.

“Shhh-shh-shh-” Celestia gently rocked her infant sister in her hooves as she whispered a tuneless lullaby. One of the delegates eyed the tiny alicorn disapprovingly from his seat at the far end of the table, but said nothing. She knew it wasn’t exactly appropriate for a child to be present at such an occasion, but she and her mother insisted that, as a princess, she deserved to be there as much as any of the rest of them. She had just had her third birthday a short time ago, and the queen believed that it was time for her to start becoming accustomed to the duties of the life ahead of her. Luna clutched tightly to a wisp of Celestia’s mane, her face buried in her elder sister’s chest. She was very shy, even for her age, and she didn’t seem too fond of being around so many people at once.

“Now then, If we are all ready to begin, I shall hereby call to order the four-hundred-and- twenty-third conclave of the Unified Equestrian Court of Harmony.”

With a resounding thud, Queen Aurora rapped her hoof against the polished marble surface of the table. The voice with which she spoke was not altogether harsh, but carried a tangible, self-assured authority that seemed to almost immediately earn the respect of whomever happened to hear it. Some may have called her tone arrogant, though those who knew her knew that the authority with which she spoke was well-deserved. However, she only asserted that authority here when it was absolutely necessary. Her crown never followed her into this room, for here, they were all equals, working toward the same goal.

“Is there any urgent business to be presented before the Council?” Aurora paused, scanning the room. “Seeing none, I shall proceed with old business. First on the docket –as we discussed last month, article four, section two of the UECH pegasi relocation effort was to be amended for the purpose of redefining construction standards for the new weather-factory design. Brother Vesper, would you like to report?”

A tall, silver-maned pony stood, flexing his wings as he bowed in the queen’s direction. “Thank, you, Sister Aurora.” He cleared his throat, producing a thick sheaf of paper from his saddlebag. “Structural analysis of the new recommendations reveals higher than predicted stability, even

under outlying wind velocity test conditions. There are some minor design changes recommended by the weather division to further bolster the structures' stability, as well as some promising new designs for future residential projects."

As he spoke, he pushed several papers in the Queen's direction, then busied himself with distributing copies to each of the other delegates. When he had finished, Aurora read aloud the single word written in bold print atop the stack of blueprints before her.

"Cloudsdale."

"We are confident that with the new designs, we shall be able to endeavor upon more ambitious construction projects such as the one detailed in the plans I have just given to all of you. This project will provide homes for several hundred thousand residents upon its completion, and will also be able to supply much-needed work through its weather factories and other suggested facilities."

"Excellent. I shall review these after we adjourn and submit my advice to you via teleshard. In the meantime, please send all information regarding costs and time scale to me at your earliest convenience."

Vesper nodded, retaking his seat.

"I hereby declare the matter of amending article four, section two of the UECH pegasi relocation effort tabled until further review."

Another rap of her hoof.

"Next order of - yes, Brother Argos? Do you have something to say?"

At the far end of the room, one of the delegates had risen from his chair to indicate that he wished to be recognized. One enormous, scaly claw clutched a small, glowing gem that hung at the end of a resplendent emerald chain about his neck.

"Thank you, Sister Aurora. I apologize for the interruption." As he spoke, the dragon named Argos drew himself to his full height, his golden – scaled head nearly scraping the ceiling of the hall, even being as high as it was to

be able to accommodate the other delegates of his persuasion. His gravelly, baritone voice boomed throughout the chamber, small wisps of black smoke issuing from his nostrils with each breath.

"I have just received word that the other draconic delegates are just now passing over the Great Forest. They send their apologies for their tardiness, and promise to bring encouraging news from the draconic reconstruction front."

"Very well. Thank you, Brother Argos." With a nod, Aurora summoned one of the guards from the edges of the hall to her side. For a moment, they exchanged whispers, after which the guard gave a crisp salute and marched out of the colossal marble archway to the hall outside.

"As I was saying, next order of business. At the conclave before last, Sister Odysa of the Draconic High Council put forth the motion that..."

She was cut off by a sudden sound like a siren. Without warning, princess Luna's persistent cries filled the conference hall, earning another nasty glance, this time from several of the other delegates. Celestia redoubled her efforts to quiet her little sister while her mother continued.

"...concerning the zoning laws assigned in accordance with article three, section eleven..."

Luna simply wailed louder, despite the whispering of her elder sister. Aurora sighed, gesturing to the nursemaid at her side who was always present for just this sort of occasion. Immediately, the somewhat portly mare swooped down upon Celestia to take Luna from the conference hall. The moment her teeth touched the little princess's blankets, however, Luna let out a shriek that caused the mare to clap her hooves over her ears, despite herself. The nursemaid tried again and again to soothe the wailing child, but she simply cried louder and louder, struggling frantically to reach toward Celestia.

"Sister Aurora, if I may suggest-"

"I am aware of the situation, thank you." Aurora snapped a curt reply at the delegate who had risen in response to Luna's outburst. She had had that particular conversation with that particular delegate on more than one

occasion, and she was not in the mood to have it again. She nodded pointedly at the nursemaid.

“Grace, if you would.”

In a fitful rush, the nursemaid snatched Luna up in her teeth and hurried toward the archway.

“I apologize for the interruption. As I was saying, in accordance with article-”

Before Grace could make it more than halfway to the exit, she loosed a shriek of her own as she was blinded by a flash of light. As she tried desperately to rub the sight back into her eyes, a series of gasps struck the air, mingling with Luna’s cries. Celestia stared down in shock at the lump of cloth that had rematerialized in her lap. Princess Luna squirmed to free herself from her blanket, reaching blindly for her sister, a few sparkles of light still issuing from the tiny bud of her horn. All of the delegates, even the normally meticulously composed Queen stared at the infant in disbelief.

“Did she just...?”

“How in the world...”

A chorus of similar whispers echoed softly between the delegates for a few moments before Aurora finally remembered herself. Swallowing hard, she attempted to resume her customary mask of cold impartiality, but was unable to completely hide a small sparkle of motherly pride in her eyes as she spoke.

“My goodness...Grace, are you alright?”

The nursemaid stood slack-jawed and wide-eyed, her gaze darting back and forth between Celestia and the end of her own muzzle, as if trying to decide whether she had done something wrong. She shook herself, offering a weak nod to indicate that she was unharmed.

“It seems she desires to remain with you, Celestia. I’m sorry to ask, but would you mind tending to her for a bit? I promise to fill you in later.”



It took a moment for her to respond. Still somewhat numb from disbelief, Celestia simply nodded, carrying her sister past a dumbfounded Grace toward the hall's massive entrance. As she walked, Luna's wails subsided somewhat, but still sounded loud and clear in the conference hall until she was well down the neighboring hallway.

In a way, she was glad to be rid of that stuffy hall and all of its even stuffier inhabitants - she never would have admitted it to anyone but her closest friends, but she hated these long, drawn-out discussions. It always seemed to her that everyone had a different way of handling each situation, and they were all bent on proving that their view was the best and only option, and how blind or stupid everyone else was for not seeing it their way. More often than not an issue would become so inextricably quagmired within itself that all discussion turned to whether they should even have been discussing it in the first place. She accepted and respected the fact that dealing with such difficulties was one of her duties as a princess, but that didn't mean she had to like it. It was perhaps this that she admired most about her mother - despite any adversity or stupidity or other such obstacles, Aurora always maintained a cool, patient disposition, asserting her authority only when necessary to such an effect as to get the others back on track when things got too chaotic. She often mused to herself that without her mother, little would ever get done around here.

At long last, when Celestia was back in her bedroom, Luna began to calm down. Gently, she set herself down on the soft velvet cushion that served as her bed and magically rocked her sister in the air. Eventually, the toddler's cries gave way to a steady stream of semicoherent babbling, and finally peaceful snoring, one hoof planted firmly between her lips. Celestia stared at her little sister in wonder. She had teleported. To her knowledge, only a small few of the most talented unicorns had managed the same feat, and more often than not, especially for those with somewhat less experience, it ended in rather gruesome failure. And yet, this tiny little filly had performed a perfect teleport, not just on herself, but on the blankets around her, as well. The little princess slept, completely unaware of the significance of what she had just done. Celestia smiled, affectionately nuzzling the soft wisps of sapphire mane out of her baby sister's eyes. Her mother was right - Luna was truly a gifted child, and she was proud to have her as her sister.

“What in Equestria had you so upset, hm? You made quite a lot of noise for such a little thing.”

“Well you’d cry too, if you had such a dullard for a big sister.”

Celestia leapt to her feet. It took a moment for her to realize that the voice had not come from Luna, but from somewhere behind her. Almost immediately, her expression of shock dissolved into one of knowing mischief.

“How did you get in here?”

From behind the luxurious lace curtains surrounding Celestia’s bay window, a tiny, blonde-maned filly emerged wearing a look of deep self-satisfaction.

“Oh please, don’t insult me. No locked door stands a ghost of a chance against Frankie the Prankster!”

Celestia glared at the filly with mock umbridge, speaking in an exaggerated imitation of her mother’s stern, official tone.

“You should know better than to enter a princess’s quarters without her permission. I trust you are aware of the penalty for such an intrusion?”

The pony named Frankie swooned, thrusting her forelegs forward in desperation.

“No! Please, anything but that! Throw me in a dungeon, banish me to the Great Forest! Just please, *please* don’t talk me to death with all of your boring official princessy stuff!”

For a moment the two simply stared at each other before simultaneously bursting into a fit of giggles. Frankie, or Francesca, as she hated to be called, was one of Celestia’s closest friends, despite their sizeable age difference. The two had known each other for years, and as a result, Celestia had become quite accustomed to her friend’s mischievously precocious disposition. Her reputation for her ability to sneak past the most attentive of guards, turn up in places where she was not supposed to be, and cause a general ruckus wherever she went earned her the moniker Frankie the Prankster, or just Prankie for short. Francesca was the only

daughter of one of the noble mares in the High Council, so not being able to get out much was one thing that she and Celestia had in common. Whenever she could, which was at least once a month, Frankie would accompany her mother to the Citadel so that she could visit and play with Celestia in her scant free time. Celestia had been told that Frankie's mother condoned their time together mostly out of the hope that some of her decorum and etiquette would rub off on her daughter, but to be honest, she found Frankie's reckless adventurousness refreshing, even if it was a bit alarming at times.

"So what, you finally wised up and ditched those stiff in the meeting?"

"Hardly. As much as I might complain, I do enjoy being able to help my mother in her duties, you know. No, Luna was very upset about something, so mother had me take her out of the meeting."

"I thought there was supposed to be a nurse for that?"

"There was, only Luna had other things in mind."

Celestia walked back over to where her sister lay nestled in her blankets on the velvet cushion, beaming with pride.

"She teleported. She teleported right out of the nurse's mouth into my lap."

Frankie's smug grin disappeared. "Get out."

"It's the truth." Celestia chuckled to herself. "I couldn't believe it at first, but one moment, she was on her way out in Grace's teeth, and the next, she was back in my lap again." You should have seen the look on her face..." With some effort, Celestia attempted to reenact the nursemaid's flustered response, much to the delight of her filly friend. The two shared another laugh at the poor mare's expense before they were interrupted by an unexpected voice.

"Now, now, it isn't proper for a princess to revel in such petty amusement, much less to laugh at another's misfortune."

Immediately, their laughter gave way to guilty quietude as they gazed into the disapproving, translucent eyes of Celestia's father, who had suddenly appeared in the now open doorway to Celestia's room.

"... but if her reaction was anything like the face you just made, I doubt even I could have helped myself if I had been there."

His stern expression melting into a crooked smirk, Chronus laughed, a loud, boisterous, barking laugh. The two relaxed slightly, though his sudden appearance had put Celestia a bit on edge. Since he didn't technically have feet, his movements were always silent and this often had the effect of surprising anyone with whom he initiated a conversation. Although her father was not known for his sense of humor, he did allow himself to take some pleasure in this. On occasion, when whimsy struck him the right way, he would indulge himself with some tired joke such as "You look like you've seen a ghost!" before returning to his typical businesslike demeanor.

"Forgive me, girls, I didn't mean to surprise you. I merely wanted to find out what all the fuss was about."

His eyes finally finding the tiny bundle in the center of the room, Chronus drifted over to Luna's side.

"Was what you were saying true? Did she really teleport?"

"Yes, father. I don't know how, but she did it. I guess she must have been really upset about something, but whatever it was, she seems to be over it now."

"Amazing...simply amazing." Chronus beamed down at his daughter. "I knew she was special, but this..."

Celestia felt a strange finger of guilt stab at the corners of her mind. She wasn't quite sure from whence it had come, but it prodded persistently at her conscience the whole while that Chronus gazed down at her little sister. Perhaps it was a slight tinge of youthful jealousy at the fact that Luna had always been the subject of her father's praise almost since the moment of her birth a little over three years ago. Ever since then, strange things had happened around her. If she got upset, or sometimes while she slept,

objects would levitate around her bedroom or smash themselves into walls. On one occasion, Celestia had seen her soundly napping sister floating down a hallway on a bubble of magic, completely unaware of her transported state. She ignored the feeling, kneeling once more beside the baby princess.

“You’re back early. I thought you were supposed to be in the Dragonlands until tomorrow?”

“The construction of the new embassy was proceeding ahead of schedule, so my presence was no longer required. And speaking of where certain ponies are supposed to be...” He turned to face Frankie, his features tightening slightly. “Miss Francesca, I do believe you’re now a little over an hour late for your lessons?”

Francesca scowled, kicking the floor with one hoof. Whenever she traveled with her mother, she was also typically accompanied by a tutor and a small group of her friends among the children of the other pony delegates. All of their families lived near each other, so it was only natural that they traveled together as well. While the delegates went about their business, their children would stay with their tutor, the renowned Professor Lionel Brarian, for lessons on history, etiquette, political procedure and the like. Francesca was well - known for her habit of skipping out of class whenever she could, much to the chagrin of both her mother and the good Professor.

“Lessons, schmessons. All we do there is sit in little cramped chairs and stare at dusty old books for hours and hours. It’s sooooo booring!”

“Perhaps you would find the books somewhat more engaging if you bothered to *read* them rather than simply staring at them. I trust you’ll hurry to Master Brarian at once?”

Frankie muttered something under her breath, but even she knew better than to refuse a request made by Celestia’s father. She nodded glumly, promising Celestia that she would drop by as soon as she was done, and plodded dejectedly out of the room with an intense scowl on her face.

“Speaking of lessons, I trust your own studies have been progressing well despite the mischief of your friends?”

A note of excitement crept into Celestia's features. She rushed over to a stack of thick notebooks on the table by her window.

"I finished all the ones you gave me, and I thought I'd look through some of Starshine's theories on molecular reconstitution as a follow-up. Watch this!"

Filled with the prideful excitement of a child who's learned a new trick, Celestia turned to her window, concentrating hard on the huge stone statue of her uncle Relius that watched over the gardens below from its perch on the garden archway. With a spark and a sound like thunder, the statue flashed a brilliant shade of pink before turning into solid gold. Celestia beamed proudly - she had been practicing on smaller objects and was quickly becoming adept at the skill.

Chronus's eyebrows rose almost imperceptibly above a slight frown.

"Very nice, little one." He conceded, with a less-than-enthusiastic tone. "It seems you've learned much." A little too quickly, he added, "Have you attempted any of the spells detailed in Borovitch's research?"

Celestia stared at her father for a moment in silence before remembering to hide her disappointment. What had she been thinking? She shouldn't have expected to impress him after what her little sister had just accomplished. Her excitement dissipated, she answered honestly in a monotone.

"I started reading the first volume, but I'm afraid I haven't read enough yet to understand it very well. I can transport objects, but I can't teleport just yet..."

Chronus nodded to himself, as if he knew what she had been about to say. "I see. Well then, I suggest you waste no time in reading further while your friend is in class. Best not to fall behind."

He offered what he seemed to think was a comforting grin, but it only made Celestia feel a pang of shameful anger, just for a moment.

"I'm so happy to see you both doing so well. However, I'm afraid duty calls me away again for the moment - I'd best get to the conference hall before

they finish without me. Study well, little one.” Chronus turned, his horn glowing faintly as he closed the door behind him, leaving Celestia alone with her sister.

Celestia turned to her window, gazing down upon the sparkling golden statue of Relius. She scowled, her horn sparking with light. With a loud crack, the statue returned to stone, wobbling slightly on its pedestal as it settled back into place. She plodded over to her bed, thumping down somewhat heavily next to her sister. Luna whimpered softly, and Celestia magicked her into the air once again, rocking her gently to and fro.

Slowly, Luna’s enormous eyes fluttered open, her hooves stretching outward in exertion from the tiny yawn that escaped her lips.

“Cewsstia...” Luna smiled, repeating her sister’s name as she began playfully tugging at her mane. “Cewsstia...”

In an instant, all of Celestia’s bitterness evaporated. She chided herself for allowing herself to feel such jealousy. Her baby sister was to her the single most important thing in this world, and gazing into those brilliant blue-green eyes of hers reminded her of just how lucky she was to have her.

Luna giggled softly, the happy rambling and sputtering of youth music to Celestia’s ears. Nonetheless, being in her bedroom was suddenly making her feel claustrophobic, and she was certainly in no mood to study at the moment. She rose to her feet, hurrying out the door with Luna bouncing along on her back.

The damp, refreshing scent of Spring greeted her as it wafted up to the walkway overlooking the courtyard below, just outside the door to her tower. Celestia strolled leisurely along with no particular destination in mind. She knew well enough that what she was looking for would reveal itself when it was ready. She ambled about the castle, enjoying the sights and sounds of her resplendent home and the surrounding gardens, until she at last found herself sitting on a balcony at the top of one of the highest towers. The room to which it was attached was small and disused, the rough equivalent of an attic. Bits of broken porcelain, the last fragments of ancient and faded tapestries, and the smell of dust filled the chamber, all forgotten by time and left here for the fulfillment of some petty sentiment or for lack of a better place to store it. Something about the remote location

and the aged feeling of the chamber and its contents comforted Celestia - perhaps it was that here, nothing ever changed, or if it did, it did so imperceptibly slowly. Perhaps it was that being surrounded by the fragments of somepony else's memories cast some shadow of the happy meaning they once carried onto her. It didn't matter - this was her secret, special place, and she always seemed to end up here whenever she had a lot on her mind. Luna seemed to like it here too - the two had spent many a sunset watching the moon rise, and Celestia would always point to the brilliant silver orb in the sky, saying "That's your moon, Luna. That's what you were named for. Isn't it beautiful?" at which Luna would giggle excitedly, reaching toward the sky as though she could touch it. Sighing contentedly, she set Luna down on the ground beside her to allow her to toddle about to her pleasure.

Behind a faded portrait of an ancient, gray-haired mare, the something Celestia had been looking for finally decided that it was ready.

In a flash of gold, it leapt from its hiding place to wrap itself tightly around the back of Celestia's neck, digging one appendage resolutely into a specific spot right behind her ear.

Having momentarily forgotten her original intention in setting out, Celestia was unprepared for her attacker's strike. She whipped back and forth, struggling to pry the creature from her mane, giggling riotously the entire time.

"Gah! Stop, stop it! I hate it when you do that!"

Finally, the creature released its grip, cackling victoriously to itself.

"I *know*. That's what makes it so much fun!"

Frankie bowed deeply with the air of a famous magician, beaming with her ever-present smirk. She was obviously quite proud of herself for her successful strike. Having known Celestia as long as she had, she had developed the skill to aim with sniper-like precision at Celestia's most ticklish spots. Celestia had known full well that when Frankie had left her bedroom, she had no intention of returning to class. Sure enough, she had been followed until she let her guard down, and that precise moment had been when her tiny friend appeared.



“So what did old Groanus want this time?”

Celestia allowed herself a smirk at her friend's remark.

“The usual. Don't get me wrong - he's my dad, and I love him, but sometimes he just makes me crazy. It's always study, study, study with him, but no matter how hard I try, it just never seems to be enough.”

“Aw, what does he know? He's just fulla hot air.” She blinked thoughtfully. “Heck, he *is* hot air. What's the use of keeping yourself cooped up with some boring old book written by some guy whose name ya can't even pronounce? I'll betcha none a' those guys would know fun if it bit 'em in the a-”

”That's enough, Frankie. Not that I don't agree, but I'm afraid I must draw the line at the use of such language.”

Frankie just shrugged, hopping forward to look over the edge of the balcony.

“It's so pretty from up here”

Celestia smiled. Her friend was right - from their perch in the tower, the entirety of her home stretched in every direction like the petals of an enormous pale flower. Even atop the battlements, there were hardly any jagged edges - everywhere she looked the architecture bulged with smooth, gentle curvature that caught the light in just such a way that it seemed to make the castle glow with a radiance all its own. The Ivory Citadel was unrivaled as a fortress, but it was also perhaps the most beautiful structure she had ever seen, even aside from the Emerald Keep with all of its brooding grandeur.

Frankie lingered for a grand total of eight seconds - by the standards of her attention span, that was quite a feat - before finally becoming bored and turning back to face Celestia. She pouted, stamping the ground to draw her friend's attention.

“Whadda you wanna do? Any fresh meat to play with?”

She was, of course, referring to the new recruits that had been the target of their last escapade. They were still finding chickens in the barracks every so often. Some of them had even been kept as pets, much to the chagrin of their superior officers.

Celestia smiled thoughtfully. "Fresh meat, no, but I do believe there's still plenty of fun to be had with the *old* meat, too."

Frankie grinned, lowering herself to the ground on her forelegs like a playful dog.

"Awesome! I've been planning something great for a while now - you're gonna lov-"

The end of her sentence was drowned out by a sound like an avalanche. The tower quaked beneath them, sending the cracked remains of an ancient vase to shatter on the stone floor of the tiny room. Far below, where once shone the beautiful glass ceiling of the conference hall, a smoking, jagged hole now gaped like the mouth of an enormous beast, its long black tongue snaking greedily into the sky above. Within its maw, a faint orange glow crackled to life, illuminating the shards of the shattered ceiling against the rapidly darkening sky. Celestia simply gaped at the sudden blossom of smoke for several moments, unable to register what had just happened. Suddenly, Frankie spoke, her voice no longer full of her perpetual mischievous vigor, but heavy with a knowing dread.

"What...what was that?! Is that...?"

From all around them, a chorus of angry and fearful murmurs bubbled up from the castle as guards poured from every direction toward the source of the blast. It hit them both at the same time, but only Frankie found the wherewithal to scream.

"Mommy?! That's the conference hall! Mommy's in there!"

Celestia looked on in horror. Her mother was there too, and dad...Luna dove under her sister, her cries echoing deafeningly in the tiny room. Without a word, Celestia tightened Luna's blankets around her, fastening her sister securely to her back, and the two ponies bolted down the stairs, leaping off of the third floor landing in the direction of the remains of the

conference hall. As they ran, Celestia looked about frantically for some indication of what was happening, but all she could see was the cascading throng of guards, armed and clad in golden armor, each emblazoned with the seal of the conjoined sun and moon that waved from every banner in the Citadel. Finally, Amidst the sea of glinting steel and the cacophony of shouts, a pony bearing the silver shoulder bars of an officer spotted them. He rushed across the hall to the princess's side, panting heavily. Celestia and Frankie wasted no time in voicing their concerns.

"Lieutenant! What's happened? What's going on?!"

"Mommy! Is mommy okay?!"

The two spoke in unison, but the guard barely gave them time to finish.

"I don't know, princess - there's been an explosion. You can leave this to us - we need to get you to the vault *now*. Linebeck! Herdier! Get your men over here!"

Gesturing frantically as he bellowed at a small group of guards, he began pressing Celestia bodily toward the stairs.

"What are you doing?! Unhoof me at once! I must get to my parents!"

Celestia summoned as much authority into those words as she could muster, but it did nothing to discourage the Lieutenant's determination to get her down those stairs. She struggled to no avail - he was surprisingly strong, despite his relatively small stature.

"Do you hear me? I order you to stop!"

"Mommy! Where is she!? Lemme through!"

Frankie was positively hysterical now, flailing at the guard that held her. With a sudden jerk, she slammed a tiny hoof into the guard's face, causing him to drop her in surprise. The instant her feet hit the floor, she bolted into the throng, effortlessly ducking under the horde of guards as she made her way toward the conference hall.

"Frankie?! Frankie, *NO!*"

Without thinking, Celestia wrenched free of the group of guards around her, Luna still bound tightly to her back by her blankets. She knew there was only one place she could be going, and she knew it would be far too dangerous for her to go alone - she took off, soaring over the heads of the guards toward the conference hall, frantically scanning the crowd below for any sign of her friend's shock of yellow mane. No sign of her - just a sea of panicked faces. Finally, Celestia spotted her friend's tail between a pair of guards and pulled, just as another tremendous crash boomed throughout the castle. The sound was much closer, much louder now. Out of nowhere, she felt a frightening tug at the edge of her consciousness, telling her to turn around. The princess reacted just in time. Behind her, where she and Frankie had just been hovering, the hallway erupted in a cascade of molten brilliance, the cries of the guards caught in its path silenced before leaving their throats. In the space of a second, at least thirty guards had been vaporized by the blazing wave of death that now painted the hallway black and orange with the last smoldering streaks of flame that covered the floor, the walls - the entire hall, vast as it was, still shimmered and burned with blistering heat.

"Retreat!"

"Pull back!"

The tide of flesh and steel instantly changed direction beneath her, flowing now down the long marble stairway to the hall below.

"Princess! There's no time! You must come with us *now*!"

Celestia faltered a bit in midair, still shaken from her brush with death, but only hesitated for a moment before bolting back toward the lieutenant and his entourage. Immediately, the reality of the situation reasserted itself in her mind with the force of a stampeding elephant. Cold logic muscled all other thoughts out of her mind - There was nothing she could do for her parents right now, and Luna's safety had to take priority. She forced herself onward, anything to get Luna and Frankie away from those flames. Together, they rushed down the stairs toward the bottom of the castle, the guards behind them hastily rallying to form a perimeter around the smoking remains of the hall beyond.

Luna's screams echoed amid the chaos as the little princess clutched to her sister for dear life. All around them, the sounds of angered shouts, clashing steel, panicked cries, and crackling waste mingled into a steady rumble, but above it all, so loud it nearly shattered their eardrums even from its considerable distance, Celestia heard a tremendous, bellowing roar - a sound she knew all too well, a sound she had prayed never to hear again. It was a battle-cry, the song of war that each dragon sang just before he plunged into the breach. It was a song of death, of hatred, of rage...

But none of that was what frightened Celestia, for she knew the deeper meaning of that song's blood-soaked history. As it slowly dawned on her that she was in fact fleeing for her life, she remembered the true meaning of that ancient ululation with vital terror.

It was a song of victory.

=====

Fluttershy hummed a merry tune to herself as she strolled through her garden, stopping here and there to select a flower to add to the basket hung around her neck. It was a lovely spring day, the last faint traces of a recent storm giving way to a cascade of warm, soothing sunlight. She loved this sort of day more than any other, when the sun shone reflected like a thousand tiny diamonds in the still damp grass, and the rich, earthy aroma of plant life permeated the air. She always thought the world seemed so fresh and clean after a good rain.

As she walked, a pair of hummingbirds darted across her path in a twirling dance, circling around and about each other as they flew. She simply sat and watched them for a few moments, admiring the effortless grace with which they hovered to and fro. She hummed a little more loudly, and the two tiny birds began to twirl about her in rhythm with her song. She smiled to herself, trotting to the next flower patch with a spring in her step. It was her single greatest joy in life to be able to share such a connection with the creatures around her home. She never saw her duties in tending to all of her animals as work - to her, each and every one of them was a close and special friend, and she brimmed with happiness each time she heard a grateful chitter or happy squeak at her gestures.

For several minutes, Fluttershy bounced happily among the sea of vibrant colors, surrounded by the sounds of her animal friends. Her basket now nearly full of some of the most beautiful flowers her garden had to offer, Fluttershy had decided that it was time to head back toward her home when something in the corner of her vision caught her attention. She turned, and gasped. There, on a small, grassy knoll, stood Angel, holding the most beautiful flower she had ever seen. Its petals were enormous, curled about each other in an elegant silver spiral bloom. The tiny white rabbit waved energetically, gesturing proudly toward his prize.

“Oh Angel, its simply lovely! Wherever did you find it?”

She bounded toward her companion, imagining how beautiful the bouquet would be with this new addition. Angel bounced happily back and forth on his hind legs as he waited for his mistress to come near. Strange, Fluttershy thought, she was running as fast as she could, but Angel still seemed so far away...farther than he had when she first saw him there. She tried to run faster. Angel ceased his bouncing, now tapping his foot impatiently. He was still so far away - had she really misjudged the distance by that much? Fluttershy ran and ran, rapidly running out of breath, but no matter how fast she moved, Angel remained fixed in his position on his tiny hill. Angel was getting annoyed now, stamping his foot more insistently and poking at his paw as though he were wearing a watch.

Fluttershy panted - she couldn't help it. Her strength left her, her pace slowing, but Angel was still as far or farther than he had ever been. Something else was strange, too - the sun no longer shone in a cloudless sky, but was rapidly becoming obscured by Dark, heavy clouds. She would have to get them both inside before it started raining again. Nonetheless, Angel's distant hill remained illuminated by some unseen source.

“Angel...I'm sorry...just...just let me....catch my breath...”

Fluttershy stumbled forward. She suddenly felt weak. She hadn't thought she had been running for that long, but she now wanted nothing more than to collapse on the spot. Slowly, she struggled to move forward across the vast expanse between them.

Angel let out an exasperated squeak. It was then that Fluttershy first noticed it - she could just make it out in the bright light that enveloped the tiny white rabbit.

The flower was moving.

Slowly, its brilliant silver spiral began to unfold itself, the stem curling and uncurling in Angel's mouth. For some reason, perhaps out of his agitation, Angel did not seem to notice.

Fluttershy tried to warn him, but she had not the spare breath to do little more than whisper. Suddenly, the flower didn't look so beautiful. Something about the slow, purposeful way in which it seemed to be moving frightened her.

The flower continued to twist about, its spiral now almost completely unfurled. As the petals separated, tiny green rootlets began to wind their way out from the flower's center like the feelers of some predatory insect. The petals no longer shined as they once had, but began to shrivel and brown, wilting away one by one.

Fluttershy was certain now - there was something very wrong with that flower. She desperately wanted to warn him, to say anything to get him to notice the flower's movement, but her body refused to allow her the energy to speak. She couldn't even force herself to move forward anymore. Each of her hooves felt as though it were made of solid lead.

The flower's movements quickened. Finally Angel seemed to notice what was happening, but it was too late. Like a snake leaping to strike at its prey, each of the green rootlets lunged forward, wrapping themselves tightly around Angel's face. Through the thick mesh of vines that now enveloped his head, Fluttershy could hear Angel's terrified squeaks. The stem changed quickly now, too - it grew longer and longer, wrapping itself in great circles around Angel's body, binding his paws, preventing him from struggling as it began to suffocate him with horrifying efficiency. Crimson thorns erupted across the surface of the stem, stabbing into Angel's flesh. Fluttershy heard the muffled shriek of his agony as he twitched in the steadily tightening web of the flower's embrace.

Finally, Fluttershy found the energy to scream, to run. She bolted toward Angel, shouting his name over and over again, running faster than she ever had before. At long last, she seemed to be gaining ground. The distance between her and her suffocating rabbit seemed to evaporate under her hooves as she lifted off the ground, flying now at full speed. Tighter and tighter, the flower wound all around him, its thorns digging deeper and deeper. Angel's cries began to weaken.

Several things happened at once. The flower's movements suddenly ceased, the entire length of its stem fading to a dry, cracked brown before falling away from its prey in a dead husk. Fluttershy arrived just above Angel, panting heavily, desperately searching his body for some sign of life. Everywhere she looked, his once pristine white fur was torn and marred with the long, bloody trails left by the thorns. His eyes searched about blindly, his chest rising and falling weakly with each shuddering breath.

"Oh, Angel no! NO!"

She scooped him up in her hooves, looking desperately around for any sign of another presence, for anyone at all who could help. She was alone. All around her the once bright, grassy field was now enveloped in a thick, dark haze. Angel sputtered as his tiny, shuddering paw reached toward her face.

"Angel hang on, just hang on! It'll be alright, I promise, everything will be alright!"

Slowly, Angel's milky eyes turned to lock with Fluttershy's pleading gaze, As he stared at her, Fluttershy noticed that he seemed to be muttering the same sound over and over again beneath his breath, but she couldn't make sense of what he was trying to tell her.

"Angel, don't try to talk. Please just stay with me!"

Despite her words, Fluttershy leaned closer to her friend in a desperate attempt to understand him, fat, hot tears rolling down her cheeks. There was nothing she could do, no one she could call upon to help. Angel was dying, and she knew it. She lay her head against his tiny chest, willing him to live with all her heart. That was when she heard it.



*“Murderer”*

Fluttershy recoiled, staring silently down at Angel’s motionless body. His eyes were still fixed with hers, but as he gazed at her, they shone not with the last desperate struggles of encroaching death, but with sheer, blistering hatred.

*“Murderer”*

One tiny paw pointed accusingly at the end of her snout. Angel’s voice was loud and clear now, repeating the same word, again and again, louder and louder.

*“Murderer, murderer, murderer...”*

Fluttershy stared downward in speechless horror. In all the years she had known him she had never witnessed such anger in his eyes.

“Angel...Angel, no, I...I didn’t do this...I could never do anything to hurt you...why would you say something like that?”

*“Murderer.”*

“Angel, stop it! Why are you saying that!? This...this isn’t my fault! I tried to warn you, I tried so hard, but I couldn’t-”

**“MURDERER!”**

This time, a chorus of other voices joined in with Angel’s ghastly chant. Fluttershy whirled about - in every direction, creatures of all shapes and sizes, all of her little animal friends, slowly emerged from the murk. Each set of eyes was like a heated dagger aimed directly at her heart. Their voices were so loud - they wouldn’t stop. They just kept repeating it endlessly, inching closer with every iteration.

“My friends...no, no, *no*! This is all wrong! I didn’t do this! Why?! Why won’t you believe me?! Please, help me save him! *Please!*”

No change. Closer and closer, louder and louder.

“Don’t just stand there! He *needs* you! *I* need you! I didn’t do this! Why won’t you listen?! Please! *I DIDN’T DO THIS!*”

Angel’s chanting suddenly stopped, but it did nothing to discourage the relentless advance of the wall of animals. Fluttershy turned back toward her companion to find a new horror before her. Angel’s body began to crack and crumble, like clay that’s been left out in the sun. As he slowly fell apart, his eyes lost none of the vital loathing they carried toward his mistress, his murderer. Fluttershy squeaked in panic, trying desperately to pick up all of Angel’s pieces, but the more she struggled, the more he simply fell through her hooves. At long last, the final traces of his body collapsed into dust, drifting lazily to the ground below. Fluttershy had little time to register the despair she felt before she became aware of a sharp pain stabbing at her sides, her ears, all around her. The pair of hummingbirds swarmed about her head like a cloud of enraged bees, the other creatures nearly upon her now. As they came close, they too began to fall to pieces around her. Great chunks of fur and flesh cracked and melted away, and yet the shambling horde did not slow in the least as it moved mercilessly toward its prey. As they crumbled, the creatures fell upon her from all directions, burying her body in their dust. She tried to scream, but the dust choked her lungs. Suddenly, she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t lift her limbs. They were so heavy - wave after wave of choking death heaped itself upon her, up around her throat, her mouth...

“MURDERER, MURDERER, MURDERER...”

Slowly, she felt herself dissolving, fading away amidst the fathomless layers of dust. She was drowning in death, her body numb, her mind unable to do anything but wish for the end to come, for some release to this nightmare. As her eyes darkened under the mounting pile, she saw the last wan light of the sun peeking through the clouds above. Through the gloom, it looked to her like a great eye, an enormous, silver eye, gazing down upon her, unblinking, unwavering, judging her, sentencing her to her doom as a God would look upon an insect. She felt the dust flow into her mouth, through her nostrils, her ears, even her eyes. It poured into her, worming within her like a sea of maggots, chittering and biting, burning white hot along every inch of the inside of her body. They refused to let her die - she could feel their will, their hatred stabbing from within...

“*MURDERER, MURDERER, MURDERER...*”

With a shriek, Fluttershy awoke, scratching frantically over every part of her body her hooves could reach, trying to claw away the things that crawled within her skin. But they were gone. There was no Angel, no creatures, no giant silver eye, no dust. Just cold, smooth stone upon which sat one very terrified yellow pegasus. She struggled to catch her breath, still not entirely sure of what she had just experienced.

“...a...a dream?”

Cold. She suddenly became aware that wherever she, was, it was freezing, and she clutched herself, rubbing her forelegs as she tried to make sense of her emotions. She cast about in the darkness, fearfully searching for any sign of the wall of eyes that had surrounded her moments ago. Unsympathetic silence greeted her in every direction.

It was too dark to see more than a few feet in any direction, but judging by the way the sound of her panting echoed in the dark, she was in an enclosed space, and a rather large one at that. She also noticed that the floor upon which she sat appeared to be smooth and polished, so she knew that she was probably not in a cave or other such natural structure.

She shuddered, half from cold, half from exhaustion, her breath escaping her in great wisps of steam. The clouds of breath sparkled slightly as the microscopic water droplets within it caught the light of some unknown source high above. Wincing a bit as she craned her neck stiffly upward, she could just make out the shining points of a small group of stars through a tiny hole in the darkness high above her.

She closed her eyes, thinking hard. Angel's faced painted the inside of her eyelids, that same hateful glare burned into her vision. Her body was no longer being invaded by the sea of dust, and some small, distant part of her registered relief at the silence, but the rest of her suddenly longed for something, anything, some sign of life to fend off the crushing emptiness she felt. Slowly, she laid herself down on the stone below, staring at nothing.

All at once, it hit her. The chamber exploded with the sound of Fluttershy's sobs. Her mouth hung open in a pathetic, silent scream, tears pouring down her muzzle. She pounded the floor with her hooves, simply

too exhausted to do anything but wail in futility at the weight she felt squeezing mercilessly in her chest. She understood no part of it - her rational mind balked and recoiled as the memories of all that had happened to her over the past few hours blazed through her consciousness with stinging clarity, wordlessly wondering why, why, why. What had she done? How had this happened? How could it be real? Angel was dead...*dead*. She saw herself, sitting on her couch at home, in the circle of guards in the conference hall, attacking Pinkie as she rushed to her aid, strapped to the bed as Dr. Grey smashed Angel to pieces. In a waking nightmare, she witnessed the rage that had burned within her as seen through the eyes of those she had hurt, transforming her into something terrifying, some warped, sickening monster that was nonetheless undeniably *her*. Over and over she told herself it wasn't real, it *couldn't* be real - she never could have done any of those things. But no matter how she flailed at the memories that tore through her like the claws of some sadistic beast, they remained, coldly, cruelly, victoriously marching onward in an endless loop. Like an infant, she cried and cried, hoping against hope that the rest of the world would drown away beneath the flood of tears, her hooves grasping at the dark for some source of comfort, some piece of home to let her know she was not alone.

In the shadows, something reached back.

She didn't properly register what she was doing at first. It was not until she noticed the tiny creature's warm breath on her neck that her sobs began to fade, and she began to feel the weight of its body as she pressed it against her chest. It didn't matter what or who it was that she held in her hooves - it was alive, and she sensed that it needed her just as much as she needed it. For several minutes, the two simply clutched each other, Fluttershy keeping her eyes tightly shut to soak in the creature's reassuring warmth, the feeble yet empowering rhythm of its heartbeat against hers. She stopped sobbing, then stopped sniffing, and finally, slowly, she opened her eyes to see who it was that she was holding.

Two brilliant orange orbs greeted her, so bright in the darkness that she did not at first see the body to which they were attached. The creature was small and youthful in appearance, but what exactly the creature was, Fluttershy could not say - she had never seen any animal like it before, even on her occasional forays into the Everfree Forest. It had a long, slender neck and a pointed, angular face, its snout ending in a narrow,

somewhat droopy tuft of whiskers. Its four limbs looked far too long and thin to be able to support its weight, and forced the creature to arrange itself somewhat awkwardly even as it leaned against her. The ears, too, were disproportionately endowed, two enormous winglike extensions, drooping down on either side of its bald head. Its tiny wings clutched tightly to either side of its frame, quivering slightly. The tail was perhaps the most bizarre, it was rather short, and it ended in a shocking tuft of soft, fine hairs that were the same vibrant shade of orange as the creature's eyes. To Fluttershy, it looked as though somepony had tried to combine a giraffe with a greyhound, and perhaps some sort of waterfowl, but hadn't exactly taken adequate care to make sure it was well put together. It gazed pathetically up at her for a moment, then averted its eyes, suddenly pulling away to sit at the edge of the faint pool of light issuing from the opening far above.

"...s....sorry..."

Fluttershy gasped. She was surprised enough at the creature's appearance, but the fact that it could speak caused her to wonder briefly if she was still dreaming.

The creature sputtered weakly for a few moments, as though trying to say several things at once and deciding not to finish halfway through. Finally, it locked eyes briefly with Fluttershy again and simply repeated its apology.

"...sorry..."

Fluttershy felt her sadness slowly being swept away by a distantly familiar warmth, growing within her as she gazed at the tiny beast. The creature just seemed so...pathetic in every meaning of the word. Something about the way it held itself suggested that it expected to be attacked by the pegasus before it at any moment, and yet it couldn't stop glancing at Fluttershy as though it were pleading for her help. She could not have forced herself to be frightened of such an animal - everything about it cried out for the comfort of another. Slowly, the emptiness within her seemed to fade slightly as she forced herself to speak.

"Hey...it's okay. You don't have to be scared. I'm not going to hurt you."

The creature retreated farther into the shadows, its eyes glinting in the starlight. It offered no response save for its persistent whimpering. The habitual greeting that she employed whenever she met a new animal asserted itself, its automatic familiarity lulling Fluttershy gently back into her comfort zone.

"I promise, little guy, I just want to be your friend. My name is Fluttershy. Can you tell me yours?"

The creature's eyes widened suddenly, its tiny form lurching backward at the sound of her words. Its mouth hung open as it struggled to find its voice.

"That's okay, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to. But, um, if you want, that is, if you don't mind...I-I wouldn't mind holding you for a little while longer. It's pretty cold in here - you must be freezing."

The offer was not entirely unselfish. She didn't understand why or how, but holding that little creature had somehow made her feel safe, or at least slightly less afraid. Right now, Fluttershy needed someone, anyone, just so that she wouldn't be alone with her memories. It seemed to relax slightly, its enormous eyes searching Fluttershy's face for a moment before turning to stare resolutely at the floor, its skinny limbs quaking absurdly beneath it. Finally, without warning, it bolted toward Fluttershy, leaping into her hooves.

Fluttershy chuckled reflexively. The sound echoed coldly in the dark, but it relaxed her a bit nonetheless. At the same time it felt odd - somehow, as soon as the laughter had left her lips, she had felt vaguely ashamed. She tried to ignore the feeling, focusing instead on tending to the strange newcomer.

"There now, it's okay..." She affectionately brushed the creature's fur as it quivered in her grasp. She looked up again to the stars, speaking half to it and half to herself.

"It's all...going to be okay..."

"...U...U-Unum..."

Fluttershy glanced down at the source of the voice.

“What?”

The creature slowly lifted its gaze to look into Fluttershy’s eyes. It seemed to have lost some of its nervousness, if only to be replaced by a heavy sadness that made its eyes sparkle in the dim starlight.

“U...Unum...”

Fluttershy’s face clouded with confusion for a few moments before she finally understood.

“Oh! I think I get it...That’s your name, right?”

The creature named Unum nodded, repeating itself a bit more confidently, almost as though trying to convince itself that it was correct.

“Unum.”

Fluttershy smiled. “Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Unum. I’m sorry if I frightened y-”

“No!”

Fluttershy blinked in surprise. Unum’s mood had suddenly and inexplicably changed into something like determination. Noticing her reaction, it regressed slightly, repeating itself a bit more quietly.

“No, F...F-Fluttershy. You don’t have to be sorry. You haven’t done anything wrong...”

She fixed the little creature with a puzzled gaze. This...thing was becoming odder by the second, she thought. Perhaps it was just the creature’s choice of words, or the resolved tone in which it had spoken them, but somehow, she sensed that Unum...*knew* her, though she was sure she would have remembered meeting something like him...or her, whichever it was. At any rate, it seemed to be warming up to her - that was by far the most it had spoken to her in the past few minutes. She had been about to ask what in Equestria was troubling it when she was startled into silence by another voice.

“Friends already, are you?”

Unum recoiled violently at the sound, its eyes falling to rest fixedly on the floor.

“W-W-W-Who’s there?! W-Where are you?” Fluttershy scanned the darkness in vain. The voice had not sounded particularly harsh, but she didn’t much like the idea of someone or something that chose to speak without revealing itself.

“Sorry about that. Did I scare you?” Slowly, a tall, slender shape melted into existence at the edge of the light.

Before Fluttershy stood a pony that...wasn’t exactly a pony. Its body structure was similar to that of an average colt, and yet it was far too skinny to be considered healthy by any stretch of the term. In fact, it appeared to Fluttershy more like a skeleton than anything else, which did little to ease her apprehension. However, her attention did not linger for long on the appearance of this additional strange newcomer, for on its back, soundly asleep, was a comfortably familiar shape.

“Spike?! *Spike!*”

“Shhh...” the skeleton-pony hissed, placing one emaciated hoof over the thin protuberances that served as its lips.

“He’s only just fallen asleep. The little fellow was up all day waiting for you to wake up.” Slowly, it lowered Spike’s slumbering body to rest next to Fluttershy on the floor. As it moved farther into the light, Fluttershy got a better look at the skeleton-creature. It’s body was almost completely hairless save for the tuft of greasy brown hair that served as its mane, covered instead with faintly glimmering scales, like those of a fish. It’s eyes appeared enormous atop its slight frame, and shined a thin, watery blue beneath their heavy lids. Despite its frightening appearance, Fluttershy found herself calmed somewhat when she looked into those eyes. Those were not the eyes of a monster - they seemed to carry the weight of countless ages, at once kind and powerful. Somehow, looking into those ancient eyes, she felt she could trust this creature. Finally, Fluttershy began to relax again, thankful for the appearance of a familiar face.



As she looked down at Spike's peacefully snoozing body, the reality of the situation began to assert itself through the haze of emotion that had enveloped Fluttershy until now. She gazed once more at her surroundings, or at least at what little of them she could see. A flood of questions sprang to her mind, and she voiced the most demanding of these first as she turned to face the new creature beside her.

"Um, if you don't mind me asking, who are you? Can you tell me where I am?"

The newest creature's face was completely expressionless, but its voice carried a reassuring warmth, as though it were smiling.

"Who..." It tapped its chin thoughtfully. "As for who I am, I suppose you could call me an ally for the time being, though that may sound a bit presumptuous on my part. If a name is what you seek, you may call me whatever you see fit - I've never had much use for names in the past. As for where you are, I believe this was once the Gallery."

"...Gallery?"

"Yes, Gallery. This was once part of a structure known as the Emerald Keep."

Fluttershy leapt backward. Every hair on her body stood on end as a wave of fear coursed through her. Suddenly, every inch of the darkness around her seemed full of a nest of unknown horrors just waiting to pounce.

"You *idiot*! You've scared her!"

With sudden vigor, Unum shot back into Fluttershy's hooves, gently stroking one hoof with a long appendage in an effort to calm her. For an instant, Fluttershy tried to resist, but her efforts were quieted by a single look from those brilliant orange eyes.

Fluttershy quaked with terror, trying with all of her strength to remain calm. The Emerald Keep...Acheron must have brought her here, but why? Who were these creatures? Why was Spike here? What was that fiend planning? Her friends...

With sickening velocity, her mind reeled with the images of the myriad of horrific fates that could await her friends in his twisted hands.

Suddenly, she felt an adamant resolve flowing into her from some unknown source. She glared at the skeleton-pony, searching it for any evidence of a threat.

Oddly enough, the skeleton-pony seemed embarrassed.

“Oh my...I’m sorry, that was rather crass of me, wasn’t it? I apologize...I’m afraid I’ve never been known for my tact, despite my best intentions. I assure you Fluttershy, I have no intention of harming you or your friend.”

Fluttershy wasn’t convinced. Whether it was the tugging persistence of her overwhelming guilt, the fear of Acheron’s treachery, concern for her friends, or the last wrathful instinct of a cornered animal, she felt a strength bubbling within her the likes of which she hadn’t felt for quite some time - the same strength she had felt when she had saved her friends from the dragon on the mountain years ago. The creatures before her were just that - creatures, and she knew better than anypony how to handle creatures. She spoke in a low, even tone, determined to take command of the situation.

“You know Acheron, don’t you? And don’t you even *think* about lying to me, mister.”

Slowly, she advanced on the skeleton-pony, her eyes trained on its like the crosshairs of a rifle. “You know about the Emerald keep, which means you know about Acheron. Why am I here?! What did you do with my friends?! You’d better tell me *now* or I’ll...I’ll...”

In the end, she opted not to finish her sentence, choosing instead to stomp her hoof pointedly on the ground, drawing herself to her full height.

The skeleton-pony blinked, its features flexing almost imperceptibly into something akin to an expression of surprise. Its perception of the pegasus before it had been turned on its head in the space of a second. Where once had sat a terrified, meek, completely unthreatening little mare now stood an imposing matriarch, brimming with intimidating authority. Under the heated gaze of those suddenly steely eyes, it had the fleeting impression of a child who has done something bad and was about to be

reprimanded by its very disappointed mother. For a few moments, it stared blankly at Fluttershy, transfixed by the change it had just witnessed.

“My goodness...that is truly impressive...I mean it - I've rarely seen such strength, especially considering all you've been through...”

Fluttershy faltered slightly, just for an instant. Even aside from its outlandish appearance, this pseudo-pony was unsettlingly bizarre. Its speech, its posture...everything about it seemed strangely detached from its surroundings.

“What are you talking about? Answer me! Where are my frie-”

“They're alright! They're all fine, I promise!”

Fluttershy looked down in surprise. It had been Unum who cut her off. The little creature stared incredulously at the skeleton-pony, reprimanding it with its eyes. Shaking its head in condescending disbelief, it turned back to face Fluttershy, speaking more slowly.

“Please, you must believe me, They're all unharmed. Only you and Spike were brought here. The others were all left just as you remember them in the hospital.”

Fluttershy backed away from Unum, half-shrouding herself in darkness in the process. Slowly, she felt her resolve ebbing away under a tide of bewilderment.

“How do you know that? How do you know Acheron?”

Unum opened its mouth to speak, but was interrupted by the skeleton-pony.

“I wonder whether you'd believe us if we told you.”

Fluttershy glared at the creature with renewed vigor. “I knew it...you do know him! Start talking!”

The creature blinked slowly, deftly maintaining its frustratingly aloof demeanor despite the fury of Fluttershy's gaze.

“Well?! What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Forgive me for answering a question with a question, but what exactly do you intend to do if we are, in fact, allies of Acheron?”

“I...what?!” Fluttershy struggled to hold onto what was left of her rapidly waning confidence. The creature’s eyes were not so quite so kind as they had been a few moments ago, but now radiated with a cold indifference.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do, mister, I’m going to get *very* upset with you, and you *don’t* want that to happen!” Fluttershy stomped the ground again, though the gesture now seemed somewhat anticlimactic. For some reason, her stare seemed to have absolutely no effect on the creature, and it was causing her to lose ground quickly.

Unum gazed pleadingly at its significantly larger counterpart. “P-P-Please...s-s-stop playing games...just tell her-”

“Tell her *what*, Unum?” The skeleton-pony emphasized the last word as though it were the punchline of some cruel joke. Unum’s meek plea was immediately silenced by the creature’s harsh tone. “That’s what I thought. Unless you have any further *objections*, I will do this *my* way.”

“What...what are you talking about? What aren’t you telling me?” Despite her best efforts, a note of fear was beginning to creep back into her voice.

The creature casually glanced back up at Fluttershy, inhaling deeply before it continued.

“Let’s assume the worst. Let’s say we are a part of Acheron’s plan, and you are our prisoner. What will you do? Go.”

Fluttershy simply stared. She had no idea whatsoever how to react - no matter how hard she tried, she could not read anything from the creature’s blank, unwavering expression.

“Surely you have something in mind? Or was all of that bravado I just saw mere bluster?”

The creature’s hairless eyebrow twitched tightly upward. “Let’s review the facts, shall we? Your friend, Angel, is dead, yes?”

All that was left of Fluttershy's tenuous grasp of the situation vanished instantly. It was as though someone had struck out her knees - she collapsed to the floor upon hearing Angel's name.

"A...An...gel...h-h-how?" How in Equestria did it know about that?

The skeleton-pony advanced, its face still an unreadable mask. "How does that make you feel? Say it. Angel is dead. Go on, say it."

"I...I-I...s...stop...stop it..."

The memory of Angel's loathing gaze pulsed painfully within her. Fresh tears began to bead in the corner of her eyes. She clapped her hooves over her ears, shaking her head violently from side to side, trying desperately to shake the gaze of those horribly familiar eyes.

"Do you feel nothing? Was all of that strength you just mustered merely a façade? Are you really so weak that you can summon no defense for your friends?"

"Stop...please...I didn't...I couldn't do it...it's not...my fault..." Fluttershy could barely speak through her sobs. She was beginning to hyperventilate. Why? Why was this creature doing this? Was this...her punishment?"

"Angel. Is. *Dead*. Say it." Despite its expressionless front, the creature's voice had suddenly become strikingly intense, almost angry.

"No! No, no, no...Stopistopitstopitsto-" Her eyes fell upon Spike, still fast asleep. All of her friends...what was going to happen to them?

"Is this all that you're really capable of? I suppose you're going to let his death go in vain, then." It was speaking more forcefully now, mocking her, provoking her, needling her when she was at her most vulnerable.

Unum gazed fearfully at the creature, shaking its head slowly. "Please, don't do this...she's already suffered so-"

“What will you do? We are working with Acheron, Angel is dead, and your friends are all in mortal danger, and all you can do is sit there and cry. Is that really *it*?”

Fluttershy simply whimpered, curling into a tight ball on the cold stone floor, wishing with all her might to just disappear.

The skeleton-pony advanced again, looming directly over her, his voice now booming throughout the chamber with cold intensity.

“*Pathetic*. Your friends need you and you’re too wrapped up in feeling *sorry* for yourself to act.”

The creature slammed his hoof into the ground, inches from Fluttershy’s face, drawing its head down to her level, boring into her with those pale, cold eyes.

“Is that really it? Is running from the truth all you can manage? I should think the lives of your friends would matter a bit more to you than that, but then, if this selfish display is really how you act after losing Angel, after losing someone who was *supposedly* your very best friend, it seems that isn’t so, *is it*!?”

Fluttershy cried into the darkness that assaulted her from within her own tightly clenched eyelids, trying desperately to drown out the voice that stabbed into her already bleeding heart with all the grace of a rusty knife.

The skeleton pony stomped as hard as he could on either side of Fluttershy’s face, now bellowing at the top of his lungs at point-blank range.

“IS THAT REALLY IT?! WHAT WILL YOU DO?!”

Finally, without warning, Fluttershy felt truly angry. It scared her at first, but her fear was quickly swept away by a warmth she thought had left her for good. For an instant, however brief, she saw the smiling faces of her friends flash across her vision - it was just enough to give her the strength to act. She was tired of games, tired of lies, tired of feeling helpless - she needed to know where her friends were. She needed to know they were safe.

Fluttershy's sobs ceased abruptly as she slowly uncurled herself to face the creature standing over her.

"I don't know if I can do anything... I've hurt my friends...I've hurt all of them, but they didn't leave..." The warmth within her grew, pulsing slightly like the heartbeat of a newborn animal. She saw her friends sitting all around her hospital bed, remembered Pinkie's smile, even through her wounds, remembered Rainbow's tearful confession of guilt. Why? Why had they not left her? Why had they not hated her? She could have killed them, all of them, and yet they stayed with her. Why?

"They...even after all I've done..." She saw Angel, crumbling to pieces on the table across from her bed. Angel had known...Angel had tried to save her, and she...she had killed him... she had *killed* her best friend...the others didn't know...if they ever found out...Slowly, the heartbeat grew stronger, faster, her thoughts moving more quickly, more purposefully. She would never be able to face her friends again - she knew that they could never forgive her...but if she was here, then...Acheron's voice flashed through her memory.

"To what lengths would your friends go to rescue you should they become aware you were in mortal danger?"

"They would try...they would try to save me...all of them." Fluttershy's eyes wandered aimlessly about, blind for the emotional quagmire that struggled to unknot itself within her heart. She raged at herself with a fury she had never before experienced, the heat of her passion mingling with the steadily building pulse to climax in a drumbeat, a steady, pounding, relentless drumbeat that drove her forward to the conclusion she knew was right. She squeezed her eyes shut, consumed by the force of that beautiful, terrifying rhythm. Slowly, one, then two, and finally a steady stream of tears began to pour down her face. It was clear. Nothing else mattered. Her eyes opened once again, burning with a brilliance that dwarfed that of the morning sun in all its fiery grandeur, the object of their focus as nothing but an ant under a magnifying glass.

This time, the skeleton-pony actually backpedaled at the fury it witnessed in those eyes. From that tiny little Pegasus girl emanated a power unlike any it had felt before. As a small semblance of a grin spread slowly across its features, it knew that it had accomplished its goal.

“They won’t forgive me...they can’t, and I don’t blame them. But I will *not*. I repeat, I will *NOT* let you hurt them.” She stepped forward victoriously, the drumbeat now a thunderous roar that cascaded through her consciousness with wave after wave of power. This was not the power she had felt in the conference hall, but something far greater...it was not fueled by hate, or rage, or greed...Her friends were the most important thing to her in this world, and even if they never wanted to see her again, she would always love each and every one of them with every fiber of her being.

“You can hurt me, you can taunt me, you can kill me if you want...but you will not lay a hoof on my friends while I draw breath.” Even as she spoke the words, Fluttershy registered some vague tinge of surprise at the fact that she heard them spoken in her own voice.

Both Unum and the skeleton-creature gazed onward in utter awe. Slowly, a sharp, staccato rhythm began to echo throughout the chamber.

The skeleton-creature was clapping, his hooves banging against the floor in a steady rhythm. Its eyes once again shone with a knowing kindness, positively beaming at Fluttershy with something that could only be construed as pride.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. I must say, Fluttershy, you are truly an inspiration. I think perhaps, you may just be able to help us get out of this place.”

Fluttershy didn’t budge. For once, no tiny shadow of fear plucked at her resolve - nothing would move her now.

“Don’t you *dare* patronize me. Tell me what you’re planning *right now*.”

The skeleton-creature nodded solemnly. “As you wish. The truth then.”

He stepped backward, staring pointedly at Unum. Slowly, the tiny creature moved away from Fluttershy to stand in the center of the circle of light, directly beneath its taller superior.

“Unum, *was it?* Why don’t you tell the good lady your, or should I say *our*, real name? Explain to her why you lied.”



Unum gazed pathetically at the floor. It swallowed hard, taking several steadying breaths as it mustered the tremendous effort needed to overcome its very apparent apprehension. Finally it spoke, measuring out each word in a slow, unsteady tone.

“I’m sorry, Fluttershy...more than you can possibly know, I’m sorry for everything we have done to you and to your friends. Everything that has happened has been our doing, albeit indirectly. Please, whether you can forgive us or not, know that the two of *us*, at least, never wished for any of this to happen, and that we vow to do all in our power to rectify what the others have done.”

With a final, steeling breath, the tiny animal prepared itself for the oncoming storm.

“I...we...do not simply *know* Acheron as you would understand it. In a way...

It paused, searching for the right words.

“...We *are* Acheron.”

=====

Chaos. Celestia ran and ran, fleeing from the roars of battle that echoed all around her. Even she did not know for how long they ran - all that mattered was that they get to the vault - there they would be safe. There they could form a plan. As they darted through the endless halls, leaping over piles of smoldering wreckage, ducking this way and that to avoid the terrors that bellowed after them at every turn, the lieutenant shouted orders to the group in general, orders that Celestia only half-heard, her body automatically reacting to every syllable. The Ivory Citadel shuddered from its very foundation with each distant explosion, driving them ever onward, ever downward.

At long last, past a final length of the countless identical hallways through which they had passed, a long marble staircase appeared in the distance, beckoning them to their salvation.

Their pace quickened with each step, the appearance of their one hope for survival breathing new life into their aching limbs, when suddenly...

Whipping about, Celestia staggered back as the wall behind her exploded, sending shards of stone flying in every direction with deadly force. Through the hole where the wall once was tumbled a gigantic, writhing mass of teeth and scales. Two dragons lashed at each other with their spines, their claws, their tails, at anything they could reach. Barely ducking beneath a mighty swing of one dragon's tail, Celestia and her entourage of guards dove to cover just as the tail collided with one of the hall's columns, sending it crumbling to the floor. Taking advantage of his opponent's missed strike, the second dragon, his golden scales glinting in the lantern light, struck a devastating blow to the other's jaw, connecting with a thunderous crack as the bones therein shattered. The gold dragon leapt forward, roaring in a frenzied rage, his teeth sinking deep into the second dragon's throat, sending great splashes of hot, crimson vitality in every direction. Slowly, his victim's movements weakened, then ceased altogether.

Argos extracted his teeth from his attacker's throat, wiping the gore from his chin with an enormous claw. His breathing became labored as the battle-heat left him, and he now clutched at a patch on his hind leg where a large swath of scales had been torn away. He cursed loudly, limping toward the stairs, wincing with each step.

"Brother Argos?"

Argos spun about toward the source of the voice, his teeth bared in an angry growl, his powerful legs leaping apart into a defensive stance.

Celestia jumped back in fear - she had no idea what to expect after everything she had seen in the past few moments.

"Ce...Celestia?" Argos blinked, his magnificent golden eyes focusing on the little creature before him. Suddenly his face contorted in an odd spasm as a series of staggeringly different emotions burst through his mind in rapid progression. At first he smiled, then scowled in deep thought, then shook his head, finally settling on a look of nervous relief.

“Oh Celestia, by the heavens, thank goodness I found you! We have to move *now*. I’ll explain-” He paused, his eyes locked on the terrified filly who was firmly attached to Celestia’s back beside a similarly-disposed Luna.

“Who-”

“She’s the daughter of one of the delegates - Sister Augusta. Do you know if they made it to the vault?”

At the mention of delegates, Argos’s eyes darkened suddenly, flicking back and forth between the princess and her charges. He cleared his throat nervously, refocusing on Celestia’s question.

“I don’t know. It happened so fast...” he shook his great head, his shoulders sagging somewhat. He looked at her with eyes drawn deep with sorrow. “...I don’t know how to tell you this, Celestia...we’ve been betrayed.”

“Be...Betrayed? What do you me-”

An explosion shook the castle from somewhere not far away. A sudden flash of light...

“*DOWN!*”

With almost crushing force, Argos’ colossal wing closed around Celestia, pressing her against the ground just as a white-hot lance of energy ripped through the air where she had just been standing. Argos howled in agony as the blast sliced through the fleshy membrane of his wing, leaving a red, smoldering hole. No blood issued from the wound - it had been almost instantly cauterized by the heat of the attack.

Through the circle of light that shone through the hole in Argos’s wing, Celestia saw an immense shadow looming behind a curtain of tenebrous smoke. Near the middle of the shadow, a hole in the smoke was just closing where it had been blasted apart. Within that hole, just for an instant, Celestia had seen a tremendous crimson maw, still glowing from the bolt of molten death it had just hurled in their direction.

“No time! *Move!*”

In a single, blindingly swift motion, Celestia was overcome with vertigo. Argos deposited the princess and her escort roughly on his back and, with a single beat of his mighty wings, he took off, soaring down the stairs to the chamber below.

Behind them echoed a roar of purest rage, followed by a sound like an oncoming storm. The other dragon was chasing them. There, at the end of the enormous space that unfolded at the bottom of the stairs, stood a colossal set of steel doors. The entire chamber was at odds with the rest of the Citadel - here, no trace of artistry, no inkling of excess, not one iota of frivolity made itself apparent. Everything around them sparkled dimly with the dull fluorescence of rough granite. The chamber rushed past them with alarming speed - Argos seemed to be struggling to remain airborne, and he was having difficulty controlling his velocity. The roars grew closer.

Celestia squinted against the blinding flash that leapt past them, impacting on the far wall with a mighty splash of heat on charred metal. Volley after volley of fiery brilliance rained upon them from the rear, Argos doing his best to avoid them, but his energy had already been all but spent. His reactions slowed, his already perilously low altitude dropping even further with each beat of his wings.

“Lieutenant! Hold them steady!” Celestia cried, thrusting a whimpering Luna toward the guard pony beside her, then doing the same with Frankie.

Her hooves now free, Celestia swallowed hard, turning to face the raging beast behind them. Through the haze of billowing smoke that poured from its nostrils, Celestia locked eyes with a mountain of an animal, by far the largest dragon she had ever seen. Under normal circumstances, such a juggernaut would have appeared slow and clumsy, but the terrifying velocity and deftness of grace with which he followed after them belied his great size. With each beat of his wings, Celestia was blasted with a wave of stinging hot air mingled with a scent akin to burning rubber, great bands of steely sinew propelling him powerfully forward, ever faster, ever closer. She swatted aside her fear, thinking of the two terrified children behind her, and concentrated.

Slowly, a pinkish light began to envelop her horn as she charged the spell. With all the force she could muster, she poured herself into the magic, aiming directly between the dragon's eyes - she would only have one shot at this. The dragon's jagged maw opened once more, his colossal lungs inflating with a sound like grating stone on steel, the flame jets beneath his tongue dilating in preparation for the final volley.

Suddenly, Celestia was blind. The spell she had been charging sputtered and dissipated as she cast about in a panic for any indication of what had happened. Before she knew what had hit her, Celestia was flying through the air, vaguely aware of a stabbing pain in her temples. She could hear nothing save for a high-pitched ringing, all sounds drowning before they could reach her ears as though she were submerged in water. With a sickening crack that she could feel, but not hear, she skidded to a halt just before the enormous steel doors to the vault. Her entire world was pain. All she could do was writhe on the floor, all rational thought blasted asunder by the agony that stabbed within her left foreleg like countless shards of glass. Celestia struggled to move, her body screaming in protest. Luna...where was Luna?! Frankie?!

With a sharp crack, Celestia's hearing returned, just in time to be nearly shattered again by the roar that erupted from some indiscernible distance. Behind her, through the adrenaline - clouded haze that obscured her vision, a great, smoldering pile of wreckage loomed where their pursuer had been only moments ago, a gigantic crimson claw peeking out from beneath a mountain of shattered stone. Argos lay on his side, roaring in agony as he attempted in vain to stem the flow of blood that issued from the shattered remains of his tail.

Only two ponies remained from her entourage of guards - The pegasus named Linebeck was shouting something to her as he motioned to the guard next to him from his position near the doors, and the pony she recognized as Herdier limped slowly toward where she lay. All that remained of the others were four shapeless, blackened lumps that were indistinguishable from the char in which they lay around the floor of the chamber.

Slowly, Celestia became aware of a faint tugging sensation on her mane. Craning her neck painfully backward, she saw both Frankie and Luna doing their utmost to drag her broken body toward the door. Her heart leapt at

the sight of them, her eyes lingering for only a moment before jumping up to focus on the doors behind them, so close now. With newfound energy, Celestia struggled to her feet, ignoring the pangs from her leg. Linebeck's voice snapped into focus as she found herself standing among the wreckage.

He was cursing at the top of his lungs, an endless stream of semi-coherent, strangled shouts interspersed with the names of the guards who had until recently been alive and well. He yanked again and again on the door with all his might, and yet they refused to yield so much as an inch for all his furor. As quickly as she could, Celestia hobbled over to him, gently pushing him aside as she focused with some difficulty on opening the magical lock that held them shut. A single thought drove her forward through the pain, through the numbing terror that still surged through her like a tide of ice.

*Safe. I must keep them safe.*

With a heavy click that sounded to Celestia like a chorus of angels, the mighty doors began to slowly swing open. Immediately, she pushed the children inside, then told the two guards to follow suit, Linebeck nearly stumbling over himself in a panic.

She turned about as another ear-splitting roar shook the cavernous chamber. Argos still writhed in agony, clutching blindly at his tail.

"Argos! Argos, don't worry, I'm coming!"

At the sound of her voice, Argos's struggling seemed to ease momentarily, his eyes blinking rapidly to clear the pain-induced haze from his vision. He shuddered as he tried desperately to focus on the tiny, white form approaching him, his breath coming in weak, rapid bursts.

"Argos, don't try to move! We're almost there! We're almost-"

She was cut off by the sound of a thunderous growl, coming from the far end of the chamber. To her horror, the giant crimson-scaled claw that poked out from the pile of wreckage began to twitch.

"STAY BACK!"

Argos had finally found his voice, snapped to attention by the realization of what had made that sound. His eyes cleared, and he gazed imploringly at the young princess, trying to urge her backward as he fought for the breath to speak again.

“GO! Leave...leave me...I’ll hol-...hold him off...”

Celestia froze, glancing fearfully back and forth between the eyes of her savior and the rapidly crumbling pile of rubble behind him. Her pulse pounded in her temples, screaming at her to make a decision, but her body refused to obey.

Argos gritted his teeth, a small trickle of blood now issuing from his mouth as he forced himself into a semblance of an upright position. In the light of the flames behind them, something hanging at the end of the dragon’s beautiful emerald necklace sparkled like a tiny star. He clutched the object, panting heavily. Behind him, a cascade of stone fell away to reveal an enormous, shredded wing.

“Argos, please, don’t move! I can get you out of here, I just...I need to..” Even as she spoke, she knew there was nothing she could do. The look in his eyes told her that he did not have much time left.

“Take it! Take...take it and...go!”

With all the strength he could muster, he tore the object from his necklace and flung it toward the doors of the vault, where it disappeared amongst the shadows between them.

“Destroy...the Stones...they’re after...the *Stones*.”

“What? What do you m-”

Suddenly, a great pile of granite burst from the mountain to reveal a roaring mass of teeth, followed by a pair of eyes that burned with mindless hunger.

“GO!”

Finally, Celestia's wings found the will to open. Closing her eyes, she took off toward the vault, willing herself not to look back, forcing herself not to think about what was about to happen to the brave dragon behind her.

Just before she reached the far end of the chamber, Celestia's eyes popped open, her will failing at last. Glancing behind her, the last thing she saw as the doors swung slowly shut were the beautiful golden orbs of Argos's eyes, staring directly into hers. He choked, a spout of blood trickling from between his fangs, and drew himself shakily to his feet as his aggressor closed in for the kill. With a mighty effort, he inhaled, inflating his lungs to the fullest, and aimed himself at the doors of the vault.

A mighty crash as the doors' colossal inner bolts fell back into place, and then a strange, warm glow, coming from the doors themselves. Linebeck and Herdier leapt away from the doors as they began to radiate an intense heat. Finally, after a few tense, adrenaline-fueled moments, all was silence, and the heat from the doors seemed to fade.

Celestia struggled to catch her breath, wincing as the pain surged through her for a second time. Safe...they were safe...

"Princess, are you hurt?!" Herdier searched her body with frantic eyes, lingering on the foreleg she held gingerly in the air.

Luna huddled under her sister, gazing upward with enormous, concerned eyes. Slowly, as Celestia began to gather what remained of her wits, she attempted to put pressure on her leg. She was rewarded with yet another wave of excruciating pain. There was no doubt about it - it was broken, and quite badly.

"I'm - *gah* - I'm fine." Celestia lied, panting as she struggled to hide her discomfort. "Luna! Luna, don't move!"

She scanned her little sister's body for any wounds, any sign of injury, but to her surprise, the filly was completely untouched. Not even a single mote of soot marred her resplendent purple coat. Celestia simply gazed at her sister in wonder. How? How had she avoided injury? They had been right next to that blast...



And Frankie...the princess's heart leapt into her throat once more as she realized that Frankie was nowhere to be seen.

"Mommy?! Mommy, stop hiding! Where are you?!"

Behind them, a small crowd of ponies huddled fearfully in the corner of the room, the children of the delegates standing in a tiny cluster at its center. Frankie hopped about, searching every inch of the group for any sign of her mother, but to no avail. With a sinking dread, Celestia realized that that not one of the faces in the cluster of ponies belonged to any of the delegates, nor did any of them belong to her mother or father. There should have been many more ponies here by now, which could only mean one thing...

"*Mom!* Where's my mommy?!"

"Frankie -*ungk* - hah...Frankie...come here...come here. Let me see you."

Immediately, all of the children ran forward, all insistently asking whether Celestia had seen any sign of their parents. Professor Brarian rushed forward to quiet them, but his soothing ululations were lost in the din. Frankie merely shouted louder, determined to be heard.

"MOMMY, STOP HIDING! COME OUT HERE RIGHT NOW!"

It was no use - no matter how Celestia called to her, the child was completely hysterical. Almost as though her panic was an airborne pathogen, it seemed to spread through the other children with terrific speed, their noise becoming nearly unbearable as each tiny voice struggled to make itself stand out over the others. As quickly as she could, Celestia shuffled over to her tiny friend, extending a wing to caress her shoulder.

Frankie turned about slowly, her eyes drowning in tears.

"Where's mom...where's my mother?!" The child sputtered, clinging to Celestia's good leg with wide, empty eyes. Despite Frankie's panicked state, Celestia could see that she, too, was physically unharmed. It didn't make sense - judging by their proximity to the blast, both Frankie and Luna should have gotten just as injured, if not more so. She shook herself inwardly, trying desperately to calm down as much as she could - it didn't matter how they were safe, so long as they *were*.

“EVERYPONY QUIET, NOW!” At the sound of Celestia’s voice, the cacophony died instantly, giving way to a tide of pleading, anxious stares. The princess panted heavily, wincing from the exertion of shouting as loudly as she had.

“Linebeck! Are you alright?”

The young, shivering guard pony tensed slightly, surprised at being addressed by his name, and nodded.

“Herdier? What about you?”

The second guard nodded solemnly, his eyes still lingering on the doors.

“Both of you, tend to the others. Make sure they’re alright and find out what you can about the delegates.”

“Frankie. Frankie, look at me.” Gingerly, Celestia knelt to bring her face level with the weeping child. “Look at me, Frankie.”

Reluctantly, the child obeyed, struggling to squelch her sobs. Though she said nothing, her eyes begged Celestia as only a child could do - she begged her to help, without knowing how she possibly could, imploring her to offer some shred of comfort as though Celestia was her last hope in the world.

“All of you, listen very carefully.” She gazed silently for a moment at the children, hoping to instill some modicum of confidence in each of them with her eyes. “I don’t know how, or why, or what exactly is happening, but I can promise you, all of you, that you are all perfectly safe here.”

She inhaled deeply. No use hiding the truth, she told herself. “I’m sorry, truly I am, but I don’t know where your parents are. *However...*” Celestia spoke quickly, once again silencing the wave of voices that had momentarily threatened to overwhelm her. “Do not fear. I will find them and bring them back here to you, I promise.”

From across the chamber, Herdier’s head snapped around to goggle at the princess.

“*What?! Princess, you can’t be-*”

Herdier’s outburst was almost immediately silenced by the sound of a muffled roar just outside. There was a brief pause, then a deafening chorus of screams as something incredibly heavy impacted on the other side of the door with all its considerable might.

“The doors! Get away from the doors!” But Celestia’s voice was but a tiny drop in a vast sea of noise.

Like the beat of a war drum, the invisible beast rammed itself against the door again and again, shaking a great rain of dust from the ceiling of the vault, yet the doors gave no sign of flexing in the slightest. Finally, with one almighty crash, the chamber shuddered, the beast roared again, and then all was silent.

“Is it gone?!”

“I wanna go home!”

“Mommy!”

Celestia struggled to keep her injured leg aloft as the children surged around her, all trying desperately to cling to her at once.

“Quiet! Everypony, be quiet, *please!*”

No response. She tried again and again to make herself heard, but the dragon’s failed attack had pushed them all beyond the capability of reasoning. Raw instinct mandated that they cling immediately to the nearest available authority figure - namely, her - and she was powerless against the panic that held them in its grasp.

Suddenly, as Celestia found herself being backed into a corner, she and the tide of children stopped moving. All around them, a familiar, warm, blindingly bright light. In an instant, that strange, soothing light seemed to have swept away the childrens’ fear to replace it with silent awe. Slowly, as the light began to fade, growing dimmer and dimmer, the wordless cries of

a single, tiny voice drifted into their awareness until once again, they were surrounded by the dull shine of the reinforced steel walls of the vault.

Little princess Luna sat by herself in the corner, having been pushed aside by the tide of children, wailing piteously, a soft white glow still emanating from her horn. Celestia stood dumbstruck, staring in awe at her little sister for the second time that day as recognition dawned on her. That was the same light, she thought. That was the very same light that she had seen just before they had been blasted off of Argos's back. Could Luna have possibly...?"

Without making the conscious decision to move, Celestia's body walked automatically forward, as well as it could, to her little sister's side. Luna spun about, clutching tightly to her big sister's mane, still weeping at the top of her lungs as Celestia bent down to nuzzle the little princess, cooing softly. After a few moments Luna finally began to calm, though for the time being she refused to relinquish her grasp on her sister's mane.

For the first time, Celestia became aware of the otherwise perfect silence of the vault. She gazed about her at the children, all of whom were now too engrossed in the little purple pony beneath her to remember their recent terror. She capitalized on the opportunity, clearing her throat.

"Linebeck! Herdier! Help me with the doors!"

The guards exchanged a puzzled glance before rushing in unison to the princess's side where they stood watching her anxiously for any indication of what she intended to do. Celestia closed her eyes, reaching out with her magic, carefully exploring with a myriad of tiny fingers of magic that probed every inch of the doors before her. She examined every nook, every cranny, every bolt and tumbler, searching for the evidence to support her hypothesis. Satisfied, she backed away from the doors, asking the pair of guards to attempt to push them open.

After only a moment's hesitation and a commanding glance from the princess, the guards obeyed, pushing with all of their strength, causing a few frightened gasps from the crowd behind them. However, any fears were quickly quieted as it became apparent that no matter how they struggled, the guards would not be able to force them open.

“Linebeck, Herdier, that’s enough, thank you.”

The pair of guards collapsed, exhausted, to the floor. Celestia turned about triumphantly, drawing herself into an authoritative stance as she prepared to speak to her subjects.

“Friends, children, all of you, I ask that you please listen very carefully to what I am about to say. The castle is under attack, though I cannot yet say for sure the identity of our assailants or their purpose in coming here. Nonetheless, all of us that are here today are safe, and for this blessing, for our very lives, we owe a heavy debt to one brave soul who was willing to sacrifice himself to ensure our safety. It is with a heavy heart that I say that the dragon we know as Brother Argos is dead, killed in battle as he carried us here. The loss that we all feel at his passing will ache for years to come, but know this - he died bravely, and he died happily, protecting those he loved. Because of him, the danger has passed for now, and it is our duty to ensure that his sacrifice does not go in vain. These doors...” Celestia pointed to the monolithic doors behind her. “...Will never open again because Argos, in his final moments, used the last of his strength to fuse the hinges, sealing them shut now and forever. I can assure you that no manner of beast could force its way through those doors now, and that all of us are perfectly safe. In the meantime, I need all of you to proceed into the tunnels beyond and make your way out of the citadel.”

As she finished her speech, Celestia glided over to the far wall, touching her horn to the smooth metal. Instantly, the wall dissolved into thin air, revealing a secret passageway beyond.

“That said, I will now go to retrieve those that are not yet among us. I-”

“But princess, your wound! Surely we would be better suited for such a task!?”

Herdier had recovered himself, staring incredulously up at her. Celestia met his eyes with a calm, cool gaze - She had made the decision before they had even arrived at the vault, before they had met with Argos, that if the others were not at the vault when she arrived, then she would go after them herself. Now, especially after what Argos had said...

“Destroy...the Stones...they’re after...the *Stones*.”

While she had not recognized the dragon that had chased them, she knew that Argos's cryptic warning could only mean one thing. The draconic delegates had betrayed them, and they were trying to get to the Stones, for which purpose she already knew, though she dared not admit it to herself. With a sinking dread, Celestia also knew that this meant that her parents were stuck in the center of all of this, and that they were even now in mortal danger, if they were still alive. She needed to save the other delegates, but she also needed to make sure her parents were safe.

"Even if I did let you do this, how would you leave this place? Through those doors, perhaps?"

Herdier sputtered, searching desperately about for some excuse.

"...But...then...how will you...?"

"The answer is clear. First and foremost, it is my *duty* as princess to do all in my power to protect my subjects, regardless of what that may mean for my personal safety. However, I am also the only one of us who can leave this room through the way in which we came."

Celestia swallowed hard, trying to convince herself that she could do what she knew she must.

"I will teleport to the others. I will teleport outside the vault and I vow to you, all of you, that I shall not return until I have done all in my power to return your loved ones safely to you."

A faint pressure on her leg. Celestia looked down. Frankie gazed imploringly up at her, clearly terrified at the thought of being left alone, but even more afraid of what may be happening to her mother at this very moment.

"Promise? You promise you'll come back?"

Celestia knelt to face the child, speaking more softly.

"I promise, Frankie, I'll come back for you, for all of you."

“And mommy? You’ll bring mommy back, too?”

Celestia’s eyes darkened for just an instant as she hesitated to answer. Finally, she smiled, affectionately nuzzling Frankie’s forehead.

“Yes, Frankie, don’t be afraid. I promise that you’ll see your mother again.”

Behind her, Celestia suddenly became aware of a soft ringing sound. Turning slowly about, a small glinting object lay half-obscured in the shadows, pulsing with a gentle hum. As she walked over to Argos’s discarded teleshard, she heard it -

It was her mother’s voice, and she was screaming.

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Twilight wrinkled her nose. The cottage smelled dank and foul, the faint traces of animal droppings punctuating the air. The scene was oddly chilling - there was no evidence of a struggle, all of the furniture and odds and ends that Fluttershy kept about her living room completely undisturbed, but somehow, Twilight felt as though she was being watched.

Suddenly it hit her - it was deathly silent. No peaceful snores, no quiet tittering of the myriad of tiny animals that usually inhabited the room could be heard. As far as she could tell, the cottage was entirely empty.

“Spike!? *Spike?!?*”

A note of panic crept into her voice as she began searching frantically for any sign of her friend.

“Spike, where are you?! Answer me!”

Soon, the air rang with the calls of Twilight and her friends as they fanned out across the cottage’s living space. It was not a particularly large house, nor were there many rooms to search, so it was not long before-

“Twi! Everypony, up here! Ya need tuh see this!”

Applejack's muffled cry came from directly above them, in Fluttershy's bedroom. Immediately, the three remaining ponies abandoned their search and ran upstairs.

"Applejack?! Applejack! What is it, what did you find?"

Applejack was silent, facing away from them toward Fluttershy's bed. As she slowly stepped aside, they saw that she was reading what appeared to be a piece of tattered paper. Applejack's expression was grim as her eyes scanned the last few lines of hastily scribbled text. The moment that she had finished, Twilight magicked the paper out of her hooves and began to read it aloud to the group.

Back in the Mendwell memorial Hospital, Pinkie stared into the darkness, shivering slightly in the cold of the nearly empty hospital room. Though it did not happen often, this was one of the few occasions that actually got past Pinkie's normally unflappable good mood. She was afraid.

*"heh...haha..."*

One of the three guards that sat around her bed forgot himself momentarily, shooting a puzzled look in her direction before crisply snapping back to attention.

It was no use - without the laughter of her friends, her own attempts seemed pitiful and cold. She thought of her friends, hoping against hope that they were safe, that they would find out what happened to Fluttershy. She sighed heavily, telling herself over and over that they would find her safe and sound, that everything would be alright, hoping that at some point it would actually begin to sink in.

Out of nowhere, Pinkie felt a strange twinge in her left ear. Slowly, the ear began to spin about, gradually gaining speed before it was joined in its spastic twirling by the other ear. The strange, itchy twinge spread to her muzzle, her lips folding in on themselves involuntarily as she began to pucker. This wasn't like the last time - her ears twirled furiously, her lips scrunching so much that it began to hurt. With sudden, invigorating, terrifying clarity, her pinkie sense climaxed in a single, blindingly clear idea, almost as though it were a vision.



“Miss? Miss Pie, are you alright?”

The guard that had glanced at her before now abandoned all pretense of impartiality, searching her with eyes full of concern.

Pinkie struggled to speak, but her spastically convulsing face allowed her little more than a panicked mumble.

“Don’t just stand there! Corporal, go and get a doctor! Sergeant, help me with-”

“*Danger!*” Pinkie gasped for breath, tears suddenly spouting from her eyes. One thought screamed in her mind, and she struggled to make the guards understand the direness of the situation.

“Something’s wrong! They’re are all in terrible danger! I need to get to them *now!*”

Twilight wrapped the paper tightly around itself and tucked it into place between the ever-present books in her saddlebag. For a moment, the ponies simply stood there, immobilized in the heavy silence, before each of them, in almost perfect unison, lifted their gaze from the floor to lock with each other in grim determination. Without a word, they all dashed out of the cottage, none of them harboring even the slightest shadow of doubt as to what they would need to do. Fluttershy was in trouble, and she needed them - that was all that mattered as they pounded on into the night, away from the empty cottage, away from everything they knew as safe and warm.

In the darkness, hidden away from the ethereal radiance of the full moon, the springs began to tighten. The grand trap that had been laid so many centuries ago trembled with anticipation like a tremendous, hungry beast as its prey drew ever closer to its final fate.

A madman hid in the shadows, anticipating the advent of his revenge, silently spinning wild fantasies in his empire of solitude. A group of friends hurried blindly onward, never knowing whether what awaited them at the

end of their journey would spell their salvation or their doom, only aware that they must push on, whatever the cost. A troubled girl struggled against the chains that pulled her inexorably toward the price of her love, nonetheless knowing that only one thing could save everything she cared about. A fallen angel stood locked in combat with a demon of her own creation, trying to convince herself that she deserved to win the battle before her.

In that timeless darkness, there echoed a sound - at once a song of triumph, of death, of fiercest passion, of deepest sorrow. The beast laughed to itself as all of the pieces took their final places, oblivious yet ready to fulfill the plan of the master player.

On that night, all the creatures of Equestria slept, just as they would on any other day, dreaming peaceful dreams, sighing contented sighs, completely unaware of what the morning would bring, of how extraordinary tonight actually was. For tonight, the song of their lives was building toward its final crescendo, all of its components falling together at long last. Tonight, the future of all life in Equestria would be decided by the few, the tormented, the brave, the mad, the lost, and the weak. Tonight, the world would change.

As the creatures of Equestria slept, the sun marched ever onward toward the dawn, wondering to itself what sort of world would be revealed by the touch of its morning light.